

My years with the I.A.F.

Air Chief Marshal P C LAL



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Air Chief Marshal PC Lal

Edited by Ela Lal

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Book Overview

This is the first time that an Air Chief is sharing his thoughts and memories with the reading public. His span of service covers a period of thirty-three years: from the end of 1939 to the beginning of 1973. It includes the Burma campaign of World War II, the restricted fighting in Kashmir in 1947 and 1948, the Chinese debacle in 1962 and the two full scale wars with Pakistan in 1965 and 1971. He had 4,274 hrs of flying with the Air Force to his credit and the experience of flying 58 types of aircraft from Wapitis to supersonic jets. In 1965 he was the Vice Chief of Air Staff and in 1971 the Chief. His honesty and forthrightness many readers will find engaging... but perhaps a few who were on the scene then may find them unpalatable.

In a way this is the story of aviation in India, in particular of the Indian Air Force. It is a story of a real life adventure the genesis, growth and achievements of the youngest of the three defence services. Sir Winstom Churchill said of the RAF: "Never before in the history of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few." That is true also of the Indian Air Force.

Though this does not purport to be a history of the Indian Air Force without it no history would be complete.

Author

Air Chief Marshal PC Lal, Padma Vibhushan, Padma Bhushan, DFC, former Chief of the Air Staff, was a flier but not a fighter by choice. He had a diploma in journalism from King's College London and was attending the Bar at the Middle Temple when world War II cut short his career in these spheres and he was called to join the Air Force. He had two tours of operation in Burma, in 1944 and 1945. Leading the Battle Axes, No. 7 Squadron on the second tour, he earned his DFC. Then he worked at Policy and Plans at Air HQ. He graduated from the RAF Staff College in England in 1950, was the Military Secretary to the Cabinet and then AOC-in-C Training Command. For five years his services were seconded to the Indian Airlines. He smoothed out the working of the eight amalgamated airlines and for the first time rescued the Corporation from being perpetually in the red. At that stage he was keen to return to his parent service but he had crossed swords twice with Mr. Krishna Menon, the Defence Minister. His service were terminated on 30 September 1962.

Then came the Chinese debacle. The country and the Lok Sabha were in an uproar. It was Mr. Menon's turn to be thrown out and Lal's to be recalled. After that there was no looking back. He was the Managing Director and later Chairman of HAL from where he came to be the Air Chief. After retirement from the IAF, he was recalled to the Public Sector. He retired as the Joint Chairman of Air India and Indian Airlines in February 1980. He was also the Chairman of the National Institute of Training in Industrial Engineering and a member of the Board of the Reserve Bank of India for a number of years. A long and distinguished career is recaptured here in this portrait of a modest, unassuming and gentle human being.

Contents

Foreword

Preface

List of Abbreviations

Organisations chart of IAF, Navy, Army

Part I A Personal Memoir

Introduction

- 1 Down Memory Lane
- 2 Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve
- 3 Contribution to the War Effort

Part II The Formative Years

- 4 Independence
- 5 Kashmir 1947-48: The First Round
- 6 Coming of Age
- 7 Interlude—IAC
- 8 Chinese Checkers
- 9 Indo-Pak War 1965: The Second Round

Part III Conflict 1971: The Third Round

- 10 The Preliminaries
- 11 Planning for Operations
- 12 The Eastern Sector
- 13 The Western Sector

- 14 South-western Sector
- 15 Central Air Command
- 16 Summing Up

Epilogue

Appendix A

Comment on IAF Maintenance Support

Appendix B

The Escape Story

Bibliography

Persons Interviewed by PC Lal and Ela Lal

Index

Foreword

My late husband, Pratap Chandra Lal, started his career in flying by joining the Delhi Flying Club late in 1933 at the age of 17. He joined the Indian Air Force in November 1939 when all members of the Civil Flying Clubs in India were invited to join that service as Volunteer Reserves at the beginning of World War II. He served the IAF for thirty-three years; he was the Chief of Air Staff from 16 July 1969 to 15 January 1973. He did not mean to choose a military career originally, least of all as a means of livelihood. He got into the Air Force more or less by accident, and he stuck to it for his love of his passion for flying. In 1981 he started work on a book regarding the Indian Air Force and his career in it. He planned the book in three parts. The first was to be a memoir, the second to cover the years after Independence, while the third was to focus on the 1971 war in which the role of the Air Force was considerable. He felt it was the touchstone which proved the maturity of the service as a finely honed force to be reckoned with in war. He wrote from direct, personal experience. A Service Chief is vested with considerable authority by the government and he is obliged to exercise that authority with a meticulous sense of responsibility. If, at places, his style is incisive I am sure he had enough reason for it. The point I want to emphasise is that this is not a history but a personal narrative. And at such it is inevitable that some incidents will be highlighted, and perhaps some important ones not mentioned at all.

