

THE EXTRA BURDEN

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Imagine a family of three children and their mother huddled around a transistor radio through two weeks of cold December nights—ears pricked to catch every word of the news reader through the static. Imagine sitting in a darkened room with a solitary candle creating eerie shadows on the on the blackened window panes. Imagine shivering and breaking out in cold sweat in spite of the room heater. Imagine hoping that no news is good news.

It should not be hard to do considering that I am referring to the first fortnight of December 1971 when hostilities broke out between India and Pakistan. My father, the late V.C.Mankotia, was commanding the air force base at Guwahati and the rest of the family was ensconced at the other end of the country.

The Eastern Air Command, the operational command of the IAF in the eastern sector, based in Shillong, had squadrons of Hunters, Su-7s, Gnats and MiG-21s at various bases. At Guwahati, Caribous were operated by 33 Squadron.

The Caribou was a Canadian tactical transport plane designed to supply the battlefield with troops and supplies and evacuate casualties on the return journey. It could takeoff and land from short landing strips. It was a rugged aircraft and was used extensively in the North East. Its maximum speed was only 216mph.

The IAF had gone into action within hours of Pakistan's pre-emptive strikes of 3-4 December 1971. Counter air sorties were so successful that the PAF was neutralized within two days of the outbreak of the war.

What is not well known is the role of Caribous as a bomber in the war. My father came up with the innovative idea of converting Caribous to bombers. The IAF had only conceptualized the usage of AN-12s (the Russian cargo plane) as bombers. The AN-12 was much bigger, sturdier and faster plane. Converting the Caribou as a bomber at first glance appeared to be foolhardy. However, the Eastern Air Command saw merit in the idea. The subsequent events resoundingly vindicated the concept. The PAF had been knocked out by then but the enemy still had plenty of anti-aircraft guns which could be devastating. The planes, fitted with old World War II bombs, flew at the tree-top level in complete darkness. Approaching the airfields they pulled up and dropped their deadly cargo from the open back. Many planes came back with bullet holes caused by small arms fire. Thankfully there were no casualties. These planes played a significant role in not only causing extensive damage to Kurmitola and Tezgaon air bases but also by building psychological pressure through continuous bombing on Lt. Gen. Niazi and his army to surrender. The AN-12s from 44 Squadron (which squadron my father had commanded before getting

posted to Guwahati) also served with distinction. Once these bases were put out of action, the IAF gained complete air superiority over East Pakistan.

My father led many such bombing missions. Wing Commander Sane, VPS Gill, Dellinder Kohli and Rajesh Pilot were some of the pilots who took part in the sorties. It was an act of the highest courage to undertake these missions in a plane not conceived, designed or ever used anywhere in the world as a bomber. I wonder what thoughts surrounded these brave airmen as their planes rolled down the runway in the middle of the night.

Back home we were totally unaware of the details. The radio was the only source of information and announcements of the IAF's various victories were greeted with loud cheers. Yet these cheers were tempered by the dread of having to hear news of the casualties which would inevitably follow. In retrospect, it's a good thing that we were completely ignorant of the bombing missions of the Caribous. The very thought of a slow flying plane, conceived and built only for transport duties, ponderously flying in the dark over tree tops deep in the enemy territory, dropping bombs and climbing steeply up, a sitting duck to the enemy artillery, would have given sleepless nights to even the most hardened military person.

The IAF recognized my father's contribution and awarded him. Using the Caribous as a bomber was indeed a very bold and imaginative concept which was used with great success. The war in the eastern sector culminating in the surrender ceremony on 16th December 1971 had several actors, amongst them the humble Caribou.

The Caribou, after 25 years of distinguished service with the IAF, has now retired. Its permanent parking place is at the IAF Museum adjacent to the secondary runway at Delhi airport. It stands proud in its silver plumage as indeed it should. As my aircraft lands and takes off I never fail to look out of the window and give it a silent salute and bow my head in the memory of those magnificent men who flew these machines.