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## Kargil Vijay Diwas Rajat Jayanti

### Flash Back to Kargil: Certain Memoirs of the Aerial Operations

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## **Introduction**

Operation “Safed Sagar” was a unique example of the conduct of Aerial operations at High Altitudes and Mountainous regions. It was also the first large-scale use of Air Power by IAF since the 1971 Indo-Pak war. Participation by the IAF proved to be the cutting edge and shaped the course of the battle, resulting in a famous Indian victory. I had significantly participated as a junior pilot in the Air operations from a Mirage-2000 Squadron and have a first-hand account of the innovativeness, efforts, sheer professionalism and the aggressive determination, which went into ensuring this unparalleled performance by the IAF. Despite the passage of twenty-five years, due to the firsthand experiences and successes enjoyed, the activities are very vividly etched in the memories.

## **Build Up**

From an operational Squadron perspective, the initial incursion reports were followed on newspaper but as an Insurgency incident. The Squadron was heavily committed with a multitude of roles and incessant participation in exercise and workshops during the month of May, plagued by the excessively high temperatures and very small flying operating windows. The gravity of the situation began to emerge with the news that IAF help was requested during a Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) meeting on 18 May 99.

The news of a Canberra reconnaissance aircraft being hit by a Stinger missile triggered aggressive emotions and anger amongst the Squadron personal. Subsequent news of the crashing of a Mig-27 aircraft in POK, capture of the pilot, Flt Lt K Nachiketa, shooting of the Escort Mig-21 aircraft by a Stinger missile, the murder of its captured pilot Squadron Leader Ajay Ahuja in cold blood and the shooting down of a Mi-17 again by a stinger missile, resulting in death of all the crew members, enraged all. I was personally further enraged, since Nachi was my course mate and he had stayed in my room during TDs, Exercises and Workshops.

## *Induction*

The deployment of IAF was sequential in nature and in line with the incremental buildup of a situation. During the afternoon of 29 May 99, we were suddenly told of our deployment from the same evening onwards. In line with wartime deployment philosophies, we took recourse to tactical routing, masking of aircraft within the ATS traffic routes and landing by night to avoid visual identification. Due to our excessive deployment routines and participation in many exercises

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throughout the year, the deployment, even though momentous, seemed very routine. All our families naturally knew of our induction but nothing beyond that. Security of information aspects and precautions were repeatedly briefed to all personnel and maintained strictly thereafter. Those were the days of STD booths and nil mobiles, wherein proliferation could be easily conserved.

### *Weather Conditions*

The months of May-July are amongst the worst in the Indian Sub-Continent for the conduct of Air Operations, especially with modern systems intensive aircraft. The weather varied from extremely hot and dry climatic conditions, unstable pre-monsoon weather phenomenon of thunderstorms, gale, increasingly humid conditions and large spells of rain with extensive clouding. However, as the missions became increasingly synergized with the Ground Operations being conducted by the Army, the missions were needed to be launched compulsorily, till the time launches became impossible.

### *Temperament*

The philosophy of IAF, as should be with any professional organisation, is to train in peace so that at the moment of reckoning, the combatants are able to give their best shots. It was that moment for the Squadron and all personal were extremely pumped up and willing to put in the extra bits; whenever it mattered and wherever called for. We were in a very aggressive but professionally tempered state of mind; and greatly hoped to get the chance to shoot down the adversary. While emotions were high but due to our high levels of professional indoctrination, we were extremely focused and alert in the cockpits. All Radar pickups, RWR indications, Cockpit indications and Mission objectives were well sorted and segregated in our minds. We were flying missions with live weapons and in fully operational weapon configurations and felt further responsible for the lethality entrusted to us. At the time of switch off after return from missions, I would notice the maintenance crew eagerly looking at the weapon hardpoints of the aircraft to see if any weapons were fired. Such was the enthusiasm and josh at that time!!!

