

Blues Skies Podcast

Season 1, Episode 40

AVM SC Chafekar - Stinger hit, DBO AN-32 landing

1:01

Ganapathy:

Hello and welcome to the Blue Skies Podcast. I am PR Ganapathi, your host.

It is my great pleasure today to speak to AVM SC Chafekar. He was commissioned into the Indian Air Force in the Transport Stream as a pilot in the year 1982 and after many years in which he had flown more than 7000 hours in various types of aircraft, he recently retired from the Air Force. AVM Chafekar has been credited with several first time activities such as landing an AN32 aircraft at the highest landing strip, Daulat Beg Oldi At 16,700ft, he's been involved with humanitarian aid and disaster relief activities such as Uttarakhand flood relief Yemen evacuation. It was also responsible and involved with the induction of modern transport aircraft such as the C 17 GlobeMaster, the C-130 Super Hercules. He was awarded the AVSM for devotion to duty and he was also awarded a Shaurya Chakra for the bravery that he demonstrated during that operation at DBO. So we're going to have a fascinating conversation with him today. But first things first. Welcome to the program, sir. Thank you so much for taking time to speak to us.

02:21

AVM Chafekar :

Thanks a lot. Thank you very much for calling me over. It's my pleasure to be speaking to you.

2:27

Ganapathy:

Thank you, sir. So as we start with all our guests, we just love to get to know them better. So where did you grow up and what was your motivation to join the Air Force? What are those initial years like? Which aircraft did you train on?

2:42

AVM Chafekar :

Okay, so how do I start? I will say I'm a small town boy place Nagpur. Now it's not anymore. A small town basically an outdoor guy you can call me, studied in a very renowned school known as Hudders High School and thereafter did College also from here. Now here there is an interesting thing which I like to tell you is I am an Air Force officer. However during my

school days as well as College days I was in army NCC. I did my BSc in math, physics, chemistry. However I was more outdoor person. So I was telling you I had decided to be in the Defense forces. However which service was not decided and Secondly I have been brought up as a very practical person. So considering that practicality, I was very clear that I will not join Defense Forces through NDA because I have wanted to enjoy the College life. Right. Okay. So that is how I ended up appearing for CDS and cleared in the first Go and thereafter I cleared the SSB. Also my dad was a Territorial Army chap. Let me tell you, he was not a regular army. He was in Territorial Army, retired as an Adjutant in the local unit here 118-TA. Very clearly he had told me that he will love that I joined the army. But my mother was very fond of Air Force. So my first choice was Naval aviation followed by Air Force and followed by army. Why naval aviation? Because there was a boy in Airwing NCC who had just joined naval Aviation and he told me a lot about landing aircraft on a ship and all. And that age. You are not very clear what exactly you want in life but when it came finally to join I thought and I don't regret that anyhow at all. I thought if I have to be an aviator why not be in a service where aviation is topmost, so that was Air Force. So here what happened is I got a call from Naval Aviation and I got a call simultaneously for Air Force. So I decided and without telling my dad let the naval aviation thing go and join Air Force.

So direct entry boys go to a place Coimbatore where we had a ground training, six months of ground training, finished that and then reported to Bidar. Bidar is a very quiet place and we had a very difficult kind of aircraft to fly there known as HT2 i.e Hindustan Trainer 2. The number of stories we had heard about this aircraft, you can say folklore only had already scared us a lot. This was the tail wheel aircraft. Now the aviators will understand the difficulties of tail wheel aircraft. All the aerodynamic forces which act on this aircraft when it is taking off and when it is landing are quite different. So it does very funny things on its own sometimes and sometimes you add your wrong inputs and make it to further go wrong. So ours was the last course on this aircraft. Thereafter I think they changed over to Kirans and then HPT 32 came in. So ours was the last course on the HT2.

What happened is I was going through quite okay but somehow I was not getting the grip of the flying because I had never seen head or tail of a A/C earlier. The instrumentation never thought of this aviation as a subject. As people say normally all aviators start looking at the aircraft when they are four years old and jump at the site of it. For me there was no such excitement. But my decision was that yes, I can manage this and I will do it. But the first hurdle was difficult for me to cross because of two, three things getting added up. The initial excitement about flying the first time we're doing it, then the instructors and the atmosphere there, I was overwhelmed or whatever. I just was not up to the Mark. They keep telling that you can even make a monkey a pilot provided you keep giving him flying. But in the Fauj (forces) there is not much time. It is a very clear cut laid down time that within this time you have to learn to be a pilot. So what happened when I went for my solo check, I bounced and got two extensions didn't make it there. And what they call it TRB (termination review board) I was put across to them and now I was damn scared because my dad used to keep telling me the rejection rate there is quite high. So think over twice if you want to choose air force. So what I did I never informed my father and mother and just appeared for the TRB there they give you a chance to speak out and tell why you have not performed. So let me tell you, I have been a very Frank open to talking and at times blunt kind of a person. I used to speak

my mind. That is what the way I was brought up and in my entire Air Force service you will see keep seeing this quality coming back or whatever you call it. Some call it quality, some they don't like it so call it something else. But that shows. So as it was my nature I told the board that there are a lot of factors which have combined and this is the result. So I can assure you if you give me two extension I will clear Solo. Now what that person thought got only lows. I got two extensions and excellent instructor. Okay. His name was I will tell you the name also Wing Cdr. Baburao, very gusty and full of enthusiasm kind of a person. So he took me up for this sortie of which I got 45, 45 minutes broken down further to 15 minutes, 30 minutes. And he used to really encourage me and the result was, you know, now I retired as AVM. That means the result was I cleared.

10:03

Ganapathy :

Absolutely right. Fascinating. Sometimes all you need is that change in the instructor that different perspective and it brings out the best in you.

AVM Chafekar :

Yes. At times it does affect you. Sometimes you don't click along. So it's a kind of a thing which I saw. So from the army NCC, Solo, here I was clearing my solo at the first stage. From there on we moved to AFA flew Kirans, a beautiful jet trainer. Wonderful A/C. Very nice to fly. All the apprehensions which we had about flying had gone off in thin air thereafter. There is another story I will keep telling you and repeating this that decision making which way it is going but I have to think over and take decisions. The next decision was that I will be a transport pilot. Very few clearly have such vision. You will find very few people in Indian Air Force, most of them want to join fighters. I was very clear that I would like to join transport aircraft because the places they visited, the life they have I had a little bit of idea from some people. Regimentation was not in my blood so much. Okay. So that may also be one factor doesn't matter. So I gave a choice as transports and there you get the stream based on your performance, your choice, the number of vacancies, so on and so forth. So luckily I got the transport and I was very happy landed up at Yelahanka, flew another beauty, Avro aircraft. That was a transport conversion. And you know, I fell in love with that aircraft because it used to listen to you, not like HT2.

12:04

Ganapathy :

My father's done a lot of the initial testing on the Avro when he was at HAL Kanpur and it is one of his favorite aircraft too.

AVM Chafekar :

It was an aircraft which was favorite for many and we had excellent instructors there, very nice atmosphere and, you know, for a chap who was not able to clear his first solo. I stood first in flying in that transport conversion on Avro aircraft. And the first posting was far, far in east on another tail wheel aircraft. Yes. Surprising after flying Avro, I got onto Otter aircraft.

Ganapathy:
Oh, the Otter. Wow.

12:51

AVM Chafekar :

Yes, the Canadian aircraft. You must be knowing about it. Tail wheel aircraft. And the best part of that was that was the only transport aircraft which you could fly alone. And in Chabua, Northeast, we did a lot of air maintenance, that is landing at smaller airfields known as advanced landing routes, like along a lot of places. And excellent seat of pants flying. That was what I can call it. And it drops also there at very difficult places, Alini and things like that. And a beautiful place north. I fell in love with it. Along with that, I got married also there. So my wife also loves that place equally. Well, that is the best station and I have taken her to many of the stations, but she likes that much.

1347

Ganapathy:

Very nice. Let me just ask you some more about the otter. So what was the capacity? How many people would it seat? And it was a single radial engine in front is what I seem to remember.

AVM Chafekar :

Yes.

Ganapathy:

And used to fly single pilot, is it?

AVM Chafekar

Yes.

Ganapathy :

Do you have a Navigator?

AVM Chafekar :

No.

