



Lights, camera, action...

This month we talk to Tony Bianchi, engineer, aircraft builder, film industry pilot and aerobatic contestant – and avid motorsport participant!

Welcome Tony, can you tell us about your career?

My day job for more than 40 years was running our CAA approved company, Personal Plane Services. This involved maintenance, restoration, construction, operation and sales of sport, antique and ex-military aircraft.

Bianchi Aviation Film Services looked after the operational and flying side, and we specialised in the aviation elements for film and television, air show flying and sponsored aerobatic contest flying. BAFS also operates its own collection of classic and replica aircraft for film work and other events.

Most of my past flying was flight testing, competing in national and international aerobatic contests as a British team member, and display flying in a variety of aircraft. Flying for the film and TV industry was a major part of the business.

I would like to stress I'm not a professional pilot, it is and was all part of my work with aircraft, getting some voltage and sport out of the flying on offer.

In 2017 we closed the doors on Personal Plane Services at Booker, after trading there since 1966. Many issues came to a head that triggered this decision including... CAA over-regulation, plus our lease on the council-owned hangar had expired and a considerable increase in rent was on the horizon. We cleared out of the hangar, handed the keys back

Main Tony Bianchi with his vintage Porsche sports racer.

and never looked back. In retrospect, it was a wise move, what with Booker losing its charm as a good field to operate antique aircraft from, and the council's decision to reduce it in size for an industrial site.

My current day job is running our two companies, primarily preparing and operating historic sports racing cars for clients. We are located close to Thame and have a well-equipped facility. On the aviation side, with Bianchi Aviation Film Services, it's the management and operating of ours and clients' collector's aircraft. Sales of aircraft and spares, film and TV work and other associated activities – the same as the company has always done.

We are happily based at the well-run, and constantly developing, Turweston airfield. Personal Plane Services Ltd continues as an aviation consultancy organisation.

What started your interest in aviation?

My late father, Doug, had been an aviator all his life and he infected me, as one would expect, in my very early days. I've pretty much been around aircraft all my life. In fact I can't remember a time when I wasn't. I think I was a hangar rat by the time I was three years old!

In what, where and when was your first flight?

I can't actually remember my first flight but my mother told me that it was either in my father's Miles Falcon 6 or his Avro 'Club' Cadet. Anyway, it was apparently in 1949 from Blackbushe.



Where did you do your flight training?

In 1962 when I started work as an apprentice engineer with Personal Plane Services at White Waltham. At 17 years old I was able to do the PPL course with the airfield-based Airways Aero Club at the company subsidised rate of £1 per hour, on the Beagle Terrier 2. Looking back at it, it was hugely expensive because it was nearly half my weekly pay.

It was a great opportunity though, and a privilege learning with ex-war-time pilots and instructors. Archie Cole, Joan Hughes (ex ATA) and latterly the indomitable Vivian Bellamy, who was the AAC CFI for a couple of years. They passed on gems I have never forgotten – and definitely prepared me for flying some of the aircraft I managed to get into years later.

How has the upkeep of vintage/classic and warbirds changed over the years?

I think it has changed in many ways. Firstly, the sort of owner is different. These days people own great aircraft and don't – or can't – fly them. Some do, of course, but they rarely venture into more high-performance aircraft or warbirds and they don't fly very much. In the past, anyone who owned a fighter or a classic flew it, or learned to do so and flew regularly, so the contractor got lots of work.

The engineer's skills are also limited compared with years ago, and the skills needed are in short supply with the really capable people getting old and retiring. Unfortunately, there is no real training scheme for working on very early aircraft to replace these people, although I believe there is a move to remedy this.

The same with the CAA, although helpful, many people in the organisation have limited knowledge of warbirds and vintage or classic aircraft. Consequently they have introduced too much regulation to guard their organisation, with the result being over-regulation, which is ultimately the downfall and makes a business in restoring warbirds commercially a mug's game! One of the many reasons why we abandoned it.

Which films has PPS been involved in?

We first got involved in the film business constructing aircraft for the 20th Century Fox production *Those Magnificent Men in Their Flying Machines* in the early 1960s. This was followed by *The Blue Max* in 1966, also

Above left Tony owns a number of old and replica aircraft, including this replica Fokker D7 project.

Above right The Morane MS230 in which Tony and Ken Craigie had a major engine failure and just made it back to the airfield.

Photo Neil Wilson.

Right Another of Tony's machines is this replica Manning Flanders Monoplane.



for Fox. That was more than six years of continuous work, constructing five flying aircraft from scratch.

