



## Early Years

“I was seven when the war started. Like many children of the period I was moved from school to school, so education was a pretty erratic process. I had no particular academic talents, other than being a very competent reader, but that early fascination for aeroplanes took me into an apprenticeship at RAF Halton. I became an electrical fitter with the intention of improving my educational skills, and using every avenue to obtain aircrew training.”

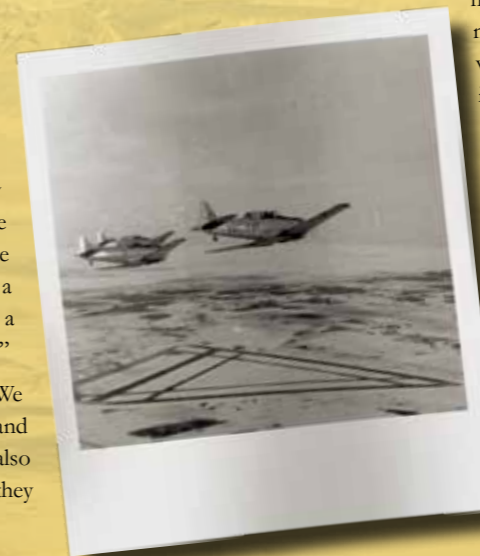
But it was the lure of flying that had brought Doug to the RAF. He applied for pilot training immediately on leaving Halton.

“When I said I wanted to transfer for flight training they told me it was a big mistake. As an electrical engineer you’d get a degree, world class experience, and the chance to retire a rich man; as a pilot you had maybe ten year’s working life and the chance to exit via a large smoky hole in the ground.”

These were the early days of jet propulsion, and military flying had become almost as hazardous as the pioneering days of aviation. But it was what this particular apprentice wanted, and he was accepted for flight training.

“It cost a lot of money to train an electrical technician, so the RAF’s willingness to let us star-struck youngsters make the switch was actually rather generous. A Dagling glider was used for ground slides. This was a bucket seat on a skid and it was considered lethal. They put sandbags on the skid so it couldn’t take off, and then they’d winch you along while you tried to keep the wings level. There was a Kirby Cadet for first solo, a T21 for dual, and a Grunau Baby when you were considered safe.”

Early FTS took place at Gimli in Canada. “We were flying Harvards. Nice aeroplane to fly, and nowhere near as noisy as you’d expect. They also had a glider very similar to the Dagling and they were kind enough to let me loose in that.”



The wide, deserted spaces and clear skies of Canada were an ideal place to learn to fly. “My instructor was Ed Wilkie, a man with boundless patience, but still plenty of love for flying, which must have been hard to maintain when he had to spend so much time coaxing ham-fisted students.

The instructors would let off steam later by getting into close formation and gently banging wingtips, or dropping a wing into one of the snow ditches and flying on a knife wedge with one wingtip actually below ground level!”

As for many student pilots, it was navigation that proved to be Doug’s *bête noire*. “You’d fold your map so that your route leg was visible on your kneeboard. I was on a nav exercise and was told to calculate a diversion back to the aerodrome which involved ten minutes’ calculation, and a refolding of the map. While my attention was elsewhere, Ed gently veered the Harvard off course, so that when I looked up again I was already lost. I hastily consulted the map and chose a village that possibly matched one I could see in the distance. Five minutes later I was orbiting it and trying to match what was outside on the ground with what was inside on paper. Wrong village.

“He took over and returned to base where I discovered that I’d folded the part of the map I needed to the back. This was a potential fail, and depression settled on me like a hopeless cloud. My dreams of flying were evaporating rapidly. Ed must have seen that my confidence had gone because he disappeared, ostensibly to organise a flight, and “accidentally” left his instructor’s report open in the debriefing room. The unauthorised peek he knew I’d take bore the words ‘Above average in instrument flying’. I got it right on the next try.”



# SAND BLASTING

Doug Johns first felt the urge to fly at the outbreak of World War 2. It was a time of massive advances in aviation; just as the Great War had spurred air technology, so the thirties saw the leap from wood and-string biplanes to marvels like the Spitfire and Dakota. As a young lad born between the two great conflicts of the twentieth century, Doug watched these technological leaps with rapt wonder. “I knew almost at once there was nothing else I wanted to do,” he told Jem Shaw, in a day-long conversation that connected the open spaces of Canada to the baking deserts of North Africa, with occasional stop-overs at the Windmill Theatre.

