

# 'The Nuclear Factor Does Not Impinge Upon My Conventional Capabilities'

Air Marshal A.K. Singh, Air Officer Commanding-in chief, Western Air Command



## **What operational lessons have been learnt from Operations Safed Sagar (1999 Kargil war) and Parakram 2002 military stand-off with Pakistan?**

No path-breaking tactics or techniques were evolved during Operation Safed Sagar. In any case, whenever we fly a sortie certain lessons are always learnt. The distinctive thing about the Kargil war was that for the first time we were using our aircraft and ammunition at extreme heights.

## **One of the key lessons of the Kargil war was the lack of intelligence. What steps has your Command taken to ensure better operational intelligence?**

Command Headquarters does not gather intelligence it uses intelligence provided by the Air Headquarters. Command executes the orders of the Air HQs. So it is the Air HQs that is in touch with all defence and other intelligence agencies through the Asst. Chief of Air Staff (intelligence).

## **Today your Command has acquired certain**

## **intelligence gathering capabilities which were not there earlier. Do these help you in gaining better operational intelligence?**

You have to understand that the capability of the Western Air Command is the capability of the nation and of the Air HQs. The Command by itself does not go on an intelligence gathering spree but it has to dovetail its activities in accordance with the matrix evolved by the Air HQs. After all, the Air Chief is the Commander in Chief of the Indian Air Force, all plans are drawn, at Air HQs according to the analysed intelligence. The Command Headquarters and the units carry out the tasks. These assets that you talk of will be used to gather real-time intelligence during operations which will help us in the task at hand.

## **As an operational commander what are your challenges?**

For any operational commander and especially for the Western Air Command, as we have a large area of responsibility extending from Siachen in the north to Bikaner in

the west and Saharanpur on the eastern side, the main challenge is on the international border and the Line of Control. In the north, we face extreme heights and cold and in the west-southwest we face the desert terrain with very high temperatures. In addition to these, we also assist the army in counter-insurgency operations. No army or the air force can ever say that it has enough when it comes to assets and ammunition. So it is a challenge to utilise the equipment that one has to its optimum value. Another challenge is to enter the age of network-centric warfare with all our guns blazing to ensure that we do not get left behind in this race of technology.

## **Could you elaborate on the equipment challenges?**

Well, we have aircraft which have been optimised for certain altitudes and roles. We also have multi-role combat aircraft available to us which can be utilised for multi-tasking; so that the same aircraft can now operate in the desert terrain as well as in the northern sector where the altitudes are very high. Hence, the crew has to be trained for multi-tasking, which is a challenge because we have to ensure that optimum value is obtained from the equipment. That calls for a high degree of training.

## **In the last four years what new equipment has come in your Command, what is in the pipeline and ideally what all should be coming?**

The question of what is in the pipeline or when it will come will be better answered by the Air Headquarters or the ministry of defence, because plans that are in place for procurements are looked after by plans branch which is under the deputy chief of air staff. As far as new equipment that has been inducted in the last four years is concerned, no new equipment has been inducted per se. We are in the market for 126 multi-role combat aircraft, the RFP for which will be issued shortly. These will be the first new inductions, if they are inducted in the WAC. For all you know, the Air

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Headquarters may plan to induct them in another Command. Besides that, there are no other inductions at the moment. What we need, are aircraft as our strength depletes due to obsolescence, better radars and infrastructure for network centric warfare. Like any commander I would also like to add that there are never enough weapons or weapon platform.

**More specifically, would you need more UAVs and aerostat radars? And when will the Integrated Air Command and Control System, which is absolutely critical for command and control, get inducted?**

As I said, all this is being worked out at the Air Headquarters. IACCS, UAVs, aerostat radars are all part of the plans branch.

**What are your projections as the commander on the ground?**

By projection I presume you mean 'new inductions.' That I cannot project, however, as an operational commander I train my forces for optimum utilisation of inducted systems.

**What is the priority, getting the platforms and the weapon systems or putting the infrastructure in place?**

Unless one knows what one is getting what infrastructure and support system can one create? If it is only a question of four rooms and a roof then that kind of infrastructure is already available. But if you are talking of laboratories and such like things, then these can only be set-up once I know what weapon systems I am getting because I cannot build one kind of infrastructure and expect some other equipment to be accommodated in it.

**In terms of welfare measures in your Command, what have been your initiatives and why?**

The IAF is 75 years old. We are now in our Platinum jubilee year. Each commander has made his contribution towards the welfare of his troops and officers; WAC has been very active on the welfare front. I have ensured that officers' are aware of the needs which are changing with the times. I have made the officers receptive to the needs of the troops they command. I have an open website available to me, on which



I get 10 to 15 messages in a day from my officers and men, sharing their pain and joy with me. As you know, the 6th Pay Commission has been announced. So I get a large number of suggestions which I forward to the Air Headquarters so that they can take cognisance of these ideas. The biggest welfare measure that we can take is a conglomeration of hundreds of small measure to keep our force happy. Besides this, WAC was given the responsibility of looking after the seven earthquake-affected border villages in Kashmir. That work is going on, we have made nine schools, five community centres and of the five mini hydel power plants that we had started building the first one is ready, besides supplying food material and victuals to the tune of 2,034 tonnes.

**Today many middle-level officers say that even after doing 20 years of pensionable service they are not being relieved unlike in the past when it was possible to leave the IAF. Has that policy been reversed?**

There has been no change in the policy. The only thing is that one has to understand that training a pilot costs the exchequer couple of crores. Then there is the question of the time that is spent on training the pilot, because in Air Force training is a constant process. So, if the exchequer does not get its due from the pilot than relieving him would

be wrong. Yet, on grounds of compassion, we have always allowed people to leave. But if somebody wants to leave to join another profession, then that case needs to be addressed individually on merits of case and cannot be part of a blanket policy.

**As the top operational commander, how does the nuclear factor affect your conventional war-fighting plans?**

As a commander, I can talk about defensive and delivery capabilities since the weapons are with the Strategic Forces Command. The nuclear factor does not impinge upon my conventional capabilities because even our adversary is aware of the fall-out of a nuclear attack. Though we have a national policy of no-first-use, if anyone uses a nuclear weapon against India then we are capable and able to retaliate.

**How confident are you of India's second strike capability?**

I am very confident. Though I am not in the loop because that is the SFC's job, as far as the delivery system is concerned the IAF along with Navy would be in the loop. The question of practising or not practising delivery of a particular weapon does not arise because there is no difference between dropping a conventional bomb or a nuclear bomb. The WAC pilots regularly practice bombing with conventional weapons.

**Are any aircraft earmarked for this role?**

Since the size and weight of conventional and nuclear warheads remain the same, I do not see any reason for earmarking any particular aircraft for this purpose.

**In the IAF's Platinum year, is there anything you would like to share with our readers?**

The IAF is a glorious service and has evolved over the years. From flying Wapitis, today we are flying Su-30s. It has not been an easy journey. I would like at this stage to thank the forefathers of the IAF for laying the foundations of a modern air force. As one of the larger air forces in the world, we have already shown our mettle in international exercises within India as well as abroad with a large number of Air Forces. Finally I would say that the IAF is capable of defending the nation. ●