

# The strange case of the air marshal's turban

In part three of his series on flight testing two Streak Shadows bought by the Indian Air Force to scare off kites which were bringing down its jets – and for its staff to fly for fun – Anthony Preston thinks he's taking the air marshal up for a test flight. It turned out to be slightly the other way around

THE air marshal was not a disappointment when he arrived; elegant as a Savile Row mannequin, and smart in mind as well as attire.

His movements and words were crisp and regimented, accentuated by the ritualistic gestures and mannerisms unique to Sikhs. On top of his head was a towering turban the colour of a summer sky, and his sparkling blue eyes flicked knowingly over the Streak, an aircraft he'd never seen the likes of before.

He sat himself briskly in the aircraft and permitted me to give him an introduction to the cockpit and its controls, starting on the left with the flap lever – up 15 or 30 – fuel cut-off valve, throttle, mixture, trim control, compass, electric fuel button, VSI, ASI, altimeter, CHT, oil pressure, oil temperature, EGTs, slip indicator, trim front/rear selector switch and indicator, tachometer, mag switches, master and starter switch, to the side-stick on the right.

He repeated the introduction to me verbatim and said he was ready to go. I got in the back, but the canopy remained open as he settled himself in. I looked about me. There were signs of suppressed consternation floating about the features of the audience on parade. What was it?

Of course – the turban. Since there were surely no MiG27s in the IAF fitted

with swollen canopies to accommodate turbaned heads the size of the Mekon of Mekonta, nor I imagine bone-domes sculpted to simulate the turban, the thought had not occurred to me.

As a result, outside the hangar on the apron at Hindan, the matter of the turban assumed alarming proportions. Were the Streak's canopy to be closed, the Air Marshal's turban would have ended up shaped like the shell of a turtle, not only obscuring his view but in all probability asphyxiating him too; not only an unattractive prospect, but decidedly poor publicity for the Streak.

"The turban, sir?" I queried, what you might call querulously. The body in front of me stiffened. Then suddenly, an imperious digit was raised and, as if reeled in on a fishing line, his ADC hurtled over from the staff car as if he had been anticipating such a summons.

The turban, handled with the kind of reverence normally reserved for Her Majesty's Crown of State, was elevated from the air marshal's brow and, inverted, held as if made of the most fragile eggshell which, in its delicate shade of blue, it resembled.

I gazed in awe at the turban turned turtle. The light somehow appeared to come from below, adding to the translucent quality. The area where the head

would normally reside had the cobwebby lustre, texture, and shape of a beautiful bluebird's nest, *sans oeufs*. It was majestic, mystical and utterly surprising.

Dragging my eyes away, I looked at the air marshal's head. His deep black hair was streaked with white, and perched on top was the neatest of buns.

The canopy was closed, and we rolled forward. The air marshal had control. He truly had control. I was reminded of it several times as the clipped tones came across the Lynx headset: "I can do it."

The air marshal could fly, and fly well, with precision and command. Yet even he was mortal and exhibited the same handling characteristics as the other air force officers, on account of their pedigree. You see, they were quite at home with the high nose angle of the 912 Streak on rotation and climb-out; the trouble was that they were used to doing it at 150, not 50, knots.

As a result, the Streak belted down the never-ending runway, going faster and faster, inexorably stuck to the ground.

From the back, having decided very early on to make flapless take-offs to avoid exceeding the flap limiting speed while still on the ground, every encouragement was given, even though I thought my peripheral vision detected smoke from the tyres.



Landing at MiG speeds tends to shorten tyre life (cartoon: Ben Ashman)

Thus speed of rotate was held down to below 70kt. Mostly. After four creditable circuits and landings, that crisp voice came through: "OK, Preston, you can get out now. I can do it!"

Now this was clearly not the way it should be done. I mean there is authority and authority.

What went through my head? Essentially it came down to answering for myself the question: was he safe?

It wasn't just the prospect of damage to the aircraft and to the air marshal – and I have to say I already liked him very much – it was all the horrible implications if things went wrong. But then, the runway was not only of obscene length, but almost as wide as the runway was long at Parham in far-away Suffolk.

I climbed out and, perched on a boulder on the barren, sun-soaked area beside the runway, I watched the Streak rotate at about 69kt, and thought again for those poor wee tyres, better suited to the speed of Farmer McGregor's wheelbarrow.

At the end of an impeccable circuit, approach, and flare over the numbers, the Streak touched down. I could see at once that something was wrong. The aircraft swung to the right and looked to be heading for the jungle. But on board was the air marshal and he could do it, and he did, and it was, after all, a Streak Shadow.

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The swing was checked and the machine brought to a rapid halt. I ran over, rehearsing consternation. I needn't have bothered. The air marshal was totally unruffled.

"A puncture, I believe," he said calmly. I had to agree, looking at the gently smoking right tyre. The explanation was readily accepted. Tyres designed for an aircraft that lifted off at maximum 50kt and touched down at 40 were not going to be happy when emulating those fitted to a MiG27.

By now it was time to collect G-8501, the other Streak, from Palam. I was flown there in a superannuated military helicopter which spent the entire flight trying to shake itself to pieces, and while waiting for the clearances was free to wander around an apron as vast as Wembley stadium.

In one hangar I found a Vampire T-11, a Spitfire and a Harvard. I lunched on very sweet tea and samosas in the crew room, and two young airmen were allocated to help me rig 8501. In the dust on top of the tailplane were the footprints of some feline creature, larger than the domestic cat.

The engine started willingly, and the journey back to AF Hindan was blissfully quiet, vibration-free and comfortable in comparison with my mode of arrival. □

• Next month: the kites have the last laugh