

IAF ANNIVERSARY 08 Oct 95

BACKGROUND

INDIAN AIR FORCE

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Indian Air Force Act became operative on October 08, 1932. Since then, the IAF, has become a formidable bulwark of the nations defence. The Indian Air Force Act came into being on the recommendations of the Skeene Committee, which was set up in better known as the Indian Sandhurst Committee/1925 under the chairmanship of Sir Andrew Skeene, the then Chief of the General Staff, following popular demands for the formation of an Indian Air Arm on the lines of the RAF. Pandit Moti Lal Nehru and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru were among the prominent members of this Committee.

The committee went into the records of Indian aviation during the 1st World War, and appreciated the feats of many pilots like Lt Inder Lal Roy, HS Malik, SG Welinger, to name a few. The committee strongly recommended that the Govt of India should take necessary steps to form an air arm of Indian Army as soon as possible, and, pending creation of proper flying training facilities in India, Indian pilots should be trained at RAF College, Cranwell and granted the King's commission. The committee submitted and published its findings in April 1927.

It was, however, not before 1930, the recommendations were taken up for implementation and a batch of six Indians were sent for training. They were HC Sircar, Subroto Mukerjee, Bhupinder Singh, AB Awan, Amarjeet Singh and Tandon.

Later, nine more Indians were sent for flying training. On the other hand 22 men were given one year training as apprentice Aircraft Hands (later called Hawai Sepoys). These officers and men formed the Indian Air Force till 1939, when the World War-II broke out. The first six pilots were granted commission on October 8, 1932. Thus October 08 has double significance, i.e the IAF Act becoming effective coinciding with commissioning of 1st batch of Indian officers. Therefore this date has been accepted as the birthday of the Indian Air Force. Today IAF completes sixty three years of its glorious service to the nation.

The first formal flight of the Indian Air Force was formed on April 01, 1933 at Drigh Road, Karachi and consisted of 6 officers and 22 Hawai Sepoys. The flight had on its inventory four Westland Wapiti aircraft of doubtful vintage, slow, sluggish biplanes which became obsolete almost as soon as they rolled-off the factory lines. But the just born Indian Air Force had to make do with this cumbersome but safe flying machine made of wood and fabric in which there was hardly any instrument panel worth the name and the pilot had to be tied to hooks by a monkey chain to prevent him from flying off through openings all round.

The years from 1933 to 1939 were the gestation period for the Indian Air Force. For four and half years till 1937, the flight devoted its time to extensive training of its aircrew and the ground personnel. Flt Lt CA Bouchair, the first Commanding

Officer, caustically called 'Bucher' in private circles, was a stickler for discipline and a hard task-master. He made sure through continuous practice and drill that everyone knew his job.

In 1937, IAF was put to its first acid test when on Oct 01, it shifted to Miranshah fort in Tochi river valley in the interior of North Waziristan to quell the Afghan rebels, its main task being 'Army Co-operation'. In the evening the aircraft had to be manually towed inside the fort and the gates secured against the trigger-happy tribemen, lurking in the dark.

1939 saw the beginning of the Second World War. On September 5, 1939, the charge of No.1 Sqn was taken over by Subrot Muknerjee with the rank of Sqn Ldr. With war came expansion, five Coastal defence flights were raised at Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi and Cochin to oversee the 3000 miles coastline of India. A sixth Coastal Defence Flight was formed later at Vishakhapatnam.

On December 7, 1941, Japan entered the war with its attack on Pearl Harbour. It had a sweeping success and Japanese came bulldozing through the jungles of Burma. The IAF then moved to the Burmese theatre, and was in a real sweat and blood war.. The Second Burma campaign saw complete rout of the Japanese. By the end of 1943 the IAF had acquired an impressive array of nine squadrons, seven of them flying Hurricanes and two Vengeance dive-bombers. Spitfires were added later in 1944-45. In recognition of the spectacular services rendered by the IAF, the prefix, 'Royal' was added to it, and it came to be known as the Royal Indian Air Force. The prefix, however was dropped when India was declared a Republic on January 26, 1950.

