

Flying Sikh

HARDIT
SINGH
MALIK

by

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The early morning mist hung like a thick blanket over the airfield at Biggin Hill. It was December 1917, but the war seemed far away as the welcome smoke from the chimneys in the station kitchen let out a blast of cheerful warm air.

It was 8 am when suddenly the calm was shattered by piercing yells. Officers turned out running to find the cause of the disturbance. Opening the door of a requisitioned cottage, they beheld a sight unique in the annals of the RFC. A turbaned, black-bearded officer was letting loose his valuable Hindustani vocabulary at a bewildered batman, who had entered the cottage with morning shaving water!

The beard belonged to Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik, previously of No 28 Squadron RFC, who had joined the detached flight of No 78 Squadron, which later became No 141 Squadron. He was the original 'Flying Hobgoblin' or better 'The Flying Sikh of Biggin Hill' — and this is his story.



Lt Hardit Singh Malik at Manchester during the Camel presentation ceremony and (above) as he is today. :H S Malik

Malik had an unusual childhood in Rawalpindi, now part of Pakistan, in that he was taught at home by tutors. At the age of 14, he left home for England for higher studies. Like many other Indians of his time, he was planning for a career in the Indian Civil Service, which he joined after the war.

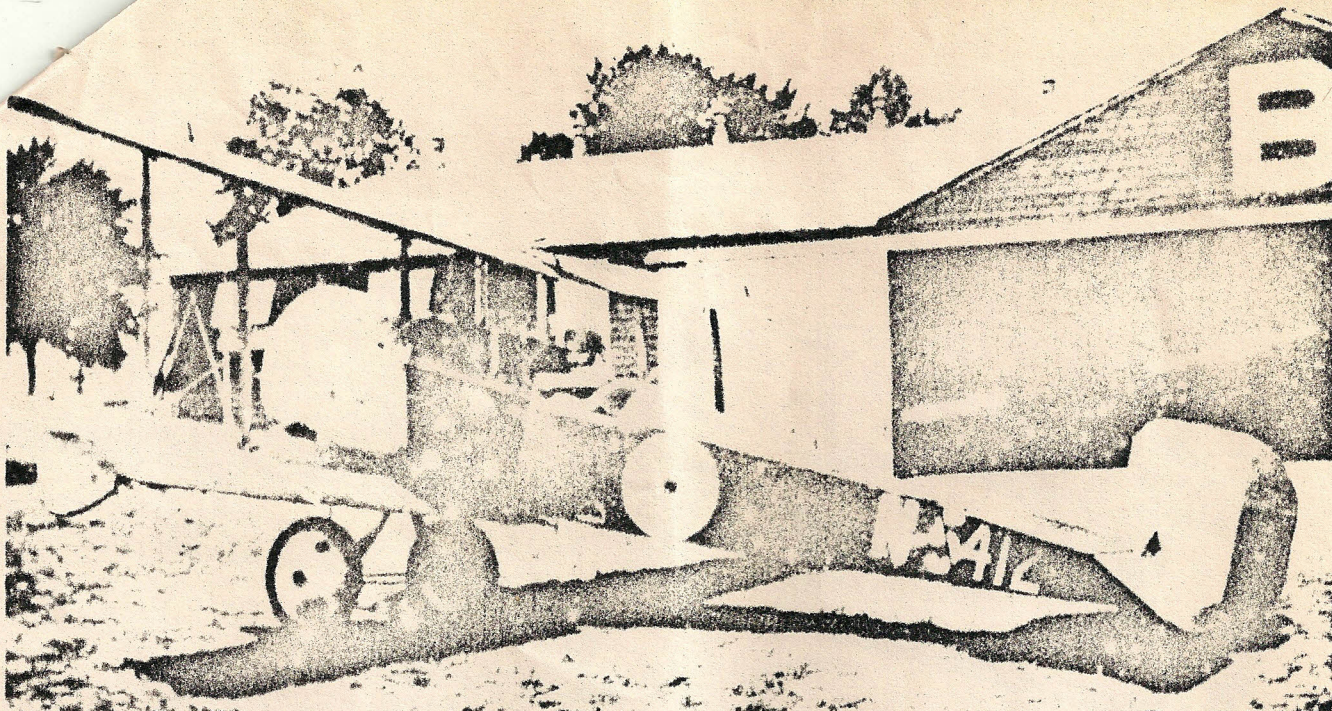
When war broke out, most of Malik's classmates at Balliol College, Oxford, joined up. He also wanted to, but there was a snag. Until then no Indian had ever held a commission in the Army. He was turned down by the Indian Office, and had perforce to continue his studies; graduating in 1915. He then tried to enlist again, but the answer was still no. Finally, he got his chance by joining the French Red Cross and started his war driving an ambulance to the front. He remained in this service for a year and had a ringside view of the early battles on the Western Front.

