

A pilot's swansong



Very rarely do we get to see someone hanging up the uniform time and again: the Air Force khakis first, then the HAL beige, and now the flying overalls. When the Times of India and C-CADD made it known in advance that Wing Commander P Ashoka (Retd) would be flying (the HANSA) for the last time on 28 November 2002, nearly all of the Belur campus and some from the Kodihalli campus turned up to witness this exceptional pilot's swansong flight. Many of his peers from NAL and the Indian Air Force were present to heartily wish him on what was undoubtedly his afternoon. Emotions apart, when Wg Cdr Ashoka took HANSA to the skies that afternoon, he did carry the warm feelings of every one in the audience; after all it's not every day that we meet someone completing half a century of flying.

Meticulous pre-flight checks over, he strapped up and then man and machine were one. The next we saw of him was when he flew overhead, dipping his wings several times over as if he could never have enough of it. His family and particularly his excited grandsons watching, he went through several tight turns and loops and rolls to earn a spontaneous applause from the onlookers. All this at what seemed to us to be treetop height! He then had one final 'bird's-eye' view flying over the hangars, before bringing his wings in. Stepping out of the two-seater, Wg Cdr Ashoka in a true pilot's tradition flung off his test pilot's cap -- for the very last time.

Dr Prahlad conveyed everyone's felicitations to him -- and to Mrs Ashoka "for having stood by him throughout" with some beautiful flowers. Several rounds of handshakes and photo sessions later, as he walked away from his tethered bird, the feathered kind took over, seemingly reasserting their territorial rights over the skies! When asked: "Wouldn't you like to fly one more last time?" the smiling "No" seemed to suggest; "this was not politics!" Perhaps Wg Cdr Ashoka's biggest accolade was from his toddler grandson whose awe was obvious: "Thatha, you flied very fast, and upside down!"

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