



Serving the sea and sky

This month we meet **Frank Cox**, former Fleet Air Arm and corporate jet pilot and owner / restorer of a lovely Fairchild Argus

Welcome Frank, can you tell us a bit about your career? I spent my pre-teen years in Somerset, relatively close to RNAS Yeovilton where my interest in the Navy and flying was kindled. To that

end I went to the Nautical College, Pangbourne, where the education was slanted towards a seagoing career. Having spent 21 years in the Fleet Air Arm, followed by a couple of years with the Fleet Requirements Unit, I then had a further 23 years in the private jet world, I have been retired for 12 years.

What started your interest in aviation?

As a very young lad, one of my earliest memories was to watch the Brabazon drone overhead, which I suppose subconsciously sparked my interest and started me into building models aged around five or six.

In what, where and when was your first flight?

After the war, my father had re-joined the Army following a period of farming and was based at Yeovilton as a Ground

Above Frank Cox with his stunning Fairchild Argus – a 25-year restoration

Liaison Officer. It was there, at an Air Day in 1952, that I managed to inveigle my mother into giving me 10 shillings for a joyride around the block in an Anson. After queuing for some two hours, I was ushered all the way forward into the right-hand seat. The rest, as they say, is history.

Where did you learn to fly?

After Yeovilton, father was transferred to Germany where, aged 14, I joined the gliding club at RAF Gutersloh and flew there during the school holidays. A year later, after another move, I joined the RAF Laarbruch gliding club, where in July 1960, I flew my first solo in a Tutor, aged 16. I remember it well for its brick-like qualities compared with the relatively high performance Kranich two-seater I had previously been flying. I continued to glide when time permitted and at weekends while at school at RAF Benson, with the Chilton Gliding club.

Having joined the Navy at BRNC Dartmouth in September 1962, powered flying came my way in the shape of a Tiger Moth. Twelve of these, based at Plymouth Roborough Airport, were used for Flying Grading of potential aircrew to weed out those that did not show the required aptitude.



From Dartmouth it was up north to Yorkshire, and RAF Linton-on-Ouse for basic training on the Jet Provost Mk3 and 4. Then followed a return to the dark blue environment in Pembrokeshire at RNAS Brawdy for Advanced Flying Training and Operational Training, part one in the Hunter T8 and GA XI in 759 and 738 squadrons. I then finally got my hands on a Buccaneer, which would be the mainstay of my flying for the rest of my Navy career.

Having completed training I joined 800 squadron at Lossiemouth as a very junior pilot crewed with an ex Sea Vixen observer, who could finally see where he was going and keep an eye on me. We embarked on *HMS Eagle* in August 1965 and immediately sailed for the Mediterranean and the Middle East off Aden, and then on to the Far East.

During the time off Aden, I became night deck qualified, which kept the adrenalin level topped up. In March we had to hurry from Singapore across the Indian Ocean to replace *HMS Victorious*, who had suffered a serious fire while on station off the coast of Mozambique blockading the port of Beira against tankers offloading oil destined for Ian Smith's Rhodesia. Having been away for a year we disembarked to Scotland in August 1966 and in October we changed over to Buccaneer Mk2s.

Top A spell with the Royal Naval Historic Flight saw Frank displaying the Hawker Sea Fury FB.11 (pictured) and T20 variants.

Above left Frank in the early 1980s with the Sea Fury, nearing the end of his Fleet Air Arm career.

Above right A Fleet Air Arm pilot for 21 years, Frank's favourite aircraft is the Buccaneer.

Following an exhilarating two years of front line flying, I was appointed to 738 Squadron at RNAS Brawdy as a staff pilot, flying Hunter T8 and GA XIs mentoring students undergoing part one of operational training. Then back to Lossiemouth to undertake the Air Warfare Instructors (top gun) course – a very intense and fast moving four months which stretches one's personal limits considerably. It was then a return to 738 Squadron as the AWI until July 1969.

The front line beckoned once more with an appointment to 809 squadron as the AWI and 11 months shore based until we embarked in June 1970 on *HMS Ark Royal*, for six months working around the UK and in the Med. We re-embarked in April 1971, proceeding to the east coast of the States where we made use of the great array of weapon ranges. Firing rockets at manoeuvring speed boats was particularly good sport, as were the runs ashore.

Having left the front line for a second time I moved on to be the AWI of 764 squadron (top gun school) instructing future AWIs.

