

Up In The Sky

h. e. l. i. c. o. p. t. e. r
stories

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All for a Little Wine

Our unit was to get new helicopters. The helicopters were to come crated from the erstwhile USSR and be assembled in Mumbai before being flown out to our base in the north. The year must have been 1993 because I remember being a young Squadron Leader at the time. I was excited to be detailed to captain the ferrying of one of the gleaming new machines along with co-pilot Flt Lt Ashish Kapoor (Kaps for short) and a flight engineer.

The Russians were already in Mumbai when we arrived at Victoria Terminus one sultry day in the middle of the monsoons. Three crated helicopters had reportedly arrived and been loaded on to big trucks that would transport

them to the airport. On the way to the airport, the driver of one of the trucks tried to take a short cut past an over-bridge, as he may have been used to doing often. In this case, he underestimated the height of his cargo and got stuck under the bridge! The result: The main gear box of the new machine was broken and it would be sometime before the machine could be fly-worthy again. Mercifully, the other two helicopter crates reached the airfield safely and we hoped that this would be the end of unforeseen misadventures on this mission.

Within no time, the Ruskis had put the main rotors and the tail portion of the helicopters in place and after a ground check of the engines, they had the machine ready for flight check. When the Russian crew flew together, for emergency purposes, we had an air force controller in the ATC along with an interpreter so that safety was not violated at any time. After the Ruskis were satisfied with the first flight tests on the machine, I was to fly the helicopter along with a Russian pilot for a final acceptance flight. The Russian pilot spoke only Russian but he could understand a very few words of English. In this sortie, I was to fly as an observer and not take to the controls while he demonstrated the airworthiness to me.

‘Kakayabcatapodnimatcya?’-what height to climb to?

Kakoenpravleniye k zemle?-What direction to land?

'Razresheniyenabal'et.' -Cleared for take off.

Vertoletkhorosho?-Is the helicopter ok?

Skorost' is speed, *vysotais* height...such words and simple sentences were written on our thigh pads as a ready reckoner. This is the only and all the Russian I knew. As we lined up on the runway for take-off, Mumbai ATC in his nasal voice instructed, 'Clear for takeoff, maintain takeoff heading and 1000 feet till five nautical miles and then turn left to intercept radial 300 degrees climb to 3000 feet; call 25 miles out for further climb with Mumbai radar'. This had me on the mat. This was beyond my proficiency in Russian and I had to say to ATC, 'Sir I have a Russian pilot on controls who can understand only simple instructions!' There were a few sniggers and giggles on RT after which he did allow us to take off with a simpler set of instructions.

When the aircraft was finally handed over to our all-Indian crew and the acceptance papers signed, we still had to clear other 'running in' tests before we could fly it home to Pathankot. As per safety requirements, it was mandated that the helicopter underwent a check at the end of 5 hours of flying. An endurance flight was also to be carried out to check fuel consumption. Therefore, limited flying time was available to us before the 5-hour check.

Fierce as the monsoons were, we chose Goa as our destination. We would wait for a suitable clear weather

day so that we could sortie without any hindrances. Goa was chosen with another special mission in mind. Our squadron was to have its 10th year anniversary celebrations as soon as we returned with the Russian helicopter. In those days, wine wasn't as freely available outside Goa as it is today. Why not get a few cases of Goan wine to add to the merriment!

Luckily, Mumbai got a break from cloudy weather and we didn't have to wait long before we were on our way to Goa. The flight to Goa was unusually fast because we got a strong tail wind. We were happy that flying hours would now remain well within the 5-hour limit. We also anticipated that the winds would die down by late noon as the weatherman had predicted so that the return journey would not take up the time gained.

When we landed in Goa, many of our brothers from the Naval units showed up to see this new acquisition that they had only read about in the defence magazines. While one of us stayed by the aircraft to look after the refuelling and flight planning, the other crew borrowed a vehicle and drove out of the airfield on the special mission. They came back in a car loaded with crates of wine and packed meals of prawns and fish. The mission accomplished and the aircraft loaded to its maximum, we were soon airborne towards Mumbai.

With the hills of the Western Ghats to the east and with the sun shining over a calm expanse of the ocean to the west, we followed the beaches as we headed north. As the weatherman had predicted, the winds had died down sufficiently. Even so, our progress was not as fast as it was in the morning.

Half way down the route, as we enjoyed the lovely scenery, it started to get dark. Rain clouds loomed ahead. On going closer, we found a thick wall of rain in our path. We quickly decided to fly into the sea and around the bad weather patch. Leaving land behind us, as we descended over the sea, we realised that it wasn't as calm and friendly as it had looked. No sight of land and an air crew without experience in flying over an open ocean made for a rather uncomfortable cockpit. Tense discussions later, we were heading back towards land to try our luck by climbing into the hills and diverting to Pune. As we headed towards the hills, we saw hill tops disappearing beneath thick clouds. It was not worth the risk, we decided. There were two choices in front of us—either divert back to Goa or choose a field nearby and carry out a precautionary landing and wait for the weather to clear.