### YEARS AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Winds of political change swept over the sub-continent in 1947, and India became free. But freedom brought partition in its wake. So, the newly formed force was dismembered and divided. The RIAF's strength was now reduced to seven fighter and one transport squadron. The only silver lining was the constitution of IAF as an independent service with its own Commander-in-Chief, Air Marshal Thomas Elmhirst.

The much-attenuated service had to cope with a wide variety of tasks in the aftermath of the partition, in which it acquitted itself with credit. Thousands of refugees were evacuated from the isolated camps in Pakistan, and when the fate of Kashmir seemed to be hanging by a slender thread, it was the Air Force that rose to the occasion and saved the day. brutal as

The invasion of Kashmir by Pakistan was as/it was unexpected. The appeal to save the valley by Maharaja Hari Singh was made on October 25, 1947. On the 26th the Instrument of Accession was signed. On 27th morning, the Air Force flew its first sortie to Srinagar Airfield, carrying the first contingent of the Indian Army, at a time when the dusty air strip was virtually under siege, Dakotas of No. 12 Sqn flew endless sorties after that, carrying the necessary reinforcements and even strafing the concentration of raiders. The race against time was ultimately won by the gallantry and efficiency of the aircrew.

In 1948, with the acquisition of Vampires, the IAF became the first Asian Air Force to fly jets. A heavy bomber Squadron of Liberators was formed from the scrap left at Kanpur. Gradually an effective operation-oriented Air Force was taking shape. In addition to operational Commands, a Training Command was set up in 1949 to impart & oversee the "all-through training" of Officers and men, Maintenance Command which came into being in 1956, was entrusted the task of overhaul and maintenance of aircraft and equipment. The Air Force Academy, Navigational Training School and Technical Training College were added one by one.

The year 1950 witnessed devastating earthquakes in Assam, probably the biggest in recorded history. The Air Force carried out gigantic relief operations. In years to come, rescue missions in aid to civil administration, were to become regular feature,

The Indian Air Force came of age in 1954, Air Marshal Subroto Mukherjee became the first Indian Air Chief and Chief of Air Staff. Incidentally, he was also the first Indian to command a Squadron and a Command.

Expansion of the Air Force continued and new types of aircraft and equipment were added to its strength for the different roles it was being called upon to play. Then came the 1962, Sino-Indian clash. The IAF, though not called for air operations, rendered invaluable logistic support to forward Army and civil outposts by ferrying men in endless sorties over the inhospitable terrain. Flying through the tortuous and misty valleys of Arunachal Pradesh, the helicopters and transport aircraft of the Air Force flew in supplies and evacuated the wounded from the remote snowy wastes. Flying through formidable heights of the

Himalayas, in utter darkness and complete radio silence over terrain which many aircrew had never seen before and which does not forgive any mistakes, the IAF achieved the allotted task. During the entire operations, not a single aircraft was lost. It also goes to the credit of the IAF that its aircraft took off with full load from Ladakh at a height of 5,660 mtrs, probably a world record at that time.

The 1965 Indo-Pak conflict added another chapter to the glorious record of the IAF. The air action started on the evening of September 1, 1965, cost Pakistan Air Force 73 aircraft destroyed in air action and on ground. To appreciate the situation fully, we may re-live the past in a broad sweep. Pakistan threw the gauntlet down by a surprise attack on the Chhamb-Jaurian sector in Kashmir in the early hours of September 1. The bridgehead of an Infantry brigade and two tank regiments, as consisted against our Infantry brigade with only 20 tanks. The Indian armoured brigade was some days away, and it became clear within hours that the IAF had to be called in, if the advance had to be stalled. At 1600 hrs, the Defence Minister called up the Chief of the Air Staff, Air Marshal Arjan Singh and asked, at the request of the Army Chief, how soon he could provide air cover in the Chhamb sector. "Within an hour", came his reply. At 1719 hrs the first attack by Air Force was launched by Vampires and Mysteres. Air Force flew as many as twenty six sorties between 1719 and 1905 hrs and took a toll of 13 tanks, two guns, 62 vehicles, not to mention the death and destruction, caused to enemy troops and installations. The thrust was contained before it got underway, and the crucial battle for air supremacy was won by the IAF.



