

## Role of the Indian Air Force During the Kargil War

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### Introduction

During 1998–1999, the Pakistan Army had surreptitiously inducted its troops, in disguise, to the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC) to occupy commanding positions. It had ingressed into Kargil District under the assumption that they would be able to bargain for some concessions on the issue of Kashmir. The resulting war was fought between Indian Forces and the Pakistani Army in high-altitude mountains, with jagged, near-vertical hill faces, which posed both tactical and logistical problems.

The Indian Army launched Operation Vijay to clear out the Pakistani forces from Indian territory. It conducted the operation in a most methodical and professional manner. While the Indian Army was busy fighting on the high terrains of the Kargil District, the Indian Air Force (IAF) was fighting the war in the open sky. According to many scholars, the task assigned to the IAF was not to use air power as extended artillery but only in assistance to the Indian Army. The primary task of the use of air power was to degrade the offensive capabilities of the intruders by targeting their gun positions, dug-in bunkers, defences on mountain tops and destroying their supply lines, camps, and distribution centres.

The role of the IAF in this critical operation in the high-altitude mountains came with its own share of challenges, like severe degradation of aircraft and weapon performance. As a result, the initial few sorties at high altitude levels were not as effective as desired. However, once revised and modified, the accuracy of the airstrikes improved dramatically.[\[1\]](#)

### Air Operation

The Indian Army had, on 8 May 1999, projected the requirement of attack helicopters for use against intruders and also helicopters for the transport of troops. This came for consideration to the Indian Government, and it was decided not to use this option as it may lead to escalation. Air power is an important tool to manage conflict, however, there is always the risk of escalating into a much bigger war. On May 25, 1999, after an in-depth appreciation of the emerging situation, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) took the decision to deploy the IAF. Once the CCS approved the deployment of the IAF, operations commenced on 26 May 1999.[\[2\]](#) The approval came with a limitation that the IAF would not cross the LoC.

Air Vice Marshal (Dr) Arjun Subramaniam (Retd) writes that although the IAF was not deployed during the initial phase of Operation Vijay, it had not only alerted its fighter squadrons, but some aircraft were also moved to the Valley for the impending operations. The IAF undertook a large-scale airlift of troops, ammunition, and stores into the sector. It also commenced aerial reconnaissance-and-strike familiarisation. The rapid mobilisation ensured that the IAF was ready to undertake wide-ranging, full-scale military operations by the morning of 15 May.[\[3\]](#)

The IAF began conducting initial reconnaissance sorties over the Kargil Heights as early as 10 May 1999. On 12 May 1999, an IAF helicopter was fired upon near the most forward-based Pakistani positions and landed uneventfully with a damaged rotor. In the next few days, IAF Jaguar fighters conducted tactical reconnaissance sorties in the Kargil area to gather target information using their onboard long-range oblique photography systems.[\[4\]](#) The Photo Reconnaissance Canberra was effectively used in the Kargil conflict and brought the first photographic proof of enemy intrusion in Indian territory.[\[5\]](#)

On the morning of May 26, 1999, the IAF commenced air operations by attacking enemy positions and supply lines. The first strike was launched at 0630 hrs by MiG-21, MiG-27ML, and MiG-23BN fighters. MiG-29 on Combat Air Patrol provided air defence cover to the strike aircraft. Post-strike, Canberras carried out reconnaissance to assess the damage inflicted on the enemy.[\[6\]](#)

In the initial few days, the IAF suffered a few losses. Between 27 and 28 May, the IAF lost two aircraft—a MiG-21, a MiG-27, and a helicopter—a Mi-17. On 27 May, the MiG-27 flown by Flight Lieutenant (Flt Lt) Kambampati Nachiketa developed mechanical problems, forcing the pilot to eject. The MiG-21, flown by Squadron Leader (Sqn Ldr) Ajay Ahuja, orbiting in the area to look for Flt Lt Kambampati Nachiketa, was shot down. Sqn Ldr Ajay Ahuja was awarded Vir Chakra posthumously.[\[7\]](#)

