

# Blues Skies Podcast

## Season 1, Episode 03

### Attacking Sargodha

00:00

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

I looked up and I saw this bright Orange flash of the shape of blowing up. And I shouted out top of my head, sir, you got him.

00:47

Ganapathy:

Hello and welcome to the Blue Skies Podcast. I'm P R Ganapathy, your host.

Well, folks, today it's my pleasure to speak to Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar. Air Marshal Rajkumar was commissioned in 1962 to the Fighter Stream of the Indian Air Force. He served in many squadrons during his initial days, 47 Squadron, 1 Squadron during 1965 war, 3 Squadron, and then he commanded 108 Squadron. He qualified as a test pilot from EPNA in France, was a flying instructor in Iraq, and his last position in the Air Force as the Air Marshall was the head of the National Flight Test Centre, where he had a critical role to play in the development of the Light Combat Aircraft, the Tejas, on which he's written two books, the most recent of which has just been published. Air Marshal Rajkumar has a Param Vishit Seva medal, an Ati Vishit Seva medal, a Vayu Seva medal, and was mentioned in dispatches. Welcome to the program, Air Marshal Rajkumar.

02:02

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Thank you, Guns

02:10

Ganapathy:

Well, sir, if I can just get you started by giving us a background of where you grew up and what caused you to join the AirForce.

02:20

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

My father was a doctor in the old Mysore Dominion Medical Service. And we were posted and I saw in 1953, at the age of twelve, we moved to Bangalore and one of the first sites that I saw in Bangalore at that time was the old vampire jet screaming over the city of Bangalore. So I looked at that and said, my God, this is where I want to be. As luck would have it, by the

time I finished high school in 1956 and I visited an uncle of mine, a distant relation, he was posted at the Air Force Technical College in Jalahalli and I badgered him to let me go and see the Aeroplanes parked on the tarmac of the Air Force Technical College. And one of the aeroplanes there was a Vampire 52 fighter. So my uncle took me there and he turned on the battery, made me sit inside the cockpit and turned on the gun sight. And I said, wow, this is it. I got to be a fighter pilot.

03:22

Ganapathy:

How old were you then, sir?

03:26

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

In 1956, I was 14 and a half. 15.

03:31

Ganapathy:

Fascinating. Must have been quite an impression.

03:35

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Yeah, so very impressionable age. And so I stuck to what I had decided. And dad, of course, being a doctor was very keen on me following a medical line. So he said, you go and do your intermediate. So I went and finished my intermediate. Then he said, okay, how about doing medicine? I said, no, I want to join the airforce. So that led to a lot of bickering in the house. So finally he said, okay, you go and do your physics and maths BSc, which is what I did. And when I finished that, I was almost running out of age to join the AirForce. So finally another uncle happened to be in Bangalore and I spoke to him and made him persuade my father to let me join the AirForce. And on the 1 July 1961 I went off to the Air Force flying College. There, after finishing the basic on HT-2 and intermediate stage in [North American T-6 Texan] Harvards, I was sent to the jet training wing at Hakimpet. And this was in July of 1962. I landed up in Hakimpet and started converting onto the Vampire. So that was a dream realised. Great fun.

And then as we were approaching the little beyond the midterm stage, the Chinese incursion took place on the 20 October 1962 and we were all hurriedly pushed through and commissioned on the 10 November 1962. And our applied stage of training was also shortened. And instead of reporting to the Squadrons in June 63, we reported to Squadrons by the end of February 1963. I was posted to number 47 Squadron at Kalaikunda which was flying with Toofani, the MD 450 Oregon. The Toofani was a little more powerful than the Vampire, the Vampire had a 3500 pound engine and the Toofani had a 5000 pound engine. So it was a big deal. And anyway, after four or five months in the Squadron I just was entering my ops stage syllabus when the Squadron was hurriedly moved overnight to Bagdogra on the Himalayan foothills. And at Bagdogra I continued with my day ops training. But by then the Chinese incursion had led to the United States offering to train 80 Indian Air Force pilots in gunnery. So we were split into ten batches of eight and we were sent off to the

