

# FLIGHTS OF VALOUR



*The Life of*  
GROUP CAPTAIN  
HIMMAT  
SINGH  
RAVUBHA  
GOHEL

# FLIGHTS OF VALOUR



Cover:

*Pilot Officer Gohel sitting in the cockpit of Lysander Co-op aircraft at Fort Miranshah (NWFP), RAF Station Kohat (c. 1942).*

Page 1:

*Multi-purpose Audax aircraft, illustrative of the type on which Pilot Officer Gohel was assessed as 'above average' in bombing and air gunnery, in c.1941-42, at No. 1 SFTS, RAF, Ambala.*

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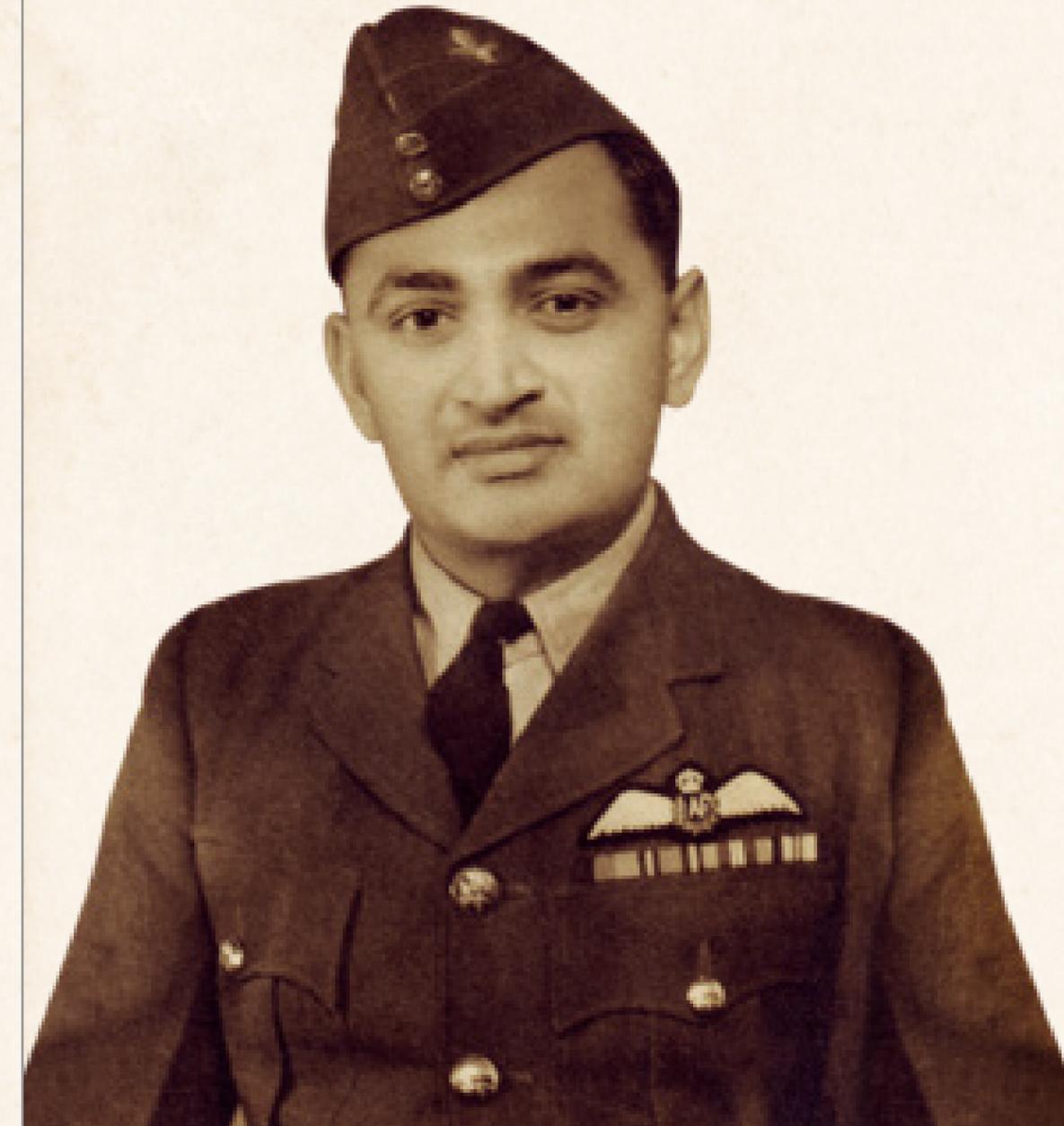
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**FOREWORD** 7

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** 9

**INTRODUCTION** 10

## CHAPTER ONE

**A MOMENTOUS FLYPAST** 15

In his Father's Footsteps 17

The Horse Whisperer 23

## CHAPTER TWO

**THE TAKE-OFF (1941-44)** 33

Eye on the Sky 35

The First Altitude 39

Green Fields, Blue Skies 46

Wings Parade 48

In an Open Cockpit 59

The Mighty Lysander 63

God as Co-Pilot 68

Flying Instructor Gohel 69

Vultee Vengeance 74

The Untold India Story: World War II 76

## CHAPTER THREE

**STRONG WILL AT WORK (1945-55)** 89

Moshi Moshi, Japan 91

An Independent India 97

The United Kingdom Courier Flight 103

First Day as a Republic 110

Flying in Independent India 115

## CHAPTER FOUR

**HIGH FLIGHT (1955-71)** 127

Unclipped Wings 129

The Final Touchdown 144

## CHAPTER FIVE

**A CELEBRATED LIFE** 159

First Lady— Gulab Kunwarba 161

Unwavering Responsibility 167

Raja Gohel 174

Epicurean 175

Time with the Children 179

Enduring Values 188

Call for Adventure 195

The Sunset Years 197

## CHAPTER SIX

### GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Dr. Dilip Solanki	203
Rajendra Singh Rathore	206
Sona Solanki	208
Sanjiv Solanki	209
Devika, Radhika and Shivraj Singh Rathore	210
Dimple Gohel	212
Neli Gohel	216
Amarjyoti Gohel	219
Col. Anuj Srivastava (Retd.)	220
Wg Cdr Narendrasinh Chudasama	222
Zuleikha Merchant	224
Pradeep Gohil	225
Piyush Vaitha	226
Dr. Sunanda Gupta	228
Wg Cdr Ajit Sinhji Jhala (Retd.)	231
	232

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### TRIBUTES

Jagan Pillarisetti	235
Matt Poole	236
KS Nair	272
	279

# Foreword

*“Some people have to wait their entire lives to meet their hero. Mine raised me.”*

-Unknown

The motto of the Indian Air Force is ‘*Nabhah Sparsham Deeptam*’ or ‘Touch the Sky with Glory’ and Daddy lived up to this with great pride, honour and integrity. His life is our best story!

Daddy’s life, by no means an ordinary one, is penned in his own words, in the form of his logbook entries, his hand-written notes, and original paper clippings from various newspapers and magazines. They are not only official documents and entries but also an extension of his nature, personality and character.

His story must be told. By documenting his momentous life and extraordinary career achievements through this book, we hope his grandchildren, great-grandchildren and future generations of the family will get a glimpse into his life, his legacy and their roots. It will give them an opportunity to

connect with him through his memories and wonderful stories, and inspire them to live a life of integrity and sincerity, to be good human beings and to celebrate every moment of life — big or small!

We take great pride in dedicating this book as a tribute to Daddy on his birth centenary.

With all our love,

His children—

Indira Solanki

Captain Kirit Sinhji Gohel

Ghanshyam Sinhji Gohel (*who still lives in the hearts of those he left behind*) and

Gita Gohel Rathore



*The engine is the heart of an aeroplane,  
but the pilot is its soul.*

*Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh*

## Acknowledgements

Many people have made this book possible for my father, my family and me.

Before I begin acknowledging them, I would like to make a special mention of my mother, Gulab Kuwarba Gohel, who was a remarkably strong woman, and truly Daddy's life-partner, through all his struggles and successes. She was the silent strength behind our family.

To my children, Devika, Radhika, and Shivraj, who conducted long-distance classes at odd hours, whenever I was technologically-challenged and needed help. To my husband Rajendra, who kept the humour going when I occasionally felt overwhelmed.

My most sincere thanks to Jagan Pillarisetti, Matt Poole, and KS Nair for penning their beautiful tributes to Daddy. Writing his story would not have been possible without the extensive research and technical details provided by them. Despite their hectic schedules, they responded immediately to my

requests (which were ever so often) for specific information regarding dates and events, or aviation jargon, a lot of which has been incorporated in the book. I shall forever be grateful to them for motivating me to write a book about my father, my hero.

Thank you to all my family and friends who enriched this book by sharing their memories about Daddy.

To the entire team at Family Fables Company, especially Samrata Diwan and Surangana Makin, thank you for turning my dream into a reality and bringing out such a beautiful book!

Thank you,

Gita Gohel Rathore

# Introduction

Group Captain Himmat Singh Ravubha Gohel was born to fly. In his 30-year service with the Royal Indian Air Force and then the Indian Air Force, his career catapulted to national importance and sealed his place in the annals of Indian aviation. He flew when few others did: in 20<sup>th</sup> century India when warfare was recurrent and the need for passionate, unswerving officers ripe.

Group Captain Gohel participated in crucial operations that now feature as landmarks in Indian history. He clinched a professional arc known to very few, manoeuvring danger and peril to rise to pivotal ranks in the Indian Air Force.

A glimpse into Group Captain Gohel's life is an insight into both his flights of imagination, of adolescent skyward dreams, as well as into his rigour and scrupulousness.

He flew over twenty aircraft in his professional career but no flight remained unrecorded. Group Captain Gohel maintained logbooks and photo-banks where he poured tremendous details about his journeys. It's these records

that show us an evolution not only of India's defence preparedness and capabilities but also the heroism and sagacity that brimmed in him, that brims in many motivated defence officers.

Group Captain Gohel showed a steadfast commitment to flying. It was as if flying was an extension of his personality; the vast blue sky, a second home. But this commitment didn't stop him from doting on his family. He was and is fervently remembered as a loving son, brother, husband, father and grandfather.

Group Captain Gohel was a man of vision and unchipped wings. Inspired by his life, this book is his personal memoir that is conceived from his detailed logbooks, archival documents, and interviews with aviation historians and family members. We would like to sincerely acknowledge and appreciate the efforts and inputs of aviation historians Jagan Pillarisetti, Matt Poole, and KS Nair, who enriched this book with their inimitable knowledge.



*Once you have tasted  
flight, you will forever  
walk the earth with your  
eyes turned skyward, for  
there you have been and  
there you will always  
long to return.*

Leonardo Da Vinci

Gp Capt Himmat Sinhji Ravubha Gohel  
as Cadet Officer, December 1941  
[Service Number: 1705 Flying (Pilot)]

*Chapter 1*  
**A MOMENTOUS FLYPAST**



The IAF flypast on India's first Republic Day was led by Wg Cdr Gohel in a formation of nine heavy bombers— B-24 Liberators of World War II fame.

## A Momentous Flypast

It was 1950— the year India celebrated its first Republic Day. The first President of Independent India, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, unfurled the tricolour to the resonating sound of the National Anthem. Citizens of India sat enthralled as the many contingents of the Indian armed forces marched past in their finery and official decoration. It was a stunning celebration. No expense was spared, no detail overlooked, but the best was yet to come. The parade on the ground had to meet its aerial match.

Heads turned, necks were arched as overhead— flying at 500 metres—was not the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) but the newly-formed Indian Air Force (IAF). Nine heavy bombers of No. 5 Squadron, the B-24 Liberators of World War II fame, thundered in the sky. The aircraft were not brand new; they were made up of components of different origins. Aviation historian KS Nair would later disclose how they were reconditioned from abandoned World War II hulks. The electric connections were unreliable and the fit wasn't

perfect. The challenge was exacerbated by the late delivery of the aircraft: the pilots had received them only four days before the Republic Day! And in those four days, they had to practice and perfect their flying formations. Nerves were on edge. But all fears were allayed as soon as the aircraft entered a stunning box formation.

Leading the flypast in a Liberator HE789 was Wing Commander Himmat Singh Ravubha Gohel. After nine years of combat and instructional flying, Wg Cdr Gohel was handpicked to lead the IAF flypast on India's first Republic Day. He was only 29—and at the peak of his aerial glory.

But this astonishing achievement had not come easy. Wg Cdr Gohel had more than 2,300 hours, or more than 90 days, of flying experience. What surveyor Sam O White said for pioneer aviator Noel Wien might as well have been true for Gohel: *"It was like the wings were attached to his own shoulders."*



*The Bhavnagar Imperial Service Lancers*  
Photo courtesy: Internet

## *In his Father's Footsteps*

**H**immat Sinhji Gohel was born in the Gohil clan of Saurashtra on 15 February, 1921. Brought up with great love and care in a Gujarati Rajput household, Himmat Sinhji, much like his father Major Ravubha Sinhji Gohil, would lead an inspiring life in the Indian armed forces.

The Gohil lineage can be traced to the 12<sup>th</sup> century with deep roots in the Mewar kingdom of Rajputana. During Ravubha Sinhji's growing up years, the family shifted from their native Songadh village in Gujarat's Tapi district to Bhavnagar.

Bhavnagar was founded by Thakur Bhavsinhji in 1723 and was an important city, reputed for its well-established administration, industries, port and roads, and rail network. Like other 560 princely states in colonial India, Bhavnagar too maintained an internal

administration system and a sizable state army.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, an impending Russian invasion compelled Governor-General Lord Dufferin to introduce the Imperial Service Troops (IST). Its purpose was to organise, train and equip units recruited from princely states to Indian Army standards. The British wanted IST to be capable of participating in campaigns alongside the Indian and British armies. Many royals offered generous assistance to the British. In 1890, the Thakur of Bhavnagar offered a portion of his state troops for reorganisation under the IST Scheme and thus the Bhavnagar Imperial Service Lancers were born. The Gohels have a long history with the Bhavnagar Lancers. Himmat Sinhji's father, Ravubha Sinhji, and grandfather, Sowar Bariyabha Sinhji, were enlisted with the Bhavnagar Imperial Service Lancers.

*Major Ravubha Sinhji Gohil*  
(Service Number: 1063)





*Inspired by Major Ravubha Sinhji's unwavering spirit and tall legacy, the family finds his exalting persona aptly captured in the lines below—*

*Fate whispers to the warrior, 'You cannot withstand the storm.'  
The warrior whispers back, 'I am the storm.'*



*Arms (crest) of Bhavnagar Lancers*

During World War I, the British tackled manpower shortage by reinforcing one state's units through another. The Bhavnagar and Kashmir Lancers fought as part of the Mysore Lancers and were indispensable during the War.

Early in the War, the Mysore Lancers, as part of the British Indian army, held the Suez Canal and prevented the Turks from capturing it. Later, they helped penetrate Turkish defences along the coastal route to Damascus and delivered

the coup de grâce. The extraordinary bravery of Mysore Lancers won them decorations and battle honours. And in recognition of its service, the Bhavnagar state was entitled to claim a 15-cannon gun salute.

One soldier whose gallantry shone through the war was Himmat Sinhji's father, Ravubha Sinhji. When the Turks had attacked Iraq's oil fields, Dafadar Ravubha Sinhji was a part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force—mainly an Indian force comprising the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Indian Divisions, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Cavalry Divisions, and some 24 other Indian battalions including the 15<sup>th</sup> (Imperial Service) Cavalry Brigade consisting of two units of the Mysore and Jodhpur Lancers<sup>1</sup>. In their defence, the Brigade launched a mounted attack on the Turks holding the defile. After a few days of battle, they conquered the town of Haifa on 22 September 1918. This is believed to be one of the last cavalry charges in modern military history.

Dafadar Ravubha Sinhji's valour in Egypt won him the prestigious Indian Meritorious Service Medal. His father Sowar Bariyabha Sinhji was elated with the honour bestowed upon his son but was staunchly against serving at a position

<sup>1</sup> Cardozo, AVSM, SM (Retd.), Maj Gen Ian, The Indian Army: A Brief History, New Delhi: Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research United Service Institution of India, 2007.



Indian Meritorious Service Medal awarded to Dafadar Ravubha Sinhji.

Photo courtesy: Internet

lower than his son or saluting him, and consequently resigned from the services.

Between 1924 and 1925, Ravubha Sinhji, then a Risaldar, a mid-level cavalry officer of the British Indian Army, was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant. This was part of a British effort to increase the Lancers' efficiency by raising the officers' cadre of posts by one. Later in his career, he would rise to the rank of a Major.

His contribution to the War has been commemorated at Delhi's famous Imperial Service Cavalry Brigade Memorial, commonly known as *Teen Murti*. The Memorial's three life-sized stone and bronze statues are each representative of Hyderabad, Jodhpur, and Mysore Lancers. Major Ravubha Sinhji is believed to have modelled for one of the statues in this set.



The Teen Murti Memorial, Photo courtesy: Internet



The medals and badges awarded to Major Ravubha Sinhji:

(top row, left to right) The 1914-15 Star (awarded to soldiers who served in a theatre of war outside the qualifying period for the 1914 Star, between August 5, 1914 and December 31, 1915), the British War Medal (awarded for service overseas, though not necessarily in a theatre of war, between August 5, 1914 and November 11, 1918), the Allied Victory Medal (awarded to Indian Soldiers who served in a theatre of war between August 5, 1914 and November 11, 1918). The Olive Branch on the ribbon signifies the honour of being 'mentioned in despatches' for gallantry in action or for a wide range of services on and off the battlefield), the 1935 Silver Jubilee Medal of King George V and Queen Mary of British India (commemorative medal), the 1937 King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Coronation Medal (commemorative medal), and the Indian Army Meritorious Service Medal.

But when Major Ravubha Sinhji was at the peak of his career, he suffered the biggest setback when his parents and younger brother passed away. While he was learning to cope with the loss, and care for his family—including his late brother's wife and children—his wife, Hariba Vala, too passed away. The triad of grief suffused Ravubha Sinhji and his two sons, Himmat and Sajjan.

On the one side were mounting familial responsibilities and on the other, his illustrious career in the army. But then he remarried and found a new companion in Bairajba Jadeja. As parents, they inspired and doted on their three children, Himmat, Sajjan and Manharba.



Bhavnagar State Polo Team Winners

(left to right): Balwant Sinhji, Kumar Saheb Nirmal Sinhji, Major Ravubha Sinhji, Col. Ajit Sinhji.

## The Horse Whisperer

Life's many lessons can be learnt on a sports ground. But Major Ravubha Sinhji learnt them on horseback.

During the Raj, the sport of Polo was synonymous with royalty and the army. And Major Ravubha Sinhji's intimate affiliation with the two worlds explains his fascination with the sport. Like his father Sowar Bariyabha Sinhji, Major Ravubha Sinhji loved horses and the thrill associated with riding them. Sometimes horses can be moody, sometimes threatening and it was the element of danger involved in

handling these glorious animals that made Polo a desirable sport for him.

Major Ravubha Sinhji was an exemplary Polo player and won several prestigious tournaments such as the Kathiawar Junior Polo Tournament (1930) as part of the Bhavnagar Polo Team (alongside Balwant Sinhji, Kumar Nirmal Sinhji, and Col. Ajit Sinhji). "At that time he was the best Polo player in India and almost equal to Rao Raja Hanut Singh of Jodhpur, who had a lot of regard for my grandfather," his grandson Capt Kirit Sinhji Gohel shares.

Major Ravubha Sinhji was adept at handling a variety of horses but he often banked on his favourite: a horse named Yashwant— a mix between the Kathiawari and the Australian breed of Waler.

"He was like a horse whisperer", exclaims SP Raghuraj D Jhala (Retd.), an old family friend of the Gohels. Major Ravubha Sinhji's grandchildren add, "His British commander was very happy with him and every time he won, the commander would give him a promotion. So with hard work, dedication and his passion for horses, he rose to become a Major and the commanding officer of his regiment".



Kathiawar Junior Polo Tournament Runners Up Cup won by Major Ravubha Sinhji in c. 1930.



*Major Ravubha Sinhji Gohil (standing, extreme left) after a day of pig-sticking. Also seen in the picture, the then Maharaja of Bhavnagar Krishna Kumar Sinhji (standing eighth from left) with his younger brothers, Kumar Saheb Dharam Kumar Sinhji of Bhavnagar (standing fourth from left), Kumar Saheb Nirmal Kumar Sinhji of Bhavnagar (standing sixth from left).*

Like Major Ravubha Sinhji, his children and grandchildren have also displayed a lasting commitment to sports. Among his sons, Sajjan Sinhji was an accomplished cricketer, and Himmat Sinhji was an avid sportsman, proficient in a range of sports including tennis, squash, football, swimming and shooting. His grandson Capt Kirit as well as great-grandson Shivraj are accomplished riders and Polo players and have rekindled the love for horses and Polo in the family. In fact, Capt Kirit's first horse was called Yashwant, in memory of his grandfather's favourite horse.

Major Ravubha Sinhji displayed his sportsmanship not just on Polo fields, but also in the jungles of Bhavnagar. He is known to have won close to 200 cups and trophies in the two thrill sports of Polo and pig-sticking— a sport usually associated with the higher ranks of the military and colonial administration. Major Ravubha often indulged in pig-sticking with Bhavnagar's royals.

In 1926, Major Ravubha Sinhji participated in the prestigious Kadir Cup (pronounced Kaarde or Kaada)—an annual Raj



*Kadir Cup (Meerut, 1926) (clockwise from left): Major Ravubha Sinhji Gohil, Capt Shobha Singh, Col Sardar Singh, Major Cato*



sporting event. Major Ravubha Sinhji became the first Indian in six decades to win this prestigious cup. Already considered a horse whisperer, he was now also an invincible boar hunter.

Polo, pig-sticking, and *shikar* were a part of Major Ravubha Sinhji's life and like him, his sons would also grow up to be fond of *shikar*. Himmat Sinhji and Sajjan Sinhji often visited their Narbad farmland as teenagers to practice a few rounds of shooting. Himmat Sinhji's shooting skills were enhanced through his training in defence and demonstrated at the hunting playground of the Maharaja of Bhavnagar, eventually called Velavadar Blackbuck Sanctuary. Later in life, he would take his children on *shikar* trips, building forts of memories they scale to this day.

After he retired, Major Ravubha Sinhji frequently visited Bhavnagar city's famous Parsi club in the evenings and kept in touch with his friends. Almost 85 years ago, he built the family's beautiful Bhavnagar residence—a spacious four-bedroom bungalow—in a quiet residential neighbourhood of Krishnanagar. Major Ravubha Sinhji took a keen interest



Opposite page:

Pig-Sticking at Mahua, 1935

(left to right): Major Ravubha Sinhji Gohil, Kumar Saheb Nirmal Sinhji, Balwant Sinhji, Kumar Saheb Dharmendra Sinhji, Jhilubha.

The coveted Kadir Cup trophy

Photo courtesy: Internet



*Brothers at Shikar*

*Himmat Sinhji aiming with his gun, while Sajjan Sinhji looks through his binoculars, at the family's Narbad farmland.*

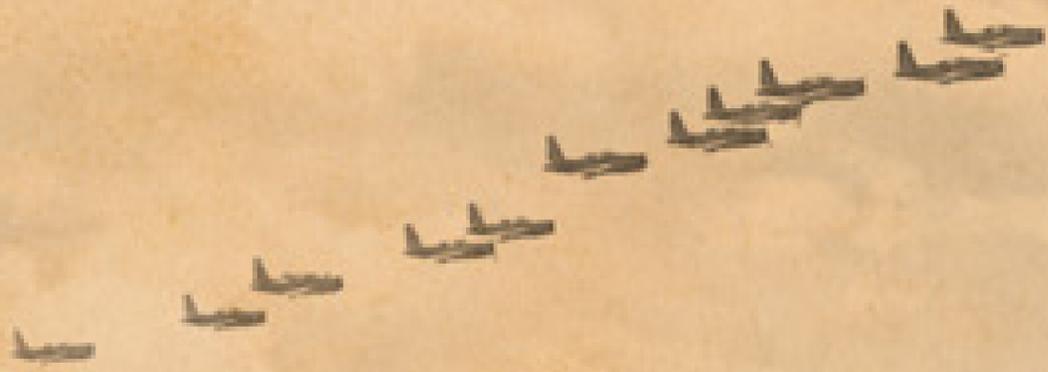
in gardening, and planted a variety of fruit trees like *jamun*, *chikoo*, pomegranate, mangoe, lime, and custard apple. He would often be spotted with a watering can, sprinkling water on the neat rows of roses, spider lilies, and *mogras*. The canopy of *neem*, *ashoka*, and *champa* trees still distinguishes the Gohel residence from other homes. These trees shelter a variety of migratory birds. Every summer, Himmat Sinhji, with his grandchildren, would tiptoe to their balcony to catch a glimpse of migratory storks or visit the Gaurishankar Lake to spot pelicans, demoiselle cranes, and bar-headed geese.

The children have also taken a piece of their ancestral home to their new residences. About twenty years ago, Gita planted a *champa* tree in her Udaipur home garden, whose branch was grafted from Bhavnagar. Watering and nurturing this now fully-grown *champa* makes her feel closer to her grandfather. *“This champa tree is so precious to me that I feel like it is an umbilical cord that keeps me tied to my ancestors. It is blooming in my garden now as a memory of my Dadabapu and our home in Bhavnagar”*, she shares.

Major Ravubha Sinhji passed away on 7 April, 1962.



*The Gohel residence, Nirmal Niwas, in Bhavnagar's Krishnanagar area. The ancestral property is a big bungalow built on two plots of land, comprising of spacious four bedrooms on the front and rear of the house with ample staff accommodation and a garden. Nirmal Niwas truly stands out as a green paradise in this peaceful residential area.*



*Chapter 2*  
**THE TAKE-OFF**  
**(1941-44)**



*Himmat Singhji Gohel* at the age of 19,

when he appeared for the RIAF recruitment interview in 1940. In this picture, he can be seen wearing the Favre Leuba gold watch, a special gift by his father. He would lose this in January 1944 while cleaning the front wind-screen of Vengeance Dive Bomber. A note accompanying this photo in the logbook reveals some interesting observations he had made out of his memory: "Watch shows 5 minutes to 4 o'clock (evening)"... "Ivory buttons with white string".

## The Take-Off (1941-44)

On 13 November 1940, Himmat Singhji, only nineteen, embarked on a historic trip that would change his life. He boarded a train from Bhavnagar to Bombay to appear for an interview before the Jinwala Commission Selection Board— a touring selection board consisting of Civil Aviation Head Mr. Leete, Flight Lieutenant Mukherjee, Ghanshyam Singh Limbdi, and Mr. Jinwala himself at Sir Cowasjee Jehangir Hall.

The Board asked Himmat Singhji a variety of questions to assess his attitude, temperament, adaptability, and ability to deal with pressure. They had to determine whether he had the aptitude for the job and whatever was asked, he answered in his broken English. Seeing limitless potential in him, Board member Mr. Leete encouraged him to speak in English. From over 4,000 applicants, 835 people were selected to appear for the interview, and only 129 were accepted into service. Himmat Singhji was one of these 129 young men the RIAF chose. "My saluting and my docility and my father's Captaincy may have helped", Himmat Singhji wrote later in his logbook.



Sir Cowasjee Jehangir Hall at Bombay, where Himmat Singhji's interview with the Jinwala Commission Selection Board had taken place on 13 November 1940.

Photo courtesy: Internet

According to aviation historian Jagan Pillarisetti, the selected candidates were sent to Civil Flying Clubs for preliminary flying training and offered a subsistence allowance of Rs. 100, a month. On successful completion of this training, they would enter the RIAF as Officer Cadets.

- Jinwala Commission interview
- ① I thought back of time probably wrote that my father was a good BSI and a good polo player
  - ② I told them later that I joined Civil Guards and training in sword drill and marching
  - ③ I was told that and then found out Makaraj and gave details later
  - ④ What they asked and what I answered in my letter Taylor is difficult to remember now
  - ⑤ My education a great advantage was taken but later that time of the HD
  - ⑥ I was medically examined including one operation by British Medical Officer
  - ⑦ My schooling and my discipline and my father's capacity may have helped including Louis later
  - ⑧ I purchased black stockings (long) for a job and gave back to BSI
  - ⑨ I got telegram from them by 2 weeks to go to the

**RECORD OF**

Date	Aircraft		Engines		Journey	
	Type	Markings	Type	H.P.	From	To
Brought forward						
<p><i>During interview in October 1940 at Sir Crompton Jinhwala House, I was showing some list and I selected the selection board members as I entered the room. Mr. Lark and Mr. Makaraj were in the selection board with Givens as the chairman. I met Lark in the corridors and I tried to speak in English fluently. I had no practice. Lark encouraged me to talk in English.</i></p>						
Carried forward						

Himmat Sinhji's recollections of his interview with the Jinwala Commission Selection Board in 1940.

On 24 December 1940, the Gohel residence in Bhavnagar was overjoyed when it received a confirmatory telegram, instructing Himmat Sinhji to report to the Karachi Aero Club. His journey as a Royal Indian Air Force officer was gathering speed but its preparation had begun a long time ago.

## Eye on the Sky

Himmat Sinhji completed his schooling from Bhavnagar's prestigious Alfred High School (now known as Shantilal Shah High School) and then went on to pursue his Bachelor of Science from the Samaldas College, famously known as the alma mater of Mahatma Gandhi. Like Gandhi, Himmat Sinhji too couldn't complete his degree as destiny had other plans for him.

He was strongly influenced by his father's achievements and contributions to the British Indian Army and harboured dreams of following in his footsteps. The disciplined, focused, and multifaceted life of the defence forces appealed to him and inspired him to build a career in the armed forces.

Inspired to join the forces after his Intermediate, Himmat Sinhji joined the Civic Guards, where he was trained in sword-fencing, drilling, marching, and the like. He was just a few months away from his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday when World War II broke out. The War compelled the British to beef up their security. The Raj foresaw the need to strengthen the RIAF to better protect the frontiers and the coast. Till then, Pillarisetti shares, RIAF had consisted of one squadron of aircraft and a dozen career officers trained at The Royal Air Force College, Cranwell (England). The British floated a proposal to form a Coastal Defence Flight and the Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve Act was passed. *"The intention was to recruit Indians with suitable qualifications in civil aviation to man Coastal Defence Flights raised at major civilian hubs"*, Pillarisetti explains.

The first few batches of volunteers were trained at Risalpur and later at Ambala. Those who completed their training became a part of the existing No. 1 Squadron. The initial few batches were selected from civilian volunteers who already had some background in civil aviation. Many of them held Pilot certificates from local flying clubs and were directly commissioned if they showed interest and reported for



Himmat Sinhji's alma maters Alfred High School (left) and Samaldas College (right) in Bhavnagar.  
Photo courtesy: Internet.

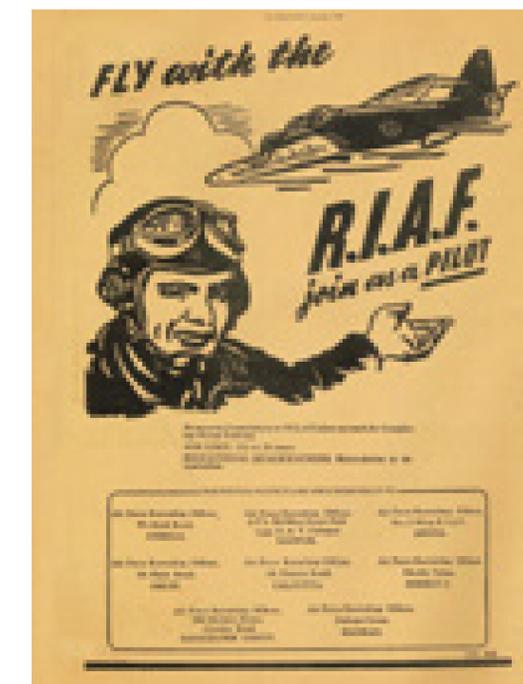
joining. This is how the first seven batches of volunteers were commissioned to the RIAF and provided flying training.



Himmat Sinhji's long-held desire to join the Air Force is evident in some old newspaper clippings found safely preserved among his other records. This particular clipping announces the making of the "new Indian Air Force".

But in 1940 India, there were not too many candidates with existing flying experience. Thus, candidates without any previous flying experience were forthcoming in large numbers. RIAF altered the recruitment conditions and began to hire the candidates as 'Officer Cadets', instead of as 'Commissioned Officers'. They were posted to Initial Training Wings, opened in 1941. The first such direct entry batch, Pillarisetti confirms, was the No. 8 Pilots Course. And it was this 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course that the 19-year-old Himmat Sinhji Ravubha Gohel would join.

At a time when flying was still an uncommon professional



Advertisement in 'The Onlooker' (c. November 1948) inviting young civilians to join the Royal Indian Air Force.

choice, perceived dangerous or risky, Himmat Sinhji applied to enroll in the RIAF. Pilots back then needed sharp instincts and top-notch flying skills to confront the dangers involved. Himmat Sinhji had the drive to achieve his goals.

After his selection by the Jinwala Commission Selection Board, Himmat Sinhji left for Karachi to begin his life as a Civil Pilot— a journey he recollected and documented with great precision in his five remarkably detailed logbooks.



The civilian trainees at Karachi Aero Club, January 1941. Civil Pilot Gohel can be seen in the center, while AR Pandit and SA Hussain are standing first and second from left.

## The First Altitude

The first logbook in the series begins with an important observation: “1941 was a crucial year in my life”. On the very first day of this year, Himmat Sinhji Gohel<sup>2</sup> bid his hometown Bhavnagar adieu, and passing through Mehsana, Marwar and Hyderabad (Sindh), he reached the Drigh Road Railway Station at Karachi on 3 January. He was the first person in his batch, the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course, to report for training. No. 8 PC was made up of 28 cadets, ten of whom would be killed, mostly in action or crashes, before the end of



Drigh Road Railway Station, Karachi (Pakistan) stood at the very first step of Himmat Sinhji’s thirty year-long journey in the Air Force.

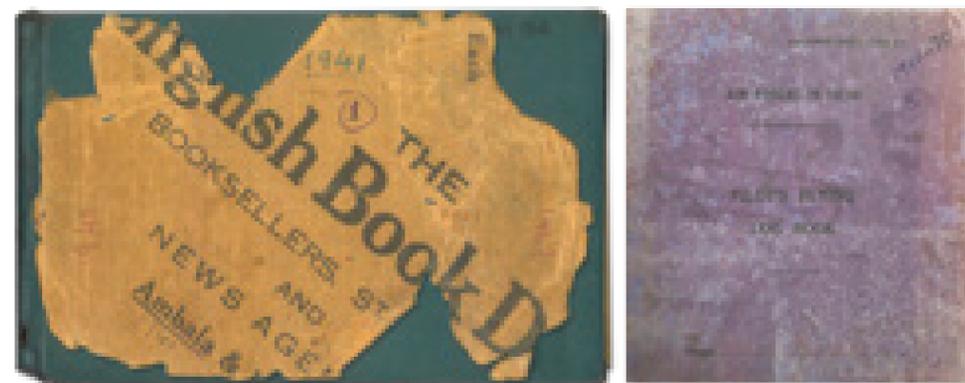
Photo courtesy: Internet

World War II. Karachi was a small milestone for each of them. The training was basic and the license was only for civil flying.

Other noted names that joined him in Karachi, Pillarisetti shares, were AR Pandit, Irani, BR Sanjana and SA Hussain. “The helmet, flying goggles, gosport tubes, and civil pilots logbook were purchased from Aero Stores at 170 Napier Road, Karachi on 6 or 7 January 1941. I locked them up in my leather suitcase stored in the R101 Airship Mooring tower, Malir, before going for lunch at Capt Finglass’ house”, Himmat Sinhji recorded in his logbook.

His logbooks are found to be brimming with vivid details of his early days in the RIAF: from the modes of transport he took from Bhavnagar to Malir (Karachi), and his comfortable accommodation in R-101 Tower to the diesel generator that heated water on cold mornings. He would also note other details like the clothes he wore for his routine tasks, his uniform that he found “ideal for flying”, the names of the instructors he reported to, as well as the people he

<sup>2</sup> Owing to a typographical spelling error made by the receiver in a tele-type-writer, after his enlistment, Himmat Sinhji’s last name ‘Gohil’ became ‘Gohel’, which remained unchanged for the rest of his life.



Himmat Sinhji's earliest logbooks, issued to him in 1941 on being recruited by RIAF.

shared his table with during meals in the Mess. It is these painstakingly-maintained records that make his logbooks a comprehensive read and take the reader back in time. They also stand testament to the enormous value he attached to his experiences and memories.

*"After flying in the morning, we used to have a good breakfast in the Flying Club canteen. Karachi Aero club gave excellent breakfast in the morning in between flying practice. Porridge with steaming hot milk, big omelette, toast with English golden spread, marmalade, coffee, tea and banana. Then classes used to start. With good food and the PT, I was in very good form. I could have gone solo earlier at Karachi with about nine hours*

The R-101 Airship Mooring Tower at Karachi Civil Airport. Civil Pilot Gohel and other trainees of 8th Pilots Course were put up in the building at the base of the tower.

Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti

*of Dual Training"*, reads one of his entries. On 4 January 1941, Himmat Sinhji was inducted into the RIAF as a Civil Pilot.

Among other experiences, Karachi also gave Civil Pilot Gohel some of his golden 'firsts': the first time he would write with black ink in his logbook, the first time he would see a glamorous but excellent tennis match between two British officers' wives, the first time he would see a ship in motion—a Japanese cargo ship at the Manori Port—as well as landing lights and airfield lights at Malir airport, and the first time he would travel in a Link Trainer aircraft.

Sharing an insight Pillarisetti reveals that Civil Pilot Gohel was sent on his first flight on 8 January 1941, within four days of his arrival in Karachi. He was paired with Civil Instructor TN Malik and the duo took to the air for a 20-minute flight de Havilland DH.60 Moth, VT-ACW, the precursor to the DH.82 Tiger Moth. His logbook entry notes, *"On 8-1-1941 during my first air experience, I looked to the right side from the front cockpit and saw the aeroplane leaving the ground. While gliding down, I clearly remember the propeller turning slow and the blades being clearly visible. Hot air from side exhaust was also noticeable. TN Malik had warned me not to touch the hot exhaust tubes on both sides of the front cockpit."*



(above) Aircraft of the Karachi Aero Club—two Tiger Moths in the background, with two DH.60s in the foreground.

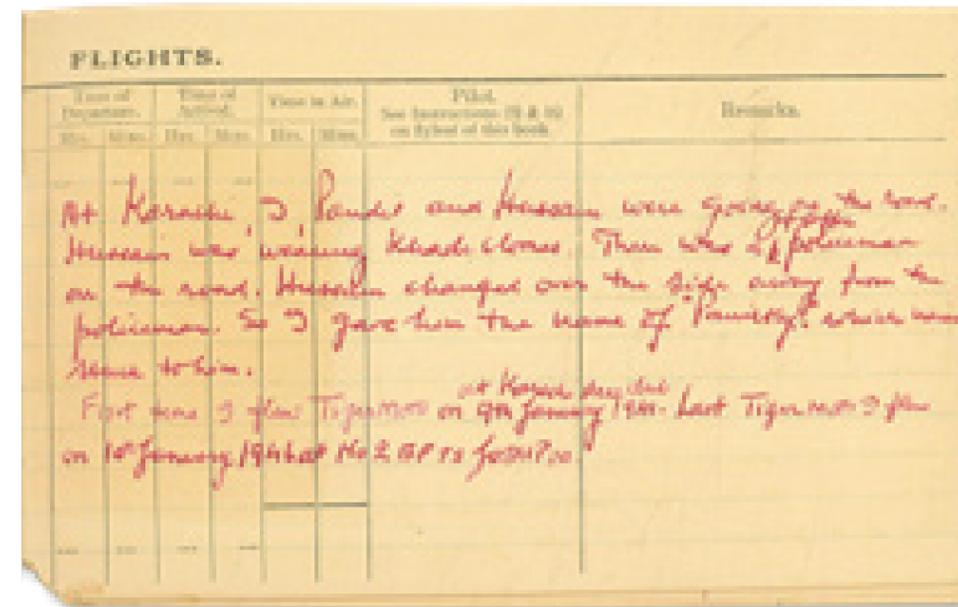
(below) The second aircraft—VT-ACW—would be the first aircraft in which Himmat Sinhji Gohel took to the air, prior to his commencement of training at the Indian Air Force.

Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti.

This air experience sortie was followed by many more. On 14 January, Civil Pilot Gohel flew his sixth flight: a dual check flight with Major William ‘Bill’ Jones— the legendary Chief Instructor of Karachi Aero Club. After the first dual check ride, Malik provided more dual flying sorties. Recalling one, Civil Pilot Gohel wrote in his logbook, “*During circuits and landings, I used to look down from the left-wing trailing edge and turn and cut the engine on reaching landmarks... e.g. dry water nullahs, which used to help in proper glide approach. Sometimes landing used to be bumpy. Malik did his best to send me solo first but I used to bounce on the last part – check of landing. Thus failing to bring the tail down when the Tiger Moth stalled. If there was intensive flying daily and more aircraft and instructors, I may have gone solo...*”

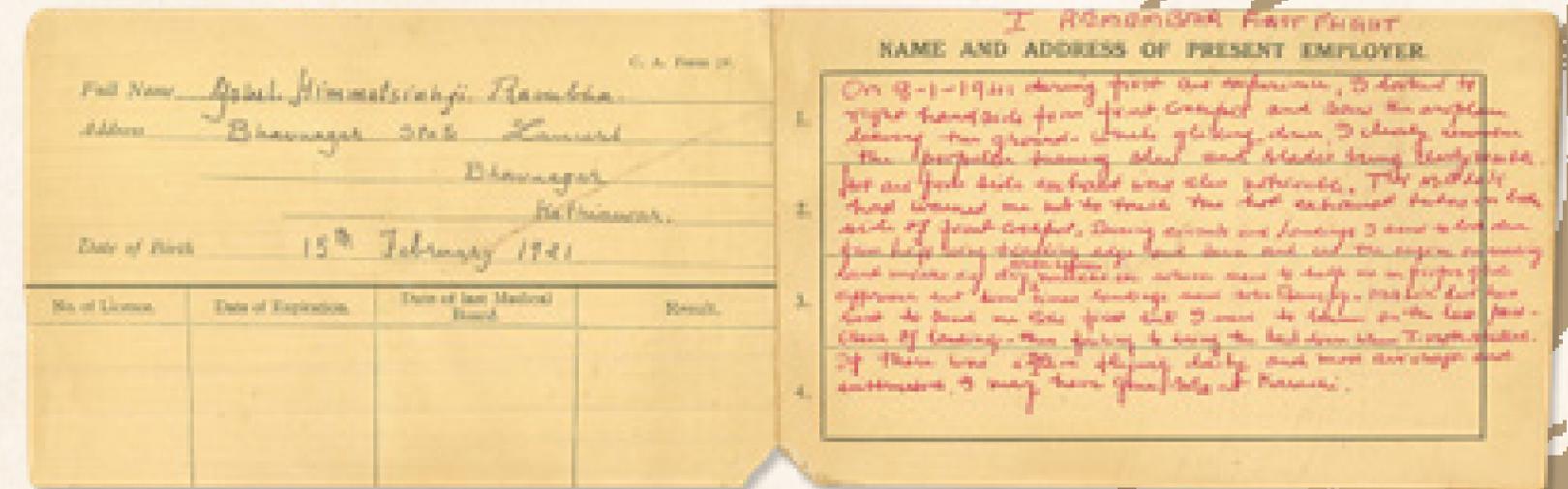
After about a month of flying, a RIAF Instructor from the Service Flying Training School (SFTS) undertook a check ride with the trainees. Flt Lt Bishop conducted this selection test. Even before the candidates had a chance to don the uniform, they were washed out. On 8 February 1941, Civil Pilot Gohel logged about 12 hours of dual time. His logbooks show that he was feeling confident about going solo at any point.

According to Pillarisetti, Civil Pilot Gohel’s instructor TN Malik was close to clearing him for a solo check. This was followed by a check with Major Bill Jones. However, Civil Pilot Gohel could not clear the solo test that day as his landing during the check-ride was bouncy. But before he could have another attempt, the RIAF had a change of mind about the Karachi Aero Club.



Teamwork is essential in the Defence. Friendships between pilots are forged in the crucible of extreme mid-air adventure. Of course, they last for life. A page from Himmat Singhji’s logbook gives a glimpse of the camaraderie he shared with his fellow officers, Pandit and Hussain, and how the latter came to earn the name ‘Panicky’ during their early years in service together.

The civilian instructors at Karachi were not considered proficient enough and it was felt that the trainees would fare better at another flying club. After spending about five weeks at Karachi, from 4 January to 12 February 1941, the trainees were suddenly transferred to the Bengal Flying Club, then located at the Behala airfield in Calcutta, according to Jagan Pillarisetti.



Civil Pilot Gohel description of his first air experience in his civil logbook.

*After flying in the morning we used to have good breakfast in flying club garden, this class was 11 am*

*with good fuel and 100% fuel in tank. The plane was in good condition and the pilot was very experienced.*

*First class of 1941*

FLIGHTS.		Date	Time	Remarks
20	T.M. Malik			First class. Experience
45	"			Demonstration of Control
45	"			Straight Flying
45	"			Turning the flying. Instruments
45	"			Straight flying. First part
15	Major. Javed			Check dual 30 flying
20	T.M. Malik			Shifting left & right turn
15	Self			Shifting left & right turn
2	50			

*On 23 Feb 1941 Tuesday*

FLIGHTS.		Date	Time	Remarks
45	J.N. Malik			Left hand flying. Control the gliding
45	"			Left hand on gliding
10	Self			Shifting left & right turn
40	Mr. J.N. Malik			L.R. turn on gliding
45	"			to turn & gliding turn
45	"			Control
15	Major. Javed			Check dual
40	Mr. J.N. Malik			to turn & gliding turn
5	35			

**RECORD OF FLIGHTS.**

Date	Aircraft		Engine		Journey	
	Type	Makeup	Type	H.P.	From	To
14/12/1941	in March 1941					

*BRITISH IN MARCH 1941. I saw John Bingham's aeroplane belong to H.H. Malhotra of Hyderabad. It was a Cessna 380 and the pilot was named as Bingham. At that time the war service of the H.H. Malhotra had been 18 Tom Bingham 5 hours plus H.H. Bingham had 3 hours. Total 21 of Great War. It is likely that Harvard AT-11 was used for 115 MPH Bingham's flight by changing the plane by First Flight, Bingham and Malhotra. It is likely that the plane was made by Bingham to Malhotra and then to Bingham.*

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*Dress made by Gurdar at I.T.S. Rd. Station Western Lahore.*

**RECORD OF LINK TRAINER PRACTICES**

DATE	SECTION	TYPE	PRACTICE	REMARKS AND REMARKS

*White flight suits (Cessna type)*

*The helmet, flying goggles and goggles were purchased from Bhatia & Co. 170 Malhotra Road, Lahore on 10th Jan 1941. I bought them up in my lecture hall case in R.M. building.*

*Major Javed going for leave at Capt. Pringle's house. Malhotra and others were called at I.T.S. Rd. Station Western Lahore. Malhotra, Gurdar, Malhotra and other were called at I.T.S. Rd. Station Western Lahore. The first water was lost in January 1941 while cleaning the first windscreen of Vengeance in Lahore in 1941. The water was lost in a fire in January 1941. The water was lost in a fire in January 1941. The water was lost in a fire in January 1941.*

When Himmat Sinhi bid farewell to his home in order to serve in the military, history was being written in another part of India. Interestingly, his journey to Karachi in 1941 and the time spent there coincided with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose's journey from India to Berlin, Germany. Himmat Sinhi captured this in great detail in his logbook.

A glimpse of the vast array of personal experiences and observations Himmat Sinhi recorded in his logbook.



## Wings Parade

In December 1941, Pilot Officer Gohel took a short leave and travelled to Bhavnagar. As soon as he got off the train, he left for the Nilambagh Palace. His Highness Krishna Kumarsinhji Bhavsinhji and the Dewan Saheb of Bhavnagar were expecting him. Plt Offr Gohel was prepared as well. This was the first time he was wearing his newly-issued blue Air Force uniform. He looked sharp in his battle jacket and trousers made up of blue terry wool. This jacket had a cloth belt and two pockets. It was buckled around the waist above the trouser and he wore it with a blue shirt and black tie. The sight of Plt Offr Gohel would have given anyone who knew him a pause—it was a hero's homecoming.

But before this coveted encounter with the Bhavnagar royalty, Plt Offr Gohel would have to complete rigorous training, which progressed from initial to intermediate to advanced.

