

## **Non-use of Offensive Air Power in 1962 was a Mistake but Does Not Tell the Whole Story**

**Air Vice Marshal (Dr) Arjun Subramaniam, AVSM (Retd)<sup>®</sup>**

### **Abstract**

*The non-use of offensive air power in the India-China conflict of 1962 is among the most discussed issues in the contemporary India-China discourse. There was a complete lack of understanding on the part of the strategic establishment of what offensive air power could achieve in Ladakh and North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA). Compounding this was a lack of clarity within the Indian Army of the value addition provided by the Indian Air Force's (IAF's) fighter fleet and a diffident approach on the part of the IAF leadership to espouse the use of offensive air power. However, the sterling contribution of the IAF's transport and helicopter fleet during the conflict merits a re-examination.*

### **Introduction**

**F**rom a military and operational perspective, the 'Forward Policy'

was a poorly conceived and politically driven military posture with almost no coercive potential against a much stronger adversary.<sup>1</sup> Crystallised into a policy directive in October 1961 and incrementally implemented right through the winter of 1961, the strategy was tactically unsound and field commanders like Lieutenant General Daulat Singh, the Western Army Commander, and Lieutenant General Umrao Singh, the top field commander in the East, expressed serious apprehensions about sustaining such a policy. They soon fell in line once General Thapar, the then Army Chief insisted on implementing the directive.<sup>2</sup> This article will highlight several flaws in risk assessments about air power at the

apex political levels in implementation of this policy. The article will also not shy away from highlighting that decision-making at Air Headquarters too contributed to the final strategic decision of not to use offensive air power during the conflict. The non-use of offensive air power has overwhelmed a largely unheralded narrative of how the IAF's transport and helicopter fleets courageously supported a policy disaster.

### **Early Support and Hesitation**

In the absence of roads and railway lines in areas where troops had to be deployed, the IAF played a pivotal role in translating the Forward Policy into an operational deployment in both the NEFA and Ladakh. Tezpur, Guwahati and Jorhat in the east were the main hubs from where loads were flown by IAF Dakotas and Packets to build up and sustain the garrisons at Khinzemane, Tawang, Sela and Bomdila. The loads were either dropped at Dropping Zones (DZs) close to the garrisons or off-loaded at Tezpur and transported by road and mules thereafter. By mid-1961, Chandigarh, Srinagar and Pathankot airfields became hubs<sup>3</sup> from where the Forward Policy in Ladakh was supported. Even with airfield at Leh and airstrips at Kargil, Fukche, Daulat Beg Oldie (DBO) and Chushul, numerous forward posts like the ones at Galwan and Shyok Valley, Sirjap-Spangur (around Lake Pangang Tso), Khurnak Fort and Demchok<sup>4</sup> had to be sustained by air dropping of stores and ammunition at DZs. It is extremely surprising that there is no record of the IAF leadership at any time cautioning the Government of India (GOI) that such an arrangement of supporting the Forward Policy exclusively by air was fraught with danger and unsustainable in the long run.<sup>5</sup>

Other than a widespread strategic naivety and disdain for the utility of the roles of air power other than for supply and maintenance, there can be no other reason for not inducting fighter and reconnaissance platforms into NEFA and Ladakh when trouble started brewing in the late 1950s. If aircraft like the Tempest fighters could actively participate in the Battles of Zojila and Skardu in the 1947-48 conflict with Pakistan, it is mystifying why ten years later aircraft like the Canberra bomber-cum-reconnaissance platform, or Toofani<sup>6</sup> and Mystere fighter jets were not deployed for regular photo and visual reconnaissance in NEFA, Ladakh and

Aksai Chin Region. Of course, though Srinagar by then was an established air base, fighter operations were not permitted from there under the 1948 United Nations (UN) sponsored ceasefire resolution over J&K between India and Pakistan. Had the GOI been decisive enough, it could have over-ruled that clause citing national security imperatives with respect to China and it is very likely that China's road construction would have been discovered much earlier. More than anything, it would have displayed some intent on part of India. Instead, it was only in 1960 that the long-range Canberra bomber-reconnaissance aircraft of 106 Squadron first flew a few missions to try and investigate the extent of China's build-up in Aksai Chin.

