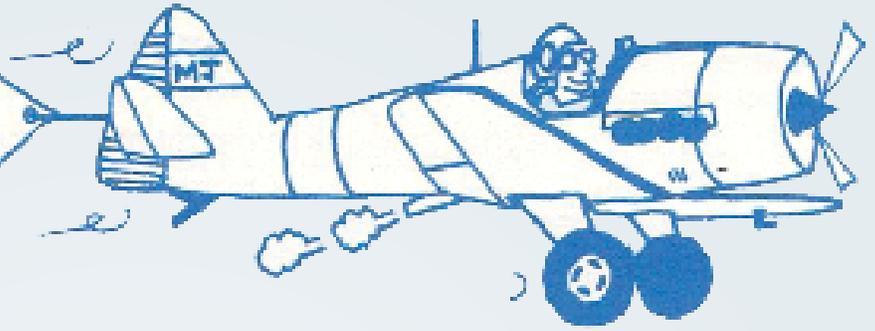


Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker recalls

Alpha to Omega to Alpha

In our retired community of armed forces veterans, birthdays are often the catalyst for get-togethers and social intercourse. In early August my wife and I received invitations to three different birthday parties, all of them to be held within the span of one week. This unusual concentration of dates was to mark the 100th birthday of a widower, followed by the 94th and 90th birthdays of two widows. While the first two parties were being held in Secunderabad, the third was to be held in Mumbai.

None of the celebrants were actually related to us, but all three were parents of good friends. In the mosaic of faith that makes up our country, one happened to be a Hindu, one a Christian and one a Muslim. Two of the three had children who were themselves defence services officers or married to one, while the third was a civilian. One chose the celebratory meal as

dinner, one as tea and the third as lunch. The first two were held at home for a few friends and family while the third was held at a starred hotel for 100 guests.

At these functions we were of course delighted to catch up with so many friends made during our years on air force airfields or military establishments all over India and abroad. But it was uplifting to observe the mental alertness of the three 'Stars' each one of whom were blessed with loving and supportive children, grandchildren and great grandchildren – a tribute to their own role as parents. Quite frankly, in their dignified and wise presence, I in my 82nd year, felt like a novice fresher.

On our return from Mumbai, waiting in our mail box, was an obituary notice. A friend and neighbour in his mid-70s had unexpectedly passed away that very morning. 'Three Birthdays and a Funeral' could well have been the title of this piece but as the

French say, *ce'st la vie* (such is life), and life of course must go on – to the next birthday.

Avian Risk Management

As a term, risk management is associated with investment banking and is concerned with the safety of financial capital. As an activity in aviation however, it has been in practice ever since man took to the air and seeks to preserve human capital. Innovation and technology led to the invention of the parachute and, thanks to one, I saved my own life in 1952. In furtherance of risk management, procedures, rules and regulations evolved, some critical ones being codified into 'Vital Actions'. The term is familiar to aviators all over the world and comprises mandatory checks at different phases and conditions of flight. Most aviation activity takes place at altitudes at which birds do not fly but in any operation close to the ground (take-off, landing, and



low-level exercises) manned flight enters the avian domain where aircraft and bird pose a danger to each other. This risk has to be managed by the aviator and not left to the birds – after all, they were there first!

In 1970, while in command of a Hunter squadron, I was tasked with carrying out live firing field trials of the 68 mm Snob Rocket Pod. I was further advised to carry out this initial trial from the twin seat trainer so that another pair of eyes could help with visual observation / lookout while I concentrated on the firing. One of my very experienced pilots had just returned from long leave and, as per regulations, was required to be given a dual check. Trainer flying hours were always at a premium so I decided to combine both commitments. The trial firing was to be conducted at the nearby Tilpat Range and involved a single live firing in ‘salvo’ of both pods which I estimated would take me no more than 15 minutes leaving us with 30 minutes for the dual check. I put the co-pilot into the left (captain’s) seat while I flew from the right (instructor’s) seat and briefed him for both exercises.

