

# **The Legend of Mahinder Singh Pujji: Aviator who flew for Britain in World War II**

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**The extraordinary story of a Sikh pilot who achieved glory for the RAF, charmed royal princesses, and refused to do away with his turban.**

Imagine a Sikh teenager living in India whose passion was airplanes. Imagine him watching the planes land and take off at Delhi airport (then it was only the Safdarjung airport) and thinking he was going to be airborne one day. That boy, Mahinder Singh Pujji, at 19, got his flying licence and a job with Shell Oil, refueling commercial aircraft. It was 1937 and that was as close to the sky he was going to get.

Until 1939, when England declared war on Nazi Germany, the newspapers were full of advertisements seeking young pilots for the RAF and Mahinder Singh Pujji applied. Today at 87, and living in Kent (UK), he is the symbol of a bygone bond between India and the British. A bond that was established against the backdrop of the turbulent freedom struggle in India and the horrors of World War II.

## **The making of a Fighter Pilot:**

Pujji was born in Simla in 1918. He went to school and college in Lahore. Son of a senior bureaucrat in India, he had a privileged, British-style upbringing that provided him with ample scope to fulfill an inherent love for flying. He was one of the 24 young Indians, who were selected by the British to be trained to fly for the RAF at the start of the Second World War. He is now the only surviving member of the group of 18 who eventually completed the training and became RAF fighter pilots. Twelve of them were killed in the war and five died afterwards. In fact, Pujji's friend, G.B. Singh, another Indian whom he shared rooms with, was the first pilot to die.

## **The Birth of a Hero in the Sky**

Pujji's experience of the war and his survival is a story of hair-raising adventure and raw courage – a story that made him a real British battle hero. He is credited with two confirmed kills – both Messerschmits which were deadly dive-bombers that were the pride of Goering's Luftwaffe. His closest brush with death came when his plane was badly damaged in an aerial combat over France. Pujji was barely able to reach English Channel and signaled the ground control for help. Flying at about 7000 feet, he balked at bailing out over the Channel because he couldn't swim! His distressed plane saw him over the channel in sight of the white cliffs of Dover. Things were precariously balanced until he opened his landing gear – the plane had burst into flames. He had to be dragged from the burning wreckage of the plane after Pujji managed to force land. He survived although with a serious head injury, which was eventually going to force him to abandon his beloved turban.

## **The Sardar who refused to fly without his turban**

Pujji is probably the first Sikh in modern history who fought with authority on the issue of religion. He refused to obey an RAF instructor who insisted he take off his turban while flying and wear a flight helmet instead. He stood his ground saying that either he keeps the turban, or he doesn't take off at all. The RAF relented and Mahinder Singh Pujji was the first Delhi-born pilot in the air-force of the British Empire who proudly affixed the RAF wings to the front of his turban. In fact when he had crashed over Dover in flames, his turban was so bloodied that he is convinced that his faith had saved his life to fight another day.

There was a romantic side to the young Sikh pilot. He was deeply in love with his fiancé – Amrit. He had her name painted on the side of the Hurricane he had flown in for hundreds

of missions. He was to marry her later, and she bore him three children.

Indian aviators were trophy flyers for the British who were fighting on two disparate fronts: Gandhi's Indian National Congress at home and the Axis abroad. Meanwhile, Subhas Bose had started his INA which was determined with the help of both Hitler and the Japanese to take India back from the British by force.

Along the Burmese border, the airfields of Kohima were hastily constructed. The marshland made it difficult for engineers to lay down runways, and besides there wasn't much time. Metallic sheets, bolted together were used as runways and the missions on the Burmese theatre took off from there. Pujji fought in the Burmese theatre as well, bombing Japanese held bridges, blasting convoys of Axis soldiers and inflicting heavy losses on the combined enemy forces.

Pujji earned glory for flying a number of low-level sorties in Burma to locate a group of hundreds of British troops who were lost in enemy territory. This resulted in his squadron getting the sobriquet – Army's Eyes.

#### **The aviator's Royal Admirers:**

The young Sikh, who believed the Empire were fighting a righteous war, got on famously with the English from the moment he landed in Britain for his training. That was 1940. The British liked his young charm, his neatly tied turban, and gave him respect for being an RAF pilot. Pujji counts among his sweetest memories his meeting with princesses Elizabeth and Margaret at Windsor Castle in September 1940. He was one of a group of Indians who were invited to a tea with the royal family. Pujji found himself sitting between the two princesses and attracting their attentions. He endeared himself so much to Elizabeth and Margaret that they would meet him every time they visited a base where he was stationed.

"Pujji's girlfriends are here," his buddies would tease the young Indian every time the royal ladies sought him out.

Pujji loved being in England and was impressed by the way Londoners endured the horrors of war with phlegmatic courage. He thought highly of the British etiquette and general courtesies.

#### **A Glorious History of War in the Sky:**

Pujji's introduction to the trauma of war began during his training, which coincided with the height of Blitzkrieg, the name given to heavy aerial bombardments by Hitler's forces. British pilots were dying even during their training. The first Indian RAF pilot to die was Pujji's roommate. Pujji and his other Indian colleagues never believed they would come out alive from the war. He wrote to his family warning them to prepare for the worst.

But his love of adventure was such that he wanted to be in the thick of action. His wish was granted when he was posted to RAF Kenley, Surrey. As part of the 258 Squadron, Pujji flew and proved himself to be a daredevil and a formidable aerial adversary, risking his life on every mission. Pujji provided air cover to British shipping convoys and went on sorties over France to detect enemy troop movement. He fought for the British in North America, Afghanistan, and Burma, apart from Europe. He flew about 25 types of aircraft, among them Hurricanes and Spitfires.

#### **The Aviator Who Hungers for the sky**

A grateful British Empire, honouring its brave gladiators of World War II promoted Pujji to Squadron Leader in 1944 and awarded him the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC), the highest bravery award for British pilots. Pujji later returned to India, married, and worked for Air India as a commercial pilot. He also worked for AI's Air Traffic Control. Later, when his health disallowed him from flying planes, he took to gliding.

He holds the world record for the longest glide across mountains – a 300-mile flight over the

Himalayas.

The young Indian RAF pilots who were used to black humour had named themselves “The Suicide Squadron”. But the sky longs for Pujji even now!

