

ROYAL CEYLON AIR FORCE (RCyAF): THE FIRST OVERSEAS AIR FORCE TO PLACE AN ORDER FOR THE JET PROVOST

Compiled by Gp Capt Kumar Kirinde (Retd)

Based on material provided courtesy: Capt Dhamseth Pallawela

(And information as recorded in SLAF history publications)



In respect of the Jet Provost aircraft inducted to the RCyAF in 1959, following is what is recorded in two of the books published on SLAF history.

*In 1959, for the first time the RCyAF acquired jet aircraft. 12 Jet Provost (JP) aircraft were purchased from the Hunting Percival Aircraft Company in the UK. The Sri Lankan Pilots who had hitherto operated transport aircraft were put through their paces to operate the jets. They mastered the techniques with consummate ease. The JP strengthened RCyAF's ground attack and interceptor capability. These aircraft soon came to be used extensively for formation flying and aerobatics – **History of the Sri Lanka Air Force Vol. 1 (1949-'85), Edited by Nalin Wijesekara, EV Tennekoon & Mervyn de Silva.***

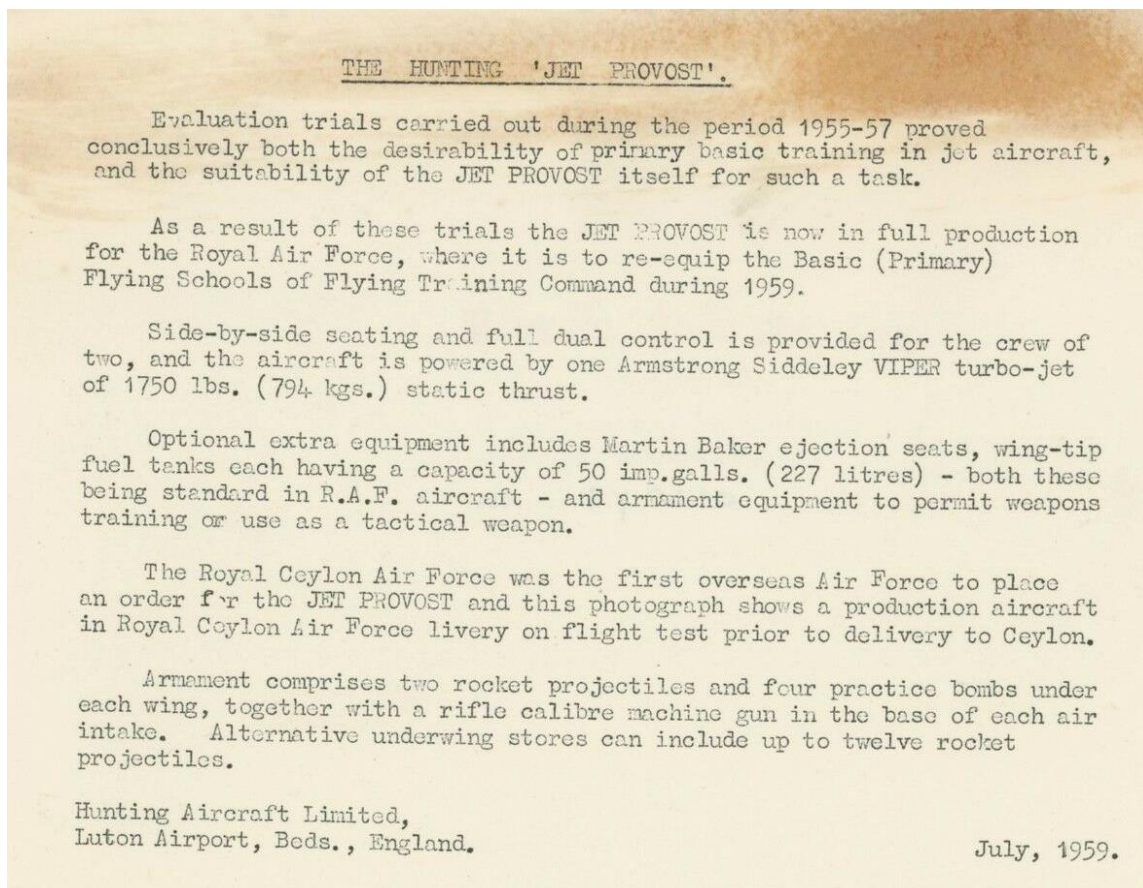
The RCyAF's first encounter with jet aircraft came in 1959 with the arrival of 12 Hunting Percival Jet Provost aircraft. These aircraft provided the RCyAF with ground attack interception capabilities, though assets were largely unutilized in the balmy days of a peaceful Ceylon, in the 1950's and 60's. The JP did however enable Ceylonese pilots to cut their teeth as it were, as jet pilots. All things considered, the RCyAF pilots coped well with their latest acquisition and first ever jet aircraft, even though history does record one "hiccup" – no fault of the pilot!* – **Wings of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka Air Force, Fifty Years of Service to the Nation (1951-2001), by Rienzi Pereira.**

