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**WING COMMANDER PADMANABHA GAUTAM (Then SQUADRON LEADER)**

<b>SERVICE NUMBER</b>	4482 F (P)
<b>RANK</b>	Group Captain (Then Squadron Leader)
<b>NAME</b>	Padmanabha Gautam
<b>SON OF</b>	Nilkanta Padmanabha
<b>RESIDENT OF (Village/District/State)/ DOMICILE</b>	Mumbai, Maharashtra
<b>UNIT</b>	No. 16 SQUADRON
<b>SERVICE</b>	Indian Air Force
<b>DATE OF ENROLMENT/ COMMISSION</b>	01 April 1953
<b>AWARD/DATE OF ACTION</b>	Maha Vir Chakra*/ 06 September 1965 & 05 December 1971
<b>WAR/BATTLE/OPERATION</b>	1965 Indo Pak War & 1971 Indo Pak War
<b>OTHER AWARDS WITH DATE</b>	Maha Vir Chakra- 1971 Vayu Medal-1961 (06 December 1961)



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Wing Commander (Wg Cdr) Padmanabha Gautam was born on 23 July 1933, and grew up in Indore, where both his parents were academicians. His father Mr. Neelkanta Padmanabha was a physics professor, and later the principal, at Ahalyabai Holkar College. Wg Cdr Gautam joined the 3rd Course at the Joint Services Wing (JSW), the predecessor of the NDA, which was in Clement Town, Dehra Dun at that time. Gautam's parents served the country in a matchless way by offering three sons to the Indian Air Force and all three sons distinguished themselves. While Padmanabha Gautam became a legend as a bomber pilot, his two younger brothers, Wing Commander P.Ashoka and Wing Commander Ajith were part of the much-coveted group pilots in the IAF.

Wing Commander Gautam was homeschooled till the age of 12. He went on to pursue Physics, Chemistry and Biology. After completing his education from Holkar College Indore. He got trained as a pilot at Begumpet, with the 60th Pilots' Course, and was commissioned on 01 April in 1953. His first spells of Squadron service were with a Spitfire/Vampire Squadron, in Halwara; and then with a Toofani Squadron. By 1956 he had been selected for the Flying Instructors' School (FIS). During 1957-58, he was an instructor at the Air Force Flying College in Jodhpur, instructing on Harvard aircraft. In 1958 he converted to the Canberra, at the Jet Bomber Conversion Unit (JBCU), in Agra. In the early 1960s, Wing Commander Gautam was posted to Iraq, as an instructor and flew MiG-15s, and MiG-17s aircraft during that period. From late 1961 to early 1962 he served with the 5 Squadron Detachment, in the first Indian-manned UN peacekeeping mission in the Congo. Wing Commander Gautam received the first of his gallantry decorations, a Vayu Sena Medal, for his contributions there.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Honourpoint- An online memorial for every Indian Soldier Wg Cdr Padmanabha Gautam (Accessed 29 September 2022)

<https://www.honourpoint.in/profile/wg-cdr-padmanabha-gautam-mvc-bar-vsm/>



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*Wg Cdr. Padmanabha Gautam in his early days as a young IAF Pilot .*

Source: <https://www.honourpoint.in/profile/wg-cdr-padmanabha-gautam-mvc-bar-vsm/>

As a Flight Lieutenant in No.5 Squadron, Wing Commander Padmanabha Gautam was in the first batch of Indian Expeditionary Forces deputed to Congo in 1961. Flight Lieutenant Gautam was one of the pilots operating with the Canberra Unit in the Congo during 1961. On 6th of December, 1961, he was ordered to attack Kolwezi airfield in Katanga. Despite extreme adverse weather conditions and heavy enemy opposition, he courageously and successfully carried out several attacks on the airfield and completely destroyed Fauga aircraft which was harassing UN ground forces. He also shot up tires on Katangese aircraft on the ground and neutralised other installations around it. Flight Lieutenant Gautam also carried out several other successful missions or Elizabethville in close support of the ground forces operating against Katangese.