During this time he was attracted by the newly created Flying Corps, whose machines he would often see flying back and forth, while he carried the wounded. He now tried the French Air Service and was accepted by them. Had he taken up this offer perhaps the history of the Indian Armed Forces would have been different. However, whilst serving in France, Malik had kept in touch with his old tutor at Oxford and when he mentioned the possibility of his joining the French Air Service, the doughty old gentleman was outraged and his patriotism got the better of him. This paved the way for Malik. The tutor wrote to Major-General Henderson, then with the Military Aeronautics Directorate at the War Office, saying that it was disgraceful for an Indian to be denied the opportunity of joining the RFC, while the French were willing to offer him a commission.

As a result of the letter Malik was offered a cadetship in the RFC. He resigned from the French Red Cross and reported for training at No 1 Armament School on April 5, 1917. A month later he was sent to Vendome, west of Orleans, for flying instruction. Although Vendome was an RNAS station, military as well as naval pilots were trained there. (In return for this service, the RFC undertook to train RNAS pilots at the schools which they had set up in Egypt.) At the time Malik was there the school was giving initial training to cadets on Caudron GIII's after which the more advanced students apparently graduated onto Bristol Scouts. With good weather providing many opportunities for flying, Malik made such rapid progress that he completed his training by June 22 and was posted to No 62 Squadron at Rendcombe in England.

This Squadron had been formed from a nucleus of No 7 Training Squadron on August 8, 1916. In May 1917 it received Bristol Fighters and was being prepared for overseas duty but eventually the orders were cancelled.

He was next posted to No 28 Squadron which was flying the newly introduced Sopwith Camel. It was with this unit that he returned to France in October 1917, when it established itself at Droglandt in Flanders.



Malik in the cockpit of a Bristol Scout D, almost certainly taken in May 1917 during his training at Vendome. This aircraft was crashed and written off at Vendome on January 25, 1918. H S Malik

His first taste of action came on October 18, the squadron's first patrol, and he recalls:

'I was in a formation of Sopwith Camels led by Barker, who was my Flight Commander and who ended up at the close of the war with a VC, DSO, three bars to an MC and three bars to a DFC; the most decorated pilot in the RAF.

I was flying next to Barker, very close to him and I saw him smile and point his thumb backwards. I looked but could see nothing. Within a few seconds however, I saw what he had seen before any of the others — a German scout diving on him and firing! Barker had anticipated this, and like lightning he did a fast climbing turn, got on the tail of the Hun and shot him down. It was all over in a few seconds.

Later during the same flight I got into single combat with a German aeroplane and after much manoeuvring, each trying to get on the other's tail, I got him and had the satisfaction of seeing him go down in flames.'

The Squadron history records the action as follows:

'The first operations were carried out on the 18th when Line Patrols and Aerial Sentry Duty took the place of formation and fighting practice throughout the greater part of the day. With singular luck all but four of those who crossed the lines on this first occasion saw enemy aircraft. In several cases, engagement at long range followed, but in no case with decisive results. The first, which occurred between 10 and 11 am, involved Captain W G Barker MC, Officer Commanding "C" Flight. Barker's two fellow Flight Commanders, Captain G A R Spain and P C Campbell, of "A" and "B" Flights respectively, likewise encountered hostile machines on this day, but were unable to close with them. Lieutenants H S Malik, who accompanied Barker, and J Mitchell, accompanying Lieutenant D Shanks, also opened fire in the course of their first day's operations over the lines.'

The Squadron CO was major Glanville, 'a regular,' who had served in the West Indies. He was ignored by Barker, who took whatever instructions he thought necessary from Wing HQ. Indeed, it was Barker who planned all flight operations, leaving the CO with the job of administration.

Just 10 miles across the lines was Richthofen's 'Circus'. By that time most of the pilots had heard of him and Barker had even seen his red triplane.

On October 26, 1917 the weather was really bad and visibility was almost nil. In these conditions Barker decided to have a crack at the Huns. 'It was a most foolhardy operation . . . and was planned over the CO's

head', says Malik. 'He (the CO) actually forbade it but Barker got the OK for it from Wing HQ'. Such a sortie, according to Barker, would have the element of surprise, as no one would dare to take off and oppose them in such conditions. There was no shortage of volunteers and eventually Malik and Fenton were chosen to accompany him.

