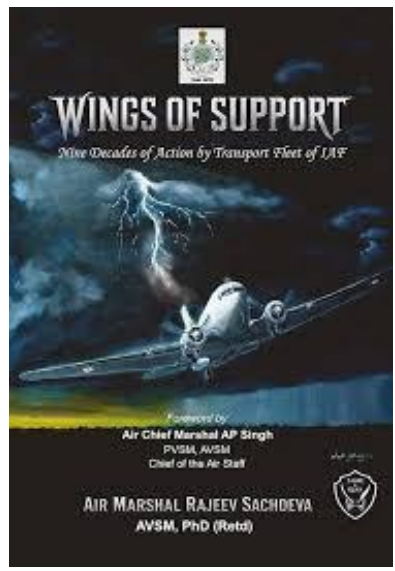
Review Articles

Review Article 1

Wings of Support: Nine Decades of Action by the Transport Fleet of the IAF

Air Marshal Rajeev Sachdeva, AVSM, PhD (Retd)



Introduction

Histories of military aviation generally focus on fighter aircraft, aerial combat and precision strikes, while transport aviation is treated mainly as a supporting activity. In *Wings of Support*, Air Marshal Rajeev Sachdeva, AVSM, PhD (Retd), addresses this imbalance by documenting the evolution and contribution of the Indian Air Force's transport fleet. The book demonstrates how air mobility has influenced military campaigns, territorial consolidation, humanitarian assistance, strategic outreach and nation-building. Its six chapters combine institutional history, operational narratives, personal

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accounts, technological developments and an assessment of India's future air mobility requirements.

Chapter One: Evolution of the Indian Air Force and Maturation of Its Transport Fleet

The first chapter establishes the historical and institutional foundations of Indian military transport aviation. It begins with the development of human flight, examines aviation's transformation during the two world wars, and traces the emergence of military aviation in India. The narrative then moves to the establishment of the Indian Air Force and the raising of No. 12 Squadron in 1946 as its first transport squadron.

A particular strength of the chapter is its explanation of the relationship between geography and air mobility. India's mountainous frontiers, extensive landmass, island territories and inadequate surface communications in remote areas created an enduring requirement for military air transport. The author effectively shows that the transport fleet did not emerge merely as a logistical convenience; it developed in response to fundamental operational and geographical imperatives.

The chapter also outlines the fleet's varied responsibilities, operational risks and progressive capability development. This provides readers with the background required to appreciate the missions discussed later in the book. Its broad historical coverage gives the chapter an encyclopaedic quality. Stronger analytical connections between technological development, organisational change and operational doctrine could further enrich a future edition. Nevertheless, the chapter establishes the transport fleet as an essential component of Indian air power.

Chapter Two: Operations That Changed Indian History

The second chapter serves as the book's operational centrepiece. It examines missions in which transport aircraft directly influenced military and political outcomes. Key examples include the Oct 1947 airlift to Srinagar, the aerial sustenance of Poonch, the pioneering Dakota landing at Leh, Operation Polo, the liberation of Goa,

transport operations during the 1962 and 1965 wars, the Tangail airborne assault in 1971, and Operation Cactus in the Maldives.

The discussion of Srinagar airlift is particularly significant. The rapid movement of Indian troops helped prevent the loss of the Kashmir Valley and demonstrated the strategic value of timely air mobility. Similarly, operations at Poonch and Leh show how transport aircraft enabled India to reinforce and sustain isolated positions despite formidable terrain and inadequate road communications.

The Tangail airborne assault illustrates the transport fleet's contribution to joint planning and operational manoeuvre. The use of multiple aircraft types to deliver paratroopers behind Pakistani positions contributed to the momentum of the Indian campaign in East Pakistan. Operation Cactus presents a different dimension of air mobility: the rapid projection of military power in support of a friendly neighbouring government.

The chapter's principal achievement lies in dispelling the perception of transport aviation as merely a passive supporting capability. It demonstrates that air transport can influence the tempo, reach and outcome of military operations. Greater differentiation among tactical success, operational effect and strategic outcome could strengthen the analysis further, particularly where transport operations formed part of larger joint campaigns. Even so, the range and detail of the operational accounts make this one of the book's most valuable chapters.

Chapter Three: Contributions Towards Nation-Building

The third chapter broadens the discussion from military operations to the transport fleet's contribution to the nation. It covers disaster relief, civilian evacuation, medical assistance, connectivity to remote regions and the movement of essential supplies during emergencies.

The accounts of operations at Daulat Beg Oldie, Leh, Chushul, Thoise, Nyoma and Kargil are among the chapter's highlights. They demonstrate the exceptional demands of operating in the Himalayas, where rarefied air, unpredictable weather, restrictive terrain and limited infrastructure leave little margin for error. The author conveys that these missions depended not only on aircraft performance but

also on professional skill, improvisation, teamwork, and calculated risk-taking.

The chapter also documents relief operations following the Assam and Bhuj earthquakes, the Kerala floods and numerous other natural disasters. Its coverage of evacuations from Kuwait, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Sudan, Israel and other crisis zones highlights the growing international responsibilities of the Indian state. As India's global presence has expanded, the ability to rescue citizens and deliver humanitarian assistance abroad has become an important element of national power.

The chapter stands out for its range and human appeal. It demonstrates that the transport fleet's importance cannot be measured solely through combat missions. Its contribution to national resilience, diplomacy and humanitarian assistance is equally significant. The numerous operational episodes occasionally produce a catalogue-like effect, but collectively they provide an important record of service that might otherwise remain dispersed across institutional archives.