Ganapathy :

You're just navigating also yourself?

14:10

Yeah. There was no Navigator. It was a Canadian aircraft piston engine. Okay. Nine radial engine. Right. Fitted onto the nose of the aircraft, a tail wheel aircraft. We had a capacity of around ten to twelve passengers which would carry out 500 kg of load for drop. And another very unique thing about that area was captain and copilot seats were there. The instrumentation was there. However, the yoke or the stick, what you call it, was only towards

the captain's side. There was no extension of that stick towards the copilot. So he's facing the instrument panel and he cannot control the aircraft. Only the trainer had that. So in the Otter. You have controls. Like literally you have controls. There was a pin in the center. You used to pull that pin and that yoke used to fall towards the copilot. Now as a captain, you don't have controls. So we used to keep doing this. That is why the aircraft was cleared for single pilot after a few days. And we enjoyed flying single. We used to navigate it was a slow aircraft so navigation was not very difficult. We used to write down the ETA and all on the windshield and it was fun flying over from 3000ft below the clouds. Normally we have to maintain and fly and wonderful flying. We learned a lot in otters

15:44

Ganapathy :

And it had very good short field performance, isn't it?

AVM Chafekar :

Yes, it means it was like a helicopter. You will be surprised to know a fixed wing aircraft when you do be on finals. People had to wait for it to come down. It's coming. It's coming. Yes, still it is coming. And then we used to arrive and within let me tell you, 300ft it could stop.

Ganapathy :

My goodness,

AVM Chafekar :

That was performance and around 250 to 300ft it could take off. You hold on, brakes open, power the tail is to go up, release the brakes. Just unstick. She used to vertically go up like a helicopter. A fixed wing aircraft, basic aerofoils, massive wings, very thick and then a good beautiful aircraft.

16:38

Ganapathy :

Wow. And so as a young officer a tremendous experience doing all that yourself which I don't think a lot of people would have got that sort of experience.

AVM Chafekar :

Absolutely right. My few course mates went directly again on Avro and few went on a few other A/C but we were the most happiest and career wise best lot. We three coursemates had gone there (to fly the Otter) and all three where we have those categories, B. Green, C. Green and all. So B. Green. We were within two years and we flew almost 2000, 3000 hours within that four year tenure that was amount of flying. We have to get phenomenal flying and as a flying officer we will B green and Co was also very enthusiastic. He never allowed us to

come out of the cockpit. Night flying we used to do over at the airfield but four, 4 hours, 5 hours. So lot of good experience we got.

17:38

Ganapathy:

What was the serviceability and all that like of that aircraft?

AVM Chafekar :

Yeah, ease of maintenance. Piston engine has its own typical problems. Cylinder leaks, oil leaks from the cylinder, spark plug getting separated from the cylinder are the very common part. But the best part of this, A/C, was that even on partial power it could get you to the wherever you want to go. So engine failure was not ever experienced. Always. Prop used to rotate and partial power was there.

One very funny incident, I will tell you, and you will laugh your guts out I can assure you. I told you spark plug used to come out of the cylinder from where it was fitted. So there used to be crack in the cylinder because of overheating or whatever. And the spark plug used to come out. Moment the spark-plug comes out. The oil used to come out from there. And now with the prop turning the oil used to come onto the main windshield, the Front windshield. So one incident I had was my entire front windshield was covered with oil. I was very close to the base, maybe just 30 miles. So with partial power came finals. But the trickiest part was I couldn't see from the front windshield the runway right. So let me tell you what I did. I did the exact kind of approach. I used to go right, looked through the left window at the runway, then turn left like that. I gave but finals where I want to touch down. I had to be straight. So what does one do? So what I did is I chopped power, put my head through the window outside, looked at the center line and put the aircraft down.

Ganapathy:

Oh, my goodness.

19:40

AVM Chafekar :

I assure you, nobody could do this in modern aircraft. No way. The advantage was the speed was less. We had a good control over the aircraft and there was no other choice left with me but to do this and make her land. And this was not the only case with me. There were other pilots also had experience means somewhat somewhere windshields were partially covered. Somewhere not covered, but from outside. Once they covered, we had to do this freaking landing.

Ganapathy :

My goodness. What were the other transport aircraft in the fleet at that time? So there were Avros. AN-12's ? Dakotas

AVM Chafekar :

And Caribous, there were in the the East in Guwahati And we were in Chabua and Chubua Airfield that time we used to call that airfield as Chabua International. And I'll tell you why. We had a fighter sqn (Mig-21's). We had a helicopter sqn (flight) there. We had a transport sqn. The detachments of Dakota and Caribou used to come to Chabua to operate in that sector of Nagaland and all. Then we had hunters coming for Valley flying. So that airfield at a time you will find transport aircraft on the right hand down wind. The fighters on left hand down wind, some ten aircraft piled up overhead coming off back after the air maintenance. And it was fun flying there. It was one of the most remotest place, but flying wise, one of the most toughest.

21:31

Ganapathy :

You were mentioning this B/C B green. What are these categories?

21:29

AVM Chafekar :

Basically, these are instrument rating, basically in which type of weather you can go and land. So if you are master Greens, then you can land on any weather that is visibility less than 800 meters and things like that. So we used to start from D White and go up to A master green. There were eight to ten categories in between. So B green. Normally people used to get around flight lieutenant-squadron leader when they used to reach on other aircrafts. But in Otters, we were the kingpins who used to get big green as flying officers. So a lot of jealous factors were there. But then we were very happy with this Otter and what Otter taught us really came handy in the entire flying career.

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Very nice. After the auto.

22:40

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah. After auto, there was a cultural shock. I went straight to An-32 which was, I think 20-30 times more speed and all the modern aviation aids and real big aircraft capacity of five plus 5.5 tons or more. And when I reach the squadron, I was posted to Agra, by the way. So when I reached the squadron, I was B green on Otters. But that time Sri Lanka ops was going up. So my all squadron pilots, along with the aircraft were there. So my commanding officer was my instructor who converted me to a An 32. So my conversion was done very fast. And my first category on An 32, it was C Green. So I was operational quite fast because of my experience in Otter. So Otter really gave us impetus. You can call it

Ganapathy:

Great. So if I can just ask you more about the An 32, and I know the N 32 that we procured was, I think, an uprated because it had more powerful engines for high altitude operations.

So just tell us something about the background of the aircraft. And I remember as a child going into an A 32 cockpit and being so pleasantly surprised by how spacious it was, how well laid out compared to, of course, the An-12 that one had seen before that were really very busy, very crowded. So just tell us more about the An-32,

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AVM Chafekar:

Definitely. And one of my favorite subjects, let me tell you, that what you ask. I am in love with this aircraft and why you will keep knowing as we move ahead. Okay. It's a Russian rugged machine, good speed, very versatile aircraft. The story goes that Russians had An 26 as the original aircraft. But India, because of the diverse weather, diverse geography, the climatic conditions, we require an aircraft which can be operated at minus 20 and we require the same aircraft operating as plus 52. Right. And then we require aircraft which is operating in coastal regions and without any rusting. So we require quite a multitasking kind of machine. And you'll be surprised to know that was provided to us by Russians, by modifying the thing, they couldn't increase the engine power and how to give a short landing and short take off performance. So what they did is they lifted the engine and mounted above the wings. Okay? That is how the exhaust used to go in a particular direction. And that used to give you that STOL or whatever you call short take off and landing. So this machine was purely made on demand for Indians and what a yeoman services has given to Indian Air Force. It's a phenomenal aircraft which can do anything in this world. And even the OEM, that is original equipment manufacturer, Antonov, What ended up what they said, this machine cannot do. I got it done. That also. So I was loved with this machine. You can call it a backbone, mid level load carrying capacity aircraft, if you consider An-32 is the backbone and the number one is also we were having much more. So this aircraft when we have to replace is going to be a big issue. C 295 is coming up, appears to be quite okay but let's see how it goes. But An 32, one of the most versatile machines and let me tell you, not very easy to fly.

Ganapathy:

So tell me about that. So what was it like to fly?

