

## THE FLYING SIKH – Hardit Singh Malik, 1894-1985

EARLY in December 1917, a young pilot, recovered from wounds sustained while flying on the Western Front, was posted to 141 Squadron, RFC, at Biggin Hill. He arrived late one night, after orderlies had gone off duty, and was given an empty room in a requisitioned cottage. At 8 a.m. the following morning, calm was shattered by piercing yells, and other officers dashed out of their rooms to see what was happening. A batman, entering the new arrival's room with shaving water, had been startled to find a black-bearded, turbaned head on the pillow and had fled before a stream of Hindustani invective. The officer was 23-year-old Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik, Old Eastbournian, Oxford golf Blue and Sussex county cricketer.

Malik, born in Rawalpindi on 23rd November 1894, had in 1902 been sent to school in England. Travelling via Bombay, Marseilles and Calais by ship, train and 'bus, he arrived at prep. school in Notting Hill in London. Next, in 1910, he was entered at Clifton College, Bristol. There, deciding that compulsory chapel attendance was, for a Sikh, unacceptable, he took himself back to London. He was next sent to Eastbourne College in the Summer Term of 1910, aged 15, where he was not obliged to attend chapel. He joined Blackwater House, then under the benign custody of the Rev. F. Atkinson and his wife.

Interviewed late in his life, he said "When I arrived some of the boys started ragging me. They wanted to see what was under my turban and started grabbing at it. I said I would kill the first boy who touched it. I must have looked very fierce because they all backed away and I was never troubled again. It was a lovely school. I escaped fagging because I got into the cricket eleven early. I went to chapel because it was not compulsory and I liked the hymns. We used to ride our bikes and tease the girls in the town and I was once fined ten shillings and sixpence for riding a bike to the danger of the public. Some of us had whizzed past a policeman and in those days it wasn't hard to track down a turban in Eastbourne." Malik was, in fact, in the cricket eleven in 1910, 1911 and 1912 and scored centuries for the school in both his latter two years. He topped the batting averages in his last year with 489 runs at an average of 30.56.

During one summer holiday, spent in Eastbourne, he equipped himself with a set of golf clubs and a textbook by the well-known golfer Harry Vardon; after hours of solitary practice, he taught himself to play golf to a high standard. Some years later, when partnering his mentor at the South Herts club, Vardon praised Malik's game, adding "Do you know, your swing reminds me very much of mine". Malik was elected a member of the Royal Eastbourne Golf Club in 1914.

In 1912, he won a scholarship to Balliol to read history. In 1914 he played in two Oxford Seniors cricket trials, batting and bowling with some success, though he was not selected for the university side. R. C. (Claud) Burton, who was to join the College staff in 1919 and who was later housemaster of Blackwater, played in the same 1914 trial games and for the university on a number of occasions. Malik did, however, win a golf Blue in 1914, a feat he repeated in 1921. During the 1914 summer vacation, Malik played cricket for Sussex Martlets and five times for Sussex with a highest score of 71. Years later, he was proud to recall a score of 25 against Frank Woolley's bowling on a rain-affected pitch at Canterbury. [Sadly his memory was at fault. Wisden records that he scored ten and six against the bowling of not only Woolley, but also Blythe and Fielder.] On the second day of this match, war was declared.

As he later said: "Everyone at Oxford began to join up. All my friends went. It seemed such an adventure. But when I tried to get into the Army I was told there were no vacancies for Indian students." His tutor at Balliol found him a job with the French Red Cross and he started by delivering an ambulance, presented by Lady Cunard, from London to France. "I really learnt to drive it along the road to Southampton. I was with the French for nearly a year and went all over the front as an ambulance driver."

Attracted by the idea of flying, he was offered a commission in the French air service. His Oxford tutor, on hearing this, was furious and complained to Major General Henderson who was at that time with the Military Aeronautics Directory at the War Office. After an interview with the General, Malik was offered a cadetship in the Royal Flying Corps. Reporting for basic

training at Aldershot in April 1917, Malik was once more in trouble with his turban. As he said later: "The sergeant looked pop-eyed at my turban and said I would have to dress like everyone else. An officer smoothed the trouble out and I reached a compromise: I was allowed to keep my turban but I had to wear an outsize flying helmet over it when I was in the air. I had one made by a hatter's in Piccadilly. It looked rather odd and top heavy and later, when I was at Biggin Hill, they called me the 'flying hobgoblin' because of my appearance."



*Lt Malik in front of his Sopwith Camel.*

After further training on Caudron GIIIs and Bristol Scouts at Vendôme in France, Malik was, in early October 1917, posted to 28 Squadron which was forming up at Yatesbury in Wiltshire. Later in October the squadron, equipped with Sopwith Camels, was moved to Droglandt in Flanders. His first taste of action came on 18th October: "I really learned to fly in battle. Most of us were young and inexperienced and many of us were shot down. I was lucky to be under the command of Captain William Barker, MC [a Canadian who was to win the Victoria Cross in 1918, together with a DSO and bar and an MC with two bars], a great fighter pilot. He looked after novices like me. I was flying next to Barker and saw him get on the tail of a hun and shoot 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." A week later, on the 26th, the weather was bad and visibility almost nil. Barker decided to raid the airfield where Baron von Richthofen's squadron was based. Malik again: "It was a most foolhardy operation . . . and was planned over the CO's head. In fact the CO actually forbade it and Barker got the OK from Wing

HQ." Barker asked for volunteers and selected Malik and another airman, a Second Lieutenant Fenton, to accompany him. Once over the lines the British airmen were set upon by some 20 German aircraft whose pilots had obviously had the same idea. There was a terrific fight and Malik was chased back across the lines by four German aeroplanes. "There was a smell of petrol and a sharp pain in my leg. I crash-landed behind our lines and fainted. The 'plane had more than 400 bullet holes in it." Doctors wanted to amputate his leg but he persuaded them not to. The bullets remained in his leg for the rest of his life.