United States Air Force for training which was a fascinating, fantastic opportunity. But to do that one had to get 200 Jettas and a White Instrument Rating. So by the end of 1963 I had those requirements and in April 1964 I was bringing my way to Lackland Airport, based in Texas for a one month English language course which turned out to be a bit of a holiday. Then we flew the T 33 at Randall Space and then did about ten or 12 hours, and didn't go solo. Then we transferred to Nellis Airport in Las Vegas for the actual gunnery. And that was a fantastic phase of training because they were very professional and we learnt a lot. And the funny thing was in the same squadron in which we were training, we had pilots from many other countries including Pakistan. Well, and the Pakistani pilots and the Indian pilots, we all were in the same Bachelor officer quarters and we were great friends.

07:42

Ganapathy:

Well, friends with the Pakistanis. That's quite an interesting set up. Just join us on the other side as we continue this story.

08:05

Ganapathy:

What happened after you returned, sir?

08:08

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Anyway, September 1964 finished five months in the United States. I came back to Delhi and was supposed to do number 1 Squadron at Adampur. So the Squadron commander was Wing Commander Om Prakash Taneja and his two flight commanders were Squadron Leader Paddy Earl and Squadron leader Danny Satur. Squadron Leader Sudarshan Handa was one of the senior squadron leaders of the squadron.

08:38

Ganapathy:

Can you tell us a little more about the Mystere? What sort of aircraft was it? What was it capable of? Performance wise, what sort of role did we procure it for and what was it like to fly?

08:50

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

The Mystere was again from the Marcel Dassault stable and it was vast improvement on the Tupani because it had a more powerful engine, the Hispano-Suiza Verdon which was a 7500 pound engine and the Mystere could carry a lot of armaments. It could carry 36 68 millimetre Rockets under the wings and then it had a belly station which you could carry 55 of the 68 millimetre Rockets. Then it had two DEFA cannons and performance wise it was supersonic in a dive, but it couldn't match the Hunter because the Hunter was more powerful. It was a 10,000 pound A1 engine, whereas the Mystere was stuck at 7500 pound and so the performance was not as good as that of the Hunter, but it was very good for ground attack because it was able to carry a big load. Now because of the underpowered engines, it took a long take off role to get it off the ground.

But once she got up to a speed of about 400 knots, she was a delight to fly. And unlike the Hunter, which had manual reverse or flying controls, the Mystere had only hydraulic controls. It had three systems and there was no manual reversion, so it was more sophisticated as far as flying controls went and the handling qualities were very good. Another drawback was the Hunter had a ground level ejection seat, but the Mystere unfortunately had an ejection seat which had a minimum ejection height of 2000 feet. That was a drawback. But we loved the Mystere because it was a delight to fly and could really pack a punch and was used mainly in the air to ground role.

For the air to air role when used to have dissimilar aircraft air combat training with the Hunters and Gnats, we always came off second best because those aeroplanes could add more power reserve, they could outrun us. So the lesson we learned during that period was that we shouldn't get into a dog fight with any, specially the Saber, because we knew how the Saber handled, having flown in the previous year in the US. So things were on a roll until last week of April 1965 when the Pakistanis intruded in the Kutch sector and the Air Force was put on alert and our training was stopped and number of pupils about seven or eight flying instructors from training command attached to a Squadron. And we spent the whole of May and June of 1965 baking in the crew room. There are no ACs or anything, not much flying. But at the end of June the alert was called off and I pushed off on leave to Bangalore and I was recalled.

At the end of August, I was recalled and the Pakistanis had started Operation Gibraltar, sent in a lot of infiltrators in Jammu and Kashmir and they were being sorted out by the army. When that Operation Gibraltar failed, Pakistan Army High Command launched what is called Operation Grand Slam on 1 September. And the grand plan was to cut off the Jammu Srinagar Highway at a place called Akhnoor. And then there was no alternate road communication available at that time and effectively isolated J&K and left it at the mercy of only air supply.

13:00

Ganapathy:

Were you fully operational on the Mystere by this time? Had you completed your syllabus?

