

# A real Van's man...

Today we meet **Steve Robson**, former marine, long-serving Devon Strut Committee man and Van's RV-4 owner



## **W**elcome Steve, could you tell us something about your career?

I consider myself fortunate to have had a wide-ranging, varied and rewarding working

life. I grew up on a rough council estate in Leeds before joining the Royal Marines. My military career gave me a fantastic window on life along with the odd hair-raising experience.

I left the military at the turn of the millennium and started working in the management training and consultancy sector but illness (cancer) took me away from that. On recovery I found myself as head of education and development at a local hospice charity. From that I moved on to an NHS Mental Health Trust working in several senior management roles.

Following redundancy, I went to work for an international maritime security company where I was head of logistics and compliance. 'HM the Wife' tells everyone I've now retired, but I tell people 'I don't have a job just now'.

**Above** Steve with his Van's RV-4, G-RVIV, which he has owned for nine years.

**Photo:** Neil Wilson

## **What sparked your interest in aviation?**

I've always wanted to fly for as long as I can remember. I recall going to an air display at RAF Church Fenton in the very early 1960s, I was certainly pre-school age. I have very clear memories of walking up to a massive military jet (no HSE in those days) and watching two people get in. It took off making a deafening roar perched on two plumes of black smoke, it was a Gloster Javelin. I was very frightened and ended up in tears, but through my fear and tears I remember saying, "I want to do that." I later realised I have the 'need to fly'. Thankfully my wife's very supportive.

Like many of us, I followed the well-trodden path, Airfix, Frog, Revel, Keil Kraft and Veron, and then learned to fly in gliders in 1982, which I have always considered to be pure flying, using the energy in the atmosphere. Thereafter I gained a PPL A, which has taken me from club trainers to an Evans VP1, a Rollason Condor and now the Van's RV-4.

## **In what, where and when was your first flight?**

My first flight was with Freddie Laker in a DC10 on the way to visit relatives in Canada, and I was as sick as dog.



During my holiday my late uncle arranged a trip in a Cessna 150 from Oshawa to Toronto, which included two orbits around the then incomplete CN Tower. I still got air sick but loved every minute. My uncle was doing his PPL but had almost given up, but we inspired each other to continue. So that flight did two things, it encouraged my uncle to go on to complete his licence and it confirmed that I was going to learn to fly as soon as I could. He ended up owing a C172 on floats, but I never got to fly in it. I still have one of the books and the Dalton E6B Flight Computer he gave me.

### Where did you learn to fly?

I learned to fly on gliders with the Devon & Somerset Gliding Club based at North Hill in Devon. As well as making many good friends, gliding taught me many things – flying accurately, keeping a good lookout, and of course, lots about the weather. As time progressed, I gained a Silver 'C' and an Air Experience Instructor rating. The plan was to attend the next instructor's course, but my military career called me away to the jungles of Brunei and ended that ambition.

On return to the UK from two years in Brunei I started my PPL training in a C150 at Swanton Morley in Norfolk. I was just within the two-year currency conversion period and was able to use my Silver 'C' experience.

I completed my PPL in 10 days and with 24 hours in my logbook. The lack of P/UT in my logbook did cause a few issues later that took quite a bit of explaining when trying to hire club aircraft.

### Tell us a bit more about your military career

I joined the Royal Marines in 1978, specialising in weapons and tactics and completed 22 years' service in 2000. This included Commando Units, the Commando training Centre as an instructor, two years in Brunei as a staff instructor at the Jungle Warfare School, as well as two drafts with the Royal Navy. As could be expected in military life, I did several operational tours including Northern Ireland, the Balkans region and North Arabian Gulf. As well as being physically exhausted, wet, cold, tired and hungry for extended periods, I've had a great many experiences and adventures.



**Above** Steve restored his former aircraft, Condor G-AXGV, and flew it up to Wick in the North of Scotland on one of the LAA Regional Rallies. **Photo: Steve Rendle**

**Below** Steve spent 22 years in the military, serving in a number of overseas arenas, including Brunei, where he was a Jungle Warfare Instructor.

Travel in the UK Armed Forces is an occupational hazard but that has provided me with close insights into different places and cultures. At the last count I think I visited 34 countries. I have so many 'dits' to tell it would take a long time, but my family are encouraging me to write them down, which is an ongoing project.

### How did you hear about the LAA?

While serving with the Royal Navy in the late 1980s, I was chatting with one of my course students who flew a Jodel. He kindly sent me a couple of PFA magazines that I read from cover to cover several times, and I was hooked. I won't mention this person's name, but I believe he is still an active pilot in the Manchester area, so, if you recognise yourself, please get in touch, I've got a lot to thank you for!

### How long have you been a member?

I joined the PFA in 1991, just before I began my PPL training.

### As an active member of the Devon Strut, what is your role?

I joined the Devon Strut in the same year I joined the Association and I've been on the Strut committee since 1993. Initially I was Event's Organiser but have also been Safety Officer, PR and Chairman.

