

# **‘Baba’ Mehar Singh: Aviator Extraordinary**

**GP. CAPT. DC BAKSHI, VSM\***

---

\* 21-C, New Cantt. Road, Dehradun. 248001.

---

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL the ‘Brihaspati’ school of war in India had laid down that a Commander should attack his adversary only if the enemy’s strength was 1/3 of his own. It is interesting to note that our insistence on 3:1 superiority for an offensive has 2,000 years of historical sanction.

Another historical fact that has linked our martial heritage through the ages is that, it is the North-Western theatre - the track embracing Panipat, Kurukshetra, Ludhiana, Pathankot and Jullunder (including J&K since independence), which has been the cockpit of the armed struggles. It is through this bottle-neck, with high mountain ranges on one side and the vast stretches of the desert on the other, that the temptation to capture Delhi, the seat of power has been every invader’s fantasy.

A new dimension which has been added (making things more difficult) during the turbulent years of the 20th century is the defence of India’s air space. No sooner the hostilities begin, the “aggressor” and the ‘defender” put their best foot forward to wrest the initiative from the other - and that is what, in general, settles the final score!

The saga of Indian Air Force’s heroism and valour is as vast as the sky. It has been a major arm of the country’s defence apparatus and has stood the test of time. It has been “in line of fire” time and again giving proof of its grit and determination to defend the nation’s airspace. Its motto has not been much different than what the great French military leader Marshal Foch dictated to his field Commanders. For “Victorious Will” he said undauntingly “My center has broken, my right is collapsing” but “situation excellent - I attack”. And, such has been the saga of air force exploits too!

“Flowers never bend with the the rainfall” and so do the memories of heroes, they never fade with the passage of time. The valiant men who took on their shoulders the onerous task of the nation’s defence at the critical juncture, how can a grateful nation forget them. One such Carlylean hero of IAF was “Baba Mehar Singh”.

Legendary “Baba” was the Chief of Western Theatre - airspace, the cockpit of India’s battle-circuit. He was the AOC-in-C (Air Officer Commanding-in-chief) of what is now known as Western Air Command. When the armed tribals struck J&K after its accession to India on 28 October 1947, the SOS came to airlift Indian troops to Srinagar at a very short notice. The quantum of air-effort was massive and incredible. In less than 48 hours over a 100 Dakotas had been assembled at Delhi to transfer troops, equipment and military supplies to the Valley. More than 700 sorties were flown from Delhi in the next three weeks. Lord Mountbatten has recorded in his memoirs that in all his experience of SEAC and “over the hump” flights to China, during the critical days of Second World War, he had never known such an airlift being effected at so short a notice. And all this under the able command of Baba Mehar Singh!

In modern times, it has been proved beyond doubt that the strategic airlifts capability of a nation will govern its armed forces ability to respond to future conflicts. Gp Capt Sanjeev Bedi in his article “Strategic Role of Air Force” in AIR POWER Journal ((Apr-Jun 08)

recapitulates. He states "The airlift of troops by IAF from Delhi to Srinagar to combat the Pakistani intruders was instrumental in saving two third of Kashmir including Srinagar. The airlift operations conducted by IAF during Op Mehgoot resulted in the initiative being with Indian troops. This manifested in the Indian Army taking control of two thirds of the highest battlefield in the world while Pakistani army was still preparing to launch operations."

Military commanders on each side of the battlefield are supposed to be in the possession of intelligence under various heads viz force-level, offensive/defective plans, maintenance state, 'D' days and even the personal likes/dislikes of the commanders. It is said that when Napoleon's grand army retreated from Russia; in the lost baggage of his personal belongings were the biographies of all commanders facing him on the Russian front.

But in case of 'Baba' Mehar Singh, it was the Indian Army Commanders who kept a "dossier" on his "favourite dishes". He was very fond of "cream-laced cherries" and the fact was well known to army brass. The historic ops planning of landings at Leh and Poonch were deliberated at Army Officers' mess at Srinagar; in consultation with senior Army Commanders late "Timmy" heading the brass (He was GOC 19 Div then) and notwithstanding the lavish overflow of cherry and cream puddings!

Poonch had no airfield. Arms, ammunition, food and medical stores were earlier airdropped. They mostly proved abortive. It was in the second week of December, 1947 when the dashing hero, Baba Mehar Singh landed his first *Dakota* creating a landmark in the aviation history.

His subsequent historic flight to Leh on 24 May 1948 with Maj Gen Thimayya on board, along the hitherto unchartered route at 25,000 ft and over the world's highest mountains, brought him accolades from the entire nation.

Air Marshal Bharat Kumar reminisces this event in his book "An Incredible War: IAF in Kashmir War 1947-48" - On May 24, taking Maj Gen Thimayya as his passenger, Air Cmdr Mehar Singh, with Flt Lt SD Singh as his co-pilot, skillfully negotiated mountains, towering 24,000 ft. In his ancient *Dakota*, he reached Leh and put his aircraft down deftly on an improvised strip. This was indeed a pioneering and unparalleled effort. History had been created and a way-out found for the Indian Army's predicament. (Interestingly, both these senior commanders had flown to Leh against orders from their higher HQs").

The story of Kashmir operations would have been barren and devoid of thrill and the thrill, had it not been for the IAF and looming shadows of heroes like "Baba" and his "boys" active participation.

It is not an unusual phenomenon that nations at war speak ill of each other. Commanders at both ends usually underrate their adversary's skill and visions of strategy and tactics. (Napoleon contemptuously called Duke of Wellington - a "Sepoy" General). But in case of Baba Mehar Singh, here is a tribute in words of Air Marshal Asghar Khan, the ex-chief of Pakistan Air Force. He writes in his book, "The First Round: Indo-Pak War - 65 (Chapter VII - A question of choice)".

"I was unfortunate early in my service career to serve under a succession of indifferent commanders - at the flight or Sqn Ldr level. Some did not like flying, others did not possess the ability to lead - with the solitary exception of solitary Mehar Singh - a pilot of outstanding ability. No one else was able to inspire confidence amongst us."

“Fate is the Hunter” writes (Late) Air Chief Marshal P.C. Lal in his scholarly treatise “My years with the IAF”.

Years later, “During the difficult period, resignation of Mehar Baba came as a grievous loss to the Air Force. He was fully conscious of his own rare abilities and unique contributions. Any danger he expected his men to face, he first placed himself.” The Air Chief adds - “He was an uncut diamond of sterling values, but without the spit and polish of sophistication.”

‘Baba’ Mehar Singh died in an air accident on 11 March 1952: The Eagle finally landed in his resting place, with the nation’s lamentations.

The country build monuments in honour of their leaders; ‘Baba’ was a monument himself.

On 24 May 2008, exactly after 60 years of the historic flight of “Baba’ Mehar Singh from Srinagar to Leh, the Centre of Air Power Studies (a leading think tank in the capital) organised a seminar at HQs Western Air Command to commemorate the event. The topic chosen was - Transport and Helicopter Operations: Challenges in High Himalayas.

It was attended by Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal FH Major, Marshal of the Air Force Arjan Singh, former chief of Air Staff and serving and retired officers of army, air force and navy. Amongst the speakers was Air Marshal CKS Raje, who briefed the audience of his thrilling experiences while flying packets in the valley under able leadership of (Late) Lalu Grewal. (Raje had landed at Daulat Beg-Auldi with Air Marshal Pinto on board, and this flight too has in equal measure its romantic flavour as that of landing at Leh by Baba Mehar Singh, though less publicised. The base has now been re-activated, its announcement was made by Air Marshal PK Barbora, AoCinC, Western Air Command during the seminar.

□