



THE HISTORY OF INDIAN AIR FORCE

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"And then, when I thought about joining the Air Force, flying seemed like a natural extension of the motorcycling experience. You're going faster, higher. You're operating a machine that's a lot more powerful than you are." - Duane G Carey

Somewhere the journey of the Indian Airforce started when on 10th March 1910, the first time an aircraft 'took-off' in India, when a Corsican hotelier based in Madras Giacomo D'angelis, flew a biplane he had designed. Very soon, some British army officers, who became flying enthusiasts, realized the potential of using this new invention in warfare.

In 1913, Captain SD Massey of 29th Punjab Regiment, Indian Army established a military flying school at Sitapur Uttar Pradesh. The units trained here went on to serve in world war I (1914-1918).

Under the unofficial name of the Indian Air corps. Indra Lal Roy (1898-1918), a scion of a wealthy Bengali zamindari family and a member of the Indian Air Corps, is considered to be the first Indian Fighter Aircraft Pilot. His nephew, Subroto Mukherjee became the first Indian to become the chief of Air Staff in 1954.

Only four Indians are definitively known to have been military aviators in World War One. They blazed a remarkable trail for the six hundred-odd who took up that occupation in World War Two (including at least one Bollywood actor), and the three thousand-odd who serve in that role in India today.

Those four pioneers were Lt Hardit Singh Malik, Lt SC Welinkar, 2Lt Errol Sen, and Flt Lt Indra Lal Roy, DFC. (Two or three others are known to have received temporary commissions, but cannot be determined to have flown operationally.) Of the four, the two whose names are relatively best-known are Hardit Singh Malik and Indra Lal "Laddie" Roy. They make a neat pair for Indian aviation enthusiasts; for rather like the fictional characters Biggles and Wilkes, one flew Sopwith Camels and the other flew SE5as.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is the air arm of the Indian Armed Forces. Before the Indian Air Force was established in 1932, a group of Indian aviators marked their presence during the first world war.

The Indian Air Force's History precedes World War Two by eight years.

The IAF was established on 8 Oct 1932 when its formation was announced in the Gazette of India. No.1 Squadron formed at Drigh Road in Karachi on 1 April 1933 with a complement of six Indian Officers under the command of a British officer.

Every history starts with the words "The Indian Air Force was officially established by the Indian Air Force Act as notified in the Gazette of India dated 8th October 1932...", but has anyone actually seen the IAF Act of 1932 that was passed by the Indian Legislature in April 1932? To which the Governor-General of India gave his assent on 8th April 1932?

The first squadron of the IAF carries immense history and has always been a subject of deeper study for all concerned. For nearly a decade since its formation, it was the only squadron the IAF had and all the IAF personnel on the Air Force List were posted to the squadron. Independence and partition, was a sad blow to the IAF with it being decided that No.1 Squadron assets would be transferred to PAF, leading the No. 1 Squadron to be number-plated for the time being.

The last of the Operational Record Books (ORB) for the squadron stored by the British at the UK [National Archives](#) ends with the month of April 1947 were Squadron Leader Ranjan Dutt (IND/1594) relinquishing command on 14 May 1947. The Squadron has activated again in Feb 1953 on the Vampire aircraft under the command of Sqn Ldr E J Dhatigara (1899). In the seven decades since this period, the IAF in all its publications has believed this to be the chronology of the command of No.1 Squadron.

The first test for the Independent Royal Indian Air Force came within the months of August 15. The Operations of the 47-48 War were unique in the sense that this was the first time Transport aircraft of the IAF saw full-time deployment in operations. Fighter squadrons also gained exposure and experience in operating in a mountainous environment.

In the July 1999 issue of a national magazine: No Air Force in the World carried out operations at heights above 16,000 ft. No aircraft has been designed for terrain like Kargil. (Incidentally during Second World War the USAF regularly flew from Panagarh to China "Over the Hump" in their 4-engine B-24s).

It has been rightly remarked that the period of 1955-1971 is called the Period of turmoil. This was the time the Indian Air Force entered a new era with the acquisition of jet aircraft. The period also saw the two Indo-Pak wars, both of which were marked by the neutralisation of Pakistani Air efforts by the Indian Air Force. The IAF also contributed to the UN Peace keeping mission in Congo as well as the Sino India Conflict, with dedication and commitment.

Some great missions were :

The Skardu missions

Weeks into the standoff with Indian forces in eastern Ladakh, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) had spread rumours about Skardu airbase in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir being used by its air force.

The rumours had led to heated debates about the prospect of a "two-and-a-half front" war, implying India's ability to deal with coordinated attacks by China and Pakistan, along with internal insurgencies.