He first trained at the Initial Training School at Walton (ITSW), Lahore in April 1941. Pillarisetti delineates that ITS Walton, at the time, imparted discipline, drill, physical training and elementary ground subjects. After spending

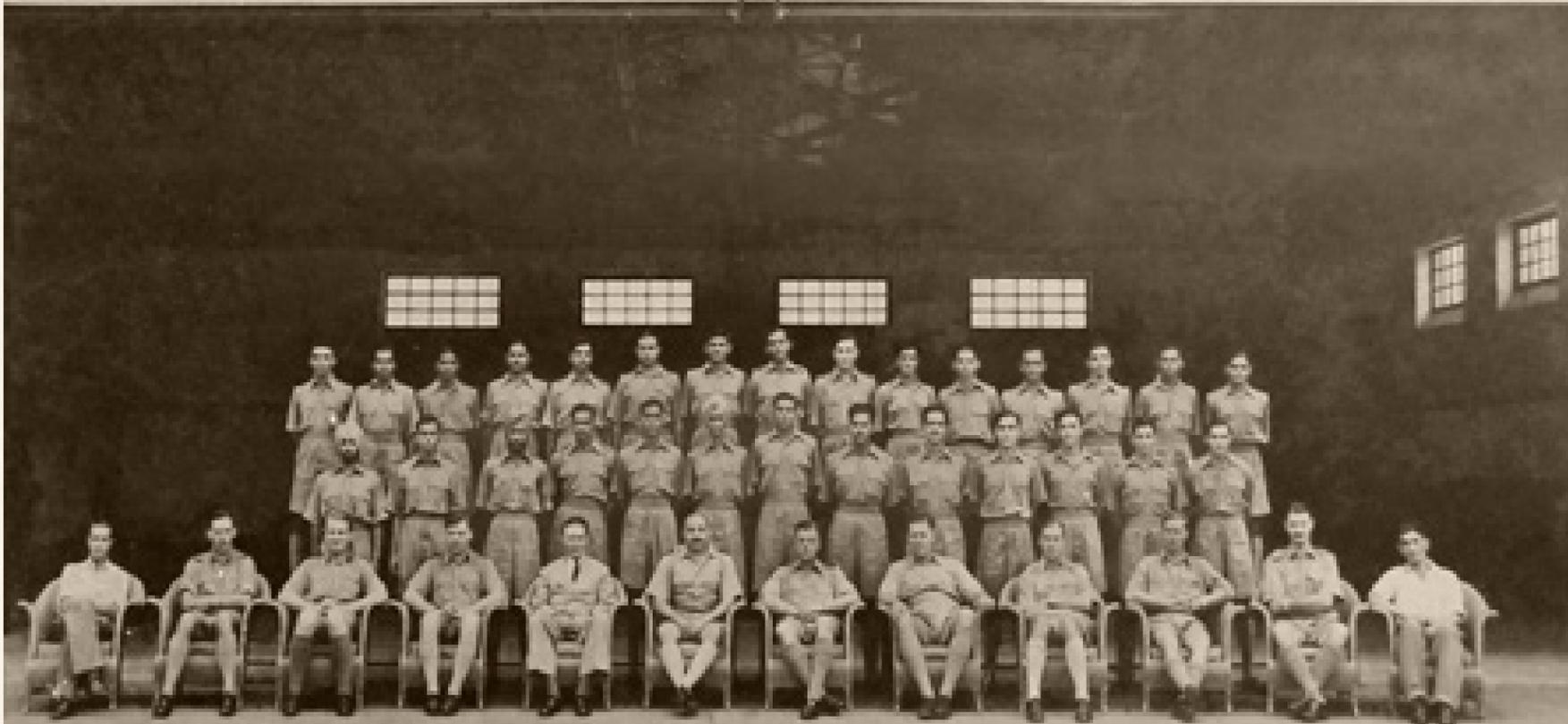


Plt Offr Gohel's first photo in the Air Force winter uniform as a 20 year old. His logbook entry reads: "Photo taken in December 1941 at BVG (Bhavnagar). Dewan Saheb Anantharai Bhai wanted my photo. Blue Banathia dress made by Ambala Camp tailor".



The passing out course photo at ITSW, Lahore in May 1941. Cadet Officer Gohel can be seen standing second from right in the third row. There were 42 cadets in No. 8 PC at this point. Photo Courtesy: Family of late Pilot Officer Ghulam Nabi Khan, provided by Jagan Pillarisetti.

# JODHPUR



Circa May 1941. On arrival, the customary group photo was taken of the 28 cadets who made up the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course with the instructors and Maharaja Umaid Singhji of Jodhpur (seated sixth from left); copies of the photo were provided to all the cadets. Cadet Officer Gohel is standing in the last row, seventh from left. Chief Instructor Geoffrey Godwin is seated, fifth from left.

Photo Courtesy: Family of Flg Offr Sundar Lal Atal, provided by Jagan Pillarisetti.

five weeks here, cadets of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course were shipped off for the Elementary Flying Training stage on 24 May 1941. Later batches would train for even longer periods at the ITSW, and the final batches would train for eighteen weeks. Cadet Officers Gohel, Pandit and others of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course had it lucky with just five weeks of extensive training.

Back then, there used to be two Elementary Flying Training Schools (EFTS)— No.1 EFTS at Begumpet, Hyderabad and No.2 EFTS at Jodhpur. Both were built on the infrastructure of the existing flying clubs. 28 cadets were sent to Jodhpur and the remaining 14 were sent to Begumpet. Cadet Officer Gohel was among those sent to Jodhpur.

But the cadets lived in distrustful times as an unsavoury travel experience showed. The officers were sent from Lahore to Jodhpur via Hyderabad (Sindh), that is, through a longer route than the usual one via Delhi. This arrangement, according to Cadet Officer Gohel's logbook, was a part of the British strategy to avoid a spy at Delhi— allegedly planted by Japan or Germany— from gathering sensitive information about the number of persons being trained by the Air Force in the wake of an impending World War II. *“Perhaps the British suspected that there was a spy at Delhi. The British Military*

*Officers were afraid of spying being done by Indians for Japan and Germany. The Spy Mania was in the air as they were losing the war at that time”*, Cadet Officer Gohel noted.

The No.2 EFTS was located at the Jodhpur airfield owned by Maharaja Umaid Singh of Jodhpur, an honorary Air Commodore in the RIAF. Here, the Officer Cadets underwent a three month long Elementary Flying Training Course and on its successful completion, they would be commissioned as Pilot Officers in the RIAF.

Cadet Officer Gohel spent the first month of his training being treated for a bout of malaria at the Jodhpur Civil Hospital. *“I should have gone solo first on AF Hart if I had not gotten sick at Jodhpur. I lost flying experience, else I was the best flier in my course. Bad luck both at Karachi and Jodhpur. By July 1942, I was well proficient, ahead of others”*, he wrote in his logbook. But he didn't let the illness or the time lost mar his spirit. Post recovery, as part of his Basic Flying Training, he went up for his first sortie on 28 May in Tiger Moth VT-ANA with his RAF instructor Flying Officer Chrystall. Pillarisetti notes that even though trainees like Cadet Officers Gohel and Pandit already had solo flying time on the Tiger Moth, they were not sent solo at the EFTS for a while. Cadet Officer



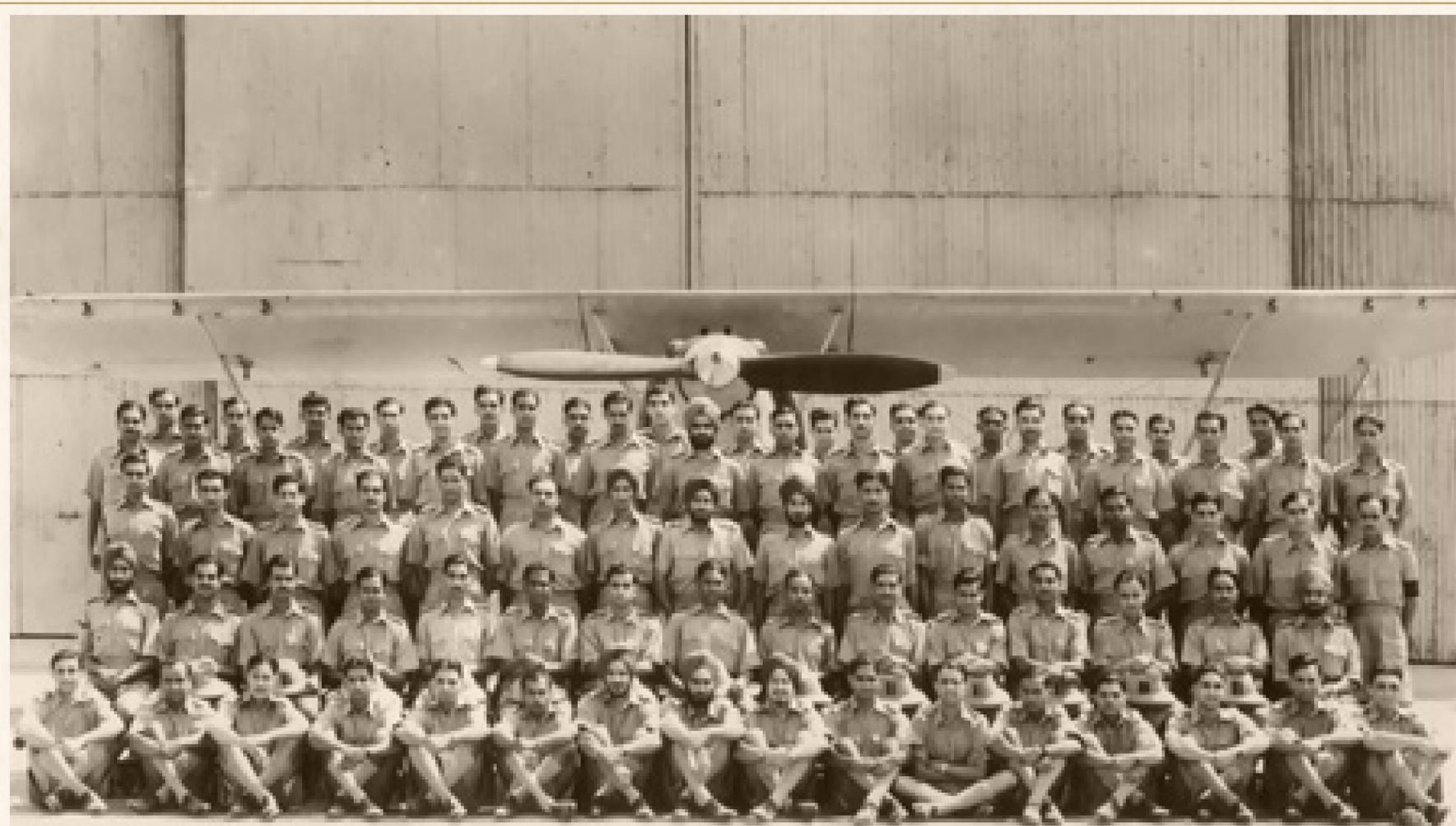
Gohel had his first solo sortie on VT-APF at the EFTS on 5 June 1941. “*Fg Offr Chrystall tried three times to send me solo after check by [Flight Officer] Godwin. Godwin was not prepared to shoulder responsibility. He was too old. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, Godwin told Chrystall to send me solo if he was satisfied. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day, Chrystall sent me solo*”, Cadet Officer Gohel wrote. Over the next three months, the trainees racked up hours as they completed the flying syllabus. According to Pillarisetti, the course officially concluded on 4 September 1941, and the batch was now sent to their next stop—No. 1 Service Flying Training School at Ambala.

*Cadet Officer Gohel in his flying gear. His logbook entry from the same day reads, “May 1941 No. 2 EFTS RIAF Station Jodhpur. Petrol store is behind. Helmet, goggles and gosport tube were purchased from Aero Club Karachi on 6 January 1941 (Monday). Tube is still preserved by me. This is the second photo in Air Force dress as a Cadet Officer. Air Force dress was made by Camp tailor and issued at ITS Lahore”.*



One section of the pilots of 8<sup>th</sup> Pilot Course when they passed out of EFTS. According to Jagan Pillarisetti, lack of rank stripes on their shoulders indicates that this photo was taken prior to commissioning. About the uniform he is seen wearing in this photo, Cadet Officer Gohel wrote in his logbook: “*Khaki Shirt and shorts were issued at IT School RIAF Station Walton, Lahore. Khaki sola topee, stockings and black shoes were the summer RIAF Uniform. The dress was made by the camp tailor at RIAF Walton*”. Seen in this photo are (standing, left to right) Goordeen, Dastoor, Irani, Ezekiel, Georges, Dorabji, Ghose. (sitting, left to right) Atal, Khan, Gohel, Andrade, Chakravarty, Hussain, Anwar.

*Photo Courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti.*



*The combined group photo of all the trainees present at the SFTS Ambala, including senior batches like the 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> as well as 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Courses, along with some of the officers relegated for Observer Training. The pupils of the 8<sup>th</sup> PC are standing in the first and the last rows. Cadet Officer Gohel can be seen standing third from left in the last row. The photo is a virtual who's who of the early pioneers of both the Indian Air Force and Pakistan Air Force.*

Cadet Officer Gohel and his batchmates arrived at Ambala in mid-September 1941. It was here that they were to be commissioned in the Royal Indian Air Force on 14 September 1941 and formally become Pilot Officers. The course began officially on 15 September 1941. The shocking news of them getting commissioned only at the end of the course left the officers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course dismayed. Pillarisetti notes that after representations, however, the authorities agreed that the cadets will be commissioned at the time of earning their wings— with their commission date being ante-date to the day of their arrival at the SFTS.



*The K3102 Audax biplane flown by Plt Offr Gohel, in December 1941 and January 1942, at SFTS Ambala. Sqn Ldr Powley was Officer Commanding, Air Force Training School.*

*Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti.*

After this, the cadets completed two months of flying with the Intermediate Training Squadron (ITS) and on completion, the pilots were awarded their “wings”— the coveted pilot’s badge. Then, they graduated to the Advanced Training Squadron for another two months. The No.1 SFTS (India) provided training in advanced flying that included cross-country navigation, bombing and air-to-air armament firing training.

On 21 September 1941, 27 officers of the 8<sup>th</sup> PC began training at the Intermediate Training Squadron of the SFTS. At that time, the SFTS operated the Hawker Hart and Audax biplanes, which Jagan Pillarisetti reveals, were designed as primary combat aircraft in the 1930s. As part of their armament training, the students flew Harvards as part of No. 2 Squadron, largely to familiarise themselves with this type of aircraft. Cadet Officer Gohel began flying in the Hawker Hart with his RAF instructor Flt Sgt Hart. At the Intermediate stage, the pilots were trained in aerobatics, formation flying and navigation. However, training did not come without a cost— they lost a member of their batch, Plt Offr Ghulam Nabi Khan, who crashed in his Audax during his night solo on 13 November 1941.

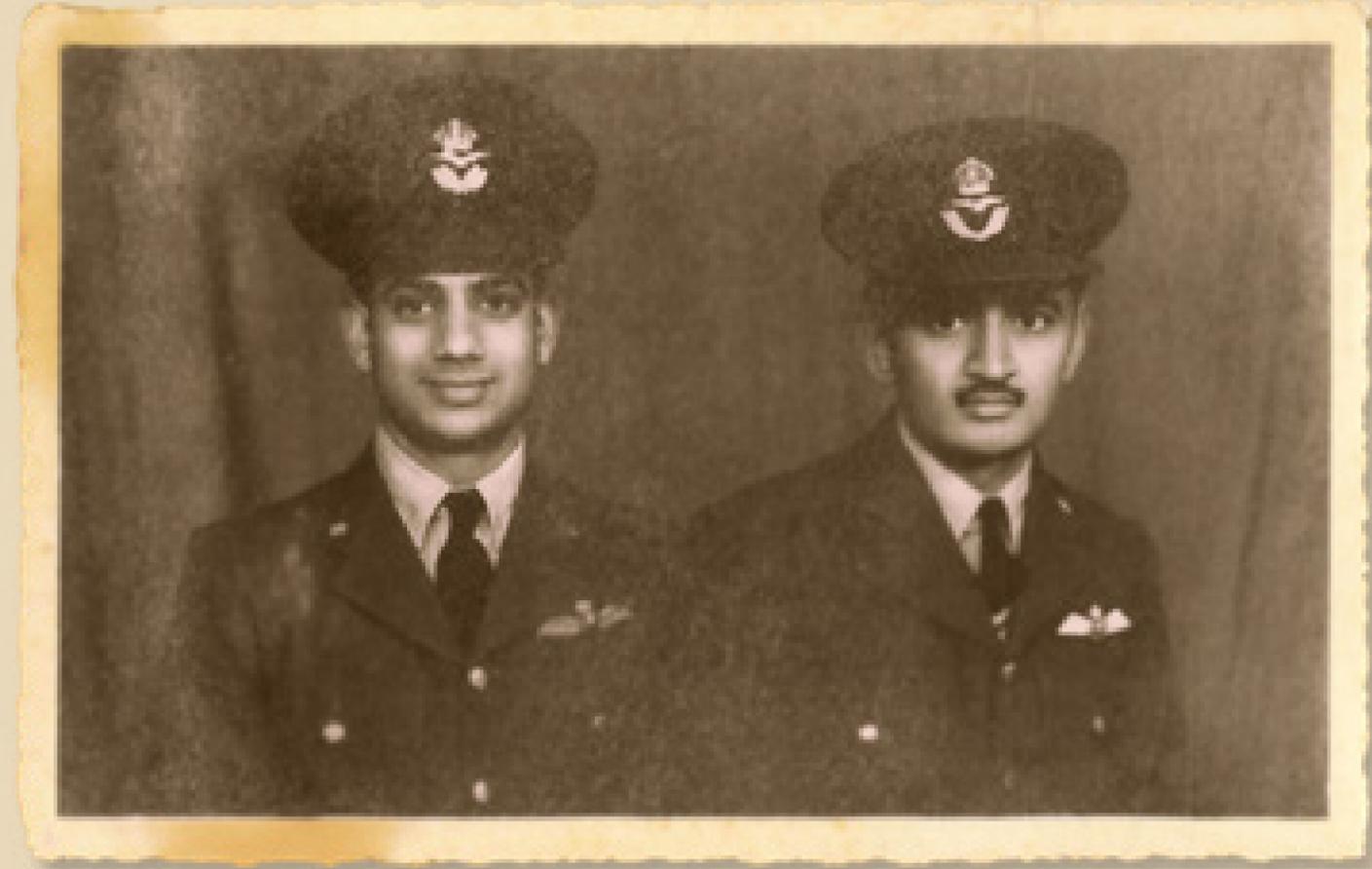
Cadet Officer Gohel and his coursemates continued their training but World War II was flaring into the Far East, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and Malaya on 7 December 1941. Almost immediately, the allies had started suffering reverses in Hong Kong, Malaya and Philippines and tremors were felt across Asia. It was in this atmosphere that

the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course completed the intermediate stage and was sent to Ambala for the Advanced Training Squadron (ATS) on 21 December 1941, notes Pillarisetti. By then, Cadet Officer Gohel had flown two new aircraft: Hart and the Audax, and completed three hours of night flying as well as Instrument Flying, thereby accumulating a total of approximately 160 hours.

Date	Time	Altitude	Remarks	Notes
Dec. 15	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 16	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 17	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 18	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 19	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 20	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 21	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 22	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 23	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 24	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 25	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 26	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 27	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 28	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 29	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 30	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 31	10:00	10000	10000	...

Date	Time	Altitude	Remarks	Notes
Dec. 15	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 16	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 17	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 18	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 19	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 20	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 21	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 22	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 23	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 24	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 25	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 26	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 27	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 28	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 29	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 30	10:00	10000	10000	...
Dec. 31	10:00	10000	10000	...

Pilot Officer Gohel's logbook entry from December 1941 listing sorties flown in the Audax aircraft.



Pilot Officers AR Pandit (left) and HSR Gohel (right) had this photograph taken shortly after the Wings Parade on 22 December 1941. Both of them had kept a copy of this photo in their archives.



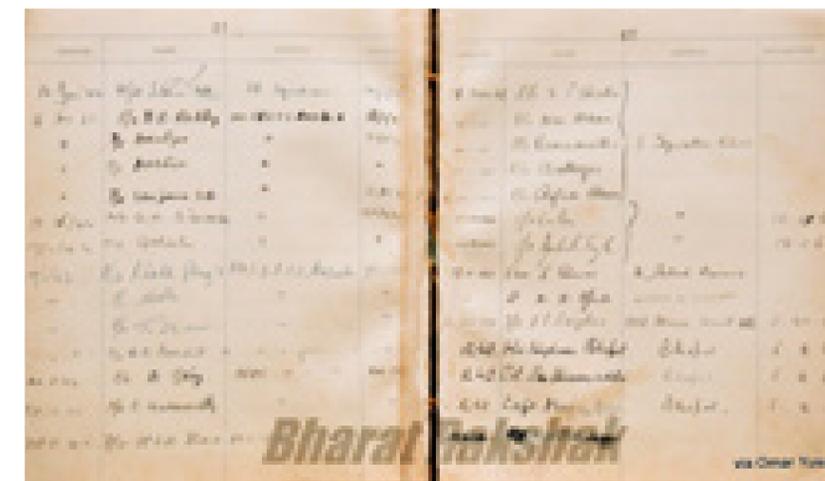


The final Passing Out Parade photo for the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course at Ambala. Plt Offr Gohel can be seen standing, second from left in the last row. The officers had just been awarded their 'wings'. The course included one Observer from a previous course, Atmaram, who is seated far right.

Photo courtesy: Family of Air Marshal AR Pandit, provided by Jagan Pillarisetti.

on land. He would often go riding with his coursemate Asghar Khan while his colleagues Dutt and Nur Khan enjoyed diving in the swimming pool at the Officer's Mess, Kohat. There was little to hold him back from winning not just the flagship sports events during the IAF Founding Day on 1 April 1942 but

also games like slow-cycling and the donkey race in Kohat. His children remember how much their father treasured the prizes he won at these games: an umpire stick and tin of Marcovitch Black & White Cigarettes.



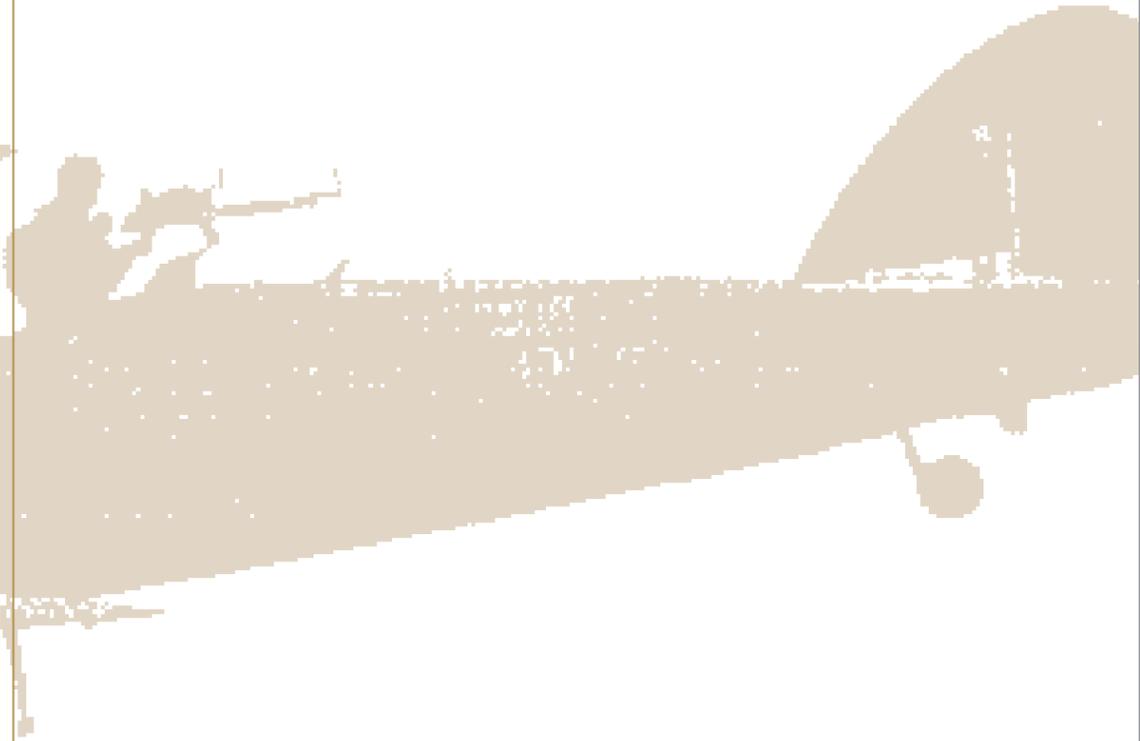
Plt Offr Gohel's signature in the RAF Visitor's Book, Miranshah, 1942. Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti (Bharat Rakshak)



Plt Offr Gohel (seen wearing green glass goggles) with Lt. Janjua outside Dak Bungalow at Khipro Canal, Sindh in 1942.



Plt Offr Gohel clicked either at Hyderabad (Sindh) or Kohat in 1942-43. An accompanying note in the logbook points at his corduroy trousers and "gold watch lost in Vengeance at Peshawar in February 1944".



## *The Mighty Lysander*

In February 1942, Plt Offr Gohel's Squadron began to operate the Westland Lysander army co-operation aircraft under Sqn Ldr Aspy Engineer.

It was a modern aircraft that, for the first time, "*featured an enclosed cockpit for crew comfort*", observes Pillarisetti. "*It was a high-wing monoplane design with a fixed undercarriage, powered by a radial engine. The aircraft featured automatic slats— that deployed whenever the aircraft's speed fell below a point. The slats would also deploy the trailing edge flaps. This was the first aircraft in which the pilot didn't have to remember to operate the flaps! It also relieved the pilot of the burden of retracting them before the safe speed was exceeded. The automatic slats and flaps gave the aircraft tremendous low speed performance. It could hang in the air at just 55 miles per hour!*"

Within a week of the new pilots' arrival, Pillarisetti further notes, No.2 Squadron moved its base from Kohat to Secunderabad. All the junior pilots and Observers from 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course were moved to No.4 Squadron, also located at Kohat.



The Lysander featured an enclosed cockpit that provided some crew comfort. The pilot sat high in his cockpit and had an excellent field of view from his position. The aircraft was armed. The wheel spats housed a .303 Browning machine gun with about 500 rounds each. Additionally, stub wings could be fixed to the wheel spats to which a variety of bombs could be fixed.

Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti

Plt Offr Gohel got an opportunity to fly the mighty Lysander soon. After a couple of flights as passenger, he went solo on Lysander L4801 on 5 March 1942. He observed that, "*The Lysander was used for Tactical Recce in the Middle East in*



1940. Some Lysanders came from Cairo to Karachi in late 1941. Low take off and landing speeds gave greater safety. Especially for inexperienced and sketchy trained pilots. There were no proper conversion training procedures or facilities at Kohat at the time. Went solo earlier in the Lysander than normal.”

There is no substitute for rigorous training in a pilot’s life and it was perhaps the consequence of undedicated and ineffective training facilities that a RIAF Lysander crashed during a ferrying sortie in 1942 at Hyderabad (Sindh). Its undercarriage had collapsed and folded back while landing. His observations of this incident vis-à-vis the pilot’s role read: “He seems to have stalled dipping right-wing from height”.

Flying the modern Lysander was also an education in itself. The aircraft was powered by a Bristol Perseus XII radial engine. The engine was a ‘Sleeve Valve’ operated engine—a more complicated system of machinery that required careful maintenance and operating procedures— as opposed to the conventional ‘Tappet’ valves found on earlier aircraft. Plt Offr Gohel, however, was unaware of its nature: “In March 1942, I did not know the differences between the Sleeve valve and

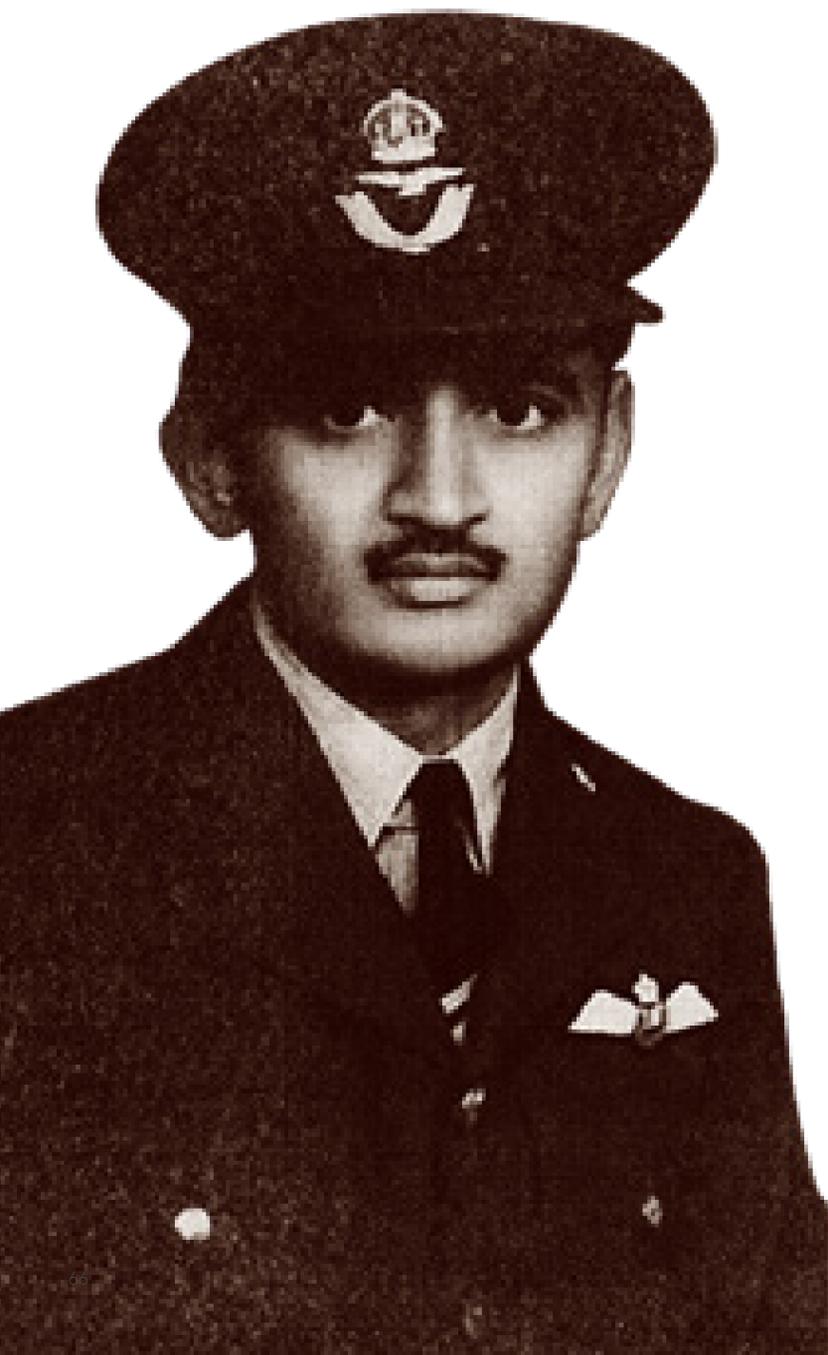
A photograph of the Lysander crash in Hyderabad (Sindh) in 1942.

Tappet valve engines. The Gypsy Major I, the Tiger Moth and the Rolls Royce Kestrel in the Hart were Tappet valve engines. I tested the Magneto switches at rated power and then increased to full power and pulled back to rated power again and tested the Magneto switches. It turns out this was a safe procedure unknowingly.”

According to Pillarisetti, the Lysander was also the first aircraft to be equipped with the variable pitch propeller, which allowed the pilot to adjust the blade pitch during a flight. The pilots had to set the pitch to ‘fine’ during take-off, and to ‘coarse’ during cruise flight. “(This was the) first Variable propeller pitch aircraft flown by me. I took off on fine pitch up to full power, and when airborne, I used to pull out the lever to coarse and climb on up to 3000 feet on rated power. In tropical climate, this reduced the cylinder head temperature and also the oil temperature. Low revolutions per minute meant lower cylinder head temperatures. This was also done unknowingly! Wartime training was hasty and haphazard, especially engine handling. Once near Kohat hangar, the engine was over primed. Flames came up from the exhaust. Sgt Cottrell asked me to carry on turning the engine, which picked up and flame went out. On 20 March 1942,



A detailed logbook entry from March 1942 about the mighty Lysander.



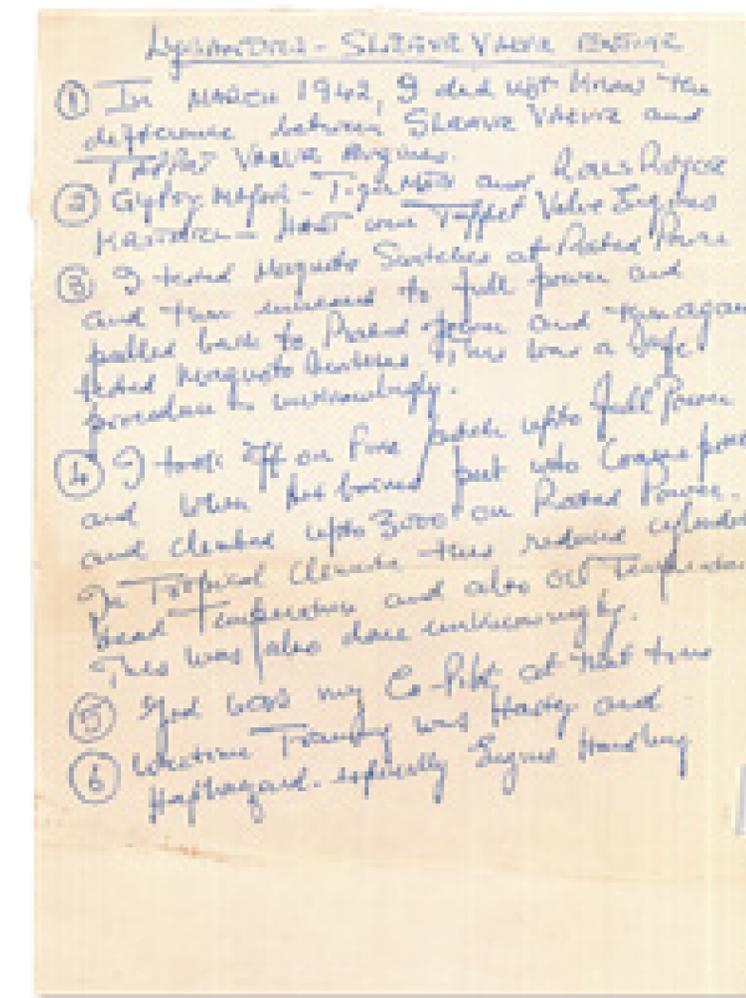
when flying Lysander N1269, 25 minute flight, I landed heavily (dropped) and burst the starboard tyre but kept the aircraft straight by left brake. Right wheel rim was okay for the short roll", he recorded in his logbook.

Plt Offr Gohel was increasing his familiarity with the Lysander. He was raking up hours through distinguished sorties such as a high altitude sortie on 27 May 1942 when he flew the aircraft up-to 12000 feet, and a long-range ferry of Lysander L4816 from Karachi to Kohat in early June 1942.

But even then official training and preparation remained unmethodical. Plt Offr Gohel undertook an "extremely hot and dirty rail journey" from Kohat to Karachi for a ferry flight but was disappointed to note that "there was no briefing at all done. Nor procedures discussed." He was to follow his leader Flt Lt Manchanda in a different Lysander. Plt Offr Gohel had a little over a year of flying experience. He was yet to explore the many challenges pilots may encounter, but what he lacked in experience, he made up with grit. Soon after take off on the day he was following Flt Lt Manchanda, he lost sight of his leader's plane. There was no second crew member in his aircraft. Plt Offr Gohel navigated his aircraft himself, relying solely on the compass and visual landmarks. Enroute, his

aircraft suffered some wingtip damage due to a fuel cap incorrectly closed when it was refueled. This compelled him to stay an extra day at Padidan airfield for repairs. This was also the first time he had flown over unfamiliar terrain. Despite the hiccups, however, he successfully reached Kohat on 12 June and thereby completed his first Long-Range Cross Country flight—flights across the country that are lengthier than usual.

Whether he shuddered in quieter moments and wondered how precariously life hung in an aircraft, we don't know. But he would continue to navigate with dexterity and fasten luck on his seatbelt.



A note added later to his logbook capturing in detail his experience with the Lysander's sleeve valve engine.

## God as Co-pilot

In June 1942, Plt Offr Gohel was in the thick of IAF duties. He was part of the Miranshah detachment and on a bombing mission. On 15 June, aboard Lysander L4786, his formation dropped 250lb high explosive bombs against a machine gun post maintained by local frontier tribes. His British superiors commended his efforts and sent him on multiple sorties there after.

Plt Offr Gohel emerged unscathed from his earlier sorties but he embarked on an especially perilous journey on 18 June 1942. He was flying as an Air Gunner, or a person who shoots from an aircraft, in an Audax with Plt Offr Nur Khan (later Air Marshal, CAS Pakistan Air Force) as the pilot in command. Shortly into the flight, the aircraft was hit by rifle fire but incurred very little damage. It was, notably, just one of the three times that Plt Offr Gohel's aircraft was hit by rifle fire from the tribesmen. Recounting these sorties, he wrote later, "I was lucky to survive because three times the tribesmen's bullets hit my AC. Once on port-wing Lysander, second on the top-wing petrol tank of Audax, third on the port-wing of Hurricane.

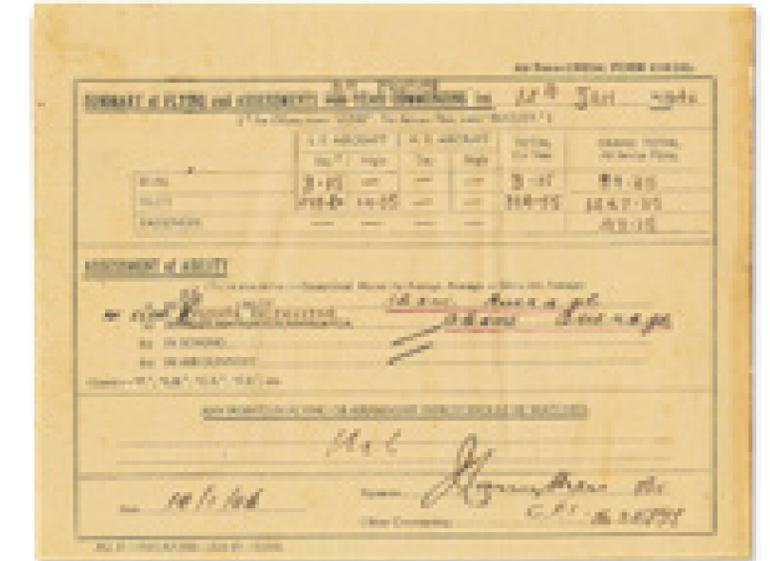
*While low-flying practice, Pathans were more accurate in rifle shooting than the Japanese in Burma. We bombed the area, so we must have killed many Pathans in Waziristan and Sindh. I got a commendable report about my strafing by planes in this area".* Luckily the damage was minor on all three occasions. It was during such testing times that Plt Offr Gohel felt that "God was his co-pilot", as he also wrote in his logbook. He noted that all the operational flying held him in good stead and helped him gain more flying experience, which made up for any gaps in training.

## Flying Instructor Gohel

As the Waziristan operations continued, Plt Offr Gohel's reasons for flying diversified. The 221 RIAF group noticed his keenness for flying and picked him to fly VIP flights. He was now flying communication sorties, which involved ferrying senior army officers between locations. But that was not all. In September 1942, No. 4 Squadron sent a detachment to Sindh for operations against the Hur tribe.

Plt Offr Gohel was in one of the formations of three aircraft that flew from Kohat to Khanpur, about 400 miles on a three hour-long flight. Fg Offr MS Pujji was the leader and SA Hussain, the third pilot. These operations, including tactical recce and offensive support, involved dropping bombs and firing at the attacking tribesmen. Pillarisetti shares that the operations against the Hurs ended in November, followed by Plt Offr Gohel's return to Kohat. But on arrival, he came down with a flu and was admitted to the Kohat Hospital.

By January 1943, Plt Offr Gohel was back in Hyderabad flying photo-ops— where special aerial cameras took photographs of the terrain— TAC recce and support sorties. Around this time, Pillarisetti adds that three additional Squadrons were



Air Force (India) Form 414 (A) dated 12 January 1946 certifying Plt Offr Gohel as an "above average" Flying Instructor.

raised, and all the Observers were posted to the newly-raised Vultee Vengeance Squadrons. The No. 4 Squadron began to draw Lysander operations to a close and posted its pilots to other units. However, Plt Offr Gohel was selected to train as a Flying Instructor— a remarkable achievement for Indian pilots back then!



No. 4 Squadron Officers in front of a Lysander at Hyderabad, Sindh. Commanding Officer MK Janjua, Surjit Singh Majithia and KS Saund can also be seen in this photograph. Plt Offr Gohel is sitting third from left.

This time he would also receive instruction on the Harvard Trainer— an aircraft, he noted, that would still be flying twenty years later. “*Brand new Harvards made in 1942 were sent to Ambala for training a large number of pilots*”, he added later to his logbook. “*There were no similar British made trainers... We used the Harvard for over twenty years with a very good safety record. It was an advanced trainer and superb aeroplane. First modern aircraft I had flown with a retractable undercarriage. I first flew it on 8 March 1943 at Ambala as Pilot Officer... then last flew it on 19 July 1963 at Siliguri 20 Wing as Gp Capt— 20 years and 4 months. No engine failure, no mag drop, no hydraulic trouble, no electrical trouble ever.*”

His training began in March 1943 at No. 1 SFTS Ambala and was completed at the end of April. He was now ready to join the instructional staff at Ambala. His first set of pupils came from the 15<sup>th</sup> and later 16<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course, including the likes of JS Ingle, Kotamraj and KN Bulsara.

“*I was lucky to be selected for Flying Instructor at this stage,*” he wrote. “*Flying became second nature by the end of 1943 and this helped me greatly in flying the Vengeance and Hurricane in 1944-1945 without any mishap or accident, which happened to others of the 8<sup>th</sup> PC.—for example Pandit, Dastur, two Sanjanas*”. By May



Jhelum River as captured by Plt Offr Gohel on 14 February 1943 during his train journey from Kohat to Ambala for training as a Flying Instructor. The logbook caption reads, “*Alexander the Great defeated Porus at the place Jhelum. He turned back from Beas Mosque/Dargah. Limit of Greek conquest in India via Persia and Durrani Gandharian people*”. Interestingly, life came full circle for Plt Offr Gohel within a year when he found himself travelling on the same rail route in 1943 as he had done on the same date in 1942.

1943, he was promoted to Flying Officer. He had accumulated just short of 500 hours of flying time.

Towards the end of August 1943, No.2 EFTS in Jodhpur required an instructor for navigation flying. Flg Offr Gohel was chosen for the job and spent the next five months training several young officer cadets the intricacies of navigation.



Jodhpur, for Flg Offr Gohel, would become a microcosm of experiences. *“At Jodhpur, first time I saw a P40 (Tomahawk) being ferried to China by Chinese pilots from Karachi. I also saw a Dakota flying over Jodhpur from Karachi to Agra. This was the first time I saw Americans with different pronunciations of the English language. Their uniform with gold, silver, brass on their collars... I was fond of driving vehicles. I used to drive a V8 three tonner and take two pupils from Jodhpur to Banar for intensive circuit flying before sending solo. I was issued a driving license at this time. This used to happen during the solo stage of pupils from August to December 1943. I had learnt driving the Ford V8- Station Wagon at Miranshah in June-August 1942. The driving was done on Miranshah Airfield. Later at Hyderabad, I learnt to drive the 3.5 Norton motorcycle. Later in 1944, while I was at Ranchi, I used to drive Chevrolet three tonner to collect rations and firewood for No.7 Squadron Mess. Sqn Ldr Lal saw my license and allowed me to drive, which I was very fond of, and there was a shortage of Motor Transport (MT) drivers. So I first learnt flying aeroplanes and only later driving cars and trucks!... Ten months of flying in training schools as QFI saved my life – gave me a high category as a pilot.”*

Photograph taken for the identity card when stationed at Jodhpur as Flying Instructor in 1943.



In 1943, Flying Officer Gohel (seated first from right) spent time teaching flying to cadets at Ambala and Jodhpur, the same institutions that he had learned flying at. This photograph shows him with a Tiger Moth along with a caption that reads, “As a Flying Instructor at Banar landing ground near Jodhpur in November 1943. Reynolds and Kagal were co-instructors. I forget the name of the Australian instructor. Khaki overall was probably made at Jodhpur by Camp Tailor. F/O RE Ryan- Australian was I/C Navigation Section No. 2 EFTS Jodhpur”.

## *Vultee Vengeance*

Life, so far, had been a series of adventures for Flg Offr Gohel, but some of the greatest experiences were yet to come. In late 1943, he moved back to No.1 SFTS Ambala. But as the year turned, he was informed that he would be sent to convert on the latest acquisition of the IAF, the Vultee Vengeance two-seat Dive Bomber, and would be posted to the Burma front World War II. It had only been two years since he became a pilot and by now, he had over 800 hours of flying experience. On a nippy winter morning of February 1944, Flg Offr Gohel reported to No.152 Operational Training Unit (OTU). He was prepared to undergo conversion training on the Vultee Vengeance and to learn Dive Bombing techniques, Air Gunnery and operational aspects of the Vengeance.

*“The Vengeance was a very good dive bomber for open country targets which could be seen and accurately hit”, he recorded in his logbook. “Not so good for the jungle. It had three electric fuel boosters for take-off and landing and one for level flying at medium level (9000 feet). It had a range of approximately 550 miles”.*



*A six ship formation of Vengeances, possibly photographed in a sortie right over Bishnupur in Imphal Valley.*

After six weeks of conversion training, he joined No.7 Squadron that operated from Kumbhirgram airfield on the Burma Front. Aviation enthusiast KS Nair notes that this squadron was commanded by highly-regarded SqN Ldr Hem Chaudhuri (brother of Late Army Chief General JN Chaudhuri).



*No. 7 Squadron Vengeances over the Imphal Valley. The aircraft were operating from Kumbhirgram. It should be noted that there are eleven aircraft in the photo, with the twelfth being the one from which the photo was taken.*

## *The Untold India Story: World War II*

The involvement of Indians in World War II remains a best-kept secret. It was, according to KS Nair, one of the greatest global transformations in history where Indians were involved on a massive scale. From the inception of the RIAF in 1939, Indians and the British flew side by side as part of the Allied forces that took on the Axis— the Germans, the Italians in Europe, and the Japanese in Asia. And yet, the Indian chapter of this globally significant story is barely known, particularly India's role in aerial warfare. India made monumental contributions to the War but the information eludes wider memory and can perhaps only be reconstructed using records like the ones left by Himmat Sinhji Gohel.

The RIAF was then called to join the critical battles of Kohima and Imphal, which represented the final turn of the tide in Burma against the Japanese. Flg Offr Gohel was handpicked to be sent to the warfront and joined No. 7 Squadron at

Udarband near Silchar (Assam) in April 1944. It was from here that he flew to Burma to carry out the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces' missions. Braving heavy monsoon clouds and rains, he flew aircraft Vengeances and Hurricanes. He paired up with Sgt Baij Nath as his air gunner (Later Wg Cdr Baij Nath), and flew their first operational bombing raid over Pingyan village in Burma on 24 April 1944. Pillarisetti confirms that the target was approximately 180 miles from base, and the Vengeances received a fighter escort. Unperturbed by hazy conditions, the pilots completed their mission successfully.

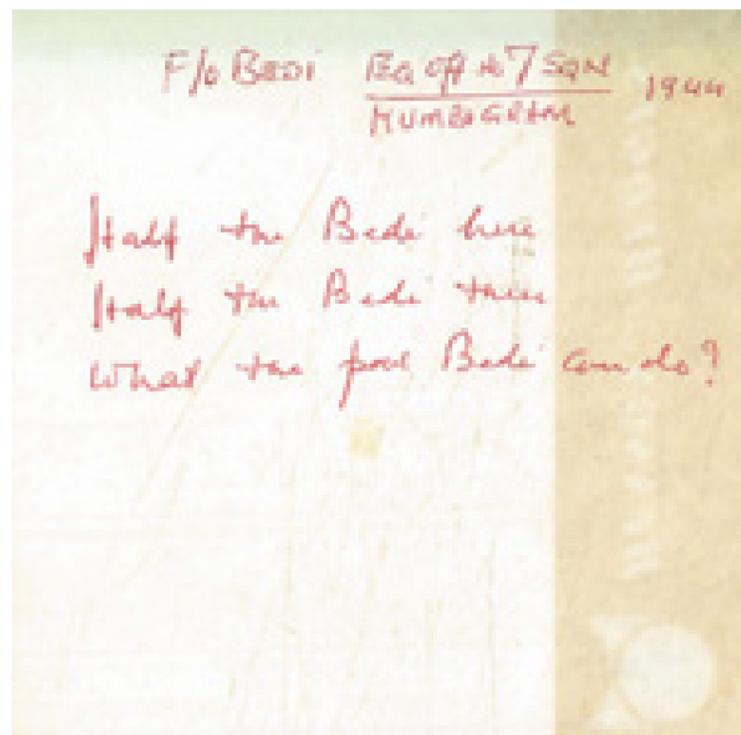
In the months of April and May, the pilots of the Squadron were provided intensive training in dive-bombing, flight formation, dogfight procedures, camouflage observations, army cooperation, reconnaissance and other aspects of air operations. This rendered them “*fully retrained and bursting with self-confidence*”.<sup>3</sup> It was perhaps in view of this strenuous

<sup>3</sup> Sapru, Somnath, *Combat Lore: Indian Air Force 1930-1945*, New Delhi: KW Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2014



*Flg Offr Gohel and his air gunner Sgt Baij Nath in a Vultee Vengeance sortie near Imphal in April 1944.*





Flg Offr Gohel's logbooks also offer many intriguing revelations about his former colleagues. This particular one is about Flg Offr Bedi— an Equipment Assistant (later Sqn Ldr) with No. 7 Squadron. The helplessness of Flg Offr Bedi, in the face of incessant requests for supply of equipment to the flights in 1944 during World War II, was captured in his amusing response: "Half the Bedi here, Half the Bedi there, What the poor Bedi can do?... No the cooperation— no the operation, what the Bedi can do?" Air Commodore A.A. Ananthanarayan, in Somnath Sapru's insightful work 'Combat Lore: Indian Air Force 1930-1945', disclosed that "from that time onwards, people started referring to him as 'Half the Bedi' instead of (full) Bedi".

