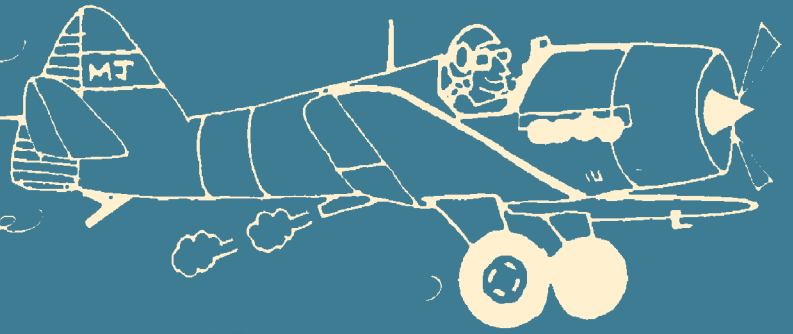


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal (R) Cecil Parker and his.....

A REVIEW OF INTERVIEWS

In one of his recent calls, our younger grandson informed us that he had successfully cleared the written entrance exam to a prestigious course of training, and now faced his first ever formal interview and asked me for any advice. I had no professional guidance to offer but suggested that he listen carefully to any question, think clearly and answer truthfully. He assured me he would and I thought back to my own first formal interview, 71 years ago!

In 1950, as a teenager still in college, I was at the AFSB (Air Force Selection Board) in Dehra Dun where the final event was an interview with the President of the Board. After the expected question as to why I wanted to join the air force, ('I want to fly Sir') it was mostly helpful advice on working hard through the 18 month Basic and Advanced stages of pilot training. In all my years in the air force, I never met this very thoughtful and likable officer again.

My next interview was 22 years later. After the 1971 Indo Pak war, a well known broadcaster from AIR (All India Radio) toured air, naval and army bases on our western front to interview and (tape) record the experience of actual participants. Among others, I was interviewed by Mr Melville DeMellow in an informal and friendly meeting in Pathankot. We had actually met earlier in 1964 in Delhi when I had been the IAF representative in a tri-service Ceremonial Guard in our Prime Minister's Funeral Cortege where Mr. DeMellow was in the adjacent vehicle relaying the event. His 1971 interviews were later broadcast and subsequently published as 'Remembered Glory' by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in October 1972; I still have a copy he sent to me.

The years course at the RCDS (Royal College of Defence Studies) London in

1980 terminated with a personal interview with the Commandant. He was an Air Marshal of the RAF who was keen on receiving a feedback from each member of the course. I had my own feedback typed and offered it to him when asked about it. He read it immediately and thanked me profusely. The rest of the interview was mostly a read – out of the College's Report on my demonstrated performance as a member of my Service and as a representative of my country.

The Swarnim Vijay Varsh, which celebrates fifty years after the 1971 Indo Pak war, appears to have set off several requests for interviews with surviving participants. The interviewers are now media savvy professionals from my son's generation who create a podcast to be relayed on the internet. The first such interview last month was both video and audio which required me to don jacket and tie; after 35 years in kurtha/pyjama I found I had almost forgotten how to tie one!

After premature retirement from the air force in 1986 I attended just one interview with the CMD of the company I joined. Ironically one of my duties thereafter was

to interview senior candidates aspiring to join our company thus giving me a different view on an interview! Incidentally we have since received news that our grandson has had a successful interview and is to join his new institution shortly

STAFF DUTIES

Military aviators fly actively for 20 to 30 years. The skills, knowledge and experience acquired, along with other attributes, also make them eligible to be employed on staff duties for another five to ten years. Staff duties refer to the occupation of officers employed on non-operational/support functions at controlling HQ. As many of these assignments include vital matters of policy, procedures and procurement, most armed forces have specialist staff colleges where selected officers are trained in a higher branch of professional knowledge. We have our own DSSC (Defence Services Staff College) at Wellington in TN where a years' course is conducted for officers of all three services. The training has a special emphasis on 'jointmanship' currently a primary *raison de'être* for the establishment of theatre commands. At a more senior (one



star) level, we have the NDC (National Defence College) in New Delhi.

