

The Maharajah & The Silver Kris

Flying adventures with Air-India and Singapore Airlines (*formerly MSA*) from the 1950's through 1980's

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This aviation travelogue attempts to weave numerous interesting experiences of the author from the mid 1950's through the 1980's in India and the Far-East. The reference to the *Maharajah* in the title alludes to the mascot of Air-India International (now Air India Ltd). *The Silver Kris* refers to the emblem of SIA (*Singapore Airlines*), formerly MSA (*Malaysia Singapore Airlines*), and before that *Malayan Airways*. The author was fortunate to fly with these great airlines during a period that many still fondly remember as the golden age of air travel. Flying then was not just about traversing long distances at hitherto unimaginable speeds. It was about the romance of visiting far-away places, and on getting to know the world and the fascinating diversity of its people.

I. Introduction

This article is an amalgamation of snippets of aviation history in Asia and my own little role in it, which I now humbly share with the reader. Being a subject close to my heart, I hope the reader will not mind permitting me the indulgence of first introducing some family history, in-order to set the context of what I have to say here. The photographs displayed are from my personal collection as well as from public sources with attribution, if known. Any inadvertent lapses in attribution are my own, and I would be happy to set the record straight if so advised. Also, for the benefit of the reader, I have added a map [Fig. I-1] that shows some of the principal places mentioned in this travelogue.

I was born in 1954 in a small town called Muar, in what was then known as the British Crown Colony of Malaya. My parents were both born in India but spent most of their lives in Malaya. My mother grew up in a town called Sungei Patani. She was a young survivor of the Japanese occupation of that country during World War Two. One of her most enduring childhood memories was a chance meeting with the great patriot Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, hero of India's liberation struggle, during his visit to Malaya to organize the INA – *Indian National Army*. My father grew up in India, where he was trained as a Veterinary doctor in the *Madras Veterinary College*. Following my parents' marriage in 1951, he moved to Malaya, where he spent his entire professional career of 36 years.

In 1953, after a couple of years serving in some quaint little towns in Malaya, he was inducted as a member of the *British Overseas Colonial Service*, counterpart of the ICS – Indian Civil Service, in the vast territories that then formed part of the British Empire in Asia & Africa. His first appointment in this position was as Veterinary Officer in the colony of Sarawak [Fig. I-1], on the island of Borneo. As the world's second largest island, Borneo has a fascinating variety of people, flora & fauna. In those days Sarawak was considered as a hardship posting, with little of the comforts available in a metropolis. But it was home for me and my family for the next several decades, as my father transferred to exotic towns like *Kuching, Bintulu, Sibuluan* and *Miri*.

Following Britain's granting of full independence to Malaya in 1965 and the formation of Malaysia, my father resigned from the Colonial Service and moved to *Bandar-Sri-Begawan*, capital of the oil-rich Sultanate of *Brunei*, also in the island of Borneo. He went there on the invitation of the Sultan, serving as his Chief Veterinary Officer for another 22 years, taking care of the Sultan's stable of fine polo horses and his huge palace collection of over 500 guard dogs, before finally retiring in 1987. His extended career in Malaya & Brunei thus gave us the opportunity to make many exciting journeys to and from India, mostly by Air-India. For me personally, this was the beginning of a long love affair with aviation, a field in which I had the good fortune to develop my subsequent professional career.

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Fig. I-1: Malaysia (formerly Malaya), Singapore, and the Island of Borneo

II. The Lockheed Super Constellation

The *Lockheed Super Constellation*^[2] and its predecessor the *Constellation*, were arguably one of the most beautiful aeroplanes ever made. With a dolphin shaped fuselage and sleek, streamlined appearance, the Constellation was designed by the legendary Kelly Johnson, Lockheed's Chief Aerodynamicist^[5]. Born out of a requirement for a transcontinental airliner with a range of over 3500 miles, the Constellation was the brainchild of Howards Hughes, TWA's (*Trans World Airlines*) visionary promoter, aviation pioneer and Hollywood movie producer, all rolled into one! TWA started commercial flights of the Constellation in early 1946. The airplane immediately became a hit with passengers, who could now fly across the Atlantic Ocean from New York to London or Paris, in unparalleled comfort. Soon, the Constellation, or "Connie" as it was affectionally known came into service with many major airlines around the world, such as PanAm (*Pan American World Airways*), BOAC (*British Overseas Airways Corporation*) and Air France.

