

BOOK REVIEW

CHRONICLING THE SAGA OF A FINE AIR FORCE

The Beginning: A History of Military Aviation in India

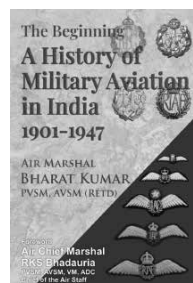
1901-1947

Author: Air Marshal Bharat Kumar

Publisher: IMR Media Pvt Ltd, 2021

628 pp.

Rs 1950



ARJUN SUBRAMANIAM

The early history of the Indian Air Force (IAF) has been written about in recent years by several accomplished air power historians and aviation enthusiasts such as Rana Chhina, Somnath Sapru, and KS Nair. Complementing them by exploring and chronicling the myriad facets of the IAF's history after independence from both a single Service and joint perspective are aviation buffs such as Pushpindar Singh, PVS Jaganmohan and the author of this review. Completing the list are practitioners with a focus on strategy, doctrine and operational art such as Air Commodore Jasjit Singh and Air Vice Marshal AK Tiwary. There is, thus, a rich repository of writings on military aviation in India.

AVM (Dr) **Arjun Subramaniam**, AVSM (Retd) is President's Chair of Excellence at the National Defence College, New Delhi, and the author of *Full Spectrum: India's Wars, 1972-2020*.

Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, the author of *A History of Military Aviation in India 1901-1947*, the book being reviewed, has been an outlier when it comes to researching and writing about contemporary Indian military aviation history primarily because of his ability to pursue relentless research and cover all possible areas that a serious student of aviation history may want to explore. It is through this prism that readers must read this latest offering on the DNA of the IAF as examined by an accomplished practitioner. This is not the first deeply researched volume by the author. His first offerings were two splendid volumes that brought into focus the hitherto under-examined and under-rated performance of the IAF in the first two major conflicts fought by independent India's armed forces viz. the first India-Pakistan conflict of 1947-48 and the India-China conflict of 1962. These books busted the myth that both these conflicts were primarily Indian Army-centric by bringing the focus onto the extensive employment of the IAF in several key roles that ranged from reconnaissance, close air support, interdiction, speedy induction of troops, air maintenance, resupply, casualty evacuation and much more. His third and fourth volumes offered added insights into the roles, missions and performance of the IAF in the 1965 conflict with Pakistan and its contribution during Operation Pawan with the Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in Sri Lanka. He has also written several other books, including one to commemorate the IAF's fallen air warriors and one on the Battle of Longewala in 1971.

The book runs across six hundred pages and ten chapters that range from the exploration with military aviation in British India at the turn of the century, to the more familiar stories and events of World War I and World War II and the expansion of the IAF and its final structure at the time of partition. The research, references and attention to detail reflect the relentless attention to bring forth to the reader every little nugget of information related to the early years of military aviation in India. While this review cannot do justice to all the important markers in the book, an attempt will be made to highlight several important ones that will interest the current generation of aviation, and aviation history, enthusiasts.

The struggle for an individual identity for an air force for India, hived out of the Royal Air Force (RAF) makes for interesting reading through the initial chapters and the years following World War 1 wherein the air force was mainly seen as a constabulary arm in the form of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) units to support the British Army. This was despite several Indian aviators who excelled in both air combat and ground attack in World War I, prominent among them the much written about quintet of Indra Lal Roy, Hardit Malik, Welinkar, Sen and Jeebhoy. The book highlights Whitehall's attempts to downsize the RFC complement that was allocated to the British Indian Army to as low as two squadrons until the growing insurgency in the North-Western Frontier Province (NWFP) forced it to reconsider the force levels. Renamed as the Royal Air Force in India (RAFI), the force expanded through the 1920s to almost 12 squadrons under an Air Officer Commanding (AOC) RAF India, prior to the outbreak of World War II.

Among the interesting chapters, the one on air operations by RAFI in the Third Anglo-Afghan conflict and operations against the Afridis and Mahsud tribals in Waziristan (1919-20) are particularly instructive as the author highlights that they comprised perhaps the first serious application of air power in combined arms operations in difficult terrain. An interesting nugget in the book reveals that Lidell Hart, an early proponent of the *indirect approach* to war-fighting took interest in the fledgling RAFI when he wrote scathingly about the decay of the force once the Third Anglo-Afghan War was won. The chapters on the formation of the IAF Volunteer Reserve and the Coastal Defence Flights reveal the myopic approach of London in not appreciating the need to create an all-round air force; rather, it assessed that aerial resources would primarily be needed to reconnoitre the seas around India and guard the inhospitable NWFP. Even as army support, interdiction and bombing operations against the Faqir of Ipi between 1936-38 provided excellent operational experience for a large band of Indian pilots and technicians who had by then established themselves as pioneers of the RAFI and later the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) and IAF. The relentless advance of the Japanese across Southeast Asia in 1941 galvanised the RAFI

into rapidly expanding to a large force that comprised 10 fighter squadrons, with several of them being commanded by Indian pilots.

Chapters 5 to 8 explore familiar skies as the author painstakingly chronicles the correspondence between New Delhi and London and the chain of events that led to several batches of Indian pilots and technicians (hawai sepoys) being trained at Cranwell; their struggle to compete and win the trust of their colonial masters; how they performed in combat in several theatres, including the NWFP and Burma; and, finally, how fighter squadrons exclusively manned by Indian pilots and technicians performed brilliantly in both the First and Second Burma Campaigns in defensive and offensive roles. Peppered with vignettes from letters, anecdotes from squadron diaries and official correspondence from carefully preserved archival sources, the book is a one stop shop to learn everything there is to know about the the IAF's early squadrons.

Chapter 9 on the *Japanese Invasion of Burma and the Role Played by the Indian Air Force* is by far the best chapter in the book as the author weaves the air operations skilfully into ground battles in every sector. Along with K.S. Nair's book *The Forgotten Few*, air power researchers of the early history of the IAF have a veritable feast of compressed squadron histories, numbers, anecdotes, operational details and personal reflections. This probably, and sadly, makes for the best researched aerial campaign undertaken by the IAF, a fact that does not speak very highly of the archival and declassification effort related to aerial campaigns in independent India.

On the eve of granting independence to India and Pakistan, the challenges confronting the British in splitting a force that was not based on communities or regions were immense. Chapter 10 that deals with *The Reconstitution of the Royal Indian Air Force Into Two Independent Air Forces* is the first serious attempt by any Indian aviation historian to navigate this complex process that finally resulted in India being given eight of the ten fighter squadrons with the two transport squadrons being split equally between India and Pakistan. However, while the bulk of the established operational bases of the RIAF went to Pakistan owing to their locations at places such as Peshawar, Chaklala

and Multan, India managed to retain important training establishments at Ambala and a few other locations in the south. The dialogue that led to the bifurcation is well narrated by the author and recreates the birth of the IAF with remarkable clarity.

This is a serious book and is not for the faint-hearted who do not have the stamina to read through what is a tough but rewarding piece of writing. The prose is formal, dense and laborious at times and will detract readers who are looking for an easy read. The size of the book is rather intimidating and except for Chapters 1-3 and Chapter 10, most other chapters extend to well beyond 50 pages, which is a tall task for any reader to concentrate on. Notwithstanding these minor observations, this is a serious book that has emerged from back-breaking research and sustained passion for aviation history and contributes richly to the growing repository of IAF historiography.