* The story related to this air crash and another two involving Jet Provosts which are not mentioned above are attached to this document. **Courtesy: Sqn Ldr Noel Lokuge SLAF (Retd), Sqn Ldr Chira Fernando, SLAF (Retd) and Roger Thiedeman**

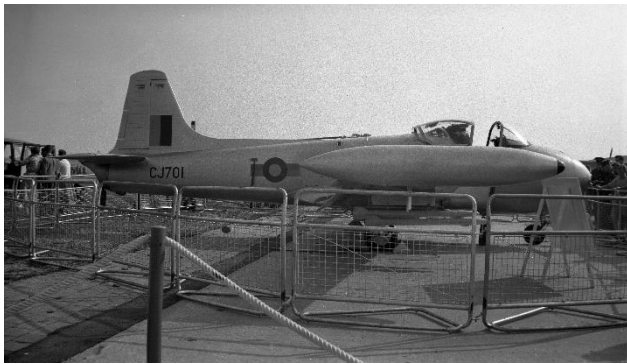


Air Cdre J L Barker, Cmr of the RCyAF at the Jet Provost handing over ceremony at Katunayake

What is not recorded in books published on SLAF history is that the 12 Jet Provost aircraft inducted to the RCyAF in 1959 have been the first order placed by an overseas air force as mentioned in a document issued in July 1959 by the aircraft manufacturer, Hunting Aircraft Ltd, England.



Picture & copy of document courtesy: Capt Dhamseth Pallawela



Pictures courtesy: Capt Dhamseth Pallawela

THE PHASED OUT JET PROVOST AIRCRAFT OF RCyAF ERA ON DISPLAY



At Viharamaha Devi Park, Colombo – 1991



At SLAF Museum, Ratmalana

Pictures courtesy: Roger Thiedeman

I'M OUT OF HERE!

(Crash of a Jet Provost Aircraft in February 1960)

By

Sqn Ldr Noel Lokuge, qfi

Courtesy: Sqn Ldr Chira Fernando, qfi

"February 1st 2016 — was the 56th anniversary of one of the most memorable events that took place in the aviation history of Ceylon" — Noel Lokuge

1st February 1960 was a bright and sunny Monday without a hint of a cloud in the sky. I so vividly remember how clearly the sights, sounds and the very scent of the atmosphere awakened my senses that blissful day. Here was an ideal day for some formation flying in the Jet Provost!

Flying the Jet Provost always gave me an invigorating feeling!

The Royal Ceylon Air Force had only recently acquired the Jet Provost Aircraft and I had gone through a rigorous course of training on it since it was the very first *jet* aircraft that we purchased.