On May 28, 1999, the Nubra Formation was tasked with striking the Point 5140 feature, located two kilometres north of Tololing. Wing Commander (Wg Cdr) Anil Kumar Sinha (later Air Commodore) was the leader of the four aircraft formation. The rocket attack launched by the formation, despite the loss of a helicopter, was successful and inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. Wg Cdr Anil Kumar Sinha was awarded with the Vir Chakra.[\[8\]](#)

It was the air strikes conducted by the IAF on some of the key locations that dramatically altered the equation in favour of India. The most prominent among them is the strike on the Muntho Dhalo, a major supply depot. The strikes of 16th and 17th June by MiG-27s and Mirage-2000s were devastating, and later attacks in the area ensured the destruction of fresh Pakistani attempts to reuse the base.[\[9\]](#)

On 8 June, the IAF engaged targets in the Mushkoh Valley, where the Pakistan Army had many storage dumps and bunkers. IAF strike operations ended on 12 Jul 1999. Overall, during the air campaign, the IAF flew 550 strike missions, 150 reconnaissance missions, and over 500 escort flights. The IAF also flew 2,185 helicopter sorties, logging 925 flying hours, for casualty evacuation and air transport operations.[\[10\]](#)

Each airstrike, in the end, was the result of a carefully planned chain of events spanning several areas of specialisation. As a result of these attacks, severe damage to enemy personnel and equipment became apparent in various areas. Any time a target was spotted, a very high success rate invariably ensued. With Indian troops in very close proximity to the enemy, air attacks had to be carefully executed or, on occasions, even called off till a confirmation was received from the army that Indian troops were out of harm's way.[\[11\]](#)

## **Conclusion**

This was the first time combat air power had been used in the high mountain ranges above 15,000 feet in altitude. The IAF was equipped with supersonic fighter aircraft. India had previously not used the combat components of its air force, either in the 1962 War with China or in the Siachen conflict with Pakistan.

The decision to deploy the Air Force and the sheer professionalism of the IAF, which rapidly adapted itself to the challenge of offensive air operations in the high altitude Himalayan terrain, while ensuring that Indian troops did not become victims of 'friendly fire', as has happened so often in other Air Forces, deserves commendation. At the operational level, the IAF's air operations during the Kargil conflict clearly stand out amongst many other significant achievements.

Legendary Air Commodore Jasjit Singh in his book, 'Kargil 1999: Pakistan's Fourth War for Kashmir', concludes, "If India can beat a professional military force equipped with modern firepower, on the ground and at a time of Pakistan's choice, with the initiative also in its hands, with strategic and tactical surprise almost complete, then India can beat Pakistan anytime, anywhere".

## Endnotes

[1] Ops Safed Sagar, Indian Air Force.

<https://indianairforce.nic.in/ops-1962/>

[2] Statement by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Minister of Defence regarding news item "Air-strike delay cost lives: Kargil Report" Parliament Digital Library, 09 June 2004. <https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/727164/1/71.pdf>

[3] A Subramanian, Kargil Revisited: Air Operations in a High Altitude Conflict, CLAWS Journal, Summer 2008.

[4] Ibid

[5] "Canberra No More...." Livelist, 12 May 2007.

<https://www.livelistdefence.com/canberra-no-more/>.

[6] Garg, Arjit. "IAF Remembers 1999 Kargil War with Throwback Images of MiG Jets from 1st Attack on Pakistani Posts." News18, 26 May 2019.

<https://www.news18.com/news/auto/iaf-remembers-1999-kargil-war-with-throwback-images-of-mig-jets-from-1st-attack-on-pakistani-posts-2160579.html>.

[7] AVM Manmohan Bahadur, "Kargil's little-known fact: How IAF used helicopters to target intruders at high altitudes," ThePrint, 16 Jul 2019.

<https://theprint.in/opinion/kargils-little-known-fact-how-iaf-used-helicopters-to-target-intruders-at-high-altitudes/263391/>.

[8] Air Commodore a K Sinha, "Nubra Formation," n.d.,

<https://www.bharat-rakshak.com/iaf/history/kargil/nubra-formation/>.

[9] Camp, Phillip. "The Mirage 2000 in Kargil," n.d.

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[10] R.V. Phadke, "Air offensive in the High Himalayas, Strategic Analysis", 1999.

[11] Ops Safed Sagar, Indian Air Force,

<https://indianairforce.nic.in/ops-1962/>

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