Harvard and the newly inducted Fairchild Cornell trainer. On completion of the detachment, he returned to No.7 Squadron in February.

"It was extremely cold at Peshawar... Peshawar's normal room temperature at night was 3 degrees and snowfall in the mountains... I saw snow on the surrounding mountains from the aircraft", Flg Offr Gohel recollected in his records. Peshawar remained etched in his memory for yet another reason. At No. 152 OTU Peshawar, while cleaning the front wind-screen of Vengeance Dive Bomber in January 1944, he lost his beloved Favre-Leuba gold watch, a special gift from his father, which Major Ravubha had won in a Polo match.

In March 1945, No.7 Squadron headed back to the Burma Front under the command of another highly-regarded Commanding Officer, Sqn Ldr PC Lal (later Air Chief Marshal PC Lal).

Notably, No. 7 Squadron is known to have done over 1,000 operational flying hours in four and a half weeks— a record for any single-engine Squadron in any theatre of war! Flg Offr Gohel landed up at Sinthe airfield in Burma on 26 March and immediately began the Tactical Recce operations. Here, he flew Hawker Hurricanes in the fighter-reconnaissance role to support the Indian Army in its thrust towards Rangoon.



On 12 June 1944, the Squadron withdrew to Ranchi for rest and recuperation. Pictured here is No. 7 Squadron group returning to Ranchi from the operations first tour. Commanding Officer PC Lal is standing in the centre with his arms folded, while Flg Offr Gohel can be seen right behind Lal, seated seventh from right, back row.

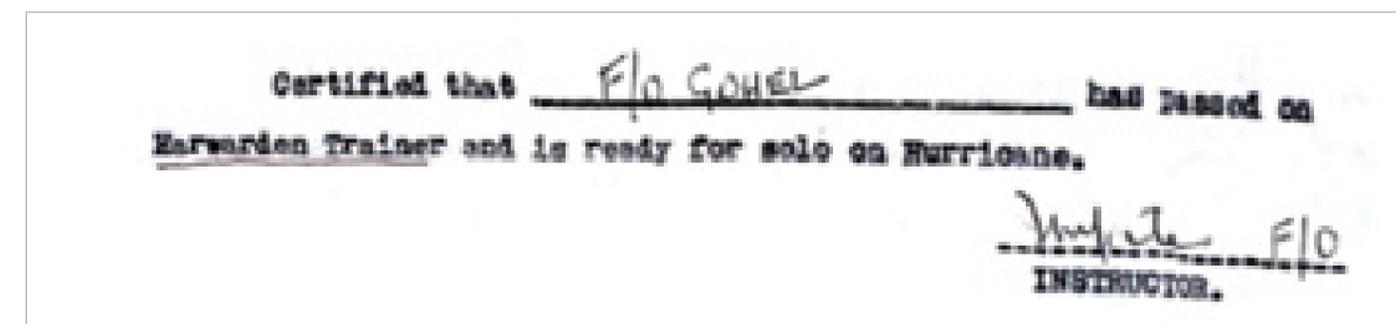
Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti.



A Hurricane IIC of the IAF— this example from No. 1 Sqn is illustrative of the type that Flg Offr Gohel flew in his second tour of operations in Burma.  
Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti.

In this role, he would observe a region to locate an enemy or ascertain strategic features. Forming a fighter recce pair with Sqn Ldr Lal and Rahim Khan (who joined the Pakistan Air Force after Partition), he flew over Magwe and Airavati (Irrawaddy) river in Burma. Constant shelling attacks by the Japanese at the airbase often forced the pilots to take safe refuge in underground trenches. Such were the crucial battles of the Burma theatre of World War II, which sadly remain under-recorded in Western accounts of the War.

By this time, however, the war in Europe was drawing to a close, and the Japanese were on retreat in Burma. On 5 May, Flg Offr Gohel was undertaking a sortie in the (Irrawaddy) Airavati area. Every month, pilots undertook at least 25–30 sorties. His own Hurricane sorties at this time included 4 TAC/R sorties in March, 24 in April and 12 in May. According to Pillarisetti, discounting his many ferry flights and air tests, this totalled to 40 missions over the front line.



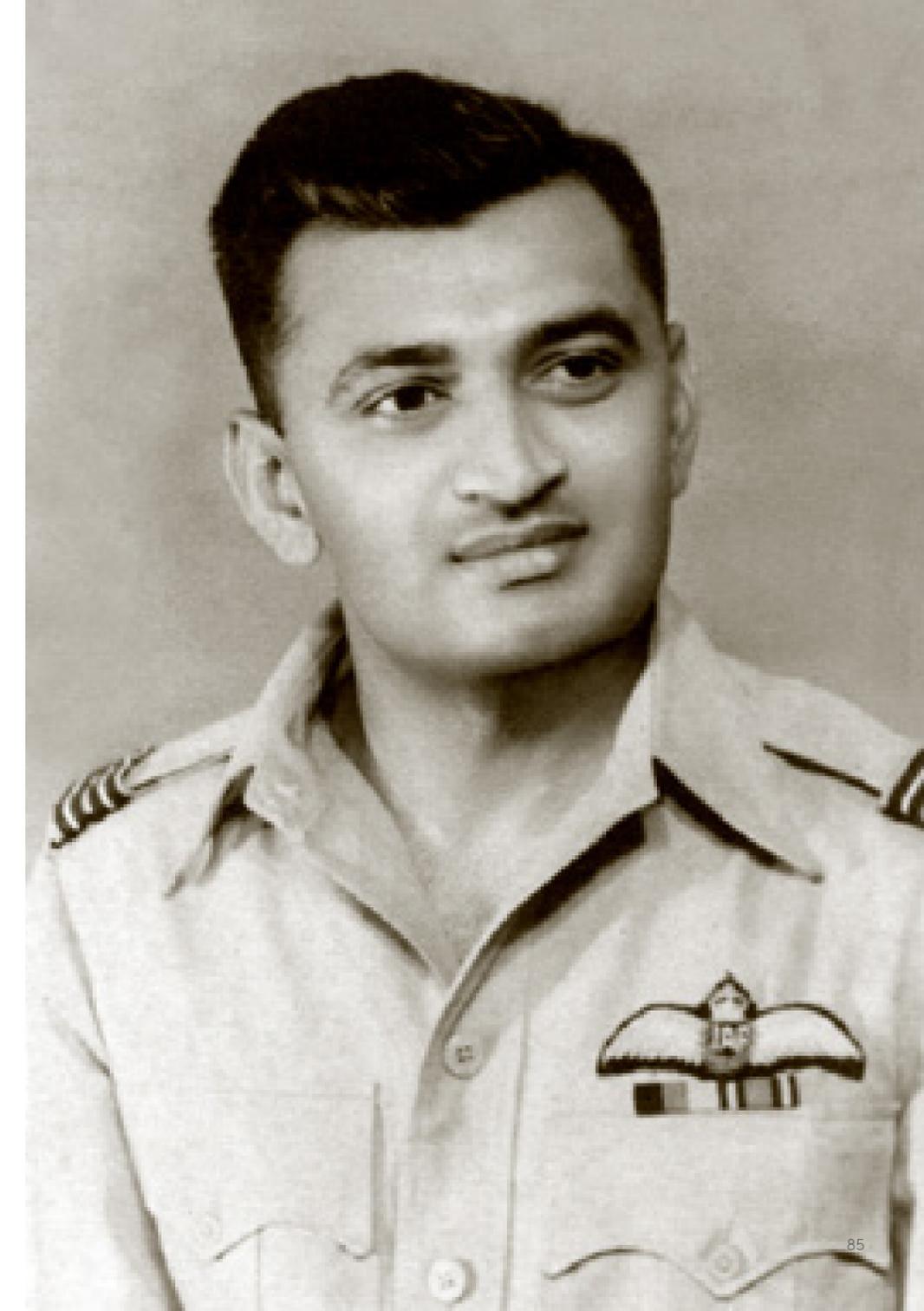
Hurricane pre-solo certification certifying that Flg Offr Gohel passed on the 'Harwarden Trainer', a cockpit mockup used for training on cockpit procedures.



No. 7 Squadron, flying Hurricanes under the command of Sqn Ldr PC Lal. Flg Offr Gohel can be seen sitting in the center of the bottom row. An insightful note accompanying this photograph in his logbook reads, "April 1945: Burma at Magwe. Sqn Ldr Lal (ACM later) was CO No. 7 Sqn. IAF on Hurricanes MK II C. I am wearing NWFP dress with boots. Gocal is wearing green trousers and we were operating as a Fighter Recce pair. Rahim Khan went to P.A.F. I used Kamina Hair Oil in Magwe, Burma".

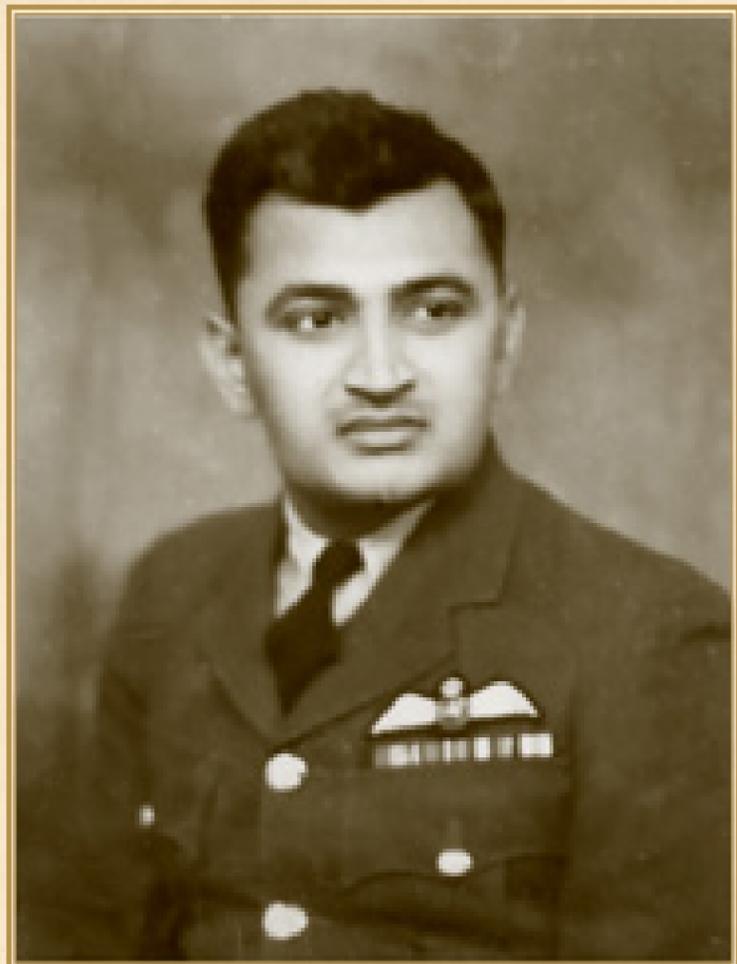
The Squadron's tour ended on 27 May 1945 and the pilots returned to the North-West Frontier, where they carried out training flights for the rest of the year. In August 1945, when the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the world to a standstill, the Squadron was well settled in routine flights in the Quetta area.

The first few years of Flg Offr Gohel's life in the Air Force were marked with a number of rigorous trainings, demanding missions and crucial operations—all of which intensified with each posting and promotion. The missions were taxing, the climate and terrain discomfiting, and professional challenges daunting. But it all made his professional career and personality sturdy and strapping.



Flg Offr Gohel in 1945, at the age of 24.

*Chapter 3*  
**STRONG WILL AT WORK**  
**(1945-55)**



*Flight Lieutenant Gohel*

(c. 1946)

## STRONG WILL AT WORK (1945-55)

**F**lying Officer Gohel was 27 years old. His family had found him the right match and he was ready to get married. Pillarisetti notes that in preparation of his new married life, Flg Offr Gohel applied for a posting to EFTS Jodhpur in October 1945 to be close to his family. The posting came through, but not before CO Sqn Ldr Hassan suspected that this request was based on Flg Offr Gohel's refusal to serve under a Muslim CO. Nothing, Flg Offr Gohel noted in his logbook, could be further from the truth. *"Sqn Ldr Hassan told me that I may not want to serve under him, a Muslim as Sqn Ldr Lal was also posted out at that time. I wanted to get married so I asked for a posting to Jodhpur, which was near Bhavnagar. There were such feelings between Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus at that time but I was not affected by it. Actually I did not (even) notice it."*

Such minor skirmishes didn't deter Flg Offr Gohel's career. He went to No. 2 EFTS in Jodhpur to train Officer Cadets of 38 Course, and this time the Tiger Moths had paved the way

for Fairchild Cornell. On 10 January 1946, he was promoted to the rank of Flight Lieutenant and posted as the Flight Commander to No. 3 Squadron at RIAF Station Risalpur and then further to RIAF Station Kolar, then under the command of Sqn Ldr OP Mehra (later CAS).

On 20 January 1946, instead of the obsolete Hawker Hurricane aircraft that he flew in Burma, he piloted the legendary Supermarine Spitfire XIV for the first time. The aircraft, Pillarisetti confirms, was JG678, an MK VIII variant equipped with the fabled Rolls Royce Merlin engine. Within a few months, he would join No. 4 Squadron in Yelahanka (Karnataka) that operated the Spitfire MK XIV—the fastest variant of the Spitfire equipped with the Rolls-Royce Griffon engine. Flt Lt Gohel drove a truck fifty miles from Kolar to Yelahanka in order to reach the destination quickly.

No. 4 Squadron, as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Forces, was deployed in Japan just a few months after the catastrophic Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings.

The most distinguished pilots, including Flt Lt Gohel, were a part of this deployment. This proved to be a great opportunity to demonstrate and hone his skills in aerial

warfare. The stint lasted three and a half months—from 14 May till the end of August 1946.



Spitfire MK XIV NH801 operated by SFTS at Ambala in 1946. Flt Lt Gohel's notes on the photo reveal that he had flown seven sorties on this variant when he was posted with No.4 Squadron at Yelahanka.

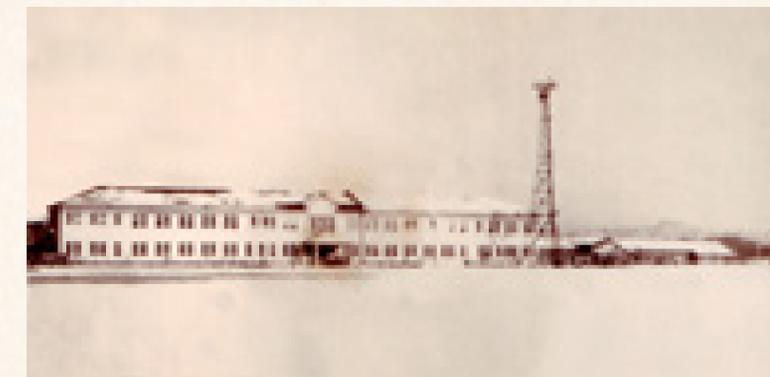
## Moshi Moshi, Japan

Fifteen officers of No. 4 Squadron left Yelahanka for Bombay on 14 April 1946. Flt Lt Gohel was leading this party to Japan. They were also entrusted with the task of moving tons of ground equipment, MT vehicles, tools and stores that were necessary for Squadron operations. Fifteen days later, they boarded the ship HMT Dunera, a Royal Navy aircraft-carrier. They reached Japan—precisely, Iwakuni on the Japanese island of Kyushu— on 18 May 1946. After an overnight journey, the contingent finally reached Miho that lay on the west coast of the Japanese island of Honshu and where most of the Squadron was now based.

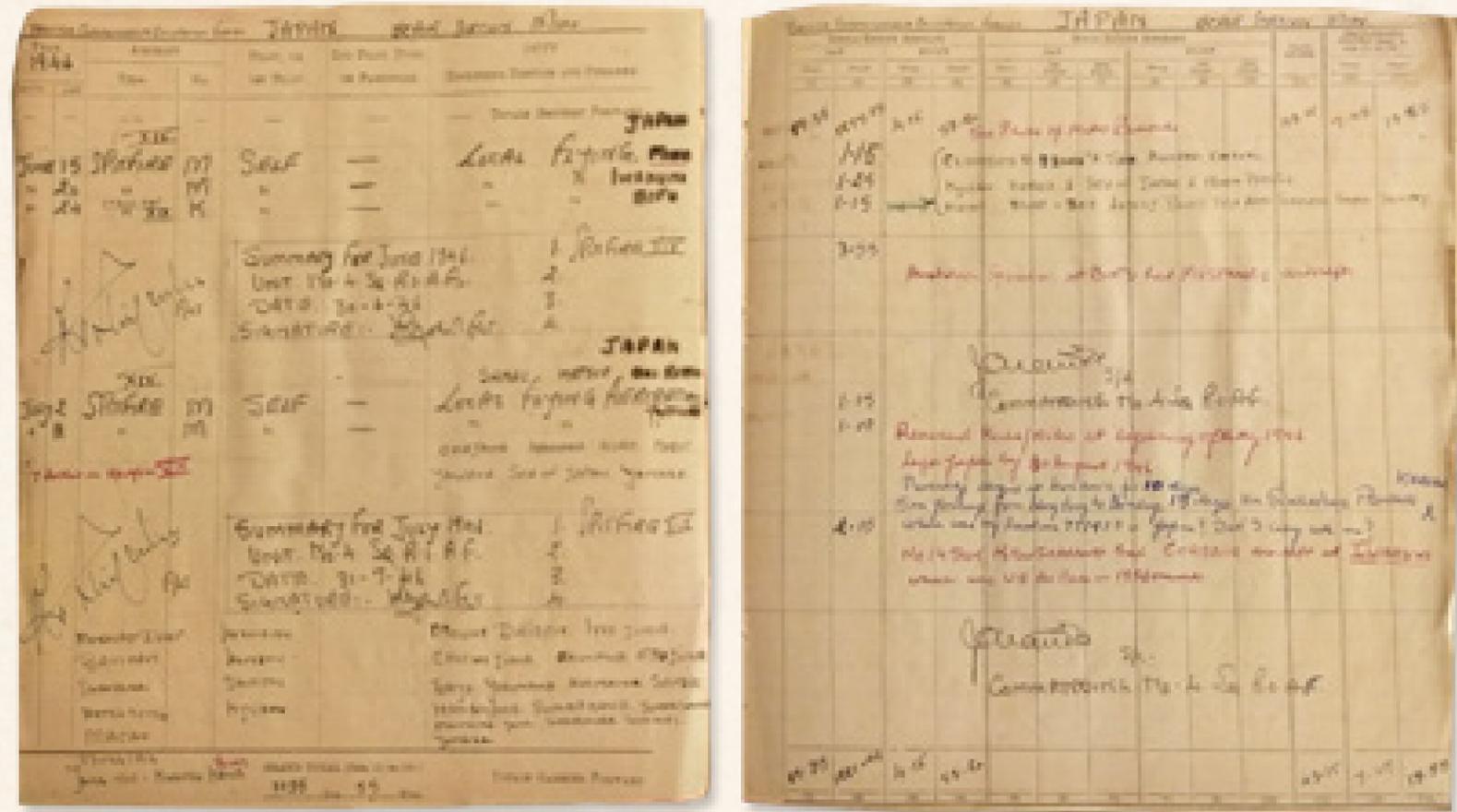
*“Smoke came out from the compartment going through tunnels. A Japanese guard came in and said ‘Moshi Moshi.’<sup>3</sup> We didn’t understand what he meant and laughed.”* Flt Lt Gohel’s first logbook entry from Japan reads. *“In the morning, we reached Miho and it was cold. There were many young Japanese girls at the station. I saw my black trunk lying and the equipment... sitting by the railway line. It had reached earlier by ship and sent*

<sup>3</sup> In Japanese culture, it is believed that unlike humans, ghosts can say “moshi” only once. Thus, saying ‘moshi’ twice is a common way to greet as well as to prove that one is a human, not a ghost.

*by the railway wagon... When I reached Miho in the morning, it was cold in May... I wore a towel dressing gown purchased at Ambala in 1941 and was taken to Japan. It was made of good towel material and lasted seven years or more”.*



Miho Officers Quarters, RAF Station Barracks in Japan surrounded by winter snow. The Japanese Naval Radar Tower (for air warning), MT Vehicles and Red Cross Ambulance are visible at some distance in this picture. According to Flt Lt Gohel’s logbook entries, “it was a Naval Air Station facing Sea of Japan in North towards Russia... building on the right was RAF Mess and behind the Mess was our community-type Japanese Swimming Baths for hot and cold water. No.4 Sqn Mess and barracks for airmen were on the left side of this big building in photo. RAF officers and W.R.A.S. (B) and some British and Australian nurses stayed on the right hand top rooms. Indian officers were staying in second and third blocks, and I had a top room in the third block. Hot water baths were in between second and third blocks. We used to get tea from the mess on the right hand side and for meals we used to go to No. 4 Squadron Mess. Swimming costume is still with me.”



Flt Lt Gohel's logbook entries from Japan, 1946.

At Miho, No. 4 Squadron had nineteen Spitfires and one Harvard on strength. Flt Lt Gohel managed only about seven sorties on the Spitfire XIV during his entire period with No. 4 Squadron while in Japan. Their main task consisted of conducting patrols over the towns of Okayama, Hiroshima, Shinaue and Totori, as well as coastal patrols to check maritime traffic in the area. As the Korean airspace was an easy 150 km flight away from Miho, one of the primary duties of the Squadron was the surveillance of the seas between Japan and Korea to prohibit the entry of smugglers and illegal migrants from Korea.

After hours of gruelling work, there were also a few opportunities to unwind. The Squadron skied in snow-bound Miho and delighted under Japan's famous cherry blossoms. They also visited some of the most luxurious hotels of Tokyo. One of their expeditions was to Hiroshima, where, despite the recent atomic bombings, there was little concern about radiation exposure. "There was no fear of radiation... We used to do our regular sorties and fly all over the place," an accompanying officer of Flt Lt Gohel recalled<sup>4</sup>.

For Flt Lt Gohel, Japan was idyllic. He wrote in his logbook how he "climbed to 33000 ft" and witnessed Honshu Shikoku,

Kyushu, parts of Korea, Sea of Japan and North Pacific Ocean. He vividly recalled marvelling at the "lovely blue sea and green small country" from his aircraft.

Flt Lt Gohel's interactions with the Japanese are not extensively documented but his logbooks reveal interactions with Australians. The Royal Australian Air Force Squadrons, equipped with North American P-51 Mustangs, also came to Miho periodically for range exercises, and the Australian and Indian troops got along well with each other.

During the return journey, the Squadron stayed in Hong Kong for ten days, from where they embarked on a 15 day sea journey to Bombay via Singapore. Flt Lt Gohel was a man of astute observation, as some of his logbook musings show: "While returning from Japan on Frigate Suttlej in August 1946, I used to stand on the bows and watch it cutting water at 10 km/hr. The edge used to throw up a thin stream of water and it used to make noise. The bows used to rise and fall in the waves about 8-10 ft".

The Squadron's time in Japan was a remarkable experience, as Flt Lt Gohel reminisced in his logbook, "1941 Karachi and 1946 Japan were the best times in my life".

<sup>4</sup> "A Flying Start - Training To Be A Pilot - Capt M Balan" by Jagan Pillarisetti for Bharat Rakshak website. The article can be found here: <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/history/ww2/veterans/1062-balan.html#gsc.tab=0>



August 1946  
 I.H.S. SUTLEJ  
 in  
 South China Sea  
 from  
 Hong Kong to  
 Singapore

SOUTH CHINA SEA

**CARRIED FORWARD**

At Repulse Bay, Hong Kong Island in August 1946. (clockwise from left): Naik, Gohel, Raman and Jansen. An accompanying note found in the logbook reads, "I and Naik came by INS Sutlej from Hong Kong to Bombay. Raman and Jansen came by air from Hong Kong to India. I was posted to Ambala and Naik to Peshawar. At Hong Kong, we stayed in RAF Staging Post— a hotel owned by a Russian but requisitioned for officers' stay. Food was good and cooked and served by Chinese. Sawai Man Guards Battalion of Jaipur and Travancore-Cochin Infantry Battalion were at Hong Kong. There was also Royal Marine Battalion."



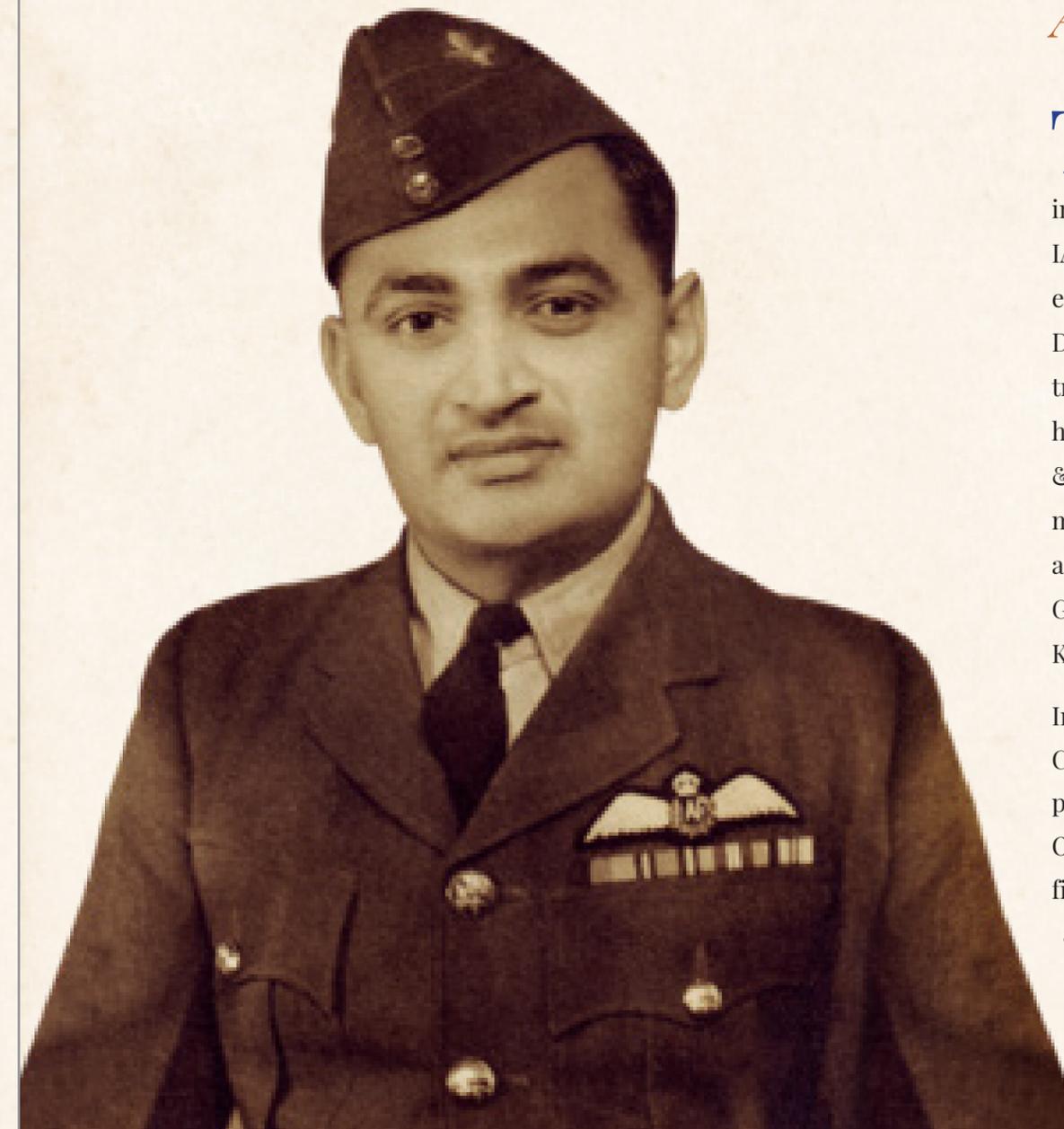
Flt Lt Gohel aboard INS Sutlej in the South China Sea on his way from Hong Kong to Singapore in August 1946 while returning from Japan.



A group of flying instructors at SFTS RIAF Station Ambala in 1946. Seen in the picture are Khyber Khan, Hank, Dutta, Gill, Murti, Blunt, Paul, Jacob, Samuel Wilbert, Bobb, Bose, and Mc-Rae among others. Flt Lt Gohel can be seen standing on the top right. Accompanying the photograph in his logbook, a brief note reads, "...I had returned from B.C. of Japan. Jacob and Khyber Khan went to Pakistan Air Force. Gill was with me in Japan. He joined Birlas as a personal Dakota pilot."



An intriguing photo showing a Dakota with the short-lived chakra markings about to embark 16 paratroopers (all of them appear to be IAF NCOs)—thus suggesting this was at the PTS in Agra. The first paratrooper drops in India were done by the Dakotas of C&T Squadron— an early example from June 1948. Sqn Ldr Gohel is standing eighth from right with sunglasses on. The person standing at the aircraft's door is his younger brother, Sajjan Sinhji.



## *An Independent India*

The first test for the independent Indian Air Force (IAF) came within months of 15 August when it was pushed into the Kashmir Operations. At the time of Independence, IAF had a single Squadron: the No.12, which operated a multi-engine aircraft— the Douglas C-47 Dakota transport aircraft. During the Kashmir operations, IAF was involved in airlifting troops in Srinagar, as well as offensive operations against the hordes of Waziri tribal raiders invading the state of Jammu & Kashmir. IAF's Douglas Dakotas air-lifted much needed men and material into the state. Its Spitfires, Tempests and Harvards went into action in support of ground forces. Gradually, the raiders were pushed back and a large part of Kashmir was recovered by India.

In 1948, Gohel, as Squadron Leader, was sent as a Flight Commander to the No.12 Squadron. He initially flew as a co-pilot but was then posted to Agra as the first Commanding Officer to the Conversion and Training Squadron (C&T), IAF's first transport conversion establishment. Aviation historian and author Anchit Gupta adds, "*My conjecture is that this was the time when the streaming of pilots into Fighter/*

*Bomber and Transport had started*. C&T was a unit raised to convert crews onto the Dakota. Sqn Ldr Gohel completed his conversion to Dakota in mid-April and was extremely grateful for being able to fly Dakotas—the safest aircraft to fly in the Air Force at that point of time—for sixteen long years from 1948 to 1964.

The C&T Squadron had many laurels to its name. It undertook the first paratrooper sorties in June 1948 in Agra. Sqn Ldr Gohel's logbook records the gradual introduction of paradropping in India, starting with sticks of two, five, ten and finally twenty. He joined the Squadron when they were still operating from Srinagar. From this time onwards, he came to be regarded as a key multi-engine specialist of the IAF.

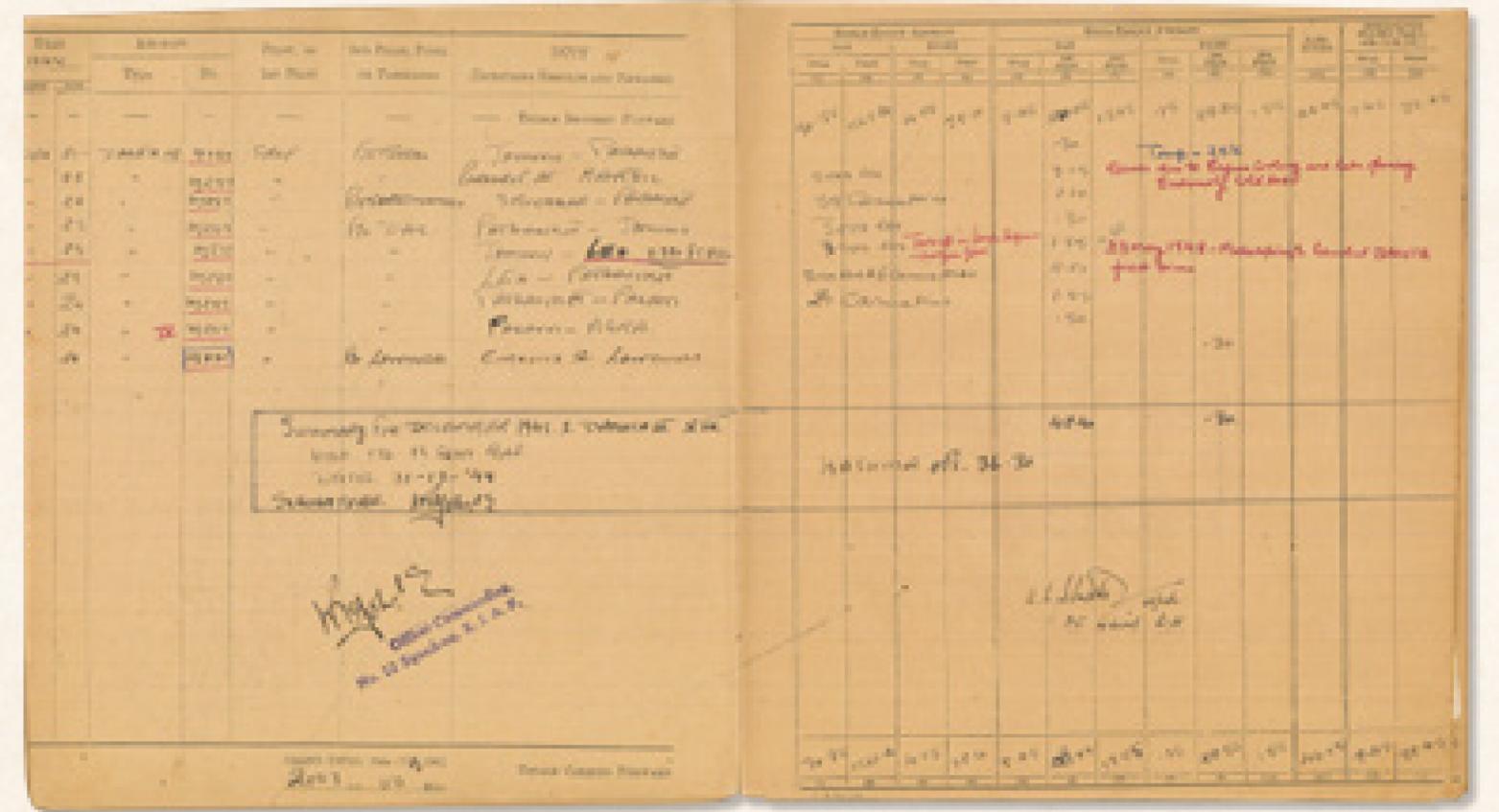
On 15 November 1948, Sqn Ldr Gohel took over the command of No.12 Squadron. The 1948 Kashmir Operations were still in progress, which gave him the opportunity to fly in J&K during the last month of the War. It was here that his plane was fired at by Pathans. He was forced to eject out of the aircraft using a parachute and, in the process, sustained a bullet wound on his leg.

The 1947-48 Kashmir Operations were unique, considering that this was the first time that the transport aircraft of the IAF

saw full time deployment in operations. Fighter Squadrons also gained significant exposure and experience of operating in mountainous environments. In August 1948, being keen on flying, Sqn Ldr Gohel was selected for communication



For the crucial role he played during the J&K Ops, Sqn Ldr Gohel was awarded the General Service Medal with Jammu and Kashmir 1947-48 Clasp.



Sqn Ldr Gohel's logbook entry from December 1948 recording his first and IAF's (probable) second Dakota landing in Leh at an altitude of 11,320 feet.



duties which also involved evacuating refugees and casualties from J&K in the wake of the Partition disturbances in the area. He made the most of it, flying to almost all the forward airfields—Poonch, Kargil, Srinagar and Leh. Some of the sorties included para dropping supplies at Kargil and Rajouri.

Around this time, Sqn Ldr Gohel also made IAF's (probable) second successful Dakota landing in the rough, mountainous and high-altitude terrain of Leh on 23 December 1948 at 11,320 feet— exactly seven months after the first one by Air Commodore Mehar Singh on 23 May 1948. It was indeed an extraordinary feat as the high altitude and unpredictable mountain weather made the journey extremely hazardous for even the most well-equipped aircraft of the era.

As the Commanding Officer of the No. 12 Squadron, Sqn Ldr Gohel flew precisely 13 sorties in Dakota IV HJ237, back to back from 20 to 24 December 1948, from Delhi to Srinagar and vice-versa. This might have been his longest flying duration in a day! Notably, he remained curious about this aircraft even after retirement. A note found in his logbook reveals how closely he traced its 22-year long lifespan right from December 1948 to November 1963. He wrote to Air HQ in 1977, enquiring about the aircraft's fate and was dejected

to know that the aircraft was long gone—written off in an accident on 22 November 1963. Gita believes that her father *“was very emotionally attached to the aircraft, as in hindsight he also sums up the shortcomings of its training in those days, and what could, and in fact should, have been done and avoided so as to ensure its well-being”*.

Jagan Pillarisetti reveals that though Sqn Ldr Gohel was 'late' to arrive in the Kashmir conflict, he racked up 36.30 hours of operational flying in the one month that he was able to take part in the operations.

During this period, Sqn Ldr Gohel flew VIP flights as well. On 21 October 1948, Sqn Ldr Gohel flew Governor-General C. Rajagopalachari from Delhi to Udaipur, Rajkot, Baroda and Gwalior. This trip was of particular importance in the making of the country as it was during this trip that Governor-General Rajagopalachari requested and ultimately convinced the Maharajas of these princely kingdoms to accede to the Indian Union. Previously, he had flown Air Vice Marshall Mukherjee from Agra to Palam (whom he flew again in 1951), and Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee—Minister for Industry and Supply in Prime Minister Nehru's cabinet—from Madras to Bangalore in a Dakota III.

## *The United Kingdom Courier Flight*

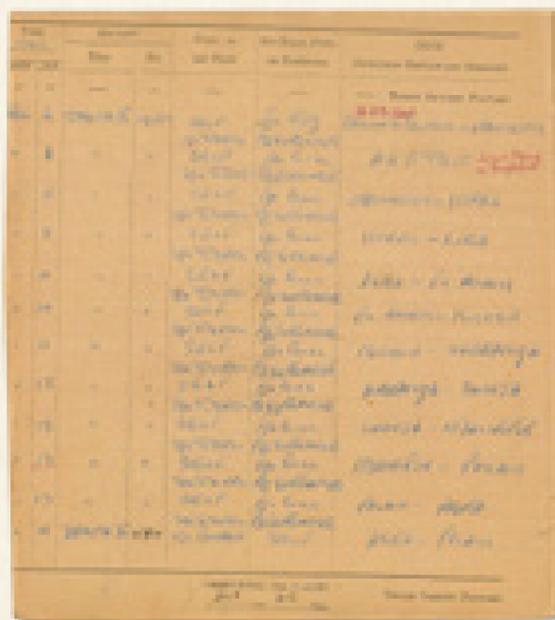
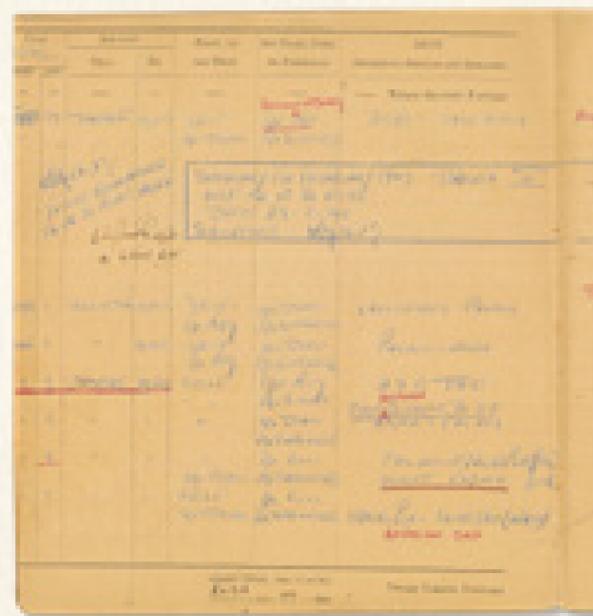
The year was 1949. After eight years in service, Sqn Ldr Gohel had amassed an inimitable career record: a personal milestone of 2000 hours of flying experience in just under eight years, according to Jagan Pillarisetti. Most of these hours were on single-engine aircraft.

It was time he conquered newer skies. Soonafter, he was hand-picked to fly the very first UK Courier flight. As Commanding Officer of No. 12 Squadron, Sqn Ldr Gohel embarked on this journey on 5 March 1949 aboard Dakota MK IV HJ237 all the way from Delhi in India to Oakington in the UK. The tour itinerary spanned all the way from Palam (India) to Mauripur (Pakistan), to Sharjah (Arabia) from over the Arabian Sea, to Habbaniyah (Iraq) from over the Persian Gulf, to Nicosia (Cyprus) from over the Mediterranean Sea, to El Adem (North Africa) where they faced a dust storm, to Luqa (Malta), to Istres (France), and finally to Oakington (UK) after crossing the English Channel. The UK Courier flight offered a great experience to the aircrew and airmen who were a part of it. On their way, they picked up some RAF airmen at El Adem and dropped them at Malta. In fact,

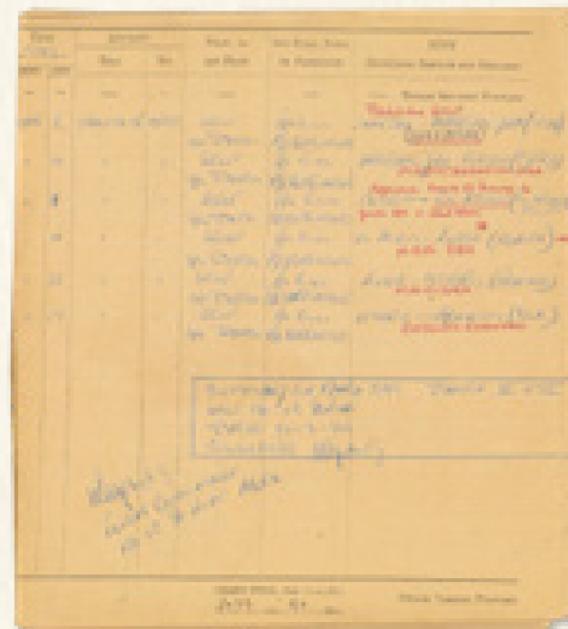
a happy coincidence took place at El Adem, where the RAF Commanding Officer Wg Cdr Simpson was a fellow officer whom Sqn Ldr Gohel had trained at Ambala earlier in the decade. *“I stayed for 25 days in England,”* he wrote. *“I went to Great Yarmouth and Brighton, the area of the Battle of Britain, East and South Coastal Zones. Dakota HJ237 was taken to an RAF BRD in Bassingbourn, to get de-icing boots fitted on the leading edge.”*

After some local flying, they set off for India on 8 April 1949 and arrived five days later. The journey had included covering 1200 miles in cold climate by flying for over seven hours a day. According to Pillarisetti, the last leg between Sharjah and Palam was completed in two hops within one single day— reaching over eight hours of flying, covering 1540 miles! The entire Courier flight had taken 77 hours in total. *“We stayed two nights at Habbaniyah (Iraq) and went to Baghdad on 9 March 1949. The front windscreen was ice-frosted... It was extremely cold”*, Sqn Ldr Gohel wrote.

But back home, Sqn Ldr Gohel's family was eagerly awaiting him. *“I remember, when Daddy returned from the UK in 1949”*,



Sqn Ldr Gohel's logbook entries recording the first UK Courier Flight.



*Summary of Pilot's Progress*

Air Force FORM 414 (A)

**SUMMARY of FLIGHT and ASSESSMENTS FOR YEAR COMMENCING ON** 1 December 1949

(For Officers only "A.P.M." For Aviators also see "A.C. 101")

	IN S. AIRCRAFT		TOTAL		GRAND TOTAL All Service Flights
	Day	Night	Day	Night	
FLYING	20	2	22	2	24
INSTRUMENT	20	2	22	2	24
PROGRESS	20	2	22	2	24

**ASSESSMENT of ABILITY**

(To be completed by a Proprietor, Wing or Group, or other Officer)

(i) AS A PILOT: Above Average

(ii) AS PILOT NAVIGATOR/NAVIGATOR: Nil

(iii) IN BOMBING: Nil

(iv) IN AIR CANNON: Nil

Flown in "A.P.M." "A.C. 101" etc.

**NOTE POINTS IN FLIGHT OR ASSESSMENT WHICH SHOULD BE WATCHED:**

26 NOV 1949

Signature: [Signature]  
 Title: [Signature]

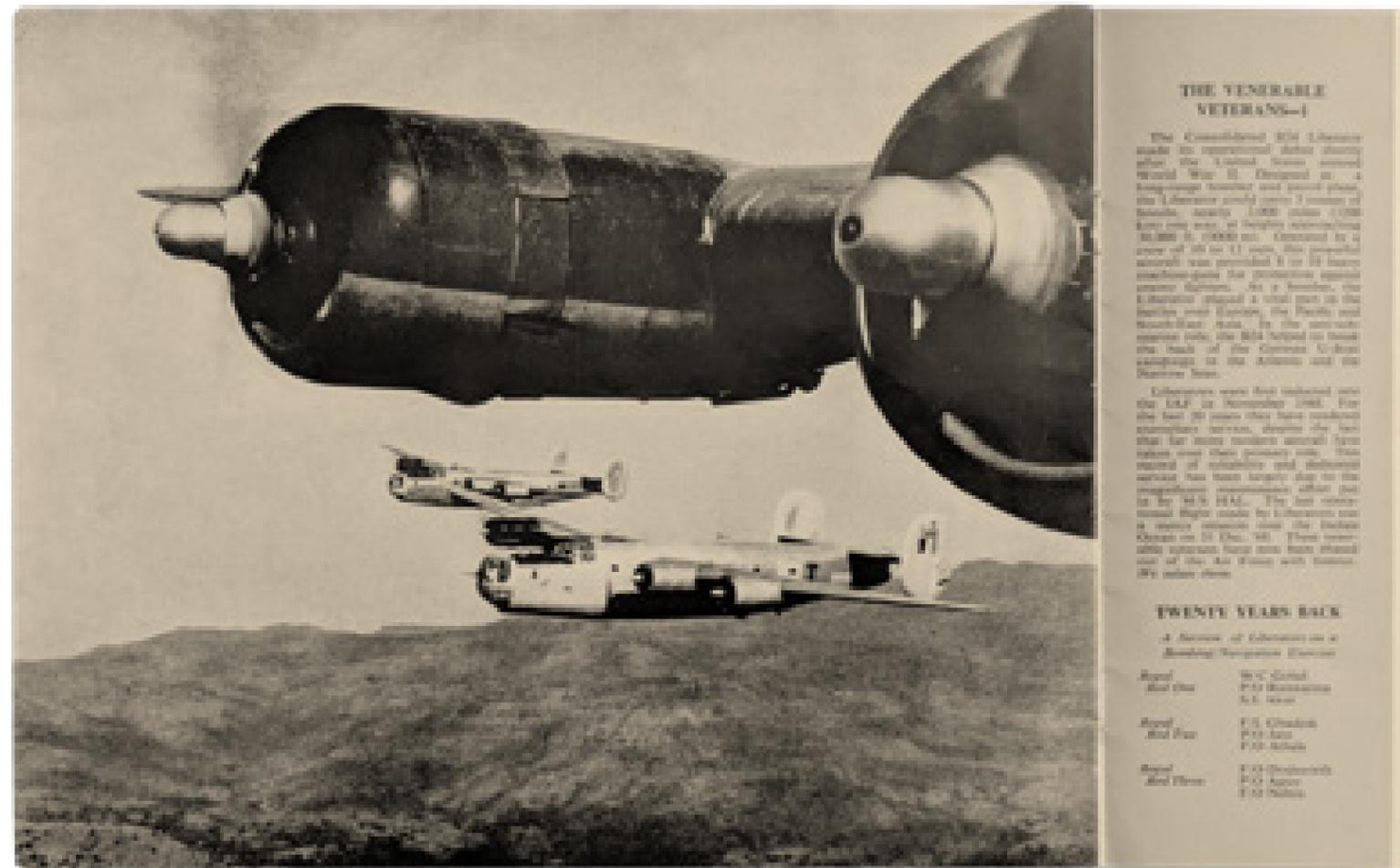
No. 1 - (FORM 414 (A) - 1949)

Air Force (India) form 414 (A) certifying Wg Cdr Gohel as an "above average" Dive Bomber Pilot on 1 December 1949 when he was posted as the Station Commander of RIAF Station Poona.

his daughter Indira recalls, "he brought along a beautiful walkie-talkie doll for me and a Morphy Richards iron and a Prestige pressure cooker for Mummy—both luxuries and very difficult to come by in those days".