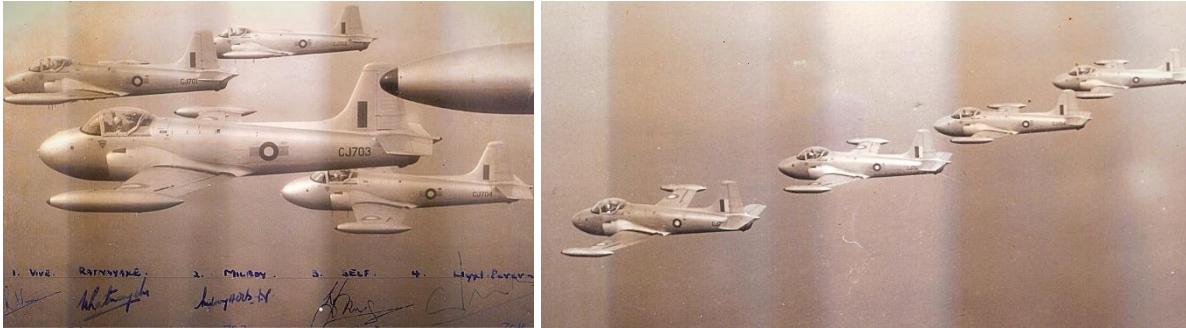
We were young pilots glowing with pride at the very sight of the new Jet Provost. There it stood on the tarmac gleaming in the morning sun! *How could I describe the feeling that overcame me?*

The euphoria that possessed me each time I settled into that JP cockpit, that sense of overwhelming power that followed each time I prepared to lift off and the sense of freedom as I glided through the air was truly fascinating. When it was time for the graceful descent and landing, a gentle thud upon the runway would remind me that I was on terra firma once more. It always left me with a sense of achievement. This ritual, fused with the intense desire to reach for the high, blue and white space above me never diminished nor did my ardour ever grow less.



Getting ready to do what I loves most!

I was practicing *formation flying* that day — the type of exercise that tested my skill and expertise without diminishing the fascination of flight. I was already familiar with formation routine, understood the mechanism of the JP and had gained tremendous self-confidence. It was approximately 1100 hours when I took off in a formation flight of six Jet Provost Aircraft for a fly past rehearsal for Independence Day of Ceylon. I was No. 3 in the formation.



The ground rapidly disappeared below me as we climbed away and I was maintaining my position precisely within the formation. We flew low at 300 feet, 500 and then at 700 feet AGL. I relaxed in my position to enjoy the flying as everything was going well as briefed.

Suddenly my engine flamed out! *Was I imagining it?* ... No matter how much I moved the throttle forward my aircraft kept falling out of the formation. There was no time for imagination! It was quite definitely a flame-out. What I had to do could only be done by myself — and quickly. I immediately pulled the control and turned back towards the KAT airfield, while making a May-Day call. I tried relighting the engine but there was no response. The aircraft was now descending at an alarming rate and I was helpless to prevent it.

I closed my eyes a split second. In the next instant I made a decision. My mind was singly clear and lucid. My seat was constructed for the purpose of ejection. *I decided to eject.* I turned the aircraft away from the populated area towards the Negombo lagoon. I was down to 300 feet and gliding at 115 knots.

My hand trembled for a brief moment, and then I firmly grasped the face blind ejection lever and pulled strongly. That was the longest few second of my life — the time taken for the canopy to open and the ejection from the aircraft.

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened ‘if’ that lever had not worked, or if the canopy did not blow open at the scheduled second. But the Martin Baker mechanism of the whole apparatus has been tried and tested and designed to work; it worked superbly! — Thanks to Sir James Martin and Captain Valentine Baker of the Martin Baker Company.

The next thing I saw was the water rushing towards me. In a second I hit the water; the impact was stunning; cold, sharp, penetrating. I had realized I was descending by the parachute attached to my gear fitted securely round my body, which had released itself automatically in a wide, spreading canopy and bore me

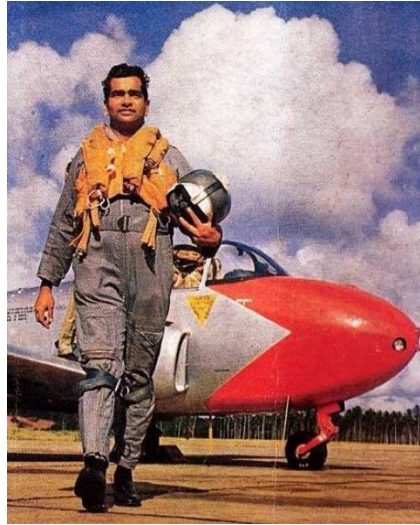
down in its silver security. As I touched the water and plunged beneath, I knew I had to work fast. I quickly felt for the safety clip of the parachute release, removed it and operated the parachute release buckle. The parachute and harness slipped away silently. I couldn't help looking at it as it drifted...it helped to sustain my life a few moments ago just as all the other streamlined apparatus had done.

