THE SAGA OF INDIAN AIR FORCE:
GLIMPSES INTO THE PAST

Indian Air Force (IAF) has air warriors in its ranks to fulfil the aspirations and the objectives reposed by the nation. History of IAF is replete with innumerable instances of unflinching commitment and dedication to the security and prosperity of our great country, written with the sweat and blood of the devoted air warriors. Every citizen of our great nation is indebted to this great force in some form or the other, be it confronting the enemy or standing up to render timely help to its brethren in need, be it the earthquakes, floods or tsunamis. This article salutes the untiring and unflinching dedication to duty rendered by air warriors at all times. While conveying our sincere gratitude, we the IAF Medical Services, the medicos hope that we have been there to provide the healing touch that goes a long way in helping an air warrior become physically fitter and mentally stronger to face future adversities to protect our skies for all times to come.

Birth of a Force to Reckon With

The saga of the men in blue started from its inception as the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) on 8 October 1932. The RIAF had a strength of six RAF trained Indian officers and 19 Havai Sepoys, literally air soldiers. The young Air Force had an inventory comprising of four Westland Wapiti IIA Army Cooperation biplanes at Drigh Road as the “A” Flight nucleus of the planned No.1 (Army Co-operation) Squadron. From such humble beginnings to the IAF (the prefix Royal was dropped after India became a Republic) becoming the fourth largest Air Force in the world, in its platinum jubilee year, makes every Indian proud of the sentinels of the Indian skies.

The Founding Visionary

On 1 April 1954, Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee OBE took over from Air Marshal Gerald Gibbs as the Chief of Air Staff of the Indian Air Force. At that time he was just about 43 years old. The immediate task of re-equipping and restructuring the Air Force with newer aircraft and equipment fell upon Mukherjee. With the first Indian Chief of Air Staff at its helm the IAF was destined for undiminished glory and unmatched greatness in the coming years. During his tenure, the Air Force inducted a variety of state of the art aircraft viz. Dassault Mystere, Hawker Hunter, BAe Canberra and Folland Gnat. Mukherjee took care to see that even the human resources planning and development received much attention to benefit the IAF personnel. His task was commendable for he had to deal with the post-independence non-violence driven defence policy but it was his vision and foresight which has placed IAF where it is today.

The Saga of Valour and Courage

The air warriors have lived through a wonderful and exciting journey that has been etched by the valor and selfless sacrifice of many. It is the told and the untold stories of the heroes of the IAF, that makes this path so exciting and humbling for those who follow in their footsteps. Here is a glimpse into a few notable ones; the ones to miss out will only be because of paucity of space and not for the dearth of bravery and valour.

The Burma Campaign & Sqn Ldr Arjan Singh

The RIAF with its Lysanders, Wapitis and Audaxes flew umpteen number of low level dangerous missions to the Japanese bases in Thailand. For almost a month they provided the vital air cover for Rangoon harbour against the marauding Japanese. In 1944, Sqn Ldr Arjan Singh led his Squadron against the Japanese during the Arakan Campaign. Flying close support missions during the crucial Imphal Campaign and later assisting the advance of the Allied Forces to Rangoon, Burma. For his role in successfully
leading the squadron in combat, Sqn Ldr Arjan Singh received the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) in 1944. He later commanded the first IAF Display Flight, flying Hawker Hurricanes, after the war and his flight toured all over the country for aerobatic displays. On 16 August 1947, he had the unique honour of leading the fly-past of over a hundred IAF aircraft over the Red fort. At the age of 44 years he was entrusted to lead the Air Force as its first Air Chief Marshal. Under his leadership the IAF saw its first modern combat, the war against Pakistan in 1965. In recognition of his services he was awarded the Padma Vibhushan after the war. In 2002 he was conferred with the rank of the Marshal of the Air, the only five star general of the IAF.

**Independence & Partition: Baptism with Fire & Mehar Baba**

The RIAF lost several of its permanent bases and other establishments as a result of the division of the country. The young divided nation did not have the breathing space to recover from the division of assets before the IAF was called to service. On 27 October 1947, No.12 Sqn was to accomplish the remarkable feat of air-lifting the 1st Sikh Regiment from Palam, Delhi to the rough and dusty Srinagar airstrip without planning or reconnaissance as an initial response to the sizeable insurgent forces that were pouring across the border into Jammu and Kashmir. On 30 October 1947, the first Spitfires from the Advanced Flying School at Ambala reached Srinagar and were soon engaged in strafing the raiders beyond Pattan. Within a week, the Tempests of No. 7 Squadron were playing a decisive role in the battle of Shelatang which halted the forward momentum of the insurgents.

