

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



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

The Caterpillar Club



Membership

28 October 1952 was another bright day at the Indian Air Force (IAF) air base at Hakimpet (15 km north of Hyderabad) where, as a newly-graduated pilot, I was undergoing my applied phase of flying training on the last of the piston-engined fighter aircraft in the IAF — Spitfire and Tempest of World War II vintage. Navroze Lalkaka, my erstwhile flying instructor at the Air Force Academy (then at nearby Begumpet) happened to be visiting and listened quietly while Umesh Hosali, my then instructor, briefed me for a routine practice sortie to be flown in Tempest IIA HA596 which, at that moment, was airborne on a similar training sortie flown by a co-pupil of mine. This was to be my thirteenth flight in this single-engined single-seater fighter bomber, which quite dwarfed in size and performance the tiny little fabric-covered Tiger moth trainer aircraft and the ubiquitous Harvard trainer aircraft which together represented the (then) sum-total of my 180 hours of flying

experience during basic and advanced phases of flying training.

He taxied the Tempest onto the change-over dispersal, gave me the 'thumbs-up' sign to indicate that the aircraft was fully serviceable and, while the engine was kept running, helped me to strap into the aircraft. Conscious of the fact that my old instructor was watching me from the Flying control, I taxied out very carefully, lined up on the runway, made a final check of instruments and took off (as straight as I could) to climb into our local flying area. Fifteen minutes later and 3,000 feet up in the air, without any warning, my (hitherto) safe world exploded dangerously. The engine had caught fire, its covering panels burst open right in front of my disbelieving eyes, smoke and flames engulfed me inside the cockpit. Gasping for air and almost blinded, I managed to transmit a hasty and feeble 'May Day' call on the radio to indicate a grave emergency, while simultaneously trying to undo my straps, disconnect myself from the various attachments to the aircraft, and

jettison the canopy to bale out of the aircraft which was now rapidly losing height and getting out of my control. In India we were still in the pre auto-ejection seat era when pilots had to physically get out of an aircraft during dire emergencies such as fire in the air. After two desperate but unsuccessful attempts I finally succeeded in inverting the aircraft and dropping out. After the mandatory (but I suspect rather hurried) count of 10, I pulled the rip-cord to deploy the emergency parachute which opened and jerked me into an upright position.

Suddenly I found myself drifting gently earthwards under the canopy of a parachute for the first time in my life while Tempest HA596 exploded in mid-air somewhere just below me. I glanced down at the brown earth below (closing in a bit too rapidly for comfort!) and was aghast to discover that I was in my socks — my shoes having been 'sucked off' some time during the bale-out. (This was prior to the introduction of flying boots as mandatory equipment for aircrew). I tried to recollect all the lessons we had been given on how to 'touch down' in a parachute but none had covered 'landing' in bare feet! Unknown to me at that moment 50 years ago, I had just become eligible for membership in the world's most exclusive organisation — the Caterpillar Club.

Origins

In 1919 a young American named Leslie Leroy Irwin demonstrated for the first time that it was possible to fall freely through the air without losing consciousness, open a parachute manually, and survive. He joined hands with a silk garment manufacturer to form the Irwin Air Chute Company which began manufacturing safety parachutes for customers in the USA and overseas. In 1922 the Caterpillar Club was formed by Irwin and its membership is still limited to those people, no matter what nationality, race, creed or gender, whose lives have been saved in an emergency by an Irwin parachute. The name 'Caterpillar' was chosen by

Leslie Irwin himself in conjunction with Lieutenants Harris and Tyndall of the United States Army Air Corps (USAAC) who were in fact the first two people to owe their lives to an Irwin parachute. There were two reasons for the choice of the club's name: the silken threads from which parachutes of the time were woven were produced by the caterpillar, and the caterpillar lets itself down to earth by a silken thread it has spun. These facts also give the club its slogan, 'Life depends upon a silken thread'. Each member on being accepted to the club is presented with a membership card and a gold pin in the shape of a caterpillar on the back of which is engraved the name and rank of the member.