The Negombo lagoon was a busy, bustling sheet of water. I saw several stationary boats and then some men in boats. I heard their voices and hailed them in my tired voice. A little fishing boat sped swiftly to my rescue; a bevy of others followed soon. The kind faces that were gazing at me quickly helped me on board the boat, inquiring anxiously after my welfare. I was surrounded with care and concern and was taken ashore to the Royal Air Force Hospital at Katunayake where I was well cared for. Apart from a small bruise on my ankle I had no other injury and none the worse considering my experience.



I was back in a JP the very next day — as per the RCyAF norm a pilot shall be scheduled on flight duty if he is found to have recovered from any minor injuries sustained in an aircraft accident. It was

established that the engine failure was caused due to a manufacturer's faulty component. Subsequently all Jet Provost engines had to be modified the world over.



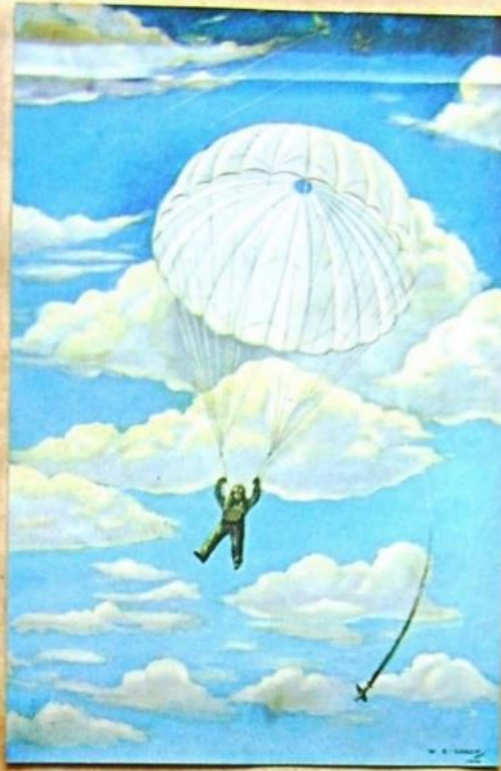
Squadron Leader Noel Lokuge is the first pilot to have used an ejection seat from a jet aircraft during an emergency to save his life, on 1st February 1960 according to aviation records in Ceylon. He was the first pilot to eject from a Jet Provost aircraft and also the first pilot of the Royal Ceylon Air Force to escape from an aircraft at low level using an ejection seat to save his life. Lokuge served in the Royal Ceylon air Force for 25 years as a Pilot/Instructor. He did his basic flying on DH Chipmunk and Bolton Paul Balliol aircraft. He obtained his training at RAF Halton (cadet of the 69th entry) and at the RAF Central flying school in Wendover, Buckinghamshire, United Kingdom. After his retirement from the RAF he joined Civil Aviation and served as Chief Pilot for the President of the Maldives for 10 years. Capt Lokuge is widely known as an exemplary Officer and a Gentleman!



Joining the Martin Baker Tie Club — “If the seat saved your life, you’re in”

Lokuge was inducted to the exclusive Ejection Tie club and is a Life Member bearing # 57. The primary objective of the Club is to provide a distinctive tie to be worn with civilian clothing which therefore provides a visible sign of the members’ common bond.

Every Club member is given a certificate, membership card, patch, tie, pin or a brooch for the women. All the Tie Club memorabilia depicts a red triangle warning sign which is the recognized international danger symbol for an ejection seat. The Ejection Tie Club was founded by Sir James Martin and is now run by Andrew Martin, the Grandson of Sir James.



Whereas by virtue of your successful accomplishment of a descent from the upper airs of this planet by Parachute we have thought fit to nominate and appoint you

Pilot Officer N. H. Lokuge
to be a member of the G. O. Club.

