



# A PASSION FOR AVIATION

This month we talk to our second LAA Ambassador, Arthur Williams,  
the Piper Cub-owner and Channel 4 TV presenter

**W**elcome Arthur, can you tell us something about your career?

I currently work as a broadcaster for Channel 4. I mainly cover aviation, military history and Paralympic sports but I'm not restricted to just those. I've been with them for about seven years.

When a friend sent me a newspaper cutting reporting that Channel 4 was on the search for disabled people to make up fifty per cent of their London Paralympic coverage, I thought it'd be a good opportunity and, to cut a long story short, I started auditioning. I then spent about eighteen months training for the complexities of presenting live, multi-sport events, before taking the plunge and presenting the London Paralympic Games to an audience of about six million each day.

Before all this media madness began, I had the polar opposite career! I spent five years in the Royal Marines, joining in 2004 at the age of seventeen. I still believe that was my dream job – I think it was what I was destined to do

(Main) Arthur and his J-3 Cub, G-BDEY.

because it takes a certain type of person to make the grade. I loved it and still regard myself as a Marine above being a television presenter.

Unfortunately, a nasty car crash put an end to that. However, it opened up new doors which led to where I am today, and I'm very happy.

**How did you get into making aviation docs?**

Really, it all stemmed from the success of the London Paralympics coverage in 2012. We won a BAFTA for what was Channel 4's biggest live gig in its almost thirty-year history, something we're incredibly proud of. We were still riding high, and while attending a party in central London, I had a drunken conversation with the Commissioning Editor. We'd discussed all sorts of ideas, to no avail, when he asked me simply, with a slurred voice "Arthur, what's your favourite aeroplane?", expecting to hear Concorde or an F-35. I came out with the

Mosquito, but he had no idea what that was, so I explained about it to him, and did it with such passion that he commissioned a one-hour documentary, *The Plane That Saved Britain*, there and then! That also proved to be a success and led to more work filming aviation documentaries, namely *Flying to the Ends of the Earth* and now a four-part series on the UK's airfields, which I'm currently shooting – it should be aired this autumn/winter.

**Tell more about your time in the Marines...**

It was great – rarely since have I crammed so much life into such a short period. We were always doing stuff, from constant physical exertion to training exercises and deployments all over the place. There was adventure in everything we did. For instance, we went to Norway with 42 Commando, on arctic warfare training. Learning to ski and dress up like a yeti while playing with machine guns, mortars and bombs in the snow, it was great! I also went to Germany and Austria on adventure training and





was deployed to Sierra Leone on Operation Vela in 2006.

### What started your interest in aviation?

I always had a love of aircraft. I come from a family with a military background – both my grandfathers served in the RAF during WW2 – so maybe there are some genes there. It could be because I was surrounded by hundreds of aviation reference books, which I'd flick through most weekends, while Dad watched aviation-based war films.

I grew up in a house directly between Defford Croft Farm Airfield and Bredon Hill in Worcestershire. During the eighties and nineties, loads of low-flying testing went on there, and it was also a transit route from the east coast bases to the Brecons. We had all manner of military aircraft 'buzz' the house at low-level.

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

My first official flight was from Birmingham to the Med, onboard a Monarch airliner. I was in the Air Cadets during school and I think our first flight with the RAF was on board a Chinook, followed shortly after by a Hercules. I vividly remember sitting on the red 'cargo net' bench seats, opposite another cadet who felt so ill that he kept kicking the seat next to me through discomfort! I remember thinking, at the time, how lucky I was not to get motion sickness.

### Where did you do your PPL flight training?

After my car accident, I desperately needed to find my place in the world again, and I decided to go back to my roots: aeroplanes. I started thinking about a career in commercial aviation, which sounds mad for a guy in a wheelchair, but unless someone gives me an airtight reason why something can't be done, I don't stop trying. I thought back to Sir Douglas Bader – if he could fly an aeroplane with no legs during the forties, then I was certain it could be done today!

I quickly found the British Disabled Flying Association (now Aerobility) online, and in early 2009 I went to their base on Lasham Airfield's massive runway, among all the airliners, and took to the sky for my first trial lesson in a light aeroplane. The rest is history.