Once back in India, Sqn Ldr Gohel would have probably continued as a Dakota pilot for a few more years, but he was instead sent to fly IAF's first Heavy Bombers. It was a curious time for the IAF. The Jammu & Kashmir operations were at

its peak and the IAF was forced to operate the Dakota in an improvised heavy bomber role, Jagan Pillarisetti shares. He further reveals, "With the aircrew rolling out the bombs out of the cargo door during these sorties, there was a need for a true bomber aircraft in the IAF's inventory. As part of its search, senior IAF Officers worked with HAL engineers to resurrect many of the abandoned Consolidated B-24 Liberator Bombers that had been dumped at Chakeri airfield. These aircraft were



1969 Air Force Day booklet showing a section of Liberators on a bombing/navigation exercise. Among the three aircraft shown here, Regal Red One was co-piloted by Wg Cdr Gohel.

Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti

part of the lend-lease agreement between the USA and Great Britain, and as per the agreement, the aircraft were purposefully made un-airworthy and dumped at Kanpur.” So in 1948, these bombers were gradually fixed and refurbished.

On 5 November 1948, the first Bomber Squadron of the IAF was raised at Poona— No.5 (Heavy Bomber) Squadron—under the command of Wg Cdr JRS Dantra. However, Pillarisetti adds as the Squadron was gaining strength, a tragic ground accident claimed the life of Wg Cdr Dantra in April 1949. Losing their first CO within five months of raising was a major setback for the Squadron. To restore their morale at this difficult time, the IAF decided to send one of its most senior transport officers to the Squadron. Thus Gohel, now promoted to the rank of Wing Commander, found himself as the second Commanding Officer of No.5 (Heavy Bomber) Squadron on 22 April 1949 at Poona. He would fly the B-24 Liberator— another aircraft from World War II that, in contrast to the Dakota aircraft, was one of the first four engine aircraft in service with a tricycle undercarriage.

As only a handful Indian pilots had heavy bomber experience back then, the Indian government contracted a retired RAF pilot for their training at Kanpur. Wg Cdr Gohel and his crew flew with Flt Lt Woods to familiarise themselves with the



Wg Cdr Gohel seen receiving General KS Thimayya on the latter's visit to Poona in 1949.

new type in May 1949. They learnt radio let-downs, three engine asymmetric landings, radio homing, and flying cross-country flights. “Not all of these Liberators were bombers. Also included was at least one C-87 ‘Liberator Express’ for transport duties. This aircraft HE772 could fly for eleven hours straight if needed,” Jagan Pillarisetti adds. The first bombing sorties would not take place till the middle of January 1950, and by then, all eyes would be on India’s most iconic moment. Indian cities would turn into spaces of light; festivity would find its footing in every corner.



Wg Cdr Gohel (seated extreme left in the second row) at a party hosted at RIAF Poona somewhere between August 1949 and January 1950.

Photo courtesy: Family of Air Chief Marshal IH Latif, provided by Jagan Pillarisetti



Group photo of No.5 Squadron personnel at Kanpur in May 1949, within weeks of Wg Cdr Gohel taking over command. The British officers in the photo were RAF Instructors, including Flt Lt Woods. Wg Cdr Gohel can be seen sitting tenth from left in the second row.



## First Day as a Republic

On 26 January 1950, citizens of a newly-independent country witnessed a stunning sight in the sky: a historic flypast whose memory is etched in many minds. The thundering aircraft, and its box formation, were a defining moment not only for a young country daring to be a democracy, but also for the pilot in the cockpit. India's first Republic Day was a defining moment in the life of Wg Cdr Gohel—a landmark that would divide his professional life into what came before that momentous January morning and what after.

*“This was an achievement on part of technical personnel”,* Wg Cdr Gohel wrote, and he wasn't being conceited, for Sir Thomas Elmhirst, the Commander in Chief of the IAF, had also found the flypast to be *“most desirable”*. Wg Cdr Gohel continued, *“US Air Attachés were so impressed that they visited the Squadron at Poona. They could not believe that such flying performance and serviceability is possible by non-white men.”*

Leading the box formation in the top row center aircraft was Wg Cdr Gohel in Liberator HE789.

THE FIRST PRESIDENT of the Indian Republic, Dr Rajendra Prasad, takes the salute at the ceremonial parade held at India Stadium, New Delhi, on the first Republic Day, January 26, 1950. In the background is the historic Parana Qila (Old Fort).

Time	Altitude	Temp	Total	Remarks
06	"	70	"	Start of formation
07	"	70	"	"
08	"	70	"	"
09	"	70	"	"
10	"	70	"	"
11	"	70	"	"
12	"	70	"	"
13	"	70	"	"
14	"	70	"	"
15	"	70	"	"
16	"	70	"	"
17	"	70	"	"
18	"	70	"	"
19	"	70	"	"
20	"	70	"	"
21	"	70	"	"

Summary for January 1950. L. Liberator  
 Date: 26-1-1950  
 Formation: Flypast  
 Wg Cdr Gohel  
 Officer Commanding  
 No. 10 Squadron  
 I.A.F.

The Formation Leader's logbook entry for 26 January 1950.

FROM: AIR HEADQUARTERS,  
 TO: Wg Cdr Gohel,  
 (CD) : OPERATIONAL COMMAND, No. 10 WING.

C. IN C. AIR. S. 26/1/50 5/10. MESSAGE FOR Wg CDR GOHEL  
 CONCERNING THE SUCCESS OF THEIR FLY PAST  
 TO THE CELEBRATION OF THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THEIR FLY PAST  
 AT THE CELEBRATION OF REPUBLIC DAY. WITH THE TIMING AND  
 PRECISION FLYING WITH ALL THAT COULD BE DESIRED.  
 IN VIEW OF THE SHORT NOTICE GIVEN IT WAS A GREAT  
 ACHIEVEMENT BY ALL HANDS OF THE SQUADRON AND WING  
 TO PUT UP A FORMATION OF THIS AIRCRAFT.

THOMAS ELMHIRST  
 COMMANDER IN CHIEF

The personal congratulatory telegram sent by Air Marshal Elmhirst to Wg Cdr Gohel. The message acknowledges that the flypast was done at a very short notice and left little to be desired in terms of perfection.

## Sir Thomas Elmhirst is dead

LONDON, November 10 (AP): Air Marshal Sir Thomas Elmhirst, a top British military leader in World War II and first commander-in-chief of the Indian Air Force in 1947-50, died at his Hampshire home at the age of 86, his family announced yesterday. He died on November 6.

Sir Elmhirst was a World War I naval air service veteran who joined the Royal Air Force when it was created in 1918.

In World War II, he was air commodore at headquarters flight command during the 1940 battle of Britain, and later was mentioned in despatches for service in Egypt, Tunis, Sicily and in the 1944-45 Normandy and Germany campaigns.

He was second in command of Britain's desert air force at Alamein.

After his retirement, he became lieutenant-governor of the channel island of Guernsey from 1953-58.

Sir Elmhirst lived near Basingstoke, south-west of London, and leaves a widow, one son and a daughter.

After clinching his career's biggest honour, Wg Cdr Gohel returned to Poona to work on his Squadron's training. Pillarisetti adds that live bombing sorties were carried out in February and various cross-country long-duration flights were practiced, too. On 14 June 1950, Wg Cdr Gohel was called once again to do a formation flypast on the same heavy bomber Liberators, this time at the inauguration of the National Defence Academy at Khadakwasla, on the outskirts of Poona.

The Republic Day flypast was also repeated the next year with the same heavy bomber Liberators. No.5 Squadron put up a formation flight over Delhi, and, for the first time, over 'Kingsway', not yet referred to by anyone as 'Rajpath'. This time, the formation took off from Agra instead of Palam.

*A newspaper clipping from 1982, found in Wg Cdr Gohel's logbook, reporting the demise of Air Marshal Sir Thomas Elmhirst.*



*This undated photograph, taken sometime in June 1949, shows the visit of Sir Thomas Elmhirst to No.5 Squadron.*

*(left to right): Jain, Sqn Ldr Woods (an RAF Officer seconded for training Indian crew on the Liberator), Khares, Sir Thomas Elmhirst, Wg Cdr Gohel, Aspy Engineer and JC Verma. Notably, the aircrew are still wearing the old style Aircrew badges with the King's Crown instead of the Ashoka Lion.*



On 7 November 1950, Wg Cdr Gohel flew Prime Minister Nehru. Also seen in the photograph are IGP Kamte, General Rajendra Sinhji of Jamnagar and DSP Praveen Sinhji of Lathi. The camaraderie of Wg Cdr Gohel and PM Nehru is evident in these photographs found in his logbooks.

## *Flying in Independent India*

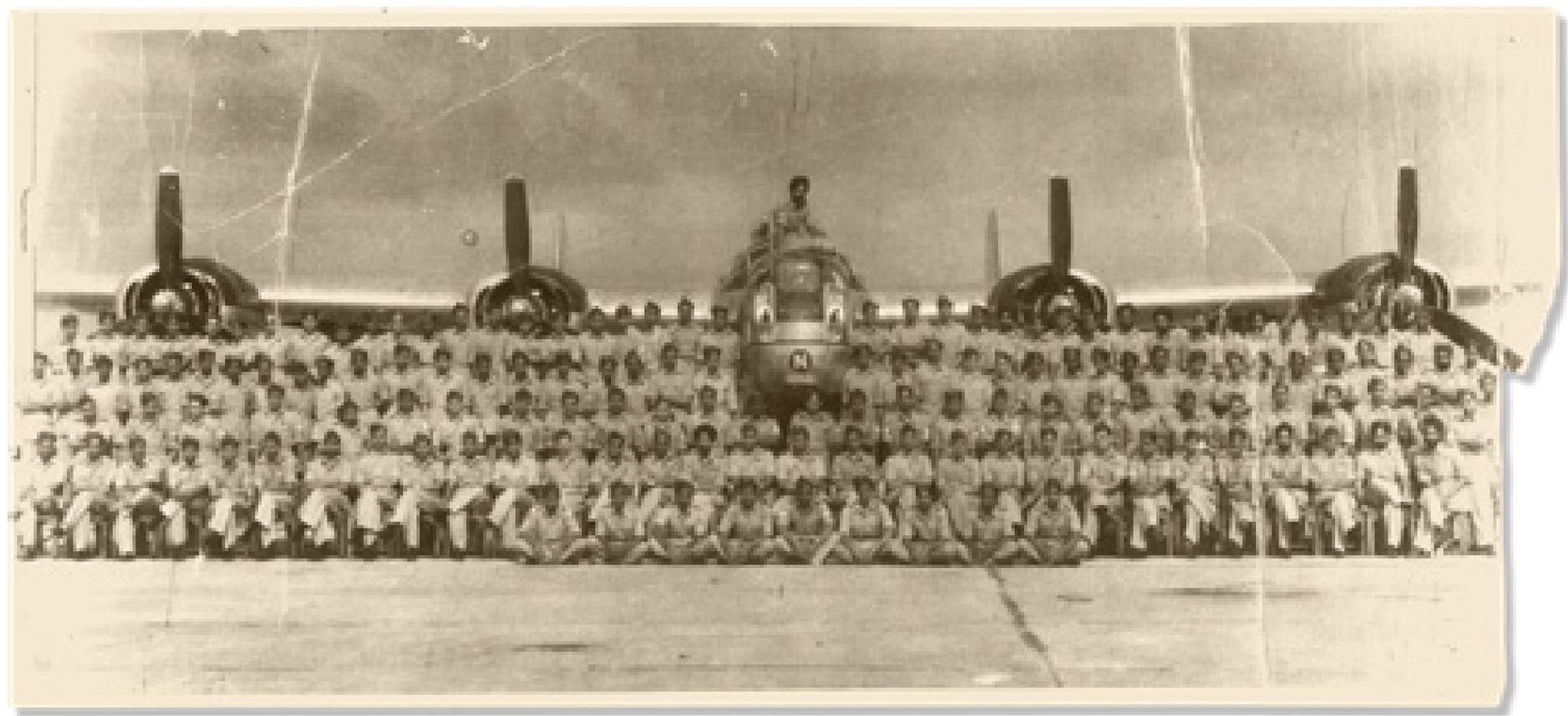
The IAF was now operating in an independent country and putting every possible effort to improve its might. By this time, Hindustas Aeronautics Limited (HAL) had supplied enough Liberators and made it possible to raise a second B-24 Heavy Bomber Squadron: No.6 Squadron. Drawing upon its history and heritage from the original No.6 Squadron, Wg Cdr Gohel was tasked with re-raising the unit and bringing it up to speed.

The Squadron's new role revolved around Maritime Reconnaissance (MR) and Air-Sea Rescue (ASR). The Squadron was inspected by the Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman on 9 March 1951, when he also accompanied Wg Cdr Gohel on a sortie in the Liberator. This Squadron is now based in Jamnagar, Gujarat.

Wg Cdr Gohel was crossing multiple milestones in his career. He spent a period in command of his old Dakota-operating Squadron, No. 12. He also flew the first fighter jets in India, the Vampires in Poona. But largely, he stuck to flying the Liberators.



On 20 December 1980— 29 years after he re-raised No. 6 Squadron in Poona in 1951—Gp Capt (Retd.) Gohel was presented a memento of the President's Standard for his accomplishments and contributions to the re-formed No.6 Squadron.



*Group photo of No.6 Squadron personnel, taken on 26 June 1951 at Poona, on the occasion of the posting out of Wg Cdr Gohel to Air HQ. Wg Cdr Gohel is seated seventeenth from left in the second row.*

In July 1951, it was time for a new assignment. Wg Cdr Gohel was posted to Air HQ Delhi as the Deputy Director of Policy and Plans. This was followed by Officer Incharge Flying Appointments with 3 Wing, Palam, where he had the responsibility of planning flight operations on the base. Much of his flying during this time was on communication flights. In 1952, Wg Cdr Gohel flew the Indian High Commissioner to the UK, V. Krishna Menon, from Palam to Kanpur, Allahabad, Barrackpore, and back to Delhi.

In 1953, Wg Cdr Gohel was one of the 18 officers who were selected to undergo the Staff Officers' Course at the prestigious Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) in Wellington, Ooty. It was a moment of unmitigated joy, as time at the DSSC remains an important qualification for officers aspiring for a higher rank. The Course ran from 1 October 1953 to 31 July 1954 and imparted critical training in military studies and some aspects of management. Since the British era, selection for this course was made through a highly competitive

examination held once a year. Generally, officers with a service of nine to thirteen years appear for this exam.

At DSSC, Wg Cdr Gohel outshone his batchmates in both practice and sports. He was a member of its cricket and shooting teams. In fact, Volume VII (1953-54) of the College's monthly magazine, 'The Owl' establishes how his great aiming skills had helped them win a tournament.

He soon moved to a senior rank, to a succession of command and staff roles at Air Force Headquarters. He became the Officer-in-Charge Flying at Palam—one of the most demanding roles in the Air Force of that time.

Across the span of his 30-year career with the Air Force, Wg Cdr Gohel had flown over 20 airplanes ranging from the Tiger Moth, Hawker Audax, Lysander, Vengeance, Hurricane, Cornell, Spitfire, Dakota, Liberator, Vampire, Alouette, and many more. In fact, of the six surviving former Indian Air Force Liberators— of which one is in India<sup>5</sup>, one in Canada<sup>6</sup>, one in UK<sup>7</sup>, and three in the USA<sup>8</sup>— he is known to have flown at least three.

<sup>5</sup> Former KH342 (RAF)/ HE924 (IAF) is at IAF Palam India Museum.

<sup>6</sup> KN820 (Later HE773) is currently at the National Aviation and Space Museum in Toronto, Canada.

<sup>7</sup> KN751 RAF (Later HE807 IAF) is at the RAF Museum, UK.

<sup>8</sup> RAF KH304(IAF HE 877) is in Pima Air and Space Museum, Tucson, Arizona, USA; RAF KH401 (IAF 771) is at Kermit Weeks Fantasy of Flight, Polk, Florida, USA and RAF KH191 (T-18) is at Collings Foundation, Stow, Massachusetts, USA.



*Photographs from the day Air Marshal Chapman visited RIAF Station, Poona in 1951. Wg Cdr Gohel can be seen leading the parade, while AM Chapman is inspecting the Guard of Honour. Officers Datta, Atmaram and Goswami are also seen in the pictures above.*



*In 1951, Air Marshal Chapman at RIAF Station Poona, which was then under the command of Wg Cdr Gohel, who can be seen standing first in line from the left. Officers Akut, Radhakani, Latif, Kapadia, Mukherjee and Venkatrao can be seen standing with Wg Cdr Gohel.*

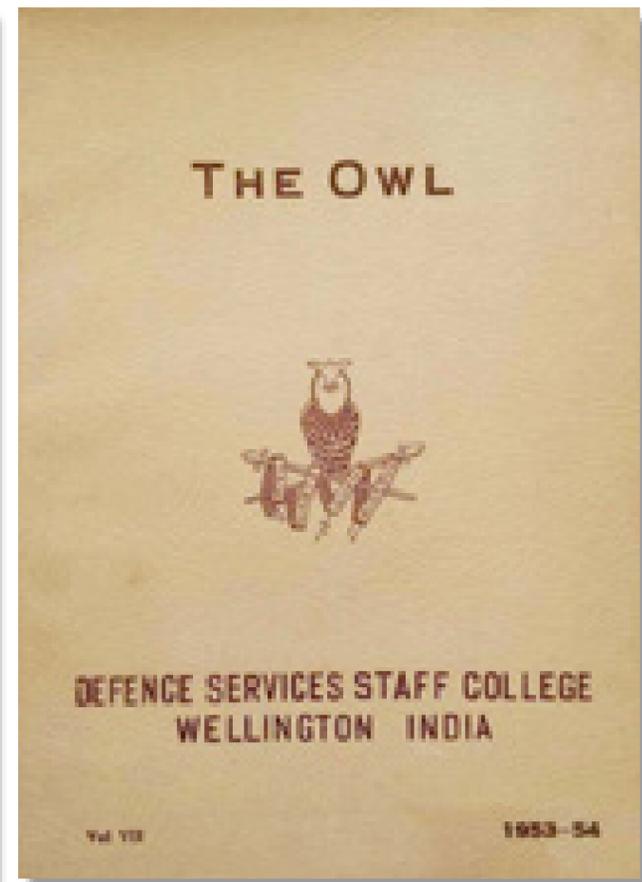
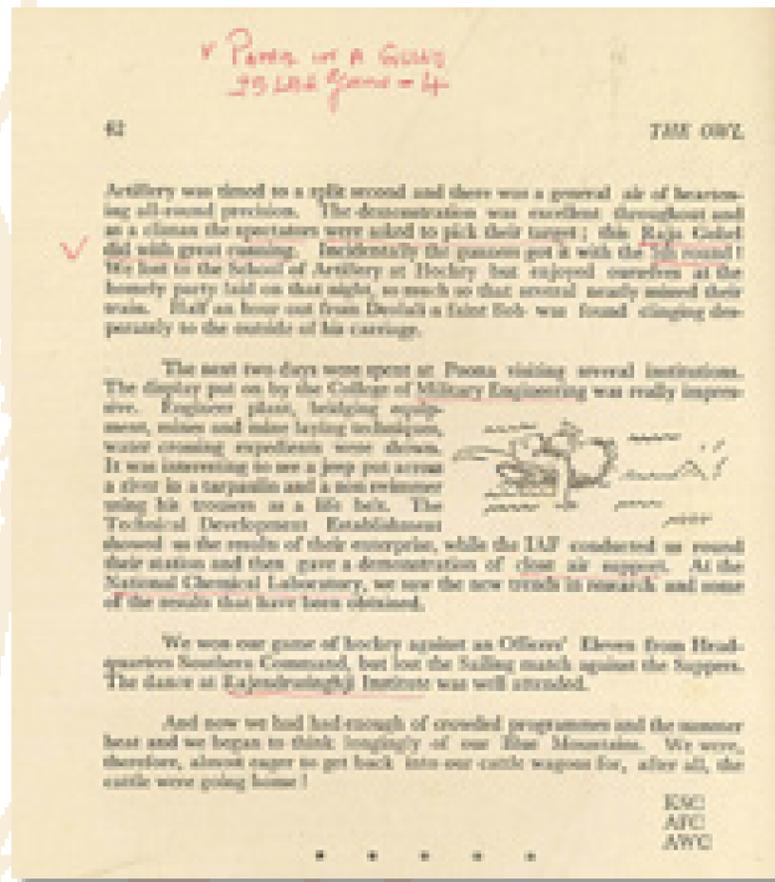


Being at Palam as OC Flying with No. 3 Wing, Wg Cdr Gohel qualified and flew the first fighter jet, De Havilland Vampire FB52 (single-seater) in September 1953.

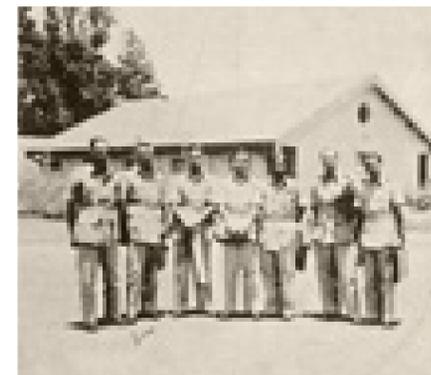
Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti



Wg Cdr Gohel as part of the DSSC cricket team (1953-54)



DSSC's monthly magazine, 'The Owl' commending Wg Cdr Gohel's great aiming skills that helped the College team win a tournament.



Officers at DSSC Ooty (from left to right): Matthews, Wg Cdr Gohel, Wg Cdr Gocal, Dhatigara, Ramachandran, Husain, Bose.



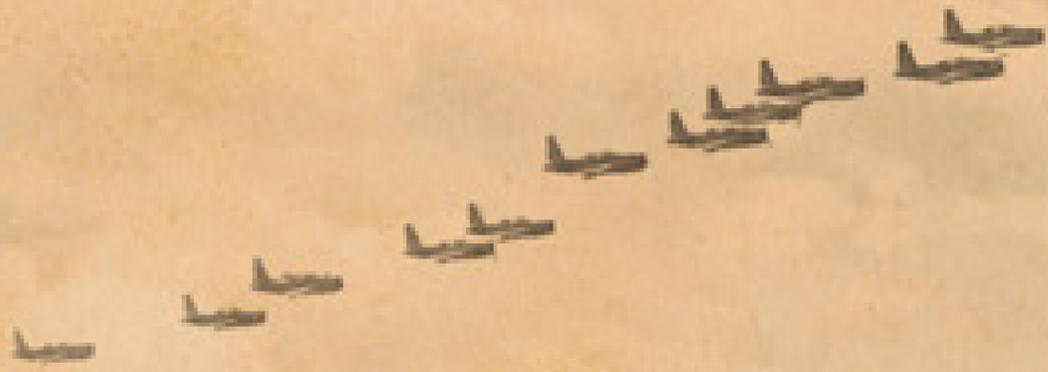
Wg Cdr Gohel with colleagues at DSSC, Wellington (Ooty) (c. 1953-54)

HSR Gohel's career deserves to be storied. It's a rare example of single-mindedness, of spirited pursuit and undeterred devotion to aviation. His career withstood epochs and blossomed through historical shake-ups to show that where there are opportunities, there are no limits; not even the proverbial sky.

SERIAL NO.	US SERIAL NO.	RAF SERIAL NO.	CURRENT LOCATION
HE-924	44-44213	KH-342	Indian Air Force Museum, Palam, New Delhi, India
HE-807	44-50206	KN-751	Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon, London, UK
HE-877	44-44175	KH-304	Pima Air and Space Museum, Tucson, Arizona, USA
HE-771	44-44272	KH-401	Kermit Weeks Fantasy of Flight, Polk, Florida, USA
T-18	44-44052	KH191	Collings Foundation, Stow, Massachusetts, USA
HE-773	44-50154	KN-820	National Aviation and Space Museum in Toronto, Canada

A list of the six surviving former Indian Air Force Liberators. The highlighted ones were piloted by Gp Capt Gohel.

Courtesy: Matt Poole



*Chapter 4*  
**HIGH FLIGHT**  
**(1955-71)**



Wg Cdr Gohel (standing extreme right) with fellow officers Flg Offr Mankotia and Gp Capt OP Mehra in Kathmandu on 20 January 1955. An accompanying note from his logbook reads, "Really cold day in Kathmandu. I met Mehra first time at Ambala in September 1941 and at Miranshah in January 1942..."

## HIGH FLIGHT (1955-71)

Even in Independent India, there was a dearth of experienced officers who could fly multi-engine aircraft. The No.12 Squadron, Jagan Pillarisetti explains, was earmarked to induct a number of Fairchild C-119 Packet

aircraft soon. And thus, the Squadron began to look for an adept leader. On 12 August 1954, Wg Cdr Gohel got his (record) fifth stint as the CO of a flying unit when he was once again posted to No.12 Squadron at Agra.



Fairchild Packet IK442, flown by Wg Cdr Gohel and Sqn Ldr LS Grewal on 16 February 1955.

Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti



Wg Cdr Gohel with the Services Football Team in Iran, June 1955.

## Unclipped Wings

Today, IAF officers manage only one stint as the Commanding Officer of a Squadron. Some have the rare distinction of commanding two Squadrons. During the 1950s, officers who may have had three stints as a Commanding Officer were few and far between. As an exception, Wg Cdr Phiroz Mehta of the 8<sup>th</sup> Pilots Course is believed to have served as the Commanding Officer of a Squadron four times. But it was HSR Gohel who took the record a notch up by becoming a CO of flying units five times! Jagan Pillarisetti believes, *“This may have prompted the posting of Wg Cdr Gohel to No. 6 Squadron at Poona, yet again tasked with overseeing the induction of a new type of aircraft in IAF service”*.

Pillariseti further adds that the Fairchild C-119 Packet was inducted in February 1955. In preparation for it, a small batch of IAF pilots had already trained in the US on this aircraft under the leadership of Sqn Ldr LS Grewal. On returning to India, this core group of aircrew began converting the remaining aircrew of No. 12 Squadron on the new type, including CO Wg Cdr Gohel, who flew several familiarization flights with Sqn Ldr Grewal in February 1955.

THROU-OUT 11-1-55					
TIME	Altitude	Pressure	Wind	Temp	DRIFT
Start	End	Sea Level	at 10000	at 10000	(Direction, Distance and Remarks)
10:00	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:05	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:10	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:15	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:20	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:25	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:30	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:35	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:40	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:45	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:50	10000	1010	10	10	1000
10:55	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:00	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:05	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:10	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:15	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:20	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:25	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:30	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:35	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:40	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:45	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:50	10000	1010	10	10	1000
11:55	10000	1010	10	10	1000
12:00	10000	1010	10	10	1000

Logbook entry dated 11 June 1955 marking Wg Cdr Gohel's second successful landing at Leh.



Wg Cdr Gohel (sitting fourth from left) with naval officers at the Naval Training School in Cochin.

Wg Cdr Gohel's most notable flight during his Packet days was a flight to Tehran and Basra to ferry the Services Football Team for a friendly tournament in June 1955. Here, they were generously hosted by the Shah of Iran who had also arranged for them a special visit to the mausoleum of his late father, Arya Mehr Reza Shah Pahlavi. Wg Cdr Gohel had instructed his non-Muslim officers *"to raise their hands in Marhaba, which was very much appreciated by the Iranians"*.

Less than a week after his return from Iran, Wg Cdr Gohel, in a Dakota IV, made his second successful landing at Leh, again at an altitude of 11,320 feet.

Subsequently, Pillarisetti shares that in October 1955, Wg Cdr Gohel was posted out of No. 12 Squadron. He had by now completed the golden milestone of 3000 hours of flying at just 34 years of age, out of which 14 were spent in IAF service. He was now deemed senior enough to be sent to non-flying appointments.

Given his unparalleled passion for flying and relentless commitment to the Air Force, Wg Cdr Gohel was given several opportunities to attend and lead many training courses in coordination with the other branches of the Defence



Wg Cdr Gohel participating in the naval exercise of 'Jackstay' at Cochin in 1956.

Services. The course work was often strenuous and kept him on his feet. In 1956, Wg Cdr Gohel attended the Anti-Submarine Naval Tactical Course at the Naval Training School in Cochin. *"Naval wives acted as naval plotters in sea-air games. This gave them insight of what their husbands do at sea and it is good,"* he wrote in his logbook. It was probably here that he also took part in the naval exercise of 'Jackstay' for replenishment at the sea, wherein the sailors were dressed in square rigs— a legacy of the Royal Navy. Similarly, in 1964, he attended the Air-Army Co-operation Training Courses at Darjeeling and Kalimpong.



*Wg Cdr Gohel attending the Air-Army Co-operation Training Course at Kalimpong in 1964.*

In December 1956, Chinese Premier Chou En Lai visited India. Wg Cdr Gohel was assigned as the Officer in charge of the Air Force Air Lift contingent that the Indian Government put together for his travel. Wg Cdr Gohel, at the time, was posted as the Station Officer of Air Force Station Poona and travelled with the Chinese Premier on the IAF's Viscount (IU-684), with Flt Lt BW Chauhan as the co-pilot. Between 1 and 10 December, the contingent travelled across the country—starting from Palam, they went to Poona, Bombay, Bangalore, Madras, Asansol and Calcutta. Six years later, it was the same

Chou En Lai who authorized the military operations against India during the Indo-China War in October 1962.

Previously, Wg Cdr Gohel had also welcomed the-then Yugoslavian President Marshal Tito to Air Force Station at Poona during the latter's fifth state visit to India.

In May 1957, Wg Cdr Gohel flew Lt Gen JN Chaudhuri, the General Officer Commanding, Southern Command, Poona (Indian Army)— the same officer, whose brother Sqn Ldr Hem Chaudhuri had commanded Flg Offr Gohel in the critical battles around Imphal and Kohima in 1944 during World War II. In November 1957, Wg Cdr Gohel was posted as Deputy Director Training, Air Headquarters, New Delhi. Eventually, he came to command two Tactical Air Centres— 7 TAC and 3 TAC.

On 16 July 1962, he was raised to the rank of Group Captain, which he held till his retirement in 1971. In 1962, he was deputed on a field posting to the non-family station of Siliguri. His logbooks reveal that in November, as Station Commander of No. 49 Squadron, he visited Bagdogra, Tezpur, Guwahati, among other places. His visit to these places was in the midst of the Indo-China conflict.



*Wg Cdr Gohel attending the Air-Army Co-operation Training Course at Darjeeling in 1964.*



The Chinese Premier Chou En Lai at the Governor's Palace (Raj Bhavan) in Calcutta on 8 December 1956. Wg Cdr Gohel can be seen standing fourth from left. These copies of the photograph were personally signed by the Premier.



The Chinese Premier Chou En Lai at the Governor's Palace (Raj Bhavan) in Calcutta on 8 December 1956. Wg Cdr Gohel can be seen standing second from right in the top row.



Wg Cdr Gohel marching alongside Marshal Tito, while the latter inspects the Guard of Honour in December 1954.



Wg Cdr Gohel (front row, seated in middle) as Deputy Director Training, Air Headquarters, New Delhi. An accompanying note in the logbooks reads, "... Nagina Singh was CTO. Tie was purchased at Calcutta in February 1941".



In 1963, Gp Capt Gohel took over the command of 3 Tactical Air Center in Bagdogra. 3 TAC supported the same XXXIII Corps of the Indian Army— to guard the northern border at Sikkim against any potential fighting—which he had supported from the air as a young Hurricane pilot during the conflict

in Rangoon in 1945. This, Pillarisetti notes, Gp Capt Gohel the opportunity to fly with the newly inducted Alouette III Helicopters, later known as the ‘Chetak’. In addition to the Alouette, he also had DHC 3 Otter aircraft at his disposal to fly to forward areas, which were in close proximity to the combat site.

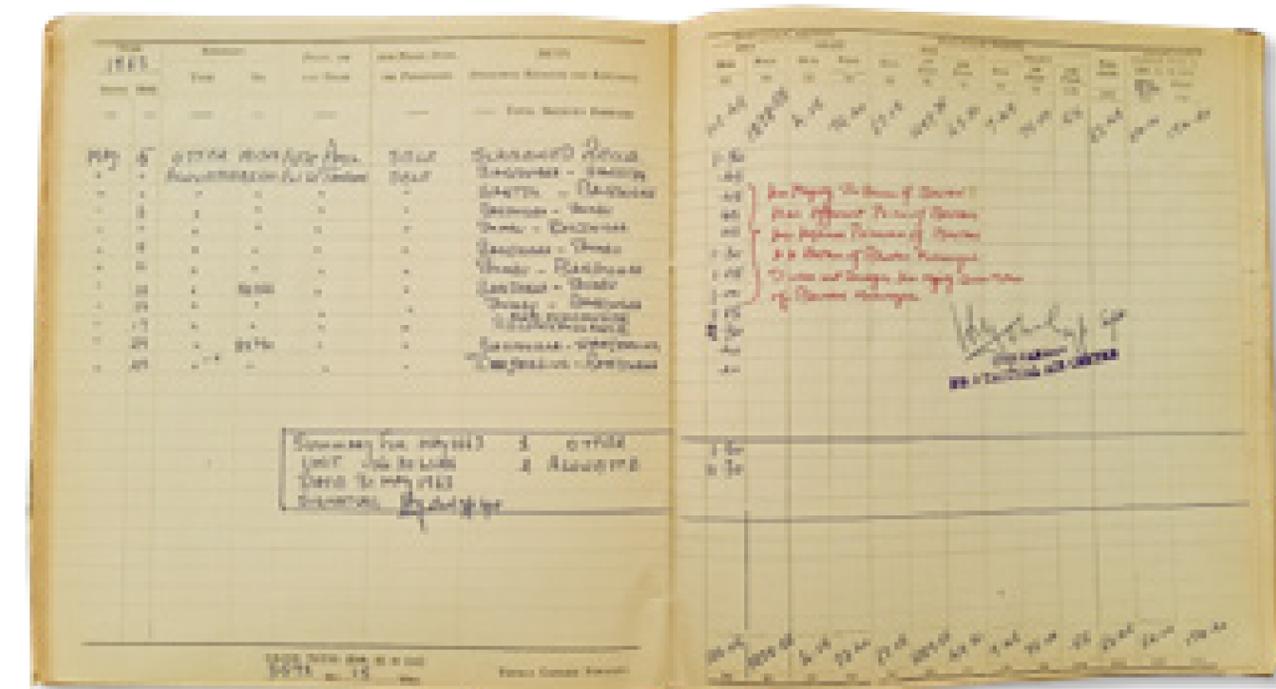
The Jaeger-LeCoultre timepiece gifted by the royal family of Bhutan to Gp Capt Gohel as a token of gratitude.

The flying also took him to Bhutan on some occasions. In May 1963, Gp Capt Gohel flew the royal family of the Himalayan Kingdom from Gangtok to Thimphu— a journey unforgettable for both: the royal family as well as Gp Capt Gohel. His children remember their father telling them that the then Queen of Bhutan, Yum Thuiji Zam, was in the family way, and thus needed urgent air assistance to Thimphu. In response to their request, the Indian government promptly put Gp Capt Gohel in charge of flying the royal family to and from Thimphu. On 11 May, the Queen gave birth to her daughter, HH Sangay Choden Wangchuk, who is Bhutan’s present Queen Mother. Grateful for the timely assistance, the Bhutanese royal family presented to Gp Capt Gohel a stunning Jaeger-LeCoultre waistcoat watch—a cherished family heirloom in the Gohel household today.

In the wake of the Indo-China conflict, Gp Capt Gohel flew regular and several flights in the region, often accompanying VIPs. On one such flight, he flew the much-celebrated Major General Pathania over the North-Eastern sector. In June 1963, the then Defence Minister, Yashwantrao Balwantrao Chavan, and Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh VrC, visited North-Eastern India to monitor the area’s defence preparedness in the face of

the Indo-China conflict. In late 1964, he also flew General Candeth, who was visiting either for recce or inspection of the region. In November 1964, Gp Capt Gohel once again

flew Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh VrC and escorted him on an inspection of the area.



Gp Capt Gohel’s logbook entry from May 5 to 16, 1963 reveals details of his flight to Thimphu with the royal family of Bhutan.



*Gp Capt Gohel, as Station Commander of No. 49 Squadron, with his unit in Siliguri during the Indo-China conflict of 1962.*



*Visit of the CAS, Air Marshal Aspy Engineer to Siliguri. While Gp Capt Gohel is standing second from left, Wg Cdr E Dhatigara KC, can be seen on the extreme right.*



*Gp Capt Gohel as CO 3 TAC at Bagdogra (standing far right), during the visit of Defence Minister YB Chavan, Defence Secretary HC Sarin, and West Bengal Governor Ms. Padmaja Naidu in June 1963.*



*(left to right) Defence Secretary HC Sarin, Lt Gen Harbaksh Singh VrC, Gp Capt Gohel and Lt Gen PP Kumaramangalam.*

## The Final Touchdown

In 1966, after completing his tenure with 3 TAC, Gp Capt Gohel was posted back to Air Headquarters at Delhi to manage the Department of Operations and Development. Here, though the opportunities of flying were few, he continued flying Devons with the Air Headquarters Communication Squadron. According to Pillarisetti, over

the subsequent years, the DeHavilland Devon was a common type that Gp Capt Gohel flew. This period, however, was not without incidents, as he would recall: “I force-landed twice (while flying the Devon). Once at Ambala with the engine sputtering and second with a feathered engine at Palam. I was flying a Devon from Srinagar to Palam. Near Ambala, the



DeHavilland Devon aircraft | Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti

engines started missing due to defective and rusted ignition contact. I contacted Ambala, turned to Ambala and force landed with a sputtering engine. I did not feather the prop. (Next) at Palam, I was flying with Bobb (on 14 February 1958). The engine failed while flying and I feathered the propeller and landed at Palam with one engine non-operative. The cause of the engine failure was not known but it was likely another ignition failure. Years earlier, when Sardar Patel was travelling by IAF aircraft, the engine oil temperature went high and the aircraft was force landed in a river bed near Jaipur. After that flight, the Oil Cooler was enlarged and modified for more cooling in the tropics.”

After close to 30 years in the IAF, multiple critical missions and operations, numerous training courses, and a range of communication flights, Gp Capt Gohel was now approaching the end of his tenure.

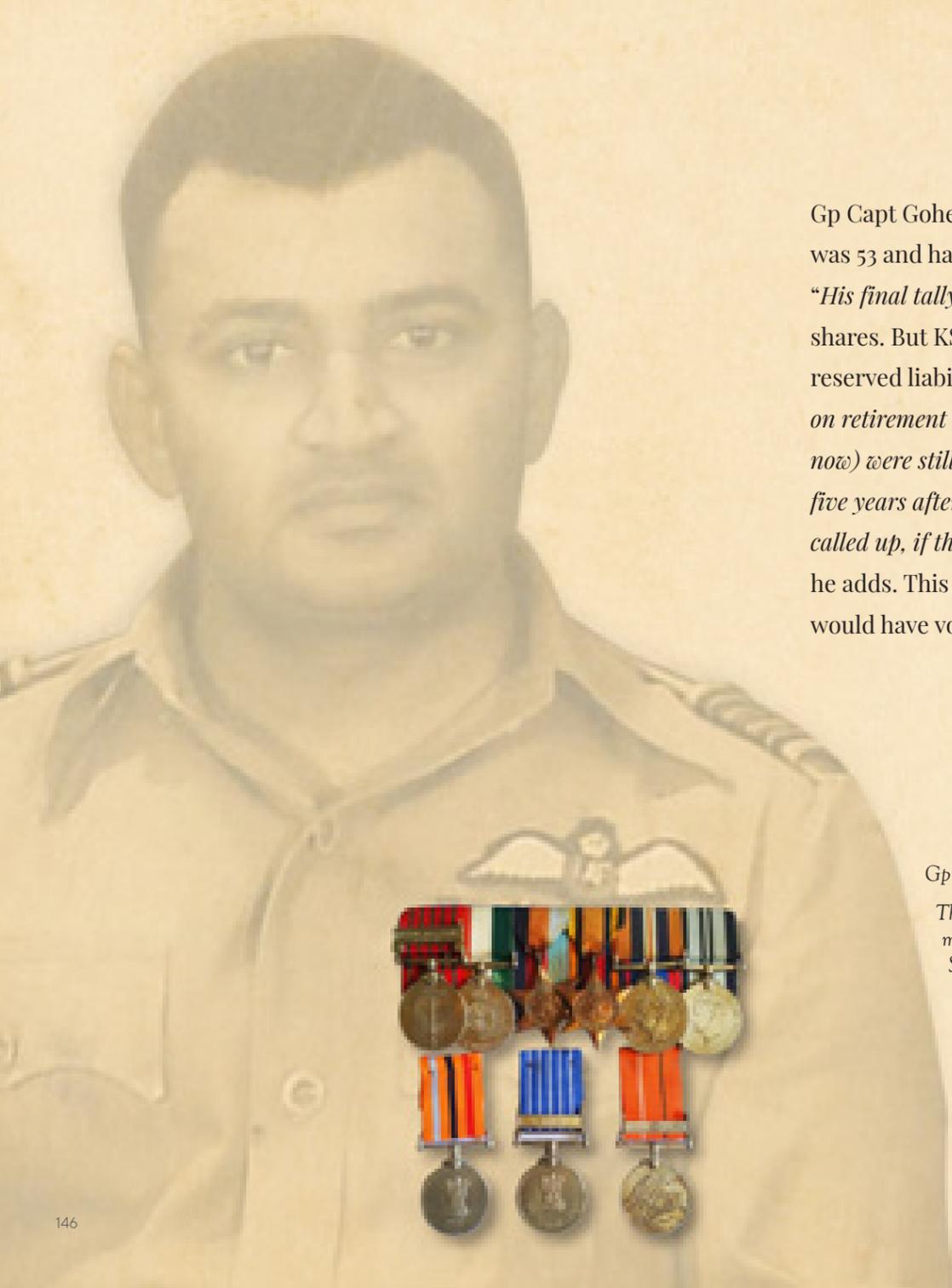
In August 1969, he was transferred from Delhi to Ahmedabad— on his last posting— where he took over as the Commanding Officer of 7 Tactical Air Center. In January 1970, Gujarat witnessed communal riots. Gp Capt Gohel took the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in an Alouette helicopter to monitor the situation. Later in the same year, Gujarat was deluged with severe floods. On 23–24 September 1970, for



The last aircraft flown by Gp Capt Gohel was an Alouette III Chetak helicopter

Photo courtesy: Jagan Pillarisetti

the second time, Gp Capt Gohel flew Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on an aerial survey over the affected areas. His co-pilot on Alouette III Z917 was Flt Lt Bilimoria. In doing so, Gp Capt Gohel became one of the very few pilots in the country to have flown both father and daughter, Prime Minister Nehru and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. It was this flight from Dholka to Ahmedabad that was Gp Capt Gohel’s final flight, which marked the end of his illustrious Air Force career. His thoughts on the day are unrecorded in the logbook, but the emotions are anybody’s guess.



Gp Capt Gohel retired from the IAF on 15 February 1971. He was 53 and had served 30 years and 11 days in the forces. "His final tally of hours stood at 4027 hours," Jagan Pillarisetti shares. But KS Nair believes that he would have had some reserved liability during the 1971 war. "In those years, officers on retirement (and retirement ages were lower than they are now) were still categorised as 'reserves' for the armed forces, for five years after retirement. That meant they were still liable to be called up, if there was an emergency, to serve on a reserve basis," he adds. This implies that it's highly likely Gp Capt Gohel would have volunteered his services during the war.

Gp Capt Gohel's medals.

The top set of six medals mounted together represented the medals that he wore till the late 60s. (left to right) the General Service Medal with Jammu and Kashmir 1947-48 Clasp, the Indian Independence Medal, the 1939-45 Star, the Burma Star, the 1939-45 War Medal and the India Service Medal. Below the main group are three single medals that were issued but were not mounted in his previous set. These include the 1965 Sangram Medal, the Videsh Seva Medal with Nepal Clasp and the Sainya Seva Medal with Bengal Assam Clasp.

**BOMBING RECORD**  
Operations, Flying Hours, Airlogbook

No.	Date	Type	No.	Part of the Fleet	No. of Passengers	Bombing Hours		Total Bombing Hours
						Actual	Maximum	
1	1941-43	Westland Lysander Mk II	43			43	43	43
2	1942-44	Vultee Vengeance	43			43	43	86
3	1944-45	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	203
4	1945-46	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	320
5	1946-47	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	437
6	1947-48	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	554
7	1948-49	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	671
8	1949-50	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	788
9	1950-51	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	905
10	1951-52	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1022
11	1952-53	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1139
12	1953-54	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1256
13	1954-55	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1373
14	1955-56	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1490
15	1956-57	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1607
16	1957-58	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1724
17	1958-59	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1841
18	1959-60	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	1958
19	1960-61	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2075
20	1961-62	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2192
21	1962-63	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2309
22	1963-64	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2426
23	1964-65	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2543
24	1965-66	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2660
25	1966-67	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2777
26	1967-68	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	2894
27	1968-69	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3011
28	1969-70	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3128
29	1970-71	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3245
30	1971-72	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3362
31	1972-73	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3479
32	1973-74	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3596
33	1974-75	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3713
34	1975-76	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3830
35	1976-77	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3947
36	1977-78	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4064
37	1978-79	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4181
38	1979-80	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4298
39	1980-81	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4415
40	1981-82	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4532
41	1982-83	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4649
42	1983-84	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4766
43	1984-85	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	4883
44	1985-86	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5000
45	1986-87	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5117
46	1987-88	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5234
47	1988-89	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5351
48	1989-90	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5468
49	1990-91	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5585
50	1991-92	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5702
51	1992-93	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5819
52	1993-94	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	5936
53	1994-95	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6053
54	1995-96	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6170
55	1996-97	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6287
56	1997-98	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6404
57	1998-99	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6521
58	1999-00	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6638
59	2000-01	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6755
60	2001-02	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6872
61	2002-03	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	6989
62	2003-04	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7106
63	2004-05	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7223
64	2005-06	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7340
65	2006-07	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7457
66	2007-08	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7574
67	2008-09	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7691
68	2009-10	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7808
69	2010-11	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	7925
70	2011-12	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8042
71	2012-13	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8159
72	2013-14	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8276
73	2014-15	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8393
74	2015-16	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8510
75	2016-17	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8627
76	2017-18	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8744
77	2018-19	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8861
78	2019-20	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	8978
79	2020-21	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9095
80	2021-22	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9212
81	2022-23	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9329
82	2023-24	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9446
83	2024-25	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9563
84	2025-26	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9680
85	2026-27	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9797
86	2027-28	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	9914
87	2028-29	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10031
88	2029-30	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10148
89	2030-31	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10265
90	2031-32	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10382
91	2032-33	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10499
92	2033-34	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10616
93	2034-35	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10733
94	2035-36	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10850
95	2036-37	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	10967
96	2037-38	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	11084
97	2038-39	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	11201
98	2039-40	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	11318
99	2040-41	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	11435
100	2041-42	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	11552

A logbook entry reveals analysis of his operational flying hours up to January 1949. Notably, HSR Gohel holds the record for flying the maximum number of hours on IAF's two pivotal military aircraft: a total of 43 hours in Vultee Vengeance bomber aircraft (1942-44) and 117 hours in Westland Lysander Mk II Army Co-operation aircraft (1941-43).

**BOMBING RECORD**  
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34	1975-76	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3830
35	1976-77	Avro Lancaster	117			117	117	3947
36	1							



The Flying Officer Rank epaulettes of Gp Capt Gohel. IAF Officers received the "IAF Volunteer Reserve" Commission, which is signified by the "VR" badges on top of the rank rings.

The earliest photograph that Gp Capt Gohel retained of himself in uniform. It should be noted that the IAF uniform, around the time of its inception in 1932, was the same as that worn by the RAF. At that time, IAF had two sets of uniforms, one for summer wear and the second for winter wear. The standard shoes were black Oxfords with all dresses. As far as the headdress was concerned, there were two types of caps referred to as the F/S or Field Service Cap or Peak Cap for ceremonial occasions. In this picture, HSR Gohel can be seen wearing the Field Service Cap.



