

Monday 26th October, 2009

The Island

Leisure

by Capt. G.A. Fernando

In April 1971, Ceylon (as the country was then known) was hit by an island-wide insurrection launched by disaffected, mostly Sinhalese youth of the Marxist persuasion who had formed themselves into the JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna) with backing believed to have been provided by North Korea. A group of civil aviation pilots, of which I was one, volunteered to fly with the then Royal Ceylon Air Force (RCyAF) which had been placed into combat mode for the duration of the Insurgency.

We were initially posted to China Bay for our training. It was there that I met Zachariah ('Zak'), a Sergeant-Pilot. He was barrel-shaped, and was grounded from flying duties because of a knee injury sustained while playing rugby (rugger) for the Air Force. Following a few months of uncertainty he was allowed to fly again. I remember that day well. After 'Zak' was cleared, he was so thrilled that he flew his Chipmunk to the west of the airfield and performed five or six consecutive loops for our benefit. He knew that we (the volunteer pilots) would be watching from the officers' mess balcony, so he put on a show for our benefit!

Later, it was my good fortune to fly with 'Zak' for several months as his co-pilot ('second dickie') in a de Havilland D.H.104 Dove twin-engine airplane of the RCyAF. Although a Pilot Officer, I had only 80 hours in my log book, while 'Zak' had logged over 800. At one stage, the Air Force received reports that North Korean ships had infiltrated the shipping lane southeast of the island and were dropping off arms supplies to the rebels on the beaches off Yala and Kirinda. Our daily task was to fly south from China Bay (Trincomalee) to this shipping lane and descend to literally deck level to copy down the names of the ships in the lane. Then, climbing to a higher altitude we would deploy our trailing radio aerial and speak on long-range HF (high-frequency) radio to Air Force Head Quarters in Colombo and relay the names of the ships for checking purposes.

The trailing aerial was a steel cable wrapped around a wheel with a handle. At the end of the cable there were five or six lead balls to weigh the cable down. The balls and cable were wound down through a tube, ideally to a length equal to half the wave-length of the frequency you are working on.

Modern aircraft are so long that the HF antenna could be positioned along the fuselage of the aircraft. One drawback was to remember to reel the cable in, by means of the handle, after use.

There was a story of a Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot who forgot to reel the aerial in, and was making his final approach for landing over the Base Commanding Officer's home. It so happened that the CO was hosting some important guests to tea in the garden that evening, and the lead balls smashed the tea pot!

After our ship-spotting exercise, the return leg to China Bay was most exciting. We would fly low all the way back. Upon reaching Pottuvil we would turn inland and fly toward Lahugala to look for wild elephants. We chased the

elephants and watched them run with trunks raised. Our regular low-flying in that region came to a halt when a RCyAF circular was issued stating that there were frequent reports of Air Force aircraft flying low and disturbing the birds at the Kumana Bird Sanctuary!

During the 1971 Insurgency, some members of the Air Force rugby team were accused of being JVP operatives. It was alleged that they had been assigned to poison the water tanks at the Katunayake Air Force base.

Consequently, the airmen were arrested and incarcerated in an old Dutch fort called Hammenheil, which was situated on a tiny island between Karinagar and

Kays, at the entrance to the Jaffna Lagoon. Hammenheil was built by the Portuguese, who named it 'Fortaleza do Cais dos Elefantes'. Later, when taken over by the Dutch in 1658, it acquired the name 'Hammenheil'. At the time the RCyAF personnel were interned there, the fort was manned by 30 staff. In the 1960s Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Keuneman lived there.

When we were attached to the Task Force for Anti-Illicit Immigration (TFAII) to do air patrols over the Jaffna Peninsula, during the time of the Kachchathivu Festival 'Zak' and I would circle over Hammenheil. The ex-airmen prisoners incarcerated there, recognis-

ing the characteristic note of the Dove's de Havilland Gipsy Queen engines, would come out of the prison building and wave to us. Sometimes we were so low that 'Zak' could even recognize his old rugby team members! I am sure it was quite an emotional moment for him although he didn't show it.