27:10

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah, the power, everything. Whatever you asked, they gave you, the Russians gave you. Now they didn't think of your comfort so they said you want short takeoff. Here is an engine which you have mounted on the top. So then you have to have some design changes at the tail also. So they give ventral fin. Now all such things were added subtract and that way the aircraft had different characteristics as compared to other stable aircraft like Avro or Otter or something like that. The rudders - engine failure was a very difficult activity to handle. Require a lot of strength. Muscle power was the required power. And a very funny incident about An-32 I'll tell when the new aircraft came in 1984 or so, one of the aircraft was getting airborne from Delhi. So this used to throw a lot of black soot or smoke. Typical Russian machine is quite characteristic. Yes. So one of the airliner was flying behind the chap so he asked him confirm all normal. So the pilot was quite witty. So he said yes, all normal. We are on coal power. So you are finding what you're saying. It was dark very blackish soot it used

to leave behind. because a lot of power but it serves the purpose. That is what is the most important aspect of it. It serves the purpose.

28:54

Ganapathy:

Interesting. And a lot of vibration in the aircraft. You get used to it after a while but it's still supposed to be quite a thing.

29:04

AVM Chafekar:

You said it we got used to so much that when this aircraft was done up a little bit, a major kind of activity was done on this aircraft in which reducing this noise level was also considered. So that time I was the CO of one of the units and that aircraft was allotted to me. So I was used to An 32 which made a lot of vibrations and lots of noise. When you started the engine also you knew that this thing has started. When I got in this aircraft first time and I started the APU and the engines, I didn't come to know. So I was so uneasy, let me tell you. And without vibration I was not enjoying the aircraft at all. Luckily or unluckily for few and luckily both are like me, not all aircraft converted and few still the original ones exist.

30:10

Ganapathy:

Great. So if we can come to maybe the landing at DBO and I think you've done multiple such high altitude landing. So what was the task? How did you go about thinking and planning and executing it? What was that experience put us in the cockpit with you as if we were landing with you in the first time in DBO,

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AVM Chafekar:

surely I will do that. But before that DBO, I have to mention an incident which changed my life till wing commander, I had quite a OK sailing. I did FIS also after very early as a flight lieutenant. Enjoyed the instructional tenure at AFA. That is ab initio training for three years, one and a half years at Yelahanka, and then of course in Squadron.. So after that I went to staff College. And post Staff College, you get choice posting from there. So I was asked where you would like to go. And I opted for Chandigarh because that is the only place in An-32 I had not operated. I had operated on detachments, but otherwise not. And I was due for flight commander tenure. Right. So I told you decision making. Okay.

Ganapathy:

What were the other options? I think Jorhat was a big one,

31:36

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah Jorhat was a big one. Agra was once again there. Then we had south one Squadron, and in Jorhat we had two. That time choices were many. So in spite of DBO, I'll take you a step back from Staff College. I was posted as flight commander to Chandigarh on the An 32

aircraft you know 1999 Kargil war was just over. I was posted in 2000, July or August. And during this Kargil runway was not available and it was with civil people, okay? It was manned by them. So as a flight commander, I was tasked by the Indian Air Force to get this airfield done up in that we had to do some resurfacing. Then they're right in the middle of the runway. One stream was flowing. So on that they had to make some bridge, kind of a structure, strengthen it. So that becomes okay. So all this work was done and I did a trial landing somewhere in 2001. Okay. It's a very tricky airfield, let me tell you. In short, it is 10,000 and above, surrounded by very huge mountain ranges very close to LOC from Pakistan. And second thing is the approach that is final to the runway. The distance is so less that you almost have to dive the aircraft. So the degree of difficulty of landing was there a lot. Anyway, I went there in the helicopter, first, tried out how to do a circuit, set a pattern and did a trial landing which was successful. There were certain more works required. So again, they did that again. I did one more somewhere in April May 2001. But thereafter there were more work required and there was a change of handing over of that airfield from civil to Air Force for reasons which were well known there. So what happened is there was a lull, there was no landing done at all. And somewhere in February 2002, I was told that now plan a sortie. in that sortie. Rather, the date was 19th February 2002. I distinctly remember because it's a life changing incident which happened to me when we were flying near the Kargil, with whom, what happened and all. We will leave the details, but I'll tell you, a missile was fired upon my aircraft.

Ganapathy:

Oh my God.

34:29

AVM Chafekar:

You are operating very close to the LOC. It is almost plus minus. You don't know which way. This way. So maybe they construed that we have or maybe but we were fired upon.

Ganapathy:

My goodness. Okay, sorry. Just to take us back a little bit. So you were at what altitude and what did you see? How did you know that missile had been fired?

34:56

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah, that's the best part of it actually. I told you missile was hit. But I will tell you if you want to know from inside the cockpit what is happening, what we see. We must have been slightly right off track, left of track in Hills. The navigation is eyeball contact. Not much of a navigational at work. And it has snowed very badly. It was kind of total white out outside anyway. But I saw Kargil Township to my left, whereas it should have been exactly 12:00 to us. So as I saw it to the left, I said, oh, we are to the right. And I put on bank to the left and I heard a thud. And with that thud lot of flashing of Orange lights, red lights, some warnings started coming. Fire engine fire, all such warnings. The cockpit was lit up. My goodness. So what we thought in the cockpit is we had a bird hit or the right engine has failed, cracked or something. And fire is then spreading. So I told the initial actions of extinguishing the right engine fire and sent my flight engineer running behind in the cargo compartment to have a

look that the fire is not spreading on the wing. But when he came back, he had a bad news. He said, yes sir, there is a fire engine and that fuel and oil is spreading on the wing and that is catching fire. But till he had gone and done this activity. I had done the final act of closing the low pressure pump also high pressure pump I had closed fuel, low pressure also closed. So now I told him again, go back and see.

36:46

Ganapathy:

Sorry, just for the audience, can you just explain what is that? High pressure pump. Low pressure pump?

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah. To feed an engine, normally you have two pipelines. Okay. At different power setting you require different fuel flow. So the amount of fuel going in. So you have a high pressure pump, you have a low pressure pump for idle starting and all you use the other one. For higher requirement of fuel, you use the other one. So whenever there is a fire, first thing you have to do is cut off your fuel supply. That is the only way to stop because engine has got a fire extinguisher. But it is confined to only inner of the engine. Wing fire extinguishers are also available, but they are fired in air, so they don't have that much effect on the whole thing. Okay, so switching off fuel had saved our life. The flight engineer came and said, so now there is no fire. So I did all the actions of an engine failure. You have to feather the engine. Basically, there should not be drag on that engine. So you feather the engine, you made the blade angle such, that it just rotates, but doesn't create any drag. And then we turned left, came over to Kargil. Now, landing at Kargil was impossible. I told you, very difficult to land with two engines. Here we were on an engine, and that engine was out because of fire.

38:13

Ganapathy:

Right now, sorry. Can I ask you, when multi engine operations, we're used to the single engine ceiling and drift down altitude. So what was the single engine ceiling of the An 32 that day?

AVM Chafekar:

For that day, it was 15,500 drift down altitude, you can call it that is the height lowest you will come down when you are on a single engine.

38:39

Ganapathy:

Single engine. Okay. And so the ridges around you must have been much higher than that.

AVM Chafekar:

Yes. So that my transition and my en route to Leh was quite happening. We were almost hugging the Hills at times. We have something known as escape route. Predesignated escape route in all these Hill flying, we do designate because such things can happen.

Pressurisation failure can happen where you have to descend, engine can fail where you have to descend. So we had a pre designated route

Ganapathy: chosen Valley, through which you can then

39:12

AVM Chafekar:

chosen Valley. But then you are so tight travelling through that Valley because the mountain ranges are very close, you have to keep looking. Left wing. Okay. Right wing. Okay. And on a single engine, as it is, your aerodynamic goes haywire. So you are controlling the aircraft, doing all this somehow through this escape route, we reach Leh. I did a single engine landing at Leh. Maybe the first one. I am not very sure, but people do say it is the first one ever in Hills that somebody has flown for 31, 32 minutes and brought aircraft back. And after we landed, the fun is now. I call it fun now, but that time it was a shock. You know, when we got down on the aircraft and I looked at the engine, we came to know it was not a bird hit or some problem with the engine, but a missile had gone through and through in our engine. Wow. In the right engine. My goodness. Now, something about the shoulder fire missile, it has got two fuses. One is proximity fuse. Basically, they are heat seeking. People must be all aware about that. It is a heat seeking. So it goes towards the engine exhaust.

