Hunters at Dawn: The Air Battle of Longewala
A Review

Jagan Pillarisetti

The Longewala battle from the 1971 War with Pakistan is an iconic victory in recent Indian Military History. What should have been a thumping victory for a Pakistani armoured offensive in the Rajasthan sector was turned into a complete rout. All this by a force of no more than a company of Indian troops on the ground, four Hunter aircraft from the Indian Air Force and two light aircraft flown by Army AOP Pilots.

The Battle received more attention than it should have in recent days, thanks to the controversy generated by an Army presentation on the battle to the visiting Defence Minister during an exercise in Rajasthan, and the subsequent flurry of statements and articles generated by all the protagonists from the Indian side hailing from both the forces.

What has been surprising is that this battle was well documented in numerous reports, books and even personal accounts – and yet it has become the battle ground for interservice rivalry.

To the already existing pile of published and written records available for the interested enthusiast, a recent addition is the film “Hunters at Dawn – The story of the air battle of Longewala” by Rohan Cowasjee of Time Frame Films. Rohan Cowasjee's motivation for this film can be traced to him being the son of Wg Cdr R A Cowasjee who was a veteran of the battle. I first came to learn about the film a few months before the recent controversy broke out. Suman Sharma, correspondent for the Mail Today newspaper did a feature on the Longewala Battle in Dec 2007. While laying her ground work, she chanced upon Rohan Cowasjee's film and procured a copy. Subsequently a short preview was posted by Shiv Aroor on his blog (http://livefist.blogspot.com/2008/03/never-before-images-from-longewala-air.html) when the Longewala Controversy broke out.
One of the surprising facts about the film was that there was little publicity about its production and zero information on how a copy could be purchased by interested viewers. Subsequently any access to the film was strictly through word of mouth and contacts.

After a few requests, Suman was gracious enough to lend a copy to me for review. I was pleasantly surprised to find the movie was in a DVD format – a first for the documentaries on the IAF which have been released only on either VCD or VHS tapes. The resulting DVD quality goes a long way in doing justice to the film.

There is no doubt that Hunters at Dawn is a slickly produced documentary covering fresh ground from the war. The documentary starts with an introduction to the Indo Pakistani War and takes us through the preparations in the Rajasthan Sector. The film goes through the war plans of both the Indian as well as the Pakistani sides and walks us through the events by narrations from the veterans.

It is these interviews with Veterans that are the highlight of the entire documentary. Prominent among the Veterans featured in this DVD are Brigadier K S Chandpuri MVC, Air Marshal M S

Not only are the interviews about the battle specific and detailed, but they are also slickly edited and interspersed with visuals, commentary, other viewpoints etc. The viewer is given a good build up to the battle – and between the narrations of the various players, a sense of anticipation is built up. The narration and viewpoints switch from veteran to veteran and literally gives a picture of what was happening in their eyes. One good example of this is when Gp Capt Dass narrates the story of the first formation under his command over Longewala. They had just started loitering around over the tanks as they had no confirmation about their identity. He tells about scanning the skies and spotting a lone AOP aircraft heading in their direction – Switch to a shot of Colonel Sangha, the pilot of that AOP aircraft describing the scene from his eyes. This multi-pronged approach to veterans telling all sides of the story sustains the tempo of the film.

Adequate descriptions of the tactics are also provided by the interviewees. Gp Capt Dass explains the intricacy of aiming for ground targets, while Air Marshal Tully lays out the target identification and the meticulous attention given to avoid civilian targets.

The interviews and narration are interspersed with stills from the war and the battle. Some of these photographic stills are from government archives while the Veterans themselves provide most. However the historical ‘footage’ used to fill in the rest of the visuals borrows heavily from the footage generated from the BORDER movie as well as the Golden Jubilee documentary Salt of the Earth.

The end titles credit the Indian Air Force for the Historical Footage. It is obvious that 90% of this footage provided was from the movie or the SOTE documentary. This is the only let down if any in the documentary.

While visuals of the current day Jaisalmer Air Field wrap up the film, nothing is shown of Longewala post as it stands today. Some visuals of the post would have provided a fitting conclusion to the movie.

All this shouldn’t detract from the path breaking work done by the director Rohan Cowasjee and Timeframe films in chronicling the history of this legendary battle. The Documentary should hopefully give ideas to other aspiring film makers on the potential for films on Military History.