### **The Air Situation**

In the skies, the IAF was superior to the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) in terms of all aircraft (fighters, transport and helicopters) that could be employed effectively, both in Ladakh and NEFA. Its pilots were considerably more skilled than their PLAAF adversaries because of stringent training patterns that still had the RAF stamp on it.<sup>7</sup> Several senior pilots in middle-level leadership appointments, like flight commanders and commanding officers, had seen action in the 1947-48 war against Pakistan. However, to be fair to the PLAAF, its fighter pilots too had seen action over the Korean Peninsula in the mid-1950s with some success. Even in terms of transport and helicopter support to army operations, the balance was in favour of India - this was to go on to play a significant role in supporting the Forward Policy and providing casualty evacuation in hostile battle conditions as the conflict progressed. *'Unsung and Unheard: The IAF in the 1962 Conflict with China'* is a well-researched book by an IAF stalwart, Air Marshal Bharat Kumar (Retd), which highlights the exploits of the IAF during the conflict.<sup>8</sup> The title of the book pretty much sums up how the IAF was seen to have contributed to the conflict. Why offensive air power was not used despite the clear superiority of the IAF, and the availability of bases and aircraft that had the radius of action to operate in the areas of operation, is a question that has perplexed many till now. Tezpur, Chabua and Jorhat in the east, and Adampur and Ambala in the west were airfields which were ready for operations. Had the situation demanded, Srinagar air base could have been activated for fighter operations after over-

ruling the UN restrictions. The reasons for not exploiting the IAF have stirred a widespread debate<sup>9</sup> and have been widely criticised as a strategic blunder.

### **Force Levels**

This part looks at the availability of aircraft for operational exploitation on both sides and the early attempts by the IAF to provide some inputs regarding the Chinese build up, particularly in Aksai Chin. The first comprehensive aerial reconnaissance mission in the region was undertaken by Canberra reconnaissance aircraft of No 106 Squadron as late as on 14 December, 1959<sup>10</sup>, nearly two years after it came to be known to the Indian Government that China had built a road through Aksai Chin. Routeing via DBO and braving bad weather, the single aircraft mission brought back clear pictures of the Tibet-Xinjiang Highway which were seen with great interest by the then Prime Minister Nehru. Air Marshal Randhir Singh, who was commanding 106 Squadron during the tumultuous period of 1959-1962, revealed that he and his flight commander, Squadron Leader Nath, carried out a number of intrusive missions into Aksai Chin and across the McMahon Line in NEFA, bringing back valuable information about troop deployments and the build-up of forces. Sadly, not much of the information was taken seriously by the powers that be.<sup>11</sup> Air Marshal Raghavendran, who retired as the Vice Chief of the IAF in 1988, was at the time on the operational staff of Operational Command, which later became Western Air Command. He recollects in his book that Squadron Leader Jaggi Nath, a close friend of his and 'the bravest of the brave Canberra pilots'<sup>12</sup>, brought back highly incriminatory photographs of thousands of Chinese troops, fortifications and vehicles in the open. While the Chinese protested at these intrusive missions, India continued to vehemently deny it instead of placing the photographic evidence before the Chinese, or even releasing it to the international media to try to pressurise the Chinese.<sup>13</sup>

With over 22 combat squadrons and around 500 aircraft available, the IAF in mid-1962 had the relatively modern Hunter Mk-56 fighter-bomber aircraft and Gnat interceptor aircraft, older but still potent French-built ground attack aircraft like the Mystere and Toofani, Canberra bomber-reconnaissance jets, and the venerable Vampire trainer cum ground attack jet.<sup>14</sup> Of these, a total

of approximately two squadrons each of Toofani and Vampire jets and a detachment of Canberra aircraft were spread amongst the airfields of Tezpur, Chabua and Bagdogra, and would have been available for operations in the NEFA sector.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 15 combat squadrons, including the Hunter Mk-56, were available in Northern India at the airfields of Agra, Palam, Adampur, Ambala and Halwara.<sup>16</sup> The remainder of the squadrons were deployed at Pune and Kalaikunda. The IAF approach clearly indicated a Pakistan-centric deployment and no major changes, barring a few detachments, were made even after the conflict started. Air Marshal Vinod Patney, the IAF's most highly decorated airman and among its cerebral and operationally proficient commanders, was posted to a Toofani squadron (29 Squadron) at Tezpur during the 1962 conflict. He recollects being quite familiar with the valleys of NEFA where they would regularly train for Close Air Support (CAS) and interdiction missions. He also recollects that joint structures for CAS with 33 Corps were in place in the form of a Tactical Air Centre (TAC) with Forward Air Controllers. While he agrees that effective CAS may have been a difficult proposition once the forces were engaged in a close contact battle, particularly in the narrow valleys of Namka Chu and Tawang, he maintains that the IAF could have created havoc among massed Chinese troop concentrations and logistics lines on the Tibetan side, north of the Thagla Ridge as the terrain on that side was devoid of the dense vegetation that marked the Indian side of the McMahon line.<sup>17</sup> He goes on to reiterate that the terrain in Ladakh was ideal for both CAS and interdiction and that the relatively modern IAF Hunters could have provided effective CAS with the Canberra bombers chipping in with interdiction missions. He also added that the older Toofanis and Mysteres, with external tanks fitted, could also have provided offensive air support from airfields like Adampur, Ambala and Halwara.<sup>18</sup>