Ganapathy:Right. And what was the name of the missile? It's the Stinger.

40:34

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah, Stinger. Stinger. Pakistanis had those only that time, so we were sure that they have done the trick anyway. So it has a proximity fuse and it has got an impact fuse. If the first fail, then the second, as it impacts, it burst and then there is no chance of surviving. With Almighty's Grace and good luck and destiny, both the fuses failed.

Ganapathy:

Oh, boy. My goodness. You suffered a missile hit but it didn't explode. Is it? That was his?

41:14

AVM Chafekar:

No. Otherwise the whole wing would have been out from the main fuselage and we would have in nowhere. So, like a projectile, it had gone through and through the engine and finished off the engine. From where it came out, there was a gaping hole of some 5-6ft. And from where it entered, there was a hole of, you can say six inches, ten inches or something like that. And all oil and fuel was on the wing. But because we had extinguished, we could survive and came back. So now, as in any organisation, any incident, there are things to follow. Why, what, how, who to be blamed? Everything. So I was busy in that for many months together and it was there very much in news in 2002. Okay. Anyway,

Ganapathy:

sorry, sir, you had earlier mentioned the An 32 is very difficult to fly on one engine. And can you just explain to the audience why a multi engine aircraft is difficult to fly on one engine and how you fly it on one engine?

42:38

AVM Chafekar:Y

You know, moment some problem comes up with the engine. I told you that if the prop keeps rotating, there will be a lot of drag on that side and then aircraft can be uncontrollable and such because vicious Yaw and roll both takes place.

Ganapathy:

Right. Because one engine is pulling and the other is pulling,

AVM Chafekar:

the other is wanting to take it back. So it is a vicious movement. So first thing you do is feather the engine, whichever has gone bad. Now, moment you shut down and feather, now it becomes controllable, but you have to almost apply full rudder and trim off fully and apply ailerons. You are stick and everything is at a cockeyes angle, but you are travelling straight. That is how the circus is done and the pressures on the leg and your arms and all is quite a bit. And any power changes you made about the live engine, it affects the aircraft aerodynamics quite a lot. So you have to do it very smoothly. Then you have to maintain height also with the available power, then you are in the Hills. So it's kind of a degree of difficulty is too high, just to mention that. And in plains it is difficult to maintain here. It was in Hills for us, so it was absolutely and landing. Also, once you are on single engine, you have no choice if you are on both the engines and you approach the runway and want to land. And suppose your parameters are not correct or not? Okay, you have always a choice to open both throttles, go around and come back again for a nice landing. In single engine. That is not possible because Leh runway is 10,000ft already circuitized is 12,000ft at that height. Maintaining going around was not possible. So it is a must land situation. So that is another stress or pressure or whatever you want to call it is there? So you once a single engine. And at that circumstances and situations in Leh in the Hill, it was kind of a difficult situation for us, but we managed pretty well and landed the aircraft. But then we saw this happening.

Ganapathy:

Airline pilots have a simulator where they can simulate this sort of situation, but I don't think An 32 there was a simulator. So how would you train for a practice for these sorts of single engine situations? Would you actually simulate it by shutting down an engine and flight and then fly it?

45:31

AVM Chafekar:

We used to find a Midway. We didn't have simulator, as you rightly said. So we used to do a lot of practice of this, especially you are aware that as you take off and you reach a certain

height, that is the most critical portion of the flight if you have engine failure. Okay, so there we used to simulate by closing one throttle, not feathering, not feathering, closing one throttle. And it used to be quite close to the real situation, not exact to the real situation, but even by closing itself, controlling that aircraft was a kind of a fight with it. It was a Russian machine. That's why I say they are really meant for tough guys. So we used to practise that way and we used to actually feather at a safe altitude. We used to fly 10,000, 15,000 feather engine, full drill we used to do, fire drills also practised So there was no simulator. So this was a compulsory thing for us. We had a schedule meant for that to practise the engine failures, and that way we used to train. Even in circuit, we used to train.

46:43

Ganapathy:

And just one last thing I want to clarify for the audience in these situations, you can't use autopilot or anything of that sort. You're trying it completely manual, right?

46:52

AVM Chafekar:

Yes. It's not at all because this aircraft, I told you, instability is by birth. because the engines were brought up, they tried compensating with the ventral fin and things like that, but still it had that little bit of instability. So because of that, autopilot was not. And let me tell you, for civil pilots, what autopilot you have, Russians don't make such autopilot. Yeah, very basic. So in normal two engine thing, also, the autopilot used to keep going left and right in single engine engaging. That was out of question. So all manual.

Ganapathy:

Fantastic. Amazing.

47:59

AVM Chafekar:

now that I was a flight commander in this place and I had this incident somehow as a captain, I was there, of course, I was responsible for whatever had to happen. But I was brought back as flight commander again because they came to the conclusion that it was not my mistake as such. And things were so settled out. However, thereafter had gone through a lot of stress and strain. So I came to my hometown, Nagpur, did a nice NCC tenure. And I reached Agra as a chief operation Officer. I was posted to Agra after my incident, though, I was blamed for the thing and all. They said, all, okay, you go back. That is the biggest base in Asia. It's a huge region and we had a lot of strategic assets there and wonderful tenure. Chief Operation officer. I had wonderful tenure. And I was most happy to do one job there. In Air Force, we had a fighter combat leader. We have helicopter combat leader. But nobody thought that there can be combat role for transport also, right? And I being a hardcore by choice transport pilot, I always used to think about this. Why not? There are so many things the transport aircraft can do. It can do Para drop, it can do surprise drops. It can do free fall. It can do bombing, it can do assault landings. So many things. So why not transport combat leader? So initially, I put across this point not agreed to initially, maybe for right reasons. So I did one localised one and showed them, no, it will be of use. And I was so happy that they approved of a transport combat leader during my tenure. And the first post was under me.

Fascinating as a Chief Operations officer. And that passed out in December that year. Somewhere in August, I got a posting to east once again as a commanding officer. Right. So I have done already 2 tenures, One in Chabua, one in Jorhat almost amounting to seven years or so. Plus I thought, why me? I've done a flight commander in Chandigarh, maybe Chandigarh Or if not, then I can go to Sulur and operate in Andaman and Nicobar and things like that. I wanted something different. So I put up an application and told them, I don't think I should be going to east. There are many people who have not. So please reconsider. And to my surprise and shock, in two minutes interview with the boss of the HR, it was agreed to. Okay. And he told me, you're absolutely correct. You should not be going there. We will cancel. I was posted as CO to Chandigarh once again.

50:59

Ganapathy:

The same Scotland where you were the flight commander, is it?

51:04

AVM Chafekar:

No. Now I was in a different squadron. I was earlier in 1 Squadron, which was IL-An 32 combined. Now I was in an An 32 independent Squadron as a commanding officer. So I reached there. So people, locals were very happy that he is the same guy who had trouble in Kargil. But look at Air Force. And I really appreciate Air Force for that, that they send me back as a boss of Squadron on which aircraft I had a problem because they believed in my capabilities and I'm very thankful for a very nice chance they gave me. And here started the DBO when I was a flight commander. DBO is a place let our people know who are listening to us. It is in Eastern Ladakh. Okay. It is just 6 km east of the line of actual control that is with China. And it is around 12 km South East of that LOC. Okay. And Karakoram Pass is just about 10 km as the Crow Flies.

52:20

Ganapathy:

Wow. I never realised it was that close.