### How did you like being at the controls?

I think, like anyone else who has gone through the process of learning to fly, the most

challenging part of training was having your 'jar of mental capacity' constantly full and brimming over. Things that I now do instinctively took a lot of time and effort to become so. For example, I remember loads of occasions when I'd be tuning the radio and the aeroplane would climb or lose 2-300ft, so then I'd focus on remaining level and wander slightly off-course. It takes a long time to be in a position where you're at one with the aeroplane and comfortable enough to fly ahead.

### How did you get on with Aerobility?

Without Aerobility and the help of Mike Miller-Smith – who should be knighted for his relentless commitment to aviation – I don't think I'd be flying and my life would be nowhere near as fulfilled as it is now. I certainly didn't need encouraging as I was as keen as mustard to learn to fly, but where Aerobility did help was providing a subsidised hourly rate and, of course, aeroplanes that were modified for flight without using your legs – hand rudder controls.

Aside from these provisions, my experience was the same as at any regular flying school, and that's a real credit to Aerobility. They accommodate not just individuals like myself who want to gain a licence, but also tailor packages and experiences for a very wide range of people with all types of disability, and they do it seamlessly and with huge enthusiasm.

The CAA was also very helpful, particularly when it came to medicals. I mentioned earlier that I wanted to become commercially licensed, and in order to achieve this you must hold a Class 1 Medical, which I did for the first year. The CAA approached my case with an open mind, assessed me pragmatically and granted me a Class 1 with a hand-rudder control restriction. That's fine because it's impossible for me to fly an aeroplane without one!

### How did you hear about the LAA?

After spending a year or so flying Piper PA-28s and building my hours, I decided that I wanted the next challenge. I felt that tailwheel flying would offer this and started to make enquires about modified aeroplanes. I soon discovered that there weren't that many, if any at all! So I thought I'd modify one myself, and it was then I learnt about the Permit system and the LAA. I joined in 2011, when I started the modification process for the Piper J3 Cub I now own and fly.



(Above) Arthur in the Royal Marines, which he still considers his "dream job".

(Left) With a dH Mosquito during the filming of the Channel 4 documentary, *The Plane That Saved Britain*.

(Below) Arthur making friends while filming *Flying to the Ends of the Earth*.



### Was converting to a taildragger difficult?

I found it harder, technically, than learning to fly. For the first ten hours or so I just couldn't get the landing right – I remember feeling pretty hacked off with myself for consistently bouncing or swerving on touchdown. Then I spoke to a member at Turweston who told me not to worry, and that one day it'd just click, which it did! After a lot of practice and multiple bounces down long, forgiving runways, I found I could land consistently without making a mess of it.

Learning on a Cub, the aspects I found easier were the amount of time you have when approaching an airfield. Because the airspeed is lower you have much more time to plan the next phase of flight.

### How many hours and types have you flown?

My legs not working this puts a huge restriction on the number of types I can fly as P1 which, at times, can be frustrating. Like all pilots, I want to get as many types in my logbook as possible. However, I then remember that I'm very lucky to be able to fly just one type!

That aside, I've had the privilege of riding shotgun in a huge range, including twin Tecnams, Cessna Grand Caravans, Quest Kodiaks, Russian microlights, An-2s, Grumman Goose seaplanes, de Havilland Twin Otters and Beavers, a BE2C biplane, my Piper Cub, a Yak 52 and the lifetime-fulfilling dH Mosquito!

Currently, I have 360 hours, about 160 of which are tailwheel time with an IR(R) and night rating. I'm hoping to do my CRI course next.

### Do you have a favourite and worst type?

The worst types I've flown were some rather dodgy Russian microlights. The best was the Mosquito, closely followed by my Cub, G-BDEY. The reason for this is because the whole experience and simplicity of flying a Cub is magical, it's just a fantastic little aeroplane.

