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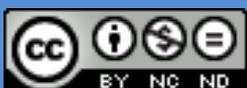
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NASCENT TO NEOTERIC

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Caption: IAF archives, courtesy IAF History Cell



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Introduction

The Indo-Pakistani war of 1947-1948 marked a crucial moment in the military history of the Indian subcontinent, arising in the wake of India's partition. On October 22, 1947, having violated the standstill agreement the tribal militias invaded Kashmir with the agenda of gaining control of the erstwhile princely state, prompting the Maharaja of Kashmir to seek military assistance from India, followed by the signing of the Instrument of Accession. Subsequently, the conflict intensified, necessitating a multifaceted Indian military response. Among the key players in this response was the lone transport squadron of the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF), No. 12-The Yaks¹, whose command was in the process of being handed over by Wing Commander Shivdev Singh to Wing Commander K.L. Bhatia². This article examines the critical contributions of the Dakota transport aircraft, detailing specific operations and incidents that underscore its vital contributions to the Indo-Pakistan 1947-48 war.

Paving the way for today's "War Veteran"

Magnanimously spreading its wings over 95 feet³, proudly standing at the Heritage Flight, Hindon Airbase revealing a century of history is the lone aircraft, the Mighty Dakota, fondly called "The War Veteran". The biggest moment of reminiscence is about the atrocious time when the tribal militias plunged to the Vale of Kashmir, transforming the Heaven on Earth into an apocalyptic sight, seizing Uri, Domel and Muzaffarabad, with their contiguous objective of conquering Srinagar. Why Srinagar? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that it was the summer capital of the Dogras and most populous region in Kashmir. At Baramulla too, they indulged in a spree of violence. Seeing the intensifying situation in Kashmir as if its soul had been wrenched to pieces, the Indian government had no other option but to bring into the picture the then lone transport squadron of Indian Air Force (IAF) available, equipped with The Mighty Douglas C-47 Dakotas.

One of the most pivotal roles played by the transport squadron was the expeditious deployment of Indian Army troops to the front lines during the most challenging circumstances. With no navigational aids, no infrastructural facilities, and no refuelling facilities for aircraft, the Srinagar airstrip proved to be the most rugged piece of land to be utilised for full-fledged military operations, as the airstrip was only meant to be used for the small personal plane of The Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). As beautiful as Srinagar was in winters, beautifully covered in snow, it held enormous tactical constraints leaving no roads open to be used for transportation. Meanwhile, the magnificent Himalayas also paved a crucial challenge for pilots as the mountaintops were often covered with clouds making navigation extremely difficult due to the limited ceiling capacities of the Dakotas⁴. Nevertheless, despite the considerable challenges posed by the prevailing adverse weather conditions, the air force of the newly independent

nation proceeded to enter the war zone to safeguard the most vital state of the nation, the Jammu and Kashmir.