### **Poor Advice**

Ranged against a professionally well-trained IAF fighter force, the offensive element of the PLAAF was a numerically superior force of obsolete platforms like the MiG-15/17, MiG-19 and medium-range IL-28 bombers, most of which were deployed against Taiwan. The IAF leadership was largely left out of the decision-making loop and barring one, rather tepid, operational assessment by Air

Commodore HC Dewan, the then Director of Operations at Air Headquarters, which cautioned against the use of offensive air power, there were no confident voices from within the IAF that pushed for the offensive employment of air power. In the absence of any sound operational assessment of the PLAAF by the IAF<sup>19</sup>, the GOI relied on diverse non-specialist inputs to calibrate its decision about not to use offensive air power against China. Some of these reports indicated that the PLAAF had acquired the MiG-21, considered at that time to be amongst the most sophisticated fighters in the world. Wing Commander Asher Lee, a British air power analyst, reported in 1963 that this was grossly incorrect.<sup>20</sup> Others went on to caution the GOI that the use of offensive air power may result in the PLAAF attacking Indian cities like Calcutta and the danger of India not being able to occupy the 'moral high ground' in case of a protracted conflict. No cognisance was taken of the fact that PLAAF aircraft could reach targets in India only if they operated from airfields in Tibet with the high altitudes imposing severe restrictions on their weapon carrying capacity.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, IAF fighters would have had the advantage of operating with full weapon loads from airfields in the plains of Assam and Punjab. Nehru and Krishna Menon decided to go by the rather defensive assessment of Blackett, a British Operations Research expert who was advising them on matters of national security.<sup>22</sup> Diffidence about using offensive air power would cost India dearly as the war progressed.

### **The Silent Heroes**

As it turned out to be, the helicopter and transport aircrew of the IAF turned out to be the heroes of the 1962 war. The IAF's transport fleet had accredited itself superbly in the 1947-48 conflict with Pakistan, particularly in the sustenance of the Poonch garrison and the relief of Leh. In the years that followed, this capability was sustained as the Leh and Kargil garrisons had to be supported in the winter months by air. However, air activity in NEFA was restricted as there was not much requirement for air maintenance till the Forward Policy came into being. When the crisis snowballed in September 1962, the IAF had 10 squadrons of operational transport aircraft divided almost equally between the Western and Eastern sectors, with several detachments operating in the east to support the Forward Policy in NEFA. Of the 200 plus aircraft, the

mainstays were still the evergreen Dakota (2 Ton payload) and the then recently acquired C-119G Packet aircraft (6 Ton payload), few of which were modified with a jet pack to support high altitude operations in 1961.<sup>23</sup> Complementing these war-horses was a squadron of the newly acquired An-12 (10-12 Ton payload), two squadrons of DH-3C Otter light transport aircraft which were used for operations from remote airstrips like Walong in NEFA and in narrow valleys, and a few Super Constellation aircraft for VIP, communication and troop carrying duties. All these aircraft would perform well beyond expectations during the conflict. The PLAAF transport aircraft fleet was reasonably large and known to have extensively supported the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950-52.<sup>24</sup> However, according to British Intelligence and American reports, it numbered only around 200 usable aircraft in 1962 comprising a mix of ageing Soviet platforms like the An-2, IL-12/14/18. Unlike India, China rightly realised that the only way of sustaining operations in Ladakh, Aksai Chin and Tibet was by creating a network of roads, tracks and railway lines, and not relying on air maintenance. This was to prove decisive in the long run.

