

Air Marshal (R) Harish Masand says...

I learnt more than flying from them: Alan Mascarenhas



Immediately after commissioning in 198th GD(P) course on 31 December 1967, all of us in the fighter stream were posted to the two Vampire squadrons in Pune (then spelt as Poona), 220 and 221 squadrons, more for marking time, or “Kadam Taal” as the term in drill and marching signified. This was essentially to while away some six months since the Air Force had a surfeit of pilots, after the large inductions following the 1962 debacle against the Chinese with an aim to expand the Air Force, but didn’t have the aircraft or squadrons where we could be accommodated. Even the Operational Training Unit (OTU) in Jamnagar to convert us on Hunters was running a backlog and didn’t have any place for us. I have already written a piece on my OTU days with a focus on the Commander, Cecil Parker, which many of you may have already read.

So, here we were in a city like Poona as young and energetic budding fighter pilots with just 20 hours to do on Vampires in six months and a

little flying with the local 6 Squadron, operating the L-1049G Super Constellation, to accumulate what was then popularly known as bounty hours.

The distractions in Poona were plenty so we didn’t really mind since such distractions kept us occupied and entertained in more ways than one, particularly after the hard grind in Hakimpet. Poona those days was a nice clean city with a cosmopolitan outlook and a forward-looking gentry led by the Parsis and

with a large contingent of the Army in the Cantonment area, NDA at Khadakvasla and CME at Kirkee. The last had an annual river dance event which was much sought after by all but restricted to a few select outside folks, especially those with the better looking daughters, only by invitation. Somehow, by various crooked means, I managed to get in that year and had a memorable evening that I haven’t forgotten yet. My coursemate Mohan Dikshit’s brother was settled in Poona and we also spent many enjoyable evenings with Ashok and Suman Dikshit, either in the Mess, or in the Club as their guests. There were also plenty of great restaurants in the city, including Greenfields, where we dashed across many a times in the mornings in my Ambassador for “Keema Parathas” as breakfast before anyone in the Squadron even realised that some of us were missing. Those days, from the Air Force in Lohegaon to Main Street in Poona took less than 15 minutes. In addition, Bombay was next door with all its glitzy attractions and I also spent a few good weekends there with my roommate, Hufriid Mullaferoze.

To be honest, with all these distractions and sporadic flying without much of an objective, it was difficult to concentrate on professional aspects till we were introduced to a new phase of air to ground armament. It was then that I first met Flt Lt Alan Maurice Mascarenhas who was