In the first year there were only two members (Harris and Tyndall), but by 1939 (i.e. outbreak of World War II) the total membership was about 4,000. The present UK roll, since computerised, now exceeds 32,000. Obviously a large proportion of this total represents Service personnel who were forced to bale out during WW II. The overall world membership today stands at over one hundred thousand and includes many names famous in aviation such as Geoffrey de Havilland, Douglas Bader, John Cunningham, Jimmy Doolittle (member thrice over), Charles Lindbergh (member four times over!) and Ernst Udet, the German air ace of WW I fame, who became a member in 1934. Among the many messages endorsed on their applications for membership, are two reproduced below from the back of POW (Prisoner of War) cards:-

"Dear Leslie, I'd like to thank you for the sweetest moments in all my life, when my parachute opened and I realised I was not going to die. Your parachutes are so good that I'm going to name my son (when I have one) Irwin as it was due to one in particular that I am alive enough to woo, marry and get me a son".

"God bless you brother Leslie on behalf of my wife and children- as yet unknown."

Indian Chapter

Initial aircraft acquisition of the (R) IAF was of American or British origin and therefore ancillary military aviation equipment invariably included Irwin safety parachutes. The IAF completed 80 years in 2012 and there are today just over 50 Indian aircrew who, as members of the Caterpillar Club, owe their lives to an Irwin parachute. The actual number of Indians who have baled out or ejected from aircraft during emergencies is of

course very much more, but our subsequent acquisitions, purchases or manufacture did not necessarily entail or include parachutes from the Irwin Chute Coy.

The first recorded member of the Caterpillar Club in India is (the late) Jamshed Dordi. He was in No. 7 Squadron in Burma in 1944, operating American-built Vultee Vengeance aircraft which carried a two-man crew, a pilot and an Observer-cum-Navigator. On 1 April 1944 while part of a six aircraft attack mission on a Japanese target in Kalieva, Dordi's Vengeance ran into a severe thunderstorm which disabled the aircraft. The pilot Flying Officer Dadhaboy, instructed Dordi to bale out first while he followed. Dordi landed on trees and in the subsequent drop to the ground, lost consciousness for some time. He walked for three days before he managed to reach his squadron on 4 April 1944 to discover that, for unknown reasons, Dadhaboy did not or could not bale out and crashed with the aircraft. No. 7 Squadron is one of the oldest squadrons in the IAF and during Dordi's tenure was commanded by Hem Chaudhari (brother of General J Chaudhari, later COAS Indian army); its two flight commanders were Pratap Lal (later CAS of the IAF) and Erlich Pinto (later AOC-in-C WAC who died in a tragic helicopter accident in 1963).

Conclusion

My touchdown in a dried paddy field was less of a 'hard arrival' than feared; apart from a twisted ankle and minor burn injuries, I had escaped lightly and was able to discover that the small auxiliary chute had ripped off at some point of time. The main canopy had large holes in it being acid burns from the aircraft battery located very close to the pilot's seat in the Tempest. After about 25 minutes I was picked up in a jeep and was delighted to be reunited with my fellow students and receive a welcome bear-hug from my instructor who quite made my day with his "I'm proud of you laddie" comment. The subsequent Court of Inquiry established that the fire in the air had been caused by the failure of the connecting rod in the engine, a not infrequent occurrence in the Tempest aircraft which led soon to its grounding and being phased out of the IAF. Marshal of the Indian Air Force Arjan Singh, DFC (Retd) who preceded ACM PC Lal as CAS of the IAF, had this to write in a letter to me: "...you were lucky to get away with it in a Tempest, a difficult



The author being commissioned by AVM Subroto Mukherjee at AF Beguapet on 30 August 1952

aircraft to fly and land and much worse to bale out from...". He had led the first (and last) flypast of 12 Tempest aircraft over the Red Fort while Pandit Nehru unfurled the National Flag on 15 August 1947.

It was a tradition in the IAF (probably inherited from the RAF) that any aircrew baling out gave Rs. 50 to the Safety Equipment Worker (SEW) who had re(packed) the parachute during its last inspection plus a tea party to the Parachute Section of the air base. I was happy to comply with the tradition but was even more delighted to meet up with the erstwhile Corporal (now a prosperous-looking Warrant Officer) when I returned to command Air Force Station Hakimpet in the mid-seventies. The most important privilege of membership in the Caterpillar club continues to be the 'Continued Enjoyment of Life', and no member ever forgets it, least of all the approximately 30 applicants who continue to qualify for membership every year world-wide even today. 🦋