The legendary transformation from nascent to neoteric

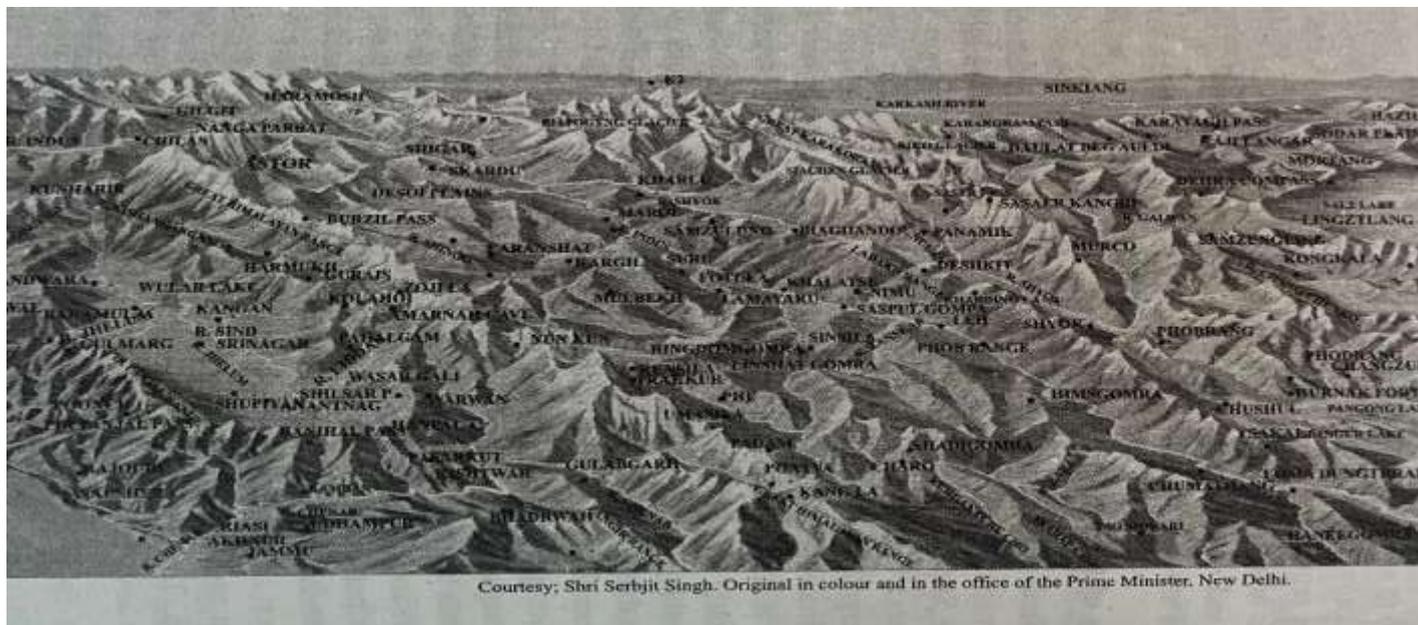
At the time of independence, the transport aircraft were in their fledgling stages, having been primarily structured during World War II and inherited from the 12 RIAF Squadron. More specifically, the then transport squadron was manned only by six qualified captains, with 11 others undergoing training. This was the nascent stage of the RIAF when it was thrust into the Kashmir war⁵. The need for an effective airlift capability became paramount to save the most beautiful land of the nation from turning into a horrendous one. It can be reasonably postulated here that the history and map of India might have been quite different had the Royal Indian Air Force not been able to put our troops on the grounds of Srinagar on October 27, 1947. At that time, the region was being menacingly threatened by advancing tribal militias⁶. The Indian government's timely and firm response to the heart-wrenching situation in Kashmir was rapid. Inevitably, troops of first Sikh Battalion were ordered to hastily venture into Srinagar to push back the advancing tribal militias. In the early hours of October 27, 1947, four flights were flown to save the state of Kashmir.

Flight	Composition	Time of departure	Place of departure
A 6 Dakotas	(Civil)	0500	Safdarjung
B 3 "	(RIAF)	0500	Palam
C 8 "	(RIAF)	1100	"
D 11 "	(RIAF)	1300	"

Source: Operations in Jammu and Kashmir 1947-48: S.N. Prasad

Facing the horrors of war, lacking navigation aids and over the jagged terrains, our pilots were able to complete the most challenging landing at the Srinagar airfield, which was later described as the most arduous in history. Within five days, the massive operation was able to airlift an entire brigade to Kashmir, involving the rapid movement of around 6,000 soldiers from various locations in India to Srinagar to take offensive action against all odds. It was planned to equip each civil Dakota to carry 15 men with an additional 496 pounds of supplies, and each RIAF Dakota would be capable of carrying an additional two men. In the gruelling circumstances, the pilots demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness and skills by conducting turnaround repairs on their own before the ground crew could reach Srinagar. The unavailability of refuelling facilities at the airfield was balanced out by the extraction of surplus fuel from the transport aircraft until a Dakota was re-equipped to exclusively supply fuel to the airfield. Furthermore, in the context of a war, uninterrupted resupply became even more imperative. Three weeks after the airlift, the Dakotas undertook about 700 flights airlifting more than 2 million pounds of supplies.

An untraversed route over the mighty Himalayas, embellished with peaks of about 24,000 feet, with the constantly changing weather posing huge challenges, the pilots skilfully operated the flights, bringing in the troops and their equipment⁷. The war lasted until December 1948, with the dice of horror rolling over the entire conflict. Surprisingly, with no bomber aircraft available to India, a Dakota was used for bombing and it was only possible due the courage and ingenuity of Air Commodore Meher Singh⁸.



Source: “Kumar, B. (2013). *An Incredible War: IAF in Kashmir War 1947-1948 (Second Edition)*”.