Throughout the operations, Flight Lieutenant Gautam displayed commendable courage and devotion to duty in the face of enemy. For his courage, devotion to duty and exemplary performance, he was awarded the Vayu Sena Medal.

On his return, after very commendable operations with the UN forces in Congo, then Squadron Leader Gautam was posted as the Commanding Officer of the Jet Bomber Conversion Unit to pass on his unique skill of flying the Canberra bomber to other aspiring bomber pilots. During this tenure, he was called upon to participate in the Indo-Pak war of 1965. In this war, titled 'Operation Riddle'.

The genesis of Indo-Pak conflict can be traced back to the year 1947. The bone of contention between India and Pakistan are the attempts by Pakistan to annex the erstwhile state of Jammu and



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Kashmir by any means. The ceasefire line in Jammu and Kashmir and our frontiers with Pakistan have remained a sensitive zone for years. Pakistan has on and off resorted to firing, incursions and intrusions at several points of these frontiers, compelling India to adopt defensive measures. These attempts of Pakistan have been met by the Indian Armed Forces with commendable bravery and steely resilience, but always with great restraint to not escalate the conflict. The Indo-Pak war of 1965 was the second war fought between these two bordering countries. While India was still recovering from the damages of Sino-India war of 1962, Pakistan saw it as an opportunity to acquire Jammu and Kashmir with might, presuming India to be weak in terms of defence preparation. The war initiated on 24 April 1965, when Pakistan Army, attacked our territory in the Rann of Kutch and penetrated six to eight miles inside the Indian territory. This act of illegal occupation of Indian territory constituted violation of Indo-Pak Border Agreement 1960 and international law as per the United Nations Charter. The aerial phase of the war began on 01 September 1965 when the Indian Air Force responded to an urgent call for air strikes against the Pakistani Army.

In 1965, Indian Air Force comprised of twenty-six Fighter Squadrons, four Bomber Squadrons, thirteen Transport Squadron and five Helicopter Units. During the 1965 Indo-Pak War, after the failure of Operation Gibraltar, a desperate Pakistan Army mounted a major armour-cum-infantry thrust in Chhamb, on 01 September 1965. The objective was to capture Akhnur Bridge and cut off Jammu-Punch Road. The same day at 1600 Hours General Jayanto Nath Chaudhuri the Chief of Army Staff and Air Marshal Arjan Singh, the Chief of Air Staff, met the Defence Minister Yashwantrao Balwantrao Chavan and Defence Secretary Shri PVR Rao and sought permission to use the Indian Air force (IAF) against the invaders. A 'go ahead' was obtained and within an hour the IAF went into action to stem the onslaught. 26 fighter-bombers of IAF (12 Vampires and 14 Mysteres) took off from Pathankot for Chhamb Sector just before sunset. In a swift action, the IAF destroyed ten tanks, two automatic guns and 30-40 vehicles of the invading column. The PAF Sabres, which were patrolling just across the border retaliated and shot down four Indian Vampires killing three of our pilots. <sup>2</sup>

During 1965 Indo-Pak War, he led raids on Peshawar as lead aircraft, marking the target with Target Indicating bombs and incendiary flares. In these missions, it was invariably the pathfinders that indicated the targets. Success or failure depended a great deal on the accuracy of the pathfinder. Their job was invariably unenviable. Heading much in front of other bombers, these Canberras were specialists. They marked out the way to the target and the target as well. Six aircraft flew all the way to the Afghan border to bomb the Peshawar airfield and successfully

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<sup>2</sup> The Indian-Pakistan War of 1965: A History. S.N. Prasad. U.P. Thaplial (2011). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, Government of India



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attacked the target. All the six aircraft returned without loss, in spite of interception by Pakistani Starfighters carrying missiles.