In January 1959, our air force held its very first DSSC entrance exam. I was then a young flight lieutenant with less than seven years of service but decided to prepare and appear for it. I was successful and attended the 1960-61 air staff course at DSSC which I found to be both interesting and educational. 12 years later I was posted as a Directing Staff (Air) in 1973-74 and returned for a third term as the Chief Instructor (Air) in 1981-83. All three tenures were professionally rewarding and the many

on the results for the next staff college entrance exam. At that point of time, I had 84 aircraft on my air base (50 Iskra + 24 Kiran + 10 Chetak) and my hands were full with the induction of a new aircraft type into our air force and overseeing the advanced stage of flying training on both fixed and rotary wing platforms. On the other hand it was a new challenge and learning opportunity so I took on the new assignment working outside office hours with only my PA in the know! The next year I was requested to repeat the exercise.

A look back at my 35 years in the air force (1951-86) reminds me that 80% was



contacts/friendships made were useful in more than one future assignment. My employment in staff duties at HQ were restricted to a year at Air HQ (1961-62) and five months at HQ TC in 1975. A year at RCDS UK in 1980 made a total of seven years on non-flying duties.

There is one connection with staff duties I have never hitherto written about and that was my 'underground' role as a paper-setter/examiner for the DSSC entrance exam. In mid-1975 I received a confidential personal letter from a PSO in Air HQ informing me that I had been appointed (read 'detailed') to set the question paper, submit ideal answers ('greens' in staffco language), evaluate the answer books (turned out to be 185 in number) and render a consolidated report

spent on air bases and the balance indoors. In my time however, officers of the flying branch employed on staff duties were permitted to periodically visit air bases for flying practice. I was most fortunate as the time-gap/distance from classroom to cockpit was always a short one for me!

HOME ALONE (A Business Opportunity?)

My generation, as represented by my pilots course of 30 young pilot officers commissioned in 1952 and whose last member retired in 1988, today has nine survivors aged 88 to 91. We ancient aviators are a part of a growing number of senior veterans who live alone as their children are settled abroad or are still in harness elsewhere. This group includes couples,

widows and widowers some of whom reside in independent houses, others in apartment complexes and a few in retirement homes in urban, sub-urban and rural areas. From time to time we old pensioners need help and, in the absence of any family members locally, turn to friends, neighbours or (in the case of air veterans) to the local branch of the AFA (Air Force Association). Covid-19s requirement for physical isolation has however severely restricted assistance from these sources.

The normal process of aging imposes its own limitations, e.g. most of us have a hearing disability (ie, no voice communication), suffer a temporary loss of short term memory and a gradual reduction in the effectiveness of human systems/sub-systems which necessitates regular medication. By and large we are also strangers in the digital world who need information and help while negotiating life online or handling laptops or smart phones to communicate our needs. Essential movements for medical reasons require a reliable driver or a hired vehicle with perhaps need for an escort for visits to canteens, banks, food stalls or shopping areas. And when the final take-off comes, the surviving spouse/family still need help with last rites, death certificates, family pensions, execution of wills, property mutations and so on. Can we not think of organising professional support systems which meet these needs, are commercially viable and not dependant entirely on buddy help or volunteers?

One source of such help is the recently retired service officer (with the necessary personal attributes) who may like to run an independent business or agency that provides a senior support system. It can charge a retainer fee from willing customers and who then pay separately for services requested, eg information, transportation, escort, home maintenance, medical assistance, food delivery and any other personal needs of senior veterans isolated at home. Investment would be minimal as such a service can be run from one's own home with normal communication and perhaps an assistant/driver. It would also provide gainful employment to recent retirees to use their service experience.

It could be a continuing win-win situation for both; today's single-point service provider might well be tomorrows home-alone customer!