The indefatigable and indomitable spirit of IAF was exemplified by the we inspiring Air Cmde Mehar Singh MVC DSO, fondly called as ‘Mehar Baba’. During those years he was in charge of the operations of the IAF, leading the 1st Operational Group. His sorties to Poonch and Ladakh, when both these areas were in imminent danger of being run over by the insurgents are stuff of legends in the IAF. He was relentless in his Dakota and was the first to land at Leh, the highest air base in the world, accompanied by none other than commander of land forces in the Srinagar Valley sector, Major General KS Thimmayya, DSO, and his troops. The daring act of flying by Mehar Baba on previously uncharted route helped the Indian troops stop the invaders from isolating Ladakh. The fighting in Jammu and Kashmir continued for 15 months with intense IAF involvement throughout. The ceasefire eventually came into force on 01 January 1949. Despite active operations during this period, the reorganization and modernization of the Service continued unabated.

**Congo Campaign 1960-62: IAF in aid of the United Nations**

The IAF was committed to support United Nations (UN) operations in Congo (now Zaire) in 1961-62. Following an appeal by the U.N. for both troops and combat aircraft to restore law and order and maintain peace, six Canberra B(1) 58s of No.5 Squadron were flown from Agra to Central Africa. Operating from Leopoldville and Kamina, the Canberras destroyed the rebel air force, raided Katangan targets and provided the UN ground forces the vital long-range air support force.

**Liberation of Goa 1961**

Goa was under Portuguese occupation till 1961. The Portuguese refused to give up this colony inspite of repeated requests by the Indian Government, on behalf of the Goan people. India decided to deploy its forces in late 1961 after failure of prolonged negotiations to evict the Portuguese out. The IAF provided the support elements to a massive effort by the ground forces. Air Vice Marshal Erlic Pinto, Air Officer Commanding in Chief (AOC-in-C) of the Western Air Command, IAF was the theater commander during the campaign to liberate Goa. The main staging airbases were Poona and Sambre. Poona hosted two Canberra Squadrons No.16 and No. 35 along with Hunter from No.17 and No.37 Squadrons. The air power was first used on 18 December 1961. No.35 Squadron sent in a massive wave of 12 Canberra led by Wg Cdr NB Menon to attack Dabolim. The bombers dropped 63,000 lbs of bombs within a span of few minutes on Dabolim runway. The pilots took care not to bomb the terminals and the ATC. A second raid by eight Canberra of No.16 Squadron led by Wg Cdr Surinder Singh dropped more bombs on the runway.
area. In another strike, six Hunter of No.17 Sqn led by Sqn Ldr Jayawant Singh took off from Sambre and attacked the Wireless station at Bambolim. Attacking with a mixture of rockets and gun cannon ammunition, the station was soon left a smoldering wreck. The Army requested close support now and then which was supported by the Vampire of No. 45 Sqn. Shortly before the Portuguese surrender on the 19th, the Liberator of No. 6 Sqn flew over Marmagao dropping leaflets heralding the surrender. Daman sector saw about 14 sorties by Mystere of No. 1 Squadron flying from Santa Cruz, Bombay. Flying in pairs of two, the Mystere harassed Portuguese gun positions continuously throughout the day. Part of air efforts during the Goa Operations were directed at Diu, another small Portuguese enclave.

The Chinese Aggression 1962

The real test of IAF airlift capability came in October 1962, when open warfare erupted on the Sino-Indian border in the North-East. Between 20 October 1962 to 20 November 1962 there was extreme pressure on IAF’s transport and helicopter units. The need was to airlift the troops and supplies to support the border posts virtually round the clock and at extreme altitudes. The helicopters constantly ran the gauntlet of Chinese small arms and anti-aircraft fire while landing at make-shift helipads in the mountains. Many notable feats were performed by the IAF during this conflict, including the operation of C-119Gs from airstrips 17,000 ft (5180m) above sea level in the Karakoram Himalayas, and air-lifting by An-12Bs of two troops of AMX-13 light tanks to Chushul, Ladakh, at a small airstrip located at 15,000 ft (4570m) above sea level.