52:23

AVM Chafekar:

Yes. It is a very strategically important place where almost five borders of five nations meet. And not only that, five cultures are also there. Establish Persian, Chinese, Indian, Central Indian, all. So that is a very important place. It is known as Roof of the World because it's the highest point from where you can see that. So strategically, very important. Just saw, you know, west of Aksai Chin area which China had taken over. And to the north is Shaksgam Valley, which Pakistan acceded to China. So very strategically important and geographically one of the most difficult terrain. The airfield is located at 16,700ft, the highest airfield in the world. It is surrounded by mountains 22,500 feet to 23, 24 that way. And it forms a kind of a bowl. And the base of the base of the bowl is the runway. So you can imagine how one operates at such place, right? So this was the reason. And most important thing was as a flight commander, I had dropped. We used to do drop sorties. All these Northern regions are air maintained throughout the year. It is another beautiful thing which a lot of Indians don't

know. The entire north sector is air maintained by Indian Air Force. That means everyday. Ration, ammunition, clothing, fuel, everything goes there. Let me tell you, around 50,000 tons is dropped every year. It's a peacetime task, you can imagine. So it's a kind of a bridge, aerial bridge between north and Chandigarh. So where there are airfields, there were only two airfields when I joined. That is Thoise and Leh. So we used to land there and drop the load and other places everywhere we used to do drop. That is the rear ramp of the aircraft was opened, the load was kept on planks, the planks were kept on wheels, rollers and used to open the door, pull the aircraft. And the load used to go out of the aircraft. And a parachute used to open and it used to fall at the designated place. So that was the drop. And the remotest place was supplied like that. So we used to do drops in my flight commander under the tenure at DBU.

55:08

Ganapathy:

Sorry, sir, when you're saying it's a bowl, what was the route in which you would run and drop and then how would you turn and climb out and that sort of thing. What altitude above the ground are you at? Typically during such a drop,

55:22

AVM Chafekar:

What we used to do is we used to drop at 1000ft, but the turns were so tight because of remaining within the confinement of the bowl. Almost certain times we used to reach 35 to 40 degrees of Wow, that was the degree of difficulty for drop. Drop direction was quite okay because it was kind of an open area. But when we had to finish the drop and turn because you have to take the Para bags in, close the ramp and turn. Otherwise the drag is more. So it was a kind of a circus you can call it. Everything used to happen very fast and we used to drop load and many places in Siachen. Also there are many places like this where we used to drop. Degree of difficulty is pretty high and when you open the Ramp, the temperature outside is -30 you are on oxygen. Pilot, copilot, flight engineer, the drop, people who drop, everybody is on oxygen and it is kind of exercise after which you used to really get tired. So that is the time when I used to draw by DBO. I used to see some markings there. So my curiosity brought me to see what these markings are. When I landed as a flight commander, only I had seen that there was a runway there. Earlier in 1962, a packet had landed, right? A packet with three engines had landed there and then they didn't continue because at 16,700ft, if you switch off the engine, it cannot restart because the maximum elevation at which you can do that trick is around 13,000. So no engine in the world is made to start after that. All everybody knows because of the rarefied atmosphere, lesser oxygen within that amount of air. So the engine doesn't start. So that is why somehow 43 years nobody attempted anything there. There was another problem. You know, that runway is not like any other runway. It is not a bitumen surface. It is mud surface because there is no road, no railway line. How do you take the bitumen and the material making the runway. So they used to just compact the mud surface and that is what the runway was. Secondly, the Hills were around were so high that you had to decide on a point that beyond which you can't go around. Since committed to land was one height for us above airfield 1500ft, we had kept that because there was a Hill right in front. So you could not have crossed and come out of that bowl if you had a single engine failure. So that is how the degree of difficulty and the

worst part what happened is in 1996 there was an earthquake there and there was a crevasse of almost 15ft wide and 50 to 75ft long right in the middle of the runway.

58:35

Ganapathy:

Holy crap.

58:37

AVM Chafekar:

Nobody wanted to do that job because you can imagine Army Jawans or whoever wanting to work at 16,700ft it is almost impossible task however, when I came back as a CEO my boss was coming to Chandigarh and a great person I will name him here excellent leader Air Marshal PK Barbora is his name he was a leader to the core and I was waiting for an opportunity to work under such officer when he came to Chandigarh for his first visit I took over Chandigarh on first Jan 2008 Air Marshal Barbora fortunately took over as in Western Air Command on first Jan 2008 Coincidence? We both took over respective places on the same day and in February he was at my station and in my squadron to get familiarised. So this is the time I propose in the DBO landing because it was in my back of mind always and I knew if somebody who is going to clear that is going to be this officer very gutsy person, very outspoken and very, very good leader

Ganapathy:

fascinating

1:00:08

AVM Chafekar:

yeah I presented him, told him the proposal, told him the difficulties, many difficulties aircraft difficulties runway then diplomatic because China will make hue and cry so there were a lot of problems but after listening to my presentation in which I had highlighted that all the operations are going to be outside the performance graph of OEM there are no graphs for 16,700ft landing now you extrapolate means draw them further where it goes nobody can tell you they may flatten, they may go up, they may go outside, nobody knows when we asked the Russians they say don't do that we will not guarantee anything however, that is why I say it was Barbora Sir because of whom it could happen. I presented in my presentation itself he said please go ahead, plan out, come to command and explain us everything and we will go ahead and do a landing there.

1:01:11

Ganapathy:

So for the audience who don't know what you mean by these graphs I think the performance graphs that show how much runway distance you need to land, how much runway distance you need to take off, what climb rate you'll get all those stop much lower than this altitude, right?

1:01:30

AVM Chafekar:

Yes, that's correct and the temperatures, the altitude, then the runway length available then the true air speed it changes with that place the radius of turn there are many factors which and even the braking speed the wheel brake speed also is designated you land at a very high ground speed almost 80 km more than what you normally like 80 km so it's a phenomenal activity you know a lot of risk factors are there but it was a military requirement basically so for this military requirement my boss was ready so in month of April I remember distinctly I went to the command and gave a presentation so there was an aviation expert sitting there there were technical experts sitting there there were soil experts sitting there there were army representatives sitting there and me I was the junior. Most chap sitting there because these all branches were represented by a higher ranking officers with in chair was Air Marshal Barbora. And that was the most soothing thing for me. So aviation experts said that three air vice marshals have done three board of officers and said An 32 cannot land there. And they were right, because what the things we just discussed, it is outside ground means the runway length is not sufficient. Temperatures are not very thing. The pressures that places they are not the radius of the so all They said what they were saying is right. Then the soil expert said the soil there is such that it is not giving the desired soil strength for an aircraft to land. I think 1.25 or something is the value. Even if you compact, this may not be possible. And the technical people were right by saying that OEM has put a ban on starting this engine about 13-5. You can't switch off the engine and start. So we said, okay, we'll keep it running. But they said if it some problem comes up, then if it switches off, then you'll have to leave the aircraft up there. I said, yes, that is the risk. So all these people said no. Then I got up, said, explain to them why you want to do so. I explained that it is outside the graph this that. But the strategic importance is such that this will come handy one day. And it is a good thing. Our people, the army Jawans who were stationed there, used to take 15 days in summer to come to Thoise walking, and in winter they never used to come. Then how do you do casualty evacuation? Because helicopters could carry only one to two passengers because of that algorithm. So I said, for our Javans morale also it is required. Then we used to keep doing drop sorties. If engine fails there, we can't come out, then we can at least put down the aircraft if it is available. So all these reasons were given and I said, militarily, it is a requirement and strategically also for the country, it will be a good thing. So lastly, after all the briefings, Air Marshal Barbora asked me , "Chafekar are you sure it can be done?" I still remember distinctly and I said, yes, sir. And it took just 30 seconds to get up from his seat and say, we are going ahead with DBO landing. Planning will be done by him and date will be decided and we are going at anyway. So I consider him the leader. You know, when you have to do certain things which are not easily possible, you require right people at the right places. So thereafter, army did a back breaking activity. They compacted the entire runway, entire runway. 8000, 9000ft. There were no center line because it is mud. So with white chuna, they made center line. Then there were no distance to go markers, you know when you land on the runway, how much runway is left gives you confidence. So you have 1000ft 2000ft. There are markers like this in all runways. You can see here there was no such thing. So on Jerry cans, they painted it white. On Jerry cans they wrote this. And Jerry cans were my distance to go markers. They put a lot of oil, lot of water on the surface so that the dust doesn't rise. And before that, of course, the crevasse which was there was to be filled up by them. They filled it up and really hats off to those army jawans. Only they can do such job at 16,700, nobody else. So that was another element which I had decided

come what may we will do this now that my boss has cleared it. Lot of difficulty still. We will be doing this. And the date decided on 31st May.

1:07:15

AVM Chafekar:

We got airborne very early because we wanted to land in temperature which are conducive to landing. And Air Marshal Barbora was in the aircraft passenger because he wanted to be there to see how we do the things. And really our morale was up because of that. And he didn't ask for VIP seats as normally people think. He was sitting on a normal seat where Jawans sit. Okay. There's a beautiful photograph with me about that. And that is why I called him a true leader. What is required, what is important, where the execution of the landing was important. He didn't bother about his comforts and things like that. So on 31st we landed there.