13:10

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Yeah, that's an interesting question, because I told you in May and June of 1965, not much flight, but we have to do some night flying. So we hurriedly given a dual check in a vampire trainer and I did one more sortie, my first solo at night in the Mystere And then I told you, I went off on leave when I came back in August and I was sent to Sulur with another officer to fetch the last two Mysteres out of Sulur from storage. And then when I got back to Squadron on the 1 September, the war had broken out in the Chamb sector and the squadrons at Pathankot were heavily engaged with the Gnats and the Mysteres So we were eagerly looking forward to some action. And when it was decided that we should complete a night syllabus. So one more soldier in the vampire trainer. And then I did my second solo on the Mystere and I was declared fully ops, ready to go to war.

And so like that, for four or five days, we were chewing our nails in the crew room, listening to the stories coming out of Pathankot where the Gnats were mixing it up with the Sabres. And finally, on the 6 September, the Indian Army opened the Lahore front because to relieve pressure in the Chamb sector, the Indian Army was badly placed in Chamb because they were caught off guard. And to relieve pressure in that sector, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri took the bold move of opening a second sector in Lahore. Our Indian Army advanced across the international border on the Amritsar Lahore axis.

So we were expectantly waiting to go into operations on the 6th, but Wing Commander Taneja led a 4 aircraft search and strike mission, but they didn't see anything much and we came back. Actually, when the Indian Army opened the front on the morning of six, he should have been over Pakistan airfield attacking their aircraft on the ground. But we didn't do it. And for years and years we were very upset about this.

Finally, on the 50th anniversary of that war, Air Marshal Bharat Kumar, came out of the book called Duels of the Himalayan Eagle, in which, after doing extensive research, he said Prime Minister Shastri had expressly forbidden Air Marshal Arjan Singh, the chief of the Air Force, from attacking Pakistan airfield on the morning of 6th.

But there's a reason for this. There's a reason for this. It was less than three years since the Chinese incursion, and that was an ignominious defeat for the Indian Army. And everybody was very, very concerned about Chinese insurance in case a large scale company interrupted with Pakistan.

So Prime Minister Shasti decided that we should not escalate the conflict beyond reasonable limits and forbade the air force from attacking the airfields. Pakistan didn't have any such restrictions. And they attacked our airfields at Pathankot, Adampur and Halwara on the evening of 6th and at Pathankot the carnage there was extensive. We lost ten aircraft on the ground and Adampur we lost a Mig and Halwara, we lost two Hunters. And next morning, on 7 September, we were asked to retaliate by attacking Sargodha

17:20

Ganapathy:

So where were you on the 6th when they struck Adampur. And what was that experience like?

17:23

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

The Sabre strike over Adampur did not materialise. We saw them on the Western horizon, but for some reason, they did not come over the airfield though we sounded the air raid siren and we all got into trenches. But the attack never came. Later on, we discovered that the Sabres had thrown head on into an IAF Dakota carrying supplies to Adampur and the Pakistani leader, who is none other than Alam, the famous Squadron leader Alam, he very wisely said, "now the defences have been alerted, I've lost surprise". So we went back.

But later on in the evening, when we're packing up and going home at about 630, it was just getting dark a B 57 appeared over the airfield and bombed the operation readiness platform when we lost a Mig and he dropped another bomb which fell on the side of the runway, fortunately, didnt crater the runway. So the next morning, we were told to attack Sargodha at dawn at 06:00 a.m.. So I was number twelve in twelve aircraft strikes.

18:42

Ganapathy:

Can I just stop you here? And if you could just give us a sense of the importance of Sargodha to the Pakistani air force. And why was that chosen as the target?

18:51

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Sargoda was one of the biggest air bases in Pakistan. Two or three Sabre squads were based there at that time. In 1965, the two big bases were Maoripur and Karachi, where the B 57 bombers were based, and the Sabers were three squadrons were there at Sargora and was supposed to be heavily defended. And it also had a radar unit on the hills close by. So it was a very important place for them. Having lost so many aeroplanes the previous evening, probably the IAF leadership felt that we should give a fitting response.

