

The Story of a Lady Helicopter Pilot

Wing Commander Namrita Chandi (Retd)*

I was a girl with stars in my eyes...quite literally. Every night as I sat on the veranda of my father's rural farm house, I watched the stars and even had my own special one. I often asked my star to guide my destiny as I wanted to do something really different and something really special..... But how far that star would take me, I did not know. My life and that of my sister, Supreet, was very normal and very humdrum. We lived and went to school in the moffusil town of Rudrapur in Uttaranchal, where doing something special in life for girls was not only unheard of but almost impossible. But the fire burned slowly, yet steadily, inside me. Everyday my special star would counsel me to dream big and to relentlessly pursue that dream.

I left for Chandigarh to pursue my college education. The days and years were monotonous, even though interesting. College years always are fun, but nothing to write home about. I joined a postgraduate course in IT and joined the first batch for doing MCA, Punjab University, Chandigarh. Years went by and I stood at the threshold of being a Post Graduate in Informatics. But fate had other plans for me.

One day I saw an advertisement in the newspaper. It was by the Indian Air Force asking for Lady recruits to be trained as pilots. I and my sister filled in the application form just for a lark, and lo and behold we were selected!!! It was perhaps the most exhilarating moment in the life of my simple, farmer parents. Suddenly, we were catapulted to feeling immensely proud of our upbringing and our education. In a flurry of packing, preparations and mentally bringing ourselves to the fact of leaving our home for something defining in our lives, became the issue.

Our Air Force Academy in Secunderabad, was a test of all our faculties. Life was tough. Waking up at 5 AM was a trial that put us through fire every morning. We were, afterall, spoilt kids

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that were used to our daily ghee soaked *paranthas* and our mom mollycoddling us. We were absolutely not aware of the rigorous physical and mental hardships that this was going to put us through. But I am proud to say that the Air Force Academy made us women of substance. I qualified to be a Helicopter Pilot as did my sister Supreet. Together, we feature in the Limca book of world records as being the first sister duo in the world to fly as Pilot and Co-Pilot.....

Long hours of theory and even harder grind of physically demanding activity filled our days. But we gamely toiled on, quite sure of the fact that this is what we wanted for ourselves in life-to be a good lady Helicopter Pilot. Breaking of stereotypes was also important to us. We wanted to prove that girls can, and will be good at whatever they set their hearts on. We wanted to prove all the naysayers wrong.

I still remember my solo flight with some trepidation. It was perhaps the single most defining moment of my young life. I felt like reaching out and touching my special star and saying-look I am flying my own helicopter. Someday, I will fly out and touch you! Helicopter flying is not an easy skill. I thank my instructors who worked so hard with me to make me a competent Heli-Pilot. And finally the day arrived when I graduated with my wings. I was finally a Helicopter Pilot. I was proud of our achievements, as were our parents...and also my prospective in-laws.

Hurray we had our wings on us.... a long dream had finally come true and with the little experience and expertise that we had gained, we were ready to face the alien world of complete male domain. The challenge now was to break into male bastions and assert that I can be as good, if not better, at my job as a Helicopter Pilot, and was knowingly intruding into a domain that was traditionally perceived as being only for men. The first day of my first posting will remain fresh in my mind forever. The unit situated somewhere in the Western Sector was all set to receive its first "Lady Pilot". I quickly realised that the requirement for me now was to fit in almost as "one of the boys", in the unit without making others feel awkward and uncomfortable. But the challenges were manifold – from sharing the male toilets (those days there were no lady toilets) to proving your worth each and every time professionally, and to fit in with a male dominated culture, where

bad language and sexist jokes were a norm (things have now changed drastically). Well I proudly say that I did very well for myself. I was quick to realise that the attitude, perceptions, professional competence and preparations can make a huge difference.

Then after another posting came my dream posting – to Leh to fly on the Siachen Glacier, the highest battlefield in the world. I am proud to say that I am the only Lady Pilot to have flown in the Glacier. I was told that Siachen is where only one type of pilot operates - the brave and a notch above the average and was told to be prepared to be pushed to my self-imposed limits and beyond.

Flying in Siachen was a challenge where records of human endurance, flying and technical competence are set nearly everyday. The area was more beautiful than one could have ever imagined and the flying – just out of this world. All operational sorties had an element of risk involved in them, especially if they were over an inhospitable terrain like the Siachen Glacier. As I started flying I realised that we had to brave temperatures as low as minus 50° Celcius, strong winds, lack of oxygen and flying in poor weather conditions in close proximity of hills. There was always the threat of powerful downdrafts that pull the helicopters down, if we were not careful with zero scope of error. Added to that was the fact that the helicopters at Siachen fly at the edge of their flight envelope, where the power margin available is small, if not negligible. Any miscalculation or mishandling of controls could result in a catastrophic accident. The landing on the match box sized helipads was precise; the Army jawans would open the door, take out the load, put in the mail/casualty and then we would execute a take-off - in the reciprocal direction. The motto of our unit was "We do the impossible as a routine, the possible may take a little longer". This posting for me was a dream come true and I think I was very fortunate to have experienced and to have enjoyed every moment of it.

The black snout of the glacier which is to say the least, imposing and menacing yet truly majestic is still so close to my heart even today.....

I proudly feel that the best part of being a Helicopter Pilot is to get the opportunity in the most easy way to explore the most

inaccessible places in this magnificent country. Perhaps the best experience that people will not get even upon paying the world's biggest money, has been flying in the Siachen Glacier. Believe me, to see the world's most inaccessible and highest battlefield from the helicopter, which you yourself are flying, is an incredible experience. My one regret is that I was not able to be "Glacier Captain", as it was against the Air Force rules for a Lady Pilot to be Glacier Captain but that is part of life. The Air Force teaches you to take the grain with the chaff.

But I hold the world record for being the only lady to have operated in Siachen and landed at the Highest ALG in the world.

I met my husband, Wing Commander Nikhil Naidu, in the Academy. He too is a Helicopter Pilot. He has been very encouraging and supporting in all my endeavours. We married after two years of our commissioning and are proud parents of two lovely children.

My experience as a Helicopter Pilot, has enabled me to get education in a very specialised field. I have had to take responsibility far beyond my own imagination; made good friends, led an amazing life.

With due apologies to all other forms of flying, no other form of Aviation can provide such an experience. It is probably the closest thing to flying like a bird, that a person can ever achieve – flying low and slow, landing in a forest clearing, mountain tops, in an ice field, pushing the envelope to its limits! Hence, flying helicopters has been exciting, challenging, empowering and just plain fun.

I have received many awards, the most prominent amongst them has been the 'Woman Achiever of the Year', awarded by the Ministry of Women and Child Welfare in the Year 2007. I was on the cover of INDIA TODAY, and that brought me a lot of name and fame as a representative of the women of tomorrow. I am told that my picture is in the museum of flying in Texas, USA.

There is large fraternity of women like me out there, hoping to make a mark for themselves, in this world of great and innumerable opportunities. I wish all the best to all those girls seeking that special opening and making plans to be a Helicopter

Pilot. Do not miss the correct openings. Find the right motivation, high quality training; persevere and great adventures, wonderful opportunities and a great life awaits ahead.....no risks, no pains...no gains.

After my retirement from the Air Force, I am still serving the cause of Helicopter flying with another agency.

I think I am quite close to being in close proximity of my Special Star...in winking distance!



Namrita receiving the 'Award for Women Achievers' on the International Women's Day on 09 March 2007