

# 60 Years of the Sri Lanka Air Force

Article and Photos  
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The Sri Lanka Air Force (SLAF), formerly the Royal Ceylon Air Force (RCyAF), celebrated its 60th birthday in March of 2011. This organization has been through more conflict than most, including a long running civil war. On a recent visit, I was given a look at this organization and some of its past and present aircraft.

## British Roots

The Royal Ceylon Air Force (RCyAF) was born on March 2, 1951 becoming the youngest of the Defence Services of Ceylon. Some de Havilland DHC-1 Chipmunks T.Mk.10 had been ordered in 1950 and were put to use with help of the RAF. They were first flown in February of 1951, so they

were already in service when the RCyAF was founded. Two more batches of Chipmunks were to follow for a total of 14 that would eventually see service in the RCyAF. Some of these Chipmunks are now in the SLAF museum at Ratmalana AFB near Colombo, in near flying condition.



Also ordered for the service in 1951 were 12 Boulton Paul Balliol T.2 advanced trainers. The Balliol was first intended as a turboprop replacement of the North American Harvard in the RAF, but this side-by-side two-seater ended with a Rolls Royce Merlin instead. Within the RCyAF, the Balliol be-



came somewhat infamous because of the so called "torque stall". Due to the torque generated by the propeller, the aircraft would rotate around its propeller and stall. Unfortunately some pilots lost their lives because of this. Two of these very unique aircraft still survive in the museum.

The well known Airspeed Oxford Mk.1 was added for multi-engine training, as well as a de Havilland Dove and four Prestwick Pioneer aircraft, which were put into service with number 2 squadron. Two Westland WS 51 Dragonfly helicopters brought the SLAF into the helicopter age. All joined the fleet in 1955.

Several de Havilland Heron MK2Ds were purchased for larger

transport missions, and put to good use. Although they entered service in the 50s, they were updated and soldiered on well into the 80s. To improve the range, speed, and comfort of the Herons, they underwent the "Jack Riley" conversion in 1972. The existing four Gypsy Queen MK30 engines were replaced with AVCO Lycoming IO540s - which were lighter in weight and more fuel efficient. The 17 seat cabin was converted into two luxury compartments of four seats each with a jump seat for a steward.

The No. 1 Flying Training School was re-established on January 15, 1971 to manage both the initial flight training of students and the certification of flight in-

structors. It started with Cessna 150s as primary trainers, which are still in use today after more than 40 years of service.

## The Jet Age

The SLAF entered the Jet Age with the arrival of 12 Hunting Jet Provost T.Mk.51 in 1959. The Jet Provost T.Mk.51 was an armed export version of the Jet Provost T.Mk.3 and the first version of the Jet Provost built for light attack, with two .303 caliber machine guns in the engine air intakes and under-wing racks for four rockets or eight 250 lb. fragmentation bombs. Apart from Sri Lanka, Kuwait and Sudan also bought this version. Further development of the Jet Provost would result in the BAC Strikemaster.

The Jet Provosts were of great importance when the communist revolt started in 1971. The Jet Provosts, having been placed in storage by 1970, were taken out of storage and put back into service within three days, carrying out attacks on insurgents. The Jet Provost was the first aircraft of the SLAF to see action in the "shock and awe" mission against the rebels.

Heavy transports of the RAF delivered six Bell 47G helicopters purchased from the United States, which were put in to combat as soon as possible, after only five days of pilot training.

Help also came from an unexpected place. The USSR sold five MiG-17F Frescos, one MiG-15UTI, and two Ka-26 Hoodlums to the SLAF. A training team was



vice with No. 7 squadron as trainers.

With the closure of Air Ceylon in 1978, its Hawker Siddeley HS 748s transport aircraft were taken over by the SLAF. These four aircraft were used by No. 2 Squadron for transport duties. They were of vital importance to the air bridge that supplied the garrisons in the north from 1983 to 1995. However, shoulder fired anti-air missiles took their toll, and several HS 748s were shot down. The survivors soldiered on until retirement in 2003.

The two Hoodlums were used as SAR, passenger, and medevac aircraft with No. 4 squadron until they also were retired from service in 1979. They were replaced by a pair of Aerospatiale SA 360s, which were used for the same tasks. These were complemented by a whole range of Bell helicopters from 1984 onwards. The two SA 360s were taken out of service in 1989.

### 1980s - Another Revolt

A single Beech 18 was briefly used by the SLAF from 1981 to 1986. Until then it had been used by the civilian Surveyor General's department. Between 1983 and 1985, the Air Force acquired eleven Bell 212 and four Bell 412 helicopters. The 412s advanced the attack capabilities of the SLAF, who, with the help of Heli Orient of Singapore, equipped twelve Bell 212 and Bell 412 helicopters to serve as gunships and as transport vehicles for highly successful commando assault operations.

In the mid 1980s there was a second uprising, this time by the Tamils from the North (LTTE). Now known as the First Eelam War, it lasted from 1983 to 1987. Even after the end of the war, conflict continued and would erupt again into the civil war that was put to an end in 2009. Because the SLAF had become primarily a transport force flying around tourists more than anything else, there was a real need for a counterinsurgency (COIN) aircraft to support the troops fighting on the ground. Nine SIAI-Marchetti SF.260TP Warriors were rushed into service and used for rocket attacks and strafing. During this conflict the airfields at Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, Koggala, and Sigiriya, which had been unused since World War II, were reactivated. Two Cessna 337s and two Beechcraft Super King Airs were added to the fleet for light transport duties.