Sabres of Pakistan Air Force were superior in armament, speed and manouvrability to IAF aircraft. But the IAF pilots hit upon the grand stratagem of swooping on the Sabres from great heights when these were engaged in chasing the low-flying Mystere and Vampire. Gnats played havoc with the Sabre fleet and struck terror in the hearts of the PAF pilots. The great abilities of IAF Pilots in 1965 proved once again the age-old adage of war "the man behind the machine is more important than the machine itself". The air supremacy, gained by the IAF was so complete and favourable that its aircraft started hitting the Pakistani targets at will, at any point and time of its own choosing. Six years later, came the fateful night of December 3, 1971 when the Pakistani air action began with a bang, but ended in a whimper. The pre-emptive air strike brought no surprise but guaranteed heavy reprisals from the IAF. Complete air supremacy was achieved in the Eastern Sector within 48 hours of the start of hostilities and Pakistan was left with a miserable assortment of four sabres in the East with hardly any runway fit for launching them. This superiority was so complete that even AN-12, the traditional 'freighter of the IAF' was extensively used for saturation bombing apart from ferrying men and material over the rivers and marshlands. This also made possible the biggest paradrop operation after World War II which took place at Tangail in Eastern Sector .

In the Western Sector, the strength of the IAF and PAF, broadly speaking were evenly matched. Even then the PAF could not mount more than 100 to 150 sorties a day as against the Indian average of 300 per day. The PAF could never succeed in making deep penetration raids into the Indian territory while

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the IAF caused bonfires over Karachi port, and oil installations kept burning till the end of the war. IAF losses were limited to a bare half of the PAF casualties. Wide spread damage was caused to the Pakistani Air Force and Radar installations. As in 1965, the IAF provided an effective umbrella to the Army advance enabling it to move with consummate ease and more despatch. The way IAF Hunters destroyed Pakistani tanks at Longewala will go down in history as an event of great significance. No less important were the IAF's night sorties in the Chhamb sector, which destroyed the enemy's line of supply and brought his offensive to a grinding halt. Pakistan not only lost the battle, but also lost their Eastern Wing which emerged as an independent Bangla Desh.

The IAF is called upon to help the needy population in the times of natural calamities like floods, drought or earthquakes. It has been playing such saviours' role quite effectively even at a short notice and in the remote inaccessible areas throughout the length and breadth of the vast country. Starting with the old generation aircraft like Dakotas, Packets and MI-4; it continues with the new generation AVro, AN-32, IL-76, Chetak, Cheetah, MI-8, MI-17 and MI-26. In the face of natural calamity in the Garhwal areas of Uttar Pradesh, when earth-quake caused death and destruction in 1991, IAF aviators and their machines again came to the aid of civilian population with relentless relief and rescue operations. 'Likewise, hundreds of stranded passengers on the Jammu-Srinagar national highway were rescued by the IAF Choppers in the blizzard conditions when the road got blocked due to heavy rains, landslides and snow. IAF's rescue operations at Timber Trail on Chandigarh-Shimla Road and more recent one of Sep 95 near Kullu(HP) have earned for itself



the gratitude of nation.

### THE IAF IN THE EIGHTIES

The 1980s saw the active involvement of the IAF in backing up the army in the operations 'Meghdoot' in Siachen from 1984, Operation Pawan in Sri Lanka from 1987 and Male operations in the Maldives Islands in 1989. In all these campaigns, IAF played a sterling role on each occasion mainly with its logistic support and air maintenance of the troops. Keeping in view the increased strategic importance of the Southern India, a new operational Command-Southern Air Command with its Headquarters at Trivendrum was set up.