### **Tempo of Missions**

Following the initial losses by the IAF, the initial missions thereafter, were reshaped towards extensive reconnaissance (Recce), Electronic Intelligence (ELINT) and Ground Intelligence gathering, to build up a comprehensive picture of the Air and Ground situation. Various platforms were pressed into service including IAF Fighter aircraft for ELINT, Recce and Photo Missions; Transport aircraft for Communication Intelligence (COMMINT), ELINT and Photo Recce missions; special aircraft from other Govt organisations and Satellite Imagery. This phase also saw the

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innovative use of the Lase Designation Pod (LDP); which is essentially a laser targeting pod for drop of Laser Guided Bombs (LGBs); as a Photo Intelligence gathering/ confirmation tool for achieving immediate clarity on targets which could not be clearly ascertained through other sources or for requirements of immediate nature. Throughout the phase, a watch was also made on PAF AD aircraft movements, envisaged intentions, Ground AD deployments as well as the probable stinger locations. Once adequate intelligence was gathered, the live bombing missions started. Reconnaissance and Int gathering missions, however, continued concurrently.

### **Achieving Flexibility in Operations**

From mid-June onwards, the intensity of missions increased. At times, the missions were tasked at extremely short notices of 30 minutes and in certain cases launched within 40 minutes of the landing of the previous mission, where there was not enough time for planning prior to the missions. The Squadron came up with flexible concepts, which enabled CATO mission planning even in the air, enroute to the target areas. Likewise, the Squadron evolved a Pan-Command Diversion system; enabling freedom of operations across the entire and vast geographical span of Western Air Command Area of Responsibility (AOR) encompassing the states of Rajasthan (northern part), Haryana, Delhi, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab and Jammu & Kashmir including Leh and Thoise Airfields. The Squadron also devised a system of duty + spare pilots roster to man the 24 hour cycle. The expectations and the confidence levels of the ability of the Squadron and the Mirage platform to reliably deliver mission success 24 x 7, amongst Command planning Staff became extremely high.

### **Mission Briefing Codes**

During those days, the only medium of communications was the Tropo and open BSNL lines. Both could be monitored. However, both the Mirage Squadron youngsters devised briefing codes to coordinate the bare essential mission details. The brief was only for time, RV place and the general sector and due to our flexible navigation and R/T plans, we were able to achieve full mission success. The lingual diversity of India was utilized to the fullest during these mission briefings, especially languages of West and South India.

### **Air Opposition**

During the operations, it became evident that PAF AD aircraft were airborne, but maintaining standoff distances well within their own territory. Through Radar and RWR inputs, we picked up F-16 aircraft confined to within 20 Kms of Skardu Airfield. Picking up the F-16 aircraft pumped us up

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even further and we were hoping for an engagement by them, so that we could shoot the F-16 down. Unfortunately for us, the aircraft stayed confined to within 20 Kms of their Base.

### **Spotting of Stinger Missile Plumes**

As per the Stinger missile threat generally prevalent in the area, an elevation floor limit was defined per mission, as per the max terrain of operations. During one of the Escort missions, I noticed a strike aircraft carrying out a dive and a white plume emanating from the ridges. On warning call of "Missile plume 1 clock low", I saw the strike aircraft discharging flares and the Stinger missile going astray.

### **Synergised Operations with Indian Army**

The System enabled bombing capabilities of the Mirage-2000 proved very effective during the conventional bombing missions. A GPS assisted manual drop of bombs was evolved by 17 Sqn using Target co-ordinates, when targets were not visible due to cloud cover. IAF operations were concentrated during the day and Army operations during the night, This led to incessant and synergised operations throughout the 24 Hr cycle by both IAF and the Indian Army, which reportedly sapped the morale of the intruders despite being very tactically entrenched in favourable ridge positions.