Indian Air Force chief RKS Bhadauria had then categorically dismissed a collusive threat and claimed readiness to deal with any situation. A similar threat when posed by Pakistan during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War was dealt a body blow by IAF.

At that time, satellite imagery was not available to the IAF and Canberra aircraft were used for photo reconnaissance missions along the borders. However, they were found to be too slow to penetrate deep into Pakistan, especially for confirming bomb damage assessment (BDA).

Some of the fighter bombers were then converted for photo recce missions by fitting them with cameras. Collecting aerial pictures of Skardu airbase bombardment was one such mission carried out by IAF.

The airbase being located in PoK, care was exercised to ensure only the runway was bombed. There was no damage to other assets or personnel as it was purposely avoided. Details of this operation such as tactics and strategy are not revealed as it might be of importance to the IAF even today.

The mission to Poonch

In the Poonch Sector along the Pakistan-Kashmir border, the Indian troops had taken up tactical positions in the important towns along the Jammu-Srinagar Highway at Sunderbani, Naushera, Borripatam, Bhimber, Mirpur, Kothi, Rajouri and Poonch. They were constantly being troubled by the invaders who had entrenched themselves in the hills. The Indian Army had a great problem at their hands i.e. provisioning of supplies not only for the troops but also for the forty thousand refugees. With the road link to Jammu under threat of being cut off, the only option was an air bridge to Poonch but there was no landing ground there. A decision was taken to construct an emergency airstrip at Poonch. Six thousand refugees worked day and night and constructed an airstrip within a record time of one week. AVM Subroto Mukherjee and Air Cmde Mehar Singh landed the first ac on the newly constructed airstrip at Poonch on 8th Dec 1947. The landing and take off at Poonch was not easy as the Airstrip was surrounded by streams from three sides and the approach was extremely steep. Despite these difficulties and against heavy odds Air Cmde Mehar Singh created a sort of record by landing a Dakota with three tons of load against normal rated load of one ton. In a span of six days, No 12 Sqn RIAF carried out 73 sorties, averaging more than two sorties per aircraft per day, carrying more than 210 tons of supplies to Poonch and evacuating thousands of refugees during the return journey. The air bridge to Poonch was maintained for one year

till the declaration of ceasefire on 01 Jan 1950.

The fifties saw the modernization of the IAF. Coming out of the decade that saw the world war, the advent of new technology like JETS, the complete Indianisation of its officer corps, expansion of its infrastructure, all ensured that it was a hectic and busy period till the next decade which was filled with conflict all over again.

The Indian involvement in Sri Lanka saw the largest air effort by the Indian Air Force in air maintenance and counter insurgency support amounting to 70,000 sorties by Transport, Helicopter and fighter aircraft without a single loss to hostile fire.

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 operations to evict the mountain tops of the Pakistani army has now etched itself in living memory as 'Operation Vijay'. The Indian Air Force provided Battlefield close support , logistical supply and Casualty evacuation along with the Army Aviation Units. Three Officers and two airmen made the ultimate sacrifice. For its role in the ops, the IAF was awarded two Vir Chakras and 23 Vayusena Medals.

The contributions of Indian Air Force in 1965 and 1971 wars are very well known and has been extensively chronicled.

Over the next two decades the Indian Air Force undertook massive upgrading of its aircraft and equipment. As part of the process, the Indian Air Force introduced over twenty new aircraft types. Jaguars and several variations of the MiG were among the aircraft introduced to replace the Dakotas and the Packets. The MiG is a revolutionary aircraft that was introduced to the Indian fleet in the eighties.

The same period also witnessed a number of world records set by Indian Air Force personnel. Sqn Ldr Makkar and Flt Lt RTS Chinna set a world record by bombing from their Mi-17 helicopter in Ladakh at an altitude of 5050 meters. Sqn Ldr Sanjay Thapar, was the first Indian to para jump over the South Pole. Exploring new vistas, Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma was the first Indian cosmonaut to venture into outer space as part of an Indo-Soviet space program.

The last decade of the twentieth century saw a phenomenal change in the structure of the Indian Air Force with induction of women into the Air Force for short service commissions. It was also a time when the Air Force undertook some of the most perilous operations ever undertaken.

In 1999, the Indian Air Force undertook "Operation Safed Sagar", the most unique air operation undertaken by any air force in the world. An air attack was launched and won at an unprecedented height, under hostile climatic conditions against an intruding enemy. The Indian Air Force also participated in the peacekeeping mission at Somalia as part of a humanitarian operation.

Thus in the very first military campaign forced on India after her Independence and Partition, her totally unprepared armed forces and many civilians gave an account of themselves of which any Nation may feel proud. Her good old sword, the world saw, was still not rusted. And this ancient land of sages was also the land of heroes.