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WING COMMANDER (Then SQUADRON LEADER) RAKESH SHARMA[1]

SERVICE NUMBER	12396 GD (P)
RANK	Wing Commander (then Squadron Leader)
NAME	Rakesh Sharma
SON OF	D N Sharma
RESIDENT OF (Village/District/State)/ DOMICILE	Patiala, Punjab
UNIT/REGIMENT/CORPS	
SERVICE	Indian Air Force
DATE OF ENROLMENT/COMMISSION	13 June 1970
AWARD/DATE OF ACTION	Ashoka Chakra/ 1984
WAR/BATTLE/OPERATION	
OTHER AWARDS WITH DATE	

[1] The GAP team is deeply grateful to the Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, AC (Retd) for providing us valuable information.

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Wing Commander (then Squadron Leader) Rakesh Sharma was born on 13 Jan 1949 at Patiala, Panjab. Son of Shri D N Sharma, Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma went to St. George's Grammer School, Abid Road Hyderabad for his schooling. He graduated from the National Defence Academy in 1968, after completion of flying training, and was commissioned into the Indian Air Force as a Fighter Pilot on 13 June 1970[2]. He was a part of the prestigious combined space initiative between the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) and the Soviet Intercosmos Space program. Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma, who was then a Squadron Leader, at the time, embarked on a historic mission where he spent eight days in the outer space at Salyut 7 space station.

Apart from space exploration, he has also served in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War wherein, he flew more than 21 operational missions and volunteered for some most dangerous assignments[3]. He flew Mikoyan, MiG 21 the fighter aircraft manufactured in Russia, at the battlefield. Later, he was selected for the Production Tests Pilots Course at the Test Pilots School of the Indian Air Force's Aircraft and Systems' Testing Establishment, Bangalore.

He has also served as an Air Force Test Pilot for 15 years before being seconded to the industry, in 1987. During this period, he was selected for the Joint Indo-Soviet Space Mission, 1984, which culminated in a 7 days, 21 hours, and 40 minutes Near Earth Orbit Space Flight. The year 1984 is marked as a significant year in Indian history, India not only launched a satellite successfully, but also made a significant progress in human space exploration. Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma made a spaceflight abroad Soviet spacecraft Soyuz T-11 on April 3, 1984. This incident added a jeweled crown on the Indian Space program making Rakesh Sharma the first Indian to reach space. This had a strategic importance too, under the then Gandhian government at the helm of affairs, it was a symbol of national pride and was marked as powerful demonstration of India's scientific and technological prowess. Also, the mission provided India with a global standing. Apart from strategic viewpoint, this further gave India with an opportunity to strengthen its ties with a trusted and time-tested ally like Soviet Union, during the days of Cold War. This came as a blow to India's policy of Non-alignment as far as its Foreign Policy was concerned. Soviet Union played a key role in advancing India's space capabilities.

As a part of the mission, 3 astronauts were sent to space including Squadron Leader Sharma from India along with Russin cosmonauts Shri Gennady Mikhailovich Strekalov and Col Yurie Vasilevich Malyshev. Strategically, this not only reinforced India-Russia bilateral relations but also India's biases towards Soviets were globally acknowledged. The space exploration likewise, had a significance over its defense capabilities and helped with the nation's power projection, especially with regard to its neighbors like China and Pakistan. Advancement in space technology had direct implications on India's national security ambitions and later on, were used for communications, reconnaissance and surveillance purposes.

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[2] Indian Air Force: Profile of Wg Commander Rakesh Sharma
https://indianairforce.nic.in/wing-commander-rakesh-sharma/

[3] Dhanedhar, Reva. 2015. Saga of Valour: Param Vir Chakra and Ashoka Chakra Winners. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

The joint space program with ISRO and Soviet Intercosmos in 1984 that gave Squadron Leader a chance to fly into space on a Russian spaceship involved a rigorous selection procedure and included a most exacting medical test. Also, his training was conducted at the Yuri Gagarin Center in USSR where he not only endured a difficult training but had excelled with devotion and dedication, showcasing his exceptional professionalism that was highly acclaimed by the Soviet space experts. He underwent a controlled diet and strenuous physical training for endurance, speed, strength, and adaptability[4]. He along with Soviet cosmonauts Shri Gennady Mikhailovich Strekalov and Colonel Yurie Vasilevich Malyshev, abroad the Soyuz T-11 spacecraft that blasted off on 2 April 1984 from Baikonur Cosmodrome, Kazakhastan.

Squardon Leader Rakesh Sharma and Yury Malyshev with Salyut-7 crewmember Vladimir Solovyov and Oleg Atkov
Source: http://spacefacts.de/english/bio_cosm.htm

[4] Report on "Gaganyaan Gives a Boost to India-Russia Space Partnership" Economic Diplomacy Division, Ministry of External Affairs, 25 January 2020 https://indbiz.gov.in/gaganyaan-gives-a-boost-to-india-russia-space-partnership/#:~:text=On%20April%202%2C%201984%2C%20through,space%2C%20creating%20history%20for%20India.

Rakesh Sharma with Russia's Yury Malyshev and Gennady Strekalov on the Soyuz T-11.

Source: ISRO is on the hunt for next Rakesh Sharma; The Economic Times 07 July 2018
https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/science/isro-is-on-the-hunt-for-next-rakesh-sharma/who-will-be-indias-next-astronaut/slideshow/64897923.cms

The Soyuz T-11 docked and transferred the crew to the SALYUT-7 Orbital Station. The team spent 7 days, 21 hours, and 40 minutes aboard, at the space station while orbiting 120 times and more, before returning. On 11 April 1984, the astronauts safely parachuted back to earth.

