



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

REMINISCENCES OF IAF FROM THE PAST

06/2025

08 March 2025

'Behind Friendly Lines': Story of how an Indian MiG-23 Pilot Ejected in the USSR

Mr Arjun Prakash Iyer and Mr Shwetabh Singh
Research Scholar, Unni Kartha Chair of Excellence



Image 1: Photograph of a MiG-23UB 'Yellow 94' of the Soviet Air Force, similar to the one Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh ejected from in Lugovaya on March 12, 1982.

Source: Rob Schleiffert, "File:MiG-23UB Lärz (22475943676).jpg," Wikimedia Commons, March 23, 1993, [Wikimedia Commons/Rob Schleiffert CC BY-SA 2.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MiG-23UB_Lärz_(22475943676).jpg). Accessed: 26th March, 2025



Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS]

This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No Derivatives 4.0 International License.

Keywords: Ejection, MiG-23UB, Indian Air Force, Soviet Air Force, Lugovaya, Ejection, Air Vice Marshal Pradeep Singh, 715th Training Aviation Regiment, 715th UAP, Frunze, Soviet MiG-23UB, MiG-23BN, MiG-23, Cold War

The 1982 ejection of the Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot Pradeep Singh and his Soviet Air Force counterpart, Captain Gaptianov, from a malfunctioning MiG-23UB over the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) remains a lesser-known chapter in the Cold War aviation history. While Hollywood films like *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) dramatise the survival of fighter pilots when shot down inside hostile territory, this real-life incident that occurred during a routine training mission, tested human endurance against sub-zero temperatures, unforgiving terrain, and logistical challenges inherent to rescue operations under such conditions.

“For diligence and excellent performance in complex aviation training, demonstrated during the period of cold-weather training, and for the display of high levels of calmness and discipline” stated the official commendation received by the then Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh from the Major General of Aviation. Drawing on an exclusive interview with the Air Vice Marshal Pradeep Singh (Retd), conducted by UKCOE (Unni Kartha Chair of Excellence) scholar Arjun Prakash Iyer, this article reconstructs the incident through the lens of participant testimony, shedding light on Indo-Soviet military collaboration, survival protocols, and the human factors underpinning high-stakes aviation emergencies.

Training for foreign pilots in the USSR

“We arrived in the USSR in October of 1981, and we were transferred to Lugovay, which is in present-day Kazakhstan.” – Air Vice Marshal Pradeep Singh (Retd.)

The 1950s and 1960s saw the widespread export of Soviet fighters to Third World countries, which meant that adequate training had to be provided to pilots of these nations. Thus, a training apparatus, called the Fifth Training Center, was set up at Frunze (Bishkek). The Training Centre had an attached air unit – the 715th Training Air Regiment, which would provide hands-on flying training to these pilots after they completed their basic ground subjects. This unit trained pilots on the MiG-17, MiG-21 and Su-7BMK in the 1960s and early 1970s, followed by the MiG-23 (both air defence and fighter-bomber variants) in the late 1970s and the MiG-29 in the late 1980s. The MiG-23BNs and MiG-23Ms entered service with the 715th Training Air Regiment in 1973 and 1974 respectively. The MiG-23MF replaced the MiG-23M's in the unit's service in 1978. Eventually, by the end of 1979, this single unit was equipped with 12 combat (MiG-23MF and/or BN) and 20 training (MiG-23 UB) aircrafts.¹

As a part of the procurement of the MiG-23BN aircraft, arrangements were made for the training of Indian pilots in the USSR. These pilots were segregated into two batches for the MiG-23BN and two

batches for the MiG-23MF, starting their training in 1980 and 1981, respectively. Flt Lt Pradeep Singh was part of the second batch to be trained in the USSR. A handful of engineering officers were also part of these four groups and they were provided technical training in Frunze.²

“We started flying in November-December (of 1981), however the weather used to be pretty bad, because winters in Kazakhstan (at that time part of the Soviet Union) were very harsh. So we could hardly do any flying until late January (of 1982)....” – AVM Pradeep Singh (Retd.)

In terms of the training itself, it was very fundamental in nature. Flying training started off with a series of dual-check sorties (wherein the pupil would be flying with a Soviet instructor aboard a type-conversion aircraft, which in this case was the MiG-23UB). This phase would cover the basics such as take-off, basic flying and handling, performing approaches and landings. After the pupil has successfully completed this stage, he is introduced to the single-seat fighter variant of the aircraft, and the pupil performs his first solo flight, which would follow the same syllabus as the dual-check sortie.