Air-India, under the leadership of the legendary JRD Tata, was one of the first airlines in Asia to acquire this magnificent aircraft. It saw service with Air-India from 1948 all the way to 1962, being gradually replaced from 1960 onwards with the arrival of the jet engined Boeing-707's, which were much faster and quieter than the propeller powered Constellations.

III. From Madras to Singapore in an Air-India Super Constellation

I am told that I made my first flight on a Constellation on an inaugural Madras-Singapore flight in 1956, when I was less than 2 years old. Having of course, no recollection of that flight, I feel fortunate that I was able to make many more such journeys in the years to come. One in-particular that made a deep impression on me, was a flight from Madras (now Chennai) to Singapore, commanded by a Captain Mistry, probably around 1960. We were seated in the first-class section, and my father and one of the relief pilots were exchanging pleasantries during the five-hour long flight. I was busy reading a fascinating in-flight booklet authored by the great Bobby Kooka (Air-India General Manager), explaining various do's and don'ts to passengers in a witty and engaging way. I especially remember his admonition not to forget one's belongings, pointing out in jest that many Air-India staff had gotten rich from the fine watches and jewellery left behind by their dear passengers!



Fig. III-1: Air India's Lockheed Super Constellation

The Constellation was a large airplane by any standards, with seating for between 50 to 75 passengers. The seats were quite a bit larger than those found on present day airliners, and if memory serves me right, much more comfortable as well. Air India's service was exemplary. Smartly attired crew elegantly went about

the cabin, serving fine meals and attending to every wish. Legend had it that each cabin crew member was personally selected by the great JRD himself, who looked closely for charm, poise, and intelligence in potential employees. Whether legend or not, the cabin and flight crew certainly had an ethereal quality to them, demonstrating an *esprit-de-corps* that must be experienced to be believed. One really felt proud to fly Air India then, and to this day I feel exceptionally lucky to have those experiences.



Fig. III-2: Air India Super Constellation cockpit crew

At one point I was invited to see the activity in the cockpit, and eagerly accepted, pleased at my incredibly good fortune. A reader today may find this invitation very unusual. But those were simpler days, and an invitation to the flight deck was not uncommon. For me, the thrill of entering the cockpit zone was akin to entering a real-life *Aladdin's* cave or *Captain Nemo's* command centre ^[3]. At first glance, it seemed quite crowded. I recall the maze of dials on the instrument panel and wondered how any earthly being could make sense of so much information. The Captain, seated on the left, greeted me with a warm smile. I was too dumbstruck by his grand appearance and demeanour to say anything. I noticed that another person, obviously the co-pilot had his hands on what appeared like a "steering wheel." He neither smiled nor introduced himself but turned around as if in polite

acknowledgment of my presence. As he did that I was then shocked, almost terrified to notice that he had a dark black mask that covered most of his face, attached to a long bent tube, making him look like some apparition out of a horror movie! The only thing that prevented me from running away in an instant was the fact that the others in the cockpit did not seem in the least afraid of him! It was only years later, as a teenager, that I understood that he was in fact wearing an oxygen mask! And as I shall explain a little later, it was decades before I got a satisfactory explanation for why he was even wearing one.

I was next introduced to three other smartly attired gentlemen: the *radio operator*, *flight engineer* and *navigator*. These positions were extremely important in their day to safely guide an airplane through very long distances. But they have long since disappeared from contemporary airliners, replaced by the wonders of modern technology in the form of advanced *avionics* and the *inertial navigation system*. I was also introduced to a sixth gentleman in the cockpit, who explained that he was an employee of the *Indian Post and Telegraphs*. He was busy carefully sorting a small bag of mail but took time to answer my curious questions. In later years, I have often wondered why a postal employee would be found here! I can only surmise that perhaps he was in charge of some important "diplomatic mail" to be delivered in person in Singapore.