From there we would fly to Delft to chase the ponies at low level before flying toward Kachchathivu. Once, my flying school buddy Vaji, who was also an Air Force volunteer, joined us as the third pilot. After take off 'Zak' went to the back of the airplane for a rest, so Vaji and I-with not more than 300 hours between us-flew the whole patrol. Eighteen years later, Vaji and I found ourselves sharing the flightdeck of an Air Lanka TriStar to Bangkok and Hong Kong, when he had to check me out as proficient to operate to now-defunct Kai Tak Airport with its legendary and tricky, curved 'Checkerboard' IGS approach to Runway 13. We could not help but remember old 'Zak' who had placed such confidence in us during those early years of our respective flying careers.

One day, returning to China Bay from Katunayake at about 1730hrs (5.30 pm), we were over Sigiriya when 'Zak' decided to circle the rock. Those were the days before the frescoes were shielded with black netting. The evening sun was shining sideways into the fissure where the frescoes were, and we were at the same level, able to clearly see the fabled Sigiri apsaras (maidens)-and their ample, buxom charms!-from the air; it was a fantastic sight, and one of the more stirring of the many memories from my long flying career.

We once had to pick up a senior government official from Vavuniya and fly him to Ratmalana. It was during the time of the South West Monsoon, and one of those rare days when the whole island is covered with cloud and rain. Unlike modern, large jet aircraft, ours didn't have weather radar. The China Bay to Vavuniya leg was fine. But on our second sector to Ratmalana we flew into cloud and became hopelessly unsure of our position. After a short while, there was a gap in the clouds through which we saw Puttalam. We quickly descended and hugged the coastline at low level, all the way to Colombo. Coming above Ratmalana, we found that the airport was obscured by rain.

So we flew down south and stayed in the clear until the rain ceased. During the South West monsoon, clouds materialise from the southwest in the form of cells, with usually rain beneath. 'Zak' was the first person to show me how it was possible to wait in the air for a cell to pass and, before the next cell reaches the airport, approach and land. In other words, land in-between the rain-laden cloud cells. I used this technique many years later when operating into airports like Malé in the Maldiv

Islands, slowing down or speeding up accordingly to come in and land between the storm cells. After leaving the Air Force, 'Zak' flew in the Middle East. I often wonder where he is now.

Air Force Flying with 'Zak'

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Heavy users may face a higher risk of developing brain tumours later in life.

Use of mobile phones 'may be linked to cancer'

Long-term use of mobile phones may be linked to some cancers, a landmark international study will conclude later this year.

A £20million, decade-long investigation overseen by the World Health Organisation (WHO) will publish evidence that heavy users face a higher risk of developing brain tumours later in life. The Daily Telegraph can disclose.

The conclusion, while not definitive, will undermine assurances from the government that the devices are safe and is expected to put ministers under pressure to issue stronger guidance.

A preliminary breakdown of the results found a "significantly increased risk" of some brain tumours "related to use of mobile phones for a period of 10 years or more" in some studies.

The head of the Interphone investigation said that the report would include a "public health message".

Britain's Department of Health has not updated its guidance for more than four years. It says that "the current balance of evidence does not show health problems caused by using mobile phones", and suggests only that children be "discouraged" from making "non-essential" calls while adults should "keep calls short".

In contrast, several other countries, notably France, have begun strengthening warnings and American politicians are urgently investigating the risks.

The Interphone inquiry has been investigating whether exposure to mobile phones is linked to three types of brain tumour and a tumour of the salivary gland.

Its head, Dr Elisabeth Cardis, backed new warnings.

"In the absence of definitive results and in the light of a number of studies which, though limited, suggest a possible effect of radiofrequency radiation, precautions are important," she said.