

THE STORY OF THE UNAUTHORISED LANDING OF AN INDIAN NAVY BRÉGUET ALIZÉ AT RATMALANA IN 1964

Compiled by Gp Capt Kumar Kirinde, SLAF (Retd)

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Based on an article by aviation historian and writer Roger Thiedeman in the Sri Lanka *Sunday Times* of February 20, 1994; plus other material written by Roger.

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THE SUNDAY TIMES, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 1994

FEATURES

India, Ceylon and the Alize affair

By Roger Thiedeman
(in Melbourne)

It was around 8.45 pm on February 24 1964, almost 30 years ago to the day. His homework and dimer behind him, a teenaged aviation enthusiast was enjoying the balmy night air in the garden outside his Wellawatte home. Suddenly his ears picked up the sound of an approaching aircraft.

Nothing unusual, one might say, except this was the sound of a turboprop, and unless one's youngster was mistaken, it was the characteristic whine of the Rolls-Royce Dart engine.

Now, this lad was well acquainted with the whistle of Dart engines. Almost daily he would see and hear Viscount airliners of Indian Airlines Corporation, powered by four such engines, pass overhead on their scheduled daytime flights to and from Ratmalana airport. But a Viscount in Colombo's skies at that time of night? And surely, didn't the intensity of the sound hint at fewer than the four engines of a Viscount?

Navigation

Puzzlement mingling with excitement, the teenager's eyes searched upwards for the mystery aircraft. Seconds later his curiosity was rewarded. Directly overhead, silhouetted against the night sky, swooped the unfamiliar shape of a single-engined aeroplane. It was flying low and heading in the general direction of Ratmalana. Even more baffling was the fact that the aircraft was totally unlit, without even its mandatory red, green and white navigation lights illuminated.

As the plane disappeared out of view into the inky black night, the boy needed no further confirmation of its engine type - yes, that was definitely the sound of a Rolls-Royce Dart. Drawing on his knowledge of aircraft and engine combinations it didn't take long to deduce with reasonable certainty that the aeroplane he had briefly seen as a darkened, ghostly form was a French-built Bréguet Alizé anti-submarine aircraft of the type operated by the Indian and French navies.

But what was a blacked-out Alizé (if that is indeed what it was) doing in this part of the world? That tantalising question occupying his thoughts the aviator 'buff' went to bed. Little did he realise that next morning's newspapers would not only confirm his identification of the nocturnal interloper but also describe the aircraft's pivotal role in triggering a most unusual international incident.

The story began at 7.30 pm that night when two Alizés took off on a night-flying exercise from the Indian aircraft carrier INS Vikrant cruising 65 miles southwest of Colombo.

The aircraft, bearing serial numbers IN206 and IN210, with respective call signs of 'Whisky 21' and 'Whisky 34', were operating within the Colombo Flight Information Region. Significantly, however, contrary to international convention the Indians failed to notify Ratmalana Air Traffic Control of the presence of their aircraft in Ceylonese air space.

Some 10 to 15 minutes after take-off IN206 suffered a complete electrical failure, losing power to its radio, navigational and lighting systems. Unable to find his way back to Vikrant the pilot pointed his crippled aircraft in the approximate direction of the Ceylon coast, hoping to make an emergency landing at Ratmalana. Meanwhile, the pilot of the second aircraft IN210, having lost both visual and radio contact with his partner, also headed for

Ratmalana, no doubt guessing where IN206 would go - provided of course it hadn't already crashed into the sea.

Emergency

The Air Traffic Control staff at Ratmalana tower were spending a routine, relatively quiet night when, unexpectedly, they heard the sound of an aircraft aloft. The time was around 8.50 pm, just minutes after the still-

identified aircraft had overflown Wellawatte and that young enthusiast. Attempts to radio the circling aircraft proving fruitless, the tower staff sensed that the plane was in trouble and, switching on the runway lights while alerting the emergency rescue unit, enabled IN206 to make a safe landing.

Almost concurrently the tower became aware of a second unidentified aircraft in the serial vicinity of Ratmalana and initiated radio contact with it. This was, of course, IN210 whose pilot only then identified his craft by its call sign 'Whisky 34' and asked whether an aircraft with call sign 'Whisky 21' had landed at Ratmalana. In a further breach of regulations 'Whisky 34' had not declared an emergency in respect of IN206 nor conveyed any probable intention of the latter to land there. Indeed, replies from 'Whisky 34' to

Ratmalana tower's queries were evasive and vague at best. IN210 ('Whisky 34') then continued to orbit the airport for at least another 20 minutes, in flagrant violation of Ceylonese air space, before returning to Vikrant.

