

AeSSA mourns the loss of two stalwart aviators

Gert Jansen van Rensburg, President: AeSSA

On behalf of the Aeronautical Society of South Africa (AeSSA), it is with great sadness and regret that I announce that the South African aviation industry suffered a tremendous loss on 17 March 2021, due to the untimely death of two stalwart aviators: Maj Gen Des Barker (SAAF, Ret) and Col Rama Iyer (SAAF, Ret) of the South African Civil Aviation Authority (SA CAA). Col Iyer was a former Indian Air Force (AIF) fighter pilot.



These two top pilots lost their lives in an accident at the Swartkops AFB while attempting to land a *Patchen Explorer* light aircraft, a one-of-a-kind example of the SAAF Museum Heritage flight collection. The Directorate: Corporate Communication of the South African National Defence Force released a communique with the following statement: "The SA National Defence Force (SANDF) Military Command is saddened to learn of the untimely death of two Reserve Force pilots as a result of a fatal Patchen Explorer aircraft crash during the scheduled General Flying day at the SAAF Museum in Valhalla, Pretoria. The fatal crash happened on Wednesday, 17 March 2021 at approximately 09:30am".

Before moving to the SA Civil Aviation Authority (SA CAA), Col Iyer was part of the South African Air Force's training directorate and a regular visitor to the South African Air Force Museum, where he piloted a number of heritage aircraft, including the Patchen Explorer.

To the Aeronautical Society of South Africa (AeSSA) and the Flight Test Society of South Africa (FTSSA), the loss of Des Barker is devastating and will be sorely felt for years to come.

Given his long-standing relationship with the AeSSA, it is my privilege to pay a special tribute to the life of Des Barker.



In Memoriam - Maj Gen Desmond Barker, (SAAF, Ret), SM, MM, MSETP, FRAeS



Desmond Barker (1949 - 2021) was a retired South African Air Force (SAAF) officer with his Air Force career spanning over four decades, including time as the SAAF's Chief Test Pilot, the air attaché in London, UK, the Air Force Test Flight Development Centre, and the Air Force Base Makhado commander, and a member of the Air Force's aerobatic display team. He was awarded the Southern Cross Medal and made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAeS).

Des was born on 25 August 1949 in Pretoria and attended the Lyttleton Manor High School. He was the third generation in his family to join the SAAF in 1968, completing his pilot training in 1969.

His first posting was to the Combat Flying School of the SAAF from 1970 to 1983. He then moved to the Central Flying School at Langebaanweg, Saldanha, flying the Aermacchi Impala. Later he also flew Canberras at 12 Squadron. In 1984 he started training as a test pilot and graduated in 1985. He was then posted to 1 Squadron and flew the Dassault Mirage F1 AZ. During this time, he was seconded to ARMSCOR, to test the Mirage Cheetah modernized fighter aircraft.

For his exceptional contribution to flight-testing he was awarded the Southern Cross Medal in 1990. A year later he was appointed Chief Test Pilot at the SAAF Test Flight and Development Centre (TFDC) at the Overberg Air Force Base near Arniston. After attending the Senior Command and Staff Course in 1995, he was appointed Commanding Officer of the TFDC and on 30 January 1996 he was promoted to the rank of Colonel. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Barker_-_cite_note-SAAF20080039-1

In 2000 he was posted to South Africa's High Commission in London as air attaché, to return to South Africa in 2003 to attend the Executive National Security Programme at the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) College. In January 2004 he was appointed General Officer Commanding of the Makhado Air Force Base with the rank of Brigadier General. He was assigned as Chief Director - Force Preparation in June 2006 and promoted to Major General.

After he retired from the SAAF in May 2008, Des was appointed at the CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) in Pretoria, where he took on various positions, including the management of the Aeronautics Research unit, until March 2017.

Overall, he had accumulated 7200 flying hours and flown 58 different types of aircraft and continued his flying career after retirement as a civilian experimental test pilot. He was a member of the SAAF's aerobatic display team, the Silver Falcons. As a Reserve Force member of the SAAF, he flew the Piaggio P-166 Albatross, Aermacchi AM-3C/AM-4 and the Patchen Explorer at the SAAF Heritage Flight.

He served as the Vice president of the South African Society of Experimental Test Pilots (SETP) and as Council Member of the AeSSA, as liaison for the FTSSA, and on the board of Air Show South Africa.