III [a]. “Save-a-Connie”, and the mystery of the Pilot in the black mask revealed

I have to confess that one of my huge frustrations for many years was the disbelieving reactions I used to get from friends and colleagues to whom I recounted my experiences in the flight deck of Air India’s Super Constellation. My encounter with a co-pilot who obviously was wearing mask, was often derisively dismissed as the excessive imagination of a star struck schoolboy. Even aviation “experts” I encountered, who had never themselves flown in a Constellation, would theorize that since the Connie was a pressurized airplane, there would be no need for a pilot to wear an oxygen mask in the normal course of flying. Although absolutely convinced by what I had seen, I could get no one to speak up for me, as the days of the Super Constellation had long since passed. However, many years later, I was to get the proof I needed, in a most unexpected way.

In 1996, I moved to Wichita, Kansas, to start a new position as a Senior Aerodynamics Specialist with the Learjet Company, makers of the well-known Business Jets of the same name. One weekend, my wife Rema and I decided to take our children Rohit & Ragini to an Air Show organized at the McConnell airbase of the USAF – United States Air Force. While walking through the exhibits of this very large air base, I was suddenly thunderstruck to see a huge white and red airplane that had the unmistakable lines of a beautiful Super Constellation. Walking at a fast pace, almost running towards it, I could see that it was indeed no apparition. Getting closer, I noticed about a dozen men and women dressed in red and black uniforms that sported the logo of the “Save-A-Connie” foundation ^[4]. They explained that they were all volunteers, and that the foundation was expressly set up to restore and fly a TWA Super-Constellation. The volunteers were managing crowds who wished to climb into the interior of the Connie, at \$2 per person. After buying entrance tickets for the four of us, I literally sprinted up the ladder right into the aircraft.



Fig. III [a-1]: TWA Super Constellation of the “Save-A-Connie” foundation, Kansas City, Missouri, USA

Now, the Connie is a large airplane, and sits quite high above the ground, so the ladder had a great number of steps to it. What greeted me at the top was a superbly maintained cabin, complete with new seats for about 60 passengers. I was told that the airplane had just flown in from the “Save-A-Connie” maintenance hangar in Kansas City. Moving up the aisle, we were met by volunteers who explained various aspects of the Connie in minute detail. They were thrilled to meet someone like me who had actually flown in one as a fare paying passenger.

I could not suppress my excitement as we walked towards the cockpit, taking photographs and reliving my days as a Connie passenger to my wife & children. This time, all four of us were allowed into the cockpit, where we encountered an elderly gentleman, about 75, who looked like the pilot in command. He introduced himself as a former Captain of *Trans World Airlines*, now a proud volunteer pilot of “Save-A-Connie.” I recounted to him my experiences of flying Air-India, and about the

co-pilot with the mask, enquiring if he could shed more light on what I had seen.

In typical American fashion, the plain speaking pilot, a Texan to boot, responded thus: “*Why of course, in the days of the Connie, cabin pressurization was still a new technology, and not considered very reliable, thus one had at all times to be prepared for the possibility of a sudden failure of cabin pressure. So, many airlines, including TWA, had a policy that the person actually flying the airplane, whether Captain or Co-Pilot, had to continuously don an oxygen mask. I presume your Air India had a similar policy!*” And thus ended my decades long quest to solve the mystery of the Air India pilot in a mask. Solved at the other end of the world, by a Texan flying a vintage Connie destined for the Museum!

IV. The Boeing 707’s of Air-India and SIA (Singapore Airlines)

From 1963 onwards, the coming of winter was eagerly anticipated, because that was the time of year when my sister Uma and I would make our annual journey from school in Ooty (Ootacamund, now Uthagamandalam) in Tamilnadu, to Borneo, to be with family.

The journey usually began in a Boeing-707 aircraft at the Meenambakkam Airport in Madras, with an overnight halt in Singapore. The journey resumed the next day with a 3-hr flight in a Douglas DC-3, “Dakota” over the South China Sea to Kuching, Sarawak. Years later, the DC-3, a slow, twin propeller aeroplane, was replaced by faster jet aircraft. But more of that later.

In those days, Meenambakkam was a small, sleepy airport, a far cry from the ultra-modern international terminal it is today. The only international destination was a once or twice a week flight to Singapore served by Air India. Passengers were welcomed at the elegant Air-India counter, by charming and attentive ground staff. We felt like and were made to feel like royalty! After waiting in a small, well-appointed lounge, the arrival of the aircraft was announced thus over the public address system, usually by a lady in a pronounced European accent with perfect diction, probably an Anglo-Indian:

“Air India is pleased to announce the arrival of their Boeing-707 flight AI-346 from London, Paris, Beirut and Bombay! Passengers flying onwards to Singapore are now advised to go through immigration.” This announcement always evoked great excitement, as air-travel for me was not just about getting from one place to another, but about the mystique of faraway places that I had only heard or dreamt about, “London – Paris – Beirut”, and I wished I heard more names to this long list!