But we couldn't have made it all the way to Goa either—there wasn't enough fuel. Hobson's Choice—the only land available for landing was right below us.

‘Kaps, how do you read?’, I asked my co-pilot.

‘If we land here we will have to find a suitable place...’, he said.

‘You look for an appropriate landing field while I try and raise some civil traffic on radio’, I said.

‘Sir, we have just 700 litres available’, Kaps cautioned.

700 litres was just enough for the flying time left to reach Mumbai.

‘If we loiter around too much we won’t have fuel to reach Mumbai either’, I said.

We decided to head along the sandy beaches at low height to determine a suitable landing place.

‘I hope we get a good place to stay near the beach’, said Kaps to lighten the mood.

‘and some good sea food...’, I added.

We had to take care to avoid getting into a dust bowl while landing. Beaches have a lot of loose sand flying around as helicopters come to hover. So a green patch near the beach is a more welcome place to land. We also searched for a green patch with a road close by so that help and a refueller could arrive close to the aeroplane.

A little panic had set in by now. Even though we were allowed to do so in extreme circumstances, it was generally a not done thing since it indicated, to some extent, poor planning. Also, landing near a small village on the western

coast would make good news for the media besides creating unnecessary ruckus for the local populace. All this flashed through my mind as we prepared for the landing.

‘Air Force helicopter flown by Squadron Leader found stranded on beach’. I could imagine the headlines on the photos of us in the local news of the next day.

Once on land, the only option was to switch off and wait for the weather to clear and get airborne, daylight permitting. But we could afford no further landings or diversions after this one since we were critical on fuel. Another landing along the route would mean that we would have to ask for the refuelling vehicles to come on site to give us the much needed juice.

As we reconnoitred the beaches below us, our intercom set decided to quit on us. The spirit of Murphy must have been with us in the cockpit that day, and laughing in glee besides. With a tandem seat helicopter, the only way to communicate now was by pre-briefed signals of motions of the control stick. No amount of shouting could get us to hear each other above the din of the engines and rotors.

Being the captain in command, I took over controls and decided to land facing north on an isolated green field close to the beach. As we came in to land, I saw a small hole appearing in the rain patch ahead and there seemed to be adequate light across it. This was a lucky break, we would

be able to cross across to Mumbai now, I thought. I was thrilled to find that my hunch was correct!

As soon as we cleared the rain patch, we could see the Mumbai skyline of Colaba very far into the distance. Suddenly, the intercom came alive too and things started looking not so bleary after all. Murphy had made an exception to the rule and we were silently thankful for this chance. There was a collective sigh of relief from the air crew, now that all was well.

We called up the ATC in Mumbai and established contact, telling them our position and ETA. The ATC controller, in a matter-of-fact tone, informed us that it was raining in Mumbai and since we were flying in visual flight rules, we were not cleared to land. He advised us to either divert to Pune or go back to Goa! This was one of those situations when pilots on their side and air traffic controllers on theirs seriously wonder if the other side is in their right minds! Didn't these guys in civil ATC understand how we operated helicopters? We are not like airliners with tons of spare fuel to divert to other airfields across the country if it was so mandated.

With all the extra time we had spent negotiating the weather, and making decisions about what to do, our fuel tanks were drying up fast. We had to plead with the controller, who reluctantly allowed us over head Colaba and

asked us to await further instructions. By this time, we were only 10 odd miles from landing. As we reported our position over Colaba, the controller in his stony voice told us to orbit there for about 15 to 20 minutes so as to accommodate some arrivals and departures at the busy airport. I was quite exasperated by then and decided to announce our predicament to the ATC.

‘We have just 10 minutes of endurance on board’, I told the controller.

There was hushed silence on the other side. A few seconds later, a still stony voice came on again.

‘Ok! Roger’, he said, giving us priority over the other commercial flights for landing.

How flying makes pilots happy. How the thought of landing on terra firma does too! As we landed I was surprised to see a line of rescue vehicles and an ambulance –to rescue us. We sheepishly called ATC to say that all was under control and we would not require any further assistance.

‘Pilots to report to ATC after switch off’, said the controller.

I was sure it was for a dressing down and maybe a written explanation. As we taxied to our bay, I decided to switch off one engine to conserve fuel. The warning light indicating low fuel had been already on for more than 10

minutes in the air and I suspected that we had just about 100 odd litres available in the tank. The gauges were not meant to be accurate to show such low levels and rightly so—we were not supposed to land in such a state!

There was a lot of explaining to do to the ATC guys. After many rounds of apologies and thank you's, we were relieved that no official safety violation issues were being raised by them in writing. We hunkered down and discussed where we had gone wrong. When we reached base, we decided to tell our boss all and made sure we shared our experience with all our squadron mates. Many years later, I also wrote about it for the flight safety magazine so that the entire fraternity of pilots could learn from our mistakes.

Squadron spirit, both literally and figuratively, is all right. One need not put the aircraft and its occupants into danger for a few bottles of cheap wine!