One Squadron of 12 aircraft went to Sargoda, now this takeoff was in the dark at 530 a. M. And the funny thing was, this was my third take off at night. I told you that I had flown only twice before. Now, this time I was getting airborne in the dark with 2000 pounders, full fuel and full gun ammunition. Very heavyweight configuration. And then we had twelve aircraft and two standbys. Two standbys are supposed to start up and wait on the operational readiness platform. And if anybody dropped out, they were supposed to come in. Nobody had dropped out.

But just as I was about to roll one of the standby aircrafts I didn't know who it was at the time but later on came to know he just entered the runway in front of me in front of my deputy leader and myself and started rolling. Now I told you the previous evening the Pak had dropped a bomb and had thrown a lot of Earth and pieces of shrapnel onto the runway there was no time to sweep the runway or anything so we just rolled and as I was raised my nosewheel I had to go through this cloud of dust and lost visual reference for about 2-3 seconds. When I came out I saw this enormous Mystere filling my windshield just airborne and just ahead of me and I was about to collide with them so the Mystere had a characteristic that if you unstuck slightly prematurely she yawed to the right which is what I did.

I yawed and staggered into the air and cleaned up the aircraft and tried to catch up with the other members of the formation so I had lost them by the time because they were all flying without navigation lights so I burned the fuel and came back and landed but on the landing roll probably my tire was cut because by the shuttle on the runway because even though I made a smooth touchdown, I had 2000 pounds, but my right tire burst and the aircraft started veering off the runway but I managed to control it and turn off onto the taxi track and as I went back to the crew room the rest of the formation returned from Sargodha and I

found that my formation I was number four in the last formation had failed to hit target because of a navigation error.

The leader was Squadron Leader Susarshan Handa and then wingman was a chap called Darshan Brar, and the deputy leader was, now group captain Kahai, so during the debrief, CO Taneja got upset and said "Why didn't you guys go to the target? So load up and go back". Now the whole idea of going at 05:30 A.m. Was to have the cover of darkness at least for the ingress and the element of surprise and all that, now in broad daylight you are asked to attack Sargoda at 1015.

23:12

Ganapathy:

Well friends, that's the set up broad daylight raid on Sargodha the most heavily defended, most important airbase in Pakistan and in broad daylight at 1015 in the morning. Join us in a few seconds as we continue the conversation with Air Marshal Rajkumar.

23:44

Ganapathy:

Welcome back. So that must have been pretty nerve wracking. Was it the same four of you who were detailed?

23:54

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

But the same formation. Handa number one, Brar number two, Kahai three and Self four. So we took off at 945 and 30 minutes later we pulled up over Sargodha and we were extremely fortunate that three Sabres and one F 104 which is doing the Combat Air Patrol over Sargodha just landed for refuelling. In fact they were being refueled when we dropped the bombs and strafed them. Pakistan admitted only the loss of one Sabre, but I think till today they admitted the loss of only one Sabre, but I think they would have definitely lost those four aircraft.

Anyway, the good thing was that all four of us made it back. We flew at extremely low level and had a lot of anxious moments because fuel was very low and we made it back to Adampur and I switched off with 200 pounds out of 6500 pounds that I was carrying. I finally switched off with 200 pounds which give me about three to four minutes of flying time.

25:12

Ganapathy:

Oh my goodness, that's amazing.

25:14

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Anyway, it was good to come back and that evening we were scared that paratroopers were going to attack Adampur, so we would call back to the Squadron and we spent the night sitting in the trenches firing at imaginary intruders and all that. Right, now, remember, this

was my very first official sortie. I was 24 years old. Not quite experienced and probably 560 or 570 hours in my logbook. And after that, for the remainder of the war, from the 7 September till 22nd September, we did the mainly Combat Air Patrols on our own territory or the airfield. And we did cross border strikes, close support missions for the army, mainly in Lahore and the Sialkot sector.