In the mid 1980s an improved bombing capability was provided by a small fleet of Chinese Harbin Y-12 turboprop transport aircraft. These were equipped with bomb racks and could carry up to 1,000 kilograms of fragmentation and antipersonnel bombs. Transport, training, and surveying functions were carried out by a variety of Cessna and de Havilland aircraft. In 1987, during the Vadamarachchi Operation, the Air Force included one HS 748, two Y-12s and one de Havilland Heron, all configured as improvised bombers.

In 1987 the SLAF acquired three Shaanxi Y-8s (the Chinese version of the An-12) and would



also use them for bombing until 1992, when one Y-8 crashed during a bombing mission. After the crash, all bombing using transport aircraft was stopped. Both of the other Y-8s later crashed as well.

### 1990s - Rebuilding Again

The lack of trained people and equipment proved to be unwise, and in 1990 the buildup of a proper air force began in earnest. The SLAF purchased twelve former Myanmar SF.260W Warriors in 1990 to serve as primary train-

ers with the newly formed Flying Training Wing. These aged aircraft were locally refurbished and put into service until they were replaced in 2001. After retirement of the MiG-17Fs and Jet Provosts, the SLAF did not operate jets for more than 10 years. With the purchase of a pair Chengdu JJ-5/FT-5s the Chinese trainer version of the MiG-17, jet training was restarted within the SLAF. Received in 1990, they were used for jet conversion training and marked the start of a cooperation with the Chinese



that continues today. In 1991 the SLAF also acquired four Chengdu F-7BS Skybolts and three Xian FT-7s from China.

The continued fighting revealed the need for bigger transports, and twelve Mi-17 Hip transport helicopters were purchased from the former Soviet Union beginning in 1993. All were delivered to No. 6 Squadron at Vavuniya and used for airlifting troops into the battle areas.

The fighting kept growing, but sanctions were in place so the SLAF struggled to find new equipment. In 1994 four FMA IA-58 Pucarás were used, but they were not really up to the task. Three were lost and the last was retired from service in 1999.

Supporting the army became increasingly important. In 1995 Mil Mi-24 Hind-D gunships were acquired for close air support.

The lack of electronic counter measures (ECM) was a problem for the HS 748 fleet, and two were shot down by anti-aircraft fire. From 1995 onwards they were replaced by ten Antonov An-32Bs, which went into service by No. 2 Heavy Transport Squadron. However, no less than four of these have been lost so far.

The role of the Pucarás was given to IAI Kfirs in 1996. The SLAF acquired seven IAI Kfirs (six C.2s and one TC.2) from Israel and added another nine of these aircraft to the inventory by 2005. This included four C.2s and four C.7s in 2001. Until March of this year, the SLAF operated two C.7s, eight C.2s and two TC.2s. The SLAF used these Kfirs to launch attacks against Tamil separatist targets in rebel-controlled areas of the island before war's end in 2009. Two Kfirs were lost in a mid-air

collision during a training flight for the 60th birthday celebrations after one of the pilots had a heart attack, and the Kfir fleet has been grounded since then.

### A New Millennium

With all of this new and relatively modern equipment, the need for a jet trainer became apparent. No. 14 Squadron was added to the Flying Training Wing and six Karakorum K-8 trainers were purchased from Pakistan to train pilots for the rapidly expanding fleet of jets.

In 2000, six MiG-27 Flogger-H dedicated ground attack aircraft were added to the fleet, along with a MiG-23UB Flogger to be used for training. They were very welcome due to lack of specialized ground attack aircraft since the retirement of the Pucarás. The aircraft were used to equip

a new squadron, No. 12. In 2006 four additional MiG-27s were bought from Ukraine to replace two lost in crashes and one lost in an attack on the airport.

In 2001, twelve Nanchang CJ-6/PT-6 were obtained from China and put to service with the No. 1 Flying Training Wing of the SLAF. These serve as trainers for the cadets, replacing the SF-260Ws.

Additional Mi-35 Hind-Fs were added to the fleet in 2001 to re-

place lost aircraft. These aircraft flew extensively in close air support missions that exposed them to sustained ground fire. At least four aircraft were lost to it. Five others were lost due to adverse weather or technical issues.

On July 24, 2001, Sri Lanka hit the world press because thirteen aircraft, including two Kfir jet fighters, one Mi-24 helicopter gunship, and one MiG-27 jet fighter, were destroyed in a predawn attack by the LTTE on Katunayake

Air Base, part of Bandaranaike International Airport. Three military training aircraft and five civilian jets were also destroyed. The airport has remained on alert for a repeat of the 2001 attack, with severe restrictions on the number of people allowed into the terminal buildings. All airports are still heavily guarded by members of the SLAF today.

Early in 2008, the Air Force received six F-7Gs, which are primarily used as interceptors and



are attached to No. 5 Jet Squadron.

Although several more attacks were made by the LTTE in the first decade of the century, one stands out from the others. In October 2008, the SLAF claimed its first air-to-air kill, when it reported that one of its Kfir interceptors shot down a Zlín Z-43 of the LTTE air wing when it attempted to attack a military base in Vavuniya. The wreckage of the Z-43 can be seen at the SLAF museum.

From its humble start to now 60 years later, the SLAF has become a very capable Air Force. I wish to thank them for their hospitality during my visit!



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