At the time of traveling to space and orbiting, Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma with acute skill and precision, conducted various scientific experiments. He conducted multi-spectral photography of Northern India in anticipation of the construction of hydroelectric power stations in the Himalayas. His field of expertise was bio-medicine and remote sensing. His works also constituted experiments that were designed to gain an insight on the human cardiovascular functioning in microgravity, material sciences and conducted a few more experiments on Earth's resources for further use.[5] According to Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma, the space exploration gave the entire scientific community, the opportunity to execute researches on areas that are remote. The idea was to design certain instruments to gauge the experiment-results in space.

Squadron Leader Sharma essentially became the very first Indian to reach space, even when ISRO had not started with its manned space missions. The crew held a joint television news conference with officials in Moscow and then Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. In a very

[5] 1984: India's Space Odyssey; Livemint; 15 April 2017
https://lifestyle.livemint.com/news/talking-point/1984-india-s-space-odyssey-111646836118138.html

famous conversation that he had with the Prime Minister Shrimati Indira Gandhi, when asked about his space experience by the then Prime Minister and how India looked from space, he quoted the famous Urdu poet Muhammad Iqbal, saying *"Saare Jahan se Achcha Hindustan hamara"*

Indian Cosmonauts Wing Commander Ravish Malhotra and Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma inside a Soyuz training module
Source : http://spacefacts.de/english/bio_cosm.htm

In Soviet Union, Squadron Leader Sharma was hailed as a hero and was conferred with the highest honour of the state " Order of Lenin" by the erstwhile Soviet Union and the "Gold Star Medal". In India, he was awarded with the Ashoka Chakra, nation's highest peacetime honor for his impeccable achievement on 3 April 1984. He retired as a Wing Commander from the Indian Air Force and afterwards, joined the Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) as the Chief Test Pilot of Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL) Nasik Division until 1992 before moving to Bangalore, also as a Test Pilot based at Aircraft & Systems Testing Establishment (ASTE). He has also been a part of the team that worked on the indigenous HAL Tejas Light Combat Aircraft program as a Chief Project Pilot. Also, during his time at the HAL, his skills were extensively utilized on its indigenous Intermediate Jet Trainer Project. Out of a flying career spanning 33 years, he spent 24 years testing aircraft and systems. During this period, he flew 4000 hrs on all front-line fighter aircraft of the Indian Air Force, apart from the NT-33, NF-16 and the F-18. Retired from the test flying in 2001.

Air commodore (Later Air Marshal) Ramachandran with Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma (Later Wing Commander). 14 Squadron "Bulls" Jaguar
Source: Private Collection

In April 1984, Rakesh Sharma became the first Indian to go into Space as a member of a joint Soviet-Indian crew on the Soyuz T-11 spacecraft. He spent a week working at the Salyut-7 Orbital Station
Source: ANI
https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/photo-exhibition-inaugurated-in-chennai-to-mark-40th-anniversary-of-first-indian-cosmonaut-flight20240403234610/

In 2001, Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma joined the IT industry as the Chief Operating Officer of a Business Process Management IT company after his retirement. Later, he headed the Indian Aerospace and Defence business unit of Parametric Technology Cooperation, USA,

till his retirement from active service in 2009. Post-retirement, he was further appointed as the Chairman of the Board of Candela Labs, an IT company located in Bangalore, until he decided to step down in 2019. In 2024, Shiv Nadar University conferred Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma (Retd) with an Honorary Doctorate.

Photo Exhibition inaugurated on April 2024 to mark 40th Anniversary of the First Indian Cosmonaut; held at the Russian House in Chennai in partnership with Russian News Agency TASS

Source: ANI

https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/photo-exhibition-inaugurated-in-chennai-to-mark-40th-anniversary-of-first-indian-cosmonaut-flight20240403234610/

Wing Commander Rakesh Sharma is married to Madhu Sharma and has 2 children Kapil Sharma and Krittika. Currently, he is settled in Coonoor, at the Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu and currently, enjoying his post-retried life.

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SQUADRON LEADER RAKESH SHARMA (12396)
(12396) FLYING (PILOT)

(Effective Date of the award: 3 April 1984)

In January 1982, when it was decided that an Indian would go into space on a Soviet space ship, Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma volunteered for this very challenging mission. After a very rigorous selection process, which included a most exacting medical test, he was selected as one of the two cosmonaut candidates from among 150 highly qualified and experienced pilots of the Indian Air Force. After his selection, he underwent training as a cosmonaut at YURI GAGARIN CENTRE in the USSR, where he applied himself with total devotion and dedication and won acclaim from Soviet Space experts. Squadron Leader Rakesh Sharma completed a most arduous training schedule, with distinction and with exceptional professionalism.

On 3 April 1984, Sqn Ldr Rakesh Sharma became the first Indian to orbit in space. He carried out all the scientific experiments planned for the joint Indo-Soviet Space Mission and other tasks assigned to him with great facility and excellence. Sqn Ldr Sharma has not only carved out a place for himself in the space roll of honour but has brought glory and credit to the nation.

Squadron leader Rakesh Sharma has thus displayed most conspicuous daring and courage to become the first Indian to go into space.

Reference: Gazette of India, Notification No-57-Pres84 dated 07 May 1984

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