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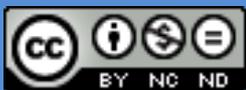
Legend of IAF – IAF Pilot who Helped Save Jammu and Kashmir after Independence

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At the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, a new Independent India awakened. But the new India was still divided into 565 princely states. Newly formed Pakistan had an eye on Jammu and Kashmir, the Muslim-majority state ruled by a Hindu king. In October, Pakistan sent about 15,000 tribal Pathans in the state under what was called Operation Gulmarg.¹

Major General Douglas Gracy, Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan Army, informed his Indian counterpart, Lt Gen Sir Rob Lockhart, on the afternoon of October 24, 1947. Lt Gen Lockhart then informed the Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten. Six precious hours were lost before Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was made aware of the situation.

Muzaffarbad and Domel, now in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir, were invaded and occupied on October 22. By October 24, the invaders reached Baramula, just 35 miles outside Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir. The marauders cut the power line to Srinagar from the powerhouse at Mahura and plunged the capital city into darkness.

The invaders shattered Maharaja Hari Singh's dreams of an independent Jammu and Kashmir. In lieu of India's help, the Maharaja signed the Instrument of Accession on October 26, after which he was asked to move from Srinagar to Jammu.

The road from India through Jammu at that time was in bad shape, the tunnel at Bannihal pass was built in 1955. Sending the Indian Army by road would have been time-consuming. With the invaders making rapid progress, it was crucial to act swiftly. It was imperative to airlift the troops.

This would have been a herculean task as the airstrips at Srinagar and Jammu were meant for light, personal aircraft of the royal family. There were no navigational or landing aids, no crash tenders, and no proper refuelling facilities. The high mountains were often shrouded in mist or clouds and had to be navigated by Dakotas, the first transport aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF).

The Dakotas were part of the No. 12 Squadron left behind by the British. In the coming days, these World War II vintage aircraft will play an important role in ensuring that Srinagar doesn't fall to the tribal raiders.

Apart from the mountainous region, the dirt airstrip meant that each landing and take-off would cause a dirt storm that would hamper the visibility. Airlifting of troops and materials would mean sorties in quick succession without allowing the dust to settle down. Any mishap on the runway would mean the end of the operations, as the enemy was just five miles away. Twenty-eight sorties were flown on the very first day of the operations, October 27.

The 1st Battalion of the Sikh Regiment was airlifted to Srinagar to fight the raiders. In the next five days, an entire Brigade of the Indian Army was transported. The transportation was carried out by Dakotas, while fighter-bombers such as Spitfires, Tempests and Harvards gave ground support to the Indian Army. The head of the Operational Group was Air Commodore Meher Singh, who earned the Distinguished Service Order for his daredevilry in World War II. This was the only such award ever given to an IAF officer.

Saving Poonch

Meher Singh inspired confidence in his men as he believed in leading from the front. In World War II, he flew the Westland Wapiti, a British two-seat general-purpose military single-engine biplane and the British single-seat fighter aircraft Hawker Hurricane. During a mission in the North-West Frontier, his Wapiti was shot down while he was raiding a force of tribesmen. The rifle fire hit his fuel tank. He forced landed the biplane into a valley. Meher Singh, along with his gunner, emerged from the plane wreckage and navigated the hostile enemy territory in the dark without a map until they found a post manned by the Tochi scouts. He was back in the squadron the very next day and was flying again.

In 1947, while heading the No. 1 Operational Group, Srinagar was secured through the joint efforts of the Indian Army and the IAF. In the very first operation after independence, the IAF deployed not only rockets and guns but also bombs. The tribals had opened multiple fronts. On November 3, a battle was won by the Pakistani tribals at Mendhar, and their next target was Poonch, situated south of the Haji Pir Pass.

The Haji Pir Pass connecting Uri to Poonch is of strategic importance as the distance between Uri and Poonch via this road is only 56 km, and it also provides access to much of PoK. The Indian Army reached Poonch, but the raiders were well entrenched. In the coming days, Poonch would be the scene of the largest battle in Kashmir that would test the mettle of the Indian forces.

The British recommended evacuation in Poonch as the situation was quickly becoming untenable. However, Nehru remained adamant that Poonch was not to be surrendered to the enemy.

Poonch had no airfield or airstrip. The arms and ammunition, food and medical stores were airdropped for both the troops and the refugees. The Indian Army started the work on a makeshift airstrip to land Dakotas. Without any equipment, the Army troops and the refugees built an airstrip on the Jammu and Kashmir Militia Parade ground. It took six days to build the airstrip, and all the while, the IAF fighters kept an eye on the enemy.

