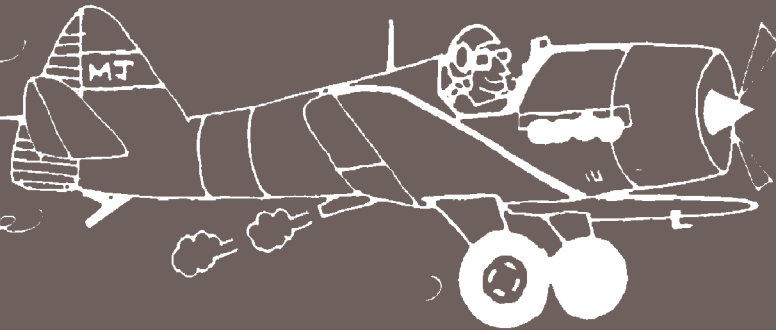


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Post the wonderful series on Ancient Aviator Anecdotes, Wg. Cdr. (Retd.) Shiv Kumar Sharma shares his impressions on Air Vice Marshal Cecil Vivian Parker

What and how do I write about Air Vice Marshal Cecil Vivian Parker, a legend with whom I have had very little association but admired greatly from a distance. My first association with him was for a week almost a month before the 1971 war with Pakistan when I was attached to No. 20 Squadron IAF commanded by him; and the next was when I was doing the course at Defence Services Staff College, Wellington where he was the Directing Staff. Therefore, what I am about to write is partly from impressions formed at a distance and partly hearsay. For the presumption of forming my impressions on somewhat limited knowledge, I ask to be excused. For views bordering on idolatry you would express no reservations if you knew the man. Although I am now 84 years old and writing about events that took place 50 years ago, my memory is clear.

In March 1971, the Awami League led by Shiekh Mujibur Rehman was victorious in the Pakistan general election. For the Military Dictatorship and for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto this was not acceptable. There was a military crackdown in the east resulting in a huge influx of East Bengali refugees into India. The figure went into the millions, imposing a huge burden on India's economy. War with Pakistan became imminent but Indian policy makers decided to delay hostilities till after the monsoon for very important tactical and strategic reasons.

The war began with a pre-emptive strike by Pakistan. There were two Hunter squadrons at Pathankot airfield, just 9 nautical miles from the Indo-Pak border. The Hunter squadrons had been classified as Ground Attack Air Defence (GAAD) squadrons. However, on account of the induction of more modern aircraft in the



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Vivian Parker looking relaxed at home busy typing his column "Ancient Aviator Anecdotes" which the Vayu Aerospace Review magazine has had the honour of carrying all 100 episodes!

Air Forces of both India and Pakistan, the role of Hunters was restricted to counter air (involving strikes on airfields and signals units like radar units deep inside enemy territory), interdiction strikes to deny men and material to and from the battle zone and also close support of our troops in the battle zone.

In preparation for war, trained pilots on various aircraft were called up and attached to their respective units. Consequently, I was attached to No. 20 Sqn Air Force commanded by then Wg. Cdr. CV Parker. When I reported to him, I was very

apprehensive, having heard about his reputation as a perfectionist. His first question was "Have you brought your log book?" which I hadn't, and I thought I have started on the wrong foot but he quickly put me at ease saying it didn't matter. He then asked me if I had any reservations to which I said yes, I hadn't flown Hunters after the 1965 war. His answer was "SK, this is not 65 we have learnt our lessons." Which on hind sight I don't agree with, the correct statement would have been "I have learnt my lessons"! He made sure I commenced my flying from the 3rd day onwards. After a few familiarisation sorties over a week or 10 days I was moved to 27 Squadron, on the same station, the antithesis of 20 Squadron. Here nobody gave a damn about my being out of touch with Hunter flying and I literally had to familiarise myself flying mission sorties.

The professionalism that I saw in those 10 days will remain etched in my memory till the end of my time on this planet. I was staying in the bachelor's accommodation, with other squadron pilots. On many days I was surprised to hear hectic activity at about 2 AM although the normal working hours were from 0730 AM onwards. The pilots would leave at 2.30 AM for work and return by 0630 or 0700 AM. They would again report for work at 9.30 AM. On enquiring, I was informed that they were training to cross borders (simulating) at night, flying and navigating at 500 feet above ground level (AGL), striking the target at first light and making a getaway thereafter. Easier said than done!