These were followed by *Mosquito Squadron* and so on... Since those days we have been involved in more than 140 productions all over the globe. I was lucky to fly on at least 100 of those. In later years, we had moved on and were able to run and manage an entire aerial unit and produce unedited material for the client or production company. You can see the credit list on the Bianchi Aviation Film Services website (www.bianchiaviation.co.uk).

Did you ever appear in any of the films?

We have to double most of the time, or act as the pilot in the script. Getting an actor airborne is almost impossible because of the risk and the insurance required. In *Aces High* I doubled for Malcolm McDowell, and I was the German WWI pilot in the movie, *The 39 Steps*.

In *High Road to China*, for weeks I doubled for Bess Armstrong, wearing a beautiful blond wig! I also played the part of a Chinese fisherman, with Ken Craigie and David Perrin.

In *Indiana Jones* I doubled for Harrison Ford (Ken Craigie doubling for Sean Connery). We have also made a lot of walk on and talking parts in TV productions. Often, I'm asked to do hands-on controls in cockpits doubling for the actor. I did this in *Murphy's War* for Peter O'Toole, for example.

Didn't LAA Chief Inspector, Ken Craigie, once work for PPS?

Yes, Ken and I were part of a team solving the inevitable problems that arise in this sort of work. If one has strict standards, which I believe we always had, without compromise, then it worked. Getting paid appropriately for our expertise was constantly the biggest challenge.

Part of joining the Bianchi organisation was perhaps an expectation of adventure, with the flying we do. That automatically brings about some risk and I thought on many occasions that we asked too much of our employees to sit as doubles in strange old aircraft. However, I guessed they could always say no! Ken was always up for the fun and the work that the industry offered.

I can vividly recall some challenging things Ken and I were involved with. One in particular was the principal day's filming with the somewhat tricky 1930s Morane 230, G-AVEB, back in the early 1970s. It was for the Hollywood production of the Saint-Exupery story *The Little Prince*. Ken was in the front seat doubling for a French mechanic.

We were in formation with an Alouette helicopter, with a cameraman shooting us over Blenheim Palace at low level. The pilot of the helicopter radioed me to say the Morane engine was smoking, and simultaneously a vibration began. I instantly made for Kidlington airfield, which was fortunately in sight. About half-a-mile out the engine began to seize, finally seizing solid over the Woodstock Road, committing me to a downwind-crosswind landing. We missed a high hedge and stopped just inside the boundary. While rolling out, the Morane ran over one of its Salmson cylinders, which was hanging on solely by a plug lead! Five feet lower on the approach and it would have been a major accident!

Another time was on the early 1980s production *High Road to China*. We were working in the remote mountains in Croatia and under intense pressure to finish the flying sequences that had been delayed by extreme weather conditions. We had a one-off special day laid aside to fly with the principal actors whilst an insurance policy was in force, which in turn meant a lot of pressure to get some important film in the can.

Myself and my co-movie flyer partner and friend, aerobatic specialist, David Perrin, ferried two Stampes in formation over a 6,000ft mountain range from our farm strip base 40 miles away, to a large, safer airfield to meet the actor safety requirements. David's Stampe arrived with low oil pressure. It was essential we had the spare aircraft.



Above A successful competition aerobatic pilot, Tony is seen here in a CAP231.

I asked our unit helicopter pilot to take David back to our farm to collect the spare aircraft while I flew with the actor, Tom Selleck, with small cameras fixed to the aircraft to pick up shots of him flying.

The helicopter never arrived at the strip and we alerted the emergency authorities, but to no avail. After two days, many of us on the film unit, including Ken, had set out driving the remote inland gravel roads searching and finally on foot discovering the remains of the Alouette in a wooded ravine where they had hit a well camouflaged cable. Tragically there were no survivors – the 'not-so fun' part of our work. One tries immensely hard to make it as safe as is humanly possible, but it's often taken out of our hands.

Did you and your father work together?

Not so much working together as Doug became more office bound as we expanded PPS, so I tended to take over the PFA aircraft with a couple of engineers. But from my early days I picked up so much more from him on the other things that make a company like ours work, much of it is nothing to do with aero engineering. If it had been run purely for engineering it would only have lasted a few years, not more than 70!

How long have you been in LAA and how has it helped?

I think I became an inspector in the late 1960s and I am still one. The Association has helped in all the ways that we have become used to with non-CofA aircraft or the replica machines we have built. They are most helpful with design and structural issues.

How many types of aircraft and hours have you flown?

Around 170 types but only 2,700 hours total (approximately 1,000 hours aerobatics). Types include include early pioneer aircraft Bleriot, Demoiselle, through to WWI machines like various Sopwiths and Fokkers. Also 1930s fighters, Hawker Fury, Dewotone D26 and second war fighters like the Spitfire, P40, Mustang. I've also flown trainers, support aircraft and modern singles and twins on routine flight testing; post-war biplanes and aerobatic aircraft. With the nature of my work, many aircraft flown are homebuilts, replicas and filming creations.

