

Streaks across the Indian sky

The Indian Air Force had bought 24 Streak Shadow microlights, to scare off kites which were bringing down its jets, and for its staff to fly for fun. There was only one problem: it needed the company's test pilot to show the local chaps the ropes.

Enter Anthony Preston, in the first of a remarkable four-part series. Photos courtesy of the Indian Air Force; cartoons by Ben Ashman

AIR Force Station Hindan lies to the north-east of New Delhi, by the town of Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh. Named after the river marking its northern boundary, despite being in the middle of the sub-continent and so near the Himalayas, it sits only 700ft above sea level.

In the last month of the last year of the 20th century, Hindan, then an active fighter station, was the setting for an unusual event of which this is an account.

In a way Roald Dahl's gremlins would have envied, some of the kites which thermalled regally above the field using their magnificent six-foot wingspan had achieved martyrdom by bringing down three Indian Air Force MiGs within a few days.

Something had to be done, and before long it was decided that the IAF would buy up to 24 microlights to scare off our feathered friends.

Since this would probably be the largest single order for microlights in aviation history, there was keen international competition.

In Britain, flight evaluation trials took place in the CFM Streak Shadow fitted with a Rotax 582, but by the time the contract was signed, the Indian Air Force had opted for four-stroke power and, when the specification was finally agreed after a visit of CFM managing director David Moore to New Delhi, it was for 24 Streaks fitted with the Rotax 912.

One advantage of the four-stroke over the two-stroke was a modest reduction in noise; a possible drawback for this application, since the plan was to use them as kite evictors at a number of fighter stations around the country.

In addition, the IAF, in an inspired initiative that other air forces would be wise to imitate, had recently set up an organization to provide a range of aeronautical activities that would benefit the air force in a number of ways.

The Adventure Cell, as it was called, provided the opportunity for all personnel to take part in parachut-



Streak during exercise Poorvi Abhyas at Hasimara Air Force Station

ing, paragliding, hang gliding, gliding and microlight flying.

Grassroots flying was of obvious benefit to active aircrew, and it only took a couple of flights for the fighter pilots at AF Hindan to appreciate the value of flying a three-axis microlight. All the lessons learned as a student pilot came flooding back. Suddenly the relevance of the weather and the wind and all the fundamental theories of flight took on major importance. It was a rejuvenating experience and one that would undeniably improve their overall flying skills. Even a MiG27 relies on Bernoulli, after all, and flying at the extremes of inertia extend the performance envelope of the pilot himself.

While the pilot improves himself and, in the process, adds to his job satisfaction and pleasure, so too does the ground crew through the Adventure Cell.

It's fair to assume that the majority who decide on a career in this particular service have some interest in flying, so to be provided with the means to explore the pleasures and excitements of flight through the service is a major fillip. The favourable influence on morale, through a better acquaintance with the job the pilots do, is obvious. The gaining of knowledge about what makes an aircraft fly, how they're made, and the element in which they are at home, adds to the sense of involvement. The CFM Streak had arrived in India carrying a heavy responsibility.

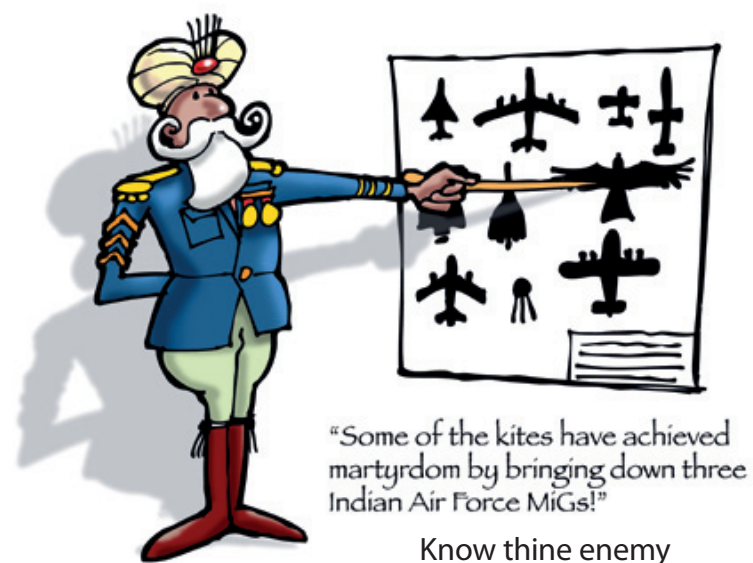
Originally the aircraft were to be supplied in four separate shipments of six. However, given the

changed engine specification, the IAF revised the schedule to permit evaluation of an initial two. An IAF test pilot flew both aircraft from CFM's aerodrome, Framlingham (Parham), in the latter half of August 1999, and issued a favourable report. Both bright white Streaks, factory serial numbers 307 and 308, were test flown under CFM's B Conditions approval, carrying registrations G-8501 and G-8502 respectively. The pilot returned to India to take up an appointment in Bombay as test pilot for the Russian MiG makers.

For their journey to New Delhi, 8501 and 8502 were consigned to a 13m container of the Yangming Line and shipped aboard the *Zim Shanghai* on 20 October from Felixstowe to the Indian port of Nhava Sheva. A month later, they cleared customs at Bombay and made the journey by rail to Palam, the military half of New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport.