He set out the synopsis, the theme and arrangement, and completed most of the chapters. For the rest he had recorded a number of interviews. The interviews are with people of various levels of seniority who took part in the fighting in the 1971 conflict with Pakistan when he was the Chief. These interviews

are particularly interesting because they are accounts of events from different angles, and the view may not look the same as from the top. The big gap in the manuscript and notes was the chapter listed in the synopsis as Chinese Checkers, because he was not involved with the operations when the Indian Army was trying to resist the Chinese aggression which came to a head in October and November 1962. In the five preceding years he was Managing Director of Indian Airlines, a post he held till 30 September 1962. His services were terminated by Mr V. K. Krishna Menon, then Defence Minister. The next three months were a kind of limbo for him. Then Krishna Menon lost *his* job and the government called Pratap back to the Air Force. The three months he was out of the service were regularised as leave without pay. To my knowledge this gesture was without precedent and remains unique. To supplement the background notes in Chinese Checkers I decided to follow the method that he had himself adopted: interviews. Four IAF officers were kind enough to tell me their parts of the story, and they brought along their log books for accuracy. They are Air Marshal C.K.S. Raje, an ace pilot of C 119 Fairchild Packets; Air Vice Marshal Subramaniam, a navigator on AN 12s; Group Captain G.J. Shaw, an AN 12 pilot who had spent about six years in Ladakh and who, unfortunately, is no more; and Air Commodore Johnson Berry, a distinguished helicopter pilot. Each one of them seemed to enjoy recounting his experience. When I thanked Air Commodore Johnson Berry, he thanked me also because he said I was the first person to ask him regarding those strenuous and exciting days and he enjoyed looking back after some twenty years. Group Captain E.N. Gadre was kind enough to send a short statement.

To complete the mosaic of the story in the Eastern Sector during the 1971 conflict I met the commanders of several squadrons posted there. For the story of the Western Sector I met some of the base commanders as well as some of the squadron commanders. To all those who were kind enough to recount their roles and experience, my gratitude. They are too numerous to name here but they are listed at the back as are all those whom Pratap interviewed. My thanks are also due to Air Marshal C.V. Gole who was kind enough to go through

the account of the Western Sector during the 1971 conflict, to Air Marshal H.N. Chatterjee, PVSM DFC, the Deputy Chief of Air Staff in 1971, who read the draft and encouraged me in my endeavour. And without the help I received from Flight Lieutenant Raj Kumar Pal, an education officer, it would not have been possible for me to complete this work. He was deputed, by Air Chief Marshal Latif in 1981, to be a research assistant to Pratap. When Pratap died in 1982 all work stopped, but when I decided to continue with the work he was made available to me. He contacted all the people I needed to see, arranged meetings, procured reference books and supervised the typing. For his devotion to the cause of the Air Force, I wish him all success.

It was my husband's desire to write this book but he died before he could complete it. I felt compelled to do so. My task has been to compile all the material he had collected, collate it and fill in the gaps in the story. As it unfolds it becomes an inside account of the attempts and achievements of the men in the IAF. My job will have been well done if this book should inspire our young lads and perhaps encourage some of them to try this great adventure. For his own part in it I cannot do better than to quote Mr. Mohammed Ayoob and Mr. K. Subrahmanyam who talk of his 'characteristic modesty' and sum up the achievements of the Indian Air Force in 1971:

The Indian Air effort on both fronts involved more than 7,300 sorties in the fourteen days—averaged more than 500 sorties a day. In the post-second World War era, this was one of the most sustained air efforts of this magnitude... Perhaps the single most crucial determinant in the west was the air supremacy of the IAF... In the war in the air more than in the other two services, scientific techniques of management play a crucial role. Launching 500 sorties day, retrieving the incoming aircraft, servicing and sustaining their operationability, assigning priorities to, and apportioning the effort of interdiction, ground support and interception, establishing and maintaining an integrated communication network among the different establishments call for a very high order of leadership in management. The emphasis the Air Chief had been laying on

efficient management appears to have paid such dividends (*The Liberation War*; New Delhi 1962, p. 259).

My thanks to Mr. K. Subrahmanyam for reading the manuscript and for his encouragement.

Robey Lal, our son, prepared the maps.

ELA LAL
New Delhi 1986

Preface

Bangladesh came into existence in December 1971. During the years that have passed since, much has been written about how that nation was liberated from Pakistan. A spate of books appeared within weeks of the event. Detailed studies were written subsequently, based on a more complete knowledge of what was happening in Pakistan, Bangladesh and India at that time.