After take off from their muddy airfield, they climbed up through the overcast and crossed the lines. Suddenly they were set upon by a large swarm of German aircraft, which had obviously had the same idea! A vicious dog-fight ensued and Malik was chased back across the lines by four German aeroplanes. He was running short of petrol and was hit. He became unconscious and fortunately crashed in Allied territory. Later he was told that his Camel had received 450 hits!

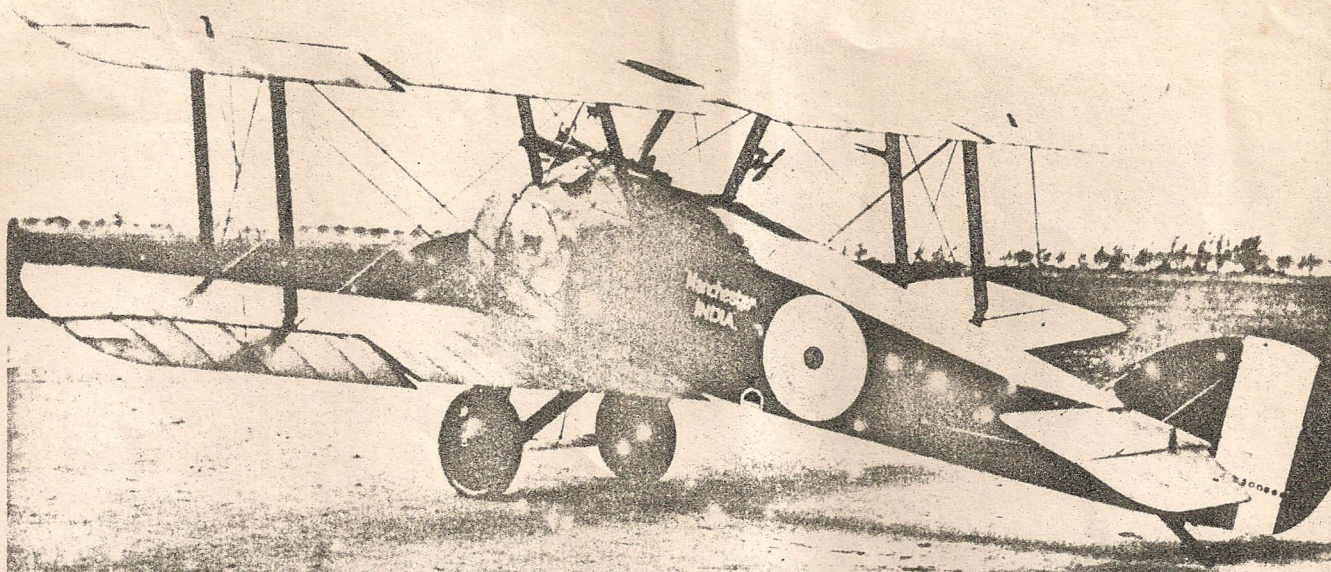
The official history sums it up thus:

'On the 26th, after several days of comparative quiet the squadron came into prominence as the result of exceptionally fine work done by Barker, Fenton and Malik. Barker performed the feat of destroying two enemy machines in flames in the course of a single patrol. Malik shot down one out of control and was himself wounded while doing so. Fenton went down and fired 100 rounds into a convoy on the Staden-Roulers road, setting two lorries alight, and, like Malik was wounded in the process. Barker, as a result of his fighting, lost his formation and landed near Arras whence he returned later in the day to Droglandt.'

This action had an amusing sequel. Whilst convalescing in hospital, Malik read Barker's report of the action. Prior to that, he has also submitted his report, in which he had concluded that Barker, with so many Huns on his tail, could not have survived. Imagine his shock, therefore, when he read Barker's report which was almost identical, though they were miles apart when they were both written. After describing the action and the surprise encounter, both concluded, 'The last I saw of Barker (Malik's report) of Malik (Barker's report), he was surrounded by Huns, fighting like hell, but I don't think there was the slightest chance of his getting away.' But both escaped.

After about a month's leave in London, Malik rejoined the squadron: this had by then moved to Italy as part of the British forces sent to help the Italians, who had just suffered a serious defeat by the Austrian Army.