We destroyed a few tanks and subsequent vehicles, attacked only military targets. And the B 57s used to raid our airfields at night. And on the 13 September, our airfield, the Adampur airfield, was badly hit by a B 57. So the next evening we were ordered to move to Ambala, finished the last strike over the Lahore sector and head for Ambala. A heap of Mystere would be there from 28 to 30, Mystere would be parked out in the open till on the 17 September the B 57 appeared over Ambala. Mercifully, the bomb fell short and destroyed the Church in Ambala. But if it had skipped and landed in those 30 Mysteres, we probably would have lost all of them. But we were fortunate to get away with that.

27:18

Ganapathy:

Hang on folks, there's more to come. Just stay tuned.

27:36

Ganapathy:

So one of the things we try to do is put our audience in the cockpit with you. So just give me a sense of what it was like. As you reached the initial point and then pulled up, what did you see? The entire Sargoda complex. What were you thinking of? What were the radio calls people were making? What were you seeing?

28:00

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Yeah. Now when we were ordered to go back, I was scared stiff. I have been so frightened in my life, but you can't say, "Mamma, I'm not going", so you go and fortunately, once you sit in the cockpit and start up, all your fear vanishes because you're so busy concentrating on the mission. Now, we went at a very low level, maybe 150-200ft. And my main job was the two wingmen. Our job was to look behind and keep the tail clear. So we continued that way and kept scanning the sky for any aircraft. And then we hit the railway line, which is northeast of Sargodha, and turn left. Sargodha is a 31-13 runway. And when we pulled up and rolled into the dive, that's the first time I saw the Sargodha complex.

Meanwhile, I was the last man on the dive. I was about 1500 yards behind the leader. The leader had already dropped his bombs on a bulk Petroleum installation short of the runway and he spotted the runways and he strafed. And his first bus hit the Sabre, the middle Sabre. And he started shouting "Aircraft on the runway, Aircraft on the runway". I looked up and I saw this bright Orange flash of the Saber blowing up. And I shouted at the top of my deck and shouted, sir, you got him. And then, now I was far too high to point my nose at the thing. But Kahai, definitely my deputy leader, dropped his bombs on those aircraft. Whether they hit, exploded or skipped, we don't know.



But anyway, I dropped my bombs and destroyed the air traffic control building and at that time Brah the number two called out, Bogey. Bogey means unidentified enemy aircraft, left, 08:00 high. So I looked to my left and I saw a flak bus. There's a lot of flak. And so I said, that's only flak. But the leader said, Buster. Now, Buster means open full throttle. And our planning was only for two minutes to get away at full throttle. But we carried on for eight minutes at full throttle. I became very low on fuel. My bingo light, the 1600 pound light, came on when I was well to the west of Lahore and then I became very low. After Bingo at 1800, you have the next call at 600, you say, thirsty. That means you're really down. My thirsty call came and Handa said, "You are over Indian territory now. You can eject if you have to". So I had no intention of doing that.

But we overflew a gun defended area, which is the Amritsar radar unit, and our own guns opened up and I could see the red traces coming straight at you and burning out. The traces you can see, but what you don't see are the ones which are supposed to hit you. So you sort of try and crouch into a little ball in the cockpit and hope that you won't get hit. So then as soon as we crossed Amritsar, I eased up. I told Handa, I'm easing up to 6000ft. I eased up and from a distance, it was fortunately a very clear day. And from a distance of about 10 miles or so, I caught sight of the Adampur runway, so throttled back and landed.

So it was a very high voltage, high adrenaline rush, sortie. And after the debrief, I came back to the crew room and I grabbed a cup of tea and sat down and I found my knees were shaking. The adrenaline rush was over. So that was that.

But after this very high voltage drama on the very opening sortie of my life, the remaining sorties in the Lahore and Sialkot sector were child's place, so to speak, you hardly went for two to three minutes, looked for army positions and emptied your load and came back. And in the evening we were back in the mess. The fighting was by poor Jawans, who were in the trenches in contact with the enemy.

So that was the 65 war. A great experience. Now Wing Commander Taneja, during the run up the previous year, he hardly ever flew with us. He was coming late to the Squadron and come at eleven, pack up by one, and hardly flew. So we said, what kind of CO do we have? But when the balloon went, my God, the transformation of Taneja, he flew sorties and the very first strike across the border, he led the Sargodha raid and continued leading from the front, right through the wall. I said, this is what military leadership is all about. It's setting the example when the bullets are flying around and thereafter I hero worshipped Wing Commander Om Prakash Taneja.