Typically, this whole process would be completed within 15 sorties, with the initial six-seven sorties being dual-checks, followed by a first solo (on the eighth sortie), then a dual-check again on the ninth sortie, followed by a solo, then again two dual-checks and three solo sorties. The schedule did not include a provision for armament training. It is interesting to note that foreign pilots had to go through a crash course in the Russian language, as all R/T calls (radiotelephony) within the cockpit and with the ATC (air traffic control) were to be conducted in Russian. This crash course was conducted through a language interpreter, who would translate the instructions from Russian into English for the foreign pilots.³



Image 2: Photograph of Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh, taken during his training in Lugovaya, erstwhile Kazakh SSR, USSR.

Source: AVM Pradeep Singh's personal collection.

That morning...

“It was on March 12, 1982; after a lot of delays, the weather became clear, and I was put on a dual-check sortie with a Soviet Air Force Captain.” – AVM Pradeep Singh (Retd.)

It was a clear Friday morning in Lugovoy, with temperatures still in minus degrees centigrade. There was still deep snow covering the ground. Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh and his Soviet instructor pilot, then Captain Gaptianov, took off aboard MiG-23UB Bort No. ‘34’ on a general handling check sortie.⁴ The sortie itself was uneventful, and the duo were approaching for an overshoot, followed by a go-around and finally a landing. As the overshoot was complete, the aircraft pitched up and began banking right for the go-around, when the engine began losing power. The Soviet pilot opened the throttle, however, the JPT (jet pipe temperature) rose rapidly. The engine had surged.

“... We were trying to relight the engine. I knew that it was serious – we didn't have the height, we didn't have the speed to do any correction. And things happened very rapidly after that. Soon after, both the hydraulic systems failed and there was a fire in the aircraft. We were barely 150 - 200 metres above the ground. We somehow managed to control the aircraft to a certain degree but we realised it wouldn't be possible to recover fully. Right then, the ATC also started screaming in Russian, “Katapultirovastyvat Katapultirovastyvat” (Eject! Eject!)” – AVM Pradeep Singh (Retd)

The two pilots ejected at a very low altitude, about 6-7 kilometres away from Lugovaya air Base. Both pilots landed safely, a hundred feet apart from each other, into knee deep snow. Realising that the Soviet pilot was still lying entangled in his parachute, face down on the snow, Flt Lt Pradeep Singh freed himself from his parachute and ran towards his instructor and freed him from the parachute and pulled him out of the snow.

“We knew we were safe, but we were shivering due to the cold. We knew that the rescue would be arriving, as we could hear the heavy KrAZ trucks at a distance, however they couldn't traverse the thick snow. After a while, I saw two silhouettes appear in the sky, which happened to be two Mi-8 helicopters. One of them cleared the snow whilst the other landed and evacuated us. We were flown to Frunze, which was about an hour of flying, and were treated by the doctors there.” – AVM Pradeep Singh (Retd.)