(clockwise from top left)  
Gp Capt Gohel's  
IAF summer, winter and ceremonial uniforms.



Gp Capt Gohel's Peak Cap

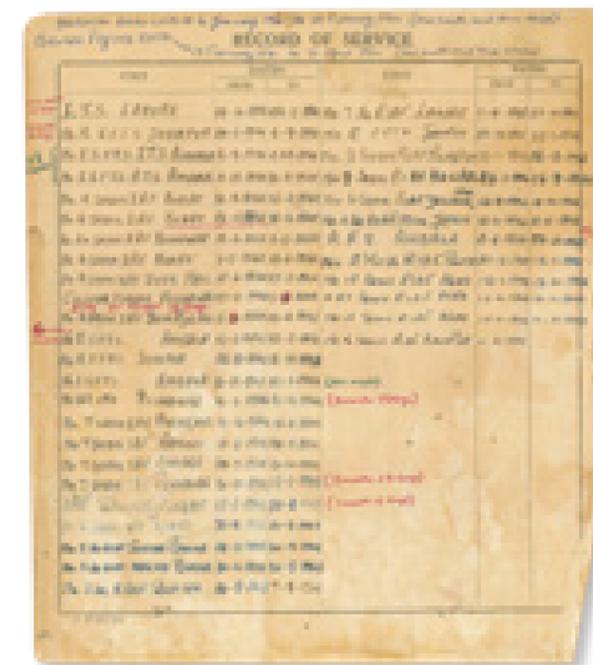




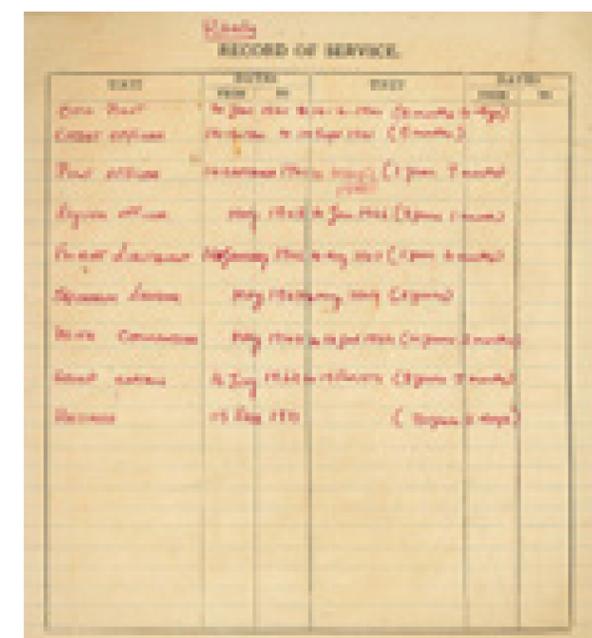
Gp Capt Gohel's flying paraphernalia consisted his green glass goggles, French flying goggles and a complete range of Rhodolight screens (anti-fog screen, sunscreen, colourless screen, screen for the protection of eyes before night-time flying).



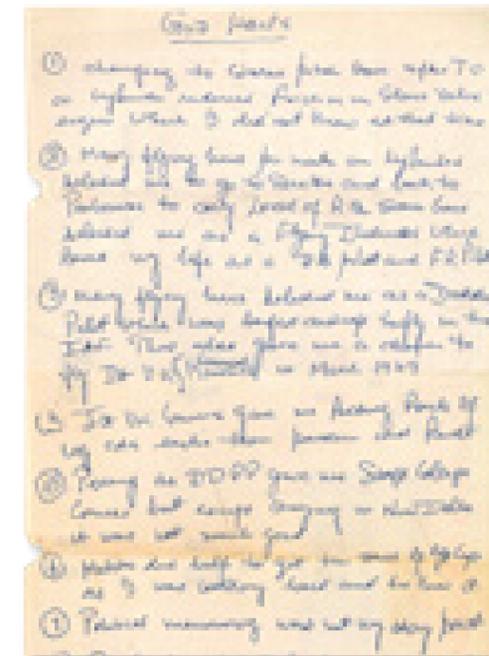
Gp Cap Gohel's Brass Button Stick, an essential tool of a defence officer's uniform upkeep and a part of his brass button and buckle polishing kit.



A record of service maintained by HSR Gohel in his logbook from January 1941 to April 1949.



A record of rank progression maintained by HSR Gohel in his logbook.



A note titled "God Helps", added later to the logbooks, is an insightful retrospective account of HSR Gohel's life in the Air Force.

## Progression of Ranks

RANK POSITION	FROM	TILL	DURATION
Civil Pilot	4 January 1941	14 April 1941	3 months 10 days
Cadet Officer	14 April 1941	14 September 1941	5 months
Pilot Officer	14 September 1941	May 1943	1 Year 7 months
Flying Officer	May 1943	14 January 1946	3 Years 1 month
Flight Lieutenant	14 January 1946	May 1947	1 Year 4 Months
Squadron Leader	May 1947	May 1949	2 Years
Wing Commander	May 1949	16 July 1962	12 years 2 Months
Group Captain	16 July 1962	15 February 1971	8 Years 7 Months

## List of Postings

DATE	RANK	UNIT	LOCATION	APPOINTMENT
28 May 1941 – 5 September 1941	Cadet Offr	No. 2 EFTS	Jodhpur	
14 September 1941 – 14 February 1942	Plt Offr	No. 1 FTS (Flying Training School)	Ambala	
15 February 1942 – 20 February 1943	Plt Offr	No. 4 Squadron, RIAF	Kohat	
8 March 1943 – 18 December 1943	Plt Offr (promoted to Fg Offr in May)	1 SFTS	Ambala	Flying Instructor
19 December 1943 – 15 January 1944	Fg Offr	2 EFTS	Jodhpur	Instructor for Navigation Flying

24 January 1944 – 31 March 1944	Fg Offr	No. 152 OTU	Peshawar	Conversion Training on Vultee Vengeance
20 April 1944 – 30 June 1944	Fg Offr	No. 7 Squadron, IAF	Kumbhigram (Burma Front)	Bomber Pilot
20 October 1944 – 21 February 1945	Fg Offr	No. 7 Squadron, 151 OTU	Peshawar	Conversion Course on Hawker Hurricane
15 March 1945 – 27 May 1945	Fg Offr	No. 7 Squadron, RIAF	Burma	Tactical Recce Operations
1 June 1945 – 31 October 1945	Fg Offr	No. 7 Squadron, RIAF	North-West Frontier Province	
27 November 1945 – 10 January 1946	Fg Offr	2 EFTS	Jodhpur	Training Officer Cadets of 38 Course
18 January 1946 – 13 March 1946	Flt Lt	No. 3 Squadron, RIAF	Kolar	Flight Commander
15 March 1946 – 9 April 1946	Flt Lt	No. 4 Squadron, RIAF	Yelahanka	Adjutant
14 May 1946 – 30 August 1946	Flt Lt	No. 4 Squadron, RIAF	Miho, Japan	Coastal Patrolling. Deployed with the British Occupational Forces
25 September 1946 – 6 May 1947	Flt Lt	Advanced Flying School (India)	Ambala	Flying Instructor
12 May 1947 – 31 May 1947	Sqn Ldr	OC A Flight No. 2 EFTS	Jodhpur	Flying Instructor
17 August 1947 – 15 January 1948	Sqn Ldr	No. 2 Wing, RIAF	Poona	OC HQ Flt.
17 February 1948 – 15 April 1948	Sqn Ldr	No. 4 Wing No. 12 Squadron, RIAF	Agra	Flight Commander
15 April 1948 – 15 November 1948	Sqn Ldr	Conversion & Training Squadron	Agra	<b>Commanding Officer</b>

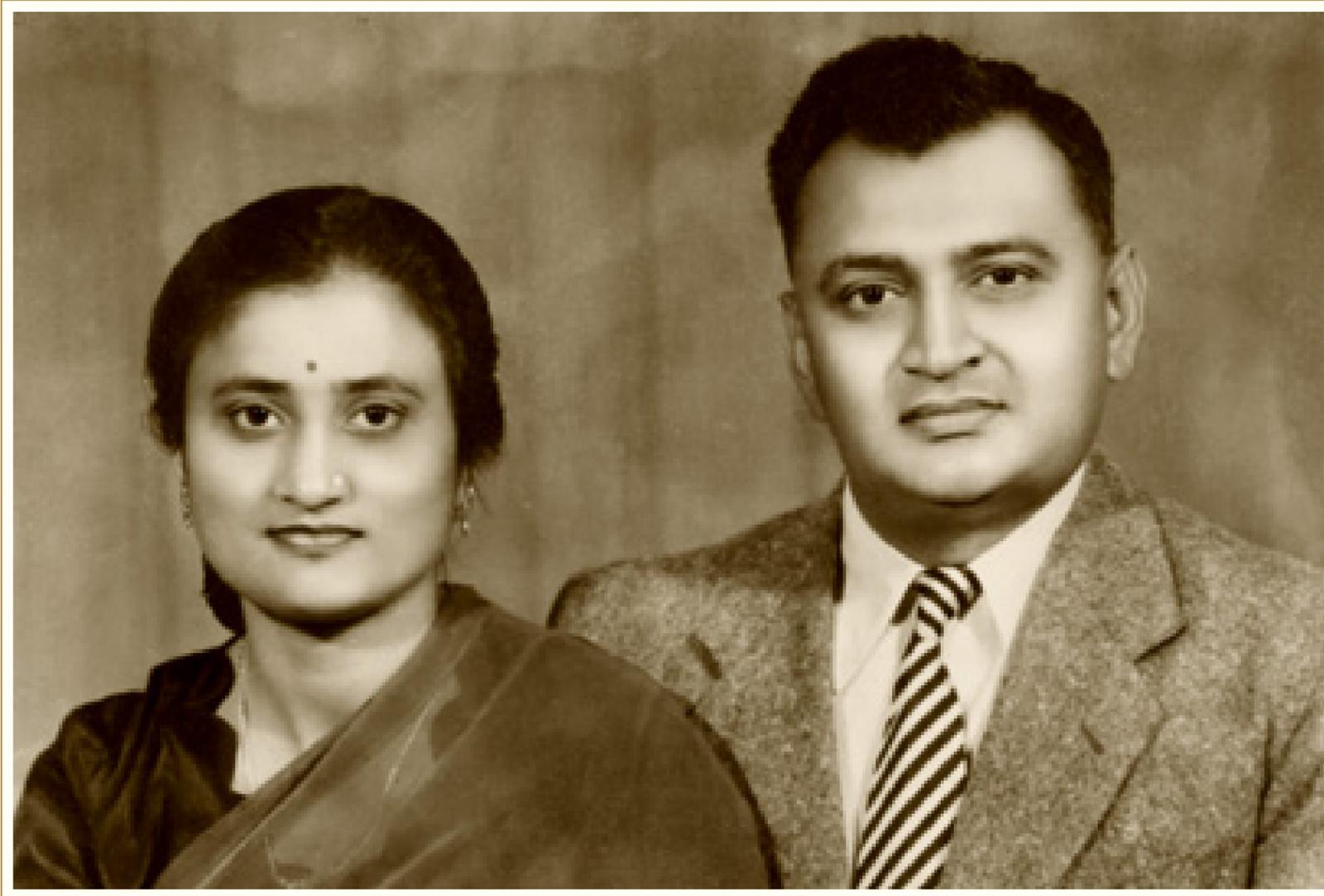
1 December 1948- 20 April 1949	Sqn Ldr	No. 12 Squadron, RIAF	Agra	<b>Commanding Officer</b>
22 April 1949 – 13 February 1951	Sqn Ldr (Wg Cdr promoted in May)	No. 5 Squadron, RIAF	Poona	<b>Commanding Officer</b>
18 February 1951 – 31 July 1951	Wg Cdr	No. 6 Squadron, IAF	Poona	<b>Commanding Officer</b>
1 July 1951 – 18 March 1953	Wg Cdr	Air Headquarters	New Delhi	Deputy Director, Policy and Plans
19 March 1953- 30 September 1953	Wg Cdr	No. 3 Wing, IAF	Palam	Officer in Charge
1 October 1953 – 30 June 1954	Wg Cdr		Wellington	Staff Course, Defense Services Staff College
1 August 1954 – 12 October 1955	Wg Cdr	No. 12 Squadron, IAF	Agra	<b>Commanding Officer</b>
3 November 1955 – 6 November 1957	Wg Cdr	No. 2 Wing, IAF	Poona	Officer in Charge Flying
27 November 1957 – 31 May 1962	Wg Cdr	Communication Sqn, Air Headquarters	New Delhi	Officer in Charge Flying
16 July 1962 – 30 November 1964	Gp Capt	3 Tactical Air Center	Siliguri	<b>Commanding Officer</b>
6 January 1965 – 30 June 1969	Gp Capt	Communication Sqn, Air Headquarters	New Delhi	
7 August 1969 – 15 February 1971	Gp Capt	7 Tactical Air Center	Ahmedabad	<b>Commanding Officer</b>



*The legacy of heroes is the memory of a great name  
and the inheritance of a great example.*

*— Benjamin Disraeli*

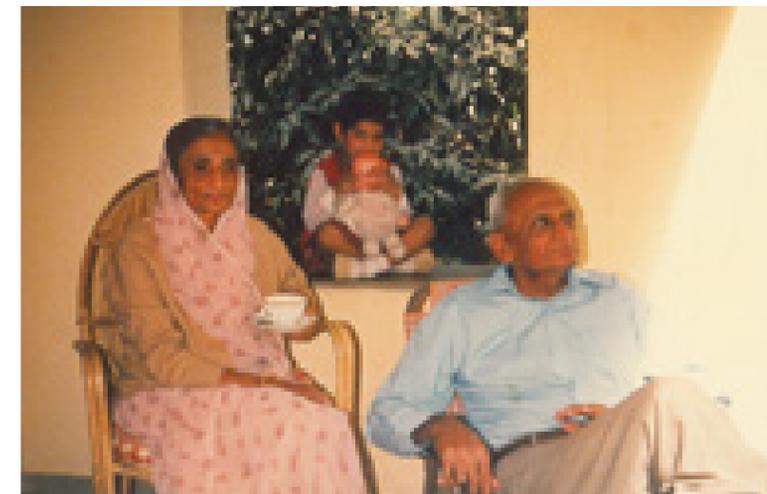
*Chapter 5*  
**A CELEBRATED LIFE**



*Gulab Kunwarba with Himmat Sinhji*

## A CELEBRATED LIFE

Flying might have been Himmat Sinhji's biggest passion, but it would be erroneous to pigeonhole his personality as a pilot alone. He played a gamut of roles for his immediate family and friends, and most of it was enabled and steadfastly supported by his wife, Gulab Kunwarba.





The various facets of Himmat Sinhji as a family man.

## First Lady— Gulab Kunwarba

Gulab Kunwarba was born in Bhadiyad, a village in Gujarat, and had only received elementary education in her native language, Gujarati. The transition to the elite defence environment would not have been easy. But she was a hard worker, quick to observe and grasp— the qualities that enabled elders to fix her marriage with Himmat Sinhji.

After their marriage, Gulab Kunwarba completely assimilated herself into the new surroundings. She learnt new languages, mastered the art of housekeeping, and cooking for her foodie husband. Instead of allowing her lack of fluency in English to become a limitation in the anglophile defence environment (where even the cooks and nannies spoke in English), she ensured that her children’s education remained uncompromised. Looking back at the infinite sacrifices made by their mother and the enormous influence she has had on them as individuals, the Gohel siblings are reminded of these famous lines by theologian Renita Weems:

*“I cannot forget my mother. She is my bridge. When I needed to get across, she steadied herself long enough for me to run across safely.”*

Gulab Kunwarba  
(b. 16 September 1927- d. 15 November 2012)





*Gulab Kunwarba with Himmat Sinhji at various stages of their life together*



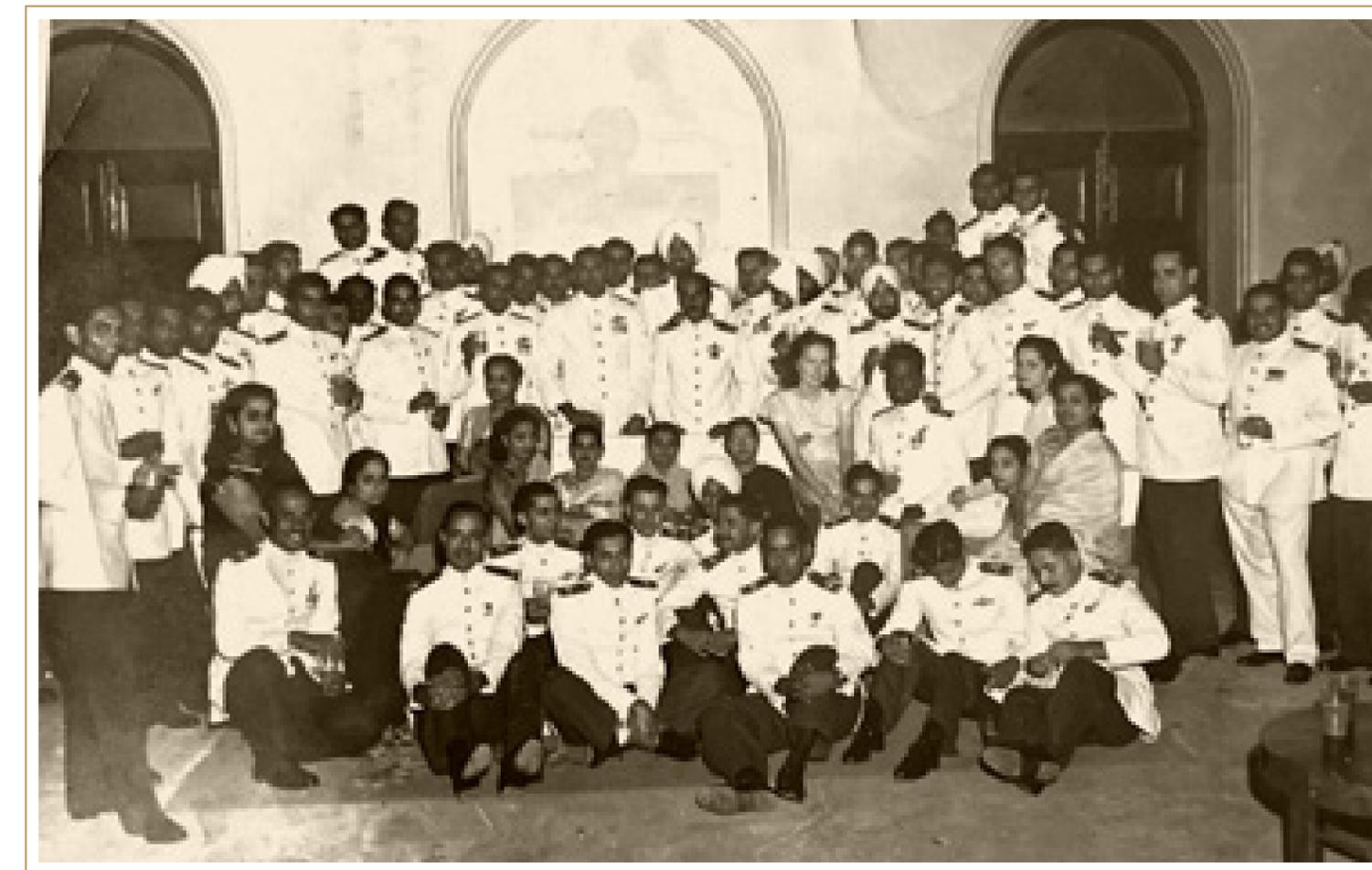
*Gulab Kunwarba with husband Himmat Sinhji and children Indira, Ghanshyam, Kirit and Gita.*



Capt Kirit and Gita remember their mother waking them on cold Delhi mornings with steaming cups of tea and egging them to prepare for their exams. She was the homemaker responsible for not only taking care of the family while her aviator husband was away but also for keeping the family's Kathiawadi roots intact. She would treat her children to lip-smacking Kathiawadi delicacies and encourage them to converse in Gujarati at home. Her role in managing the home single-handedly cannot be overstated. But Gulab Kunwarba took it in her stride and managed things flawlessly.

Military deployments often impose excruciating challenges on defence families, and the Gohels were no different. When Himmat Sinhji was away on duty, Gulab Kunwarba single-handedly managed health and other emergencies. The birth of their children—Indira (c. 15 April 1949, Bhavnagar), Capt Kirit (c. 16 December 1950, Poona), Ghanshyam (c. 25 February 1952, Delhi), and Gita (c. 29 July 1953, Bhavnagar) — in his absence is illustrative of how the need for military order often conflicts sharply with family life.

Gulab Kunwarba matched each step with her husband's: be it on their daily evening walks at Rajpath or in assuming the role of the Squadron's First Lady. Their children describe their relationship as "*just perfect*". Himmat Sinhji,



At a party in Poona; Gulab Kunwarba is sitting in the middle and CO Wg Cdr Gohel can be seen standing behind her, on her right.



Wg Cdr Gohel with wife Gulab Kunwarba (standing extreme right) at a fancy dress party hosted at Air Force Mess, Agra in 1954.

too, unfailingly acknowledged and admired her role and contribution towards their family and had the utmost regard for her in his heart. *“He never found her lacking in anything and took enormous pride when her simplicity and grace won the hearts and admiration of all”*, their children share.

Gulab Kunwarba giving away a prize as the First Lady of the Squadron at the Officers’ Club, AFS Poona in the 1950s.

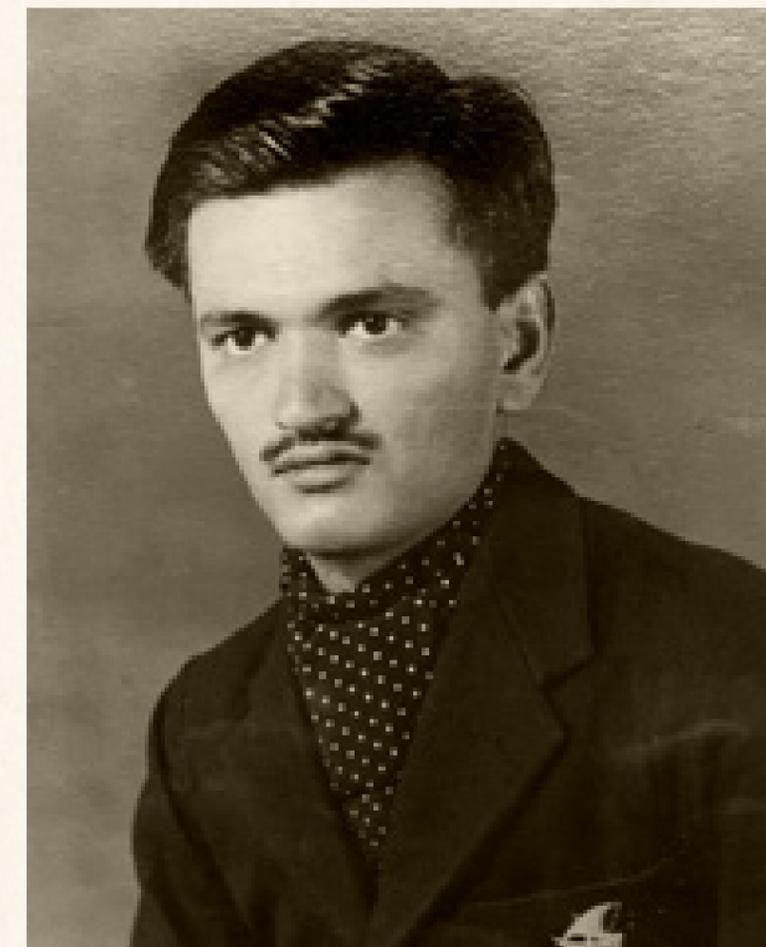


## *Unwavering Responsibility*

Himmat Sinhji was only 17 years old when he lost his mother. He assumed the responsibility of a younger brother and a grieving father at a critical time when he also had to find a career for himself. When his father remarried, Himmat Sinhji wasn’t resentful. Instead he embraced his step-mother, and a few years later, was overjoyed with the birth of their sister. When his younger brother Sajjan died in 1955, it was a loss as big as his mother’s, but once again Himmat Sinhji readily assumed responsibility—this time of Sajjan’s Sinhji’s young wife and children.

He ensured that his nieces, Ushaba and Harshaba, received as good an education as his own children, *“Daddy had a very strong sense of responsibility and justice. He never differentiated between us or his brother’s children and because of that we are still so close and he earned a lot of goodwill and blessings”*, his children share.

Himmat Sinhji is fondly remembered for his selfless deeds even outside of his family. He mentored young boys in Gujarat who aspired to join the armed forces and took several other youngsters under his wing. He would go out of his



Himmat Sinhji’s younger brother, Sajjan Sinhji Gohel (b. 1925- d.1955)



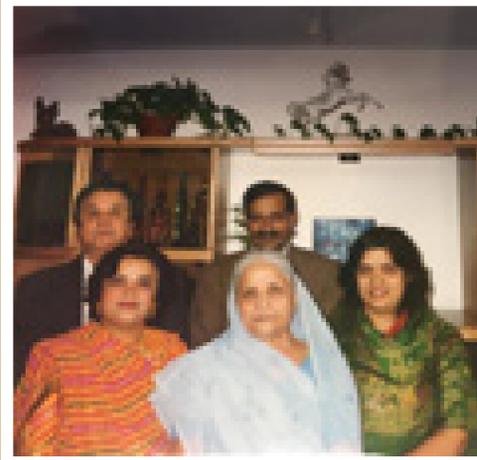
*Sajjan Sinhji's wife Mohan Kunwarba with daughters, Ushaba and Harshaba.*

way to advise and guide them. His steadfast commitment to flying, sports, and public service can also be understood as a lesson he learnt from his father, Major Ravubha. Today both of them have been valorised by Capt Kirit Sinhji and his wife Amarjyoti at Bhavnagar's Silver Bells Public School, where impressive sports facilities, namely Major Ravubha Gohil Riding School and Gp Capt Himmat Sinhji Shooting Range, have been built in their memory.

The shooting range dedicated to Gp Capt Himmat Sinhji Gohel was inaugurated in the School on 8 July 2017. The event was attended by many dignitaries of Bhavnagar such as Deputy Collector Harshad Kumar, and Mehul Patel, Chairman of Bhavnagar Rifle Club. The shooting range was inaugurated by child prodigy Chitrang Patel, an ace shooter and a student at the school. Eleven students of the school participated in the 52<sup>nd</sup> Gujarat State Shooting Championship.



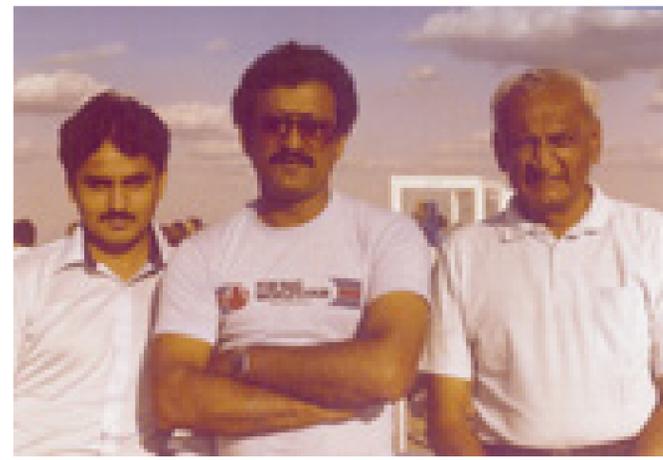
*Gp Capt Himmat Sinhji Shooting Range at Silver Bells Public School, Bhavnagar.*



*(clockwise from right) Raj Sinhji Parmar, Harshaba, Mohan Kunwarba, Ushaba and Nirmal Sinhji Jadeja.*



*Himmat Sinhji's sister Manharba with her husband Kirit Sinhji Chudasama and their family*



*(left to right) Sanjay (Manharba's son), Ghanshyam and Himmat Sinhji in the USA (c. 1981).*



*Mohan Kunwarba (b. 1930- d. December 2018) with her mother-in-law Bairajba (b. 1915- d. 2 June 2006)*

*Mohan Kunwarba (left) with her sister-in-law Manharba (right)*



Major Ravubha's legacy lives on through Major Ravubha Gohil Riding School at Silver Bells Public School, Bhavnagar and in his great-grandson, Shivraj Singh Rathore, who excels in Polo and Equestrian sports.

The riding school dedicated to the memory of Major Ravubha Sinhji started with one horse, Black Beauty. The school soon grew to ten horses, including varieties of Kathiawari, Marwari, and thoroughbreds. The Marwari thoroughbred Yashwant was named in memory of Major Ravubha's favourite horse by the same name. A large part of the credit goes to Shri Ghanshyam Singh Jadeja, the first person to work in the stables and bring it up with great love and care. The school's horses have won many prizes and certificates in horse shows, equestrian events, tent pegging and polo tournaments. The parents take enormous pride and delight in seeing their children get an incredible opportunity to learn horse riding and participate in equestrian events. It was and probably still remains the only riding school in the city.



Accolades won by the students of the riding school.



## Raja Gohel

Himmat Sinhji was born into a Rajput family of the Gohil clan of Bhavnagar. As a VIP pilot, he flew several royal families. He shared an intimate relationship with the royal families of the princely states of Bhavnagar, Jodhpur, Bharatpur, Morvi, and Dhrangadhra. In fact, his relationship with royalty came to wield a considerable influence on his lifestyle. Every officer in the Air Force is usually given a nickname. Gp Capt Gohel's princely lifestyle, cultured demeanour, and handsome aristocratic looks earned him the nickname of 'Raja Gohel', amongst his friends and colleagues.

During World War II, officers were allowed to bring their private Batman. Since Himmat Sinhji was quite young when he joined the forces, his worried father, Major

Ravubha, asked Ramdas— a Bhavnagar native—to accompany his son everywhere and look after his needs. Ramdas and his father were both very committed, and had been in the service of the Gohel family for almost two generations. He is known to have devotedly looked after Himmat Sinhji even in the most disturbed war-zones like Burma, Afghanistan, Japan and Pakistan. He would also often go out of his way to assist and advise Gulab Kunwarba in housekeeping. Ramdas was a favourite among Himmat Sinhji's friends and families. In fact, his popularity was a talking point. After independence, when Himmat Sinhji's coursemate and Pakistan's Air Marshal Asghar Khan visited India, he made sure to visit his old friend and also meet the ever-so loyal Ramdas. *"The first question he asked Daddy was "Where is Ramdas? I have to meet him first if he is still with you". He walked over to the quarters at the back of our house and went and hugged Ramdas",* Gp Capt Gohel's eldest daughter Indira vividly remembers. On losing his family to cholera, Ramdas renounced the material world and took to asceticism, but remained grateful to the Gohel family for all their kindness, love and support.

## Epicurean

Himmat Sinhji travelled across the world and was exposed to a variety of cuisines. Naturally, he developed a taste for good food. When the British left India, many well-trained chefs and cooks called '*Khansamas*', who were initially employed with them, began to look for jobs. *"Daddy was so fond of good food that in those days when people usually didn't have such high-paying salaries, he used to have three cooks employed in his kitchen: Molino, a Goan, for preparing continental dishes; Maqbool, a Muslim khansama, for making the Mughlai food— his favourite being chicken and mutton cutlets and stew or fried pomfret with green peas and potato chips—and a cook from Bhavnagar called Dilubha who used to cook local vegetarian Kathiawadi cuisines for the family, which our mother was particularly fond of",* his children recount. Himmat Sinhji had a sweet tooth and his love for sweets meant that caramel custard and bread-butter pudding were regular features in the house. He also enjoyed a drink of Scotch every evening and, once in a blue moon, a pipe filled with the best tobacco brought for him from South America by Capt Kirit.



A man of style, young Himmat Sinhji, standing with his friends at the Gaurishankar Lake overflow bridge. A note accompanying this photo in the logbook reads, "Ring on my hand seems unusual as I did not approve of ornaments". The influence of his father's practical attitude and the progressive ways of the Air Force indeed reflects clearly in this particular observation.

Himmat Sinhji was also a man of style. Photographs show him young, dressed stylishly in green corduroy trousers tailored at Hyderabad (Sindh), green woollen coat and a Japanese felt hat. Long before Indians were exposed to

Wranglers and Levis, he owned an original pair of Lee jeans, which, curiously, he used as his repairing outfit. Every time he had to repair, service, or oil his Hillman car, his children remember, he used to quickly change into his pair of jeans. *“Whenever he used to change into his jeans, we used to know that now he would go and spend a couple of hours repairing his car”,* they recall.

There was one more family member that Himmat Sinhji loved unconditionally. He was extremely fond of driving, and soon after his return from England in 1949, he purchased a Hillman Classic, an English car with a sunroof that became his prized possession. His children fondly reminisce how, as kids, they used to roll down its sunroof and stand up. As the car snaked through Rajpath, the wind would blow their hair. Himmat Sinhji was attached to his car and kept it for years, even bringing it with him to Bhavnagar after retirement. Despite his children adding more cars to the family’s fleet of vehicles, nothing could pull him away from his beloved Hillman. Dr. Dilip Solanki, his eldest son-in-law, remembers him, *“working on his Hillman a couple of hours ahead of our trip to the Khodiyar-maa temple to get the blessings for his eldest daughter and the*



*Himmat Sinhji (left) with his good friend Kumar Saheb Shivbhadra Sinhji of Bhavnagar (right), after a wild boar shoot.*

*new son-in-law. He wanted to be sure nothing would impede that. I remember him quietly lamenting the poor quality of the battery and the tires requiring frequent replacements!”* Himmat Sinhji kept the car for 30 years and unwillingly parted when it became difficult to procure its automotive parts or get it serviced.



*Himmat Sinhji and family with their prized Hillman car.*





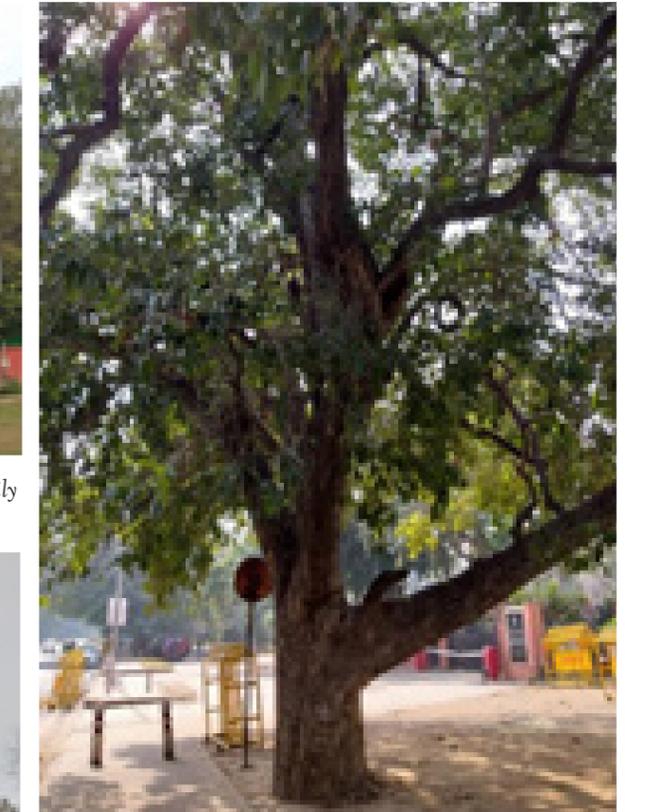
Young Gohel siblings with their friends at the Maulana Azad Road Officers' Hostel in Delhi in early 1960s.



100, Lodhi Road, Delhi— a former residence of the Gohels



5, Man Nagar, Delhi. This former residence of the family is near what is now the city's famous Khan Market



This Khirmi tree, situated outside what is now the office of the Ministry of External Affairs, holds immense sentimental value for Himmat Singhji's children, who have fond memories of playing on this tree, when the family stayed in King Edward Road Officers' Mess.

C-327, Dhaula Kuan, Delhi. The Gohels occupied the ground floor. The house on the extreme right was the residence of Major Srivastava and his family, who went on to enjoy a warm and long association with the Gohels.



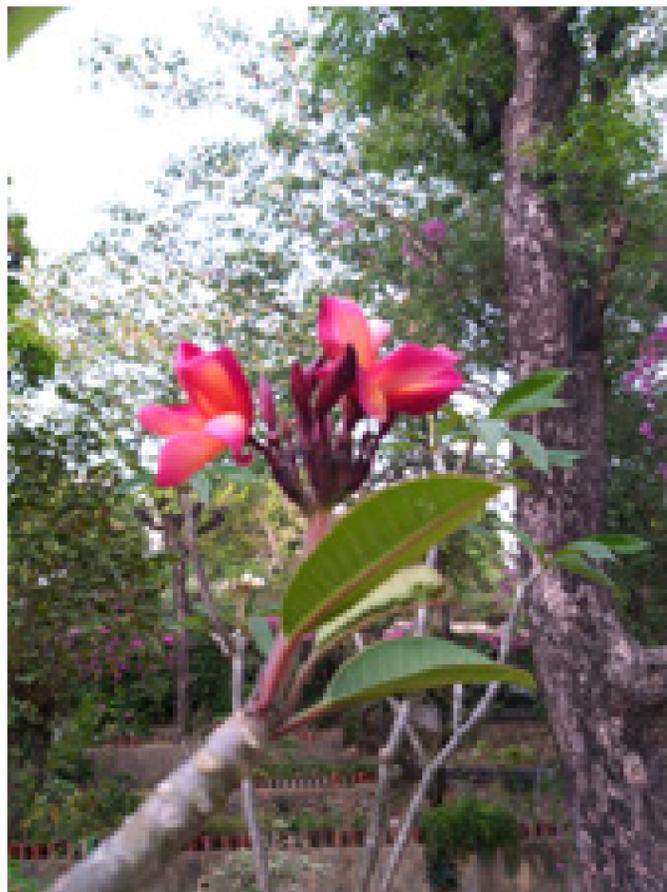
The family on their many Sunday picnics and family holidays.

Her brother Capt Kirit Sinhji Gohel adds, *“Right behind our house in Dhaula Kuan were the Nicholson Ranges, not far from where the Rajputana Rifles’ firing ranges are located today in the Delhi Cantt area. Barring a barbed wire between our house and the firing range, there was no other security barrier. I clearly remember, every evening after returning home from office, Dad would collect his guns and take us as well as our neighbour Major Srivastava’s children to the firing range to shoot partridges. In fact, this firing range was so close to where we lived that I had even shot a few partridges from the window of our house”.* Capt Kirit further adds, *“More than shikar, it was just to be amidst nature, be outdoors. Dad absolutely loved it! He used to put a gun on his shoulders and walk briskly, and I would walk behind him”.*

Himmat Sinhji’s children remember him fondly as a devoted father. *“Daddy was always a family man. He always took us to different places, and spent time with us whenever he could. Be it on picnics or shooting trips, he used to always take us along”*, they say. *“I remember, Dad used to take me for evening walks almost daily”*, Capt Kirit recalls. Being a fan of the outdoors, it was a ritual for Himmat Sinhji to take his family for picnics every Sunday to either Qutub Minar, Buddha Jayanti Garden, or Lodhi Garden.



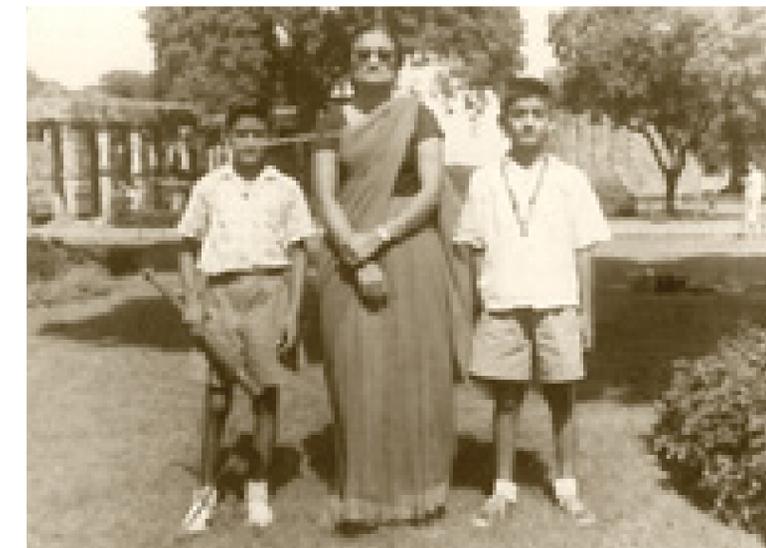
Ghanshyam, Kirit and Gita at a duck-shoot with their ‘Daddy’ in Najafgarh forests, Delhi



The Red Champa tree in Gita's garden in Udaipur that was originally grafted from the tree planted by her grandfather, Major Ravubha, at the family's ancestral home in Bhavnagar.

Capt Kirit shares one of his fondest childhood memories: “I was always my father's favourite! I remember, Dad used to take paratroopers in the Dakota airplane. Since we were small then, he used to take us to the hangar and let us play on this huge swing which the paratroopers would use to learn how to land. I remember playing on that swing as a kid and also seeing the paratroopers being trained on the same. Then, when the airmen used to get the aircraft ready, I used to go and sit in the cockpit and play around in the aircraft. When I joined playschool in Pune, I remember that security back then was very lax, perhaps why we now call them ‘good old days’. One day, in the excitement to see my father return home after a long flying trip, I sneaked into the air-base unnoticed and cycled almost up till the runway. In about a moment, I saw a group of fighter aircraft, Vampires, approaching the runway preparing to land. My father was leading this group. I was standing dangerously close to the runway and saw the pilot waving at me and frantically signalling me to not cross. After they landed, my father came running towards me, caught my ears and squeezed them hard. This was the first time that Dad had lifted his hand on me”.

“The most beautiful and precious memories of Daddy that will always remain with us is that he loved all four of us



Young Kirit and Ghanshyam with their mother.

unconditionally,” the Gohel siblings claim in unison. “He doted on us and would do anything to make us all happy. The memories of Dad, countless and beautiful, can perhaps never be put down in a lifetime. He was the best son, brother, husband, father and then grandfather that ever was— loving, gentle, caring and always there for us. He gave us a strong foundation when we were young, provided all opportunities so that we could widen our horizons, and then gave us wings to fly when we got

older. He was very open-minded and respected all the decisions we took. He taught us to appreciate reading, music, long walks, picnics, sports, and to be self-reliant, and take responsibility for whatever we did. He instilled proper etiquette in us and always made sure that we were honest in all we said and did. He was always very proud of all our achievements and was indeed the guiding light in our lives who showed us the way”.



Ghanshyam and Kirit as young boys.

Himmat Sinhji was also a voracious reader and passed on his love for books to his children and grandchildren. He would often stay up late in the night finishing books after books that he borrowed regularly from the Central Vista Library in Delhi. His love for reading was furthered with the vast number of books— on themes ranging from military aviation to communism, hunting, and travelling— that his family gifted him on several occasions.

Gita remembers how reading magazines like the Time, Newsweek, National Geographic, and The Life was an important part of their childhood. “Daddy used to tell us about General MacArthur, Admiral Yamamoto and all these personalities who normally people would not even know of. Until this day, all this knowledge is well-embedded in our minds. In fact, it was not limited only to us but even his grandchildren. I remember that whenever I used to return to Udaipur from Bhavnagar, I would always find that my children had added some new knowledge, new vocabulary through all the stories that Daddy would tell them. It would really expand their knowledge and they came back home so much richer”.



Books gifted to Himmat Sinhji by his family, which he held dear till the very end.

## Enduring Values



Gita in Canada for the Rotary International Student Exchange Programme in the 1970s.



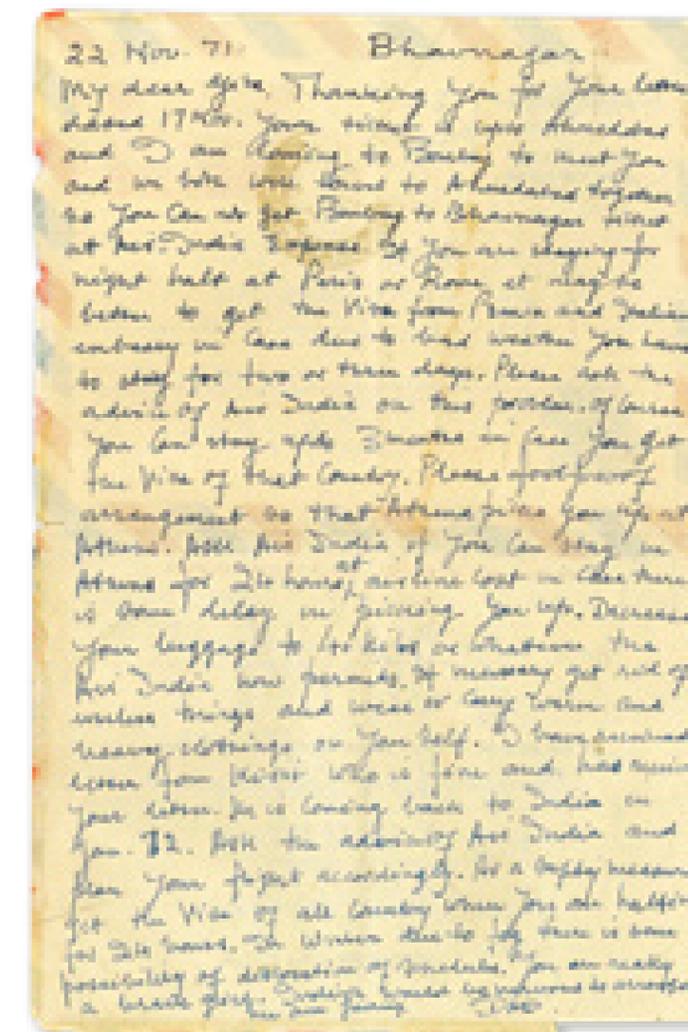
Himmat Sinhji was a rational, forward-looking man, and his family gained from his qualities. He laid utmost importance on education. “When we were young, his friends advised him to put his daughters in a boarding school in Gujarat, but he refused as he wanted his daughters to be educated along with his sons in good public schools where all four of us could get an all-round education with maximum exposure to all the events in the capital, Delhi,” his children

share. “He always felt that girls should have as good an education as the boys and he never differentiated between any of us. We are so grateful that he was ever-ready to bear such great expenses when it came to getting us quality education and exposure. I remember, I had just finished my school and got a scholarship from the Rotary International Organisation to study for a period of one year in Canada and for this, a large amount of the expense had to be borne by my parents. Despite

all the other financial responsibilities he had, he never hesitated and was very happy and proud to send me there. He said ‘I will spend any amount whatsoever for your education. You don’t worry’. And he did send me there. I think that one year in Canada taught me more than my entire life ever did”, Gita adds with gratitude.



One of the many letters Himmat Sinhji had written to Gita while she was in Canada for higher studies. A father’s undying affection, concern, pride and love for his daughter is palpable in this letter.

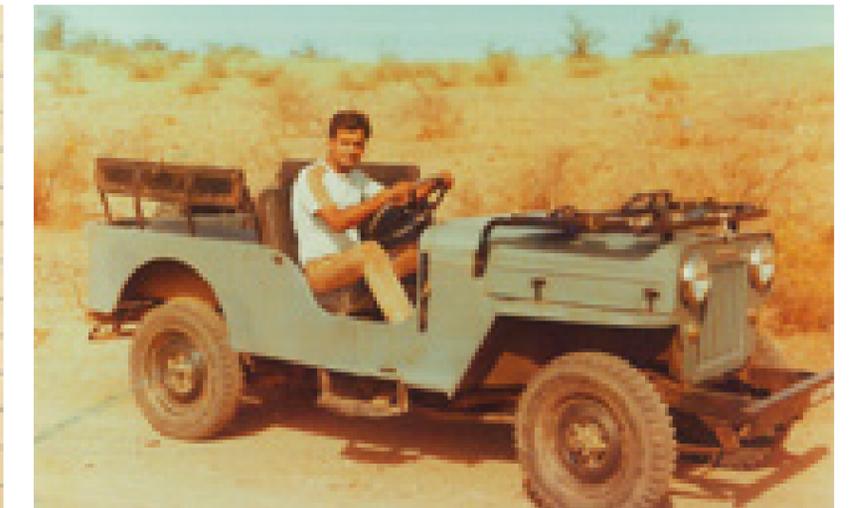
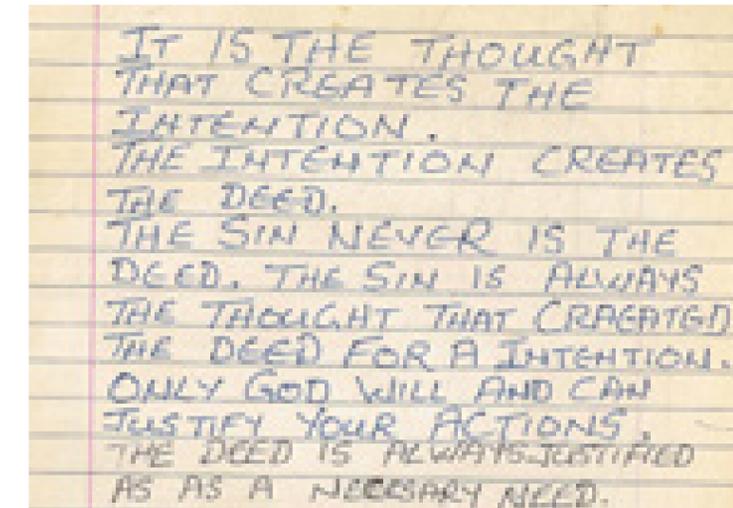




At the wedding of his daughter Indira with Dr. Dilip Solanki

Himmat Sinhji was also known for his tremendous patience and understanding. *“We rarely ever saw him angry,”* his children share. *“He was always cheerful, smiling and full of life.”* Granddaughter Dimple remembers how generous and patient he was with all his grandchildren. Another significant lesson the family learnt from him was punctuality. *“He was very particular of his time and would always be ready much before the given time”,* they recall.