Till the morning of 06 September IAF and PAF (Pakistani Air Force) were engaged in a limited war. But the day marked beginning of a new phase in the air war when the Indian Army opened a new front against Pakistan and the Pakistani President General Ayub Khan formally declared war on India. On 06 September alone, IAF flew 31 Mystere sorties from Pathankot and Adampur, 16 Hunter sorties from Halwara and six Canberra sorties from Agra in support of the Indian Army operations in the Chhamb Sector and for offensive recce in XI Corps area. 14 Gnat and four MiG-21 air defence missions of 'escort and sweep' were undertaken in areas where ground attack aircrafts were operative. The IAF claimed nine tanks, twelve heavy guns, four ack-ack guns, twenty-six vehicles and one military train as destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the war he was given a number of challenging and dangerous missions within the enemy territory on short notice when combat first started. Between September 06 and 21 September 1965, he conducted six offensive, tactical, and close support missions deep into enemy territory, despite intense ground fire and Pak Sabre jet attacks. These missions included reconnaissance into enemy territory, destroying the airfields at Akwal and Gujarat, and strafing enemy concentration in the Gujarat and Chawinda regions. He was awarded the Maha Vir Chakra for exhibiting extraordinary bravery, determination, and devotion to duty.

In 1968, on completion of his tenure as the Commanding Officer of the Bomber Conversion Training unit, Gautam was posted to Iraq, as part of the Indian Training Team. In this tenure, he trained Iraqi pilots to fly the MiG-15, and MiG-17. An emergency during a training flight caused a forced landing on the runway. True to form, Gautam displayed exemplary skill and presence of mind saving two precious lives as well as an expensive aircraft of the Iraqi Air Force. He was commended by the Iraqi Air Force for this act.

After his return from Iraq in 1969, he took over No.16 Squadron - The Cobras, based at Gorakhpur, operating his favorite Canberra Bomber. In December 1971, the Squadron was deployed to undertake bombing missions under "Operation Cactus Lilly" Wing Commander Gautam led six missions under Operation Cactus Lilly,' from 3rd December to 15th December 1971, carrying out three missions over West Pakistan and three missions over East Pakistan. For all six missions, the navigator of his aircraft was Squadron Leader K.K.Dutta (KKD).

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<sup>3</sup> The Indian-Pakistan War of 1965: A History. S.N. Prasad. U.P. Thapliyal (2011). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, Government of India



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India gained Independence in 1947, following the partition of the country and the creation of Pakistan. The foundation of Pakistan was laid by the Muslim League based on the two-nation theory. Pakistan comprised two wings- East and West Pakistan which were geographically separated by 1600 kms Indian territory. The two wings of Pakistan were culturally and linguistically different and the diversities between the two wings could not be bridged by an emotional appeal to religion. Consequently, fissures started erupting in the political body of Pakistan soon after the Independence and with each passing year it widened. In the absence of appropriate defence arrangements, the people of East Pakistan felt isolated and abandoned. Finally, the malfeasance of Pakistani leadership during Cyclone Bhola and the overwhelming support for the Awami League in the 1970 elections, proved the proverbial last straw on the camel's back.<sup>4</sup> The Awami League led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (of East Pakistan) secured an absolute majority in the general elections held in December 1970. This entitled the League to form a Government in Pakistan. However, Pakistan's military rulers denied this democratic right to the Awami League, in connivance with the PPP, led by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. This arbitrary act of government caused deep resentment among the population of East Pakistan resulting in widespread protests. When the slide became unmanageable, the Pakistani rulers resorted to a midnight crackdown on 25 March 1971. Government ordered a military crackdown and repression wherein, the Pakistan army under Lieutenant General Tikka Khan unleashed a reign of terror and massacred thousands of Bengalis in a genocide code-named 'Operation Searchlight'. Pakistan launched its attack against India on 03 December 1971. The Indo-Pak War of 1971 was the first war when the Indian Government engaged all three services on a large scale.