After a month's convalescent leave, in December Malik rejoined 28 Squadron which was now stationed in Italy in the campaign against the Austrians. Unfortunately, like many pilots, he developed an allergy to the castor oil which was used to lubricate the Camel's rotary engine. This led to his posting back to England where he joined 141 Squadron at Biggin Hill, engaged in ferrying Bristol Fighters to St Omer in France. In the book *The History of RAF Biggin Hill*, it is recorded that Malik was one of the most popular officers at the station. Whilst at Biggin Hill, Malik, flying a Sopwith Dolphin, managed to turn the 'plane over on landing. His was a lucky escape because the single cockpit was placed so high between the wings that this resulted in the pilot being trapped, with a fair chance of being burnt alive.

Malik returned to England after the war, marrying Prakash in 1919. They made a striking partnership at Sandy Lodge Golf Club, he in his many-shaded turbans, she in her sari. He must have done some post-graduate work at Oxford for he gained a second golf Blue in 1921 and rejoined the Royal Eastbourne, winning the Club Gold Medal in the Spring Meeting. In a letter written in 1983, Malik recalled his most memorable round of golf, in that same summer of 1921: "I was playing cricket at the Saffrons. Cyril Tolley [twice Amateur Champion] who was living at Eastbourne at the time, had been watching the game and at the end of the day's play when there was still plenty of light he said: 'What about a game of golf?' . . . I readily agreed and we proceeded to the Royal Eastbourne. There was no one playing at the time and we had the course to ourselves. I started off with figures which indicated that we were in for something quite unprecedented and Cyril started to note down the score. . . . I went round in 62 shots, 31 for each nine and signed by us both. It was duly put up in the club and was there for several years." This was a truly remarkable score, albeit not made under competitive conditions. The official course record at that time was 69, held by Cyril Tolley. In 1991, with the advantage of steel-shafted clubs and improved balls, the amateur record was reduced to 62, Malik's 1921 score.

Also in the summer of 1921, Malik found time to play cricket four times for Sussex. He made a century in June, sharing with Albert Relf a partnership of 175 against Leicestershire, scored, according to Wisden, "at a tremendous pace". In another game for the county against Oxford University, he scored 24 and 30. He then turned out for the next game, this time playing for the university against Surrey at the Oval. It is probable that the invitation to play for Oxford was an impromptu one, stimulated by his recent play against them. Although Oxford won by ten wickets, Malik scored only five runs.



"The Elder Statesman."

Malik left England to make his career in the Indian Civil Service. He was Deputy Commissioner in the Punjab from 1924 to 1930. During this time, as the only surviving Indian who had served in combat with the RFC, he gave evidence to the Indian Sandhurst Committee which later recommended the selection of Indians for Cranwell. In 1930 six Indians were sent to Cranwell and formed the nucleus around which the Indian Air Force was later established. In 1930 he was appointed Deputy Trade Commissioner to Britain and Germany before, in 1938, being sent to New York as Indian Trade Commissioner. During a six-year period he was unique as an Indian member of the exclusive Pine Valley Golf Club. He was recalled to India in 1944 to become Prime Minister of the State of Patiala until independence in 1951. He was then appointed India's first High Commissioner to Canada, stopping off at St Moritz on his way to taking up the appointment to reach the final of the Swiss golf championship at the age of 53. Two years later he was appointed Indian ambassador to France where he remained until his retirement in 1956. He was appointed CIE (Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire) in 1941, OBE in 1938 and Grand Officier of the Légion d'Honneur in 1952. After retirement he became a director of a number of companies.

Interviewed towards the end of his life, Malik recalled some examples of racial prejudice that he had encountered during his service with the Allied forces, though one has to suspect that his charm and dignity would have been significant in averting many such incidents. "One night in the mess, a South African pilot asked what we were coming to, having Indians in the air force. My observer, a Scot [Jock Crichton], lunged across the table at him and gripped his throat until he apologised. And just after the war I took a 'plane on a short trip because I wanted to see a girl. It was strictly against the rules and, as luck would have it, I had engine trouble and had to come down in a forest clearing. I was surrounded by American soldiers who were rather surprised to see a man in a turban. The colonel gave me dinner. He was from the Deep South and we had a terrific argument about the way blacks were treated in America. There was only one bed in the camp and that was his, but neither of us would dream of allowing a fellow officer to sleep on the floor. So the Deep South Colonel and the Indian shared a bed." And while on leave in India in early 1919, while still in uniform, he tried to enter a railway compartment and an English officer said there was no room. "I could see that there was and, when he resisted, I gave a push and he fell back. It was then that I saw his jacket hanging up. He was a Major-General. Incidents like that did not make me bitter. I had so many genuine British friends."

He died in 1985 in his 91st year, leaving a widow, a son, two daughters and four grandchildren. In his later years, young OEs visiting India would call on him and experience the great warmth and charm which made him such a distinguished diplomat.

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My thanks are due to Mr Trevor Fishlock for permission to quote verbatim extracts from his *The Times* article of October 1982: "When a child of the Raj could find an ever open door". I have also referred to an article "Flying Sikh" by Somnath Sapru and used an extract from John Milton's *History of the Royal Eastbourne Golf Club 1887-1987* (with permission), amongst others.