Upon taxiing to a halt at Ratmalana IN206 was impounded and its crew taken into military custody for interrogation. Remember, up to this point the local authorities had been given no explanation

for the intrusion of this alien aircraft.

Shortly after 1.00 am on February 25 the Indian High Commission contacted the Ceylon Ministry of Defence and External Affairs, seeking permission for another aircraft from Vikrant, bringing engineers to repair the hapless Alizé, to land at Ratmalana. Clearance was duly granted at 7.30 am and after aircraft and aircrew were released from custody this phase of the drama concluded.

Enthusiast

Diplomatic repercussions, however, were yet to follow. On March 17 the High Commissioner for Ceylon in New Delhi handed a terse note to the Indian government protesting the irresponsible behaviour of its naval personnel over the Alizé incident. The letter pointed out that while it took no exception over the unavoidable violation of Ceylon's air space by the stricken Alizé, Colombo was displeased with the failure of those aboard Vikrant and/or the second Alizé to alert Ratmalana to both the emergency and entry into Ceylon's territorial air space by one or more Indian naval aircraft.

Responding to a complaint from New Delhi, the diplomatic statement refused that the crew of IN206 were mistaken on landing, asserting instead that the Ceylon authorities had little option but to question the aircrew, and

that even before their brief files were established the Indian naval aviators were "treated in a manner befitting the members of a service of a fellow Commonwealth and friendly and neighbouring country."

The opportunity was also taken to reinforce the seriousness of the Indians' lapse in the context of an earlier incident when Ceylon was rapped over its diplomatic knuckles by the Indian government. This had occurred nearly two years before when, on 14 June 1962, an aircraft of the Royal Ceylon Air Force landed at Madras allegedly without appropriate clearance, despite a flight plan having been filed with Madras Air Traffic Control, thereby notifying the Indian authorities in advance of the aircraft's presence in their air space.

In a deft piece of political point-scoring it was highlighted by Colombo that India's protestations over the 1962 Madras incident paled into insignificance compared to the Indian Navy's poor handling of the potentially disastrous Alizé affair that dark February night.

So ended another episode in the long and chequered relationship between these two neighbouring nations. What does all this have to do with that aircraft enthusiast from Wellawatte? you may well ask. Well, he now lives in Australia and is the author of this article.



What was a blacked-out Indian Navy aircraft doing over Colombo skies?

Playing a pivotal role: an Indian Navy Alize aeroplane

Overview of the article as it appeared in the newspaper.
A transcript of the complete text follows.

India, Ceylon and the Alizé affair

by Roger Thiedeman

(Sri Lanka Sunday Times, February 20, 1994)

It was around 8.45 pm on February 24, 1964, almost 30 years ago to the day. His homework and dinner behind him, a teenaged aviation enthusiast was enjoying the balmy night air in the garden outside his Wellawatte, Colombo home. Suddenly his ears picked up the sound of an approaching aircraft.

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Now, this lad was well acquainted with the whistle of Dart engines. Almost daily he would see and hear Vickers Viscount airliners of Indian Airlines Corporation, powered by four such engines, pass overhead on their way to and from Ratmalana airport. But a Viscount in Colombo's skies at that time of night? And surely, didn't the intensity of the sound he was now hearing hint at fewer than the four engines of a Viscount?

Puzzlement mingling with excitement, the teenager's eyes searched upwards for the mystery aircraft. Seconds later his curiosity was rewarded. Directly overhead, silhouetted against the night sky, swooped the unfamiliar shape of a single-engine aeroplane. It was flying low and heading in the general direction of Ratmalana. Even more baffling was the fact that the aircraft was totally unlit, without even its mandatory red, green and white navigation lights illuminated.

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Responding to a complaint from New Delhi, the Ceylonese diplomatic statement refuted that the crew of IN206 were mistreated on landing, asserting instead that the Ceylon authorities had little option but to question the aircrew; and that even before their bona fides were established, the Indian naval aviators were "*treated in a manner befitting the members of a service of a fellow Commonwealth and friendly and neighbouring country.*"

The opportunity was also taken by Ceylon's High Commissioner to reinforce the seriousness of the Indians' lapse in the context of an earlier incident when Ceylon was rapped over its diplomatic knuckles by the Indian government. This had occurred nearly two years before when, on June 14, 1962, an aircraft of the Royal Ceylon Air Force landed at Madras allegedly without appropriate clearance, despite a flight plan having been filed with Madras Air Traffic Control, thereby notifying the Indian authorities in advance of the aircraft's presence in their air space.