Fig. IV-1: Air-India Boeing 707

and snacks. In those early days, I could not shake off the feeling that foreign travel from India was probably like space travel of astronauts from a spaceport! All credits to Air India management for creating this exciting impression.

The new Boeing-707's were much faster than the Super Constellations. Singapore was now just 3 ½ hours away from India, instead of over 5 hrs. In-flight service was of course superlative. The Cabin interior walls were tastefully decorated with murals evoking the Ajanta-Ellora caves. I used to really admire Air India for their creativity, in contrast to the rather plain interiors of western airlines such as PanAm and BOAC. On the ground, the early Boeing-707 jet engines had a high-pitched scream that many found quite annoying. For me though, it was pure music, and the louder the scream, the more exciting it was for me! In the air, the 707's were much quieter than the propeller equipped Super Constellations. Later versions of 707's were even quieter, after the shift from turbojet to turbofan engine propulsion.

Upon arrival at the old Paya Lebar^[7] airport in Singapore, we usually had to stay overnight in a hotel, and then catch our connecting flight to Borneo the next day morning. Air-India's preferred hotel was the historic Adelphi Hotel^[6] in Coleman Street. This classic hotel founded in 1863, was regrettably torn down in 1973 to make way for new development. In those days, young passengers traveling alone were scrupulously chaperoned by airline ground staff. They accompanied us to dinner on the day of arrival in Singapore, to breakfast the next morning, and all the way back to the airport to board the flight to one of the various places in Borneo that my father worked.

It was always a thrilling sight to see the gleaming Boeings land and majestically taxi their way to the apron. They usually were named after Himalayan mountains, “Kanchenjunga, Nanga Parbat, Makalu.” I found this convention fascinating, as also the convention of naming the Super Constellations after royalty, “Kashmir Princess, Malabar Princess, etc.”

Until I was about 11, Uma and I used to be escorted through immigration by an Air-India ground hostess, whenever we travelled alone. Then all passengers were seated in a waiting area, which was simply a large tent equipped with white wicker chairs. As we waited, smartly attired attendants would politely serve us tea



Fig. IV-2: The Adelphi Hotel, Singapore

IV [a]. The birth of SIA - Singapore Airlines

For many years, Air-India was the sole airline that operated international flights out of Madras, with a direct connection to Singapore. In 1970, friendly competition arrived in the form of SIA – Singapore Airlines, within 5 years of the formation of the independent Republic of Singapore. SIA was created by splitting the assets of MSA – *Malaysia Singapore Airlines* into two entities, Malaysia Airlines and SIA. The MSA itself was formed from the old *Malayan Airways* in the aftermath of both Malaya and Singapore gaining independence from Britain in 1965. However, in 1970, MSA was again split into SIA, which concentrated on international operations from its hub in Singapore. Malaysia Airlines focused on domestic operations in the Malay peninsula, with a few flights to international destinations from its hub in Kuala Lumpur.



Fig. IV [a-1]: SIA Boeing-707

on the SIA 707's and 747 Jumbo Jets. Today, SIA is rightly considered to be one of the premier airlines in the world. India and Air-India can justifiably take some of the credit for this Asian success story!

It is a matter of record that Air-India was the original inspiration for SIA, providing technical and management expertise, as well as man-power in its early years^[17].

As my luck would have it, I first flew SIA's Boeing-707's from Madras to Singapore and back a few times, between 1970 and 1973. Initially, the flights were hardly full, probably because passengers like me perceived the in-flight service to be not on par with that of Air-India! But soon, as experience was gained, there was a marked improvement, and I even made a few flights to London

V. From Singapore to Borneo in a *de Havilland Comet-4* of the MSA (*Malaysia Singapore Airlines*)

Borneo, the world's second largest island [Fig. I-1], comprises the East Malaysian provinces of Sabah and Sarawak, the Sultanate of Brunei, and the Indonesian province of Kalimantan. For long, the only air connection between Singapore and Borneo was by a long overseas journey in a Douglas DC-3. However, beginning in the mid 1960's, MSA (*Malaysia Singapore Airlines*), the successor to *Malayan Airways*, began operating jet services on this route, using *Comet-4C* aircraft.