While China hardly had any operational helicopters, the IAF had built up a fairly diverse mix of helicopters to support operations in jungle and high altitude terrain. The 50 odd helicopters comprised Russian built Mi-4's which were inducted during 1961-62, the older American Bell 47G-3 and S-55s.<sup>25</sup> While 107 Helicopter Unit (HU) with Mi-4s was the sole unit in Ladakh, 105 and 110 HUs supported the Tawang and Walong Sectors in the east.<sup>26</sup> Aircrew proficiency was high and the rotary wing fleet took on the onerous responsibility of sustaining the number of forward picquets in NEFA and Ladakh in the absence of roads and tracks. Their exploits would unfold as the defensive battle in both sectors turned into fragmented retreats. The helicopters of the IAF would fly tirelessly through the war as they carried out hundreds of casualty evacuation missions and even searched for stragglers as they retreated through the jungles of Bhutan.

Compared to the air effort in the eastern sector, which was fraught with danger in terms of the fickle weather and sub-optimal DZs, the situation in Ladakh was a little better despite the higher altitudes of operation. With airfields at Leh, DBO, Fukche, Thoise and Chushul acting as feeder nodes to induct and sustain troops,

the 'rate of flow' of men and material was quite good during 1961-62. However, the GOI frittered away these advantages by increasing the number of forward posts and stretching the air effort to such an extent that the moment resources from the western sector were diverted to the east, the build-up in Ladakh suffered. Without taking anything away from the workhorse of the IAF, the C-119G Packet, the venerable Dakota and the IL-14, all of which performed magnificently, the single biggest 'air factor' in the west was the newly inducted An-12 with its payload of 9 tons. The An-12 squadron (44 Squadron), unaware that the Chinese had commenced their attack in the DBO sector at 2300 hrs on 19<sup>th</sup> October and on 20<sup>th</sup> morning, continued operations to DBO when Squadron Leader Chandan Singh, while attempting to land, was hit by ground fire and had to return to Chandigarh with nineteen hits on his aircraft.<sup>27</sup> Other aircraft, including Packets, continued on their dropping missions in the area as Indian posts were overwhelmed one by one. On 21 October, it was one of the Packet aircraft on a forward dropping mission that reported a long trail of Indian troops (5 Jat Regt) trudging across the Shyok River and directed the Mi-4s of 107 HU to commence a stupendous casualty evacuation (casevac) operation in which over 100 troops were evacuated to the closest field hospital.

### **In Hindsight**

The IAF had a dedicated reconnaissance squadron, in the form of 106 Squadron, equipped with the new British built Canberra bomber cum reconnaissance aircraft. Tasked with a few sporadic missions in both the eastern sector and in Ladakh, the squadron could have done much more and acted as the eyes of the Indian Government and complemented the Intelligence Bureau's scanty intelligence inputs. It could also have assisted with building an intelligence picture and mosaic of the disposition and gradual build-up of PLA forces in Tibet and tracked their move forward in both sectors. Not only would it have provided military commanders with what they were likely to come up against but also could have provided Nehru with a reality check of whether he needed to temper his bravado of 'wanting to throw the Chinese out of Indian Territory', sensitise the raucous opposition of what India was up against and accept China's proposal for a composite dialogue based on post-colonial realities.



Air Headquarters did not also contest the exaggerated capability of the PLAAF as conveyed to PM Nehru by the US Ambassador, John Kenneth Galbraith, and chose to go along with the typically restrained political interpretation of the time that air power would be unnecessarily escalatory. With joint army-air force structures in place at the corps level, and Forward Air Controllers with the brigades, it is clear that the IAF brass was timid and diffident about forcefully articulating to both the army and the political leadership that in an asymmetric situation on the ground, offensive air power could play a stabilising, if not a decisive, role. If offensive air power had been used in the east, particularly on the Chinese side of the McMahon line across the Thagla Ridge and while the PLA was concentrating its forces, significant attrition could have been caused. Similarly, if the Indian Army had maintained its fortress strategy at Sela and Bomdila without retreating chaotically, Indian fighter-bomber aircraft could have caused significant attrition on PLA forces as they attempted to either lay siege to these positions, or bypass them as they did. It would be foolish to surmise that air power would have been a game-changer; however, it would certainly have been a face-saver and India's armed forces may have possibly come out of the conflict in both sectors bruised, but not beaten and humiliated.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed analysis of the Forward Policy see Maj Gen D.K. Palit, *War in the High Himalayas* (New Delhi, South Asia Books, 1992), pp.90-100. Also see Maj Gen Jagjit Singh, *While the Memory is Fresh* (New Delhi, Lancer, 2006), pp.101-110.