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IN206, the Indian Navy's Bréguet Alizé that caused the diplomatic spat between India and Ceylon

Pic courtesy: Roger Thiedeman collection © Bharat-Rakshak.com



Bréguet Alizé IN202 of the Indian Navy on the deck of INS *Vikrant*

Pic courtesy: Roger Thiedeman collection © Bharat-Rakshak.com



IT happened on Monday night.

While the city of Colombo was deep in the Land of Nod, a tension-packed drama was being enacted at the Ratmalana Airport.

THE QUIET OF THE NIGHT WAS SUDDENLY DISTURBED WHEN AN INDIAN NAVY ALIZE ANTI-SUBMARINE PLANE CRASH-LANDED, UNANNOUNCED AND WITHOUT LIGHTS.

A number of armoured cars and troops armed to the teeth, carrying top officials of the Ministry of Defence and External Affairs, the heads of the armed forces and the police rushed to the airport soon after the plane landed. The plane was surrounded by armed men and vehicles.

The crew of three were placed in custody and the plane was searched for bombs and weapons.

It was later explained by the Indian High Commissioner here, that the plane belonged to an Indian Aircraft Carrier INS Vikrant which was positioned at

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Bréguet Alizé IN204 on the deck of INS Vikrant, with an Indian Navy Westland Sea King (S-61) helicopter.

Pic courtesy: Roger Thiedeman collection
© Bharat-Rakshak.com

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Indian Navy plane crash lands

(Continued from Page 1)

miles South West off the Colombo coast.

Its electrical system and radio had failed.

At 9 O'clock on Monday night the officers at the Control Tower were jolted out of their seats on hearing the drone of a plane in flight.

All the aircraft stationed at Ratmalana were in their hangers. There were no flights scheduled for the night. Was this some sort of phantom, they wondered.

Usually an aircraft approaching Ceylon had to contact the Control Tower, but that too had not been done.

The officers rushed to the balcony of the tower and this time they heard the drone almost overhead.

Katunayake was contacted, but they were told that all R.Cy.A.F. planes were grounded for the night.

It dawned on them that it would be an aircraft in distress. So they acted swiftly. The Airport Fire Brigade was alerted. The runway lights were switched on and the sirens wailed.

Seconds later the plane crash-landed. Although the runway lights were on, the plane's landing lights were not on. The pilot braked heavily as the plane landed and its tyres burst.

Almost immediately the Control Tower received a call from another plane identifying itself as an Indian Navy plane.

"Have you heard from an Indian Navy plane with the call sign Whisky 21?" it asked. But the Control Tower men could not help them.

They could only say that a plane had just crash-landed.

The three crew members of the crippled aircraft climbed out and were taken to the Control Tower.

The Ministry of Defence and External Affairs was contacted.

Telephones buzzed from the Ministry to the Service chiefs and the police.

Armoured cars as if ready for battle rolled out to the airport carrying troops.

The Service chiefs, high police officials and top brass of the Ministry of Defence rushed to the spot.

The crew of the aircraft were questioned and taken under armed guard from the airport.

Meanwhile the sister plane of the one that crash-landed had radioed the Vikraut, of their sister's fate.

Another Aleze turbo prop was flown to Ratmalana, but when it radioed the tower for permission to land the request was refused.

It was told that it could not land until diplomatic clearance was obtained.

Some hours later after the grounded Aleze had been searched for weapons the V.I.P.'s, the troops and the armoured cars left the airport. The crew were taken under guard, for a night's rest after the high voltage shocks. The drama was over.

Yesterday morning another Aleze plane carrying spares for the grounded aircraft landed after she was given diplomatic clearance.

The crippled plane was repaired and both planes left Ratmalana Airport at 2.55 yesterday afternoon.

I.A.F. PLANE CRASH-LANDS

(By a "Daily News" reporter)

There was some excitement at Ratmalana airport on Monday night when an unannounced aircraft made a crash-landing on the tarmac.

Air guards and police rushed to the plane, later identified as an Indian Air Force reconnaissance aircraft, while the airport's fire unit was also alerted.

Meanwhile, a second plane droned overhead, circling the airport for almost half an hour. The crew of the plane which crash-landed made contact with its sister IAF plane from the Ratmalana control tower. Subsequently, the second plane returned to Ratmalana but was not given permission to land.

Later investigations revealed that the first plane which burst, its under-carriage wheel tyres when landing, had been forced to make an emergency landing because its radio and electric circuits had failed completely.