Fig. V-1: Comet 4C of MSA – *Malaysia Singapore Airlines*

Designed and manufactured in England by the famous *de Havilland Aircraft Company*. The *Comet*^[8] was in fact the world's first civil jet aircraft, introduced to universal acclaim in 1953. However, a series of technical disasters caused a long delay in its adoption by the airlines and it never fulfilled its original promise. I count myself lucky in having the chance to make several journeys in this exceptionally graceful aircraft.

sorry to see it replaced around 1969 by the new Boeing-737 twinjet aircraft.

Personally speaking, I found the *Comet* to be a more exciting aeroplane than the Boeing-707. At take-off it had a tremendous acceleration that literally pinned one down on the seat. One amusing quirk that I recall was the "smoke" that partially enveloped the cabin prior to take-off! The MSA stewardess used to fore-warn us about this, and ask us not to be alarmed, as it was not smoke that we were seeing, "but very fine moisture" emanating from the air-conditioning system! The *Comet* was a very popular airplane, and I was

In 1965, when my father moved from Kuching to Brunei, we could no longer fly there directly by jet aircraft from Singapore, as Brunei did not have a large enough airport then. The journey was thus first accomplished by a jet airplane of MSA from Singapore to Jessleton (now Kota Kinabalu)^[9], the capital of the Malaysian state of Sabah in North Borneo. After a few hours halt in Jessleton, we flew the final 40-minute leg to Brunei in a DC-3 *Dakota*. I remember the British pilots of the Dakota always keeping the cockpit door open when flying the aircraft. I did not lose this opportunity to constantly look at what they were doing from my vantage point while seated just behind. Little did I realize then that I was witnessing the last days of a great era in flying, for the Dakotas were soon to be phased out, never to return.

V [a]. Bandar-Seri-Begawan (*The Abode of the Gods*), the Capital of Brunei

This account will not be complete without a reference to Brunei, where I spent many pleasant years with family. Ruled for centuries by a Sultan of Muslim descent, it was a British protectorate until given full independence in 1984. In 1970, Brunei renamed its capital as *Bandar-Seri-Begawan*^[10]. The Sanskrit connotations here are unmistakable and speak to the historical impact of India's civilization on the country going back more than a millennium. In fact, the formal titles of the principal royal functionaries and even references to the palace are to this day all in a form of classical Sanskrit (*Bendahara, Raja Isteri, Isthana*, to name a few).

The Sultanate owes its vast riches to the discovery of petroleum in the 1920's and the subsequent exploitation by the Anglo-Royal Dutch Shell Oil Company. The company had very impressive infrastructure in Brunei, complete with refineries, schools, hospitals, shopping complexes, and even a private airport equipped with the latest helicopters, small planes, and hovercraft!

In 1974, The Brunei International Airport^[11] was constructed by clearing a vast stretch of equatorial jungle, with one of the longest runways in the Far East. The airport was mostly served by SIA (Singapore Airlines) and Royal Brunei. BOAC, later



Fig. V [a-1]: BOAC Super VC-10 at *Bandar-Seri-Begawan*

renamed *British Airways*, also inaugurated a direct service to London with stops in Singapore, Bombay, or Calcutta. In 1974, I flew on a BOAC Super VC-10 all the way from Brunei to London, with stops in Singapore and Tehran. The Vickers VC-10 was one of those great British Airliners which attempted, unsuccessfully, to compete with the Boeing-707. It had outstanding performance and even more outstanding looks, and the four engines at the rear, far away from the cabin, made for a very quiet interior. Another memorable trip I recall making in late 1975 was a British Airways Super VC-10 flight from London to Calcutta, direct! This was probably one of the last few VC-10 flights before they were retired for good. I distinctly remember one of the passengers who boarded at Calcutta. He was a monk of the Ramakrishna order, on his way to Singapore, perhaps to become part of the local mission there. We exchanged greetings but had no opportunity to talk.