The year 1982 also marked the Golden Jubilee year of the Service. The first over space flight by an Indian Astronaut-Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma- aboard a Soviet spacecraft in April 1984 took place. Keeping pace with the advancement of technology, IAF added the sophisticated aircraft, weapon system and other equipment to its inventory. These included the modern fighters/fighter bombers like Mig-23, Mig-27, Mig-29 and Mirage 2000. Helicopter fleet acquired the powerful MI-17 and heavy lift capability MI-26 Choppers. MI-25 and MI-35 attack helicopters were also added for effective tactical support role. The transport fleet replaced the Packets, Dakotas and Otters with the medium haul transport aircraft AN-32 and Dornier DO-228. IAF acquired strategic airlift capability by including the giant IL-76 Jet transport aircraft. These inductions immensely contributed to the modernisation of the IAF fleet to counter threats from any quarters. Thus the eighties were the period of major modernisation and consolidation of the gained experiences besides effective participation in the various low intensity operations alongside the other two services.

IAF IN NINETIES

1992 was the Diamond Jubilee year of the IAF. It was a time to take stock of the achievements, critical analysis of the problem areas and plan for the newer challenges posed by the prevailing security environment. After geo-political changes in the erstwhile Soviet Union-the major supplier of weapon systems to the Indian Armed Forces - IAF decided to go in for massive effort at indigenisation. On the other hand, the successful development of indigenous missile systems and prospective development and production of LCA, are indeed very encouraging for the defence services in general and IAF in particular.

IAF added yet another chapter in its glorious history by undertaking peace keeping operations in war torn Somalia. As part of United Nations' Peace keeping Force, the IAF contingent comprising 34 officers and airmen with 4 chetak helicopters were inducted in Somalia in Oct 93. It provided air cover to the food convoy over 270 Km stretch from Mogadishu to Baidos. It carried out route surveillance, aerial recce, communication and casual evacuation. Despite difficult living and operating conditions, the IAF detachment in Somalia, by its professionalism and humanitarian approach, earned for itself kudos from large number of countries as well as the gratitude of distressed populace of the affected country. Indeed it kept the Indian Tricolour and IAF ensign flying high.

Keeping pace with the change in social milieu-the Air Force decided to induct women officers in 1992. The first batch of ground duty women officers passed out from the Air Force Academy on

01 Jun 93. The decision to open the flying and technical branches to women was taken soon afterwards. These officers are now serving in various units of the IAF.

### IAF TODAY

Today Indian Air Force has completed sixty three years of its glorious service to the nation. It can look back with pride at its achievements and look ahead with confidence born out of experience it gained in a wide variety of roles. Maintaining its high operational standard and excellent record of efficiency, IAF has upheld its high traditions in all aspects. Ever ready to meet new challenges and to keep pace with the geopolitical and technological developments, the IAF has been constantly reviewing its capabilities and assimilating the high tech aircraft, equipment and weapon systems besides devising new doctrines and formulating its training programme to meet the potential threats. Its technical personnel are one of the best in the world in terms of motivation and professionalism. There is a long march from the vintage Spitfires to modern state of the art Mig-29 and the Mirage-2000. It is a tribute to the professional efficiency of IAF personnel to have absorbed the technologies that have changed at a rapid pace in the past six decades.

Today, the IAF maintains an operational readiness round the clock to meet any threat to the country's security. The experience of three major post Independence operations and day-to-day commitments in meeting the diverse and complex

requirements of so vast a country with a bewildering variety of terrain and climes - have moulded the IAF into a unique institution. It symbolises strength, adaptability resourcefulness improvisation and spirit of standing against the heaviest of odds. This youngest of the three services has emerged as the fourth largest and a balanced Air Force of the World thus realising the vision of the pioneers in their life time itself. The modernisation of the force is a continuous process keeping in view the changing security environment and the emerging strategic concepts and technological advancements.

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