## MEET THE MEMBERS

### What's your best aviation moment?

I'm lucky, I've had so many. It goes without saying that one was when, on a warm summer's day in Virginia, I was sat at the shoulder of Mike, the pilot, in the cockpit of the Mosquito, as he applied the brakes, two-thirds power and then released. To feel that kick that you only get from jet engines in a twin Merlin-powered beast was beyond words. The tail came up very quickly and the view through the single-sheet, glass windscreen – it was a fighter variant – is excellent. You lift off, tuck the gear away and slice through the air like a cleaver. No turbulence or wind bothers you, you're too powerful and fast! And then, in the cruise, you synchronise the propellers and listen to that stunning soundtrack as the variable pitch props come into harmony: hmmmm, hmmmm, hmmmm. Amazing!

But there was also flying with missionaries in west Papua, and at 500ft above the Pacific, watching blue whales from a twin-engined WW2 floatplane. Or chugging along the endless arctic tundra in a tug of an An-2 biplane. Or swinging around an active volcano in a speedy little Cessna 210, watching local cult members 'speak' to the Earth's core. But the best of all are the summer days spent taking the family for pleasure flights while enjoying a BBQ and laughs at our local airfield.

### Do you have any aviation heroes?

Yes, Douglas Bader, for obvious reasons. We should all be inspired by the actions of our grandparents and parents during the war, but for me growing up with *Reach for the Sky* constantly on television, and seeing this man command the respect of all those around him, I couldn't help but feel inspired. That feeling became galvanised since I acquired a disability – I know first-hand the obstacles which stand in the way of flying.

### Have you had any 'interesting' flying moments?

Fortunately, none where I've been on the brink of disaster, but plenty that have made me think twice about doing the same thing again! The most notable one that springs to mind was while I was taking off from a short runway which was at slight altitude. It was a hot day and the runway was inclined up to halfway, then dropped away for the last third. I was in an aeroplane which didn't have the best short-field



(Left) Arthur in his beloved Cub, flying in to the Pooleys Day at Compton Abbas Airfield.

performance, and as I sat down, doing my weight, density altitude and performance calculations, I noted that I'd be fine getting airborne, albeit with little margin for error.

I ran the figures for a second time, then a third and fourth, each time concluding that, on the given day and with the loading, it'd work – however, I was nervous and uncomfortable. I taxied to the threshold, gave myself as much room as possible, held the brakes and full power, and committed to the take-off. I did get airborne, but realised I'd left no way near enough margin for error. If something doesn't feel right then don't do it, simple.

The majority of occasions where I've nearly been caught out were the ones where I became complacent. Everything in flying has to be meticulously thought out and conducted.

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

I enjoy clay shooting throughout the summer, plus a couple of days of driven game during the winter months. I swim three times a week, in the early morning, before my first cup of tea or coffee. And I love visiting castles or National Trust and English Heritage properties, and spending time with my family.

### As an LAA Ambassador, what do you hope to bring to the Association?

I think, quite simply, more members. Our sport and passion is going through a really difficult period – at the moment it's at the mercy of the government and local planning committees.

Housing strategies and airfields are firmly in the crosshairs so unless we band together and try to protect our precious sites, they won't be around for future generations to enjoy. I believe the only way we can do this is by showing that loads of people get huge enjoyment out of these apparent 'former industrial sites!'

Also, I'd like to see light aviation made more accessible to a wider range of people. For example, at Bidford Gliding & Flying Club we've recently introduced the CASC (Community Amateur Sports Club) scheme, which means that new and existing members can enjoy flying or gliding at really reasonable costs. As a result, the club is a really fun place to spend time.

### What advice would you offer to fellow pilots?

I was thinking, the other day, when filling out my log book, that I take too much enjoyment from simply logging my hours – looking forward to how many more I have to get before the next big milestone. We're measured by the number of hours flown, and I think that's a bit daft – the emphasis should be on the pleasure taken from the act of flying itself, rather than numbers and words in a book. Live in the now!

It's been said many times before, but keep looking for the next challenge. Take up an IR(R) or farm strip course, push your limits and you'll be a safer, more rounded pilot.

Also, please, for the sake of other airfield users, be courteous. Think about the other traffic using the airfield. ■

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