

(Hon) Flight Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik (1894-1985)

First Sikh Fighter Pilot who fought against German aces and lived to tell his tale



Figure 1. Second Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik proudly wearing both beard and turban with his 'maternity' jacket and Sam Browne belt, c. 1917 (by kind permission of Mr Somnath Sapru).

Early Days

Hardit Singh Malik¹ was born into a well-to-do Sikh family in 1894 in the

¹ The meaning of his name is as follows:
'Har' = The All-Pervasive One

bustling city of Rawalpindi in West Punjab(now in Pakistan).

He grew up in the family's old mansion in a joint family arrangement consisting of his father and his three brothers, and their families along with their servants.

He was spoiled by his father who bought him everything he asked for (such as silk socks, elaborate playing cards and train sets). By contrast, his mother was a devout Sikh who did her best to ensure her son was strongly attached to the faith. When he was given a steel bracelet, or 'kara'², by a Sikh holy man, he wore it throughout his flying service in World War I.

Keen Kite Flyer

One of Hardit Singh's favoured pastimes was kite-flying. He would get the best kites made of brightly coloured paper stretched across thin cane frames, and coat the cords with powdered glass. This

'Dit' = gift

'Singh' = lion

² One of the five K's that an initiated Sikh must wear at all times.

type of cord would cut the cord of rival kites in aerial combats. These dogfights demanded considerable skill to manoeuvre kites into the optimal position to bring down rivals and such mock battles might have been a forerunner to his First World War exploits.

Education Abroad

The young Hardit Singh had always harboured an ambition to go to England just to be able to say he had been to 'vilayat' (or Blighty)!

He had to work hard to persuade his parents. While youngsters went abroad for studies after they had graduated from Indian universities, it was almost unheard of for a young boy to go to England for schooling.

Epic Journey

In 1908, 14-year-old Hardit Singh travelled down from Rawalpindi across British India to Bombay, took a ship all by himself to Marseilles in the south of France, then caught a deluxe express train to Calais, sailed on another boat across the Channel to Dover, took a second train journey to Charing Cross (where he was met by his elder brother, Teja Singh) and finally sped across the streets of

London in a horse-drawn carriage to a boarding house in West Kensington.

Hardit Singh attended Linton House, a prep school in Notting Hill. He next went to Eastbourne College, a public school in the south of England. He spent three happy years there, enjoying the cricket, riding his bike and teasing the girls in the town.

Time at Oxford

In 1912 he was admitted to Balliol College, Oxford. Under the able guidance of his tutor, Francis 'Sligger' Urquhart, he shifted his focus from Greek and Latin (his favourite subjects at school) to study modern European history. His scholastic achievements were matched by his sports prowess, getting his blues in cricket and golf.

When War Broke Out

In August 1914, Hardit Singh had completed his second year at Oxford, and had been selected to play for Sussex County. It was on the eve of a match against Kent that news broke that Britain was at war with Germany.

On his return to Oxford in October practically all his British colleagues had volunteered to join the fighting services. His efforts to join the British Army as a

commissioned officer were twice rejected because of the prevailing attitude towards race (no white man was ever to be commanded by a black man).

To France

Through the help of his college tutor, Francis Urquhart, he volunteered for service in the French Red Cross. He started out by driving a motor ambulance.

On the Western Front

Hardit Singh stayed with the French for a year, running the ambulance to different hospitals all over the Western Front.

In due course, he looked to join the French forces, preferably the Air Force. When his application was approved, he wrote to his former tutor, Francis Urquhart who in turn wrote an angry letter to Major-General David Henderson of the Royal Flying Corps (RFC), saying that if Hardit Singh as a British subject was good enough for the French, why wasn't he good enough for the British Armed Forces?

The letter worked, and, following a personal interview with General Henderson, Hardit Singh became Hon. 2/Lt H. S. Malik, RFC, Special Reserve, on 5 April 1917.

Finally joining Britain

Not only was Hardit Singh the first Indian in any flying service in the world, he was also the first non-British with a turban and beard – which was against every British Army regulation of the day – to become a fighter pilot.

In the RFC

As a cadet in Aldershot, Hardit Singh wore a specially-designed flying helmet over his turban. This would later earn him the affectionate nickname of 'Flying Hobgoblin' from ground crews.



Figure 2. Second Lieutenant Hardit Singh Malik with his Sopwith Camel fighter, c.1917 (by kind permission of Mr Somnath Sapru).

Hardit Singh learnt fast – he was selected for fighters and went 'solo' in a Caudron after just two-and-a-half hours instruction.

He was posted to Filton, near Bristol, flying the Avro 504, the BE 2C, the Sopwith Pup, the Nieuport and finally the

Sopwith Camel, the most advanced fighter at this time.

At Filton, RFC pilots were taught combat tactics, including the famous Immelmann Turn. Hardit Singh got his wings in under a month.

Fighting

They flew over France. In one major dogfight, with over a hundred British and German fighters scrapping over the battle lines, Hardit Singh shot down his first German Fokkerand.

He went on to notch another eight aerial victories in the weeks ahead, before he himself was wounded in action, but survived in amazing circumstances.

Close Escape

On 26 October 1917, Barker took Malik over the lines in an attack on an enemy airfield in poor weather. They were surprised by a large number of German fighters, and although Hardit Singh shot one down, his aircraft was struck by an incredible 450 bullets, two of which pierced his leg. Seriously (but not fatally) wounded, and with his petrol tank hit, he crash-landed in France. He survived, having lost a lot of blood and broken his nose.

Hospital

A stint in hospital followed, then a posting to Northern Italy. There was a long train journey to Milan, where the ladies apparently thought the turbaned pilot especially exotic!

He was wounded again in a dogfight and was invalided home, this time complicated by an acute allergic reaction to the castor oil used to lubricate the Camel's rotary engine.

End of War

In the summer of 1918, Lieutenant Hardit Singh returned to France and flew Bristol Fighters with No. 11 Squadron until the end of the war.

Like millions of others, he prepared for life after demobilisation and planned to continue with the RAF in India, or join the Indian Civil Service (as had been his pre-war intention).

After the armistice in November 1918, Hardit Singh secured eight months leave and began his journey home after an 11-year absence. It was by a strange coincidence that the ship he boarded at Marseilles was the very same that he had travelled on in 1908 when making his way to England.

The End of His Flying Dreams

Onboard the P&O vessel he was befriended by an Indian Army officer, Captain Keen of the 28th Punjabis. One evening Keen asked the Sikh what his plans were. Hardit Singh told him that he would join the RAF in India. Keen warned him: 'You know we don't want Indians in the RAF. You will find one fine day you will go up and your plane will break up in the air.'

He arrived at Bombay on 10 March 1919, and travelled by train across the dusty plains and up into the hills to his home. He received a hero's welcome in Rawalpindi.

Post-War Years

In his post-war years, he fell in love, got married, but had to promise to leave flying.

He also enjoyed a distinguished career as a civil servant and diplomat. He became Prime Minister of Patiala State and then, Indian High Commissioner to Canada; later still, he was named Ambassador to France.

His unique experience saw him involved in the discussions that led to the founding of the Indian Air Force in 1932.

After retirement in 1956, he returned to his first love, golf, becoming India's finest player ever, even with two German bullets still embedded in his leg.

The 'Flying Hobgoblin' died in New Delhi on 31 October 1985, three weeks before his 91st birthday.