They remember him as a man of firm values and principles and describe him as *“a self-made, downright honest, disciplined, simple and humble man whose greatest asset was his integrity. He lived by example”*. Himmat Sinhji didn’t lock up these virtues in himself, but inculcated the qualities in his children at an early age. *“Once my father told me that ‘even if your brother does something wrong, you should put him to task’”,* Capt Kirit says.



Being a man of firm values and principles, Himmat Sinhji never locked up these virtues in himself, but made sure to pass them to his children. A reflection of his enviable nobility can be clearly discerned in a profound observation made by his son, Ghanshyam (b.25 February 1952- d.5 June 2009), in a hand-written note (see photo).

His daughter Indira recalls, *“Daddy never differentiated between boys and girls in any way. He did not like girls or women being treated unfairly or unjustly. I remember, once, as a child, when our family was living in Dhaula Kuan, I ratted on Kirit. So Kirit got angry and shoved and punched me. When Daddy saw that, he immediately smacked his bottom. I was so shocked as this was the first time I saw my father lifting his hand on someone, and that too, Kirit, his favourite kid”*. So commendable was Himmat Sinhji’s fair attitude towards both, girls and boys!



Indira, Kirit and Ghanshyam (left to right), in Poona.

In many ways, it’s Himmat Sinhji’s many qualities that made him. *“I feel that Daddy was a very satisfied soul, happy with whatever he had,”* Gita says. *“He led the best of life as a pilot, accomplished sports person and an ace shooter, but on the opposite side of the spectrum, he had also witnessed the horrors of many wars— the World War II, 1948 J&K Ops, the Chinese aggression— and had seen so much killing and death. Yet there was no bitterness in him at all. He was very simple at heart. He never had any complaints, grudges, hatred, or animosity towards anyone. I remember him as always smiling and happy to help all, with no expectations in return.”*



*“Siblings take different paths and life may separate them... but they will forever be bonded by having begun their journey in the same boat.”*

-Unknown

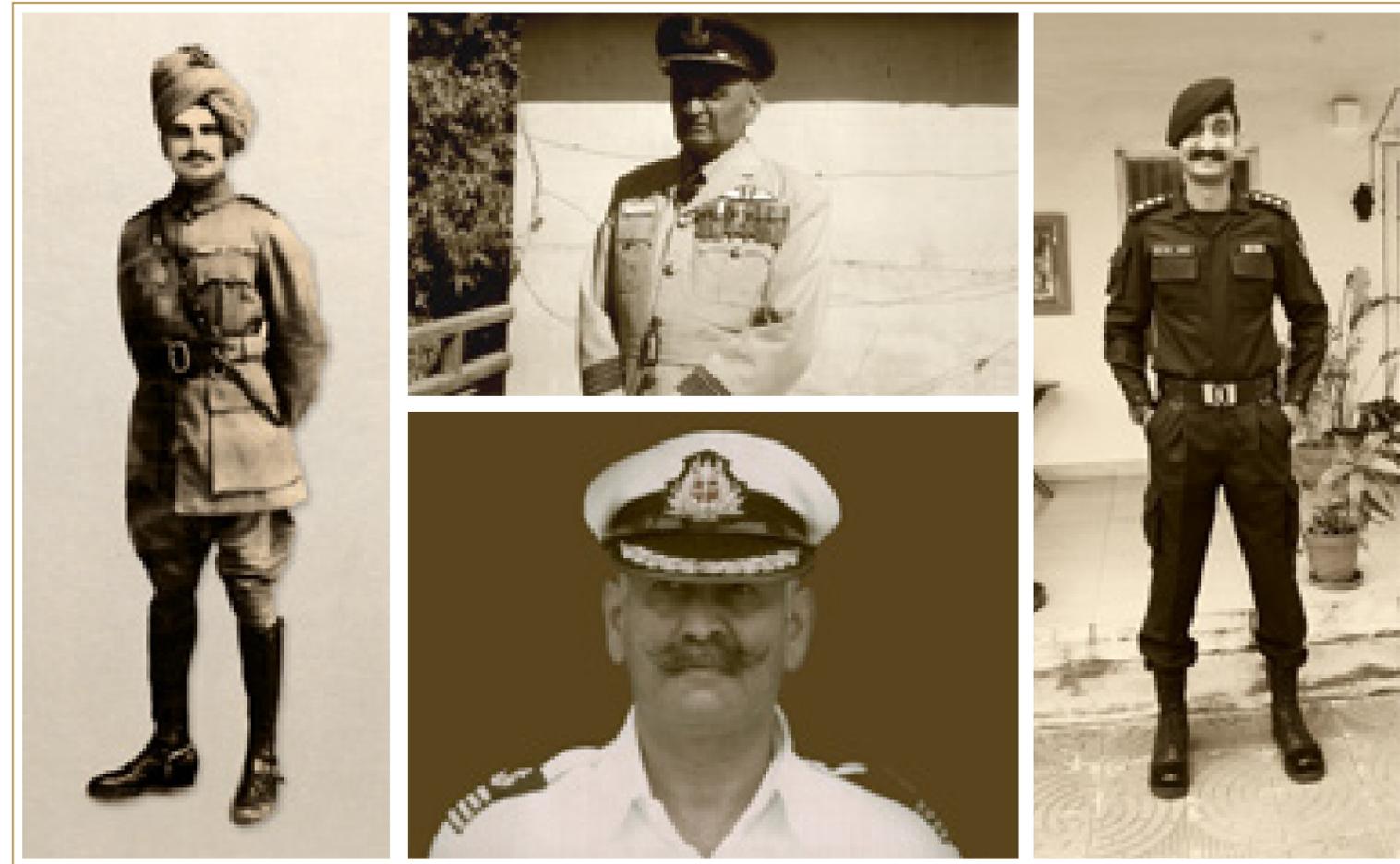
Here are Gohel siblings captured young at their Maan Nagar residence.



Young Indira, Ghanshyam and Kirit at the family’s Bhavnagar residence. Their grandfather, Major Ravubha can be seen standing in the balcony above looking down lovingly at his grandchildren.



Ghanshyam, Gita and Kirit at a fair in Poona in 1957.



The Gohels have been serving the nation for five generations. While Sowar Bariyabha Sinhji and Major Ravubha Sinhji had dedicated their lives to the Bhavnagar Imperial Service Lancers, the latter's son Gp Capt Himmat Sinhji served in the RIAF and then later in the IAF. Further, Himmat Sinhji's son Capt Kirit Sinhji sailed as a Master Mariner with the Merchant Navy and later served with the Gujarat Maritime Board and Alang Shipbreaking Yard. Himmat Sinhji's grandson, Captain Shivraj Singh Rathore is currently serving in the Indian Army.

## Call for Adventure

Himmat Sinhji could sustain his desire for adventure because he regularly indulged in it, like the sport of shooting.

In the 1960s, the Uttar Pradesh Government would regularly publish newspaper advertisements inviting volunteers to shoot man-eating tigers. Himmat Sinhji volunteered for the job many times. His love for *shikar* is also testified by his possession of an elaborate collection of the entire works of Jim Corbett.

Before shooting tigers was banned, the then Maharaja of Bharatpur had invited Himmat Sinhji to join him and a German friend on an expedition. The trio spent a couple of hours on the *machan* waiting for a tiger. When the tiger appeared, the German was too frightened to shoot. The task was passed on to Himmat Sinhji, who shot it with great dexterity, using his double-barrel shotgun. The Maharaja later sent the skin to the famous taxidermist Van Ingen & Van Ingen at Mysore, and gifted the same to Himmat Sinhji as a trophy. It is now displayed in the family's living room as a memory of the bygone era.

The head-mounted skin of the tiger hunted by Himmat Sinhji on a shikar with the Maharaja of Bharatpur.

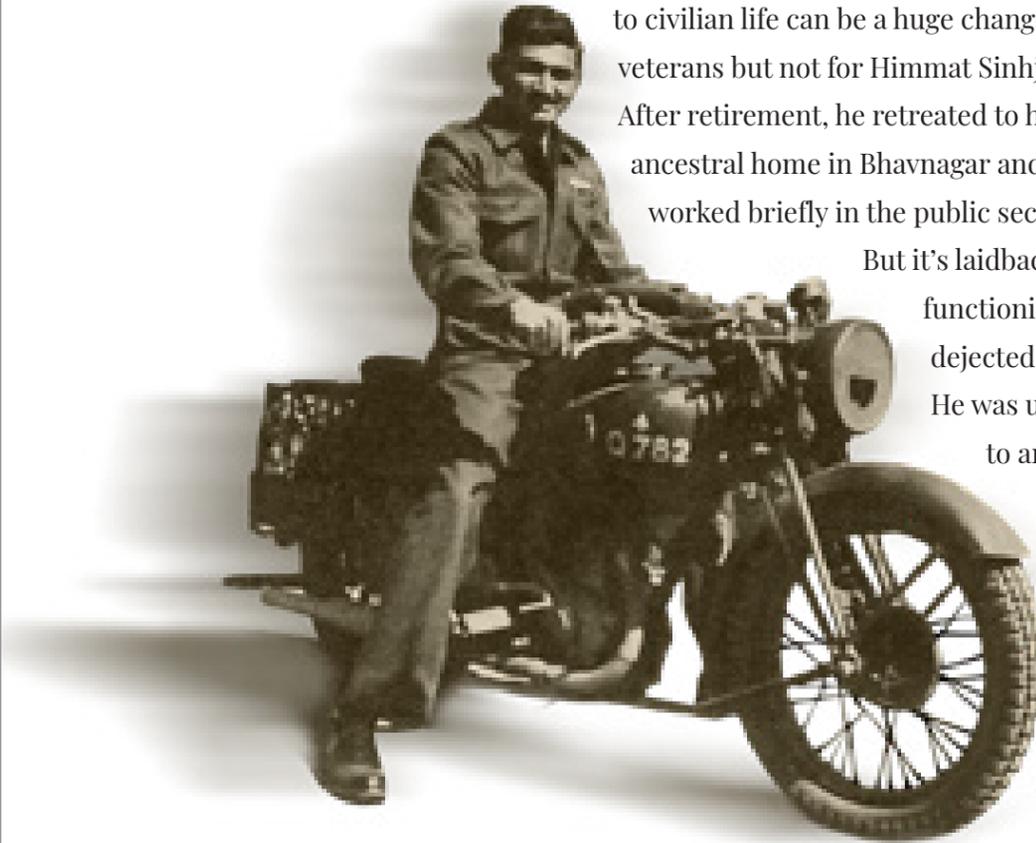




Himmat Singhji with the head-mounted trophy of the panther hunted by his son, Ghanshyam Singhji.

## The Sunset Years

Himmat Singhji's zest for life refused to take a backseat even after he retired from the forces. The transition to civilian life can be a huge change for veterans but not for Himmat Singhji. After retirement, he retreated to his ancestral home in Bhavnagar and worked briefly in the public sector. But it's laidback functioning dejected him. He was used to an



Plt Offr Gohel on his Norton bike in Kohat in 1942.

efficient manner of working and thus struggled to adapt to the civil setup. Soon, he discontinued his service and decided to devote his life solely to his love for family, sports and other passions.

He then embraced the simpler pleasures of life, such as farming on the family's agricultural land, sharing his treasured collection of books with his young grandchildren, and giving them lessons in riding, swimming and bird-watching.



Nameplates of Nirmal Niwas, the Gohel Residence at Bhavnagar.



*Himmat Sinhji's binoculars that were used to spot birds.*

Likewise, he was active in the social arena too and usually spent his days hosting friends and family, serving as a prominent member of the Bhavnagar District Soldier Association, and being felicitated by educational institutions as their guest of honour. His son Capt Kirit notes, *“most people, after retiring from such a high position, feel depressed for having lost their chair, but he enjoyed his retired life equally well”.*



*The Gohel residence at Bhavnagar. The below picture shows the balcony outside Himmat Sinhji's room, where he, along with his grandchildren and neighbours, used to spend hours spotting birds during the day and constellations at night.*



*Gp Capt Gohel's service to the nation and its armed forces was recognised and admired by his native town of Bhavnagar. He was often invited by the local schools as the guest of honour to grace their many events and ceremonies.*



*Post retirement, Gp Capt Gohel assumed the active and demanding role of Patron-in-Chief of the Bhavnagar District Soldier Association. For his service to the Association, he was felicitated by Bhavnagar's Mayor Vibhavariben Dave in May 1998.*



*Himmat Sinhji lighting the ceremonial lamp at a local event he was invited to as a dignitary. His good friend, Kumar Saheb Shivbhadra Sinhji of Bhavnagar, can be seen standing next to him here*



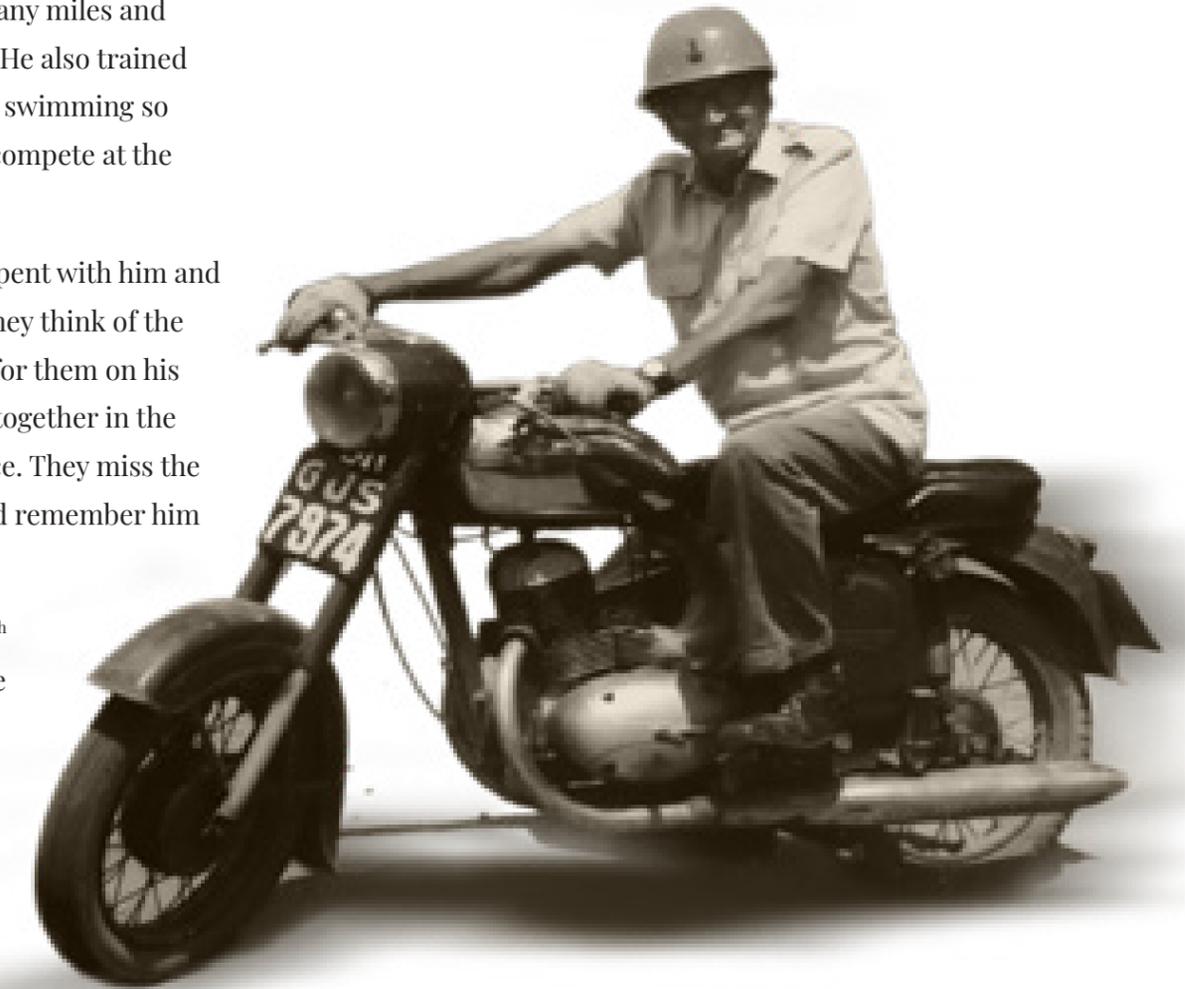
These photographs capture the countless precious memories Sona, Sanjiv, Devika, Radhika, Dimple and Shivraj have and still treasure with their beloved Nanabapu.

Himmat Sinhji had always been agile, and even as a senior citizen, he did not let his swashbuckling personality lose its charm. He would cycle everyday for many miles and regularly pursue walking and swimming. He also trained his grandchildren in shooting, riding and swimming so effectively that some of them went on to compete at the national level.

His grandchildren still cherish the time spent with him and recall the huge impact he had on them. They think of the small things— like the baby seat he fixed for them on his bicycle or the many summers they spent together in the swimming pool at his Bhavnagar residence. They miss the days they gorged on *samosas* with him and remember him with fondness and love.

On 9 February 2006, a week before his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, he passed away peacefully in the presence of his family.

He is missed dearly by all who knew him.



Himmat Sinhji, aged 84, on his Jawa motorcycle post retirement in 2005.

*Chapter 6*

**GONE, BUT NOT FORGOTTEN**

*"If only there could be an invention that bottled up a memory, like scent.  
And it never faded, and it never got stale. And then when one wanted it,  
the bottle could be uncorked, and it would be like living the moment all over again."*



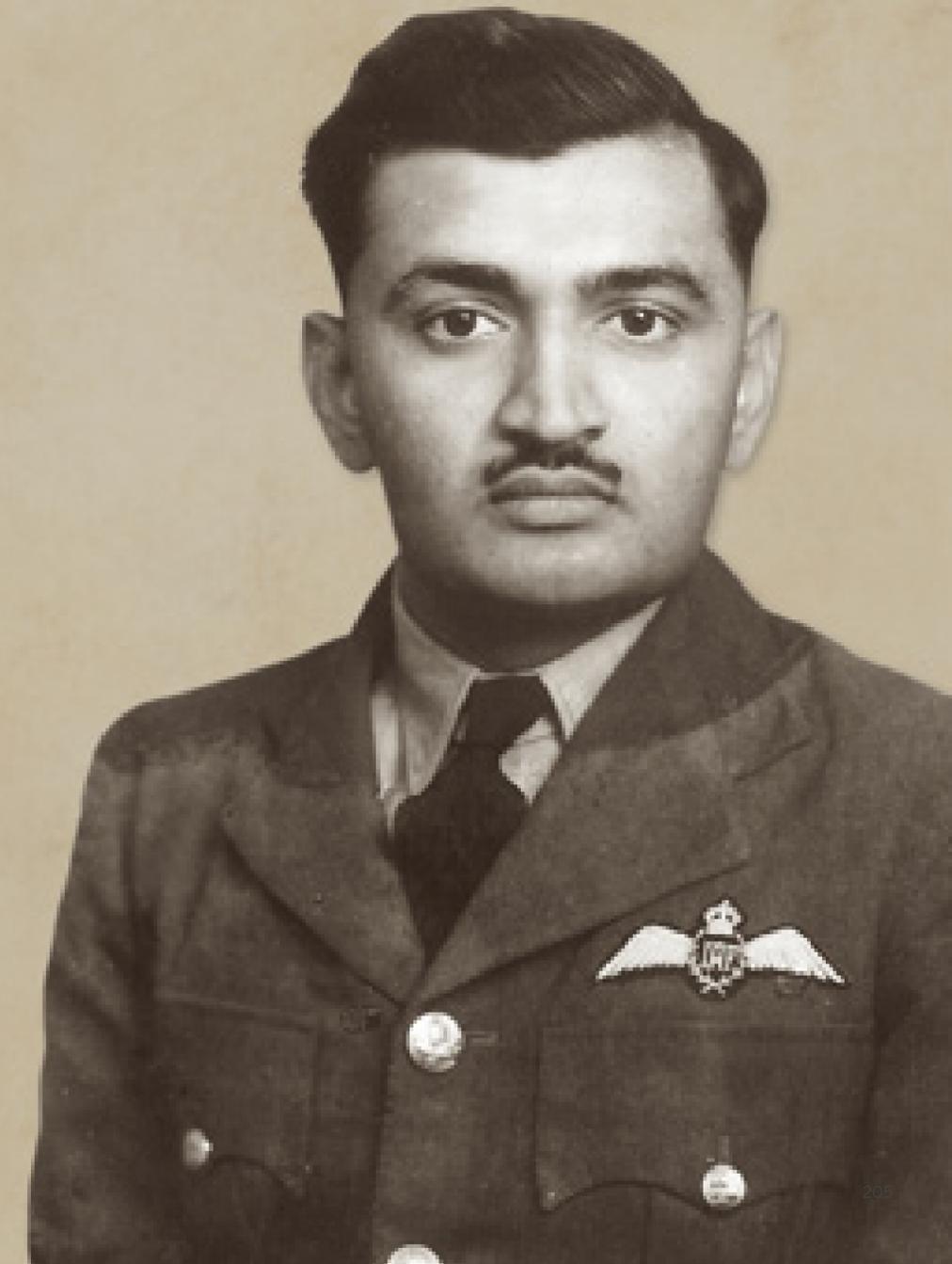
Daphne du Maurier



Friends and family pay homage to

*Himmat Pinkji Gohel*

and share the valuable feelings, memories  
and moments that coalesced their lives together.



## *I am richer for having known Bapu*



Indira taught the kids to call their grandfather ‘*Bapu*’ and grandmother ‘*Mummy Ma*’. That remained with the kids even as they became adults. What was so endearing about it is that we still refer to them in the same manor.

The first words of *Bapu* that are etched in my memory as he walked towards us at the end of our wedding ceremony and shook my hand were: “*Welcome to our family!*” There was something so authentic and sincere about those words, which can only come from the authentic and sincere soul that he was. I can still see that moment clearly in my mind’s eye nearly five decades later!

There was a discipline in him that I am sure came from his military career and which very likely also attracted him to it. I remember seeing him working on his Hillman a couple of hours ahead of our trip to the Khodiyar Maa temple to get the blessings for his eldest daughter and the new son-in-law! He wanted to be sure nothing would impede that. I remember him quietly lamenting the poor quality of the battery and the tires requiring frequent replacements.



*Himmat Singhji’s eldest daughter and son-in-law, Indira and Dr. Dilip Solanki.*

When *Bapu* and *Mummy Ma* visited America in 1982, Sanjiv was six months old, while Sona was five years old. He sat on our patio with Sanjiv in his lap and watched planes fly over. He would point to them for Sanjiv and say: “*e jay*”. For the next several years for Sanjiv, every plane was “*e jay*”!

We planned a long car trip to show them the western half of America. We always stayed at places that had kitchenettes so Indira and *Mummy Ma* could make dinner while we watched TV. *Bapu* was still in part in his military mould on this trip. At a stop after about a 600-mile drive, I caught him touching the tires. He was astonished that the tires were not at least a bit hot! He saw young people riding motorbikes on highways and passing cars. He could not believe it when I told him that many stayed in New York and were headed to California on a motorbike! The part that he simply could not fathom was the distance one could cover in America by car. He had started by imagining that Oklahoma city was Jammu in Kashmir and our destination was Kanyakumari. He would ask ever so often how far we had come. When I told him we had travelled 2000 miles, I remember him exclaiming: “*We are in Kanyakumari!*”

I am so glad we took them on that trip. I gave him a map of the USA with our trip route marked on it to keep and to share with his friends. He told us that his friends refused to believe that one can

travel almost 6000 miles by car! He knew better because, like the Japanese surrender, he had experienced it himself, first hand.

Like all true professionals, his interest in and fascination with all things Air Force never seemed to fade. As a strategist and a soldier, he looked upon the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese with intrigue (and perhaps some admiration) about the planning and the execution. But he also thought it was a strategic miscalculation because it pulled America into World War II, which ultimately proved to be Japan’s downfall. He had always wanted a copy of the book “*The Day Of Infamy*” by Walter Lord which, I am happy to say, we were able to locate for him. He was not a man to wear his emotions on his sleeve like all men of his generation, but I venture to imagine that getting the book made him happy inside like a kid with a toy he always wanted. I am richer for having known *Bapu*!

— *Dr. Dilip Solanki*  
(*Son-in-law*)

## *Daddy's humility was his greatness*



I can never forget the warmth and affection Daddy had for each and everyone and the informal and comfortable environment in which I was welcomed into the family. The love and respect I was given brought me closer to all and I felt honoured to be considered more of a son, just like Kirit and Ghanoo.

I remember, whenever we were in Bhavnagar, Daddy spoke fondly of his career in the Air Force, and his action in all the wars. All his grandchildren never tired of hearing his stories. He loved children dearly!

He had an exceptional memory and could remember even the minutest details like dates etc. Daddy had a lot of knowledge of cars and machines and he appreciated the same in Ghanoo and me.

Having travelled the world over, and being a fond reader, he could talk on most topics. Everyone who interacted with Daddy, even for a short while, got to learn a lot. I clearly remember, many years ago, I had taken Dr. David Aitken, a professor at Harvard University, on a tour of Gujarat. He was interested in steam engines, few still with the Indian Railways. During the tour, he spent some time



*Himmat Sinhji and Gulab Kunwarba with their son-in-law, Rajendra Singh Rathore.*

with Daddy and they would have interesting discussions. He came away greatly impressed and told me, “*Your father-in-law is a walking encyclopaedia!*”

Daddy's humility was his greatness. A simple and gentle soul loved by all, and greatly missed—but alive forever in our hearts and memories.

— *Rajendra Singh Rathore*  
(*Son-in-law*)

## *I hope I make Bapu proud everyday*



There are a ton of memories I have of *Bapu*. One of the most vivid is when he and *Mummy Ma* came to Oklahoma City, he would go on his evening walks. My room faced the street, and I would see him in his *khaki* pants, brown sweater, and his scally cap just walking up the street. There was a slight incline going up our street and his stride would increase just a bit more and his arms would swing a little wider. I just remember every night he would leave through the garage and I would go to my room to watch him walk up the street. I can still see it in my head and it always makes me smile. I wish I had known him better but the time that I did have, I am extremely thankful for and I hope I make him proud every day.

— *Sona Solanki*  
(*Granddaughter*)



*Sona Solanki*

*My memories of him are of a man  
who cared so much about the people around him and  
wanted to enjoy the time he spent with them*



*Sanjiv Solanki*

My memories of *Bapu* are not as specific as my cousins. Sadly, I don't even remember when he visited America, as I was just a baby, and my memories of my first couple of visits to India are fleeting.

But I will always remember the impression he made on me, and the images I have of him in my mind's eye are distinct. I remember his stature, his silhouette: he had the bearing and posture befitting of a man of both his military training and his education and bearing. But I always remember his face, and I remember the soft smile that always seemed to be playing on it. Whether across the breakfast table from him, or in the back of a Jeep with him, or playing in the pool with Sona as he watched over us, I can remember the look of gentle contentment he had, every moment I was with him.

And even now, when I see a picture of him, even if it's a picture taken well before I was born, or especially when I think of him, and my first times visiting India, I think of his warmth and his dignity, and I think of the pride he had in his family. My memories of him might be fewer and more fleeting, but they are of a man who cared so much about the people around him and wanted to enjoy the time he spent with them.

I'm sure my mother has pictures of me with *Bapu*, but they will pale in comparison to the impression he made upon me emotionally.

— *Sanjiv Solanki*  
(Grandson)

*We always think and talk of him  
with our hearts swelled with love and pride*



Our grandfather, whom we lovingly called '*Nanabapu*', will always be one of the most significant and lasting influences on our lives. All three of us, Devika, Radhika and Shivraj, were extremely fortunate to have spent so much of our childhood with our grandparents. It is, however, a daunting task to write about *Nanabapu* and what he meant to us, more so in limited words, but we will try to do our best.

He meant the world to us. We adored him as much as he adored us. We have fond memories of spending each summer in Bhavnagar at the house our mother had called 'home' for a long time. All our time there would be spent with either of our grandparents. *Nanabapu* was an adoring grandfather who made sure we were kept busy and enjoyed each day with him, and oftentimes to give Mummy a rest!

*Nanabapu's* cycle had a special baby seat to accommodate us as toddlers so that he could cycle us around town to discover the sights and sounds of the city such as the vociferous peacocks

and the ancient steam train of a bygone era that still ran through the city in those days. The cycle ride, of course, changed to a motorcycle ride by the time Shivraj was born— his prized 1971 Java, which Shivraj was given to keep as a memory of him and is still parked in our garage. We have vivid and fond memories of visits to the beautiful and tranquil Takhteshwar temple on a hillock not far from where we lived. He often took us to Dakshinamurti Balmandir to spend hours in the school's playground. After a hectic day of spending time with all his grandchildren, he would indulge himself in an outing to a small local park at Rupani Circle, where all his friends met for a chit-chat every evening.

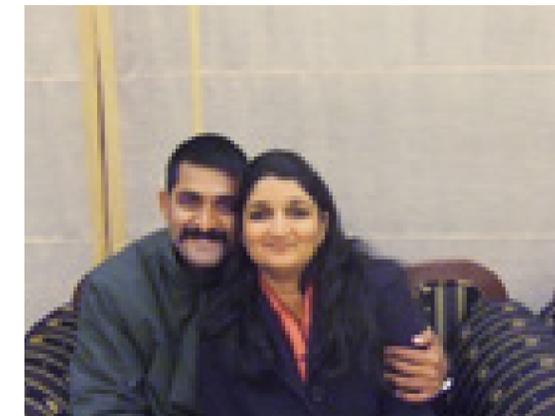
*Nanabapu* was a good and avid swimmer just like *Mamasahab* (our maternal uncle) and it was with him that Dimple, Radhika and I spent hours in the swimming pool built by *Mamasahab* at home. He patiently spent time teaching us to swim and just being with us in the pool so that we could play the fool and cool off on hot summer



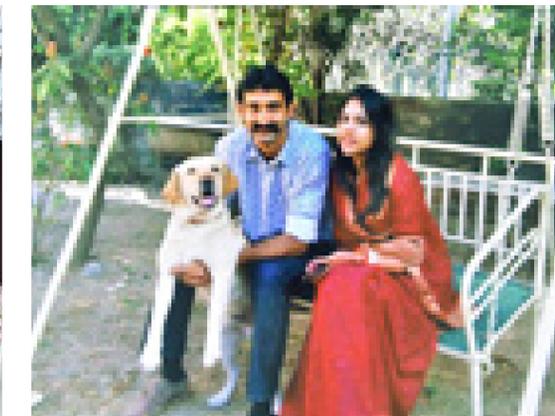
(Left to right) Rajendra, Shivraj, Harish, Devika, Gita and Radhika.



Radhika with her husband, Akshay, and their son, Fateh.



Devika with her husband, Harish, and their son, Hanu.



Shivraj with his wife, Shraddha, and their son, Devraj.



days. Radhika and Devika went on to become accomplished swimmers, all thanks to *Nanabapu's* swimming lessons! Shivraj went on to become an accomplished polo player inspired by *Nanabapu's* father and *Mamasahab*. His decision to join the armed forces and the way he chooses to live a disciplined life has much to do with having *Nanabapu* as an idol he looked up to and always will.

In our mind's eye, we can still clearly see him sitting in the upstairs balcony (his favourite spot in the house) with his books, his journals, and magnifying glass. He had a precious collection of war books that he treasured and enjoyed immensely. *Nanabapu* was an extremely well-read, intelligent, polished, and well-travelled man. As might be expected from an Air Force officer, he was organized and scrupulous. We clearly remember his meticulous logbooks and notes, from which he often read to us as we sat in his lap and listened with rapt awe and attention! He would tell us about his exploits from far and away, much of which was beyond our comprehension but yet we loved listening to him! It was this strong, indescribable connection and bond with *Nanabapu* that made us his most ardent fans and listeners. He would tell us about the quests that he had been on to hunt man-eating tigers/leopards that were terrorizing villagers way up in the North of the country. We still have his wonderful set of treasured binoculars that he let us have

for hours to look at birds all around, especially the migratory storks that nested on the big *Asopalav (Ashoka)* tree touching the balcony.

Of course, the highlight of going upstairs for us was the little treats we got when we went to see him, either a Kisme sweet or a cherished famous *Bhavnagari Das Penda!* He loved his sweets and always had a stash upstairs that he willingly and lovingly shared with his grandchildren or any other children that visited. He was well-loved and revered not just by us but all the children from the neighbourhood.

We recall how often we would notice him sitting quietly, deep in thought in that balcony. We wonder now what it must have been like for him to sit in one quiet spot and think of all the places he had been to, think of all the great feats he had achieved and all the action he had seen. We wonder if he missed it and in his heart was flying his aircraft somewhere over Miranshah in the North-West Frontier Province, or in the skies of Burma and Japan. Nonetheless, We are sure of one thing, while reminiscing about his glorious past, he always had a look of contentment (to be in the present). We think that was owing to the fact that he had lived life to the fullest. He had worked hard and become a distinguished Air Force pilot, travelled far and wide. At the same time, he had provided a life of comfort and adventure for his family, giving his children the best lives any

father possibly could. He was a proud and loving husband, father, and grandfather.

We have always heard heroic stories about an adoring father from Mummy, and we idolized him as much, if not more than her. It was a rarity in those times to have a father and grandfather like him who didn't treat girls any different from boys, and in fact, who put his daughters before his sons in every way. We only wish we had more time together so we could learn all about his exploits and expand our knowledge and interest in wars and airplanes. We wish we could have shared with him Devika's experience of working on a historical project for "*criticalpast.com*" about the two World Wars, especially the air warfare and airplanes used and heard more war stories from him. We wish he could have seen Radhika's work in the highly acclaimed Indian film *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*. We wish he could have seen Shivraj commissioned into the Indian Army, don his uniform proudly, and carry on the family legacy of his forefathers in serving the nation. We wish he could have seen Dimple become a successful lawyer. Most of all, we wish he could have seen his great-grandchildren and they could have gotten to know a great man such as him.

It is difficult to fathom his courage, bravery, and dedication as an Air Force Pilot and a war veteran. We have always imagined the

life he led from the stories we heard from him and Mummy. He lived a life of great adventure, flying and meeting some of the most significant historical personalities of the time such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Chou En Lai, Marshal Josip Broz Tito, and Sir Thomas Elmhirst (the first Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Indian Air Force). One of his greatest moments was leading the first-ever fly-past over Kingsway (now Rajpath, Delhi) on India's first Republic Day celebration in 1950; a feat for which Sir Elmhirst personally congratulated him. We are so very proud of our *Nanabapu* having made history several times, to which this book is a testimony.

*Nanabapu* enriched our lives not just with knowledge and historical chronicles, but also with unconditional love and adoration. We always think and talk of him with our hearts swelled with love and pride. We knew, loved, and idolized him as a doting father, an adoring grandfather, and of course a quintessential officer and gentleman.

— *Devika, Radhika and Shivraj Singh Rathore*  
(*Grandchildren*)

## *Dada was the God of my childhood*



*Dada* was the God of my childhood. He was the tallest person in my life when I was a child. He seemed like a kind warrior and if he was there I would always be safe. The first time I realized that I felt safe with my grandfather was when we were once stranded in the rain. It was pouring, *Dada* and my six-year-old self were huddled under his trenchcoat and his level of protectiveness in that instance would have been justified if we were stuck in the midst of torrential rain.

Everyone agrees that *Dada* was a kind person; his thoughts were way before his time when it came to women, religion and overall human behaviour. He had a very strong sense of character and morality. All this culminated into a person who was a perfect role model. Obviously, as a child, I did not know these nuances. I only knew that if I had any questions, I could go to my grandparents and they would— without talking down to me— give me the fairest and clearest response that my young mind could understand. We were not religious when I was young and I was studying in a Catholic school. I came to *Dada* and *Dadimaa* with my questions about God



*Dimple with her father, Capt Kirit Sinhji Gohel and husband, Abhijeet Singh.*

and religion and the impressions of what they said to me will stay with me forever.

My fondest memories with my grandfather are in the pool at Bhavnagar. We used to swim together for hours and he would tell me stories and we would play-act them in water. Our favourite was that of crocodile and monkey. When I was younger and studying at Bhavnagar, my parents would take an afternoon nap. As a child bustling with energy and vivaciousness, every afternoon I would visit *Dada* after my parents were asleep and tell him that “*I tucked my parents in bed*”. This was a running joke between us. Then we would spend the whole afternoon together and I would be introduced to the world from his perspective. Usually, we would spend the afternoon eating *samosas* or *penda* or some other sweets while looking at pictures of fighter planes or talking about tracking and hunting man-eater predators. There was culture involved as well. *Dada* would tell me stories from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which were edited to give bigger roles to the characters I enjoyed, such as, *Ghatotkacha*. There was geography involved too. He was posted at various places all over the world before and after independence. He visited a lot of places for training

which was for a shorter duration. He never hated anyone perhaps because of this travel pre and post-independence or perhaps because it was a part of his innate character. That was something that he very strongly passed on to me. Even though he had fought in many wars and battles, he did not hate anyone, which I think is a true illustration of his moral fibre.

When it came to food, *Dada* would usually prepare his tea and scrambled eggs and I feel that cooking your own food and never wasting any, was something he imparted to me. He enjoyed all sorts of food and had a stomach of iron that could handle spicy street food, even in his eighties. I think this is a huge achievement and I hope that I can have an immune system even half of his.

*Dada* usually would drive me to school and then pick me up at the end of the day. He would sneak into my class and would write down my classwork and homework from the board when I wasn't fast enough to write it down myself. My teachers wanted me to do this myself and would forbid him. So, he would wait till the teachers left

the premises and then sit on chairs meant for 5-6 year old children just to help me out. Sometimes my parents would pick me up from school at the end of the day. Even though it was pre-decided that they were going to pick me up, my grandfather would still show up at the school gate. I would get angry with my parents for not informing him and for him having a wasted trip.

*Dada* always did his civic duty and every couple of years, he would have a black ink mark on his nail. The first time I noticed this, I asked him about it and he told me that it was incredibly important to vote. We made a pact that that when I would become eligible to vote, we would go together.

The generosity and patience with which my grandparents put up with me is astounding. I was an incredibly talkative and curious child. And whenever it got tiring for my parents, I would run to my grandparents and they would be so welcoming in answering all my questions and dealing with a child's energy. I try my best not to be impatient with my nieces and nephews because if my grandparents could manage it at their age, I should be able to as well at mine.

I was incredibly protective of him as well. Once, we were on my grandfather's motorcycle Java and he met with an accident. He got hurt and needed to get a tetanus shot. So, we went to the hospital and after his wounds were bandaged, the doctor took out the

syringe. I was petrified that something would happen to him and he needed to calm me down and tell me that it was okay and it was for his own good and would not hurt him.

I feel that grandparents' love is special. After experiencing the love of my grandparents, it would be a shame to have any self-esteem issues. They were by my side through every step of my life. I hope I showed them the same amount of devotion as they had for me.

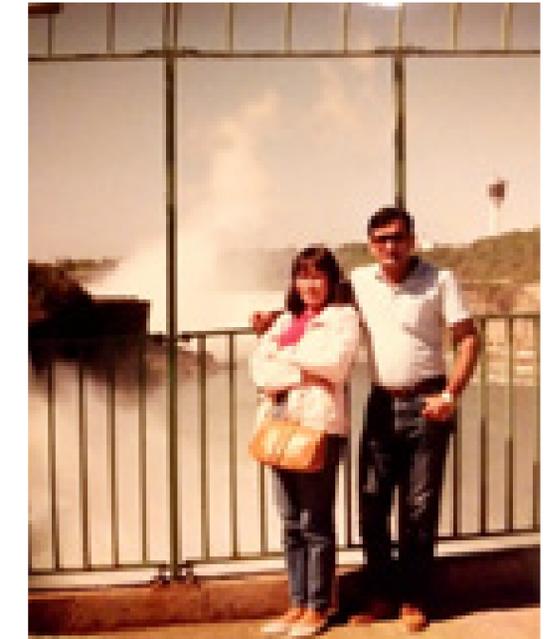
— *Dimple Gohel*  
(*Granddaughter*)

## *Dad was a respectable, likeable and kindhearted father-in-law*



Dad was a respectable, likeable and kind-hearted father-in-law. I enjoyed listening to his stories about World War II. I remember Dad would ride his bike, go to the park, according to Ghanoo, and meet friends and other veterans there. Dad was very appreciative of my profession as a Cytotechnologist. He praised my house-keeping skills and enjoyed my cooking. He was amazed at my skill of using up each part of the chicken I cooked without letting any part go waste!

— *Neli Gohel*  
(*Daughter-in-law*)



*Himmat Sinhji's son and daughter-in-law,  
Ghanshyam & Neli.*

## *In remembrance of my father-in-law who taught me the laws of life*



A father plays a significant role in a daughter's life, especially in her early growing up years. But the Almighty seemed to have different plans for me. Perhaps I was destined to be with my father only till the young age of fourteen. His departure from my life left a huge vacuum for many years.

I had never thought that anybody after him could fill in his place and be there for me through thick and thin, protect and provide for me, and be that wise and knowledgeable fatherly figure in my life. I was, however, of course, still longing for that someone who could fill the void left by my father. In just a matter of time, my prayers were answered and I got in my dear father-in-law, far more than what I had desired for. When I was married into the Gohel family, my life took an unexpected turn with his shower of blessings, love, protection and warmth.

He had unmatched human virtues. He was someone who believed that one's true purpose is to evolve and become a better human being as one continues to move forward in this journey called life.



*Himmat Sinhji's son and daughter-in-law, Capt Kirit and Amarjyoti Gohel.*

His ways of life, unlike that of others, were uncomplicated but effective, soothing, comforting and inspiring.

For men to take part or interest in cooking in India is usually considered to be below their dignity and is usually regarded as the responsibility of women. But my father-in-law, being the unique gentleman that he was, always found time and pleasure in cooking. He was an excellent culinarian who could dish out scrumptious food and also serve it with immense compassion and hospitality.

Apart from being a great cook, he was also a voracious reader with an abundance of knowledge which he would readily share with me. I still find myself going back to and using the immense bank of knowledge he gave me. He was indeed a remarkable teacher. I drive confidently today and it is all because of his patient training. He never flooded my mind with information on the road signals, changing gears or other rules of the road. I remember he simply handed me the steering wheel after making me aware of some basic rules and assured me, *'be confident and you will see that the rest will happen by itself'*. And so it did happen.

Come what may in life, he would also find time to spend with his

family and make splendid memories that all of us treasure with all our hearts. Life does not come with a precise expiry date. It is here today, it may not be there tomorrow. I learnt from Daddy that the secret to enjoying and living a great life lies in sharing love and happiness till one's very end. It is not about having too many people around one but only those who can actually make that big difference in one's life. It is not about how many years one lives but rather how one lives those years. My father-in-law's life exemplifies this thought perfectly!

He will always remain a maverick who will continue to be alive in my mind and heart forever!

*— Amarjyoti Gohel  
(Daughter-in-law)*

## *Good memories are always etched in the mind with indelible ink*



Memories etched in the mind are there to haunt. Things end but memories last forever. I relate to my Delhi days staying in Dhoola Kuan to July 1969 when Apollo 11 was launched. I was eight years old then. And Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon really fascinated me.

In my mind's eye, I can still picture my association with the Gohel family—our friendly and very affectionate next-door neighbours. Especially Gohel uncle and Ghanu *bhaiya* with whom, beneath a canopy of green leaves against a blindingly blue sky, I used to tag along for hunting in the Nikolson Ranges (unfortunately the dense forest cover is no more) just behind our houses for hunting partridges. I remember after every shot, when the cartridges were discarded, picking up the fired cases and smelling them. Uncle used to look at me and give out a hearty laugh. It was excitement at its peak.

Ghanu *bhaiya* was very strict. Whenever I went with him alone, he wanted me to maintain discipline and carry out a ghost walk



(Starting anti-clockwise) Prabha Srivastava with sons Sanjay (Montu), Anuj (Babloo) and Vivek Anand (Vicky), and Gita (as a teenager).

without making noise, which was very difficult at my age. I used to make lots of noise and in the bargain, he used to avoid taking me. But then Uncle was there who used to call me whenever he went out. I have lost count of my hunting sprees but at my age, I was keeping pace with them and walking the entire route.

Another heart-warming childhood memory recalled by my mother is from the time when my youngest brother Vicky (now a senior pilot with Qatar Air) was just two years old and was left every day at Uncle's place since my younger brother Sanjay (superannuated from the Army as a Bombay Sappers) had undergone Tonsillectomy and was admitted for a week or so in the Military Hospital.

I remember, once Kirit *bhaiya* had returned from Russia after a voyage and got delicious Swiss chocolates, which was a big treat in those days. I went over to meet them all and took my Pomeranian Ginny with me. As I was there, I naturally got a share of chocolates, which—to the horror of all present—I fed to my precious Ginny. I don't think I was forgiven for that generous act of mine!

As vivid as the moment seems at the time, memories fade. But very good memories are always etched in mind with indelible ink.

— Col. Anuj Srivastava (Retd.)  
(Former neighbour)

## *A stupendous journey*



It is really heartening to know that the grandchildren have decided to publish *Nanabapu's* memoir. Indeed such a stupendous journey with so many milestones should be documented, especially to enlighten the future generations.

*“A soldier may leave service but one cannot separate the service out of a soldier”*. *Nanabapu*, i.e., Gp Capt Himmat Singhji Gohel perfectly exemplified this statement. He would love to get the feel of the cockpit even while driving a car and for that, he used to drive a car always with his gloves on. A walking encyclopedia that was ever ready to share his memories and experiences of being in IAF, his eyes used to shine with excitement and his voice was filled with enthusiasm when he used to talk about aircraft and the wars of the IAF. As a kid, I was introduced to him by my father, Dr. (Prof.) JB Chudasama, who stayed at his residence before marriage. My father was highly impressed by his smart personality in the Air Force uniform when he landed at the military ground in Bhavnagar with

the Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. He guided me to *Nanabapu* for any queries related to war and the Air Force.

A lively personality like *Nanabapu* would, any day and any time, share his personal stories, his books and photos of his service in the IAF. We used to enjoy the conversation so much that *Nanima* used to envy us as to why I am not spending time with her. But such was the interest which he used to generate through his conversations that one would want to meet him every time one visited his residence.

Memories fall short as it has been seventeen years (and still counting) in the Indian Air Force. But his guidance will always be cherished as it motivated me to join such a prestigious organization as the IAF.

— *Wg Cdr Narendrasinh Chudasama*  
(*Grand-nephew*)

## *Their home was a home away from home for me*

I have known Uncle and Auntie since I got married and came to Bhavnagar in 1981. This friendship with the Gohel family spans across three generations. Uncle and my father-in-law were friends; Kirit and Ghanu were friends with my husband, and now my son and Gita's daughter, Devika are friends.

When I got married and came here, Kirit and his sister Gita would come over. Gita and I hit it off from the word go. We used to visit each other's homes as the children used to play together. I used to visit Uncle and Auntie regularly, even when Gita was not there.

Whenever I felt lonely and homesick, I used to go and spend the day or evening with Uncle and Auntie. Their home was always welcoming and never did I feel that I was not welcome.

Uncle would welcome us with open arms and he was my son's favourite *Nanaji*. Whenever I visited them, Uncle would take him under his wings and show him all his wonderful trophies among other things. Even if I had to go out, I would leave my son with Uncle and Auntie and they would readily keep him till I got back.



*Gp Capt Gohel with Mrs. Merchant at a school event where he was felicitated as the Guest of Honour.*

Their home was a home away from home for me. God bless their souls in eternal peace. Amen.