The saying that there are no old, bold pilots might rhyme nicely, but having spent one of the most fascinating days of my life in the company of a man who fulfils both criteria with elegant modesty I’ll repeat it a lot less frequently. Doug was kind enough to e-mail me following the last issue’s Czech Flight article, briefly mentioning his experiences in Meteors in the fifties. We corresponded briefly, leading to a meeting at Newquay to harvest his superb reminiscences. What follows is a series of memories sparked by the photographs he brought with him. No attempt has been made to sort them into chronological order – these are the recollections of a man who’s spent much of his life breathing the rubber-smelling air of early jets, recorded as they came out.

If you enjoy them a quarter as much as I did you’re in for a great time.

## Women Drivers

“I was based at Langham in Norfolk in 1958, working with the Civilian Anti-Aircraft Co-operation Unit. We all lined up in front of the hangar

doors to have our picture taken and this is the result. Down there at the front, fifth from the right, is the splendid Veronica Volkersz.”

Veronica, author of *The Sky and I*, was one of the criminally underrated women pilots that formed the Air Transport Auxiliary – the fabled “Atagirls”. Doug’s fondest memory of her is also an illustration of the narrow performance gap between early jets and fast piston aircraft.

“I was heading for Langham in a Vampire and saw a Mosquito ahead, going the same way. Obviously I needed to say hello, so I dived



underneath, came up close on the right hand side and gave the pilot a wave. A friendly gesture came back, but it was impossible to identify Veronica among the goggles and leatherwear. I opened the throttle and powered away, no doubt treating her to a few unplanned oscillations when my turbulence hit her.

“I landed at Langham and was just turning off the runway when a mildly petulant and rather rapid Mosquito shot over, missing my tailfins by a few feet. I felt myself well rebuked.”

## On Low Flying

If you're flying over a desert, in a landscape devoid of hedges and power lines, you might as well enjoy yourself. Doug completed a specialist tac/recce course which specialised in low flying. "The rule was, if the gate was open, you flew between the gate posts."

When you consider that this was going on at 360 knots, you conclude that any surviving pilot must have had the reactions of a microswitch. "360 knots is a nice, easy speed to do your nav. You're doing six nautical miles a minute. Surface winds at these speeds are minor adjustments, so the maths isn't too challenging."

"That was good for me, I could never do the sums."

The terrain-following capability of the Meteor FR9 consisted of an experienced hand on the control column. His primary job was reconnaissance, so he was expected to write copious notes on his kneeboard while missing the camels wherever possible.

"One trick was to trim tail-heavy. That way, if you eased off on the stick while you were looking down, you'd gain a bit of height."

"Of course, you'd have the odd moment now and again. Two of us were out on exercise when the bounce aircraft came in directly behind me. We put ourselves down on the deck to stay out of line. I looked across to my wingman and felt the stick come back, and the nose come up sharply. Somebody had left a sand dune in an awkward spot, and I might have put a bit of a groove in it with my ventral tank."

## On Flight Safety

Given Doug's low-level exploits and his flights in and out of remote places it's remarkable that he survived the experience. But it's even more surprising to learn that very few serious incidents occurred for any of his squadron mates and flying colleagues. "We only lost one. The poor chap had been target towing in a Meteor T7 and lost an engine on finals. He was out of practice on the T7, which did have a bite at low speed with some yaw on, and spun in."

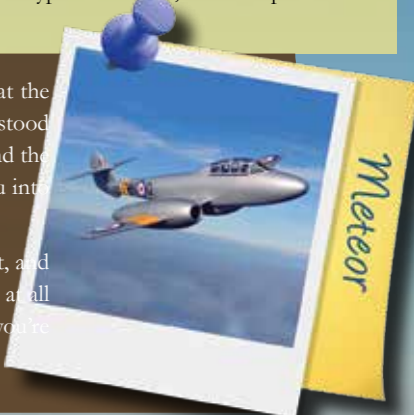
The Meteor's infamous phantom dive is the stuff of legend, so I asked Doug if he'd experienced anything similar.

"Never. It's a very well-behaved aeroplane if you treat it with respect. It's far safer than, say a Vampire, which could be very nasty in a spin."

"Knowing that Vampires could be tricky we'd practice spins in them for that very reason. Usually they're a lot more alarming than dangerous, but I did have an uncomfortable moment when the little devil decided not to cooperate. The rudders are very small, and partially masked, so there's not a lot of authority there. On this occasion she didn't want to come out; the rudders weren't doing much other than flap to and fro. After a few thousand feet I began to feel uncomfortably like a passenger."

"Eventually we got down into some denser air and a bit of feel started to come through. By that time 10,000 fairly unhappy feet had been used up. Two people were killed the following day carrying out the same exercise. It was shortly after that that intentional spinning was prohibited on Vampires."