Soon afterwards Malik unfortunately developed an allergy to castor oil which was used to lubricate the



The Camel 'Manchester-India'. The aircraft's serial number was unfortunately censored for the presentation, but it is known to have been a Rushton and Proctor built in the range C8200-C8289. :IWM CH8988

Camel's rotary engine. He was therefore posted back to England, with the recommendation that he be sent to a squadron operating stationary engined aeroplanes. Thus he found himself at Biggin Hill with No 141 Squadron, where he was to earn the 'Flying Sikh' title.

During his stay at Biggin Hill Malik helped the war effort by ferrying aircraft to St Omer in France. In addition he also paid an official visit to Manchester where, on Saturday March 2, 1918, a Sopwith F1 Camel was to be presented to India by members of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. The Camel was one of several presentation aircraft comprising the Imperial Air Fleet, which were given to various countries within the, then, British Empire.

At the luncheon in the city centre prior to the aircraft presentation Lord Desborough, President of the Imperial Air Fleet Committee proposed the toast 'India and the Imperial Air Fleet Aeroplane Manchester.' He said that a great debt was owed to the people of India for the part they had played in the fight for justice.

As a memento of the occasion he presented an Imperial Air Fleet Indian flag to Mr Stoker, President of the Chamber of Commerce, and a similar flag to Sir Daniel McCabe to hand to the Lord Mayor of Manchester. Lord Desborough also presented a trophy of flags to Sir Henry Worsley Taylor, Director of the Great Central Railway Company, bearing the names of towns on their system which had made a gift of an aeroplane. In reply Sahibzada Aftab Ahmed Khan, member of the Secretary of State Council of India, read a telegram from the Viceroy of India, which stated, 'Please convey to Manchester Chamber of Commerce on behalf of Indian Government my cordial thanks for their generous gift. Under modern conditions of warfare the importance of the Air Services increases from day to day. In India the scope of their activity and usefulness has greatly developed and in last year's operations in Waziristan our airmen showed how aircraft can be utilised to meet the special conditions of frontier warfare. It is very gratifying, to us in India, to learn that 2nd Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik has earned distinction in the Royal Flying Corps and I congratulate him on his being selected for distinction. Lord Islington.'

The presentation itself was made at the Athletic Grounds, Fallowfield. Mr Stoker presented the aeroplane to Lord Desborough who replied that, as aircraft had only short lives, arrangements had been made with the War Office so that when Manchester was worn out it would be

replaced by an equal or better aeroplane on behalf of Manchester and so on as long as the war lasted so that the gift to the Indian Government would thus be perpetuated.

Mrs Stoker then formally named the Camel. On behalf of the Indian Government Mr Khan accepted it and attached to it a mascot in light bronze in the form of a tiger. The Camel was then further transferred to Lt-Col Boer, who received it on behalf of the Air Ministry for use on the Western Front. Unfortunately due to Manchester's famous inclement weather the aircraft could not be demonstrated as had been hoped.

In the summer of 1918 Malik was posted to No 11 Squadron then stationed at Bapaume in France. This squadron operated Bristol Fighters, which he had learned to fly whilst with 141. 11 Squadron was commanded by Maj Heath, an Australian with whom Malik got on well, and had many experienced pilots and fine ground crews. Malik's observer was 'Jock' Crichton, a Scot who had served in the Royal Scots before joining the RFC.

Malik's service with 11 was brief as by now the Allies were advancing. When the Armistice was finally signed on November 11 he was stationed at Aulnoye, his last posting.

He was soon demobilised and returned to India. He had the intention of rejoining the RAF, but gave up the idea as until then no Indian had been commissioned in the RAF in India.

It is interesting to note that even after joining the Indian Civil Service, Malik exercised an influence, albeit indirect, on the formation of the Indian Air Force. When the Indian Sandhurst Committee was appointed Malik was the only surviving Indian who had served in combat in the RFC. He appeared before this committee, which later recommended selection of Indians for Cranwell. Thus, in 1930, six Indians were sent to Cranwell for training. These men formed the nucleus around which the Indian Air Force was later formed.

Malik had the pleasure of seeing 28 Squadron again when he was posted to the Punjab as the Squadron served in this area throughout the 1920's. After a distinguished career in the Civil Service, Malik became Indian High Commissioner in Canada where, before he was tragically killed in 1930, he again met W G Barker. He topped off his career as the Indian Ambassador to France and retired in 1957.

Today at 80, he still recollects nostalgically his days in the RFC, with a special glint in his eye which only the Flying Sikh of Biggin Hill could have.