

The Ladder of His Life – A Biography of Air Chief Marshal Idris Latif, PVSM*

Brigadier DS Sarao (Retd)®

I would call this book a gift of love by Mrs Bilkees Latif to her husband, Air Chief Marshall Idris Latif, the much respected Chief who headed the Indian Air Force from September 1978 to August 1981. Mrs Latif has captured the essence of the Air Chief Marshal's life from childhood to his step by step rise to the uppermost echelons of the Indian Air Force and thereafter, as he steps out in civvies to serve his Country as the Governor (Maharashtra), the Lieutenant Governor (Goa) and finally as the Ambassador to France. It did help that Mrs Latif herself is well versed in writing. She has not only authored a number of books earlier, but has also lectured at a number of international forums. As an Air Force officer's wife and later when the Air Chief Marshal was the Governor and the Ambassador, Mrs Latif has always been at the forefront of welfare and social upliftment causes.

The book is spread over thirty concise chapters with quite a few photographs of each phase of her husband's life. Of special interest to the aficionados of aviation history are the many photographs of various planes; *Tigermoths*, *Wapitis*, *Spitfires*, *Hurricanes* to the jet era of the *SU 7's* and the *MiG* variants. The Air Chief Marshal had flown 25 different types of aircraft.

Fast forward to 1940, the war is raging in Europe and Idris, an impressionable 17 year old applies for a career in the Air Force. He goes for the preliminary interview by the British Resident for joining the Indian Air Force Volunteer Reserve (which later became the RIAF). Selected, Idris is sent to the Madras Flying Club before proceeding to Walton, Lahore and then to the Elementary Flying Training School Begumpet for further flying. Here young Idris is awarded the trophy for the 'best' simulated forced landing. Idris finishes his training at Ambala (*Audax* and *Hart*) and is

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®**Brigadier DS Sarao (Retd)** passed out from OTA Madras with a Gold Medal and was commissioned into 216 Medium Regiment in 1977. He retired as Brigadier Artillery 33 Corps in 2012.

commissioned on 26 January 1942. His first posting is to Karachi, Drigh Road. It was here that the future Chief of the Indian Air Force gets a 'severe reprimand' and a fine of Rs 35/- for losing his service revolver (stolen with his bag from under his seat while travelling by train on leave).

Chapters five and six take us through his experiences in England for operational training on *Spitfires* and *Hurricanes* and his return to India and onwards to the Burma front as a fighter pilot with No 3 Squadron. Here was his experience during war time which made his lifelong associations with distinguished and well known pilots of the likes of Minoo Engineer, Asghar Khan, Shivdev Singh and Subroto Mukherjee, to name a few. From chapter seven onwards is recounted the journey of Idris Latif from his command of No 4 Squadron as a 26 year old Squadron Leader, to his various command and staff assignments including tenures at the Joint Services Wing, Dehradun and then as the Deputy Director Weapons followed by an assignment to Indonesia (which was inducting the *De Havilland Vampire*). His stint as the Air Attaché in Washington and an insight to the behind the scene machinations during the Sino-Indian War of 1962 as India bid unsuccessfully for the F 104 aircraft, and then almost got the C 130 and the *Northrop F 5*, makes interesting reading.

What strikes the reader is how the Air Chief Marshal was involved in various far reaching policy and equipment related decisions as he slowly rose in the hierarchy. The book elaborates as to how Idris Latif, not yet the Chief, pushed through the project for the *Ajeet* and later was involved in the induction of the *Jaguar*, the *MiG 25* and the *MiG 23*, the *MI 24* attack helicopters and the *AN 32* all of which fructified when he was the Chief. No wonder the IAF truly became a multi-dimensional force under his captaincy.

Chapter 25 onwards begins the journey of the Air Chief Marshal; now retired, as the Governor of Maharashtra, the Lieutenant Governor of Goa and finally his appointment as the Ambassador to France from April 1985 to April 1988 where he and Mrs Latif struck a personal chord with the French establishment and were instrumental in organising the ever so popular and successful 'Festival of India'. Indeed, a full life.

Credit must be given to Mrs Bilkees Latif for having painted a panorama of the life of Air Chief Marshal Idris Latif so beautifully – and why not, she has been by his side all along as they climbed the ladder together.