As the tension mounted along the Indo-Pak borders, violations of the Indian Air Space by PAF became very frequent. In November 1971, ten major air violations had taken place in areas around Srinagar, Amritsar, Jammu, Jamnagar and Ganganagar. In the Eastern sector, on 22 November 1971, three PAF F-86 Sabres were shot over Boyra. On 03 December at 1745Hr, the PAF simultaneously attacked Indian airfields at Amritsar, Srinagar, Avantipur and Pathankot, the Advance Landing Ground (ALG) at Faridkot and the radar unit at Amritsar. complete understanding between the Army and the IAF also effectively halted Pakistan's determined offensive during the Battle of Longewala. In the Eastern sector, the IAF achieved total air superiority within the first 24 hours of the outbreak of hostilities. The first heli-borne operation was undertaken by the IAF in 1971 when it heli-lifted 4/5 GORKHA RIFLES and landed them at Sylhet nearly 100 kilometres behind enemy lines. IAF also helped in air bridging the innumerable water obstacles crisscrossing the countryside. The effective coordination and cooperation among the tri-services sealed the Indian victory in this war.

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<sup>4</sup> The India-Pakistan War of 1971: A History. S.N Prasad and U.P. Thapliyal. (2014). Natraj Publishers and Ministry of Defence, India



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Wing Commander Gautam's first mission was on 03-04 December 1971 morning over Mianwali. He and Dutta took off from Gorakhpur and landed at Ambala, where the aircraft was to be loaded with special bombs. Though it was planned to attack the runway at the airfield with special bombs, since the 'Y' plan bombs could not be made ready, the aircraft was loaded with conventional 8 X 1000 bombs to be dropped from 7000 feet. They returned to Gorakhpur after refueling at Ambala after a successful completion of the mission.

The second mission on the western sector by him and Squadron Leader Dutta was also to Mianwali on 04-05 December 1971. Unlike the previous night, the special bombs under 'Y' plan were prepared and loaded in time for the mission. They undertook the mission and found themselves facing heavy fire from anti-aircraft guns (ack-ack). They dived to 100 to 200 feet to fly parallel over the runway and release this special bomb. The only light visible was the ack-ack tracers which illuminated the runway. They had to fly under the arcs of the ack-ack along the runway. The heavy fire did not deter Wing Commander Gautam and Squadron Leader Dutta in adhering to the plan and release the special bombs which spread the jelly and the spikes over the runway at this important air field, affecting PAF operations the next day.

While they were flying low over the runway, the ack-acks were firing just above the; aircraft, almost at the same height as the aircraft. It was providence that the guns failed to score a hit on Gautam's aircraft. During the post-flight debriefing, Wing Commander Gautam expressed that the risk level in such sorties was of extreme nature, as experienced by him and Dutta in the final stage of the raid.

Nevertheless, in the annals of the Indian Air Force, Wing Commander Gautam and Squadron Leader Dutta's mission on the 04 December 1971 over Mianwali, operating at 100 feet, being exposed to tremendous risk, stands as an exceptional act of bravery and highly skillful flying and navigation at low level.

Wing Commander Gautam's third mission over West Pakistan was an interdiction mission over Raiwind rail marshalling yard about 15 NM south of Lahore. They did the first run over the yard with rockets and three subsequent runs with 20 mm front guns. Heavy ack-ack was experienced during these runs, but they came back unscathed. The subsequent three missions were flown over East Pakistan. Out of these, the first being on 11 December, was a daytime attack as a single aircraft over an army concentration near the west bank of river Sitalakha, East of Dhaka.

The fifth mission of Gautam and Dutta was also over East Pakistan on the 13th of December. It was a bombing mission over Tezgaon, Dhaka's well-defended military-cum-civil air base. This mission was carried out as Hi-Lo-Hi mission from Gorakhpur. The sixth mission flown by this crew was the last mission of the war, flown on 15th December to bomb Kurmitola Airfield at Dhaka. Though they were to bomb the airfield from 7000 feet, because of the cloud cover up to



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4900 feet, they descended below the cloud and released the bombs over the airfield at 1630 hrs. In this three aircraft raid, the last aircraft flown by Flight Lieutenant Brian Wilson and Flight Lieutenant R B Mehta was lost to ground force over Dacca. Wing Commander Padmanabha Gautam was awarded a Bar to Maha Vir Chakra for gallantry during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation Operations.

