

The Day the Sky Took an Oath

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On the morning of 06 September 1965, Pakistan did not wake to an ordinary sunrise. It woke to the rumble of armour, the shock of invasion and a question aimed at the heart of a young nation: Would Pakistan stand? The answer came from trenches, bridges, command posts, factory floors, hospital wards and homes where mothers prayed with trembling hands. But it also came from above, from the fierce roar of jet engines slicing through the sky. That roar was Pakistan's answer. It said Lahore would not be abandoned. It said fear would not dictate the future. It said a smaller Force would never become a smaller spirit. And it said Pakistan would fight. When the enemy advanced with the confidence of numbers, Pakistan Air Force rose with the confidence of purpose. In September 1965, PAF did not merely fly sorties. It flew the will of a nation. It carried the hopes of soldiers on the ground, the prayers of families at home and the uncompromising pledge of a people determined to remain free. This is why Defence Day is not simply the remembrance of a war. It is the remembrance of a standard.

A Young Force, an Ancient Resolve

Pakistan was still a young state in 1965, and its Air Force was barely 18 years old. It was transitioning into the jet age. Air Marshal Nur Khan had assumed command only weeks

before the September conflict. Across the border stood a numerically superior adversary. The challenge was immense; the margin for error was narrow. But PAF did not allow numbers to become a verdict. It lived the Quaid-e-Azam's injunction: "Second to None." That was not a claim of possessing more aircraft or more resources. It was a refusal to accept second-rate planning, second-rate training, second-rate courage or second-rate sacrifice. A nation may possess fewer machines, but it need never possess a smaller will. In the autumn of 1965, every Sabre became more than metal. Every runway became more than concrete. Every cockpit became a sacred post of duty. Pakistan's airmen were not simply defending airspace; they were defending the confidence of a nation.

Chhamb: The First Thunderclap

The aerial war began with a message delivered over Chhamb on 01 September. Indian aircraft attacked Pakistani Army positions. The call for air support was urgent which PAF answered without hesitation. Two F-86 Sabres, flown by Squadron Leader Sarfraz Rafiqui and Flight Lieutenant Imtiaz Bhatti, were scrambled against four Indian Vampire fighters. In the ensuing dogfight, all four Vampires were brought down. The effect was immediate: India withdrew 130 Vampire aircraft from

frontline service. It was not merely an aerial victory. It was psychological warfare in its purest form. In minutes,



PAF transformed the enemy's confidence into caution. Chhamb told the world that Pakistan's skies were not an open corridor for aggression. They were a frontier guarded by PAF Shaheens who knew their mission and trusted their skill. The enemy had tested the air. PAF answered with fire. **When Lahore Called**

Then came 06 September. The international border was crossed. The danger was no longer distant. Lahore, the city of poetry, culture, memory and national pride, stood threatened. But Lahore did not stand alone. As Indian armour and infantry pressed towards the BRB Canal, PAF F-86 Sabres took to the air on close-support missions. Flying low and fast, Pakistani pilots struck advancing enemy formations and helped disrupt the offensive directed toward Lahore.

Their action made a major contribution to the city's successful defence. For the soldier on the ground, the sight of a Sabre overhead was not merely tactical

support. It was a promise: you will not fight alone. For the invader, it was an unmistakable warning: this land is defended from the soil to the sky. The defence of Lahore was not the achievement of one arm alone. The Army held the line with courage. Civilians stood with remarkable resolve. PAF made sure the enemy's advance was contested not only at the canal, but from above it. In that shared resistance lay Pakistan's real strength: Unity under Fire.

Pathankot: Taking the War to the Source

A defensive war does not mean a passive war. PAF understood that protecting Pakistani cities required more than waiting for enemy aircraft to appear over them. It required striking the airfields from which danger would emerge. On 06 September, PAF aircraft carried out a

bold dusk raid on Pathankot airfield, destroying several Indian aircraft on the ground, including MiG-21s, Mysteres and a C-119 transport. Strikes against

other airfields, including Adampur and Halwara, compounded the pressure on Indian air operations. The raid carried a message of strategic clarity: Pakistan would not let the enemy choose the time, place and rhythm of the conflict. An airfield is not merely a strip of tarmac. It is a launchpad for aggression. Deny the enemy the use of that launchpad and you protect your own soldiers, cities and skies. PAF did precisely that. It seized the initiative, disrupted hostile plans and compelled the adversary to think first of defence.