The loss, the impact, the legacy

Though the resilience of the officers who undertook the challenging operations was commendable, every historic win comes with its unfortunate and unavoidable losses. India had 17 aircraft losses, which included the crash of one Dakota aircraft at Pir Panjal Range on October 30, 1947. As the war progressed, a breathtaking incident took place on March 21, 1948, when the Dakota flown by Wg Cdr K.L Bhatia was shot during an operation. But, against all odds, he utilised his phenomenal piloting skills to bring the aircraft back safely⁹. The success of the airlift operations not only enhanced the operational capabilities of the Indian forces but also highlighted the importance of air mobility in modern warfare¹⁰. This strategic advantage was vital for India as it sought to consolidate its position in the aftermath of the conflict. The 1947 war marked a turning point for the Indian Air Force, particularly regarding its understanding of logistical operations and the use of air power in warfare. The war highlighted the valuable contributions of transport aircraft to the Indian Army, which flew rigorously for 3045 hours, airlifted around 3.5 million pounds of supplies and 18,000 pounds of bombs, and rescued around 10,000 refugees from the warzone. The only transport squadron of 12 RIAF played a crucial role in the 1947 Kashmir war, enabling the Indian troops to maintain their operational effectiveness.¹¹



Source: IAF archives, courtesy IAF History Cell (C-47 Dakota flew in troops, ammunition and supplies to Srinagar in the Vale)

On January 01, 1948, India respectfully brought the Jammu and Kashmir dispute to the attention of the United Nations Security Council. Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah was appointed Prime Minister of an interim government in the state of Jammu and Kashmir by Maharaja Hari Singh on March 05, 1948. The UN Security Council facilitated the negotiation of a ceasefire agreement that came into effect on December 31, 1948. The losses incurred and challenges faced during the 1947 war highlighted the need for dedicated airlift capability of the RIAF. This led to subsequent investments in transport aircraft and training programmes, ultimately enhancing the IAF's operational readiness in future conflicts. The successful use of transport aircraft in 1947 laid the groundwork for more sophisticated air operations in later years, including during the 1965 and 1971 wars¹². Exemplifying the varied and vital role of the transport aircraft—from the rapid deployment of troops to sustained logistical support—the Dakotas were central to the Indian military's response in Kashmir. The operations undertaken by these aircraft not only contributed to immediate military successes but also established important precedents for the use of air power in India's future military engagements. As India navigates its complex geopolitical landscape, the legacy of the RIAF's transport aircraft during the 1947 war serves as a reminder of the enduring significance of air mobility in national defence. The extremely important operational lessons learnt during this period continue to inspire military strategies and underscore the importance of robust logistical frameworks in contemporary warfare.

Notes:

¹ Anchit Gupta. "12 Squadron in the 1947 Kashmir War," IAF History, (July 17, 2022), <https://iafhistory.in/2022/07/17/the-epic-journey-of-no-12-squadron-in-the-1947-kashmir-war/>, accessed on December 05, 2024.

² Ranjit Bhatia, "The Airlift that saved Kashmir," Bharat Rakshak, (April 16, 2024), <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/iaf/history/1948war/the-airlift-that-saved-kashmir/2/>, accessed on December 05, 2024.

³ Britannica, "DC-3," October 8, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/DC-3>, accessed on December 22, 2024.

⁴ Directorate of Operations, Historic Cell "Kashmir Operation 1947-48".

⁵ Bharat Kumar, *An Incredible War: IAF in Kashmir War 1947-1948* (KW Publishers, 2013), p. 27.

⁶ Bhatia, n.2.

⁷ Directorate of Operation, n.4

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Jagan Pillarisetti, "Aircraft Losses in the 47-48 Operations. Indian Air Force," (October 5, 2022), <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/iaf/history/1948war/aircraft-losses/>, accessed on December 05, 2024.

¹⁰ Ministry of Defence. (2024). *The Story of the Indian Air Force: A Journey Through Time*. <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2024/oct/doc2024107411201.pdf>

¹¹ Directorate of operations, Historic Cell "Kashmir Operation 1947- 48" (IAF archives, courtesy IAF History Cell)

¹² S N Prasad. *Operations In Jammu and Kashmir 1947-48* (Natraj Publishers, 2009).