



TWENTY TYPES & COUNTING

We talk to Russ Woodland, a former RAF helicopter pilot and airline captain who's now with the CAA as a Flight Ops Training Inspector

Welcome Russ, can you please tell us about your day job and career?

I started my aviation career with the RAF, who very kindly gave me a University Cadetship. So, not only did they pay me while I was at college, but my weekends and holidays I spent flying a Bulldog with the London University Air Squadron at RAF Abingdon.

After I graduated, it was into full-time service starting with my 'square-bashing' at RAF College Cranwell. Then, because I had previous flying experience, I went straight on to the Jet Provost flying training course at RAF Church Fenton. Anyone who remembers the "Fighter Pilot" TV series from the early eighties will be familiar with what that was like. If you didn't see it, have a look for it on YouTube as it's a fine demonstration of how not to teach pilots – very much the "why can't you do it, I've shown you once?" style of instruction, and CRM [Crew Resource Management] was a thing of the future. I'm pleased to say that we've all come a long way since then!

They were very happy days though, and the friendships I made then are the strongest ones I have. At the end of the course, we'd lost fifty per cent of those who started and those remaining were all 'streamed' for future training. I left for a weekend of leave, having been told that I'd go to RAF Valley for the BAe Hawk

(Main) A Wessex HC.2 of 28 Squadron at RAF Sek Kong in Hong Kong.

course in three months. However, I came back on the Monday to be told that I was now starting a helicopter course at Shawbury in six days! Such are the exigencies of service life, or 'life in a blue suit', as we'd more commonly say.

Despite the disappointment of not going to fly the Hawk – *Top Gun* had just been released so we all wanted to be going "Mach two with your hair on fire" – I found that I really enjoyed Shawbury and flying helicopters. Our basic training was on the Gazelle – a real sports car

"Piloting the Wessex is like flying a two-bedroom council house from the upstairs bathroom window"

of a helicopter and a great little trainer. Our advanced training was on the mighty Wessex – as someone once said, piloting it is like flying a two-bedroom council house from the upstairs bathroom window, and you have to shinny up the drain pipe to get in to do it.

For those who've never seen the Wessex up close, the pilot has to climb up the main gear oleo and enter the cockpit through his sliding window – when they first told me this at Shawbury, I thought they were pulling my leg!

At the end of the Shawbury course we proudly received our 'wings' and were asked which type we wanted to go to – after recovering from the shock of the military actually asking for my opinion, I said I'd like to fly the Wessex with 72 Sqn in Northern Ireland.

At that time, the mid-eighties, NI was the only operational posting and 72 Sqn was the biggest in the RAF. Of our course of eight starters, six graduated – a high percentage in those days – and three of us got our wish to go to 72 Sqn. The problem was that 72 was very busy at the time and said they could only take two pilots straight away, the third would have to 'hold' for three months before coming.

So tell us about being posted to Hong Kong...

With a surname of Woodland, I've spent my whole life being the 'last on the list', but this is



one occasion when it actually worked in my favour. Because I needed to stay current on the Wessex while 'holding', they sent me to 28 Sqn in Hong Kong.

It seems bizarre, but it was the cheap option as the Hong Kong Government used to pay fifty per cent of the costs of the UK military who were posted there.

So, 28 Sqn was a relatively small and close-knit outfit, flying both in support of the British Army in the Territory and carrying out Search and Rescue duties. The base was at RAF Sek Kong, which is in the New Territories area, north of Kowloon.

In those days, it was a quiet agricultural area and quite a contrast to the hustle and bustle of Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. While I was holding with 28 Sqn they suddenly became three pilots short – one had badly broken a leg playing rugby and two were sent home in disgrace for conducting an illicit relationship with a WRAF. That was strictly forbidden in those days, and not helped by the fact that they were both seeing the same WRAF!

One day the boss called me into his office and said that, as they were short of pilots, and as I'd been there six weeks and was already half-trained, did I want to stay? I spent about three nanoseconds considering my answer, and my three-month holding post became a three-year tour of duty.

Needless to say, it was a fantastic time, and made better by the fact that I met my wife Kate there, when she dropped in during her round the world back-packing tour.