Routine flight

Indian High Commission sources said yesterday that the planes were on a routine flight during jet exercises, and are from an aircraft carrier in Indian Ocean waters.

Yesterday, a plane from the aircraft carrier brought in spares with which the aircraft that crash-landed was repaired. Permission was then granted for both planes to leave.

The IAF plane which crash-landed had a three-man crew; pilot, observer and radar officer.



Artist's impression of IN206, the aircraft at the centre of the 'Alizé Affair' in Ceylon in February 1964.

Pic Courtesy: Roger Thiedeman collection

BRÉGUET BR.1050 ALIZÉ

The **Bréguet Br.1050 Alizé** (the latter word meaning 'tradewind' in French) was a French-built carrier-based anti-submarine warfare (ASW) aircraft. Making its maiden flight in 1956, the Alizé was powered by a single Rolls-Royce Dart turboprop engine, and was equipped for a three-man crew: pilot (on the left), navigator (right), and sensor/sonobuoy/radar operator seated sideways between them.

The internal weapons bay could accommodate a homing torpedo or depth charges, and underwing stores pylons were capable of carrying bombs, depth charges, rockets, or missiles.

A total of 89 Alizés were built between 1957 and 1962, with the French and Indian navies as the only customers. Following an initial delivery of 12 examples to the Naval Air Arm of the Indian Navy, another five were believed to have been purchased by India as used aircraft from the *Aéronavale* (French Navy).

The Indian Navy operated its Alizés from shore bases and from the light carrier INS *Vikrant*. They were used for reconnaissance and patrol duties during India's 1961 invasion of Portuguese-controlled Goa, and for ASW patrol during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, during which one Alizé was shot down by a Pakistan Air Force Lockheed F-104 Starfighter.

Numbers of operational Indian Navy Alizés dwindled during the 1980s, and the type was relegated to shore-based patrol in 1987. However, that same year Alizés were deployed by the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) during 'Operation Pawan' in Sri Lanka, flying sorties against the LTTE and crippling the merchant ship *Progress Light*. The type was finally phased out in 1991.

(Source: military.wikia.org)



Bréguet Alizé IN202 in 'retirement' at the Naval Aviation Museum in Goa, India

Pic source: Wikipedia



Another view of Alizé IN202 at the Naval Aviation Museum in Goa

Credit: Google Images © Petr Nesmerak for www.aviationmuseum.eu

INS VIKRANT

INS *Vikrant* (from the Sanskrit *vikrānta*, meaning ‘courageous’) was a *Majestic*-class aircraft carrier of the Indian Navy. The ship was originally intended to become HMS *Hercules* for Britain’s Royal Navy during World War II, but construction was suspended when the war ended. In 1957 India purchased the incomplete carrier, and when construction was finished in 1961, on March 4 that year *INS Vikrant* (with pennant number R11) was commissioned as the Indian Navy’s first aircraft carrier.



INS *Vikrant* (R11) with a variety of aircraft types parked on deck

Pic courtesy: Roger Thiedeman collection © Bharat-Rakshak.com

During its ensuing 36 years of service *Vikrant* ‘hosted’ such types as the Hawker Sea Hawk jet fighter, Bréguet Alizé ASW aircraft, Aérospatiale Alouette III/HAL (Hindustan Aeronautics Limited) *Chetak* helicopter, Westland Sea King (S-61) helicopter, and BAe Sea Harrier STOVL (short take-off and vertical landing/take-off) jet fighter.



A Bréguet Alizé launching off *Vikrant* during the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War

Pic courtesy: Roger Thiedeman collection © Bharat-Rakshak.com

Vikrant was deployed during ‘Operation Vijay’ (code name for the annexation of Goa) in 1961 but did not see action, only patrolling along the coast to deter foreign interference. Nor did *Vikrant* participate in the 1965 Indo-Pakistani War, as it was in dry dock undergoing refitting at the time.

However, during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 *Vikrant* played a vital role in enforcing the naval blockade of East Pakistan (which later became the modern, independent nation Bangladesh).

After *Vikrant* (R11) was decommissioned in 1997, it was opened as a museum ship in Mumbai in 2001. But deemed unsafe for the public in 2012, the museum was closed, and the aircraft carrier was scrapped in 2014.

(The name of the Indian Navy’s first aircraft carrier lives on following the construction in Kochi, Kerala of a new INS *Vikrant*, a.k.a. *Indigenous Aircraft Carrier 1/IAC-1*, which was scheduled for completion and commissioning in 2021.)