Sargodha: Where Legends Rose

On 07 September, Indian aircraft launched large-scale attacks against PAF Base Sargodha. It was an attempt to strike at the heart of Pakistan's air-defence capability. The answer became one of the most celebrated episodes in the

history of Pakistan's aerial warfare. Then Squadron Leader Muhammad Mahmood Alam led an interception against Indian Hawker Hunters and was credited with shooting down five aircraft in a single mission. His name became inseparable from the courage, composure and combat skill displayed by PAF in 1965. Yet, the legend of M M Alam is also the story of an institution. Behind every aircraft that climbed into battle stood radar controllers, engineers, armourers, technicians, ground crews and commanders. The pilot was visible in the sky, but the nation's resolve worked from the ground upward. That was PAF's deeper strength: individual courage made formidable by collective professionalism.

War Beyond the Dogfight

PAF's contribution was not limited to dramatic aerial engagements. It fought a complete air campaign: air defence, airfield strikes, close air support, interdiction and night bombing. PAF B-57 Canberra bombers conducted night missions against Indian airfields and other targets. In darkness, over hostile territory, their crews had to rely on discipline, navigation and nerve. These missions placed pressure on the enemy beyond the front line and demonstrated that Pakistan's striking reach did not fade after sunset. PAF aircraft also targeted transport, railway wagons carrying ammunition, armoured vehicles and other

military assets. Such strikes attacked the enemy's capacity to sustain its offensive. An army advances on fuel, logistics, reinforcements and supplies; interrupt those arteries, and its momentum begins to fail. PAF struck the road behind the tank, the rail line behind the gun and the runway behind the raid.

The Night Was Guarded Too

Pakistan's vigil did not end with daylight. On 21 September, Squadron Leader Jamal A Khan, flying an F-104 Starfighter on night air-defence alert, intercepted an Indian Canberra near Fazilka at 32,000 feet. He fired an AIM-9B Sidewinder missile, which struck the bomber. The mission is described in the source document as the only confirmed night missile kill by an F-104 worldwide. Its symbolism was immense. The darkness did not belong to the intruder. Pakistan's defenders were alert, armed and ready. The sky had no blind hour. PAF also contributed to the maritime dimension of the war by maintaining air cover over coastal areas, helping protect Karachi and supporting Pakistan Navy's operational posture. Its strike on Indian naval radar and port facilities at Okha on 08 September complemented Operation Dwarka and reflected the unity of Pakistan's armed forces in a national crisis.

Defence Day's Living Meaning

PAF paid a price. It lost 12

F-86 Sabres, one F-104 Starfighter and three B-57 bombers in combat. Behind those numbers were PAF Shaheens who accepted the ultimate risk because Pakistan stood behind them. Their sacrifice must never become a mere ceremonial phrase. Defence Day calls upon every Pakistani to remember that freedom is protected by preparedness, unity, discipline and an unyielding sense of duty. The heroes of 1965 did not possess ideal circumstances. They possessed something greater: the determination to make difficult circumstances yield to professional excellence. They showed that courage is not noise. It is composure when danger approaches. They showed that patriotism is not a slogan. It is service when sacrifice is required. They showed that Pakistan's strength is not only in its weapons, but in the character of its people. On this Defence Day, let the nation remember those who rose into the sky when Pakistan needed them most. Let us remember the Sabres over Chhamb, the strikes that helped save Lahore, the bold raid on Pathankot, the steel spirit of Sargodha and the sentinels who guarded even the night. In September 1965, PAF did not merely defend Pakistan's airspace. It defended Pakistan's honour. And through the roar of its wings, it declared a truth that still burns in the national heart: Pakistan may be challenged. Pakistan may be tested. But Pakistan will never be broken.

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