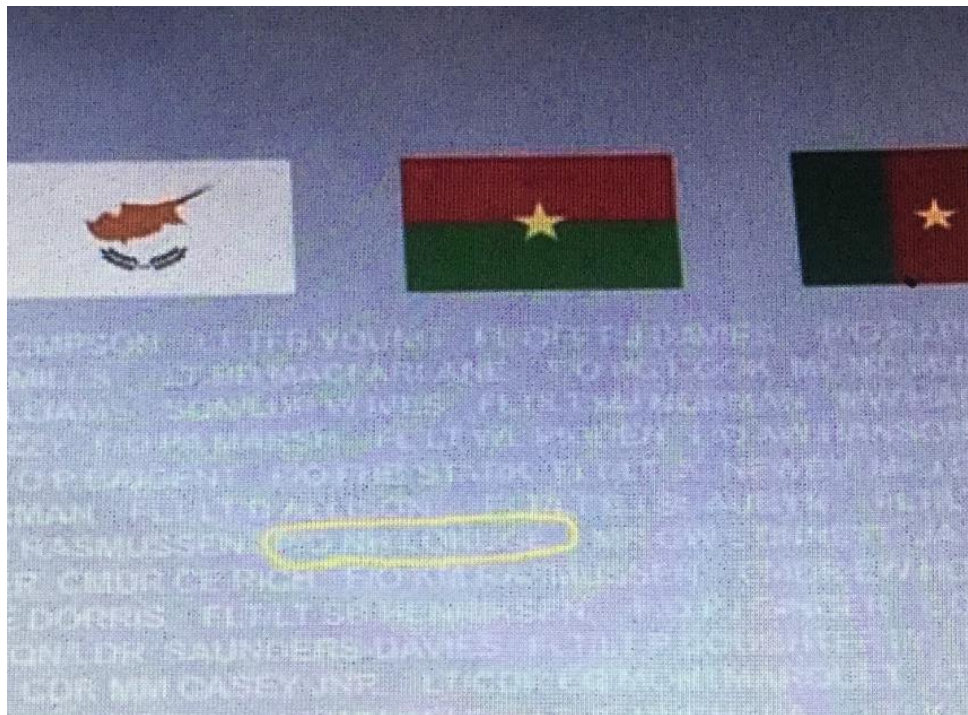
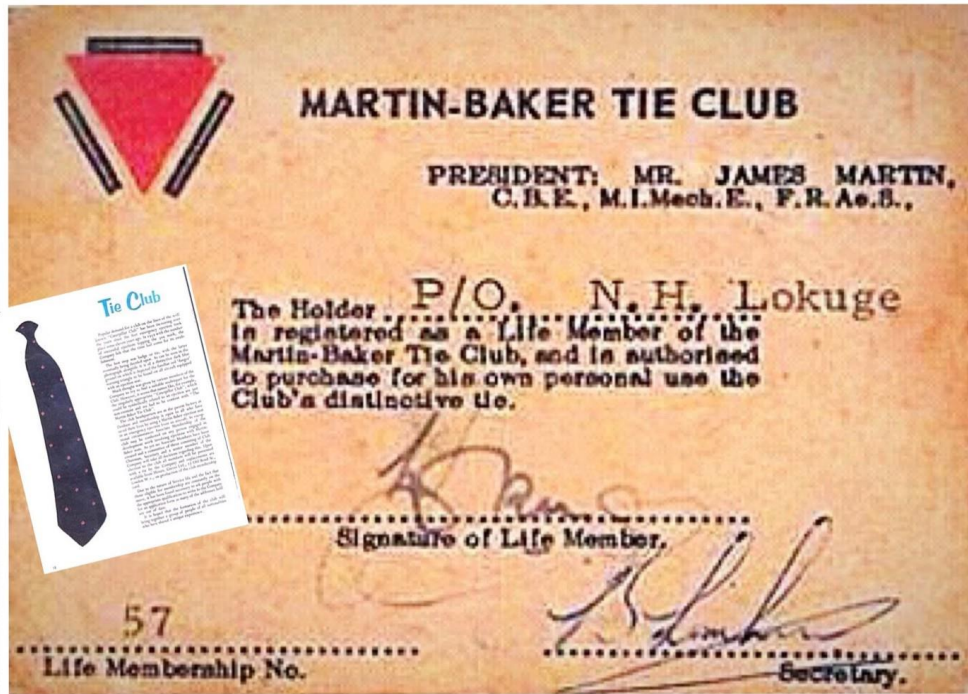
We do by these presents bestow upon you the dignity of membership and hereby authorize you to have hold and enjoy the privilege of wearing its gold badge of two wings No. 651 without challenge, let or hindrance.

