

Ancient Aviator Anecdotes



Air Vice Marshal Cecil Parker on

A Double Diamond Jubilee

A creatively designed card from my old squadron invited us to join its Diamond Jubilee celebrations on 3-4 June 2016. On arrival, I realised that in my 84th year, I was the oldest and senior-most member present. All of us outstation members were looked after with meticulous care and were of course delighted to meet up again with old colleagues and friends. The programme, spread over 36 hours, comprised the traditional *Bara Khana* preceded by a talented variety show, the Dinner Party at the Officers' Mess and an Airshow-cum-Breakfast at the Squadron.

The unit was raised in 1956 and has lived up to its motto, 'Swift and Fearless,' in peace and war. From its insignia, it is known as the Lightning Squadron and from its number its members are labelled as 'Tribe Twenty.' In the past 60 years it has been equipped with a multitude of different aircraft types (Vampire, Hunter, MiG-21, Su-30MKI), was based on 10 different airfields in four operational command areas and has had operational, display and training roles. My own stay in the squadron, covering seven years in three ranks/appointments between 1962 and 1972, has been eclipsed by the present squadron commander who has served the unit for over nine years! In six decades the squadron has had 27 Commanding Officers,

20 of them still alive, of whom 10 (plus two widows) were present for the celebration.

Equipped with the Hunter Mk.56 and Mk.56A aircraft, the squadron participated in both the 1965 and 1971 wars winning a collective two MVCs, eight VrCs, and two VMs making it the most highly decorated squadron in the Indian Air Force. In the 1980s the squadron was chosen to be the IAF's first formation aerobatics team ('The Thunderbolts'), which mesmerised the country with scintillating displays. In 1992 it received the President's Colours, an event that in retirement I was able to attend, as also the squadron's Golden Jubilee a decade ago. With decommissioning of the Hunter, which the unit had flown for 37 years, the squadron was number-plated for five years

before being resurrected in 2002 with the latest Sukhoi Su-30MKI.

During the Diamond Jubilee functions there were many emotional reunions. I was touched to meet up with the widow of my successor to whom I had handed over command 44 years ago. It just happened to be her birthday and the squadron had thoughtfully ensured not only a cake but also a band for the birthday music. I was privileged to be asked to help cut the magnificent Diamond Jubilee Cake, flanked by four charming ladies – wives of the present Commanding Officer, the AOC, the Commodore Commandant and my own.

In my brief address to the squadron I concluded by mentioning that, though everyone present knew that the unit was



*A No.20 Squadron Su-30MKI on exercise in the USA
(photo: USAF/ A1C Ryan Crane)*



No.20 Squadron was raised with de Havilland Vampires

raised in 1956, only one other person present (my wife) knew that she and I had also been married in 1956! Amongst the loud cheers and popping of champagne corks, one voice called out: "Then sir, this is your second Diamond Jubilee this year!" Too true and we could not have asked for a better occasion to celebrate it again.

Not many like Denny

30 August 2016 will mark the 64th anniversary of the graduation of No.58 Pilots Course of the IAF. Of those 30 young Pilot Officers who were commissioned in 1952, 15 are alive and well into their 80s. Their current dispersal has one in Goa,

with two each in Delhi, Gurgaon, Kolkata, Noida, Secunderabad, Australia and the UK. The advent of the Internet and mobile telephony helps keep these 'octopilots' in touch as course reunions have become less frequent; the bond between coursemates lasts a lifetime.

Arguably the moving spirit and stalwart of our group continues to be Denny. His good nature, cheerful attitude and popularity remain unchanged over the years. He is a fine musician and guitarist who, since 1951 has delighted his coursemates with risqué songs from an even earlier era. A gifted hockey player, he developed his leadership skills and teamwork on the sports field. He is one of our three survivors who had already served two years in the Air Force when they joined our pilots course. They were therefore not only a bit older, but more mature, knowledgeable and a source of guidance to us young Flight Cadets straight out of school and college. A more practical reason for their popularity was the fact that they continued to draw their pay (Rs 150 per month was a princely amount those days) during flying training while we direct entries had to survive on a strict 'forty bucks a month'; they were therefore the only financial source we could borrow from. Denny was always a soft touch!