As a former British protectorate, Brunei always maintained strong connections with the UK even post- independence. The general belief thus was that the British Airways flights between Brunei and London were, for strategic reasons, heavily subsidised by both Governments. One of the last flights I made on this route was in 1979, on a Boeing-747 from London. The plane made a halt in Bombay, to deplane a handful of passengers and board a few more, before proceeding directly to Bandar-Seri-Begawan! I think the Bombay (Mumbai) – Brunei direct flights have long since ceased. So, in having this experience, I feel almost like the proverbial coin collector who stumbled on a rare find!

V [b]. India and Brunei in Space!



**Fig. V [b-1]: Indian Space Research Organization
in Kampung Tungku, Brunei**

A significant fact not commonly known even in India, is that the ISRO – *Indian Space Research Organization* has built and operated a large ground command and control centre^[12] in Brunei since 1998, under a bi-lateral agreement signed between the two Governments at the highest levels. Every Indian space mission is tracked by a series of such centres strategically located around the globe. The Brunei centre at *Kampung Tungku* is a matter of much pride not just for India and Brunei, but also for the small local Indian community. Most recently, it was used to track the launch of the Chandrayaan-2 Moon Mission.

As a matter of reciprocity and goodwill, the centre also trains Brunei citizens in space related applications, computer technology, and so on.

VI. A Beautiful Blue-Eyed Blond Damsel in a Dakota!

In 1964, we were living in Kuching, the capital of Sarawak. It was a lovely town, where life proceeded at a languid pace. I remember the Sunday trips with family to the large park in the centre of town, with its immaculately maintained lawns, and a bandstand in the centre. Vendors mullered around selling all manner of delights, from ice cream cones to freshly grilled nuts, as citizens enjoyed themselves in one of the favourite leisure spots in town. The highlight of the day was a performance by the local police band. The energetic music accompanied by the smart swing of the conductor's baton was a thrilling sight to behold and emulate for a young boy like me.



Fig. VI-1: Malayan Airways, Douglas DC-3, 'Dakota'

With the approaching end of the summer holidays, it was time for me and my sister Uma to return to boarding school in India. Leaving our family behind and flying to a faraway place was something to be both enjoyed and dreaded at the same time! Enjoyed for the flying adventure and dreaded for the sad prospect of leaving behind our parents to see them again only after many months.

When the day of reckoning finally arrived, we both tearfully bid our parents good-bye at the airport, and with a heavy heart slowly climbed up the stairway of a waiting Douglas DC-3 of *Malayan Airways*. The DC-3, also known as the *Dakota*, was a famous but strange aircraft, with a sloping floor that one had to climb up to reach one's allotted seat row. At one time, tens of thousands of these DC-3's were flying all over the world. After finding our places, we made ourselves

comfortable as best as we could, silently sitting with downcast eyes, waiting for the roar of the engines to begin. Suddenly, we were startled to hear a voice with a pronounced English accent asking, "*are you both alright dear?*" Rubbing our wet eyes open, we were astonished to see the most beautiful pair of blue eyes looking down at us! It was the English airhostess, a young girl of no more than 20, who had evidently sensed our melancholy mood and dejected appearance. For a fleeting few seconds we sat immobilized by the appearance of this beautiful, kindly face.

And then the most extraordinary thing happened. Perhaps mistaking our silence for a lack of knowledge of English, the girl suddenly addressed the same question to us in fluent Tamil, which just so happened to be our mother tongue! By now both startled and delighted, I blurted out, "*how do you know Tamil, aren't you English?*" At which she explained that she grew up

in a remote rubber plantation in Malaya, where her father was the general manager. Most of the several hundred rubber-tappers and laborers employed there were Tamil speaking migrants from India. As a result, she said her childhood friends and playmates were largely the children of these laborers from whom she learned fluent Tamil! She continued to keep us excellent company over the next few hours en-route to Singapore, talking about her family and asking us about ours, lifting our spirits and bringing us back to our usual cheerful selves. The passage of over five decades has not dimmed my memory of this extraordinary incident, nor the stunning visage of this gentle and talented damsel, a perfect example of the amazing unity in diversity of the people of our planet.

VII. The Triumph and the Tragedy of the Kashmir Princess

I now come to the final part of my travelogue, with an incident that took place more than 60 years ago, that not only had global implications but powerfully resonates with me to this day, because it has elements that bring to surface my early life in Borneo, which I will now share with the reader.



