

Air war in Kargil



It was a wonderful opportunity: a "dashing young pilot" (that's how Dr Prahlad introduced Wg Cdr R Nambiar VSM in his welcome speech) who flew 25 sorties over the Kargil region on his Mirage 2000 aircraft in 1999 was going to talk of his war experiences. To no one's surprise, the S R Valluri Auditorium was full. There is a special energy about an IAF pilot in uniform. He's youthful, he's tremendously confident and he has that winning glow of a performer. When the pilot is also articulate and savvy, the mix is completely irresistible. Little

wonder, then, that Wg Cdr Nambiar completely bowled over the audience. The pilot narrated a compelling tale: the hooting of the emergency IAF sirens at Gwalior base on 26 May 1999, IAF's initial surprise at the development, a tyre burst leading to a blocked runway at Adampur (which briefly delayed operations), the agony of losing three aircraft in three days at the beginning of the Kargil operations, the discovery that high level pounding using Mirages was the key; *not* low level attacks using MiG's, the rapid recovery of the IAF morale, the bombing over Point 5140, the remarkable air adventure over Muntho Dhalo on 16-17 June, the pounding of Tiger Hill and finally the taking of Point 4388 on 9 July ("after which the war was practically over"). Wg Cdr Nambiar's presentation contained excellent maps (showing locations of the key battle centres), graphics (tellingly used to explain the topology of the terrain) and actual video clippings of aerial bombing operations. Sitting in the cool comfort of the auditorium, the participants witnessed a major Indian victory. Wg Cdr Nambiar's lecture also contained comments on the Indian battle strategy. "The air power which we committed for Kargil operations would be akin to using a sledge hammer to crack a nut, but it enabled India to quickly seize the initiative. I believe that the battle ended quickly not just due to diplomatic initiatives, but also due to IAF's operations". The quick realisation that low level attacks were unsafe was also a factor ("the Russians lost 367 aircraft at Afghanistan before they discovered this!"). The pilot praised the performance of the Mirage aircraft and



explained how these high flying planes were used to deploy laser guided bombs. "It took us some time to master the technique of high altitude low drag bomb delivery, but we eventually achieved wonderful results using the technique". When asked to comment on why the Pakistan Air Force didn't enter the fray, Wg Cdr Nambiar said that the IAF had a very significant numerical advantage. "But there was the odd Pakistani helicopter moving around. In fact I could easily have shot the chopper down, but it just managed to re-enter Pakistani air space". Indeed the only time when the ace pilot appeared low was when he ruminated on the missed opportunity. "I should have shot the helicopter down.. I'll regret this miss till my dying day ..

" Srinivas Bhogle