1:08:07

Ganapathy:

Sorry, you got airborne from Chandigarh Okay. And how did you calculate how much fuel and how many people did you have on board? I just love to hear those details. And then, of course, just describe the sortie to us. What was the day like? What was the weather like

1:08:26

AVM Chafekar:

Sure. All these things which you are talking about take a lot of time of mine. I had to simulate the conditions which are at DBO, at Chandigarh and try out landings like that rate of descent, high, higher landing speeds. Everything we tried out at Chandigarh, I was given clearance to do that because simulating those conditions here in an actual difficult you are almost on a kind of a flap less approach. For what there it is. Full flap. But anyway, that was done. Then we prepared for all eventualities if the best aircraft was selected. Time and again, a lot of additional checks were done on tires, the engine mountings. And we made sure that the aircraft should not go unserviceable there. My technical staff was at it almost for 20 to 30 days. We selected two aircrafts which were good. Then we had almost taken out everything from the aircraft to reduce the weight, minimise the weight only one seat was kept for Air Marsha Barbora. And that was very lightweight. We had only the crew, which is required. And nobody additional was taken. Those additional checks, I told you, were kept for the safety of the aircraft so that the aircraft should not go unserviceable was the main aim. And we took off almost 4:40-4:50 in the morning. It was night flying for us and we saw sunrise over Himalayas only beautiful sight. The excitement was right from the briefing because when my squadron people saw that C in C is there, the AOC is there. It was different for them.

1:10:40

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah. And we used to do early morning take off. It is not new to Chandigarh. But that day with so many dignitaries around and let me tell you one thing. We had kept it need to know basis. Very few knew that we are going to do this. Okay. Yes. Because Chinese reaction if it doesn't work. So we have kept this and we had a problem in Kargil. So I had requested that

if this need to know. So my technical staff knew my pilot's knew I knew C in C and all but rest Indian Air Force didn't know that we are attempting something like that. So reaching weather was okay that day.

1:11:24

Ganapathy:

Did you help anybody on the ground there who was relaying say the local altimeter, setting weather conditions, wind direction, anything of that sort?

1:11:33

AVM Chafekar:

Actually whatever you talk about DBO there is a new thing. Funny thing crops up now. Altimeter the Altimeter there means what is the elevation was an issue there when helicopter leaves to land. It used to show 16, 500 sometimes. When we used to do drop and calculate it used to show 16,700 sometimes. So finally we made a decision that let's keep it 16,600 as an average thing because whatever instrument we were taking there it was not giving an accurate thing because of the rarified atmosphere and things like that. It was not giving that. So that was the kind of met facilities or help from the local was available. There was no ATC. There was no met. However we had put our met assistant there and he used to tell us but accuracy was a problem. Definitely a problem. Okay. So that also we had catered for by keeping selection of altimeter at one certain point only where we had done earlier. I've done a few circuits there moment I say I have done circuits. I remember of one more very interesting part when Air Marshal Barbora cleared me to land that you go ahead. We will land at DBO. So what I used to do take an aircraft, do a drop sortie after drop. The aircraft used to be empty, right? So this empty aircraft I used to select undercarriage down and try out an approach on the runway not go down below that decision height but still there at least. So we started knowing that this is the best place to set altimeter. This is the speed which we should maintain. This is the circuit pattern we should fly that you'll get. Yeah but one problem was there everything there was an issue. The Chinese woke up. They said they have a DZ here and they do drop sorties. Now why this one aircraft which comes in two days once or something like that, puts it undercarriage down?

Ganapathy:

Wow they were observing all that

1:14:02

AVM Chafekar:

Yes, they were monitoring everything. There was lot of discussion on this subject on the Chinese Internet and their other sources. Ok. So they knew that there is something, but they didn't know when and why and what they are doing. So that was the preparation. Everything was tried out, done. But that accuracy, you can't say was phenomenal. But we did have an idea about what to do. So that day the weather was kindly, quite okay. You can say Katzo Lake and things like that. But thereafter there was one layer at 20,000 ft or so and we were

maintaining around 24,000ft. But I have already gone three, four times there. And we had taken one more precaution. There was another aircraft above me earlier behind me, following me. And when I descended over DBO through that cloud layer, there was another aircraft hovering above me for two, three things. Number one, they wanted to shoot the landing so that it can be used for training purpose. Then they were keeping a watch across the LAC that there is nothing tried out, no tricks are done by the Chinkies. And so that one aircraft was about me and we made an approach for runway 11. It was a kaccha runway. It was unpaved, so it was not as flat as any. They had done compacting, but they were still bumps, so the touchdown was smooth. However, thereafter, the ride was slightly bumpy. Okay. But it was fun filled because these bumps only tell you that you have done something very unique and different and you're not landing on a normal, smooth runway.

Ganapathy:

Technique wise, were you using any different techniques from what you would normally do?

1:16:11

AVM Chafekar:

No, I told you, technically what we did is all speeds were higher, so we were going on ground speeds, which were higher circuit if we maintained 250 all the while here we were maintaining 300 plus. Okay. Then on finals we were maintaining a constant speed and started reducing much later, not as we did earlier at 300ft and below. And the touchdown speed itself was 280 kilometers which is our flapless speed in normal circumstance. And here we were full flap. So, you know, the attitude touchdown attitude was slightly different. It gave a different feel. You are moving at that speed with full flap is a different field in itself. But the runway length was okay. So we didn't have to break in a hurry or something like that. But when we started breaking, the effectiveness was not that as good as other runways because they have the friction.

Ganapathy:

Did you use reverse fast?

1:17:15

AVM Chafekar:

<unclear>..Reversible propeller we did use, but slightly late because we wanted to see how it reacts on that surface. But the stopping was not a major issue.

Ganapathy:

Okay. We've seen video of the C 130 landing there and tremendous amount of dust that gets kicked up. Did you experience the same thing when you landed?

1:17:42

AVM Chafekar:

Yeah, it is more to tell you it is more during takeoff than during landing. Okay. C-130 has got a problem of four engines and they are counter rotating kind of things there. So the way they suck up the dust is different than An 32. An-32 props move in the same direction. In that

case it is in half. So they have more problem on landing also. And take off also. But take off, it is behind the aircraft. So it doesn't matter much. But for us also for take off, that is to throw a lot of dust. And that dust used to remain for ten minutes plus.

Ganapathy:

Okay, great. So then the aircraft came to a stop. You turned around,

1:18:34

AVM Chafekar:

we stopped. Then we lined up all these people Army Johnnies who had done this backbreaking job. We had taken a lot of sweets for them. And there was Shabashi all around. The army commander who was the boss that Gen Bharadwaj time was also on ground. He had come by a helicopter. His role was very important because of his leadership that airfield could be done up. And you can imagine when I used to go. I'll tell you another thing, why I say it is so difficult. When I used to go for inspection in a helicopter, they used to keep the rotors running because hardly any time they would stop for all of which the fuel taken was bare minimum. Five minutes, all that's all. So I used to go for inspection. I used to get into a Jeep. That Jeep maximum speed used to be 5 km to 10 km/hour. I used to prefer to walk. So second or third day particular touchdown area I wanted to check. So I barely do four to five steps. Fast, quickly I will see. And there I could feel the dizziness due to lack of oxygen. Luckily Jawan was standing, walking along with me with a mask and the oxygen cylinder. Because we were not acclimatised from Chandigarh. We used to straight come there. Whereas the boys there, these army Jawans who were stationed there were so acclimatised that their base from runway where they used to live was almost around 2 km away. They used to run from there when they used to hear my aircraft noise and come to the airfield to man it run. Such tough boys they are. And they did a phenomenal job. So there was Thanksgiving all around because of their good job. And then after five minutes engines were not to be switched off. So engines were running. They were one extra pilot we had carried. We were sitting in the cockpit. So we got into the aircraft and got airborne. Now airborne. There was an issue. You know the ASI that is air speed indicator registers very late, rarified atmosphere. That is going to take that initial time. So your heart almost comes in your mouth. That why this thing is not registering. Luckily we were aware of it. We were prepared for it. Still it gave us we missed our heartbeat once that hope everything is going normal but then ASI started registering then unstick also it was are bumpy ride basically you're getting shaken up all over in that bumpy ride unsticking is also you don't know how clean it is and after unsticking there is another huge Hill right in front so you have to immediately turn right. So you have to select flaps immediately turn right reduce the drag and turn right and then in orbit you climb up and then set course. So the other aircraft which was on the top I've done a nice video clipping and we did a lot of training based on that clip because thereafter I did a lot of sorties cleared a lot of pilots there because Barbor Sir was such a leader which I always had anticipated that once I do trial landing he's not going to stop at trial correct obviously. So when we finish trial he said Chafekar let's take some load in now let's get this boys out. But he gave a lot of freedom to me that I do decide how much to load take in instalments increase but then we did almost 50-60 sorties in my tenure itself and we established the entire standard operating procedures and another very unusual incident after we landed at DBO and took off we had taken minimum fuel. You have been

asking about fuel. We had taken fuel from Chandigarh to DBO and DBO to Thoise because if we had taken more fuel then landing weight would have been an issue. So as we got airborne for Thoise and landed at Thoise we got information that of Chinese have asked for a Flagstaff meeting.