I returned to the Buccaneer, albeit of a different colour, at RAF Honington, in 1972 for two years as a staff weapons instructor, and in March 1974. I went to the USA to spend two years with the US Navy. Returning to the UK in May

1976 saw me re-join 809 squadron and the Buccaneer, as the senior pilot via various short re-familiarisation courses. Land base at this time was Honington, because Lossiemouth had been handed to the Air Force. We embarked on Ark Royal once more in September for two months and made the final embarkation before the demise of the fixed-wing carriers in February 1978. Once again, the east coast of the States beckoned where great use of the Puerto Rican ranges was made with many different weapon loads.

My final Buccaneer flight was an inauspicious trip from Ark Royal, operating to the south of Marseilles, to St Athan with the wheels down and ground locks in due to a major problem which precluded retraction. So ended my embarked and Buccaneer flying days.

Next, came a return to Brawdy, by now RAF Brawdy, where I held the position of Senior Naval Officer and staff weapons instructor in 234 Squadron, flying the Hawk and overseeing the last of the naval fixed wing students destined for the Sea Harrier.

My final naval appointment began in March 1981 when I joined the staff of Naval Flying Standards Flight as a weapons and tactics instructor, specifically to introduce helicopter pilots destined for the Sea Harrier to the joys of high speed fixed-wing aviation, including weapon delivery and combat manoeuvring.

Also at this time I was lucky enough to be able to fly for the Royal Naval Historic Flight, flying the Firefly for the 1981 season and the Sea Fury for the 1982 season. Notable venues for the Firefly were the two-day shows at Biggin Hill and Mildenhall. Significant appearances in 1982 with Sea Fury were at Mildenhall again and three days at the Farnborough Airshow, I managed to achieve a total of 22 hours Firefly time and 40 in the Sea Fury T20 and FB11 combined. It was a great privilege to fly them. What great aeroplanes but so very different in their ways.

Incidentally, prior to my involvement with the Firefly and Sea Fury, in June of 1979 the Navy entered the Historic Flight's Tiger Moth, T8191, into the Grouse Rally and I was fortunate, with another pilot, to take part. It was a superbly organised, slightly competitive, tour from Hatfield to Strathallen in Scotland, with fuel stops at Hucknall and Sunderland. We had the dubious pleasure of receiving the 'wooden spoon' for the worst fuel efficiency overall – the Queen was paying for the fuel so economics did not come into the equation when setting the mixture!

How did you find operating off a carrier?

Carrier operations with conventional fixed-wing aircraft are just another skill to be learned but where the margins for error are greatly reduced and where one's situational

Below After his Navy career, Frank flew HS125s worldwide as a corporate jet pilot and has great affection for the type.



awareness must be greatly increased. Any divergence from the ideal must be rapidly recognised and corrected. I found that practice day landings did not raise the adrenalin level to any degree. However, at night a couple of beers afterwards were required to bring it back to normal, especially in poor weather. After a busy and demanding sortie, it was an even more demanding task to get safely back on board.

What was your connection with The Diamonds?

This was in the days where it was possible to form a squadron display team without the several layers of oversight that are in place these days. At RNAS Brawdy 738 Squadron formed a seven-aircraft team in April 1969 and performed throughout the season at various open days and air days around the country. I was number four, in the centre, and therefore had to fly as smoothly as possible to give my wingmen an easy ride. We would practise first thing in the morning and then fly one or two syllabus sorties with students, and then occasionally fly another practice in the evening – a fairly hard day's work.

What did you fly in the States?

The Navy always had several standing exchange positions with the USN and I was lucky to be appointed to VA42, the training squadron for the A6 Intruder. My job was to instruct the students passing through in the art of visual weaponry which, for the A6, was very much a reversionary mode after the radar and weapon release computer had failed. I was based at NAS Oceana in Virginia Beach, however, most of my working time was spent running detachments to MCAS Yuma in Arizona or NAS Fallon in Nevada where the airspace was uncluttered, and the relatively quiet weapons ranges enabled the booking of slots to fit the flying programme.

The A6 was an aeroplane with a remarkably clever weapon system and the ability to carry a huge weapon load, albeit relatively slowly. Manual flying at low level at night in mountainous terrain, purely by the use of the radar and the TV like presentation to the pilot, took a little getting used to; night vision goggles did not exist then.

What did you fly on retiring from the RNAS?

I was extremely lucky in that I was given a government grant for my commercial licence training and the Navy kindly lent me a Sea Devon for my CAA instrument rating exam. Having a licence in my pocket led me to be offered a job flying an HS125 in Saudi Arabia for a construction company based in Riyadh. I was subsequently offered a position with British Aerospace, also in Riyadh, to set up and manage a VIP flight of four 125s with associated crews and engineers. After four years I left the desert and moved to Istanbul, where we flew mainly into Europe and occasionally to Moscow and the States, which invariably involved a fuel stop in Iceland although when eastbound we could usually make the UK in one hop from Gander.