Indo-Pak Conflict 1965

India was attacked on 1 September 1965 in the Chhamb sector by Pakistani forces, after years of mounting border tensions since independence. Pakistan had seized the initiative, having chosen the time and the place, besides enjoying the numerical superiority of both the armour and troops. This posed a grave threat to the Indian forces on the ground. IAF, responding to urgent requests from Army for air strikes against advancing Pakistani armour in the Chhamb-Jaurian sector, launched its Vampire FB Mk52 of No. 45 Sqn from a forward base at 1745 hours on the very first day of the conflict. This was followed by strikes by the Mystere of Nos.3 and 31 Sqn from Pathankot. This effort halted the Pakistani armoured thrust. The IAF Gnat proved its mettle in shooting down several PAF Sabres in this sector, with the first aerial victories being notched by Nos. 23 and 9 Sqn. IAF Canberras raided major PAF bases at Sargodha and Chaklala at night, flying 200 counter air and interdiction missions during the war also to Akwal, Peshawar, Kohat, Chakjhumra and Risalwala. The virtuosity of the Hunter was amply demonstrated with Nos. 7, 20 and 27 Squadrons employed in counter-air as well as interdiction and close air support missions in the West, while No. 14 Squadron battled with PAF Sabres at Kalaikunda in the East. The Mystere were extremely effective in the ground attack role, where their swaths of 55 mm rockets proved highly effective against armoured vehicles. The most outstanding operational success was enjoyed by the Gnat. The three Gnat squadrons provided the air defence mainstay by flying CAPs over most operational IAF bases as well as flying escort missions. Indeed, such was its success, particularly against the F-86, that it earned the appellation of “Sabre Slayer”.

East Pakistan – Creation of Bangladesh 1971

The professional standards, capability and flexibility of the much expanded IAF was put to test in 1971. With the deteriorating political situation in East Pakistan, the IAF was alerted to the possibility of another armed conflict in early 1971. By November 1971, both Indian and Pakistan governments protested violations of their national airspace along the Western border, before the aerial conflict broke out on 22nd November, preceding full-scale war between India and Pakistan by 12 days. At 1449 hours, four Pakistani Sabres strafed Indian and Mukti Bahini positions in the Chowgacha Mor area, and 10 minutes later, while engaged on a third strafing run, the Sabre were intercepted by four Gnats from No. 22 Sqn, a detachment of which was operating from Dum Dum Airport, Calcutta. During the ensuing melee, three of the Sabre were shot down and all the Gnats returned to base unscathed. Other aerial encounters followed over the
next 10 days. The IAF carried out some 4,000 sorties in the West from bases in Northern India, while in the East, another 1,978 sorties were flown. Throughout the conflict, the strategy was to maintain defensive postures on the Western and Northern fronts whilst undertaking lightning campaign in the East, the IAF established a highly credible serviceability rate exceeding 80 per cent. Mission emphasis throughout was on interdiction. IAF’s primary tasks on the Western front were disruption of enemy communications, destruction of fuel and ammunition reserves, and prevention of concentration of ground forces so that no major offensive could be mounted against India while Indian forces were primarily engaged in the East.

The versatility of the MiG-21’s was amply demonstrated in this war, with highly effective short range, precision attacks with 500 kg bombs on the PAF’s air bases at Tezgaon and Kurmitola, while pin point 57 mm rocket attacks were carried out against key command centres in Dhaka. The MiG-21 finally met its original adversary, the F-104 Starfighter, in air combat during the conflict and in all the four recorded cases of classic dog fights, the MiG-21 outclassed and out-fought the F-104. The first aerial victory was on 12 December 1971, when MiG-21FL of No. 47 Squadron shot down a PAF F-104 over the Gulf of Kutch. This was followed by three more victories in quick succession on 17 December, when MiG-21FL of No. 29 Squadron escorting HF-24 Marut, shot down intercepting F-104s near Uttarlai in the Rajsthan desert in gun-missle encounters, while a third F-104, on an intruding mission, was shot down by another MiG 21FL of No.29 Squadron.

**Param Vir Chakra - Fg Off Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon**

The Param Vir Chakra (PVC) is the highest gallantry award given to the Indian Armed Forces. Thus far only 21 PVC have been awarded with as many as 14 of these being posthumous. The IAF received its first Param Vir Chakra during the 1971 conflict. This was awarded posthuminously to Fg Off Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon. Fg Offr Nirmal Jit Singh Sekhon was commissioned on 4 June 1967. During the 1971 Operations, Fg Off Sekhon was with No.18 “Flying Bullets” Squadron flying the Folland-Gnat fighter at Srinagar. In accordance with the international agreement dating back to 1948, no air defence aircraft could be based at Srinagar, until the outbreak of hostilities with Pakistan. Flying Officer Sekhon was, therefore, unfamiliar with the terrain and was not acclimatised to the altitude of Srinagar, especially with the bitter cold and biting winds of the Kashmir winter. Nevertheless, from the onset of the war, he and his colleagues fought successive waves of intruding Pakistani aircraft with valour and determination, maintaining the high reputation of the Gnat aircraft.