The political developments that led up to the Bangladesh war, and the principal features of that conflict are now well-known. Several accounts have been published of the manner in which the Indian Army fought its campaign. The part played by the Indian Air Force has yet to be described in any detail. I have tried to make good that deficiency.

I am indebted to Air Chief Marshal I.H. Latif, Chief of the Air Staff, for having made available records of the war, and for having arranged for me to meet again some of the officers and airmen who took part in it. My thanks are due to the CAS and to the many others who have helped me to reconstruct the major happenings of an eventful period in the history of the Air Force.

This book is dedicated to the Indian Air Force, and especially to the memory of those of its members who have given their lives in the service of the nation.

New Delhi, 1982

P.C LAL
Air Chief Marshal

Abbreviations

RANK

ACM	Air Chief Marshal
Air Mshl	Air Marshal
Air Vice Mshl	Air Vice Marshal
Air Cmde	Air Commodore
Gp Capt	Group Captain
Wg Cdr	Wing Commander
Sqn Ldr	Squadron Leader
Flt Lt	Flight Lieutenant
Fg Offr	Flying Officer
P Offr	Pilot Officer
MWO	Master Warrant Officer
WO	Warrant Officer
JWD	Junior Warrant Officer
SGT	Sergeant
CPL	Corporal
LAC	Leading Aircraftsman
AC	Aircraftsman
Gen	General
Lt Gen	Lieutenant General
Maj Gen	Major General
Brig	Brigadier
Col	Colonel
Lt Col	Lieutenant Colonel
Maj	Major
Capt	Captain
Lt	Lieutenant
Sub-Lt	Sub-Lieutenant

Adm	Admiral
V Adm	Vice Admiral
R Adm	Rear Admiral
Cmde	Commodore
Capt	Captain
Lt Cdr	Lieutenant Commander
Lt	Lieutenant
Sub-Lt	Sub-Lieutenant
Act Sub-Lt	Acting Sub-Lieutenant

DECORATIONS

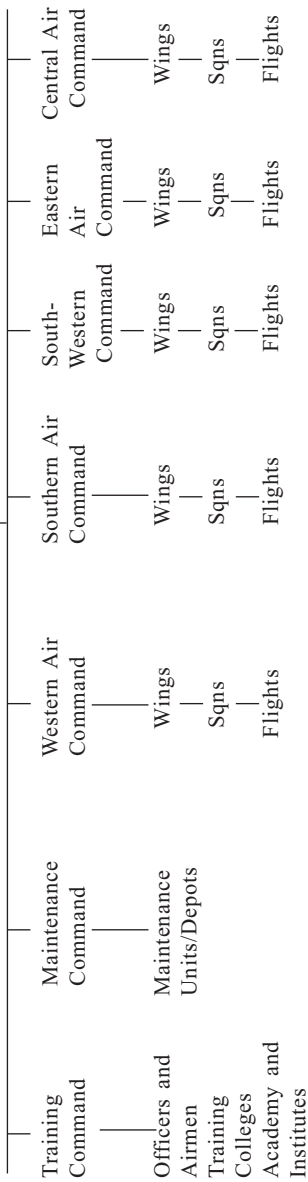
PVC	Param Vir Chakra
MVC	Maha Vir Chakra
VrC	Vir Chakra
AC	Ashok Chakra
KC	Kirti Chakra
SC	Shaurya Chakra
PVSM	Param Vishist Seva Medal
AVSM	Ati Vishist Seva Medal
VM	Vayu Sena Medal
VSM	Vishist Seva Medal
M-in-D	Mention-in Despatches

SERVICE TERMS

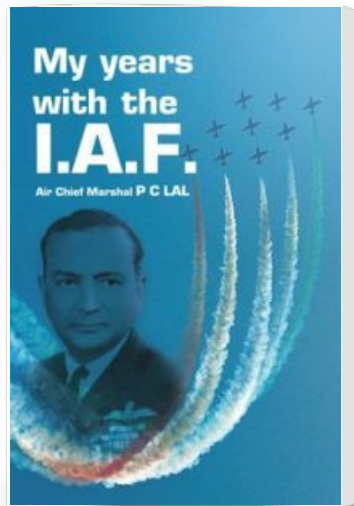
AOC-in-C	Air Officer Commanding-in-Chief
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
WAC	Western Air Command
EAC	Eastern Air Command
CAC	Central Air Command
TC	Training Command
MC	Maintenance Command
CO	Commanding Officer

ORGANISATION CHART: INDIAN AIR FORCE

AIR HEADQUARTERS



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