Ganapathy:

Flag meeting. Oh my goodness that quickly. That's amazing.

1:23:22

AVM Chafekar:

That quickly. But the interesting part comes thereafter as quickly they called for one they cancelled immediately and they did thrice. You know why? Because they also would have thought what to ask them DBO is in our area, it is our airfield. We are doing our activity within this thing but all these years because they may have some issues we were not going following that path and once we did that is how it very clearly shows that you have to go ahead and do things the repercussions and this may not be as bad as you think it may be in your mind. They called for three meetings such and all the three times they called it off that was the most fun part of it and there was no objection thereafter and then they kept going there 50 plus sorties and here in the flow I would like to tell you what we didn't understand then the strategic importance we understood in 2020 when Chinese put all their soldiers there in Eastern Ladakh we had to pump in our people. That is the time DBO airfield helped the Hercules aircraft took lot of people did a lot of sorties and we could induct our troops also and that is why the status quo could be managed so what we thought in 2008 actually came true and practically was known to the whole world in 2020. So when you do out of box thinking at times, maybe the results will not be immediate, but they do. So I had retired till then. But then onwards DBO again came in limelight.

Ganapathy:

Understood. Amazing. So you also did a few more, which is Nyoma and Fukche. Where are these and what are they like? They're a little lower altitude but were there any unique difficulties in these?

1:25:31

AVM Chafekar:

I had a wonderful lot working under me. My squadron pilots were so enthusiastic, so devoted, so much of enthusiasm I have never seen in my life. And that is why I fully believe you give a cause to the youngsters and they readily accept it and they give their full to you. So when I did DBO, they said sir 8-10 days, newspapers everywhere, covered everything and it's over. Now what? Let's look for something else. And because of these youngsters, I pulled out a map one day in a briefing all put the whole squadron there and started looking for places. And that is the time we found something known as Fukche. Now Fukche airfield is in - now the Pangong Tso Lake is in the news south of Galvan and south of Pangong Tso lake Indus River. Next to Indus River is this runway which is at 14,500 elevation. And best part of this area is the Eastern Bank of the river is with India and the Western Bank of the

river. Sorry, other way around. Western bank is with India and Eastern Bank is with China. Because of the lot of halagula which was created after DBO. Chinese asking for flag meet this that the permission from government was coming late. Anyway, we went ahead with the preparation because a lot of preparation was to be done. This runway was also not used at all. There was a water tank very close to the runway. The surface was bad so we had to compact. So all that we had started till then. Within a month we got a clearance. So May 2008 we did DBO and in November we did Fukche. And this was slightly easier. As I told you, the common factors were unpaved. Very close to line of actual control, surrounded by Hills and because of elevation, the degree of difficulty. But this being in a river bed, the circuit was over the Hills, but the approach and all was quite steady and nice and it was a cakewalk after DBO. But again, bumpy ride both for landing and takeoff and here also a very unique incident happened. Now, the Chinese knew that there is something going to happen to Fukche because I used to do trials with landing arrangements. So they put almost every inch of their bank soldiers with their personal vehicles. They lined up facing the Indian site. Now we were not very sure whether it was a show of force or they wanted to actually see whether they actually do or they're just declaring one after the other so possible. But they saw full our landing and take off and then they withdrew in the evening. It seems the people say they're informed us. So the entire people were watching when we were landing there. But thereafter this has not been used like the way I landed in DBO and did a lot of operations. There was no such requirement. But we proved a point that when you guys use it. So that was how Fukche went and I had taken an entirely different crew. Now, these small little things do matter when you are trying to raise the morale of the squadron, the copilot who was there, the Navigator and the flight engineer who was there for DBO, they were not repeated. This time I took an entire new set. I was the only common point and everybody is enthusiastic to do something very new, very unique. So that is story. People used to feel the name wise also very different and it had its own charm. But you can say much easier and much comfortable than DBO

1:30:18

Ganapathy:

can we shift gears to some of the flood relief, the Yemen evacuation, what are some of your experience?

1:30:22

AVM Chafekar:

Definitely. But in passing I will tell you about Nyoma because why it was required. You know, in this Indus Valley there is a Valley going towards Leh from Indus Valley. It goes via Nyoma. So the biggest place in Himalayas or in north region is Leh. So any adversary wanting to do anything there Leh will be, will be the. So we wanted to have in between from Indus to Leh in between. That is how Nyoma came to me. It was at 13,500ft, very close to a river. But here we had a problem. The soil was Sandy. So what we could do at DBO and Fukche we couldn't do here. So army used their jugad and they added one cement like material to that sand.

Ganapathy:

How interesting.

1:31:23

AVM Chafekar:

Okay. And it was unpaved only, but the sand was holding. Now that is how we landed there. And this landing was done somewhere in September 2009. So in 17 months, because of my youngsters josh and enthusiasm, they made me work out and do landings at three airfields and we restarted these three airfields which are of utmost strategic importance. And as I told you, the commonality was unpaved surface, high elevation, closer to the line of control, right.

Ganapathy:

Fascinating. Yeah, I can see them on the map and they're all really very strategically located.

1:32:16

AVM Chafekar:

Now that you have mentioned map, I will tell you another interesting thing. When I did landing in 2008, when you used to have a look at the map of this area, there were only two places mentioned Leh and Thoise that's all. But 2008 changed everything. Now DBO was shown more prominently on maps than all discussions of all the different forces for that matter. So we brought these places once again on map.

1:33:10

Ganapathy:

So can we change gears to humanitarian assistance disaster relief the Air Force has really done some amazing work in that area and you were personally involved with Uttarakhand flood relief, the Yemen evacuation so just tell us what were those experiences like? When did the call come? What did we do?

1:33:31

AVM Chafekar:

Whenever the role of Indian Air Force primary is guarding the skies of the country however helicopters and transport have got an additional task that is peacetime task that is humanitarian assistance and disaster relief as I told you earlier also the air maintenance as it is there which is 24x7x365 and it's a huge amount. To add to that these two tasks also are around any calamity anywhere in the country definitely wherever the Air Force is required the helicopters and transports are respond immediately. Now I'll tell you a very interesting thing after my co tenure I went to air headquarters and a place which controls the transport and helicopters so I was initially director transport and helicopters and then I became the principal director helicopters and transport after becoming an air Commodore right in my office my TV used to be on with volume zero you will be surprised to know that before anything could happen any information used to come from the government or from the Air force I used to be mentally prepared for the activity seeing on the TV that there is flood in so and so area I used to straight away tell my boys those squadrons be ready there is something to come so we always could anticipate and such a simple method we had adopted I will give you an example when Nepal earthquake happened I first saw it on TV only, that Nepal has been hit by an earthquake which is very massive straight away what I did is picked up my phone and told the Hercules squadron stand by one aircraft because