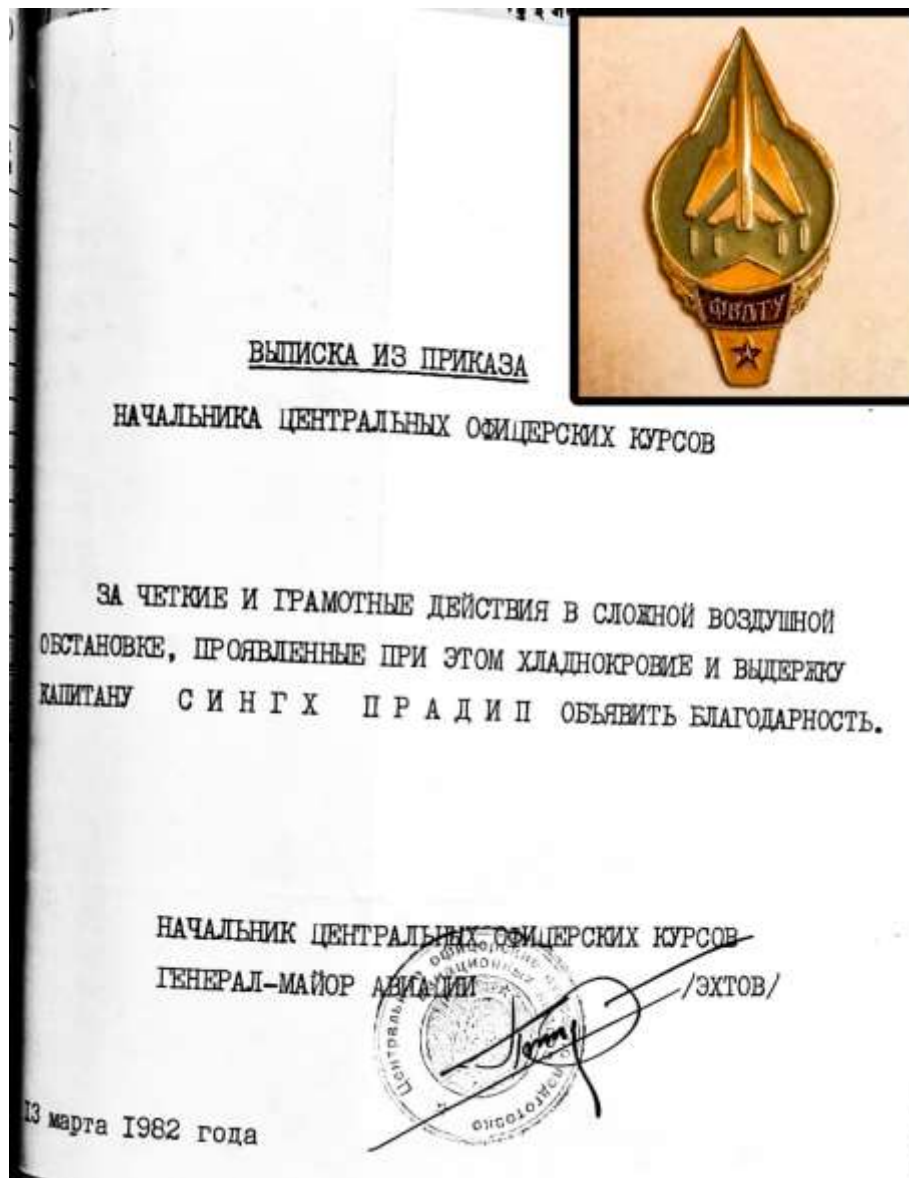


Image 3: Photograph of the citation of the award of commendation medal to Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh by the Soviet Air Force.

Source: Personal Collection of Air Vice Marshal Pradeep Singh (Retd.)

For his act of bravery, in not only contributing to the attempt to recover the aircraft but also for saving the life of a Soviet Air Force pilot, Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh was awarded a commendation badge from the Major General Aviation, Head of the Central Officers' Courses at – *Frontovoe Voennno-Aviatsionnoe Technicheskoe Uchylische* (Frontline Military Aviation Technical School), Lugovaya. Flight Lieutenant Pradeep Singh would go on to successfully convert onto the MiG-23BN, flying with No.10 and 221 Sqns in the IAF, complete the Test Pilot's Course and eventually command the No.18 Squadron 'Flying Bullets', retiring as an Air Vice Marshal.⁵

Note: This article has been compiled based on the personal interview of Air Vice Marshal Pradeep Singh (Retd.) by the author dated February 22, 2025.

Notes:

¹ "MiG-23 Conversion School in Lugovoy," Eastern Order of Battle, http://www.easternorbat.com/html/mig-23_conv_school_in_lugovoy.html. Accessed on March 09, 2025.

"5th Training Center," Eastern Order of Battle, http://www.easternorbat.com/html/5th_training_center_eng.html. Accessed on March 09, 2025.

"715th Training Aviation Regiment," WW2.dk, <https://www.ww2.dk/new/air%20force/regiment/uap/715uap.htm>. Accessed on March 09, 2025.

² "223 Squadron Indian Air Force *Form 1500*", Ministry of Defence, June 30, 1982.

Virender Nath Kalia (Retd), in discussion with the author, December 19, 2024.

³ Kalia, n.2.

Pradeep Singh (Retd.), "Pilot's Log Book, 1981-1982,". Accessed on February 22, 2025.

⁴ Singh, n.3

⁵ "Excerpt from the Order of the Head of the Central Officers' Courses," Soviet Air Force, March 13, 1982.

"Air Vice Marshal Pradeep Singh," Bharat Rakshak, <https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/indianairforce/database/14086>. Accessed on March 09, 2025.