Given under our hand this day *24th Feb. 1960*

C. S. S. S. S.

CHAIRMAN

"G. O." PARACHUTE COMPANY LTD., STADIUM WORKS, WOKING, SURREY.



Noel Lokuge's name appearing on the WALL of FAME at the MARTIN BAKER STALL at the Farnborough Air Show

DIVE FROM FLAMING JET

Young pilot bales out into lagoon

(By an 'Observer' Reporter)

At 11.10 a.m. yesterday morning Pilot Officer NOEL LOKUGE baled out of his flaming Jet Provost MK-51 aircraft at the fringe of the Negombo Lagoon.

With five other members of the R.Cy.A.F. Jet Squadron Pilot Officer Noel Lokuge was practising formation flying in preparation for the Independence Day flypast.

Shortly after take off he started losing altitude at 900 feet and dropped out of the formation. He turned round and headed for the base. His

engine cut out and there was a burst of flame from it. His efforts to get the engine going again did not meet with success and he had to eject when only at a 150 feet. The plane crashed into the Negombo Lagoon at a silted spot with ten feet of water.

The Pilot Officer was immediately put under medical observation, standard practice the world over when any airman meets with a mishap. He is in sound condition, according to an R.Cy.A.F. spokesman.

Noel who is twenty-two years old was one of the first to change over to the jets among R.Cy.A.F. airmen and has a total 600 flying hours to his credit. He is described as an experienced flyer.

The Jet Provost which he was flying was one of the six handed over to the R.Cy.A.F. by the Hunting Aircraft Company on December 10. Each costs Rs. 800,000 and

are fast craft with 7-10 the speed of sound, and carry armoury equal to a light cruiser.

The low altitude bale out which Noel performed is rare and risky in conventional piston engined aircraft and the hazards are increased in the case of jet planes.

Such a bale-out would not have been possible if not for the ejector seats with which the Provost is equipped. They are the very latest, fully automatic, and when released, shoot the pilot 60 feet above and away from the plane. The parachute then opens out, the straps get disengaged and the seat falls away. In the case of very high altitude bale outs the pilot falls without the aid of the parachute till he is just one mile over the ground and then the same procedure occurs.

Salvage operations began last evening and are expected to be completed today.

Fatal crash of Jet Provost on January 17, 1966

Paper cuttings Courtesy: Roger Thiedeman

Brother saw pilot crash

A full-scale inquiry has been instituted to determine the cause of the R.Cy.A.F. jet crash at Katunayake, in which a 25-year-old bachelor pilot, Sergeant Shayir Sally was killed. **01/17/66**

A Service Court of Inquiry has already been nominated by headquarters, and that it will comprise a senior pilot as President, a technical officer and one other.

Parts of the plane will be sent to Britain for a detailed investigation by experts.

At the Katunayake airport a preliminary investigation has already been held.

The wrecked plane lies covered with canvas to protect it from the elements. Parts of it had to be cut and lifted by crane to extricate the dying pilot. His skull had been crushed and he died a few minutes after the crash.

Pt. Sgt. Sally has another brother, Siddique who holds a similar rank at Katunayake. At the time of the mishap he was at the Control Tower watching his brother crashing and being unable to bail out.

The Coroner's inquest was held on Monday. The funeral took place yesterday with full R.Cy.A.F. honours and according to Muslim rites.



The wreckage of the **twin-engined** jet Provost near the new runway at Katunayake.

