

Was warned against low aerobatics

Hindustan Times Correspondent

NEW DELHI, June 23 — The Indian flying wizard, Capt. Kamendra Singh, Aviation Adviser to the Punjab Government and Mr Sanjay Gandhi's flying guru, had warned Mr Gandhi two days ago against aerobatics below 2,000 feet, it was learnt today.

Last week, Mr Sanjay Gandhi, known for his dare-devil aerobatics, had a near escape. He performed a barrel-roll at slightly less than 2,000 feet and came out of it at 500 feet, after losing 1,500 feet. It was dangerous.

Two eye-witnesses, Mr A. Varshnei and Mr R. Whig, both members of the Delhi Flying Club, told this reporter that Mr Gandhi arrived at the Flying Club at about 8.30 a.m.

Mr Gandhi went towards the northern sector, which is designated as the general flying area. He took off with Capt. S. Saxena. Mr Gandhi was at the controls in the rear.

Witnesses claim they saw the aircraft bank very steeply for a roll. Suddenly, the nose tipped down and the Pitt Special rolled. About 300 feet, it spun slipped out of control and crashed.

It all happened within seconds. Subsequently, the control tower telephoned the Delhi Flying Club that the Pitt Special with Sanjay aboard had crashed.

According to aviation rules, there is no radio communication between the control tower and an aerobatic aircraft. Aerobatics are prohibited in over-populated areas but regular flying is permitted with a clearance of 1,000 feet over the highest obstacle in a radius of one mile except circuits and landing, which are done at 700 feet at the Delhi Flying Club.

Earlier, too, Mr Gandhi had narrow escapes. He was a "passenger" in the Beachcraft Bonanza, commanded by Capt. N. P. Singh, which crash-landed near Lucknow early in 1977. The aircraft under-carriage had not been lowered. The aircraft was a single-engine.

As for the ill-fated aircraft, it was delivered about two months ago by the customs which had seized it. Its performance efficiency was being tried out over the past five days its airworthiness certificate was redone only recently.

A Flying Club source said Capt. Saxena, Mr Sanjay Gandhi's co-pilot in today's mishap, was medically unfit for flying. He suffered from hernia. The doctors had advised an operation.

Mr Gandhi had logged 627 flying hours till June 17. He got the Private Pilot Licence (PPL) on Sept. 9, 1976. And, on June 23, last year he was issued a Commercial Pilot Licence (CPL).

The CPL was valid up to March 21, 1981. His last medical fitness test was conducted on March 19, 1980, for flying purposes. It was valid for one year. He was allowed to fly Pushpak, Bonanza, Beach Baron, Piper Super Cruiser, twin Beach and Maule aircraft.

Mr Gandhi, who was an assistant pilot instructor with the Delhi Flying Club, had become a full-fledged instructor just 15 days ago. He had obtained instructor's rating January last. Cool, confident and dedicated, he was thorough with navigation and air rules.

As for Capt. Saxena, former Chief Flying Instructor, he got the PPL on Sept. 23, 1964, and the instructor's rating on Dec. 29 the same year. His licence was valid up to Sept. 30 this year. He has trained many pilots.

The ill-fated Pitts Special had been lying in package for quite some time and was assembled at the Delhi Flying Club last week. It was tested four days ago by Capt. Kamendra Singh. Mr Gandhi made the third test flight this morning.

It is believed the aircraft belonged to Mr Gandhi and was registered with the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) in the name of a Calcutta firm, Messrs. Thomas Moudia Limited under registration number VT-EGN of June 21, 1980.

The DGCA gave it a certificate of airworthiness just two days ago. Since then the aircraft had logged 10 hours. How it came for use at the Delhi Flying Club has not been ascertained.

According to this morning's flight plan, Capt. Saxena, was in the front seat and Mr Gandhi in the rear. The highly sensitive-control aircraft can be manoeuvred from both seats. The front and rear seating arrangement is called tandem.

PTI adds:

It was "a little difficult to say," who was commanding the aircraft at the time of the crash, said Mr H. Y. Sharada Prasad, Information Adviser to the Prime Minister. Both Mr Gandhi and Capt. Saxena were fully qualified to fly.

More Soviet assistance to Kabul pledged

MOSCOW, June 23 (PTI)—President Brezhnev said today that while withdrawing some units of Soviet troops from Afghanistan "on agreement with the Afghan Government", the Soviet Union would "further help" that country "build the new life and preserve gains of the April revolution."

He made the statement in a report to the plenary meeting of the Soviet Communist Party Central Committee.

Life in Afghanistan, the Soviet leader said "is now gradually coming back to normal. Large gangs of counter-revolutionaries were routed."

"The interventionists have suffered a serious defeat. In these conditions we decided to withdraw from Afghanistan some units of our military contingent," he told the plenary meeting which also heard a report from Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko on the current international situation and Soviet foreign policy.

Safety limits ignored

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buildings is not permitted. While doing loops, the plane can lose its height alarmingly. This is the reason for prescribing that it should do exercises at a height of 5,000 feet and above and away from the flying path of commercial planes.

The question being asked in the aviation circles is what made the Directorate-General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) permit the flying over the city? Also, whether the aerodrome officer at the Safdarjung Airport had received in advance and approved the flight plan of the aircraft clearly within the defined safety limits?

It is reported that DGCA Director-General J. Zaheer has in a note to the Government about two weeks ago protested against the violation of safety rules by some trainee pilots of the Delhi Flying Club.

Mr Sanjay Gandhi who received the Commercial Pilots Licence (CPL) on June 23, 1979 had a total flying experience of 627.50 hours as on April 30 1980. The licence was valid till March 21, 1981.

Capt. Subhash Saxena, former Chief Instructor of the Delhi Flying Club had a flying experience of 40,955 hours and held both CPL and the Private Pilots Licence (PPL). Both the licences were valid.

According to Jane's "All the World Aircraft", the two-seat version of the Pitts biplane is manufactured and sold by the Pitts Aerobatics Company of the United States. The firm manufactures high