On completing his tenure at No. 16 Squadron, in 1972, Wing Commander Padmanabha Gautam was posted as Chief Operating Officer (COO) of No.4 Wing, Pune. During his curtailed tenure as COO, No. 4 Wing, Gautam converted himself to fly the famous MiG-21, which had given a creditable performance in the 1971 operations. On the morning of 25 November 1972, while taking off from runway 27 at Pune, the engine of his MiG-21 FL aircraft failed. Since this version of MiG had an ejection seat which could operate only above a height of 300 meters, he had no possibility of ejection. His aircraft crashed into rocks and burst into flames engulfing the greatest hero of the IAF, leading to his very untimely demise. Most of the stalwarts of the Canberra operations assembled at Pune to bid farewell to Wing Commander Padmanabha Gautam, a personification of all the qualities of a very able leader, pilot, and exemplary human in all respects.





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## CITATION

SQUADRON LEADER PADMANABHA GAUTAM, VM (4482) F(P)  
(Effective date of award- 06 September 1965)

Squadron Leader Padmanabha Gautam was commissioned in the Indian Air Force on 1 April 1953. Squadron Leader Gautam had already seen action in the Congo Operations flying the Canberra bomber of No.5 "Tuskers" Squadron in support of the United Nations Ground Troops. Squadron Leader Gautam was awarded the Vayu Sena Medal for his role in the Congo Operations.

During the Indo-Pak War 1965, Squadron Leader Gautam was commanding the Jet Bomber Conversion Unit (JBCU) flying Canberra bombers at Agra. On the outbreak of the hostilities, he was assigned many difficult and dangerous missions into enemy territory at short notice. He undertook six offensive, tactical and close support missions deep into enemy territory between 6 and 21 September 1965, notwithstanding the heavy ground fire and Pak Sabre jet attacks.

These missions included reconnaissance into enemy territory, bombing of Akwal and Gujarat airfields and strafing of enemy concentrations in Gujarat and Chawinda areas. For displaying exceptional courage, determination, and devotion to duty he was decorated with Maha Vir Chakra.

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Reference: Gazette of India, Notification No.\_\_\_\_\_ dated\_\_\_\_\_



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## CITATION

SQUADRON LEADER PADMANABHA GAUTAM, MVC, VM (4482) F(P)  
(Effective date of award- 05 December 1971)

Wing Commander Padmanabha Gautam, MVC; VM, Commanding Officer of a bomber squadron [No.16 Squadron, Canberras] led many missions deep into enemy territory. Notable among these are two raids on the night of December 5th and 7th, 1971, when he led attacks on Mianwali airfield. On both these occasions he and his formation were met with intense anti-aircraft fire. Despite that, the target was attacked with great precision, at low level, and heavy damage was inflicted. On other missions, Wg Cdr Gautam carried out rocket and four gun attacks on railway marshalling yards in the Montgomery-Raiwind area with conspicuous success. Throughout the period of operations, Wg Cdr Gautam displayed an ability for cool and clear planning, along with unflinching courage, exemplar flying skill and leadership of the highest order in carrying out many hazardous missions. His conduct has been in the finest tradition of the Air Force. with Maha Vir Chakra.

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Reference: Gazette of India, Notification No.\_\_\_\_\_ dated\_\_\_\_\_



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## VIDEOS

1965 INDO-PAK Air War (Source: YouTube PIB India)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6mPJm\\_I-X8&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6mPJm_I-X8&t=1s)

1965 INDO-PAK AIR WAR (YouTube: Ministry of Defence, Government of India)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7j5OeV-9eM>

Wg Cdr Padmanabha Gautam -His Audacious Bombing on Enemy Territory Speaks of His  
Courage & Dedication (Youtube: utnb **பெளத்திக்**)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Zh7bWRgDDE&t=94s>

Special programme: 65 Ki Jung (Sajish) (YouTube: DD News)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSdsrhWhimM>

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## **OTHER INTERESTING RESOURCES<sup>6</sup>**

Sabre Down! Dogfight over IIT Kharagpur - 1965 India-Pakistan war (Source: Youtube  
Cybersurg - Shiv's Military Aircraft Channel)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQVRnQnpZwM>

India Pakistan war of 1965 - a picture documentary (Source: YouTube Shiv's Military Aircraft  
Channel)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81cGFqYX0ZU>

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