<sup>2</sup> The Indian Army's operational dissent to the Forward Policy is well chronicled by Neville Maxwell, *India's China War*, (Dehradun, Natraj, 2015) pp. 199-205.

<sup>3</sup> P.B. Sinha, A.A. Athale, with S.N. Prasad, chief editor, History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, *History of the Conflict with China 1962*, official Indian history of the Sino-Indian War (New Delhi, 1992), pp.343-346.

<sup>4</sup> Air Chief Marshal P.C. Lal, (Ed by Ela Lal), *My Years with the IAF* (New Delhi, Lancer, 1986), pp.100-106.

<sup>5</sup> The IAF and the Indian Army had calculated that to sustain the Forward Policy in the East a monthly airlift of 2200 Tons was the bare minimum required. Despite their best efforts the IAF could manage an average of only 1200 tons/month on an average. If one factors in the 25-30% loss due to the small size of the Dropping Zones and narrow valleys, the airlift was woefully inadequate. See Sinha & Athavle (1992), p.353.

<sup>6</sup> A literal translation of its French name of Ouragan.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Air Marshal Vinod Patney on 02 June, 2013. The Air Marshal was a young Flying Officer and posted at Tezpur during the conflict.

<sup>8</sup> Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, *Unknown and Unsung: Indian Air Force in Sino-Indian War of 1962* (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> See R. Sukumaran, The 1962 India-China War and Kargil 1999: Restrictions on the Use of Air Power, *Strategic Analysis*, Vol 27, No.3, Jul-Sep 2003, pp.332-355 –Also see Arjun Subramaniam, 'Clearing the Air' *Indian Express*, New Delhi, October 21, 1963, p.2.

<sup>10</sup> Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, p.39.

<sup>11</sup> Telephonic conversation with Air Marshal Randhir Singh in October 2014. He revealed during that interview that he was asked to assume command of 106 Squadron after it had one aircraft shot down over Pakistan in 1959 during a clandestine intrusive mission.

<sup>12</sup> Air Marshal S Raghavendran, *Panther Red One* (New Delhi: KW publishers, 2013), p.141.

<sup>13</sup> Air Marshal S Raghavendran, p.187.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 83-84. Also see Sukumaran, p.333. Also see S. N. Prasad, Ed, H, *History of the Conflict with China, 1962*, New Delhi, History Division, Government of India, 1992, pp. 356-357.

<sup>15</sup> A detachment of Canberra reconnaissance and bomber aircraft from Agra was moved to Tezpur and worked in close liaison with HQ IV Corps. Also see Bharat Kumar, IAF deployment map, p.95.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Air Marshal Patney on 02 June 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> An operational assessment from Air HQs sounded extreme caution with regards to Close Air Support in NEFA. However, it is surprising that the same report does not mention that CAS in Ladakh could be a worthwhile proposition. See Sukumaran, p.337.

<sup>20</sup> Asher Lee, *The Russian and Chinese Air Forces, Brasseys Annual-The Armed Forces Yearbook* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1963), pp. 97-99. Also see Sukumaran, 335-336.

<sup>21</sup> Most of the 20 odd airfields in Tibet were at altitudes of above 3500 m, with some as high as 4,500m.

<sup>22</sup> Air Vice Marshal A K Tiwary, 'No Use of Air Power in 1962', Indian Defence Review, Vol 21.3, Jul-Sep 2006, at <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/spotlights/no-use-of-combat-air-power-in-1962/> (accessed 29 November 2014)

<sup>23</sup> Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, pp. 103-110.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 130-133.

<sup>26</sup> Sinha & Athale (1992), pp.353-355.

<sup>27</sup> Bharat Kumar, p.245

**®Air Vice Marshal (Dr) Arjun Subramaniam, AVSM (Retd)** is currently a Mentor and Academic Advisor at National Defence College, New Delhi and Adjunct Faculty, Naval War College, Goa. He is the author of 'India's Wars: A Military History 1947-1971' and 'Full Spectrum: India's Wars 1972-2020'.

*Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. CL, No. 621, July-September 2020.