### **Directing of Bofors Fire**

A necessity arose to evolve a methodology towards directing and improving the accuracy of the Bofors Firing. It was natural that only an airborne platform could provide this input and direct fire. However, there were only meager LDP pods in the IAF inventory. Consequently, a methodology was evolved in the Squadron to use the waypoint depiction on the HUD as the Target position mark and thereafter use R/T to relay the approximate accuracy to the Ground Forces. We flew the mission in a trainer aircraft (CO & self) at 0130 hrs in the morning. The snow-clad mountainous terrain, which looked picturesque during the day, looked very eerie, cold and desolate by night. On reaching the calculated standoff point and establishing orbit pattern in the target area, we found that the methodology was workable as the sequence of firing by the Bofors Guns was not continuous and gave the necessary time interval to be able to correlate the firing with respect to the target waypoint and relay approximate accuracies to the ground. Unfortunately, we did not get any response from the Ground agencies.

### **Flying at 45000 Feet**

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During Escort Missions to the other Government Agency special aircraft, we flew missions at 45000 feet. This was an altogether new experience for us as aircraft and aeroengines behave excessively sluggishly at those altitudes. We also practically got to see the effects of crossing the Myntra levels, which resulted in the formation of contrails. To avoid visual detection, the altitudes had to be lowered till the contrails stopped. In one mission, I encountered pressurisation failure, wherein I was not able to find my voice, till I descended to an altitude close to 30,000 feet.

### **Change of Mission after Getting Airborne**

There was a peculiar instance of a mission which got changed in the air which show cases professional flexibility and operational mind set. Our formation was to escort a Recce mission from our base. Another Mirage Recce formation from Adampur was to be escorted by aircraft from Adampur. We got airborne, but our Reconnaissance aircraft had to abort the mission. In the meantime, the Mirage Recce aircraft got airborne, but the Escort aircraft could not get airborne. While the distance between our formations was 200 Kms and missions unknown to each, we did chance upon the situation on the common AD recovery frequency. R/T contact was established between the formations. "Feasible to provide Escort and join up" was the request from the Mirage-2000 Recce leader. "Yes" we responded. Despite the enroute leg being straight with only one turn involved and without knowledge of the area of Ops of the missions; through Radar pick-ups, pre-fed way points and with minimal R/T, we joined up with the formation as they reached the target area and thereafter provided Air Space sanitization for the entire mission. When the same was debriefed to the Command Ops Staff on return, they were both enormously amazed and respectful of the professionalism of the Squadron and the operational commitment levels.

### **Full Force Escalatory Strike Mission**

During one of the days of extreme political heat up, we got a tasking of a full force ingress into Pakistan with the possible escalation of a full-blown Conventional war. The mission was to launch at dusk. I considered myself fortunate to be amongst the members chosen for this mission. We came into the full war mode of Aircraft preparation, mission preparation, Int briefing including escape and evasion procedures, civil clothes and Pakistan currency collection. Unfortunately, on reaching the aircraft and strapping up, we got the news of the mission being called off. We were very pumped up by then and were disappointed at this news.

### **End of the Deployment**

Post the recapture of Tiger Hill on 04 Jul 99 and key peaks in the Batalik sector by 11 Jul 99, the tempo of operations had weakened. Missions now came by the trickle. One evening, one Officer jokingly mentioned that the ladies back home were talking of returning the next day. We all had a hearty laugh as the end seemed nowhere in sight and missions were still being given. The wry smiles continued till the next morning as we had a mission to fly. However, things rapidly changed and we found ourselves at our homes by lunch; and were now laughing at ourselves. An enjoyable laugh though, after the culmination of a very professionally satisfying and successfully conducted operations by the Squadron.

## **Conclusion**

The conflict officially came to an end on 26 July 1999 when the Indian Army announced the complete eviction of the Pakistani Forces. Innovative application of Air Power was a key enabler during this conflict which significantly contributed to the eventual success. The experiences, thought processes, effective actions leading to the eventual success, enormously enhanced the confidence levels and sense of belief in the conduct of fighter operations for the IAF, leading to successes and the premier reputation of the IAF in the various subsequent international exercises such as Cope India, Cope Thunder, Ex Indradhanush and the Red Flag exercises. Last but not the least; nothing tastes, feels or smells better than the sweet smell of success, especially if it comes on the battlefield.

“When the Situation Evolves.....So Must You”.