

## President set to make history in Sukhoi sortie Wednesday

President Pratibha Patil will Wednesday do what no woman before her has ever done - fly in a Sukhoi-30MKI, an Indian Air Force (IAF) fighter jet. And all preparations are in place for the 30-minute flight that takes off from the Lohegaon Air Force base on the outskirts of this city.

The air force base is all decked up for the sortie Wednesday morning, IAF Wing Commander T.K. Singha told IANS here Tuesday.

Upon her arrival around 9 a.m., Patil, the supreme commander of the armed forces, will be accorded a ceremonial guard of honour by the air-warriors. She will then have breakfast since she cannot fly on an empty stomach.

The president, who is 74 years old, will then change into a special G-Suit (anti-gravity suit), which helps the flier withstand high gravitational pressure by preventing excessive blood from flowing to the brain.

Wednesday's epoch-making event is a culmination of more than three months' preparations after the president expressed a desire to fly in a Sukhoi.

Besides a fitness regime that she underwent, President Patil was given a detailed briefing on her proposed flight and an audio-visual presentation of what to expect before and during the flight by senior IAF officers at Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The briefing included know-how of the different controls and equipment inside the aircraft, how to enter the aircraft, what she can touch, what she cannot touch, how to communicate with the pilot, how to handle the flying accessories like helmet and G-Suit and how the world would be visible from inside during the flight, Singha explained.

'President Patil has been found medically absolutely fit to undertake this flight,' Singha said proudly.

The Sukhoi-30MKI, in which Patil will fly, belongs to the Rhino squadron that was formed Nov 1, 1969, making it 40 years old this month.

The president's flight will be commanded by Wing Commander S. Sajan and the aircraft will hover at speeds of between 700-800 km/ph or 0.9 Mac.

'However, it will not achieve the supersonic levels of around 1100 km/ph. President Patil will occupy the rear seat behind the pilot and the flight will last around half hour,' Singha said.

But to make the experience a memorable one for President Patil, two more Sukhois will fly beside her aircraft to enable her to gain an experience of how fighter jets look in flight at that altitude and at such high speeds.

Singha said that a medical team will be on standby for attending to any medical needs of the president after the flight lands.

Maharashtra Governor S.C. Jamir will be present at the air force base to witness the flight, besides

Air Chief Marshal P.V. Naik and other top civil and defence officials.

Patil follows in the footsteps of her predecessor A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, who had also flown in a Sukhoi from Pune in 2006.

The IAF currently has 784 women officers working in different branches, but at present they are barred from the fighter stream.

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