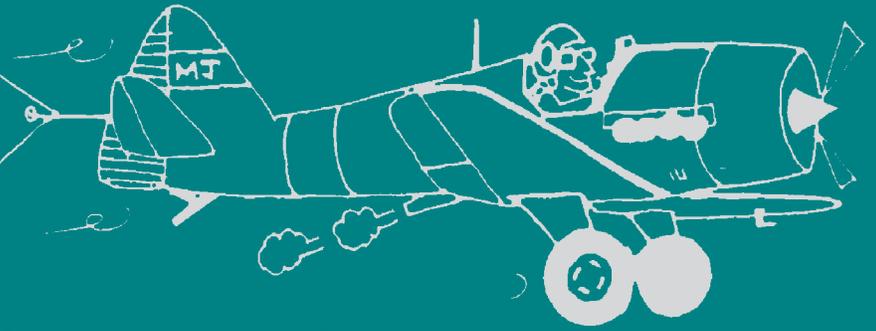


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



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

NEARLY NINETY



Representative photo of the Tiger Moth

Our air force and this writer were both born in 1932 and, 20 years later, the latter became part of the former. My boyhood dreams to 'fly' were fulfilled in 1951 when I made my very first flight in the rear cockpit of a fabric-covered Tiger Moth as a flight cadet of No 58 Pilots Course at No 1 Air Force Academy in Ambala. For the next 35 years I continued to enjoy my time in the cockpits of piston/jet, single/twin engine, fixed/rotary wing aircraft in various operational and training assignments till I retired in 1986. The following 35 years of post-air force service included a decade in the corporate and academic worlds after which came the freedom of non-commercial retirement. This period also had regular air travel, initially business related and thereafter leisure flying primarily to visit our two children wherever in the world they were located. This brought us in age into our late eighties and in family status to great grand parenthood.



Another representative photo of the Tiger Moth

Though communication technology continues to keep us in touch with the children, the travel ban imposed by the pandemic prevented any personal visits for close to three years. The recent relaxation in November 2021 however allowed us

to accept an invitation to visit our son and family. Accompanied by my wife and escorted by our family sevadaar, we boarded a commercial Airbus 320. The flight itself was pleasant enough but the transit to/from airports and pre/post flight procedures

therein were rather tiring. Our son had arranged a wonderful 89th birthday party for me. Among the invitees was a 91 year old coursemate whom I had not met for a decade and with whom I share a birthday and 70 years of friendship. He is spry, mentally alert and regaled the gathering with recollections of our youthful (mis) deeds on the ground and in the air! We cut our birthday cakes in formation.

The other guests from the air force fraternity included a young pilot from No 20 Squadron (now 75 years old) who was my wing-man during the air strike on the Attock Oil Refinery on 06 December 1971. His wife is an air force daughter whom I had first seen as a little child in the early 1950s. Another was the widow of a fighter pilot who was my student at DSSC Wellington in the 1970s. The youngest guest (now in his early sixties) was not only the son of one of my closest air force friends (now sadly no more) but had also been the student of my wife who had taught him at Mount St Mary's School in the 1960s. He had continued to keep in contact over the years and it was a touching sight to see them bonding a half century later. Such are the connections and friendships that cement the extended air force family.

Back home we now look forward to the arrival of our daughter and son-in-law in time for 16 December 2021; a date that marks the end of the 1971 Indo Pak war and incidentally, is also my wife's birthday. This is being written as 2021 draws to a close so let me wish all readers of this column a healthy, happy 2022. We ourselves look forward to the arrival of our second great grandchild in April 2022. Our air force will have its 90th birthday in Oct 2022; (hopefully) this writer will follow suit a month later!

UNIT HISTORIES

History is the link between the past and the present. A primary source for any history of the IAF should be the histories of its constituent units. In my years with the air force (1951-1986) these were normally recorded in squadron/unit diaries and vetted by the CO at periodic intervals. The scribe was the officer whose written communication was the best and he was directly supervised by the flt cdr. Currently the Swarnim Vijay Varsh celebrations have focused a great deal of attention on actual events of the 1971 Indo-Pak war from recorded or recollected history.



Image of Hunter Mk.56 courtesy: Dave Welch Collection



Representational image of Hunter Mk.56 courtesy: Tom Cooper

In 1957 as a flt Lt I was posted to Ambala to set up and command the very first MEU (Mobile Echelon Unit) in our air force. It comprised just one officer, ninety airmen of all trades and near fifty specialist vehicles. I wrote the history of the unit and handed it over to my successor a year later. I understand that as the IAF grew the MEU was revived as a C & MU and then as the FBSU. If the unit history has survived it may well be buried in the basement of Air HQ.

In 1966 as a wg cdr I was posted to Jamnagar to set up and command the IAF's first OTU (Operational Training Unit) on Hunter Mk.56 aircraft. It was a most challenging assignment and I had no choice but to personally record all initial events as it was several weeks before I got an officer with the requisite attributes to take over as the scribe. The OTU (now renamed OCU) completed 55 years on 1 Oct 2021. From time to time I am delighted to hear from next generation COs/CIs that the unit diary continues to record its history faithfully.

In 1969-72 I was in command of No 20 Squadron on Hunter Mk 56A ac in Hindan and then Pathankot. Among the 29 officers under my command was a young naval aviator on an exchange posting. In due course he became fully operational on type and assimilated seamlessly into air force squadron life as a fighter pilot. Among his many attributes was the ability to write

well, and I suggested to the flt cdr that he be deputed as the Oic Squadron Diary – one of wisest decisions I had made. His written record of No 20 Squadron's War Diary during the 1971 war was factual, truthful and a faithful written rendition of both individual and collective performance of all squadron personnel on the ground and in the air. His talents were not only on the ground but in the air too and I was extremely proud that he earned his VrC from the air force. In due course he rose to become the CNS and very thoughtfully organised a memorable Reunion of all his 1971 squadron colleagues at Navy House in 2005—a fine example of 'jointmanship' so much in the news today. In retirement the admiral lives in Goa and continues to write effectively on national defence strategy and allied topics.

I was the AOC of the air base at Adampur 1978-79 when HQ WAC instructed all air bases to compile their complete histories of which one copy was to be sent to Comd HQ and the other to be retained in the VIP guest room. A great deal of our input came from the four MiG squadrons on base but we had immense difficulties in obtaining credible past data. We did finally succeed and I was proud that the Education Officer received a congratulatory commendation from HQ WAC. In this digital age I assume that unit histories are now recorded electronically. 🦋