Fig. VII-1. Captain DK Jatar, hero of the ill-fated *Kashmir Princess*

On the 11th of April 1955, an Air-India Constellation, “*Kashmir Princess*”, was enroute from Hong-Kong to the Indonesian capital of Jakarta. Onboard were a delegation of diplomats from *The People’s Republic of China*, and a few journalists, all on their way to attend the first Afro-Asian Unity conference in Bandung, Indonesia. One of the principal protagonists of this high-profile conference was India’s Prime Minister, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, who had given special instructions to Air-India to assign their best flight crew to the ferry the Chinese delegation.

About 350 miles from Singapore, the Constellation was suddenly rocked by a deadly explosion, that was later confirmed to be a time bomb. After radioing Mayday emergency signals, the pilots, Captain D.K.Jatar and Co-Pilot M.C.Dikshit put up a brave and desperate struggle to save the aircraft. A decision was made to ditch the stricken airliner by attempting a water landing. But this turned out to be impossible, and it ultimately went down in the South China Sea off the *Great Natuna Islands*, tragically leading to the deaths of 8 crew and 11 passengers. The sole survivors were First Officer M.C.Diskhit, Flight Navigator J.C.Pathak and Maintenance Engineer A.S. Karnik. For their heroism and devotion to duty under the most unimaginable circumstances, the entire crew of 8 were decorated with the Ashok Chakra^[16], India’s highest peacetime award for conspicuous valour, by the President of India.

In his riveting and long since out of print book “*Kashmir Princess*”^{[1], [15]}, written within a few years of the tragic crash, A.S.Karnik, one of the three survivors, writes movingly about Captain Jatar; “*He died a hero’s death. He died seated with his hands on the control wheel!*”

Karnik was also witness to the exemplary heroism of the cabin crew, especially that of Gloria Berry, the young stewardess, who made sure that all passengers and the pilots donned their life jackets in the last desperate minutes of the flight. For her singular act of selflessness, she ensured that at least 3 survived, even though she lost her own at the tender age of 23.

Now, the *Great Natuna Islands* where the doomed airplane went down in the South China Sea is hardly 100 nautical miles North off the coast of Kuching [see Fig. I-1] in the British territory of Sarawak in Borneo where we were living at the time. I was barely a year old then, but it was an unforgettably tragic day for my father, one of the very few senior officials of the British administration residing in Kuching. He recalls listening to the unfolding events right after the first radio broadcast of the missing airliner. Hearing that it was an *Air India* plane, he rushed to the offices of the *British Resident* (“Resident” was the official title of the chief representative of the colonial administration), to seek any information they had and offer his help. Within hours, a Royal Navy ship, HMS Dampier, was despatched from Singapore to look for survivors.

Years later, my father recounted to me his encounter with an Air India Captain who had rushed to Kuching in connection with the rescue operations. I only recently procured and read a copy of A.S.Karnik’s book, and lo and behold, there is a sentence on p.147 referring to a Captain Vishwanathan “*who had just returned from a visit to Kuching on April 14, 1955*”, just a few days after the crash! He was one of Air-India’s ace Captains, who by a strange twist of fate was to have actually piloted the ill-fated *Kashmir Princess*, only to be replaced at the last minute by D.K.Jatar at the latter’s request! He later became an integral part of the investigation team put together by Air-India to unearth the reasons for the crash. These and other fascinating anecdotes are in Karnik’s book, which I highly recommend for its fast paced and moving portrayal of this fateful day in history.

I will now close with an incident mentioned in the book that particularly touched me and my family. Karnik and the co-pilot Captain Dikshit had both miraculously escaped from the *Kashmir Princess* in the moments after its impact with the sea.

So had the Flight Navigator, J.C.Pathak. All three swam overnight for hours in shark infested waters. At one point, Karnik and Dikshit swam near each other, while Pathak got separated but was miraculously reunited with his crewmen later. They kept swimming for more than 8 hours, guided only by moonlight before finally beaching on a remote island and falling asleep exhausted, under a coconut tree.

Early next morning, they were startled to be awakened by a team of fierce looking tribals carrying long scimitar blades, and thus became absolutely terrified at the thought of being imminently slaughtered by them! As it turned out, the tribals were very kind, offering them food and water, medical treatment at a remote Indonesian hospital, and finally informing the authorities who arranged for their eventual rescue by the British authorities aboard the Naval Ship *HMS Dampier*.