The Hawker Hunter aircraft was not designed for night flying. It did not even have a landing light and in those days there were no navigation aids, inertial or otherwise. By the way, after the war when I was posted to a

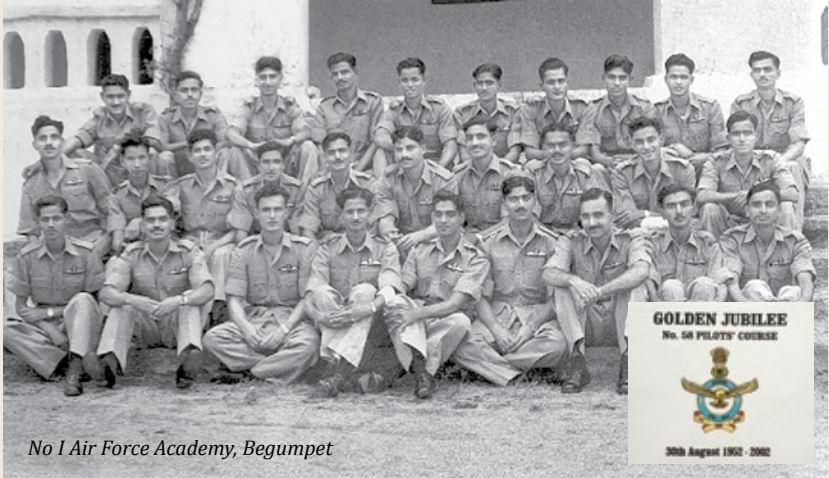
Hunter Squadron, I tried to do low flying at night at 1500 feet AGL, and I must confess I was scared stiff. I can't imagine how pilots were trained for this, but I could very well imagine the risk taken by the Squadron Commander. One accident would have put paid to his command and further career. The pilots also trained for surprise strikes at dusk and get away and recovery by night.

Preparation for War

Units were assigned their targets as soon as the war became imminent. Squadrons were provided with photographs of targets that they had to attack e.g. airfields, Signals Units, Oil storage dumps, Radar Units etc. For each strike formations were assigned - including the standbys - and each pilot was told individually what specific part of the target he would engage and, in case he was unable to spot his target, what he would alternatively engage. During such times there is an immense work load on the engineers and technicians who, apart from routine daily servicing and maintenance, have to undertake heavy repairs and maintenance to ensure the highest availability of aircraft. This involves round the clock work in long shifts. The pilots cannot be seen to be working only during flying hours, so they have to come to flight offices as long as the men are working. What was most impressive at 20 Squadron was the gainful and productive utilisation of time. Every day a formation was nominated to conduct a detailed briefing as if they were actually going on the mission. To make the atmosphere real, all of us had to come in the flying overalls/g-suits, and the mission members with their maps, water bottles, currency and weapons. Each pilot had to have memorised the route by heart with turning points, the magnetic course for each leg, the time from Initial Point to Pull Up Point, the description of the target as he expected to see it and finally the alternative target. Mission members were cross-examined by the Sqn CO or the Flight Commanders ad nauseam. I suspect that if you asked any member in his sleep about his target and role he would be able to recite it. I am not aware if this was done by any other unit of the Air Force. I wonder why this method of training has not been made a standard operating procedure for the Air Force even during peace time.

Apart from this, Wg. Cdr. Parker's administration and paper work was as near perfection as possible. He kept the bar charts

From the Vayu Aerospace Review archives



No 1 Air Force Academy, Begumpet

R : * YP Mehta * VBR Misra * S Bhat * SC Saxena * DE Satur * OP Gupta
* TK De * JP Gupta * VK Singh * RL Badhwar

C : * HN Koul * RC Mariano * MW Tilak * KD Hoon * R Vasisht
* RN Kaul * KK Malik * Jaggi Rao * S Sen * PK Chitnavis

F : * CV Parker * MS Rane * AJ Maitland * MK Rudra * GS Iyer
* SL Tandan * MK Khanna * BK Dhiman * Hari Singh

Not in Picture : * MN Singh * Lt Jayachandran, IN

*Fifty years have flown in myriad ways
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on 30th. August, two thousand and two*

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Shirley & Cecil Parker

of the progress made by each pilot and how much training had been accomplished meticulously.

Now this is pure hearsay - someone mentioned that he had a draft ready for the citation for pilots of each mission well before the start of the war! If it is true, it speaks volumes of his confidence in his preparations for the war. I have known a lot of cases where gallantry awards have been bestowed on totally undeserving and not so deserving pilots but in the case of Wg. Cdr. CV Parker, I can say with certainty that if anybody deserved the Mahavir Chakra he was awarded, it was him. He would have deserved it even if he had not flown a single mission in the war. But he was not just the ideal training head. When the shooting

war came to 20 Squadron it performed excellently, and leading from the front was its Commanding Officer.

In the end I can say that I feel sorry for the Indian Air Force that a man of his calibre didn't not go beyond AVM, whereas people much less deserving made it to the rank of Air Marshal. It is the dream of every pilot to have participated in a war; and doing well career-wise would be the icing on the cake. But to have led a fighter squadron in war and achieved such phenomenal success is what makes a legend. I am sure, Parker sir, you are enjoying your retirement somewhere and sleeping well and contented. 🦋

*By Shiv Kumar Sharma
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