Another highlight of the tour was being sent on a three-month exchange posting

(Above) A formation of three Wessex, with Russ leading, which he says, "proves that Hong Kong wasn't all skyscrapers!"

to Singapore, to fly with the Royal New Zealand Air Force, who had a base at Sembawang in the north of the island.

They had the Bell UH-1 'Huey', flying mostly up to Malaya. My conversion course to the Huey was fifty minutes with the Sqn boss, after which he declared that he was getting out, but because of their rules I couldn't go solo – I'd have to take a loadmaster with me!

The Huey really does live up to all the folk stories that have grown up around it. My favourite was cutting the engine on the ground and still having enough inertia in the blades to lift to the hover, do a 360° turn and land again – please don't try this in a Robinson R22!

Sadly the Kiwis closed their base in Singapore just after I left, so I can proudly say that I must be the last RAF pilot to have been based in Singapore.

Did you eventually get a posting to Ireland?

Yes, after nearly three years of the joys of Hong Kong, reality caught up with me and I was posted to Northern Ireland.

Life on 72 Sqn was very different and the pace of work was huge – we'd regularly do a hundred hours of flying a month, which on a helicopter means a hundred hours of hands-on – there's no autopilot on a Wessex!

It really was an operational environment and during my first tour there we saw two Lynx and a Gazelle of the Irish Army Air Corps shot

down, plus a Lynx and a Puma hit by mortar rounds as they landed at one of the forward army sites – not something that really got reported back home.

During your ground tours, did you miss flying?

My time on 72 Sqn was followed by my first ground tour, where I was the personal aide to an Air Marshal – it was an interesting job, but hard work.

I must have done alright as, after two years I was promoted to Sqn Ldr and sent back to fly the Wessex again, this time with 60 Sqn at RAF Benson. With 60 Sqn I had a dual role of army support and VIP comms, and our time seemed to be split between going to Northern Ireland – again! – to support 72 Sqn, or flying VIPs into London – I even carried the Queen's suitcases once!

At the end of my time with 60 Sqn, I was given another ground tour, again in Northern Ireland, this time as the RAF liaison man in the Army HQ – or the SO2G3 OPSAIR post, for those who speak Army. Being the only RAF officer in an HQ full of Army types was very interesting, but it made me realise that I was missing the flying.

I had got to the stage where all I had to look forward to in the RAF was a series of desk jobs with little chance of flying again, so it was at that point I decided to leave and enter civilian life and the airlines.

I'd kept up my fixed-wing hours by flying Chipmunks and Bulldogs for the Air Experience Flights so I was able to get my licences, but I still had to sit all the ATPL exams and pay for the instrument rating. ➤

MEET THE MEMBERS



(Above) One of only two Starlites to fly in the UK, G-FARO was built by Martin Faro and was a prize-winner at the PFA rally. “Martin, who sadly died of a brain tumour a couple of years ago, was one of the kindest men in the world,” Russ says. “When I needed to build up my fixed wing hours before leaving the RAF, he lent me his Starlite for two years!”

(Right) Russ with his Acroduster, a 50th birthday present to himself as his Pulsar build is taking longer than he anticipated.

(Opposite) The Acroduster is Russ’s all-time favourite aeroplane, he even likes it better than flying a BAe Hawk!



What happened after your return to ‘civvy street’?

As many LAA members will know, employment opportunities in the airlines seem to be cyclic, and when I left the RAF in 1996 it was at one of its low ebbs. Despite my 3,000 hours, I couldn’t get a job, and ended up motorcycle dispatch riding through the winter of 1996 to make ends meet – now that’s hard work!

Eventually, I got onto a six-month scheme with easyJet, whereby they type-rated and flew you on the Boeing 737, but you didn’t get paid while doing it. Sounds like a con, but getting that first job is what it’s all about, and after those six months I walked straight into a job with British Midland, flying the 737 out of Heathrow. Two years later, I got my command and converted to the A320 and I’ve been flying Airbuses ever since.

In 2006, I decided to leave Midland, or bmi as it’d become, to join BMed – which is short for British Mediterranean, but as very few people can spell Mediterranean correctly, they wisely shortened it! They ran a franchise for BA, flying to all the places they were too frightened to go to themselves – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,

Kurdistan – basically anywhere with ‘stan’ on the end – plus Sierra Leone, Beirut, Syria, Iran, Ethiopia and Sudan. It sounds hairy, but it was fantastic flying and definitely the best company in aviation to work for – right up to the point where it went bust!