Des published several books, including *Zero Error Margin – Display Flying Analysed* (2003). In 2017, he co-authored the book, *Wings Over Langebaanweg – A History of Fighter Training in the South African Air Force, from Spitfire to Impala*. He has forwarded a manuscript to the International Council of Air Shows in the USA, *The Anatomy of Airshow Accidents* for publishing at the end of 2019, which focused amongst others, on the decision-making and the fickleness of judgement of display pilots.



Apart from him being widely known as having by far the most aircraft types of any SAAF pilot in his lengthy logbook, Des added one more to an already impressive list of achievements, when the Herman R Salmon Technical Publications Award was presented to him by the SETP. He received this prestigious award for 2020's best technical paper for his publication, "Flight Test Report: Focke-Wulf Piaggio P149D-Turbo Prop", in the SETP quarterly journal, *Cockpit*.

This 49-year-old award was renamed in 1981 to commemorate the test pilot Herman R "Fish" Salmon, who died in an aircraft accident. There have been 48 recipients of this award, from 1971 to the present, with no award in 1981. Criteria for the award include originality, interest to SETP members and contribution to flight testing. Read more about [SETP](#).

In June 2018 Des was awarded the Honorary Fellowship of the Royal Aeronautical Society (RAeS), only the second South African to receive this prestigious award. The RAeS is an international, multi-disciplinary professional institution dedicated to the global aerospace community, with more than twenty-two thousand members. In the past 101 years, the Honorary Fellowship title has been awarded since the first in 1917, only 191 Honorary Fellowships have been awarded.

Des's citation issued by the RAeS reads: "*Major General Barker, experimental test pilot, is admitted to Honorary Fellowship in recognition of the major role he played in establishing and developing a formal flight test capability in the South African Air Force (SAAF) and Defence industry. In a flying career spanning more than four decades, Major General Barker also played key roles in a wide range of SAAF flight test programmes. In addition, through his publications and presentations he made a significant contribution to display flying safety internationally*".

His other awards include:

- The European Air Show Council Paul Bowen Award in 2011, "*in recognition of his contribution to airshow safety in Europe*",
- Society of Experimental Test Pilots, Guillaumaud Trophy in 2012, and
- The Jock Maitland Sword of Honour 2018, "*in recognition of his long-term contribution and support of Air show Pilots and Organizers across the Globe in pursuit of Safety and Excellence in the Air show Community*".

After his retirement from the CSIR, Des remained self-employed as a civilian experimental test pilot and flew numerous other civilian aircraft for the Warbirds Aircraft Maintenance Organisation at the Wonderboom Airport in Pretoria.

The deaths of both Des Barker and Rama Iyer are felt as an incredibly sad loss to the aviation fraternity; our thoughts are with their beloved family, friends, the SAAF and the SAAF Museum.

May their souls rest in peace.

Now raise your glass with me my friend

And turn your head

To the sound of thunder in your ears

There have been few

Who have had the honour

Like those now here.....

For in a dive, with guns blazing,

Or in a deadly spiral chase

We avenge the deaths of those

Whom passed before us

And in return,

They reserve for us a place.

Fights On!

Acknowledgement:: Lance Wellington



Individual tributes

Our Aeronautical Society suffered a devastating loss yesterday as did so many others who were associated with Gen Des Barker, whether professionally or personally. He was exceptionally knowledgeable on a wide range of complex Aviation matters which he shared generously with other similarly enthusiastic people. His awesome sense of humour made any lecture he gave a delight to attend and his all-consuming love of flying and his Air Force linkages were unforgettable. Long will he be remembered in our midst. We salute you Des Barker. Rest in Peace.

Gen (Ret) Winston Thackwray

Des Barker was for so many years the leading figure on fixed wing fighter aircraft testing in South Africa. He will be sorely missed for his flying skills, caring and endless willingness to be a guiding light in a multitude of aircraft development projects and enterprises, some of which I had the honour and privilege of partaking in and successful accomplish. In so many ways he was a true blessing and touched a multitude of colleagues and industry partners' hearts, both locally and internationally. He never ceased to provide sound mentorship and support in the many complex and technologically challenging SAAF and other development programs that he wholeheartedly supported. We will sincerely miss his good sense of humour, technical expertise and objective professional execution of flight test development activities.



For now, the call-sign 'Bishop' will sadly be silent in our realm but will live on in eternity – until we meet again.

God speed, Sir...God speed.

Gert Jansen van Rensburg

AeSSA President