Karnik has this to say about the tribals; *“These simple folk living a secluded life on a far-away island really had hearts of gold. They rescued us from dreary sands, offered us meals and were rushing us to a place where medical aid could be sought. Their friendly farewell moved me considerably.”*

Although not mentioned by name in the book, the “tribals” were actually *Dayaks*^[18], native people who are found in remote jungle settlements all over Indonesia and Borneo. Known historically as warriors, famed for their “head-hunting” skills, the Dayaks are a simple people who my late father, Dr. C.V.Subramaniam, was intimately associated during the course of his long career as a Veterinary officer in Sarawak!

One of his duties was to travel to the interior jungles from Kuching and live with the Dayaks in their remote long-houses, teaching them animal husbandry. With no proper roads to speak of, the journey was hazardous, involving travel by canoe through dense equatorial forest teeming with wild-life and unknown dangers. Often my father would be gone for a month with no news, since none of the means of communication we take for granted today were available then. He had a special fondness for the Dayaks, and they in turn for him. He never forgot them, as I am sure Karnik neither did as well.

In retirement in India in the evening of his long life, my father would proudly display some of the mementoes gifted him by the Dayaks, as a constant reminder of his professional years amongst a grateful and unpretentious people whom he had the unique honour to serve.



Fig. VII-5: Dayak headman and his two wives!



Fig. VII-2: My father flanked by Dayak Ladies



Fig. VII-3: Father in a Dayak Longhouse



Fig. VII-4: Dayak battle shield

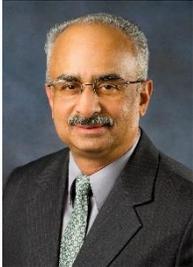
VIII. Epilogue

It is hoped that the reader would by now have acquired an interesting glimpse of aviation history in India and the Far-East as I experienced it in far-away lands, over six decades ago. Air travel then was the preserve of the fortunate few, made possible by the innovations of great aircraft designers and engineers, daring pilots, and the tireless efforts of the men and women who operated pioneering airlines like Air-India. The onward march of aviation technology has made the world smaller today and brought its amazing benefits to every corner of the planet.

It is finally my great pleasure to acknowledge here those nearest and dearest to me for being part of my journey. My parents who nurtured and encouraged my budding interest in aeroplanes and whole-heartedly supported me in pursuing a profession in aviation. My siblings with whom I spent many happy child-hood years in the exotic surroundings of Borneo. My devoted wife

Rema, who in nearly 40 years has supported me through thick and thin as I strove to gain new knowledge in the science of aeronautics, taking us to India, France and the USA. And not least our children Rohit and Ragini, who from a tender age were exposed to both the delights and the rigours of a father who was as passionate about his profession as he was of his family. To all of them I say a big thank you, as I happily ride into the sunset down my chosen path!

About the Author



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Dr. Venkatasubban, known as Venkat to friends and family, has over 40 years' experience as an aircraft designer in India, USA and Canada, at HAL, Bombardier, Raytheon-Hawker-Beechcraft, Bell Helicopter, CIRRUS Aircraft and Terrafugia. He is a *Fellow of The Royal Aeronautical Society* of the UK, a *Raytheon Engineering Fellow*, and a *Hawker-Beechcraft Engineering Fellow*.

He was responsible for the design and development of several Business Jets that are currently in service, such as the Learjet-45, Bombardier Challenger-300 and Hawker-4000. At CIRRUS, he was the head of Aerodynamics, with responsibility for the SF50 Vision Jet^[19], the world's first single engine General Aviation jet aircraft equipped with a unique built-in emergency parachute recovery system. The highly successful SF50 went on to win the prestigious *Collier Trophy*^[20] in 2018. He was Director (Aeronautics) at Terrafugia, Inc., before recently joining his current position as the Head of Flight Technology at *Jaunt Air Mobility*^[21], developing an eVTOL (*Electric Vertical Take-off and Landing*) Air-Taxis, in partnership with UBER, Inc^[22].

Dr. Venkatasubban is a graduate of the *College of Aeronautics* at Cranfield University^[23] in the UK, and of the CERT-ONERA^[24] and I.S.A.E. Sup'Aero (*French National Institute for Advanced Study in Aeronautics and Space*)^[25], Toulouse, France. He has lived and worked in the USA since 1992, travelling often to India to be with friends and family.

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