— *Zuleikha Merchant*  
(*Family friend*)

## The Way I Knew Him



Pradeep Gohil

Ravubhasaheb and my grandfather Col. Mohbat Sinhji Gohil knew each other quite well. I was about to complete my schooling then and so the discussion turned to what career I should select for the future. I mentioned how I wanted to be a Chemical Engineer. Uncle told me that the Indian Air Force does hire chemical engineers and then went on to explain to me the various options that the Air Force offered. It was enlightening to learn how chemical engineers can contribute right from maintaining and repairing aircraft to

I first met late Group Captain Himmat Sinhji Ravubha Gohel (fondly called by me as ‘Uncle’) at our house when he came to meet us after retiring and settling in Bhavnagar with his family. He had come with Aunty and their two daughters, Indiraba and Gitaba. I was informed that we have a faraway relation and

developing the latest airborne weapons and delivery systems. He explained that the number of stripes on an aviator’s shoulder as part of the uniform represented their rank, and he, as a senior Group Captain, had four stripes on his shoulders. This was certainly very motivating for me and I wish that more youngsters today would read about his exciting life as a pilot and get motivated too. This was his introduction of the Air Force to me.

Then whenever we met, I would ask him about flying. I then went to the U.S. for about 12 years but whenever I visited India, we would discuss flying. Inspired by his stories of flying different aircraft, I took lessons in flying too. He explained to me the difference between a Cessna and commercial aircraft and how you land on the front wheels in Cessna and on the rear in the other case. Uncle was always excited when talking about flying, his true passion.

After I came back from the U.S. and settled in Bhavnagar, I knew Uncle would walk down to Rupani Circle Garden every evening, where he would talk about the Air Force with several students. They

called him ‘Captain Saheb’ and were fond of him. He was a serious but meticulous person and I had never seen him laugh heartily. He was extremely disciplined, frugal and thrifty. He lived a very simple life despite the high designation he received in the Air Force.

I have great regard for him and Aunty for grooming a family of four. Aunty was from a small village and yet she adjusted well to the high profile Air Force life. Indiraba, their eldest daughter, settled in the U.S. after marriage to a brilliant medical doctor. Kirit *Bhai*, the eldest son, became a mercantile navy captain and then was in charge of bringing the ships that came to the Alang Ship Breaking Yard from mid-sea to the shore— an extremely difficult and hazardous operation. After retiring, he assisted his wife, Amarjyotiba, to build the best school in Bhavnagar. Amarjyotiba is a great entrepreneur and has been conferred with national and local awards. Ghanshyam *Bhai* spent a lot of time in Bhavnagar with his parents before he passed away. The youngest sibling, Gitaba, was extraordinary in everything she did. She was selected to go to

Canada under a scholarship. She is fluent in English, very sociable and a good speaker. She has been a principal in a school in Udaipur for many years. Uncle and Aunty would be proud of their four children!

—Pradeep Gohil  
(Family friend)

## *Saheb helped broaden my horizons and showed me the way to adventure and exploring life*



Piyush Vaitha

He was ‘*Saheb*’ for me but Himmat Sinhji Gohel by fame and his work. As a child, I did not know him by his name. For me, he was and will always remain ‘*Saheb*’. But as I matured with age, I came to know that he is a retired Air Force pilot, and couldn’t be more proud to have him as my neighbour.

By nature, *Saheb* was affectionates, loving, and caring, always ready to help in any situation without any ego whatsoever. In 1982, Bhavnagar was hit by a strong cyclone. As a consequence of it, a huge Jamun tree had fallen at the entrance of our house. He immediately took action—had the tree cut up and moved and got the entrance to our house

cleared. He did all this on his own, without us even asking him to. Thank you, sir, for that!

*Saheb* loved to see birds and had two binoculars and one telescope. He used to call us home and show us the birds from his balcony and terrace. He taught us the names and characteristics of a variety of birds. He often took us to the Takhteshwar Mandir, a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and also the highest point of Bhavnagar in those days. Through his telescope, he would show us the Bhavnagar Port and the ships anchored there. He had tremendous knowledge of all things that he generously shared with us.

Today I am a wildlife enthusiast, a trekker, and a mountaineer. Doubtlessly, *Saheb* was the inspiration and the guiding force behind my interest in these activities. I am grateful to him because he helped broaden my horizons and showed me the way to adventure and exploring life.

Being from the Defence Services, he owned two rifles— a single bore, and a double bore. He would let us handle the rifles and patiently explain how each is operated. He taught us how to aim at an object. Since we were still just small kids who found it tough to lift the heavy rifle, he would help us to do so. He also had a set of combat knives and showed us how to use them as well.

*Saheb* always kept his rifle atop a chair. One day, while sitting with him in his room, I asked out of curiosity, “*Why do you keep your guns on the chair?*” He replied, “*We should always keep our weapon ready. In case of any emergency or criminal activity, we cannot waste time in searching for and preparing our weapons, if there is an urgent requirement. So I always stay prepared*”. During the night, we would relax and sleep but *Saheb* would stay awake often. One day I asked as to why he does not sleep through the night. He explained to me that as one ages, one’s requirement for sleep reduces. It was perhaps owing to his undying concern, alertness, and courage that we never had any robbery or theft in our neighbourhood. No one

dared to commit a crime in our street, while cases of robbery and theft were sometimes reported in the street next to ours. It was only because of his presence that we all felt very safe and protected.

He always maintained all his things very well. He had a double silencer motorcycle, a Java, painted green like an army vehicle. He used to clean it daily himself and service it regularly. It was in perfect condition and would start immediately with just one kick. He told me that he had learnt the maintenance of road vehicles along with the maintenance of fighter jets. He generously passed on this knowledge to me.

In 1998, when I wanted to purchase a bike on turning twenty, he gave me all the technical knowledge to help me buy the bike best suited to my requirements and budget. I bought an Escort Yamaha RX 135, a two-stroke engine motorcycle on his advice. So perfect was his guidance and advice that I am still using this bike in 2021, i.e., twenty-three years of perfect service.

During the kite festival, many kites would land up at his terrace. He would collect them all and keep them carefully for me. As a child, I used to feel ecstatic to receive them and felt as if *Saheb* had given me everything he had! Even though he was seventy and I was only seventeen then, I never felt the age difference. It seemed like we were friends and of the same age. He also had a swimming pool at his house. I learnt how to swim there and he was my patient swimming coach. It brings me great joy to see how now my son too has come to make so many fond memories swimming in that very pool.

*Saheb's* son, Capt Kirit Sinhji, had a Doberman called 'Buster'. He was an excellent watchdog and no one could enter their house in his presence. He was fierce and everyone was scared of him as he used to often bite strangers. One day, he managed to jump the wall and crossed over to our compound. The very next day *Saheb*, concerned for our safety, got the height of the wall increased so that Buster does not repeat this. This truly reflects his thoughtful and responsible character.

*Saheb* was a very humble person. He would often be sitting in his balcony, reading or writing something, and however many times we would pass by, he would always be the first person to wave at us children.

He rode his bike daily and I always noticed that even if it was for a brief outing to the neighbourhood general store, he would always be wearing his boots, helmet, gloves, and goggles when he was on the bike. He was very particular about his proper attire as well as safety when going out on his motorbike. Such was his discipline!

*Saheb* used to get his Defence quota of liquor and would take one small drink every evening. Once when I quizzed him about the reason behind this habit, he said that one's digestive system weakens as one ages, but one drink a day increases one's appetite and helps digest food better too. Such was his discipline that he never exceeded his one drink. I never saw him cross this limit.

To this date, I miss him dearly. There is an empty space in my heart for him that cannot be filled by anyone else.

From the bottom of my heart, I salute Himmat Sinhji *Saheb*.

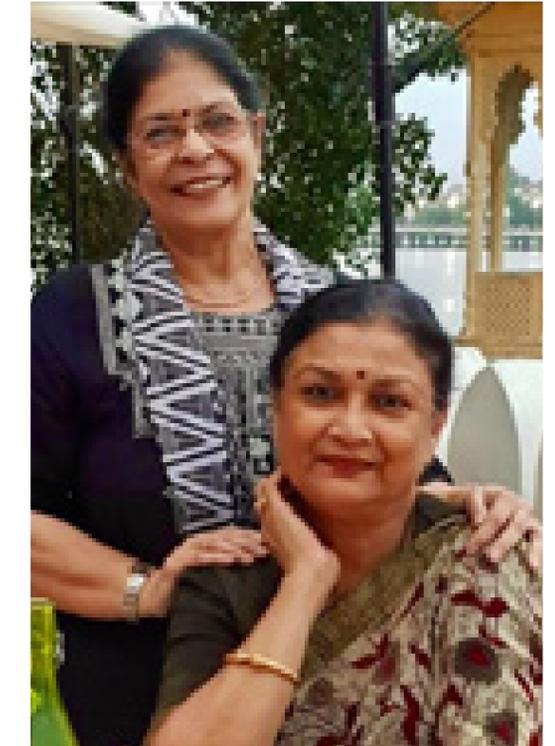
— Piyush Vaitha  
(Long-time neighbour)

## Remembrances



I first met Uncle in his room upstairs, on the first floor of his house in Bhavnagar, where he looked very comfortable in a tee-shirt and shorts, surrounded by loads and loads of books and magazines on shelves, tables, and chairs. He cleared a chair for me to sit on, while he relaxed on his easy chair, and while Gita went down to arrange for tea and snacks. He put me at ease, regaling me with stories of his flying carrier. I remember asking him, how he prepared himself before each sortie. He said, “*You know Sunanda, our professions are very similar.... You do a thorough pre-anesthetic checkup before you approve the patient for surgery, while I do a pre-flight checkup to ensure my aircraft is airworthy; During surgery, you keep checking the monitors to know the health of the patient, while I keep checking my dashboard to know the health of my machine when it is airborne.....I am the doctor of my aircraft, up there! It is a tremendous responsibility. We need to be fiercely focused with intense concentration – since one wrong move can lead to a major catastrophe!!*” His memory about all events was so crystal clear and I just wished, I had met him earlier and had more time to spend with him and had taken some photographs of that day! Meeting and knowing Gp Capt Gohel was a truly humbling experience!

—Dr. Sunanda Gupta  
(Family friend)



Dr. Sunanda Gupta with Gita Gohel Rathore

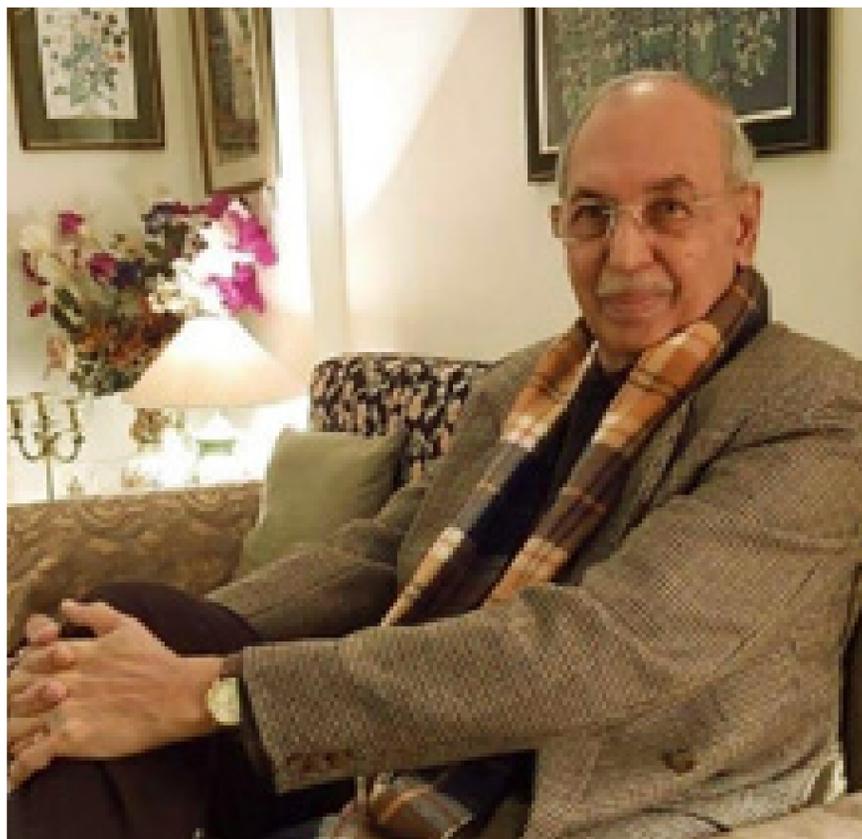
## *He reminded me of the Hollywood star, James Garner*



In 1987, I was deputized by Group Headquarters NCC, Gujarat, Ahmedabad, to conduct the B&C certificate of NCC cadets of 3 Gujarat Air Squadron at Bhavnagar. I had heard that Bhavnagar was a beautiful, compact city. This was my first visit there. It was during this visit that I first met Retd. Gp Capt HSR Gohel.

On the evening of my arrival, Wg Cdr AK Mitra, Commanding Officer of 3 Gujarat Air Squadron NCC (Bhavnagar), hosted a cocktail party for a few friends at the Nilambag Palace Hotel. It was here that I was privileged to meet with Gp Capt Gohel. A tall, handsome and ramrod straight figure, he came across as a warm and nice person. The moment he walked in, I knew he was from the armed forces. Though I had heard much about him, I had never met him before. He stood out, tall, handsome, and with a stately gait.

When we were introduced, the first thing we spoke about was how I remembered seeing his name at the top of the Commanding Officers' list in the No. 6 Squadron CO's office. We had an interesting conversation. He asked me if No. 6 Squadron still flew



*Wg Cdr Ajit Sinhji Jhala (Retd.)*

Liberators. I replied that two Liberators were gifted by the IAF to the Canadian Royal Air Force, and their crew after carrying out the air test, flew them to Canada, one in the year 1972 and the other in 1973. I had come to know that one Liberator was placed in the Air Force Museum Palam, New Delhi. The present No. 6 Squadron consisted of A flight Super Constellation (L-1049) carrying out Maritime Reconnaissance for the Navy, B Flight for UK, Assam and Car Nicobar couriers, and C Flight Canberras.

As the evening wore on, our conversation struck a warm note. He spoke about how he had enjoyed his tenure in the Air Force, especially in Poona of those days. He wanted to know more about me. I said that he was the first CO of No. 6 Squadron and I was the last flight commander and pilot to fly Super Constellations on their being phased out of service, from the same squadron. He also asked curiously about others who had joined the IAF from erstwhile Kathiawar from Rajput families. I extended to him an invitation to visit Ahmedabad just before my departure. But alas, that was my first and the last meeting with the stalwart!

He came across as warm and affectionate and reminded me of the Hollywood star, James Garner. It was an evening of unforgettable memories with a legend of not just the IAF but also the RIAF!

*— Wg Cdr Ajit Sinhji Jhala (Retd.)  
(Family friend)*

*Chapter 7*  
**TRIBUTES**

*Pilots were given new postings to other units, but Gohel was selected to train as a Flying Instructor—a rare achievement for Indian pilots at that time.*



Jagan Pillarisetti

A pilot's logbook is a fascinating document— it is almost like a diary— noting down every flight made by the pilot through his career, the flight times meticulously logged and tallied, with locations, signatures, sometimes notations that give a glimpse of what flying was about. While many logbooks are maintained with the bare minimum information, the logbooks belonging to Gp Capt HSR Gohel are an exception. They are interspersed with memories, notes, photographs and news clippings that tell his life story, in unexpected detail. I felt perhaps he was refreshing his memory with the intention of writing them down as a memoir. The following account of his flying is based on his logbook notations correlated with various archival documents and photographs. The logbooks have been lovingly preserved by his family, and credit goes to his daughter, Mrs. Gita Gohel Rathore for recognizing the importance of these notations and artifacts and sharing them.

### *The First Steps*

In the history of India, one of the most important dates marked on the calendar, next only to 15 August 1947, is the day India turned a republic— 26 January 1950. It was the day that the Indian Constitution came into effect, with the nation completing the journey from a British Dominion to a fully independent republic.



On this very day, Dr. Rajendra Prasad began his term of office as the President of India. The nation celebrated its first Republic Day at the Irwin Stadium. As he unfurled the flag, in front of several marching contingents of the Indian Armed Forces, the crowd on the ground were met by an impressive sight— thundering over the stage were nine heavy bombers of No. 5 Squadron. The B-24 Liberators of World War II fame flew over. The formation was led by Wg Cdr Himmat Singh

Ravubha Gohel, who at 29 years of age, was the Commanding Officer of the recently established Bomber Squadron of the IAF.

For Gohel, it was a singular accomplishment— handpicked to fly the first-ever flypast of the IAF on the first Republic Day. His journey to this moment took nearly nine years of combat and instructional flying with the Indian Air Force and more than 2300 hours of flying experience.

### *Selection into the Royal Indian Air Force*

Himmat Singh Gohel was born on 15 February 1921 in the Gohil clan of Saurashtra. The Gohils are Rajputs that go back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century with deep roots in the Mewar kingdom of Rajputana. Himmat Singh's father was Ravubha Gohel and keeping with the tradition that existed, the father's name was attached to the son's and he was officially known as 'Himmat Singh Ravubha Gohel'.

Gohel was just a few months short of 19 years of age when World War II broke out. Till that time, the Royal Indian Air Force consisted of one squadron of aircraft and about a dozen career officers who were trained at RAF, Cranwell over the years. Both, the British Government as well as the Indian

administration foresaw the need for the expansion of the Royal Indian Air Force to a size it could protect the frontiers and the coast. A proposal to form Coastal Defence Flight was floated and the Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve Act was passed. The intention was to recruit Indians with suitable qualifications in civil aviation to man Coastal Defence Flights raised at major civilian hubs.

The first few batches of volunteers trained at Risalpur and later at Ambala, and on completion of training were used to form the various flights as well as the existing No.1 Squadron. The first few batches were all selected from civilian volunteers who already had some background in civil aviation. Many of them held Pilot certificates from local flying clubs. The first seven batches of volunteers were directly commissioned in the RIAF and provided flying training.

Early in 1940, candidates with previous civil flying experience were not available. Candidates without any previous flying experience were forthcoming in large numbers. Hence, it became necessary to alter the conditions of recruitment and candidates then entered the service as officer cadets, instead of as commissioned officers. They were posted to Initial

Training Wings, which were opened in 1940<sup>9</sup>.

The first such direct entry batch was the No. 8 Pilot's Course. It was with the No. 8 Pilots Course that the 19-year-old HSR Gohel would be inducted into the Royal Indian Air Force.

In September 1940, he applied for training in the Royal Indian Air Force. The selection was done by the first selection board, then known as the Jinwala Committee, that toured the country in October and November 1940. It was a tough selection process. Nearly 4000 applicants were rejected due to poor physical fitness. Of the 835 selected for interview, only 129 were accepted into service. Gohel was one of those 129 men<sup>10</sup>.



The candidates that were selected would be sent to Civil Flying Clubs for preliminary flying training, during which period, they received a subsistence allowance of Rs. 100 a month. On successful completion of this training, and if required, they entered the RIAF as officer cadets.

<sup>9</sup>History of the Indian Air Force 1932-1945 – Bisheshwar Prasad  
<sup>10</sup>Ibid

### *Karachi Aero Club & Bengal Flying Club, 4 January 1941*

Gohel found himself at the Karachi Aero Club on 4 January 1941, the first to report from the selected civilians of 8 PC. Over the next three days several of them gathered. Other noted names that joined him in Karachi included AR Pandit<sup>11</sup>, Irani, BR Sanjana and SA Hussain<sup>12</sup>, in total – nine of them. The trainees would go around preparing for their upcoming training. Gohel writes,

*“The helmet, flying goggles, gasport tubes, and civil pilots logbook were purchased from Aero Stores at 170 Napier Road, Karachi on 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> January 1941. I locked them up in my leather suitcase stored in the R101 Airship Mooring tower, Malir, before going for lunch at Capt Finglass’ house.”*

Within four days of arrival, Gohel was sent on his first flight in an aircraft — on 8 January 1941, he paired up with Civil Instructor TN Malik and took to the air for a 20 minutes-long flight in De Havilland 60 Tiger Moth, VT-ACW, the percussor to the DH82 Tiger Moth. Gohel's memories of that first flight were vivid.



The R101 Airship Mooring Tower at Karachi Civil Airport – HSR Gohel and other trainees of 8 PC were put up in the building at the base of the tower.

*“During my first air experience, I looked to the right hand side from front cockpit and saw the aeroplane leaving the ground. While gliding down, I clearly remembered the propeller turning slow and the blades being clearly visible. Hot air from the side exhaust was also noticeable. T N Malik had warned me not to touch the hot exhaust tubes on both sides of the front cockpit.”*

This air experience sortie was followed by further sorties, this time in a DH82 Tiger Moth. Malik demonstrated controls and let the pupils get some time flying the aircraft. On 14 January, on his sixth flight, Gohel would fly a check dual flight with Major William ‘Bill’ Jones — the legendary Chief Instructor of Karachi Aero Club<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup>Anand Ramdas Pandit - <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/Database/1707>

<sup>12</sup>Syed Abbas Hussain - <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/Database/1706>

<sup>13</sup>Bill Jones had earlier done a Bombay to Karachi flight in DH 80 Pussmoth and had stopped at Bhavnagar en route- having landed at the Polo ground. He had the distinction of serving in the RFC, RAF prior to his civil career. He also served as a honorary officer in the RPAF during his term as Chief Instructor of Karachi Aero Club.



Aircraft of the Karachi Aero Club – two Tiger Moths in the background, with two DH60s in the foreground. The second aircraft – VTACW would be the first aircraft flight experienced by HSR Gohel, prior to his commencement of training at the Indian Air Force. Note the long exhaust tubes that Gohel recalled being warned about.

After the first dual check ride, Malik provided more dual flying sorties.

*“During circuits and landings, I used to look down from left wing trailing edge and turn and cut the engine on reaching landmarks... eg. dry water nullahs, which used to help in proper glide approach. Sometimes landing used to be bumpy. Malik did his best to send me solo first but I used to bounce on the last part— check of landing. Thus failing to bring the tail down when the Tiger Moth stalled. If there was intensive flying daily and more aircraft and instructors, I may have gone solo...”*

After about a month of flying, an RAF Instructor from the SFTS dropped by to undertake a Check Ride with the trainees. Flt Lt Bishop conducted this selection test. Many candidates were washed out at this stage, even before they got the opportunity to don the uniform!

On 8 February 1941, Gohel had logged about 12 hours of dual time. One could tell by his recollection that he was feeling confident about going solo at any point.

*“After flying in the morning, we used to have a good breakfast in the flying club canteen. Karachi Aero Club gave excellent breakfast in the morning in between flying practice. Porridge with steaming hot milk, big omelette, toast with English golden spread, marmalade, coffee tea and banana. Then classes used to start. With good food and the PT, I was in very good form. I could have gone solo earlier at Karachi with about 9 hours of Dual Training.”*

His instructor TN Malik was close to clearing Gohel for a solo check. This was followed by a check with Major Bill Jones. However, the solo did not happen that day as Gohel’s landing during the check ride was bouncy. Before Gohel could have another attempt on subsequent days, the RIAF bought in other plans.

The RIAF had decided that the civilian instructors at Karachi were not proficient enough and decided the trainees would fare better at another flying club. All the trainees were suddenly shipped off to the Bengal Flying Club, then located at the Behala airfield in Calcutta. They had spent about five weeks at Karachi— from 4 January 1941 to 12 February 1941.



The civilian trainees at Karachi Aero Club, January 1941. Standing left to right are AR Pandit (Indore), SA Hussain (Hyderabad Deccan), Hafeez (Delhi), Unknown (Quetta), HSR Gohel (Bhavnagar), Sanjana (Surat), Latif (Rawalpindi), Irani (Bombay), Hashmat Ali Khan (Aligarh).

It was a different experience for Gohel. He arrived at Calcutta along with AR Pandit and SA Hussain. As he would recall later—

*“In mid-February 1941, I was in the train between Karachi and Calcutta, travelling via Lahore and Delhi. We travelled in the Inter-Class. We went to the office of Rickenbaker (Secretary*

*of the Karachi Aero Club). He was sorry to see us leaving the KAC, and then paid us the 2nd class train fare from Karachi to Calcutta.*

*When we reached the Bengal Flying Club in a taxi in February 1941, I saw lush green grass on the airfield. I had never seen such growth of grass in my life. It was a pleasant and impressive sight. We three were put in a tent. Bathroom was on the other side of the tent. We ate smoked fish in the flying club canteen. The atmosphere was moist and warm as compared to Karachi Aero Club. It may have rained in the winter then. When we travelled through Lahore and Delhi on 12 February 1941, it must be cold and Calcutta at night would be 14° C. I had only one woolen coat, one woolen jersey and one woolen trouser. Lahore in April must be just as nice when (later) I returned for Ground training from Calcutta.”*

Five days after arrival, the flying training commenced, first with the Instructor Cooper, and later with the Chief Instructor Arthur Chitambar.

### *The First Solo*

After about ten sorties in the subsequent days, the red-letter

day came on 28 February 1941. HSR Gohel made his first solo flight in Tiger Moth VT-AMR. It was a simple sortie, take-off, a circuit and landing lasting about ten minutes.

Gohel notes with pride,  
*“First to go solo, then followed by Pandit and Hussain. Went solo after 11 days at the Bengal Flying Club.*

*With the daily dual flying I may have gone solo at Karachi (earlier). At Dum Dum I went solo earlier than Pandit and Hussain. And the same may have happened at Karachi.”*

More flying was undertaken, and a selection test was done by Flt Lt Middleton of the RAF on 28 March 1941.

By this time, Gohel had been flying solos without much dual instructions. He noted, *“Cooper was confident that I can do solo without further dual flying.”*

The flying training at Bengal Club lasted for seven weeks, concluding on 10 April 1941. During this time, Gohel had accumulated about 26 hours of dual time and 16 hours of solo flying. Most of his flying was done on the Tiger Moth VT-AMR<sup>14</sup>.

### *Into Uniform – ITS Lahore- 14 April 1941*



*The earliest photograph that Gohel retained of himself in uniform – as he would write: “Khaki Shirt and shorts were issued at IT School RAF Station Walton, Lahore. Khaki sola topee, stockings and black shoes were the summer RAF Uniform. The dress was made by the camp tailor at RAF Walton”.*

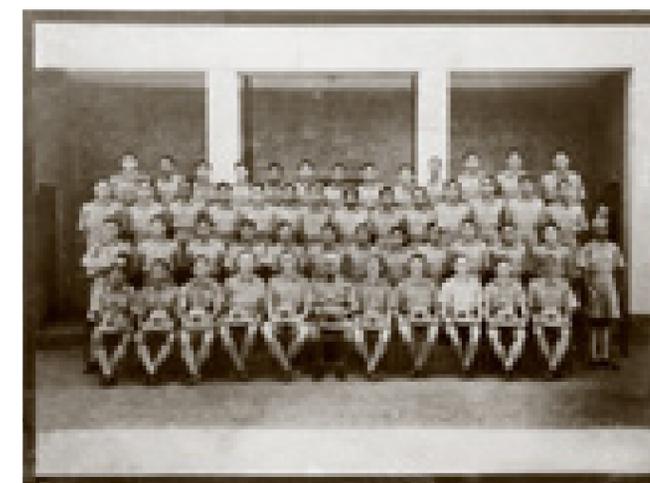
The time had come for Gohel and his compatriots to officially don the uniform of the Royal Indian Air Force and report for training at the Initial Training School at Walton, Lahore. This happened on 14 April 1941. ITS Walton, at that time, imparted discipline, drill, physical training and elementary ground subjects.

<sup>14</sup>Tiger Moth VT-AMR (C/N 83629) was inducted into service in September 1940. It was written off in a crash landing at EFTS Begumpet on 23 October 1942.

The cadets of 8th PC spent just about five weeks at the ITC and then were shipped off for the Elementary Flying Training stage on 26 May 1941. Later batches would train for longer and longer periods at the ITW, and the final batches would train for 18 weeks. Gohel, Pandit and others of 8 PC had it lucky with just five weeks of square bashing. Before they were shipped out, the final course photo at the ITS was taken.

There were two Elementary Flying Training Schools set up for the purpose– No. 1 EFTS at Begumpet, Hyderabad and No. 2 EFTS at Jodhpur. Both EFTS were built on the infrastructure of the existing Flying Clubs at these locations. 28 Cadets were sent to Jodhpur and the remaining 14 were sent to Begumpet.

*“When we finished training at Lahore in May 1941, the batch going to Hyderabad was sent by train via Delhi and we were sent to Jodhpur via Hyderabad (Sind) which was longer. I think this was done so that a spy at Delhi could not find out how many cadets the air force was training. Perhaps the British suspected that there was a spy at Delhi. The British Military Officers were afraid of spying being done by Indians for Japan and Germany. The Spy Mania was in the air as they were losing the war at that time.”*

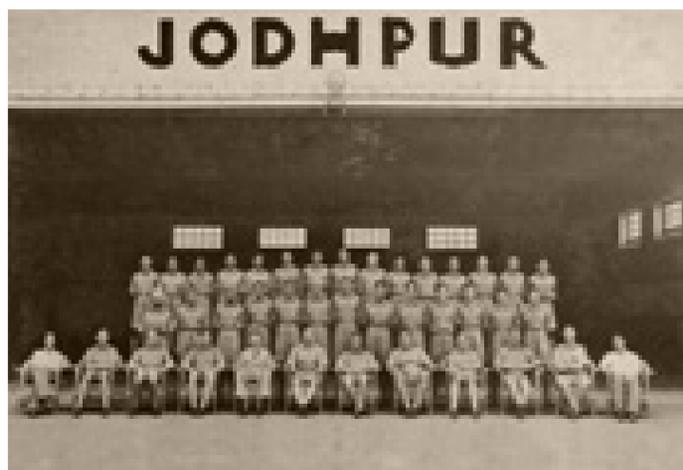


*The passing out course photo taken at ITS Lahore in May 1941. Gohel is standing second from right in the third row from the bottom. There are 42 Cadets in 8 PC at this point.*

*Photo Courtesy: Family of late Plt Offr Ghulam Nabi Khan.*

### *2 EFTS, Jodhpur 24 May 1941*

The 28 cadets of 8 PC arrived at Jodhpur on 24 May 1941. No. 2 EFTS was located at the Jodhpur airfield owned by Maharaja Umaid Singh Ji of Jodhpur, who was an honorary Air Commodore in the RAF. On arrival, the customary group photo of the course was taken and copies of the photo provided to all the cadets. Here at Jodhpur, the Officer Cadets will undergo the Elementary Flying Training Course,



Circa May 1941. The 28 cadets who made up the 8 PC in a group photograph with the instructors and Maharaja Umaid Singh Ji of Jodhpur (seated sixth from left). Gohel is standing in the last row, seventh from left. Chief instructor Godwin is seated fifth from left.

Photo Courtesy: Family of Flg Offr Sundar Lal Atal.

which would last about three months, and on successful completion, they would be commissioned as Pilot Officers in the RIAF.

Gohel went up for his first sortie on 28 May in Tiger Moth VT-ANA with his RAF instructor Fg Offr Chrystall. The Chief Instructor (CI) of Jodhpur EFTS was Fg Offr Godwin, who during the pre-war years was the CI of the Civil Club. Even

though trainees like Gohel and Pandit already had solo flying time on the Tiger Moth, they were not sent solo at the EFTS for a while.

Gohel managed his first solo on VT-APF at the EFTS on 5 June 1941.

*“Fg Offr Chrystal tried three times to send me solo after check by Godwin. Godwin was not prepared to shoulder responsibility. He was too old. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, Godwin told Chrystal to send me solo if he was satisfied. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day, Chrystal sent me Solo.”*



c. May 1941, No.2 EFTS Station Jodhpur: HSR Gohel in flying gear. The petrol store can be seen behind him.

Gohel’s friend and colleague from the civil club days, AR Pandit, would be assigned a Civilian Instructor, MU Parekh

and would undergo a similar experience. He was allowed to go solo only after his tenth dual sortie.

Over the next three months, the trainees racked up hours as they completed the flying syllabus. On 4 September 1941, the course officially concluded and the batch was now sent to their next stop– No. 1 Service Flying Training School at Ambala.



One section of the pilots of 8<sup>th</sup> Pilot Course when they passed out at EFTS. Lack of rank stripes on shoulders indicate that this was prior to commissioning. (Left to right) (back row): Goordeen, Dastoor, Irani, Ezekiel, Georges, Dorabji, Ghose. (front row): Atal, Khan, Gohel, Andrade, Chakravarty, Hussain, Anwar.

### *No.1 Service Flying Training School, Ambala 15 September 1941 – 14 February 1942*

Gohel and his compatriots arrived at Ambala in mid-September 1941. The course started officially on the 15 September 1941. The arrivals faced a shock when they were told that they will only be commissioned at the end of the course. After representations, the authorities agreed that the cadets will be commissioned at the time of earning their wings, with their commission date being ante-date to the day of their arrival at the SFTS.

On their arrival, a combined photograph was taken of all the trainees present at the SFTS. These included the senior batches like the 6 and 7 PC, as well as some of the officers relegated for Observer Training.

The No. 1 SFTS (India) would provide training in advanced flying that would include cross-country navigation, bombing and air to air armament firing training. The course was conducted in two distinct segments. Two months of flying would be done with the Intermediate Training Squadron (ITS) and on completion, the pilots would be awarded their “wings” – the coveted pilots’ badge. They would then graduate to the Advanced Training Squadron to train for another two months.



The combined group photo of the 6th, 7th and 8th Pilots Courses— as well as the 6th Observer Course. The pupils of the 8th PC are distributed in the first and last rows. Gohel himself can be seen standing third in the last row. The photo is a virtual who's who of the early pioneers of both the Indian Air Force and Pakistan Air Force. Note that the 8th Course Pilots are still wearing their 'Cadet' stripes while the senior courses are wearing Pilot Officer ranks.

On 21 September 1941, 27 Officers of the 8th Pilots Course commenced training at the Intermediate Training Squadron of the SFTS.

The SFTS operated the Hawker Hart and Audax biplanes— which were designed as primary combat aircraft in the 1930s. These were the first 'armed' aircraft that the students encountered. Gohel started flying in the Hawker Hart with his instructor, Flt Sgt Hart of the RAF. During

the Intermediate stage, the pilots focused on aerobatics, formation flying, navigation etc. It was not without cost— they lost one member of their batch, Plt Offr Ghulam Nabi Khan<sup>15</sup>, who crashed in his Audax during his night solo on 13 November 1941.

Even as Gohel and his coursemates were carrying out the training, World War II, which till then had been relegated to the European theatre of operations, now flared into the far east, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and Malaya on 7 December 1941. Almost immediately, the allies had started suffering reverses in Hongkong, Malaya and Philippines.

It was in this atmosphere that Gohel and the rest of his course completed the intermediate stage and were sent to the Advanced Training Squadron on the 21 December 1941. By then, Gohel had flown the Hart and the Audax, done three hours of night flying as well as Instrument Flying<sup>16</sup>.

The first day at the ATS was the "Wings Parade". The ITS graduates were awarded their pilot badges on 22 December in the afternoon on the Ambala tarmac. It was also the occasion

<sup>15</sup> Ghulam Nabi Khan <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/Database/240>

<sup>16</sup> Gohel had accumulated a total of approximately 160 hours by this stage.



The K3102 Audax biplane flown by Plt Offr Gohel, in December 1941 and January 1942, at SFTS Ambala. Sqn Ldr Powley was Officer Commanding, Air Force Training School.

that they were formally commissioned as Pilot Officers.

During January, at the Advanced Training Squadron of the FTS, the pilots focused on Air to Air Gunnery, air to ground gunnery training. On 12 January, they moved to Kohat for their Armament detachment. Some pilots were handpicked to fly the Audax/Harts to Kohat but Gohel travelled by train to the armament camp.

Once at Kohat, time was spent in firing exercises, while operating from the satellite airfield at Miranshah. The period also included one flight from Kohat to Miranshah in Vickers



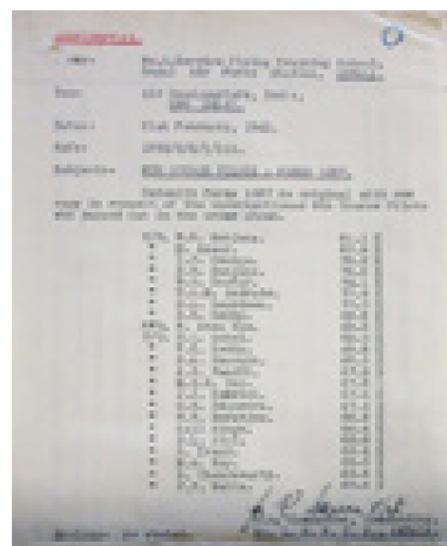
AR Pandit (Left) and HSR Gohel (Right) had this photograph taken shortly after the wings parade on 22 December 1941. It was also the first time they wore the uniform of a commissioned officer. Both of them had kept a copy of this photo in their archives.

Valencia K3613 on 17 February 1942. Gohel noted that the open cockpit Valencia was quite cold for the enclosed passengers as well. Miranshah was operating a detachment of Audaxes from No.3 Squadron IAF at that time. One memory stood out for Gohel. He remembers that he was impressed by the mountainous countryside— and an encounter with Plt Offr OP Mehra (who later would become Chief of Air Staff).

*"I met OP Mehra at Miranshah on 17 January 1942 when I went for air to air firing practices. He was wearing a blue overcoat.*

*He said that NWFP is controlled through Pathan Maliks by the British. He was in the No. 3 Squadron detachment there. His blue overcoat was later stolen from the Kohat Air Force mess where it was hung outside. He was an 'intriguer' (sic) by nature even at that time<sup>17</sup>.*

The Kohat detachment ended on 23 January, and the next stage of training back at Ambala commenced covering formation flights, camera work and air to ground bombing. The ATS phase completed on 12 February 1942.



A comprehensive marks-list of 8th Course Pilots published on 21 February 1942 by No. 1 SFTS RIAF Station Ambala.

The final Passing Out Parade of the 8th Pilot Course from the SFTS was done two days later on 14 February— and one day prior to Gohel's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday!

It must be noted that the Burma fighting was in full swing at this time and No. 1 Squadron IAF had been operating near Rangoon for about two weeks under the command of Sqn Ldr Jumbo Majumdar. With only two other squadrons in existence at that point, the need for an additional number of units and the pilots to equip the units was always prominent.



The final Passing Out Parade photo for 8 PC at Ambala. Gohel is standing in the last row, second from left. The officers have been awarded their 'wings'. The course included one Observer from a previous course, Atmaram, who is seated far right. This photo comes from the collection of Air Marshal AR Pandit's family.

With No. 1 Squadron being away in Burma, the options available for the posting out of the new pilots were limited to No. 2 Squadron, No. 3 Squadron or the Coastal Defence Flights. No. 4 Squadron had just been raised but it was a squadron only on paper, with no aircraft. Gohel's first operational posting was soon made clear— it would be No. 2 Squadron, then located at Kohat.

### *The Lysander Era – No. 2 Squadron, No. 4 Squadron*

Gohel's first operational posting was to No. 2 Squadron at Kohat in mid-February 1942, then under the command of Sqn Ldr Aspy Engineer. The Squadron was operating the Westland Lysander which was an Army Cooperation aircraft.

The Lysander was a 'modern' design as far as Army Cooperation aircraft were concerned. For the first time, it featured an enclosed cockpit that provided some crew comfort. It was a high-wing monoplane design with a fixed undercarriage, powered by a radial engine.

The pilot sat high in his cockpit and had an excellent field of view from his position. The entire cockpit was a long glass



house with the air gunner/observer sitting in tandem to the pilot. The gunner could also double up as the bomb-aimer with access to a bombsight that could be aimed through a clear glass panel in the fuselage. The aircraft was armed. The wheel spats housed a .303 Browning machine gun with about 500 rounds each. Additionally, stub wings can be fixed to the wheel spats to which a variety of bombs can be fixed.

The aircraft featured automatic slats that deployed whenever the aircraft's speed fell below a point. The slats would also deploy the trailing edge flaps. This was the first aircraft in which the pilot didn't have to remember to operate the flaps! It also relieved the pilot of the burden of retracting them before the safe speed was exceeded. The automatic slats and flaps gave the aircraft tremendous low speed performance. It could hang in the air at just 55 miles per hour!

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps Gohel meant to write "man of intrigue"

Within a week of the new pilots' arrival, No. 2 Squadron moved its base from Kohat to Secunderabad. All the junior pilots and observers from 8 PC were moved to No. 4 Squadron, also located at Kohat. No. 4 Squadron was raised only at the beginning of the month and had only four Lysanders on strength.

Gohel started conversion training on the Lysanders soon after. After a couple of flights as a passenger, he went solo on Lysander L4801 on 5 March 1942.



*“The Lysander was used for Tactical Recce in Middle East in 1940. Some Lysanders came from Cairo to Karachi in end 1941. Low take off and landing speeds gave greater safety. Especially for inexperienced and sketchy trained pilots. There were no proper conversion training procedures or facilities at Kohat at the time. Went solo earlier in the Lysander than normal.”*

The aircraft was powered by a Bristol Perseus XII radial engine. The engine was a ‘Sleeve Valve’ operated engine as opposed to the conventional ‘Tappet’ valves found on earlier aircraft. The sleeve valves were a more complicated system of machinery that required careful maintenance and operating procedures. Gohel, however, was unaware of its nature. He would write—

*“In March 1942, I did not know the differences between the Sleeve valve and Tappet valve engines. The Gypsy Major I, the Tiger Moth and the Rolls Royce Kestrel in the Hart were Tappet Valve engines. I tested the Magneto switches at Rated power and then increased to full power and pulled back to rated power again and tested the Magneto switches. It turns out this was a safe procedure unknowingly.”*

The Lysander was the first aircraft to be equipped with the variable pitch propeller. The pilots had to set the pitch to

“fine” during takeoff, and to “coarse” during cruise flight.

*“(This was the) first Variable propeller pitch aircraft flown by me. I took off on fine pitch upto full power, and when airborne, I used to pull out the lever to coarse and climb on up to 3000 feet on rated power. In tropical climate this reduced the cylinder head temperature and also the oil temperature. Low revolutions per minute meant lower cylinder head temperatures. This was also done unknowingly!*

*War-time training was hasty and haphazard, especially engine handling. Once near Kohat hangar, the engine was over primed. Flames came up from the exhaust. Sgt Cottrell asked me to carry on turning the engine which picked up and flame went out. On March 20 1942, when flying Lysander N1269, 25 min flight. I landed heavily (dropped) and burst the starboard tyre but kept the aircraft straight by left brake. Right wheel rim was okay for the short roll.”*

Gohel racked up hours on the aircraft over the subsequent months. Some memorable sorties included a high altitude sortie on 27 May, flying the aircraft up to 12,000 feet, and a long-range ferry of Lysander L4816 from Karachi to Kohat in early June 1942.

For that ferry flight, Gohel travelled by train from Kohat to

Karachi. *“Extremely hot and dirty rail journey”* as he would put it.

In Karachi. *“I went to BOR Barrack at Karachi to wake AC MacNeilly for the air test on June 7. I took delivery of L4816 at Karachi. The ferry started on June 8, Karachi, Padidan, Multan, Kohat reaching on June 11. First long-range X Country by me and it was successful.”*

It nearly went wrong in the beginning.

*“This was supposed to be a ferry flight. But there was no briefing at all done. Nor procedures discussed. Manchanda took off and carried on and I never saw him after take off. I did my navigation alone. Manchanda had an observer with him, I had no observer to navigate in the dust in cross country. I stuck to the compass course which was a safe bet. I learnt to stick to the compass, tell by the landmarks that appeared and adjusted the course to keep on track. The previous cross country was on February 9 at the ATS in Ambala.”*

Gohel, flying alone, relied solely on the compass and navigating by visual landmarks. It was the first time he had to do the flying over unfamiliar terrain, but he managed it successfully reaching Kohat on June 12. En route, his aircraft suffered some wingtip damage due to a fuel cap not correctly

closed when it was refueled. He had to stay an extra day at Padidan airfield for repairs.

It was in June that Gohel was to fly his first operational sorties. As part of the Miranshah detachment, he flew his first mission on June 15, on Lysander L4786. His formation dropped 250lb High Explosive bombs against a tribal gun position.

Several other sorties followed. On one occasion, however, Gohel flew as an Air Gunner in an Audax with Plt Offr Nur Khan (later Air Marshal, CAS Pakistan Air Force) as the pilot. This was on 18 June 1942. Gohel notes that the aircraft was hit by rifle fire on this sortie, but with very little damage incurred. It was just one of the three times that Gohel's aircraft was hit by rifle fire of the tribesmen. Luckily the damage was minor on all three occasions.

*“Three times tribesmen bullets hit my aircraft, once on port wing Lysander, second on top wing petrol tank of Audax. Third on port wing of Hurricane while low flying practice to Prachinar. The Pathans were most accurate rifle shots than the Japs in Burma.”*

In his logbook, HSR Gohel has written many observations on this type— from engine operations to the handling of aircraft and its low speed flying characteristics. He had fired his

guns in anger against the tribesman and had taken part in bombing sorties. Gohel noted that all the operational flying held him in good stead, he had gained more flying experience and this made up for any gaps in training that the young cadets had to go through during their training phase.

He also noted that the troops he had been supporting on the ground had reported on his close support missions— expressing gratitude on more than one occasion.

*“When I was firing two .303 Browning machine guns on mountain/hill crest on each pass, some Waziristan tribesmen must have been killed or hit by these bullets. The Tochi Scouts have seen this and they reported on my good close support.”*

As the Waziristan operations continued, flying included communication sorties— ferrying senior Army Officers between locations. 221 RAF group had noticed Gohel's keenness in flying and had picked him to carry out VIP flights.

In September 1942, No. 4 Squadron sent a detachment to the Sindh area— for operations against the Hur tribe. Gohel was one of the formation of three aircraft that flew from Kohat to Khanpur, about 400 miles on a 3 hour flight. Fg Offr MS Pujji was the leader and SA Hussain, the third pilot. Similar operations were undertaken— tactical Recce and offensive

support. This involved dropping bombs and firing guns at the attacking tribesmen when needed.

The operations against the Hurs ended in November, and Gohel got to go back to Kohat, but on arrival, he went down with the flu and was admitted to the Kohat Hospital.



No. 4 Squadron Officers in front of a Lysander at Hyderabad, Sind. Commanding Officer MK Janjua, Surjit Singh Majithia and KS Saund can also be seen in this photograph. Gohel is sitting third from left.

In January 1943, he was back in Hyderabad Sind Area again flying photo ops, TAC recce and support sorties. At this time, the three additional squadrons were raised. All the Observers were posted to the newly raised Vultee Vengeance Squadrons. No. 4 Squadron started winding down Lysander

operations, and its pilots were given new postings to other units, but Gohel was selected to train as a Flying Instructor— a rare achievement for Indian pilots at that time.

### *As Instructor at No. 1 SFTS Ambala 8 March 1943*

Gohel went to No. 1 SFTS Ambala again in March 1943. He received instruction on the Harvard Trainer— an aircraft that he noted would still be flying twenty years later closer to his retirement date. It was the first modern aircraft with a retractable undercarriage. He completed his Instructor Training on April 30 (CFI No.181) and was now part of the instructional staff at Ambala.

*“I was lucky to be selected for flying instructor at this stage. Flying became second nature by the end of 1943 and this helped me greatly in flying the Vengeance and Hurricane in 1944–1945 without any mishap or accident which happened to others of 8th PC. Eg. Pandit, Dastur, two Sanjanas.*

*Brand new Harvards made in 1942 were sent to Ambala for training a large number of pilots. There were no similar British made trainers. We used the Harvard for over 20 years with a very good safety record.*

*It was an advanced trainer and superb aeroplane. First modern aircraft I had flown with retractable undercarriage. I first flew it on 8 March 1943 at Ambala as Pilot Officer, then last flew it on 19 July 1963 at Siliguri 20 Wing as Gp Capt – 20 years and 4 months. No engine failure, no mag drop, no hydraulic trouble, no electrical trouble ever.”*

His first set of pupils came from the 15th Pilots Course and later 16th PC. Pupils included JS Ingle, Kotamraj, KN Bulsara. Shortly thereafter, Gohel was officially promoted to Flying Officer in May 1943. He had accumulated just short of 500 hours of flying time.

At the end of August 1943, Gohel was sent to No. 2 EFTS Jodhpur on Tiger Moth. No. 2 EFTS required an instructor for navigation flying and Gohel was selected. For the next five months, Gohel helped train many young officer cadets in the intricacies of navigation.

A few memories stood out from Jodhpur—

*“At Jodhpur, first time I saw a P40 (Tomahawk) being ferried to China by Chinese pilots from Karachi. I also saw a Dakota flying over Jodhpur from Karachi to Agra. This was the first time I saw Americans with different pronunciations of the English language. Their uniform with gold, silver, brass on their collars.*



At No.2 EFTS, Jodhpur, Tiger Moths.

*I was fond of driving vehicles. I used to drive a V8 three tonner and take two pupils from Jodhpur to Banar for intensive circuit flying before sending solo. I was issued a driving license at this time. This used to happen during the solo stage of pupils from August to December 1943.*

*I had learnt driving the Ford V-8 Station wagon at Miranshah in June–August 1942. The driving was done on Miranshah Airfield. Later at Hyderabad, I learnt to drive the 3.5 Norton motorcycle. Later in 1944, while I was at Ranchi, I used to drive Chevrolet three tonner to collect rations and firewood for No. 7 Squadron Mess. Sqn Ldr Lal saw my license and allowed me to drive, which I was very fond of, and there was a shortage of MT*



Photograph taken for identity card when stationed at Jodhpur.