The weather was fine and, after a practice dummy dive, I fired the pods and was pulling out of the dive when three occurrences took place almost simultaneously: a fleeting glimpse of a very large bird; a loud sound of the front windshield cracking and a muffled squawk on the radio saying ‘Birds Birds!’ I saw my co-pilot with his helmet visor up, i.e. open, and both hands covering his eyes. Due to the sudden inrush of air there was neither inter-communication possible between us, nor any radio contact with the ground. In response to my visual signals the co-pilot gave me a ‘thumbs up’ but continued to keep his eyes covered. I returned to base, carried out a very quick emergency unserviceable R / T procedure, landed after the green visual signal but only at the end of the landing run could I open the canopy and request for medical help which was waiting by the time I switched off at the tarmac. Fortunately the co-pilot’s facial injuries were superficial, a spare windscreen was available and both pilot and aircraft flew a few days later.

In retrospect I was also culpable to the extent that, as captain of the aircraft, I should have noticed the co-pilot raising, i.e. opening his helmet visor evidently to observe more clearly. Every time an aviator transits or operates within the avian domain, constant lookout is the essence of risk

management. Some measure of risk will always exist but if the pilot is careful (and lucky), he will be a winner; and if not, he will certainly be wiser!

(Postscript: in partial compensation for the bird hit, my Log Book records that the rockets were a direct hit!)

Sunrise at Sunset

If told that it is possible to see the sun set, rise and set again, all in the space of a few minutes, the reader would be understandably sceptical. To observe this unusual phenomenon however, one needs to be at the right place, at exactly the right time and in the right aircraft. Our Air Force provides the opportunity to meet all three requirements to its aviators in the course of their normal duties. During 1966-69 I was in command of a Hunter equipped unit at Jamnagar tasked with the conversion and operational training of newly commissioned young pilots of the fighter stream. Though under HQ WAC in New Delhi, the unit had a war role for which we came under HQ Western India (WI) at Poona.

Night flying was a regular feature of staff continuity training and was carried out in two phases: ‘Moon Phase’ (a week on either side of a full moon) when there was a distinct natural horizon and visual flying was possible, and ‘Dark Night’ when there was absolutely no horizon and pilots were on instruments almost entirely from take off to landing. Such training certainly sharpened our flying skills especially as the Hunter had neither on-board navigation aids nor a landing light.

The then AOC WI was a strict, non-sensical Air Vice Marshal with a volatile personality, short fuse, colourful linguistic skills and an intimidating bearing. On one of his short notice visits he learned that we were carrying out ‘Dark Night’ flying training that night; he immediately expressed a desire to be taken up in the Hunter trainer aircraft. I instructed my Flight Commander to include him in the flying programme and to ensure that an experienced QFI (Qualified Flying Instructor) took him up. Shortly thereafter the Flight Commander came to my office and, with a deadpan face (we were good personal friends), conveyed the unanimous opinion of all our QFIs that the privilege of taking up the AOC WI on a dark night, should be that of the Commanding Officer exclusively!

On 17 October 1967, while briefing AOC WI for the sortie, I asked him if he would like to see the sun set, rise and set again all within 20 minutes from take off. He appeared to be nonplussed but just nodded his head and was not his usual vocal self while being helped to strap up in the right hand seat of Hunter T.66 (BS364). As the sun began to set, we started up the engine, taxied out and parked briefly on the 27 dumbbell of our East-West runway to watch the sun set completely and darkness commence. We took off and climbed due west on a heading of 270 degrees. As we gained height, the tip of the sun appeared again and with an increase in altitude it kept rising till at 40,000 feet it was almost entirely visible. As we levelled out and maintained height and direction, it then began to sink again more rapidly. We were now 65 nm from base over the Arabian Sea and were able to observe the sun set completely once again. To our far right the glow of the lights of Karachi city was faintly visible. (Little did I know that two years later I would land the first IAF Hunter aircraft at sunrise at Karachi International airport while on a ferry flight from the UK to India).

Our return to base for the controlled descent and landing was in pitch black conditions requiring my full attention to instrumental flying and I was grateful for the silence of my co-pilot. After the flight I asked him if he had any questions. His response was: “Nosey, two sunsets and a sunrise on a dark night certainly make a [expletive deleted] sight!”



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker (retd.)