Having left Turkey to get based nearer home I spent six months with a start-up ad hoc charter company in Dublin flying a very old and tired 125-700. From there I picked up possibly the most enjoyable job of my civilian career flying an 800XP based in Tel Aviv but living here in the UK and commuting as required for an owner that was always concerned as to our well-being. After six years I found myself based in the UK for the first time at Bournemouth for



Above The Historic Flight's Fairey Firefly, which Frank displayed throughout the 1981 air show season.

five months, flying to UK and European destinations prior to retirement in 2008.

I found the 125 to be the most reliable aircraft I have ever flown, with the exception of the Irish one which had obviously suffered from a lack of care and attention throughout its life. Otherwise I only missed two trips due to unserviceability in over 4,500 hours' 125 time. It is a delight to fly with crisp control response and gives a very comfortable ride.

How did you hear about the PFA/LAA

Many years ago I had an L4 Cub and joined the PFA to cover the permit paperwork. I re-joined five years after the CAA finally allowed the Argus to become an LAA aircraft. The LAA route to airworthiness totally overcame the bureaucracy and 'goal post moving' that I was suffering at the hands of the CAA.

How did you come across the Argus?

In 1993 I had a share in a fully restored Tiger Moth which, with a growing family, was not exactly practical and while searching for a four-seat taildragger came across an Argus for sale, based at Coventry. Being based overseas, I did not fly it very often but in 1994 I decided it had to be re-covered, as it was cosmetically a mess. As with most re-cover jobs, it was also a mess underneath, and so started a 25-year restoration, including an engine overhaul. It was not particularly difficult but as it was my first attempt, each phase required research into the procedure required. The internet came to the rescue many times.

I used Ceconite, which at the time was cheaper than, but is identical to, Poly-Fiber fabric but the finish is Poly-Fiber's Polytone system, flattened for a matt finish. I did not need many spare parts, however I spent many hours cleaning and refinishing existing parts. What new/serviceable parts I did need were sourced via the internet and mostly came from the States.

All that was required to get it onto the LAA was to submit the required paperwork to Engineering for approval and obtain the services of an approved test pilot. The flying was completed in one day, with a minor omission carried out later. There were no snags, which was very pleasing.

Thus far I haven't ventured outside of the West Country but now that the engine is finally broken in and the oil consumption has reduced, the plan is to venture further afield from the West Country.

What is your total of types and hours flown?

I have flown 26 different types and amassed 10,800 hours

Do you have a favourite and not so keen on type flown?

The Buccaneer has to be my favourite, probably because I had a lot of time in it. It was an absolute joy to fly in its element at low level, although at slow speed one had to be on top of it. Not to be controversial and with great respect to owners of them, the Cessna 152 and 172 have to be the worst. I have little time in either, but first impressions count. Being a fast jet man, I appreciate good performance and crisp handling – I find these two lacking on both counts.

What do you consider to be your best aviation moment?

One of the best was flying from the ship through the Norwegian fjords and mountains to reach and photograph a target in extremely marginal weather at 420kt, with my observer and I having absolute trust in each other as to each other's ability to fly and navigate. This bond of trust is very difficult to describe.

Do you have any aviation heroes?

My heroes are those test pilots who were pushing the boundaries at the introduction of the high-speed jet age, especially during the transonic era. They really were nibbling at the unknown, and at some cost.

Any hairy 'I learned flying from that' experiences?

Diverting from *HMS Eagle* at night to Aden, having failed to hook on twice, to find that the ship was twice the distance she said she was from the diversion, and to lose one engine as we turned off the runway through lack of fuel.

The lesson learned was that however insistent and, in this case senior, the officer or ATC are, remember that you are the one in the aircraft and, if necessary, declare an emergency before matters get out of hand.

Do you have non-aviation interests?

Not really, aircraft restoration absorbs quite sufficient of a limited budget. However, I'd love to have my old 3.8 Series 1 E-Type Jaguar back.

What advice would you offer pilots?

To plan carefully and to have a 'Plan 'B'. When airborne keep well ahead of the aircraft in terms of situation awareness, and should an instrument not be indicating what you know to be 'normal', even if it is within limits, investigate before matters deteriorate. In the long run it is cheaper and saves on long 'down time'. ■