Chapter Four: Sky Sovereigns—The Unsung

The fourth chapter shifts the focus from operations to the people and aircraft that made them possible. Through biographical sketches, the author records the contributions of pioneering aviators and transport personnel whose achievements have not always received adequate public recognition.

Figures such as Group Captain Karori Lal Bhatia and Air Vice Marshal Harjinder Singh give the institutional history a human face. The chapter also pays tribute to aircraft such as the Dakota, Caribou, Avro HS-748, Otter, Devon, C-119G Packet and An-12B. These platforms are presented not merely through their technical specifications but also through their operational employment, reliability and association with historic missions.

The Dakota emerges as a particularly significant aircraft. Its contribution to the defence of Kashmir, airborne operations, humanitarian assistance and territorial integration establishes it as

one of the most consequential aircraft in India's post-independence history.

The chapter makes a valuable archival contribution by bringing together personal accounts, professional achievements and aircraft histories. It also reminds readers that transport operations are collective undertakings involving aircrew, engineers, technicians, loadmasters, ground handlers and numerous support organisations. A more standardised structure for the biographical sketches and aircraft profiles could improve consistency, but the chapter's commemorative purpose is both justified and effectively realised.

Chapter Five: *Atmanirbharta* in Transport Aircraft

The fifth chapter examines India's pursuit of self-reliance in aircraft manufacturing. Beginning with Walchand Hirachand and the establishment of Hindustan Aircraft Limited, it traces the development of India's aerospace industrial capability. The chapter covers the Avro HS-748, Dornier 228, Saras programme, indigenous airborne warning and control initiatives, and the C-295MW manufacturing programme.

One of the chapter's strengths is its treatment of *Atmanirbharta* as a strategic requirement rather than merely an industrial aspiration. Transport aircraft fleets remain in service for several decades and require dependable access to spares, maintenance facilities, upgrades and technical expertise. Excessive dependence on foreign manufacturers can therefore create long-term operational vulnerabilities.

The discussion of the C-295 programme is especially relevant because it represents an important expansion of private-sector participation in military aircraft manufacturing. The programme may help develop domestic supply chains, specialised skills and a broader aerospace ecosystem.

The chapter also recognises that genuine self-reliance requires more than licensed production. Indigenous design, certification, engine development, avionics integration and life-cycle support demand sustained investment and institutional cooperation. A deeper comparative assessment of successful programmes and delayed or incomplete projects could provide additional policy lessons.

Nevertheless, the chapter makes a persuasive case for treating aerospace manufacturing as an important component of national security.

Chapter Six: Envisioning the Transport Fleet of *Viksit Bharat* in 2047

The sixth chapter moves from historical assessment to strategic foresight. It considers the air mobility capability India may require by 2047 in light of its anticipated economic growth, expanding global interests and evolving security environment.

The author examines requirements for strategic and tactical airlift, humanitarian assistance, casualty evacuation, special operations, overseas deployments and joint operations under theatre commands. The chapter appropriately emphasises that future transport aircraft will often operate in contested environments. Their effectiveness will depend on intelligence, electronic warfare, fighter protection, suppression of enemy air defences, secure communications and survivable command-and-control arrangements.

A distinctive feature is the use of a quantitative framework to estimate future fleet requirements. By considering payload, aircraft availability, mission categories and logistics allocation, the author attempts to move beyond general prescriptions. This provides a useful starting point for professional discussion, although the model would benefit from regular updating as operational assumptions, technologies and force structures evolve.

The proposed framework for an IAF Air Mobility Doctrine is another important contribution. It covers force structure, operational concepts, technological integration, infrastructure, training, international cooperation, resources and risk mitigation. The chapter correctly argues that aircraft acquisition alone cannot create an effective air mobility capability; doctrine, infrastructure, personnel, joint planning and industrial support are equally important.

This forward-looking chapter gives the book contemporary policy relevance. It connects the accumulated lessons of nine decades with the future requirements of Indian air power and

presents transport aviation as a cornerstone of India's aspirations for regional and global influence.

Epilogue

The epilogue brings together the book's principal themes. It traces the fleet's progression from approximately 30 tonnes of airlift capacity at independence to more than 3,000 tonnes per mission today. It revisits historic operations in Srinagar, Poonch, Leh, Tangail, and the Maldives while highlighting the increased range, payload, responsiveness, and survivability of modern aircraft.

The epilogue reinforces the author's central argument: the transport fleet has evolved from a small collection of relatively limited aircraft into a strategic capability that supports military operations, humanitarian assistance, regional engagement and global outreach. It also acknowledges emerging threats to large transport aircraft and the need for force protection in contested airspace.

Overall Assessment

Wings of Support is a comprehensive, authoritative and richly documented account of the IAF's transport fleet. Its principal achievement lies in bringing an often-overlooked component of air power to the forefront of India's military history. The book combines operational narratives, personal accounts, aircraft histories, industrial development and strategic foresight in a single volume.

The work stands out for its breadth, professional insight, and archival value. Its extensive collection of mission accounts and individual experiences will be useful to military professionals, scholars, policymakers and aviation enthusiasts. A consolidated bibliography, additional operational maps, comparative fleet tables and further editorial standardisation could enhance a future edition.

Above all, the book demonstrates that transport aviation is not merely a supporting capability. By enabling the timely movement of forces, sustaining remote positions, assisting citizens during emergencies and extending India's reach abroad, the IAF's transport fleet constitutes a vital instrument of national power.

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