Single engine

The caption for the picture in the "Daily news" showing the wreck of the R.Cy.A.F. jet aircraft reads "The wreckage of the twin-engined jet provost near the new runway at Katunayake." In this connection I would like to point out that the jet provost is a single-engined aircraft and not a twin-engined one. It is powered by one Armstrong Siddeley Viper A.S.V. turbojet engine.

ROGER THIEDEMAN

Colombo

NOTE: We are grateful to Mr. Thiedeman for correcting this **error** — Editor.

SUNDAY OBS. 17/1/93

**Twenty Seventh
Death
Anniversary
In Memory of**



**Sgt. Pilot
MOHAMED
SHAYIR SALLY**

**Royal Ceylon
Air Force**

Born - 20th Jan. 1940

Died 17th Jan 1966

*May Almighty Allah
grant him Jennathul
Firdhouse - Ameen.*

**Remembered by his
brothers and sister.**

17/1/93

TRAGEDY OVER THAMPALAKAMAM

(Crash of a Jet Provost Aircraft in April 1971)

By

Sqn Ldr Chira Fernando, qfi

It was the 12th April, 1971, and the Air Force was in the thick of the 'Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna' [JVP] insurgency. F/Off Chira Fernando and F/Lt Manoharan were detailed to drop smoke markers on a target in Polonnaruwa from a Jet Ranger helicopter. Two Jet Provost (JP) aircraft based at Katunayake were also tasked with dropping bombs on the same target.

The Jet ranger was to eventually proceed to China Bay for refueling, prior to returning to Colombo. Following is the First Person narration by F/Off Chira Fernando of the unfortunate accident that he witnessed during that flight.

"It was early evening. The two JPs overtook our helicopter abeam Kantalai tank. One JP, flown by F/Sgt Tudugalle was ahead and the second, flown by Sgt Pilot Ranjith Wijetunga was about one mile behind him.

I was commanding the Jet Ranger. Suddenly it became obvious to me that Ranjith was flying slower than normal and we were overtaking him. Within minutes after we overtook him, Ranjith called up to say that he was losing power. I asked him what speed he was maintaining. There was a silence. "Check speed" I prompted him again. "105 knots" came the reply.

120 knots is the best gliding speed on the JP and thus 105 kts was way less than the best gliding speed. Both the helicopter and the JP were now over the Western edge of Tampalagamam Bay and at an altitude of about 500 feet. I immediately realized that Ranjith lacked sufficient altitude; and there was no way that the JP could have glided to the China Bay runway.

All I could do was call on the radio and shout "Ranjith Eject, eject!" "Ranjith do you read me? Eject!"

Unfortunately he did not. As we watched in horror, the aircraft nose pitched up and entered into a spin to the left. One and a half turns later the aircraft struck the ground at a relatively flat attitude but in a spin.

I landed the helicopter about 30 seconds after the JP hit the ground and within about 50 meters of the crash site. We could see fuel pouring out of the wing root area. Fortunately there was no post-crash fire and F/Lt Manoharan was able to reach the crashed aircraft. He then ran back shouting “Chira, I don’t know how to make the ejection seat safe”. I had no choice but to tighten the friction on the cyclic control and jump out to assist Manoharan; leaving the helicopter unmanned and the rotors turning!

Fuel was still pouring out of the broken JP wing. The aircraft nose had sheared off to the right and Ranjith was hanging on the ejection seat straps, seemingly unconscious. His helmet was missing and so was the whole front and sides of the cockpit, where the seat safety pins are stowed. Mano supported Ranjith’s body while I unstrapped him. He fell into our arms. We carried him to the helicopter within a few minutes of the crash and were immediately on our way to China Bay; a mere 1NM from the crash site.

I called for an ambulance and as we approached to land on the apron, I saw the ambulance speeding — away from us! I landed and shut down. We desperately shouted at the airmen using all the profanity we could muster only to find out that the ambulance had gone to pick up the doctor! We anxiously assumed that Ranjith would survive, but the doctor confirmed that he had suffered fatal injuries. Ranjith’s helmet had been flung forward off his head and his head had whiplashed back, fracturing his skull and causing his death.

It was a very somber and quiet flight as we flew his body back to AFHQ that night.



Ranjith Wijetunga, second from right. [Pic courtesy: SLAF]