they were giving information thereafter that one of the main Kathmandu runway may also be damaged. Now I had made them stand by they have loaded up with few things and they had to do a landing to check out whether the runway is okay for landing or not because nobody was going there so now MEA got involved it is a very tricky activity going to other country you have to have clearances you have to have air defence clearances you have to have Ministry of external affairs clearances you have to have Ministry of defence clearances and the way system works it does take time but because I had told them earlier that we stand by and when the decisions came they were already in the cockpit strapped up to go before the Chinese or the US could respond Indian aircraft was touching down at Kathmandu and it was considered a big thing the full runway was not available so they used whatever runway was available then they reported the whole situation there then the repair works and thereafter the unprecedented task of helicopters and transport started the supply of rations this casualty evacuations everything started thereafter But in this game of who goes first this is the way we could beat the topmost people because of being proactive on a simple method so that was very handy So this one incident tells me about this and as I was telling you Yemen was a difficult task because gathering people at Yemen itself when this fight was going on was difficult so the local embassy people really did a good job secondly we had to decide about the route to follow and be ready for any eventuality and flying times are very we had to cater for two crew things like that So planning from newspaper it appears one aircraft has gone to Yemen. However the activity behind that which takes place is phenomenal the amount of work that people put through the Air force, the air headquarters, the commands, the squadrons and it is very interesting to know and these things have to fall in place at the right time then only at the right time you can take people out and we evacuated. Yemen evacuation is one of the must mention evacuation because the speed and the number of people we could evacuate was phenomenal and we were the only ones who could have done that time and that was seen again in many other places thereafter also Philippines we helped out, we helped out you know our neighbours also when there was a water crisis in our neighbourhood we had taken even water tankers so such humanitarian health and disaster relief is quite a major thing that is why I'm always used to call transport and helicopter fleet the face of Indian Air Force in calamities. it can be said to be so and it gives immense pleasure Let me tell you for this I will tell you a casualty evacuation activity which happened when I was a commanding officer that also comes under humanitarian assistance only but only when this is when I was a CO in Thoise there were some casualties young boys of army because of some skirmishes with Pakistanis they had a lot of injuries head injuries, splinter or splinter injuries okay and it was a Sunday so we have a methodology of keeping an aircraft standby on Sunday for casualty evacuation because that is a must activity. That day weather I saw it was not very conducive for the crew who was detailed weather it was cloudy over Leh and Thoise descent would have been problem so I changed the crew and got myself into the cockpit because if it was a normal day air maintenance we would not have done such was the weather but this was a requirement because of 20 casualties and immediate evacuation was required so it was SOS we got airborne till Leh and Thoise weather started deteriorating when we reach over at Thoise there was a layer over Thoise and you know in the Hill descending without having contact with the ground is not there yet

1:40:50

Ganapathy:

Scary yeah

1:40:52

AVM Chafekar:

so in our normal route through the Valley we couldn't descend because of clouding. Now we reach over and we couldn't descend because of cloud. Anyway, we decided to orbit for some time and luckily we saw a few patches opening and so could see the runway. So kind of a spiral, descent we did literally, spiralling down. We landed, kept the engines running. These boys were boarded. Sedatives were given to them because they were in agony. And you have to keep the head injury casualties when you carry, you have to keep the pressure in the aircraft entire well balanced so that there is no too much of variation otherwise that affects these people. So the doctor came and briefed me about the patient, told me that morphine has been given, but still this pressurisation and things like that. So we closed the ramp and I lined up to our utter disgust, the weather again packed up because now we require a clearance to climb up, climb through. Right. So again, we waited on the runway for ten minutes. The fuel was less. So I decided to go back to dispersal. But I didn't switch off and started waiting for getting some clear patch. At that time, the doctor walked into the cockpit and he tells me, sir, do you know all these guys blood pressure is settling down. Do you know the reason in this sedation? Also, they are well aware that they are being boarded on the aircraft now. An-32 noise is so familiar. They are that they know they have been boarded. That means they are now that hope has lighten up. And he says, I'm surprised. That's why I came to tell you that their blood pressure and all the other parameters are showing positive. But I told him we are not airborne. We are on tarmac and the weather doesn't appear. Don't worry, sir, that hope which you have created itself is going to hold them. Luckily, we got a patch. We got climbed up, landed at Chandigarh Chandigarh the ambulances were ready. They were immediately taken. And you know, when you do such things, you are very involved with the whole thing. Next day, along with my wife, I went to the CH. Okay. In civvies, I went just to meet these people. I wanted to see that have my efforts given some fruitful result. I was very keen sleepless night. I had to our happiness. Almost all the guys survived.

Ganapathy:

Oh, my goodness. Wow.

1:43:38

AVM Chafekar:

And we didn't mention them that I was the pilot or nothing because their faith on the An 32 is so much build up there because they know in crisis these helicopters, the transport aircraft will definitely come. So to keep the morale of the people posted there, is a big job for Chandragarh. And I am a very privileged officer of Indian Air Force who was posted at Chandigarh as a flight commander, commanding officer and air officer commanding. Three tenures I had and mind you I had no personal requirements, but for operational reasons, I was posted and I feel very nice that I could do such activities which were - the smiles on their face makes your day so you may not feel an addition. And disaster relief is one of the most satisfying activity though one pryas that such situation should never come. But if they

come you can't help and then you have to go and help them out and it is one of the most satisfying jobs.

Ganapathy:

They call it anna bathees I believe

1:45:02

AVM Chafekar:

Yes they call it anna bathees Sometimes the weather packs up for 8-8-10-10 days, right? So if aircraft cannot go, we go for drop sortie. So listening to the very sound of the An-32 flying there bring down their nervousness. They know another day they will land up, they will bring something, they will drop. So that is how it is so important for us in Chandigarh as I was supposed to be ready to go and do this air maintenance activity whenever possible.

1:45:42

Ganapathy:

Fantastic. I've taken so much of your time but do you have a few minutes to talk about the induction of the C 17, the C 130? Yeah. And I know we made a big change. We started buying American aircraft. What are those aircraft like and what is that induction process been like? What do you feel about these two aircraft that we now have in the inventory about?

1:46:06

AVM Chafekar:

About C-130 Hercules I can say I was involved right from the beginning. I always in Air Force. We had this kind of a new aircraft coming means. A lot of top notch of officers used to get selected to go abroad and do their training. I always had this young. Once you have reached that stage, when you get back and train others locally, it's time for you to either leave the service or go to a non flying activity so you are not available. So when we decided about C -130 induction, what I did is only two senior people were selected, one as a CO designate and one as a flight commander designate. And rest all youngsters we selected that is squadron leader and below even flying officers who went for training abroad. So that Josh desire to do well was so much evident in all the exercises. The training the C-130 is a excellent buy it is a very nice combat aircraft. It has got many roles it can undertake, the ones which I mentioned, the paratrooper assault landings and many things which it does. And we mentioned how it came handy during DBO landing also. So it is a very nice aircraft. It has got a lot of good aids on which you can do nice close formation and it is a combat oriented aircraft. So what I thought about TCL in 2008 came up some use when this aircraft was inducted and now it is understood and agreed by the force that yes, TCL was a good decision. So Hercules is a very nice aircraft and nice means combat oriented aircraft and we use them like that. We don't use them in normal roles. We use them in these activities only. They are always combat ready and they do a very good job. Whereas C 17 aircraft when we were going for buying, we always thought it is too huge for our comfort but that partially is true. But it has really improved the load carrying capability of Indian Air Force. Right. Air

maintenance has become easier. All these activities which you were talking about, the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief has become easier. You must have seen in COVID how they brought the oxygen plants and cylinders and the capacity means huge amount that we can carry. I had a fortune ferry in the last C 17 the 10th one from and its frank performance is phenomenal. It can land at short airfield, also short runways. It has landed in east at Machuka yes, YouTube. They have that thing video. It is worth seeing. Your heartbeats increases so tremendously because such a huge thing coming and landing and for C 17 also is the same. We inducted a lot of youngsters in that Squadron. Now the both the squadrons are doing very well. They are a lot of youngsters and the performance ability airlift capability of Indian Air Force has phenomenally gone up because of these two inductions. That is what I can say

1:50:12

Ganapathy

Tremendous. Wow. Great, sir. It's been a wonderful conversation. We spent almost 2 hours. I can't thank you enough for your service and I can't thank you enough for your time that you've taken to share your experiences. You've had just a very fascinating and exciting career in the Air Force and today we got an opportunity to get a small window into what you've experienced. Yes. Thank you very much, sir. Thanks again. I also enjoy it.