In the second week of December, when the airstrip was completed, Air Commodore Meher Singh landed the first Dakota, carrying Air Vice Marshal Subroto Mukherjee and essential supplies. The

airstrip, situated on the flat top of a hill, was surrounded by rivers on three sides and a steep slope on the fourth. The constant threat of enemy fire from all directions was a stark reality.

The army sought field guns with a longer range. Dakotas carrying the twenty-five-pounder guns found it difficult to land at the airstrip during the day as the enemy kept lobbing shells on the airstrip. Meher Singh decided to land the aircraft at night with the help of a few oil lamps, and he managed to do it successfully.

His ingenuity was on display as he converted five Dakotas into bombers. The Dakotas were modified to carry 500 lbs. bombs in their cargo bay, and the cargo handlers were trained to roll the bombs out of the door onto targets below.

The efforts meant that the Indian Army managed to gain dominance in Poonch by the end of November 1948. The Kashmir operation was complicated, with action taking place on multiple fronts.

Saving Ladakh

In May 1958, the Indian Army lost two platoons of Gurkha soldiers who had gone to relieve the garrison at Skardu (now in Pakistan-occupied Gilgit-Baltistan). Skardu is a fortress town located in the upper region of the Indus Valley in Ladakh.

The two Gurkha platoons were ambushed and annihilated. Reinforcements from Srinagar Valley were unlikely unless Drass Valley was cleared of infiltrators. The Garrison commander in Skardu realised that he would not have access to water or other essential supplies if the invaders laid siege to the Skardu fort. Proactively, he prepared an airstrip beside the Fort and sought reinforcements from the IAF Dakotas before invaders surrounded them.²

Air Commodore Meher Singh was of the opinion that the performance of the Dakota Mark III at the height of 9,500 feet with no oxygen for the passengers and crew was unknown. He agreed to deploy Tempest fighter-bombers to drop supplies but it was not enough. The Skardu Garrison had to surrender and its members were sent to Pakistan as Prisoners of War. After the capture of Skardu, the raiders set eyes on Leh, the capital of Ladakh.

Major General K S Thimayya took over as chief of the Srinagar division, and his first priority was to save Leh, a task unachievable without the support of the IAF. By then, Air Commodore Meher Singh had earned the moniker of Meher Baba.

"General Thimayya realised that he had to convince Meher Baba that the fall of Leh would be a strategic blow for India," former IAF Chief Air Chief Marshal PC Lal wrote in his memoirs, "My Years with

the IAF".³ General Thimayya set on the task to placate Meher Singh over strawberries and cream on the banks of Jhelum.

Meher Singh enumerated the risks involved in flying and landing Dakotas at high altitudes traversing two passes: Zozila and Fatula. The aircraft was not designed for this role. General Thimayya responded that he was ready to risk his own life if it meant saving Leh.

Meher Singh agreed to pilot the first aircraft to Leh. On May 24, 1948, Meher Baba, with Major General Thimayya as his passenger, navigated the Himalayan Mountains as high as 24,000 feet. He managed this feat in his ancient Dakota, with no de-icing facilities, no pressurisation, and no route maps. He reached Leh at a height of 11,500 feet above sea level and deftly landed his aircraft on an improvised strip constructed by a Ladakhi engineer.

Leh was saved, and Meher Baba was awarded Mahavir Chakra, the second highest military decoration in India.

Baba Meher

Meher Baba was respected in Pakistan as well. Pakistan Air Force (PAF) Chief Air Chief Marshal Asghar Khan described him in the following words: "With the solitary exception of Squadron Leader Mehar Singh, a pilot of outstanding ability, no one was able to inspire confidence among us."⁴ They had both flown together in Burma in 1944.

Wing Commander Aizad Baksh (AB) Awan, another PAF officer who gave him the nickname of Baba Meher, described him as one with "the heart of a Bengal tiger, stamina and guts of a Punjabi bull and flying ability of a Himalayan eagle".

Mehar Singh was born in 1915 in Lyallpur (now Faisalabad in Pakistan) and spent the better part of his 36 years of life in conflict zones. He loved flying and died in the cockpit during the crash of his civil aircraft.

NOTES:

¹ Ministry of Defence, "1947-48 Indo-Pak War: The First War of Kashmir", <https://www.gallantryawards.gov.in/assets/uploads/wars/pdf/pak.pdf>. Accessed on October 1, 2024.

² Chattopadhyay R, "The Relief of Leh", *Bharat Rakshak*, July 19, 1999, <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/1948war/relief-of-leh/>. Accessed on October 1, 2024.

³ Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, *My Years with the IAF* (Lancer International), 2008 Edition.

⁴ Major General Syed Ali Hamid, "Man behind the legend: Baba Mehar Singh", *The Friday Times*, July 30, 2021, <https://thefridaytimes.com/30-Jul-2021/man-behind-the-legend-baba-mehar-singh>. Accessed on October 1, 2024.