### What do you think a Strut can offer a member?

Whilst in the Chairman's role, the committee undertook a review to establish our future direction in order to promote the Strut to the wider GA and air enthusiast communities. At this point I looked back at my journey and how they and 'it' had helped me. I often describe the Devon Strut offering as being a great aviation resource for all kinds of things. If, for instance you needed a left-handed widget with a 3/8in drive, there would be someone who had one, and more importantly knew how to use it. It also provides a wide circle of friends, I think the social side of aviation is often understated.

### How many LAA aircraft have you owned?

I had the Evans VP1 for four years, it was the aircraft built by Robert Lowe and it taught me a great deal. I loved it to bits.

## Meet the Members

I moved on to a Rollason Condor which I owned for 14 years. It was a gentleman's aerial conveyance that served me well. I also enjoyed the restoration, including a recover and top end overhaul.

The Vans RV-4 I have owned for nine years and it is probably the nicest handling aircraft I've flown to date.

### How has the LAA helped you?

It has shown me how to achieve affordable flying as well as enabled me to share in a great aviation community.

### Any aviation books you would recommend?

The usual favourites, *Fate is the Hunter*, *Gift of Wings*, *Once upon a Thermal*, and *Empire of the Skies* etc.

### Do you have a favourite or worse type flown?

The worst type was probably an Evan VP2. The example I tried to fly only briefly got airborne but decided to give up at about 10ft. I'm still working on the best type but my RV-4 has yet to be beaten.

### What is your best aviation moment?

As well as being a proud member of the Devon Strut, I'm also a proud member of the Fleet Air Arm Squadron. Flying with former and serving Fleet Air Arm pilots has lifted my flying to a new level.

Through their patient and professional tuition, I've learned aerobatics and formation flying in a professional, structured and disciplined manner. My RV-4 is well suited to this type of flying and although I still have a great deal to learn, I'm enjoying every moment.

### Have you done much touring?

I've done a couple of trips to France, one to the RSA Rally at Blois a few years ago, and more recently (last summer) to Dinard/Quiberon staying over in St Malo. In addition, a few of us made a long weekend trip in the days of the regional rallies to Wick. This was via Sywell, Fishburn, Perth, Wick, Lamb Holm, Oban, Carlisle, Barton and back to Devon. All of them have been fantastic adventures, and I plan to do more.

### Do you have any aviation heroes?

Of course, all the historical aviation figures are my heroes,

but most of my heroes are the people I fly with today. I've had the privilege of mentoring several people though their PPL course and have received good guidance and mentorship from others.

In particular, I include all my flying friends and those who have invested time in me in an attempt to make me a better, safer pilot, shared flying adventures with me and those who provide knowledge, skills, experience and tools to help me keep my aircraft airworthy.

### Any 'I learned flying from that' moments?

Encountering carb icing at the same moment as going inadvertently IMC just after take-off. The cloud base had lowered significantly between me arriving at the airstrip and taking off, and I'd failed to notice it.

Fortunately, I'd practiced my low-level circuit just a few weeks earlier, so I already knew what I was going to do – you should always think about the 'what ifs' and have an escape plan.

### Do you have any non-aviation hobbies or interests?

I do like shooting, but these days only air weapons. I also like to learn new things, inspired mainly by my two sons. Right now, I'm learning

electronics, but I've a long way to go before

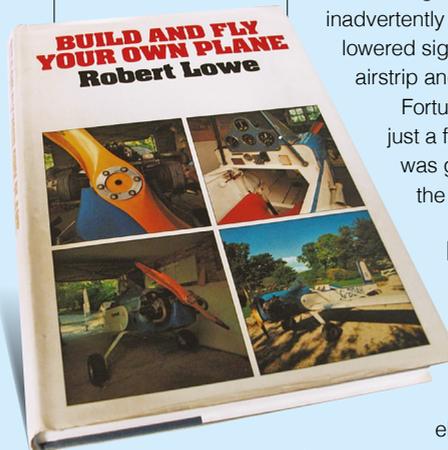
I can programme my Arduino.

### What do you have on your aircraft or vehicle wish list?

The restoration of a rare, classic vintage aircraft is probably the highest on my list. I did a full restoration on my Condor in 2003-4, enjoyed it and learned a great deal... and I got a heap of help and support from all over the place, which is what the LAA is all about.

### Any advice for fellow pilots?

Have fun with all your flying but be safe, think ahead. Don't be afraid of trying something new with suitably qualified and experienced people and beware the 'C' word – Complacency! When you think you are good, you're about to do something dumb. I make mistakes all the time and I try to review what I can improve. The thing that concerns me most is the mistake I don't recognise and so I may repeat. I'm far from being perfect – 'HM the Wife' will tell you that! ■



**Above** The first aircraft Steve owned was Evans VP1 G-BDAH, a well known LAA aircraft as Robert Lowe wrote this book about building it in the 1970s.

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