In fact in 2016, when he was 89 years old and suffering from cancer, I went up to Delhi just to have dinner with him once and I met him for the last time. He passed away in July of 2017. But he was somebody I held in such enormous esteem because of the leadership that he demonstrated during the war.

And thereafter, what happened was Pakistani B 57s raid had no opposition at all at 65 because we had no night interception capability. Zero. So then in the middle of 66, we started getting the Type 77 Mig 21 with an Airborne Interception Radar, the R 12 and the K

13 missiles. So we started doing a lot of night flying. And over a period of three to four years, we have developed a very good night air defence capability, which was very useful during the December 71 conflict because the B 57 raids sort of petered out. There's not many raids. They wouldn't come over there till the time because they knew that the Migs were around.

So depending on what weapons the other side has, you have to develop counters well in time, in peacetime, and you're going to use it in war. That's the lesson.

Then in early 71, the Air Force decided that we needed to have a specialist unit for development of tactics and combat techniques in the IAF. And they started this Tactics and Combat Development and Training Squadron at Adampur. And in June we moved to Ambala and I was sent off to Air HQ to learn French because my name had come for the French test pilot squads. So I came back to the unit sometime in September and I was told that we don't know whether your signal will come whether you're going or not. So you better get into the act and start practising low level Nav at night.

Because the task given to the Squadron was to carry out single aircraft night bombing raids, harassment raids over Pak airfields. We were supposed to take off from Amritsar, go to Chaklala, Sargodha, and so on, which were about between 22 and 25 minutes flying time from Amritsar.

37:10

Ganapathy:

And which aircraft were you operating at that time?

37:13

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Mig21s with ventral tank and 2000 pound bombs. And the only Nav, there was no GPS and all that, the only Nav we had was Compass and stop-watch. And the entire Punjab countryside on both sides was completely blacked out. So you just had to steer a course and time and go and hope like hell that you arrived over the target.

And usually what used to happen later on, my friends told me, was that the Pak guards would open up and give away their position when they heard the aircraft coming. While I was training for this on the 8 October, I pushed off to France for EPNER training. So I missed the 71 war.

Then over the next 20 years, I returned in 72 and between 72 and 2001 over a period of 29 years, I spent something like 20 years in the flight testing specialisation. In between, of course, you had to go Command a squadron and Command station, do stuff, jobs, Air HQ and all that to tick the boxes, kind of.

So I did all that. And finally, in 1994, Sept 1994, Dr. Abdul Kalam asked for my services to test the flight-test program of the Light Combat Aircraft. So I came to Bangalore and set up the National Flighttest Center. I was quite convinced in my mind that we needed a small group, but you need a group which is devoted exclusively to the LCA program, because we

have to interact with the designers, we have to develop the control of the fly by wire. There's a lot of simulator flying to be done. And so I had only a very small group, maybe six or seven people, but we were eyes down, focused only on that.

And finally, in spite of the US sanctions, between 1998, after Phokran, the US withdrew all support - all Western countries withdrew support, and in spite of that, we managed to fly it. And if I'm allowed to beat my own drum a little bit, I've said, all this in the "Radiance in the Indian Sky" is the book that has just been released by DESIDOC. So you could perhaps put a link on it. And interested people can read that book which gives the full LCA story.

40:17

Ganapathy:

Yeah. No, I think we'll definitely put a link to both your books, which really offer a fascinating insight into all the challenges that we overcame in building this aircraft. Tremendous success that it has now become and is an operational service. I know I promised to take not more than an hour of your time and we are at time I want to thank you for your generous and insightful conversation putting us in the cockpit with you attacking Sargodha I'd love to have a further conversation with you sometime about training at Epner, test flying and the Tejas project, but I'll set up time for that separately. I really want to thank you for your time and just a wonderful recounting of the experiences that you had.

41:02

Air Marshal Philip Rajkumar :

Yeah, thank you, Guns. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak to you.