*Drivers. So I first learnt flying aeroplanes and only later driving cars and trucks! Ten months of flying in training schools as QFI saved my life – gave me a high category as a pilot.”*

Gohel moved back to No. 1 SFTS Ambala in late 1943. Then in January 1944, he got the news that he would be sent to convert on the latest acquisition of the IAF, the Vultee Vengeance Dive Bomber, and be posted to the Burma Front!

## *The Vultee Vengeance and No. 7 Squadron*

With over 800 hours of flying experience under his belt, Gohel went to No. 152 Operational Training Unit (OTU) in February 1944 to undergo conversion training on the Vultee Vengeance. No. 152 OTU imparted training in dive-bombing techniques, air gunnery, and operational aspects of the Vengeance.

*“The Vengeance was a very good dive bomber for open country targets which could be seen and accurately hit. Not so good for the jungle. It had three electric fuel boosters for take off and landing and one for level flying at medium level (9000 feet). It had a range of approximately 550 miles.”*

The Conversion Training lasted about six weeks and at the beginning of April 1944, Gohel joined No. 7 Squadron operating from Uderbund (Kumbhirgram) airfield on the Burma Front. The Squadron was then under the command of Sqn Ldr Hem Chaudhary.

Earlier at No. 152 OTU, Gohel paired up with Sgt Baij Nath as his gunner (Later Wg Cdr Baij Nath 3617 SIGS). The pair flew their first operational bombing raid on Pingyan village on 24 April 1944. The target was approximately 180 miles from base, and the Vengeances received a fighter escort. The pilots encountered hazy conditions, but completed their mission.

Over the course of the next two months, he flew 23 dive-bombing missions against the Japanese forces, bombing targets in the Manipur area<sup>18</sup>.

On 12 June 1944, the Squadron withdrew to Ranchi for rest and recuperation.

Serial	Time	Altitude	Remarks
01	0710	10000	Released bombs on target
02	0715	10000	Released bombs on target
03	0720	10000	Released bombs on target
04	0725	10000	Released bombs on target
05	0730	10000	Released bombs on target
06	0735	10000	Released bombs on target
07	0740	10000	Released bombs on target
08	0745	10000	Released bombs on target
09	0750	10000	Released bombs on target
10	0755	10000	Released bombs on target
11	0800	10000	Released bombs on target
12	0805	10000	Released bombs on target

The Form 541 for the first raid that Gohel had taken part on 24 April 1944 at 0710 hours. It was a squadron balbo – with 12 aircraft and crews taking part to bomb Japanese Army concentrations.

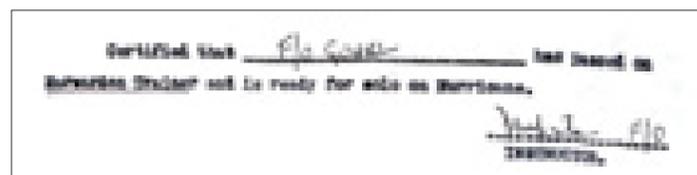
### Hawker Hurricanes and the Second Tour of Burma

In November 1944, No. 7 Squadron started the conversion to the Hawker Hurricane single-seater fighter. Gohel followed



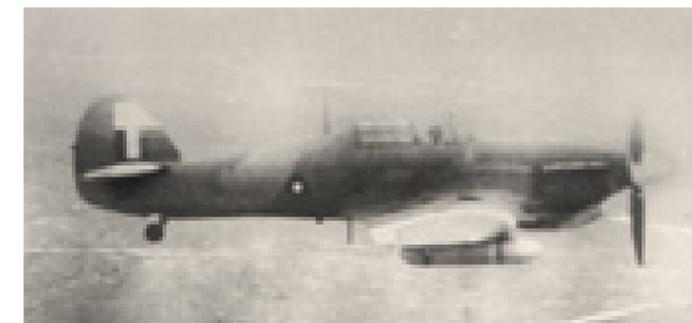
Fg Offr Gohel and his gunner Sgt Baij Nath in a Vultee Vengeance sortie near Imphal

the rest of the pilots to No. 151 OTU located at Peshawar. The Squadron completed the training in January 1945.



Hurricane pre-solo certification certifying that Gohel passed on the 'Harvard Trainer', a cockpit mockup used for training on cockpit procedures.

<sup>18</sup> Gohel's tally of Dive bombing sorties: April :3, May :15, June :5 – Total 23. Aircraft flown: AN791, AN744, AN710, AN614, AN744, AN674, AN818, AN645



A Hurricane IIC of the IAF – this example from No. 1 Sqn is illustrative of the type that HSR Gohel flew in his second tour of operations in Burma.

*“It was very cold at Peshawar, I used to start the engine of the Hurricane and close the cockpit to keep warm. Propeller used to turn back very cold air, but the closed cockpit was comfortable.”*

One memorable flight included a height climb on 7 December 1944, when Gohel took a Hurricane to 33000’ altitude – the maximum ceiling!

While at Peshawar, Gohel was sent on temporary detachment to the Indian Air Force Display Flight on 15 January 1945, then under the command of the legendary Wg Cdr Jumbo Majumdar. For the next two weeks, this provided Gohel an opportunity to tour North India while carrying out formation flights, aerobatic displays, etc. Most of his flying was on the Harvard and the newly inducted Fairchild Cornell trainer.

On completion of the detachment, he reverted to No. 7 Squadron.

In March 1945, No. 7 Squadron headed back to the Burma Front under the command of Sqn Ldr PC Lal. Gohel landed up at Sinthe airfield in Burma on 26 March 1945, and immediately the Tactical Recce operations started. By this time, the war in Europe was drawing to a close and the Japanese were on retreat in Burma.

On May 5, when victory in Europe was declared, Gohel was undertaking a sortie in the Irrawaddy area. Every month brought in at least 25-30 sorties that the pilots had to undertake. Some of the TAC/R sorties lasted nearly three hours from take-off to landing.

Gohel's Hurricane sorties in this period included 4 TAC/R sorties in March, 24 in April, and 12 in May. Total of 40 missions over the front line (discounting various ferry flights, air tests, etc.)

The Squadron's tour ended on 27 May and the pilots travelled back to the North-West Frontier— carrying out mostly training flights for the rest of the year.

In preparation of his marriage, Gohel applied for a posting to EFTS Jodhpur in October. The posting came through, but



No. 7 Squadron, flying Hurricanes under the command of Sqn Ldr PC Lal. Gohel is sitting in the centre of the bottom row.

not before the CO Sqn Ldr Hassan suspected Gohel's request was because of his refusal to serve under a Muslim CO. As he noted in his logbook, nothing could be further from the truth.

*“Sqn Ldr Hassan told me that I may not want to serve under him, a Muslim, as Sqn Ldr Lal was posted out also at that time. I wanted to get married, so I asked for a posting to Jodhpur, which was near Bhavnagar. There were such feelings between Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus at that time but I was not affected by it. Actually I did not (even) notice it.”*

Gohel went to No. 2 EFTS; this time, the Tiger Moths had

given way to Fairchild Cornell. And he was involved in training the Officer Cadets of 38 Course.

On 10 January 1946, Gohel was promoted to Flight Lieutenant rank and posted to No. 3 Squadron at Kolar, as the Flight Commander, then under the command of Sqn Ldr OP Mehra (later CAS). On 20 January, he flew the legendary Supermarine Spitfire for the first time. The aircraft was JG678, an Mk VIII variant equipped with the legendary Rolls Royce Merlin engine. He was with No. 3 Squadron for two months till the middle of March.

Gohel then went on to serve as the Adjutant of No. 4 Squadron at Yelahanka. He made the quick trip by truck from Kolar to Yelahanka. No. 4 squadron operated the Spitfire MkXIV, equipped with the Rolls-Royce Griffon engine, and was the fastest variant of the Spitfire in India at that time.

He was deployed along with them to Miho, Japan as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force for a two-month stint, travelling by ship HMT Dunera. The stint in Japan lasted three and a half months— from 14 May 1946 till the end of August 1946. This period did not involve much flying and Gohel managed only about seven sorties on the Spitfire XIV during his entire period with No. 4 Squadron.

On return to India in late 1946, he was sent to AFS Ambala and at the time of independence with No. 2 Wing in Poona.



Spitfire Mk XIV NH801 – operated by SFTS at Ambala in 1946. Gohel's notes on the photo indicate he had flown seven sorties on this variant – while posted to No. 4 Squadron at Yelahanka.

### *Independence and Converting to Multi-Engine Aircraft*

The Indian Air Force at the time of Independence had only one single squadron operating multi-engine aircraft. No. 12 Squadron operated the Douglas C-47 Dakota transport aircraft and was pushed into service in Kashmir Operations in November 1947.

Earlier in 1948, Gohel, now a Squadron Leader, was sent as a Flight Commander to No. 12 Squadron. Initially flying as a co-pilot, he was then posted as the Commanding Officer to the newly raised 'Conversion and Training Squadron', a unit raised to convert crews onto the Dakota. He completed his conversion to the Dakota in mid-April.

The C&T Squadron was also involved in paradrop exercises and is believed to have undertaken the first paratrooper sorties in June 1948 in Agra. Gohel's logbook records the gradual introduction of para-dropping in India, starting with sticks of two, five, ten, and finally sticks of twenty.

During this period, Gohel got to do VIP flights as well, including one carrying the Governor-General C Rajagopalachari on a tour of North India during October.

On 15 November 1948, Gohel took over command of No. 12 Squadron. The 1948 Kashmir Operations were still on-going, and this gave Gohel the opportunity to fly the last month of the war in operational flying to Jammu and Kashmir. He made the most of it, flying to almost all the forward airfields. Punch, Kargil, Srinagar, and finally one sortie to Leh at 11,320 feet altitude! Some of the sorties include paradropping supplies at Kargil on 14 June, and another at Rajouri on 21 June.



The first paratrooper drops in India were done by the Dakotas of C&T Squadron— an early example from June 1948, still in 'Chakra' markings. Sqn Ldr Gohel is standing in the center with sunglasses on. There are 16 Paratroopers ready to go in this photo and all of them appear to be IAF NCOs.

Though Gohel was 'late' to arrive in the Kashmir conflict, he racked up 36.30 hours of operational flying in the one month he was able to take part. He also achieved a personal milestone of 2000 hours of flying experience— in just under eight years! Most of these hours were on single-engine aircraft.



### *The IAF's First UK Courier*

In March 1949, Gohel flew the very first UK Courier flight. He took Dakota HJ237 to the UK, staging through different airfields along the way over multiple days. The UK Courier flight offered a great experience to the aircrew and airmen who were part of it.

A happy coincidence happened at El Adem, where the RAF Commanding Officer, Wg Cdr Simpson, was a fellow officer when Gohel trained at Ambala earlier in the decade.

On their way, they picked up some RAF airmen at El Adem and dropped them at Luqa, Malta. One of the sights at Malta was a USAF P-47 Thunderbolt that came into and after air to air firing over the sea. Gohel noted the landing pattern circuit was remarkable, turning and losing height on a crosswind leg. The memory stayed with him for years.

The Courier flight reached the UK on 13 March 1949. Gohel and the crew stayed for about 25 days.

*"I stayed 25 days in England. I went to Great Yarmouth and Brighton, the area of the Battle of Britain, East and South Coastal Zones. Dakota HJ237<sup>19</sup> was taken to an RAF BRD in Bassingbourne, to get De-icing boots fitted on the leading edge."*

They set for India on 8 April. The journey was completed by 13 April. This included flying for over seven hours on one day, covering 1200 miles in cold climate. The last legs between Sharjah and Palam were done in two hops within one single day— over eight hours of flying covering 1540 miles! The whole courier flight took 77 hours in total!

Gohel would have probably continued as a Dakota pilot for a few more years, but fate intervened— and sent him to fly the first Heavy Bombers of the Indian Air Force.

### *The need for Bomber Aircraft*

At the height of the Kashmir Operations, the IAF was forced to operate the Dakota in an improvised heavy bomber role, with the aircrew rolling out of the bombs out of the cargo door during these sorties.

There was a need for a true bomber aircraft in the IAF's inventory and as part of its search, senior IAF Officers like Gp Capt Harjinder Singh, then OC of the RIAF Station Kanpur, worked with HAL engineers to resurrect many of the abandoned Consolidated B-24 Liberator Bombers that had been dumped at Chakeri airfield. These aircraft were part of the lend-lease agreement between the USA and Great Britain and as per the agreement, the aircraft were purposefully made un-airworthy and dumped at Kanpur.

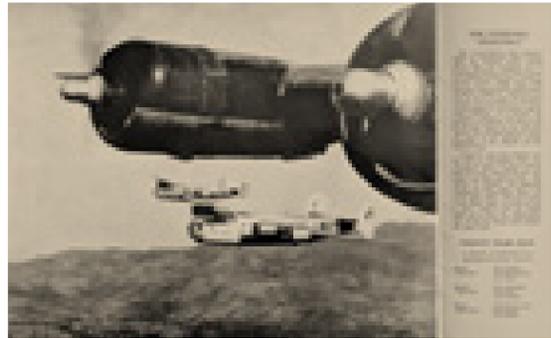
So in 1948, the HAL team, helped by the IAF technical personnel slowly fixed up these bombers and flew them to HAL Bangalore where they underwent a complete refurbishment<sup>20</sup>. And on 5 November 1948, the first Bomber Squadron of the IAF was raised at Poona, No. 5 (Heavy Bomber) Squadron— under the command of Wg Cdr JRS Dantra.

<sup>19</sup> Gohel remained curious about this aircraft even after retirement. He wrote a letter to Air Head Quarter in 1977, enquiring about the aircraft's fate. An officer from Air Head Quarter wrote back, conveying that the aircraft was long gone— written off in an accident in 1963.

<sup>20</sup> India's Reclaimed Bombers: The B-24 Liberator: <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/aircraft/past/927-b24.html>

As the Squadron was building upon strength and getting operationalized, a tragic ground accident claimed the life of Wg Cdr Dantra in April 1949. Losing their first CO within five months of raising was a major set-back. To compensate for this, the IAF decided to send one of its most senior transport officers to the Squadron, and thus Wg Cdr HSR Gohel found himself as the second Commanding Officer of No. 5 Heavy Bomber Squadron on 22 April 1949.

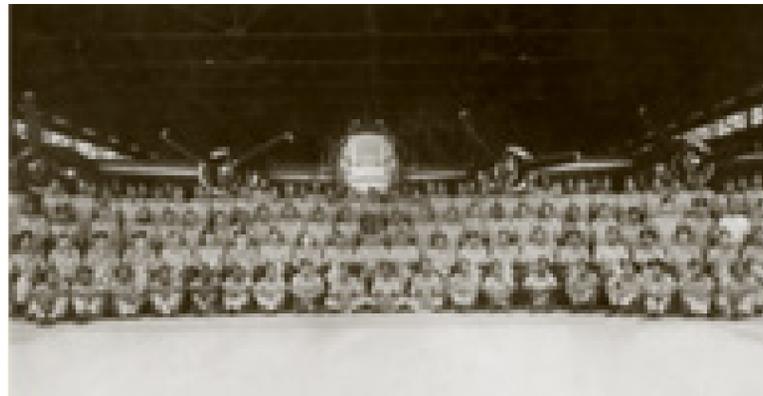
The B-24 Liberator was another World War II era aircraft that was vastly different from the Dakota aircraft. This was the first four-engine aircraft in service and had a tricycle undercarriage.



1969 Air Force Day booklet showing a section of Liberators on a bombing/navigation exercise. Among the three aircraft shown here, Regal Red One was co-piloted by Wg Cdr Gohel.

Since very few pilots had a heavy bomber experience, the government of India contracted a retired RAF pilot to come in and train Indian crews. This training happened at Kanpur. Gohel and his crew flew with Flt Lt Woods to familiarize themselves with the new type in May 1949. The conversion training went for months— radio let-downs, three engine asymmetric landings, radio Homing, cross-country flights.

Not all of these Liberators<sup>21</sup> were bombers— also included was at least one C-87 ‘Liberator Express’ for transport duties. This aircraft HE772 could fly for 11 hours straight if needed.



Group photo of No. 5 Squadron personnel at Kanpur in May 1949, within weeks of Wg Cdr Gohel taking over command. The British officers in the photos were RAF Instructors including Flt Lt Woods.

<sup>21</sup> Wg Cdr Gohel's experience with the Liberator bomber survivors is the subject of a different article by Matt Poole, where he tracks some of the surviving aircraft that can still be seen around today.

The first bombing sorties didn't happen till the middle of January 1950. But one other significant milestone was coming up, the day India would turn republican.

### Republic Day 1950

Much has been reported on the festivities, celebration, and pomp around the day the Dominion of India would turn into a republic, with its own constitution, emblems, and Head of State. The photograph of the first-ever Indian Air Force fly-past on this momentous day shows nine



Liberator bombers in a box formation— aptly captured by the photographer over the saluting platform.

Leading the box formation was Wg Cdr Gohel in Liberator HE789. They had arrived at Palam only four days earlier and had practiced formation flying for the event.



The formation leader's logbook entry for 26 January 1950.

The flypast was well recognized with congratulatory messages flying in from the Operational Command Head Quarter and finally the Commander-in-Chief of the IAF, Sir Thomas Elmhirst.

Gohel's squadron returned to Poona to work on its training. Live bombing sorties were done in February and various cross-country long-duration flights were practiced. On 14 June 1950, he was called once again to do a formation flypast— at the inauguration of the National Defence Academy at Khadakwasla, on the outskirts of Poona.

Another Republic Day repeat was done on 26 January 1951, when No. 5 Squadron put up a formation flight again over Delhi, and for the first time over “King's Way”— today's Rajpath. This time the formation took off from Agra instead of Palam.

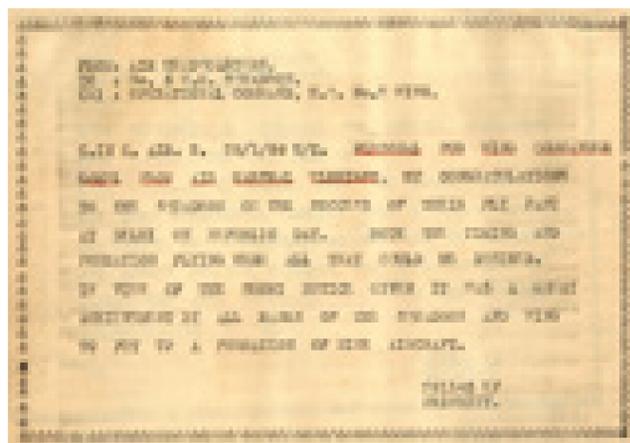


Photo of the box formation on 26 January 1950.

### *Re-Raising No.6 Squadron (February 1951)*

By this time, enough Liberators were supplied by HAL that a second B-24 Heavy Bomber Squadron was raised: No. 6 Squadron. The original No. 6 Squadron was raised in 1942 under the legendary Baba Mehar Singh, who took part with distinction in World War II. Towards the beginning of 1947, the Squadron was earmarked to convert to the transport role and at the time of Partition, the unit was allotted to Pakistan.

In February 1951, the Indian Air Force's No. 6 Squadron was re-raised, drawing upon its history and heritage from the original No. 6 Squadron— and Wg Cdr Gohel was tasked with



The personal congratulatory telegram to Wg Cdr Gohel from Air Marshal Elmhirst. The message acknowledges that the flypast was done at a short notice and left little to be desired in terms of perfection.



This undated photograph, taken sometime in June 1949 shows the visit of Sir Thomas Elmhirst to No. 5 Squadron. Left to right are Jain, Sqn Ldr Woods, an RAF Officer sent for training Indian Crews on the Liberator, Khares, Elmhirst, Gohel, Aspy Engineer, and JC Verma. The aircrew is still wearing the old-style Aircrew badges with the King's Crown instead of the Ashoka Lions.

raising the unit and getting it up to speed. Initially, only one Liberator appears to be on strength, HE806.

The Squadron was inspected by the CAS, Air Marshal Ronald Ivelaw-Chapman on 9 March 1951. Ivelaw-Chapman accompanied Gohel on a sortie in the Liberator on that day.

After nearly two years of flying with Liberators in Poona, the time came for Gohel to be posted out. In July 1951, he went to Air Head Quarter Delhi as the Deputy Director, Policy and Plans. This was followed by an OC Flying appointment with No. 3 Wing, Palam.

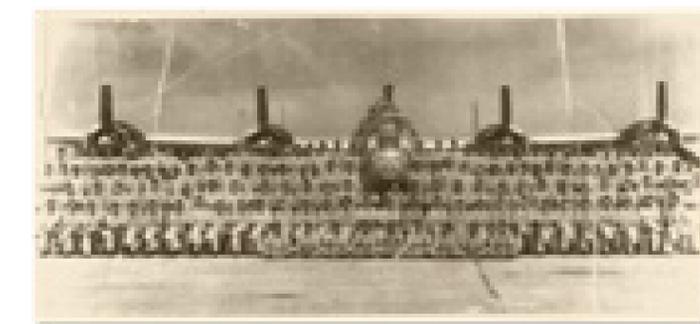


Sir R Ivelaw-Chapman, accompanied by Gp Capt R Atmaram, Station Commander of Poona, inspecting a Liberator of No. 5 Squadron. The photo is accompanied by the note "Highly Polished and Shining Liberators – credit to Plt Offr Sarvate and airmen and civilian followers of No. 5 Sqn IAF at Poona."



Sir R Ivelaw-Chapman, the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Air Force geared up in flight suit and parachute harness for his flight in No. 6 Squadron Liberator.

Much of flying during this time was on communication flights. Being at Palam gave him an opportunity to qualify on Jet aircraft. He qualified in the De Havilland Vampire fighter on 10 September 1953, flying with one of the units in Palam.



Group photo of No. 6 Squadron personnel taken on 26 June 1951 at Poona, on the occasion of the posting out of Wg Cdr HSR Gohel to Air Head Quarter. Command of the Squadron was now passed on to Victor Srihari.

In October 1953, Gohel went to complete the Staff Officer's Course at the DSSC in Wellington — an important qualification for officers aspiring for higher rank. The Course ran from 1 October 1953 to 31 July 1954.



Being at Palam as OC Flying with No. 3 Wing, Wg Cdr Gohel qualified and flew the first fighter jet, De Havilland Vampire FB52 (Single-Seater) in September 1953.

### *Commanding Officer (for a record fifth time!)— Return to No. 12 Squadron*

Having commanded four different flying units till that time (Conversion and Training Squadron, No. 12 Squadron, No. 5 Squadron, No. 6 Squadron), if Gohel had presumed his days as the CO of a Squadron were over, he would have been mistaken.

On 12 August 1954, HSR Gohel got his fifth stint as the CO of a flying unit! He was once again posted to No. 12 Squadron at Agra.

While the reasoning behind this is difficult to fathom, one can guess that there was a dearth of experienced officers on multi-engine aircraft. No. 12 Squadron was earmarked to induct a number of Fairchild C-119 Packet transport aircraft soon. This may have prompted the posting of Gohel, yet once again tasked with overseeing the induction of a new type of aircraft in IAF service.

The Packet was inducted in February 1955. A small batch of IAF pilots had already trained in the US on this aircraft, led by Sqn Ldr LS Grewal. And this core group of aircrew began to convert the remaining aircrew of No. 12 Squadron on the new type, including the CO. Gohel flew several familiarization flights with Lalu Grewal in February 1955.

One of the notable flights during his Packet days included a flight to Iran to ferry the Services Football Team for a friendly tournament.

Subsequently, in October 1955, he was posted out from No. 12 Squadron. He had completed the milestone of 3000 hours of flying. Note that at this time, he just completed 34 years



Fairchild Packet IK442, flown by Wg Cdr Gohel and Sqn Ldr LS Grewal on 16 February 1955. The early photo can be noted by the lack of the Jet Pack engine pod on the top of the aircraft.

of age, 14 of them in IAF service, and he was deemed senior enough to be sent to non-flying appointments.

### *Visit of Chou En Lai*

In December 1956, the Chinese Prime Minister Chou En Lai visited India. Wg Cdr Gohel was assigned as the officer in charge of the Air Force Air Lift contingent that the Indian Government put together for his travel. Gohel travelled with the Chinese Premier on the IAF's Viscount (IU-684), with Flt Lt BW Chauhan as the pilot.



The Chinese Prime Minister Chou En Lai in a photo taken at the Governor's Palace (Raj Bhavan) in Calcutta on 8 December 1956. This copy of the photograph was personally signed by the the Chinese Premier.

The contingent travelled all over the country in a period of ten days. Starting from Palam, they went to Poona, Bombay, Bangalore, Madras, Asansol, and Calcutta.

Chou En Lai's VIP trip ended on 10 December 1956. Six years later, it was Chou En Lai who authorized the military operations against India during the Indo-China War in October 1962!

### *Group Captain and TAC Commander*

Gohel was promoted to Gp Capt on 16 July 1962. In 1963, he took over command of 3 Tactical Air Center in Bagdogra. 3 TAC was aligned with the Army's XXXIII Corps to guard the northern border at Sikkim against any potential fighting. This gave him the opportunity to fly with the newly inducted Alouette III Helicopters— later known as the Chetak. The flying also took him to Bhutan on some occasions. In addition to the Alouette, he also had DHC 3 Otter aircraft at his disposal to carry flights to forward areas.

After completing his tenure with TAC, Gp Capt Gohel was posted back to Air Head Quarter, the opportunities at flying were few— though he kept himself current by flying Devons with the Air Head Quarter Communication Squadron. Over the subsequent years, the DeHavilland Devon was a common type that he flew.

This period was not without incidents, as he would recall— *“I force-landed twice (While flying the Devon). Once at Ambala with the engine sputtering and second with a feathered engine at Palam. I was flying a Devon from Srinagar to Palam. Near Ambala, the engines started missing due to defective and rusted ignition contact. I contacted Ambala, turned to Ambala and force landed with a sputtering engine. I did not feather the prop.*



Gohel as TAC Commander at Bagdogra (far right). This was taken during the visit of Defence Minister YB Chavan and Governor Padmaja Naidu in June 1963. Lt Gen PP Kumaramangalam can be seen standing on the extreme left.



Visit of the CAS, Air Marshal Aspy Engineer to Siliguri. Gp Capt Gohel is standing second from left, while Wg Cdr E Dhatigara, Kc can be seen on extreme right.



DeHavilland Devon aircraft

*(Next) at Palam, I was flying with Bobb. The engine failed while flying and I feathered the propeller and landed at Palam with one engine non-operative. The cause of the engine failure was not known but it was likely another ignition failure. Years earlier, when Sardar Patel was travelling by IAF aircraft, the engine oil temperature went high and the aircraft was force landed in a river bed near Jaipur. After that flight, the Oil Cooler was enlarged and modified for more cooling in the tropics.”*

In August 1969, he was given command of 7 TAC at Ahmedabad, which would be his last posting in the IAF.

His last flight in an IAF aircraft was undertaken only a few months earlier, co-piloting an Alouette III Chetak Z917 along with Flt Lt Bilimoria on a VIP flight— the passenger being Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi on a tour of flood-hit areas in Gujarat.

Retirement came soon after on 15 February 1971, just ahead of him reaching the age of 50 years. Gohel noted in his logbook, he had completed 30 years and 11 days in uniform— and his final tally of hours stood at 4027 hours!

At the time of his retirement, he was one of the three surviving officers from the 8th Pilots Course still in service. After his retirement, 8 PC was still represented by two of his course mates and friends— Air Marshal AR Pandit and Air Vice Marshal Syed Abbas Hussain.

*From Biplanes to Bombers, the planes he flew...*

FLYING	DATE
Tiger Moth Flight	8 January 1941
Tiger Moth Solo	28 February 1941
Hawker Hart	September 1941
Audax	September 1941
Westland Lysander	5 March 1942
Harvard	15 March 1943
Vultee Vengeance	7 February 1944
Hawker Hurricane	24 November 1944
Fairchild Cornell	18 January 1945
Supermarine Spitfire	20 January 1946
C-47 Dakota Qualified	8 April 1948
B-24 Liberator	5 June 1949
Devon	14 August 1951
Auster	6 June 1953
Vampire FB52	10 September 1953
C-119 Packet	9 February 1955
Viscount	1 December 1956
HT-2	7 April 1959
T6-G Harvard	13 April 1959
Otter	5 May 1963
Ilyushin Il-14 Super Constellation	9 June 1969
Alouette	5 May 1963 & 22 January 1970

*Gp Capt Gohel's Medals*



The top set of six medals mounted together represented the medals that he wore till the late 1960s.

(Left to right) the General Service Medal with Jammu and Kashmir 1948 Clasp, the Indian Independence Medal, the 1939-45 Star, the Burma Star, the 1939-45 War Medal, and the India Service Medal.

Below the main group are three single medals that were issued but were not mounted in his previous set. These include the 1965 Sangram Medal, the Videsh Seva Medal with Nepal Clasp, and the Sainya Seva Medal with Bengal Assam Clasp.

*Progression of Ranks*

RANK POSITION	FROM	TILL	DURATION
Civil Pilot	4 January 1941	14 April 1941	3 months 10 days
Cadet Officer	14 April 1941	14 September 1941	5 months
Pilot Officer	14 September 1941	May 1943	1 Year 7 months
Flying Officer	May 1943	14 January 1946	3 Years 1 month
Flight Lieutenant	14 January 1946	May 1947	1 Year 4 Months
Squadron Leader	May 1947	May 1949	2 Years
Wing Commander	May 1949	16 July 1962	12 years 2 Months
Group Captain	16 July 1962	15 February 1971	8 Years 7 Months



The Flying Officer Rank epaulettes belonging to HSR Gohel. IAF Officers received the "IAF Volunteer Reserve" Commission – signified by the "VR" badges on top of the rank rings.

—Jagan Pillarisetti

*Military aviation and history enthusiast.  
Author of many books, Pillarisetti is also  
the webmaster of the 'Bharat Rakshak' IAF website.*

## *I am humbled by the exploits and accomplishments of such men (and women) as Gp Capt Gohel.*



I am the American son of a Liverpool, England woman whose first husband, Sgt George Plank, also of Liverpool, disappeared on 29 February 1944 when his British Royal Air Force 159 Squadron Liberator was shot down over Rangoon, Burma. 159 Squadron was based at Digri, West Bengal, India, 65 miles west of Calcutta. With Mom's blessing, I delved into the past, starting in 1990, in an attempt to uncover at least some of the mystery behind George's loss. To my great astonishment, it became my glorious obsession, and I learned an outrageous amount of detail.

As time progressed, I branched out and focused upon the bigger picture of Liberators flying out of India and Ceylon, mainly RAF-related, during the War. And then, through my friendship with extraordinary Indian author/historian Jagan Pillarisetti, it was only natural that I would also learn that Hindustan Aircraft Limited cleverly rebuilt over forty former RAF Liberators left behind when the British departed India post-war and that a core of these Liberators actively flew in

Indian skies until the late 1960s.

Through Jagan, I also first became aware of Group Captain Himmat Singh Ravubha Gohel, and, in particular, his association with the former RAF Liberators. Gp Capt Gohel was the Commanding Officer of two of the Indian Air Force Liberator squadrons from 1949 to 1951 before continuing his rise in the IAF:

- 5 Squadron: 22 April 1949 - 13 February 1951
- 6 Squadron: 02 February 1951 - 11 July 1951.

A brief chronological review of his service record can be found here: <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/Database/1705>.

Currently residing in the United States, Jagan Pillarisetti is an expert on the Royal Indian Air Force and Indian Air Force matters. His multi-faceted dedication and generosity have resulted in the IAF section ([www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF](http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF)) of a very popular military history website, "*Bharat Rakshak*"

and also his website on vintage aircraft in India, "*Warbirds of India*" (<http://www.warbirds.in>).

With Jagan's involvement, I met two of India's finest aviation-related authors and researchers: Sree Kumar and currently-serving IAF Air Commodore Vikram "Polly" Singh. In addition, I met Gp Capt Gohel's daughter, Mrs. Gita Gohel Rathore. Gita posted various pages from her father's impressive logbook online, and from these, I correlated his entries against the small list of surviving Liberators. I was delighted to learn that three of the Liberators he personally piloted survive today:

- IAF serial number HE771/RAF serial number KH401 (at the Fantasy of Flight Museum in Polk City, Florida, USA),
- HE773/KN820 (at the Canada Aviation and Space Museum, Ottawa, Canada), and
- HE807/KN751 (at the Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon, London, UK).

Thankfully, the Government of India had the foresight to preserve these three Liberators, plus two more iconic complete Liberators and one instructional airframe (rebuilt

to become the sole still-flying Liberator, of the six survivors).

Although Gp Capt Gohel's logbook reveals that he only piloted three of these six, their preservation means that his relatives can better connect with his past by seeing these aircraft, all of which — not just the ones he personally piloted—were under his command. As a result, it is hoped that they will feel even prouder of his contributions to Indian Air Force history, and to their security in a challenging world.

In addition to the three survivors listed above, the other three former IAF Liberators survivors are:

- HE877/KH304 (at the Pima Air and Space Museum, Tucson, Arizona, USA),
- HE924/KH342 (at the Indian Air Force Museum, Palam, New Delhi, INDIA), and
- T-18/KH191 (maintained and flown by the Collings Foundation, Stow, Massachusetts, USA).

Only one of the surviving ex-IAF Liberators is in India. The others are thousands of miles away. The Internet is especially valuable in presenting glimpses of all of these aircraft to

anyone who is appreciative of the past, including Gp Capt Gohel's family. Searching via "google.com" can uncover photos and details.

On "YouTube.com", by searching on "*Collings foundation B-24*", one can find numerous videos of the exterior of the former T-18 and also interior footage, including video taken during the flight. Again, while the airframe is an ex-IAF aircraft, Gp Capt Gohel did not pilot this beauty.

### *The first of the three surviving Liberators piloted by Gp Capt Gohel, HE771/KH401:*

HE771 can be seen on YouTube, here:

- Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZYtoecBuc>
- Part 2: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1Z\\_uFM1B2Q&t=986s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i1Z_uFM1B2Q&t=986s) .

Here is another photo of HE771, taken from the website <http://www.aerialvisuals.ca/AirframeDossier.php?Serial=34226> (which also shows other HE771 images).



Remarkably, because this former IAF Liberator was never restored, the aircraft, though dusty and aged nowadays, is a spectacular time capsule providing a direct glimpse into the past—to a time when Gp Capt Gohel piloted this very aircraft. It had been flown from India to the United States, and I remember when it was still being flown in the US by its owner at the time, American restaurateur Dave Tallichet, a wartime bomber pilot. Kermit Weeks, the current owner, decided to ground the aircraft soon after purchasing it, but no doubt this gem could be made flyable again. What a stunning original Liberator it is now, on the ground, and it would be, in flight.

Specifically, Kermit's "Fantasy of Flight" website page devoted to this aircraft is located here: <https://www.fantasyofflight.com/collection/aircraft/currently-not-showing-in-museum/wwii/1944-consolidated-b-24j-liberator> .

A 9"x12" softcover book of colour photos of this aircraft (including the cover image) when it was in the hands of Dave Tallichet was published in 1994. While the book does have an American slant, the aircraft is, undeniably, the former Indian Air Force's HE771. The book is long out of print but worth tracking down and purchasing. Copies can be found by searching *www.bookfinder.com* for the following title and ISBN Number.

THE SOLDIER

ISBN Number: 0-943231-61-2.

The used copies seem plentiful and relatively cheap, as seen on 7 October 2020 at:

[https://www.bookfinder.com/search/?author=&title=&lang=en&isbn=0-943231-61-2&submitBtn=-Search&new\\_used=\\*&destination=us&currency=USD&mode=basic&st=sr&ac=qr](https://www.bookfinder.com/search/?author=&title=&lang=en&isbn=0-943231-61-2&submitBtn=-Search&new_used=*&destination=us&currency=USD&mode=basic&st=sr&ac=qr)

The shipping destination and currency can be changed; the above gives the price in US dollars and it uses my US mailing address for calculating postage.

The book is also available via various amazon websites, including one copy at *amazon.in* on 7 October, here:

[https://www.amazon.in/Soldier-Consolidated-Liberator-Living-history/dp/0943231612/ref=sr\\_1\\_10?dchild=1&key-words=michelle+crean&qid=1602094359&sr=8-10](https://www.amazon.in/Soldier-Consolidated-Liberator-Living-history/dp/0943231612/ref=sr_1_10?dchild=1&key-words=michelle+crean&qid=1602094359&sr=8-10)

Other images of HE771 can be seen by googling on "HE771" or "Kermit Weeks" and "B-24".

### *The second of the three surviving Liberators piloted by Gp Capt Gohel, HE773/KN820, in the collection of the Canada Aviation and Space Museum in Ottawa, Canada:*

The aircraft is, strangely, held in storage, and not on public display. Although Canada was gifted this IAF bomber by the Government of India, it was ultimately painted in the fake livery of a Canadian Liberator in Coastal Command in World War II. The web page devoted to this airframe is found here:

<https://ingeniumcanada.org/artifact/consolidated-liberator-gr-viii>

Here are some photos of this aircraft in Canadian hands, from one website:

[http://silverhawkauthor.com/canadian-war-planes-3-the-second-world-war-and-postwar-consolidated-b24-liberator\\_710.htFLIBERATORml](http://silverhawkauthor.com/canadian-war-planes-3-the-second-world-war-and-postwar-consolidated-b24-liberator_710.htFLIBERATORml)

The first image shows HE773 circa the time of its flight from India to Canada when it was handed over to the Canadians.

The second two show the aircraft after the fake Coastal Command paint was applied.



A website I had found at some point, now unknown to me, offered multiple photos of HE773 in storage in Canada after it had been externally restored and repainted in the Coastal Command livery. Here are four of these photos, showing the cockpit area that Gp Capt Gohel knew so well:



Incidentally, here is a photo of this same airframe from when it flew as KN820 on RAF 159 Squadron in January 1946:



*The third of the three surviving Liberators piloted by Gp Capt Gohel, HE807/KN751, on display at the Royal Air Force Museum in Hendon, London, UK:*

The third and last of Gp Capt Gohel's three surviving Liberators was gifted to the RAF by the Government of India in 1974. After being overhauled at Hindustan Aircraft Limited, this Liberator was flown to England in July of that year. It was on display at the RAF Museum's Cosford location until 2005, when it was moved to the main RAF Museum in London. It has been on display there ever since.

The RAF Museum's page on this Liberator is found here:

<https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/research/collections/consolidated-b24l-20-fo-liberator/>

A PDF of HE807's history is found here:

<https://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/documents/collections/74-AF-790-Consolidated-Liberator.pdf>

Here is a photo of HE807 on display in London; more images can be found via "google.com" and by searching "YouTube.com", as well:



Below, I photographed HE807's forward fuselage in 1991, when visiting the Cosford museum. The gentleman is legendary RAF F/Lt John Gauntlett DFC, who piloted the Liberator (but not this one) on two tours of combat ops with the RAF during World War II, based in India. Regarding

his exploits aboard Liberators during the war, he was very modest, and, typical of the man, I could not get him to look into the camera for this photo.



*A close-up from the same photo*

Finally, let me say that I am humbled by the exploits and accomplishments of such men (and women) as Gp Capt Gohel, and I can honestly say that nationality is of no importance to me in the vast majority of cases! Typically, it matters not that a man was an Englishman or an Indian. The person does not have to be an American for my interest to be

roused. To me, dedication, accomplishment, and leadership transcend political boundaries.

Far too many people are small-minded in thinking only in terms of their own village, or region, or country. Not me, and it has truly been an honour to learn even a little bit about Gp Capt HSR Gohel's legacy, even though I am a Yank!

May this small piece of writing help his family, colleagues, and other friends better understand his role in keeping them safe and in defining the meanings of courage, honour, determination, and sacrifice.

—**Matt Poole**

*A retired US Government Geospatial Analyst  
and an expert in Satellite Imagery and Aerial Photography.*

*Poole has authored many books.*

## *His was a remarkable career, with understated involvement in several of the most crucial episodes in the history of the Indian Air Force.*



*KS Nair*

Gp Capt HSR Gohel was born in 1921 and was commissioned in the Indian Air Force at the age of 20, in September 1941. He was one of 28 young men commissioned as 8th Pilots Course. Ten of the 28 would be killed, mostly in action or crashes, before the end of the Second World War.

Young Himmat Singh's *ab initio* training was at EFTS Jodhpur, flying Tiger Moths. This was followed by Basic training at SFTS Ambala, flying Harvards. His batch was awarded wings on completion of their training in Ambala.

Like many service personnel of that time, he was somewhat reticent about his service record and has left no memoir. However, his photographs and logbooks have been carefully preserved by his daughter Mrs. Gita Gohel Rathore, and provide a valuable basis for reconstructing much of his career, as well as recapturing something of India and the Indian Air Force of that time.

As far as can be assessed from these records, carefully reconstructed by Jagan Pillarisetti and Anchit Gupta of *Bharat Rakshak*, his first squadron posting (other than a brief period at No. 2 Squadron, probably for type familiarisation) was to No. 4 Squadron of the IAF. The squadron had itself just been formed and was flying Westland Lysander army co-operation aircraft, the second aircraft type operated by the infant Indian Air Force of the time.

He moved on to No. 7 Squadron, where he flew higher-performance aircraft with a clearer combat role. During his time with the squadron, he first flew Vultee Vengeance two-seat dive bombers, under the command of the highly-regarded Sqn Ldr Hem Chaudhuri (brother of later Army Chief General JN Chaudhuri) in the critical battles around Imphal and Kohima in 1944. The following year, he flew Hawker Hurricanes in the fighter-reconnaissance role, in another tour of duty, as the squadron supported the Indian Army in its thrust towards Rangoon in 1945, under another highly-regarded CO, Sqn Ldr PC Lal (later our Air Chief). These were crucial battles of the Burma theatre of the Second World War, though still sadly under-recorded in Western accounts of the War.

Immediately after the War, in 1946, Flying Officer Gohel was a member of what was now the Royal Indian Air Force contingent of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan. Participation in this role was a unique and remarkable experience, for a small number of young Indian officers of the time.

On his return to India, he converted to the Dakota transport aircraft and flew with No. 12 Squadron on promotion to Flight Lieutenant. He appears to have joined the squadron while they were still operating from Srinagar, where they had been based for the 1947-48 Kashmir Ops. From this time onwards, he appears to have become as one of the Indian Air Force's key multi-engine specialists.

Promoted to Squadron Leader the following year, he took command of India's first Heavy Bomber Squadron, the newly-raised No. 5 Squadron at Poona, flying the B-24 Liberator. This followed the tragic death of the squadron's first CO, Sqn Ldr JRS Dantra, in a freak ground accident, and he would have been specifically chosen to restore squadron morale and spirit at this difficult time.

The stage was thus set for the first Republic Day flypast

on 26 January 1950, at which Sqn Ldr Gohel put together a formation of nine B-24 Liberator heavy bombers to participate, at short notice and in close formation, in the nation's first Republic Day flypast. Given that the aircraft were reconditioned from abandoned World War hulks, with attendant reliability challenges, this was a singular achievement. It was marked by a memorable congratulatory signal from Air Marshal Sir Thomas Elmhirst, the first post-Independence Commander-in-Chief (as the Chiefs were then designated) of the Indian Air Force.

In subsequent years, promoted to Wing Commander in 1953, he also commanded No. 6 Squadron, flying the same B-24 Liberator type as No. 5, but in the distinct role of maritime reconnaissance. He also spent a period in command of his old Dakota-operating squadron, No. 12.

He then moved, inevitably at senior rank, to a succession of command and staff roles, at Air Headquarters, as OC Flying at Palam (one of the most demanding roles in the Air Force of that time), and in command of two Tactical Air Centres (one of which, 3 TAC, supported the same XXXIII Corps of the Indian Army which he had supported from the air as a young

Hurricane pilot during the dash to Rangoon in 1945). He retired in early 1971, but almost certainly had some reserve liability during the 1971 war— which could be the subject of a whole new family research project!

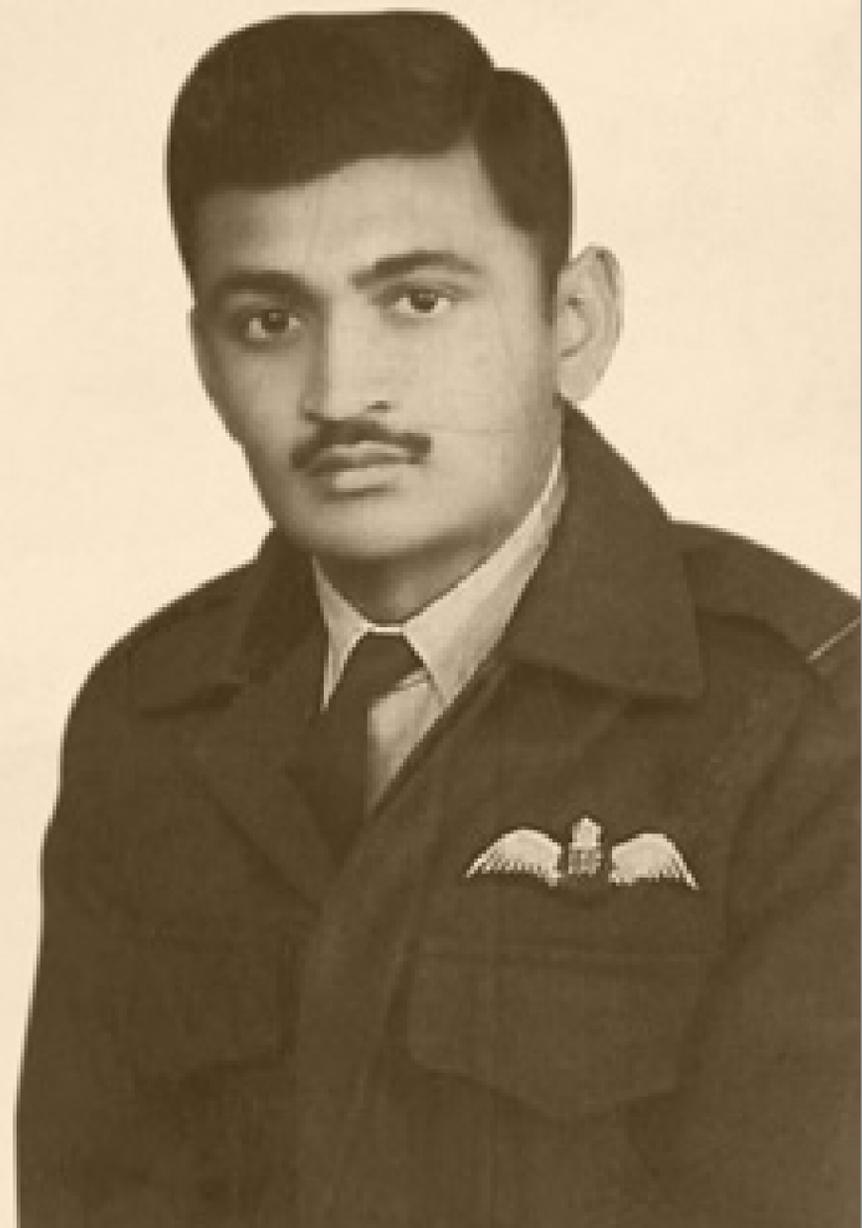
It was a remarkable career, with understated involvement in several of the most crucial episodes in the history of the Indian Air Force— Imphal and Kohima, Rangoon, the Occupation Force in Japan, the 1947-48 Kashmir Ops, and the raising of new squadrons and the development of new Air Force roles and responsibilities. For Indian aviation history followers, the only regret is that he did not live long enough to share his stories first-hand. His carefully-scanned photographs and logbook are the next-best resource, whenever the country looks back.

—KS Nair

*Son and son-in-law of IAF officers who served from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s. Nair is an Indian aviation history enthusiast and author, who has published two books and about 70 articles on the topic.*

*Great pilots are made, not born.  
A man may possess good eyesight, sensitive hands,  
and perfect coordination, but the end result is only  
fashioned by steady coaching, much practice,  
and experience.*

Air Vice-Marshal J. E. 'Johnnie' Johnson, RIAF



*Back cover:  
Flying Officer Gohel and his gunner  
Sergeant Baij Nath in a Vultee  
Vengeance sortie over Imphal in April  
1944.*



"It is very clear that Gp Capt Gohel absolutely cherished his time in the Indian Air Force and was very proud of what he did. Even though he is no more with us, his writings in the logbooks have left behind a permanent record of some of his thoughts that are wonderful to read through."

*Jagan Pillarisetti*



"May this small piece of writing help his family, colleagues, and other friends better understand his role in keeping them safe and in defining the meanings of courage, honour, determination, and sacrifice."

*Matt Poole*



"The Record of service page of the logbook is, I always find, one of the most useful original documents in reconstructing a service officer's career. This one is clearly, particularly detailed!"

*K S Nair*



"Such documents and personal data of veterans are priceless and should also get a place in the Air Force Museum."

*Wg Cdr Ajit Kumar Jhala (Retd.)*