

The Honour for the Dishonoured

Indian government's decision to award the Vir Chakra, third highest gallantry award, to a downed Indian Air Force (IAF) pilot from an aerial engagement with Pakistan Air Force (PAF) on 27 February 2019, that too through a fake and fabricated citation, has raised serious questions on the credibility of the entire system of assessment and awards in India.

One can argue that it is the choice of the Government of India to decide who they want to award. Agreed, but not on fake, fabricated and unproven claims that the recipient had shot down a PAF F-16 before getting shot himself. Therefore, it is necessary to dissect the citation before quoting other sources to prove that IAF's claim was absolutely false and fabricated and has only been done so for political gains supported by a strong domestic media campaign.

As the citation reads, "Wing Commander (now Group Captain) Varthaman Abhinandan (27981) On 27 February 2019, at around 0955h, a large force of Pakistan Air Force fighter aircraft, consisting of advanced fourth-generation F-16 and JF-17, were detected heading towards LoC. At about 1000 hrs, Wing Commander Varthaman Abhinandan was scrambled to intercept this package. Displaying exceptional air combat acumen and knowledge of the enemy's tactics, Wing Commander Varthaman Abhinandan scanned the low altitude airspace with his Airborne Intercept (AI) radar and picked up an enemy aircraft that was flying low to ambush the Indian fighter-interceptor aircraft."

The most interesting part of the citation is where India accepts that Abhi ejected and fell down in enemy territory, thereby accepting areas across the Line of Control (LoC) as Pakistan's territory.

This part of the citation wilfully accepts the superiority of PAF fighter aircraft taking part in the operations, perhaps to show later that an inferior and old vintage MiG-21 Bison was able to shoot down a much superior F-16, a dream that every IAF pilot would have.

The citation continues, "Wing Commander Varthaman Abhinandan alerted the other formation pilots towards this surprise threat. He then consolidated the riposte, by gathering his wingman in an offensive formation against the hostile Pakistani aircraft now dropping weapon on Indian Army positions. This audacious and aggressive maneuver forced the enemy aircraft into tactical chaos. All the enemy aircraft thereafter turned back including rear-echelon aircraft who were yet to launch their air to ground weapons."

This is an interesting part of the citation because an IAF pilot forced a much superior force package of the PAF into tactical chaos only by getting his wingman in an offensive formation. Then, the rear echelon PAF aircraft that were yet to launch their air to ground weapons turned back, whereas the first action that any fighter aircraft which spots an interceptor takes is to drop its weapons to lighten itself either to extricate or to engage in combat. Moreover, who was watching all this, remains a mystery.

The citation further reads, “Wing Commander Varthaman Abhinandan then pursued a retreating enemy fighter bomber aircraft, and in the ensuing aerial combat shot down an F-16 aircraft with his onboard missile. However, in the melee, one of the enemy aircraft fired multiple advanced BVR missiles, one of which hit his aircraft forcing him to eject in enemy territory.... he was repatriated on 01 March 2019. His action raised the morale of armed forces in general and IAF pilots in particular.”

This is the funniest part of the citation. It initially said that Abhi was chasing the retreating aircraft which had not off-loaded its weapons, and then it says that in the ensuing air combat it shot the F-16 down, and in the bargain got shot by some unknown enemy aircraft which fired multiple BVR missiles. Where was his wingman when Abhi was shot? And how a retreating F-16 could be termed as engaged in air combat, is also not understood. Where did the wreckage of the F-16 fall, and where did its pilot go, and why was it not shown to international media the next day, as was done by Pakistan’s Director General Inter-Services Public Relations (DG ISPR) on 28 February 2019, within two days of the failed IAF strikes at night in Balakot, where only a few trees were damaged as against the claims of having destroyed a terror training camp and killing over 250 alleged terrorists? The most interesting and productive part of the citation is where India accepts that Abhi ejected and fell down in enemy territory, thereby accepting areas across the Line of Control (LoC) as Pakistan’s territory. Perhaps, this aspect has been missed by Pakistan’s institutions.

It is now necessary to quote US scholar Christine Fair, who is known for being critical of Pakistan’s Armed Forces. Fair was quoted by Chander Suta Dogra in *The Wire* on 19 December 2019 that, “I say this clearly with 100 percent certitude that there was no F-16 struck down. I do not believe you did. I believe that my bonafides as a critic of Pakistan stand for itself.” Fair was speaking at the Military Literature Festival in Chandigarh, India. However, Fair did not hide her hate for Pakistan and said, “that she and many others in the Pentagon actually wished that the IAF had indeed shot down the F-16 because India had ‘a right to bomb Pakistan’ in retaliation for the Pulwama attack.” Fair maintained that “India has lost a lot of credibility in the ways that certain images have been deployed through social media that do not show what they show, with the level of certainty that is asserted.”

In my opinion, the IAF has done a lot of damage to its credibility as a professional service by staking a fake and fabricated claim of shooting down an F-16, only to politically benefit the Modi-led BJP government, and it would be interesting to analyse the morale of its personnel following the award of Vir Chakra to a downed, captured and then returned pilot in Pakistan’s territory.

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