Have you a favourite and least favourite types?

We have made some aircraft in the UK that have very disappointing handling characteristics.



Above Tony has flown all manor of aircraft, including several Marks of Spitfire.

It would be discourteous to mention them by type, suffice to say some are pre-war DH aircraft. But they all would have to go a long way to compete with some of the homebuilt and production aircraft I have sampled, some from across the pond, which can present a challenge...

As for the best. The Messerschmitt ME108 Taifun is a delight to fly, as are most Bucker derived aircraft, all have perfectly harmonised and balanced controls.

The early Marks of Spitfires are great, with excellent, easy, friendly handling qualities.

One in particular, the MK1a G-AIST, which we operated for many years, was sublime. It was very special and typical of a wartime post-period modification before restoration with a unique performance. After restoration and put back to early spec, that special uniqueness was gone!

What has been your best aviation moment?

Winning my first aerobatic competition. Anyone who takes aerobatic contest flying seriously will know that winning after all the hard work practising is just the beginning, and a door opens to an amazing and unique experience and an incredible challenging way of life, which in my case spanned 25 years.

Aerobatic aeroplanes are fantastic to fly and the whole thing becomes addictive (it's the same with motor racing).

Do you have any aviation heroes?

Prince Constantin Cantacuzene, the highest scoring Romanian Ace in WWII. He flew in combat with several nations. He was a fascinating all-round pilot, a pre-war record breaker and a pre- and post-war aerobatic specialist with a Jungmeister.

And Neville Duke – he had a great flying life and was the nicest of men.

Have you had any hairy flying experiences?

Yes, a few of too many: Once a jammed elevator on an inverted Zlin 526 with limited height taught me to never trust who flew before me – and what they left behind in the aircraft. A loose article during a tailslide moved aft to lodge between the rear fuselage sternpost and the elevator bell crank. Intermittently rolling the aircraft erect and pulling the stick back in gentle jabs as far as it was safe to do so, eventually crushed the offending object to allow positive flight and then flight on the elevator trimmer. In this case a 35mm film case was found. The aircraft was landed with the engine stopped, still with some restriction but enough control to land. On another

occasion a post-major repair air test on a Pitts S-2A displayed some poor handling characteristics. Ultimately this caused a secondary mode spin from 7,000ft to only recover in the last 500ft with a full back stick recovery and a stopped engine!

The CAA afterwards flew the aircraft and amended the flight manual for spin recovery action. The aircraft was subsequently sold to Sweden and sadly the owner very soon afterwards spun in and lost his life. Many lessons learned.

And one more – on the UK certification flight test an omitted factory flight manual limitation on an early PZL Wilga caused considerable and potentially destructive tailplane flutter during a VNE dive.

Do you have other non-aviation hobbies/interests?

One thing that people probably don't know is that we were an old motorsport family long before anyone was involved with aviation. In fact, our great uncle Cecilio was a Brooklands and Paris – Madrid driver before WWI.

I started racing cars back in the 1960s with my homebuilt specials, and I still race, but with other cars I have acquired, competing mostly in historic racing. When I stopped contest aerobatic flying in 1993, I went back to racing at a more serious level, including some GT races with Porsche, and hillclimb and sprint championships with modern racing cars.

We race all over Europe – Spa, Portimao Monza, Dijon, Paul Ricard and Le Mans. Some of the late season events are in the US, at Sebring and Daytona. In the UK we do most of the better known events: the Silverstone Classic and Goodwood Revival, plus many off-the-radar events, which are even better.

My wife Pia and I started our present company, Racing Repertoire, to respond to the increase of racing preparation work for clients.

I also like playing with old motorcycles, riding my mountain bike, skiing, sailing and Siamese cats.

What aviation books would you recommend?

The Power to Fly by Leonard Setright, which is the definitive history of aero engines. *Spitfire, A Test Pilot's Story* by Jeffery Quill. *War in a Stringbag* by Charles Lamb. *My Life* by Jean Batten and *North to the Orient* by Anne Morrow Lindbergh.

What aircraft or vehicles form your wish list?

Aircraft I'd love are the Bucker Jungmeister, an SE5a with the Hispano Suiza engine, and a Dewotone D520.

Cars that can grace my garage any time are a 1933 Zagato Spyder, an 8c Alfa Romeo, a 1950 Ferrari 166 Barchetta and a 1965 Porsche 904 GTS.

Do you have any advice for pilots?

Not really. Most people who fly these days know the score as well as I do. I'm sure there's a phone app or website somewhere that gives better advice than I can give! ■