On the morning of 14 December 1971, Srinagar airfield was attacked by a wave of six enemy Sabre aircraft. Flying Officer Sekhon was on readiness duty at the time. However, he could not take off at once because of the clouds of dust raised by another aircraft which had just taken off. By the time the runway was fit for take-off, no fewer than six enemy aircraft were overhead, and strafing of the airfield was in progress. Nevertheless, inspite of the mortal danger of attempting to take off during an attack, and with all the odds against him, Flying Officer Sekhon took off and immediately engaged a pair of the attacking Sabre. He succeeded in damaging two of the enemy aircraft. In the fight that followed, at tree top height, he all but held his own, but was eventually overcome by sheer weight of numbers. His aircraft crashed and he was killed.

Thus sacrificing himself for the defence of Srinagar, Flying Officer Sekhon achieved the objective of deterring the enemy from attack. The remaining enemy aircraft fled from the scene of battle without pressing home their attack against the town and the airfield. The sublime heroism, supreme gallantry, flying skill and determination, above and beyond the call of duty, displayed by Flying Officer Sekhon in the face of certain death, set new heights of bravery in the true Air Force traditions.

**Operation Safed Sagar –The Kargil Heroics**

Early in May 1999, the Indian Army discovered large scale infiltration by Pakistani soldiers across the LOC in the Indian territory in the desolate Kargil sector. The operation to evict the mountain tops of the Pakistani army has now etched itself in living memory as 'Operation Vijay' and 'Operation Safed Sagar' (the IAF Campaign). IAF was called upon by the army to bamboozle the insurgents. Mi-17
helicopters, MiG-21, -27, -29 and Mirage 2000 were deployed. They provided battlefield close support, logistical supply and casualty evacuation along with the Army Aviation Units. The mild winter in Jammu and Kashmir during 1998 enabled Pakistani Army regulars and mercenaries to infiltrate, and set up camps on the Indian Side of the Line of Control (LOC). The build-up of forces, unknown to Indian authorities at the time was to have a major impact on the IAF the following year as it fought to dislodge the enemy.

The battle in Kargil took place over some of the highest terrain in the world, where aircraft and weapons were limited in their effectiveness. Conventional targets like airfields, command and control centre and convoys did not exist. Instead, the IAF were to be confronted with tents and fortified bunkers. The advance along the LOC was eventually to penetrate up to 10 Km in some areas along a line 200 Km long. All the ridges in the area were off-shoots of Mount K2 (8611 metres), the world’s second tallest mountain or Nanga Parbat (8126 metres), both located on the Pakistan side. Because of the climatic conditions and wind directions, a large number of features are sheer cliffs on the Indian side with gradual gradients on the other. Heights varied along the line, with a low of 2700 metres at Kargil, going up to 3400 metres in Dras and Tiger Hill being at 5000 metres. The area had no habitation and was covered in snow for most of the year. Strategically, the area could not be used as a launch pad for a major offensive, its sole importance being the heights and the threat to the strategic National Highway 1A.

IAF was limited in what could be used at such demanding altitudes. Mi-17 helicopters and MiGs were initially deployed for low level strike missions. The use of shoulder fired surface-to-air (SAM) missiles such as the Stingers by the enemy restricted the effective use of both helicopter and fighter due to hostile flying environment. During the early part of operations IAF sacrificed two fighter and a Mi-17. This was the turning point in IAF’s mission planning. It was decided that high altitude bombing by fighter aircraft, particularly precision bombing by Mirage 2000, was the best option. Mirage 2000 could operate at high altitude but did not have high altitude attack capability. The aircraft which had already moved to forward ops location in its air defence role, thus had to be made ready for an offensive role. It has always been regarded as an air defence fighter with limited ground attack capability. Consequently it lacked certain resources such as bombs, hard-point pylons, tools, testers and ground crew experience in such matters. But the IAF personnel stood up to the challenge and ironed out most of the requirements for the redefined role of Mirage 2000, making twelve aircraft available at any given time for bombing missions. Each aircraft was configured with 12 bombs, 1 ventral fuel tank and 2 ‘Magic-2’ Matra air-to-air missiles. The mission would meet up with fighter escorts to fly into the Indian side of Jammu and Kashmir, with MiG 29s providing top cover. The early attacks took place on Point 5140 near Tololing in the Dras Sector facilitating the Indian Army to recapture this position after fighting in tandem with continuous IAF Strikes. Notable amongst approximately 200 plus attack missions flown by Mirage 2000 were air strikes on Muntho Dhalo, Tiger Hill and Point 4388 in the Drass Sector.

During Kargil ops, three Officers and two airmen made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation. The IAF was awarded two Vir Chakras and 23 Vayusena Medals for the valour and courage shown by air warriors.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This text is borrowed largely from the following websites:-
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