I suddenly found myself without a job, but was lucky enough to be taken on by Virgin, flying the A340. I spent two years with them, flying all over the world, but the industry was going through another low, and in 2009 I suddenly found myself being made redundant.

To be honest, we could see it coming and I’d already set up another job as I wasn’t really enjoying the long-haul lifestyle – nice shopping and sightseeing, but found the flying itself to be deadly boring.

I then started with a Nigerian company, based in their London office, running their long-haul operations for them. That was an ‘interesting’ two years, after which I set up my own consultancy business – the best boss I ever had! – working as a Type Rating Inspector and Type Rating Examiner for various companies.

After a few years of doing that, I decided that I needed a steady job again and started working for the CAA as a Flt Ops and Training Inspector. It’s normally at this point in the conversation that people start to ease away, desperately trying to remember where they put their licence! But don’t worry, I only deal with airlines, not GA.

I now look after eight airlines, ranging in size from Virgin down to a PA31 operator, as well as approving simulators and examiners.

You’ve certainly had an interesting career! What started your interest in aviation?

Like most boys, I started off with Airfix kits and graduated to making balsa models. I joined the Air Cadets at 14 and never considered any career other than flying.

I was lucky enough to win a Flying Scholarship from the RAF, which gave me 35 hours of flying, and my Saturday supermarket job paid for the extra hours to get my PPL! That was at Compton Abbas Airfield, back in 1982, under the watchful eye of John Curtis who some LAA members may remember.



What, where and when was your first flight?

My first flight was in a 22 Sqn Whirlwind helicopter, which was quite prophetic, considering what happened later.

I grew up near Bideford in Devon and, as ATC Cadets, we would hang around the SAR flight at Chivenor, in the hope of getting a flight.

On my first trip as a 'survivor' for winning practice we landed on the beach at Instow, where my main job was to run in and buy the ice creams for the crew!

How many different aircraft have you flown?

I have about twenty types, the least enjoyable of which is the Airbus A340-300, as it's a big, lumbering aircraft, powered by four hairdryers, which only gets airborne thanks to the curvature of the Earth.

My favourite helicopter is the Huey, my favourite aeroplane is the Hawk, and light aircraft is the Starlite – the single-seat version of the Aero Designs Pulsar. But my overall favourite has to be my Acroduster!

What aircraft do you currently own?

I'm still building my Pulsar, and have been since 1991. I calculated that, given my current work rate, I'll be retired before I finished her, so I bought the Acroduster as I couldn't wait that long to get flying. It was my 50th birthday present, so you could call it a midlife, crisis!

Do you have a favourite aviation moment?

Yes, when I was aide to the Air Marshal in charge of training in the RAF. He was ultimately in charge of the Red Arrows, and each spring he'd go to Cyprus to watch their training and 'sign-off' on their display. On one trip, the Arrows' manager asked if I wanted to fly with him in the back seat of his Hawk – silly question!

We lined up as No 10 at the back of the formation for take-off, and stayed with them for the pull-up for the first loop. As the rest of the team pulled through to finish the loop, we rolled off the top and watched from above as they completed the rest of their display – it was magical!

Have you had any hairy times when flying?

I've had three engine failures and an engine fire, all in the Wessex. The fire was during my first week on my first Sqn, when I was sent out to ground-run a Wessex after an engine 'compressor wash'. As I started the starboard engine, a forty-foot sheet of flame came out the exhaust, taking off my eyebrows and eyelashes!

The lesson I learnt was always shut the door when starting the No 2 engine on a Wessex, even if it's 40° in the cockpit! The investigation discovered that they'd washed the compressor with paraffin instead of the water-based solution. The fire extinguisher bottle worked well though!

Any aircraft or vehicles on your wish list?

Like everyone else I'd love to fly the Spitfire. I've always wanted an Aston Martin too – I'll have to keep dreaming on both counts!

What advice would you offer fellow pilots?

You never stop learning. "Every day is a school day," as one of my instructors used to say. ■

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