Our personal friendship had its origin in two accidental events. The first was that, though two years my senior in age, we discovered that we shared a birthday. The second took place on 28 Oct 1952 when Denny and I were in the same batch who carried out our fighter conversion on Spitfire and Tempest piston-engine aircraft of WW II vintage. Each solo sortie in the (single-seat, single-engine) Tempest was shared between two pupil pilots between refueling(s). On that date Tempest HA 596 was flown by Denny who, after landing, handed over the aircraft to me on our dispersal without switching off the engine as was the briefed practice and procedure, while he helped me strap in. 15 minutes later and 3,000 feet up in the air my world literally exploded in my face as the aircraft caught fire and I was plain lucky to be able to bail out safely. Later, when we discussed the accident, Denny muttered with feeling, "A few minutes earlier and it might have been me!"

Thereafter, we had parallel careers on different air bases or units but continued

to meet intermittently. I attended his marriage in Madras in 1955 and he attended mine in Secunderabad a year later. He was always a very devoted family man and our friendship is now in its 66th year. As we grew in service, he was posted to fill many important assignments in staff and command and participated in both the Indo-Pak wars actively. He has the distinction of commanding the only squadron that gave the IAF its sole Param Vir Chakra gallantry awardee. Our generation was used to a term, 'solid citizen', which described a thoroughly dependable, reliable individual both professionally and personally. Looking back over the years, there were not too many like Denny and our pilots course is fortunate to have such a solid citizen as a member.

Monkey Business

In the Air Force, the loss of a personal identity card due to negligence is viewed seriously and invites disciplinary action. The incident being related took place in 1963 when No 20 Squadron was located at Palam Air Force Station and commanded by (then) Wg Cdr David Bouche. He was a thorough professional, an extremely disciplined officer and, as his Flight Commander, I learned a great deal from him. The Boss's office was located at the end of the hangar annexe with a window behind his desk, overlooking the tarmac. One morning when he was airborne, a monkey entered through this window, spotted CO's packed breakfast lying on his table and attacked it with great enthusiasm. Halfway through, apparently bored with his repast (displaying scant appreciation for Mrs Bouche's culinary skills) it turned its attention to the Boss's uniform bush shirt hanging behind his chair. From the pocket it extracted some papers, including his identity card, which he commenced to chew! At that moment CO landed and entered his office.

Picture the scene if you will. A squadron commander enters his office to see a monkey, having demolished half his breakfast, now sitting contentedly on his table biting his identity card! The ensuing scenario and dialogue went something like this:

Boss: "ADJUTANT!"

Fg Offr 'Baby' Sehgal rushed in from next door.

"Baby can you see that monkey?"

"Yes Sir."

"It has eaten my breakfast and is in possession of my identity card. You are a witness."

"Yes Sir."

"Stop saying 'Yes Sir' and do something!"

"Yes Sir. SHAMLAL!" Our Flight Office *sevadar* came running.

When excited (and hungry) our Boss's Hindi was not as clear as he would have liked. "*Thum witness dekha? Thum monkey hai.*"

Before Baby could reword that statement from the Boss, Shamlal shot off and returned with the DWO (Discipline Warrant Officer) and a posse of muscular air warriors all of whom were made witness to this gross violation of Section 65 of the Air Force Act. Meanwhile, the monkey seeing it was outnumbered, made a dignified exit through the window but took the evidence (Boss's identity card) with it.

Eventually the excitement died down and normality returned. Shamlal closed the window and produced someone's breakfast for Boss to eat in my office while I was detailed to draft an immediate letter highlighting the many witnesses to the loss of his identity card and the monkey menace that was now affecting security, flight safety and morale! Despite the absence of Witness No.1 (the monkey), a Court of Inquiry was held which exonerated the Boss from any negligence and he was provided with a new identity card. At his farewell party a year or so later, Baby Sehgal, an excellent mimic, gave a hilarious rendition of the incident, news of which had spread rapidly on the informal (but effective) Air Force grapevine. On my last visit to London a few months ago, I called up Air Cmde Bouche, now in his late 80s, to pay my respects. As usual, he always asked me about 'our old squadron.' I updated him as much as possible and assured him that the squadron was now located at a base with no monkeys! He laughed heartily.

Post Script: This story has been told and retold frequently with non-witness anecdotalists tending to add a little tale-spin each time. I must therefore warn the reader to treat with great caution a latest version on the internet which claims that the Palam monkey had been subsequently caught, detained in the Air Force museum and has recently been spotted in Gurugram. At worst this is an outright canard and at best, a case of mistaken identity!