It had been agreed that the flight trials in India would take place under the guidance of, and with the assistance of, the CFM chief test pilot, and so it was that on Monday 13 December I arrived in New Delhi. ▸

SO DENSE IS THE POLLUTION ABOVE NEW DELHI THAT IT SWIRLS IN TANGIBLE CHUNKS, THE COLOUR OF FRENCH ONION SOUP



FEATURE OF THE MONTH



WINS AN AIRBOX AWARE 5



Facing page Indian Air Force Streaks in formation

Left Kamikaze kites (Ben Ashman)

Above Shadow and kite, by Anthony Preston

▷ Next morning I waited in the hotel for the IAF driver, due at 7.30. He arrived at 7.55.

"You were expected at 7.30," said I. "Sir, I'm late" he explained carefully.

At Palam, I met Wing Commander G from AF Hindan, wearing a black flying suit and ready to accompany me to AF Hindan in G-8501.

Wingco G was from Tamil country, down south, and had a dark complexion, boxer's nose and the requisite moustache.

All IAF pilots sport moustaches in true RAF style, but the Wingco's never quite concealed a mischievous smile every time he made some joke. He was a man of great charm and wit, and served as an ideal introduction to the officers I met later.

In a huge hangar, sharing the space with a bright yellow but dusty Dakota, stood the two Streaks which I'd last flown at Parham on 9 September.

Within minutes, a team of crack technicians surrounded the machines to rig them, a task rapidly mastered, despite an over-abundance of enthusiasm and hands.

The Wing Commander then set about getting clearance for a microlight to depart India's main international airport. In this

AS WE TAXIED, BRIGHTLY PLUMED PEACOCKS STRUTTED AND PEERED AT US. DAZZLING GREEN PARROTS FLASHED ACROSS OUR PATH, AND OCCASIONALLY I GLIMPSED, DEEP IN THE FOREST, BLUEBULLS, A CROSS BETWEEN A DEER AND A HORSE, WHOSE DISTURBINGLY INTELLIGENT FACES BELIED THE FACT THAT THEY REGULARLY WALKED INTO THE MAINS-VOLTAGE BOUNDARY FENCE

energetic, bustling country, things may take time but they do finally happen.

Rigged, checked and rolled out onto a vast apron, G-8501 looked diminutive but dazzling in its new surroundings. The Rotax 912 started on the second compression and, while it warmed, a lengthy discussion with the tower took place. The word microlight was new to IGI Airport.

Soon, differences settled, Wingco G as P1 in the front, 8501 was taxiing jauntily to the threshold of runway 27, canopy open, attracting attention from the mighty Boeing 747 and Airbus 310 under whose noses it sped. Six separate frequencies were programmed into the Icom IC-A22 for the 40min trip to AF Hindan.

I soon became accustomed to the ambient daytime visibility in and around New Delhi. A stratum from ground level up to 3000ft, sometimes 4000, is made up of dust and the emission of uninhibited smoke from industrial chimneys and the exhaust from several million worn out and ill-adjusted vehicle engines. So dense is the pollution that it swirls in tangible chunks, the colour of French onion soup. A tall factory chimney provided a useful landmark in a terrain of uniform house

blocks, set like sand bricks on a beach half swept away, and viewed through the shallows of a muddy sea.

The Garmin GPS III Pilot was unable to find enough satellites or cling to them, but Wingco G, unaccustomed to the luxury of time to spare to ponder the map and explore the detail of the earth's surface, had no problem with dead-reckoning navigation.

At Hindan, we landed on the numbers of 27, and needed little more than the numbers. Taxiing to the hangar meant a long journey on well maintained tarmac through a corridor of tangled undergrowth, interrupted every 100m or so by dispersal points. On either side brightly plumed peacocks strutted and peered at the plain white object as it beetled by. Dazzling green parrots flashed across our path, and occasionally I glimpsed, staring out from deeper in the forest, bluebills, a cross between a deer and a horse whose disturbingly intelligent face belied the fact that they regularly walked into the mains-voltage boundary fence.

Around every bend in the taxiway, we encountered colourfully robed men and women burdened with bundles of twigs.

The hangar, once again, was vast for such a small resident. G-8501 was wheeled at a forward march into the dark, echoing void, and the foot-thick hangar doors rumbled home.

The Officers' Mess, where we lunched each day on an unvarying diet of rice and curry followed by jelabis (doughy baklava-like concoctions swamped in sugar juice), was sparsely furnished and bleak inside and out.

The outer walls were painted in peeling yellow, green and red, and in the centre was a badminton court which had not been used in an age, its sad net sagging.

Above our heads as we ate, great ceiling fans swept desultorily around at 20rpm or so, as if themselves fatigued by the heat.

In place of the rogues gallery to be found in the hallowed dining halls of RAF messes – the parade of beribboned top brass in oils and heavy gilt frames – there were just three oil paintings: one of imperilled sailing ships on a tormented sea, one of stylized flowers and the third a fantasmagorical creation of shapes and designs that might have been modern art, but clearly wasn't. As a disincentive to linger over the meal, despite good food and

good company, the décor was decidedly effective.

Although I was staying at a perfectly adequate hotel nearby, I suddenly realized that Virgin Air Miles had earned me a couple of nights at the Le Meridien hotel in downtown New Delhi. It was a good excuse for a treat and, running greater risks than any MiG27 or Streak Shadow pilot would ever contemplate, I took a taxi into town.

It was to be an experience I would never forget. □

- Next month: a life or death journey and a meeting with Elvis.

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