"It does bother me that the modern way to deal with a dangerous situation is to avoid it, which is fine until something unexpected happens."



"She's a delight to fly. Very quiet and easy, and she behaves herself beautifully on one engine. It's a great shame that the type earned a reputation for poor safety because it was actually a very safe aeroplane. The problem was that we understood so little about jet propulsion in those days. There was no propeller wash to give you control authority at low speeds, and the engines took a while to spool up if you needed power in a hurry. And of course you could reach speeds that put you into completely unknown aerodynamic territory. But when you knew her she was a delightful aeroplane."

Doug remains unconvinced by the fuel-saving tactic of flying the Meteor on one engine. "You inevitably lose height, and trimming out the asymmetric increases drag. And it's not always easy to get the engine to relight. If you save anything at all then it's maybe a couple of pints. My preference would be to adopt a minimum drag speed and specific fuel height - you're going to glide 100 miles or so anyway."

"It's hard to say anything new about the Dak, but they really are that special." Doug flew Dakotas as an instructor in Africa. "I'd been working as a glorified Chauffeur, flying a Heron for Ferranti and was bored stupid. I had a great time in Africa training some terrific people - all expect for one who regarded crashes as an essential part of his training."

The DC-3's mannered, predictable handling made it a favourite of many pilots, and Doug's very much of that persuasion. "If you trim her right she'll take off by herself. It was a trick I picked up from an old hand on the type and once I'd mastered it I did it every time. You just put your hands in your lap and work the pedals; she'll pick up the tail and fly when she's ready, and never once ask you to do anything to help."

"In fact you can get a Dak off the ground on one engine. I proved that by accident."

On this occasion the Dakota was down in a mile-wide clearing, surrounded by the African forest. And inhabited by a considerable herd of wildebeest. "It wasn't so much an airstrip as a game reserve. I knew I was going to need my eyes open to avoid covering the paintwork with minced beef, so I asked my trainee number two to hold the throttles open and watch the gauges while I spent my time looking out of the window and trying to miss the wildlife."

"It was all going to plan, but the aircraft seemed to be asking for an increasing bootful of rudder. As we came unstuck it became uncomfortably clear that we weren't climbing with the usual enthusiasm. A glance inside the cockpit gave me a quick explanation. My student P2 was hunched over the throttles with eyes the size of saucers fixed on the dials. Unfortunately he'd failed to read what they were trying to tell him. He was only holding one lever, and the other had slid back to zero. I hadn't intended to demonstrate EFATOs this early in his career, but as the opportunity had presented itself..."

"It's an amazing piece of machinery. When they're empty they climb like a fast jet, and they're good for a fighter approach. They're actually fun to fly."

By the time Bristol's Whispering Giant was gracing our skies, Doug was already a pilot with some seniority, in years as well as hours. As a result, the appeal of sporty flying characteristics was becoming overshadowed by more practical considerations.

"I loved the Britannia, it was such a civilised aircraft. The seats were comfortable - which is an issue when you're sitting in them for 13 hours - and there was an excellent galley, so you could get some decent food on a long haul. And if you had to park up and wait for a few hours, as was often the case, there was room to stretch out and get some sleep."

"These were days of four-man crews, so because of the complexity of electrical prop control, you'd call for power from your flight engineer rather than work the levers yourself. If you upset him he had the power to make your landings look distinctly amateur!"

Not every technological advance was a step forward. "The weather radar on the Britannia was superb. In those days you set it up in the air, rather than use a one-size-doesn't-really-fit-anybody configuration that was applied on the ground on newer systems. As a result we could see the size of the raindrops." ●●●

When the need arises to land an Airbus in the River Hudson, it's as well to have a pilot on hand who's really put his flying skills to the test.

"208 Squadron required its pilots to have a genuine love for flying, and to constantly hone their skills by testing them in ways that nowadays would be considered foolhardy. Inevitably, some liberties were taken."

When young men are equipped with fast machinery, an occasional testosterone overload is inevitable.

**"You weren't supposed to aerobat while wearing drop tanks, but once they were empty you could carry on pretty much as normal... one bomber pilot decided to have a go himself"**

"All of 208 Squadron flew formation aerobatics - this was on Meteor 8s and 9s. We had a 12 ship team and we'd grab every chance available to get in some extra practice. I always loved aerobatics and carried on practising regularly later on when I joined Exeter CAACU on Vampires. You weren't supposed to aerobat while wearing drop tanks, but once they were empty you could carry on pretty much as normal."

"It must have looked quite impressive from the ground, so one bomber pilot decided to have a go himself. Unfortunately he missed the vital fact that we'd emptied the drop tanks first. They're only held on by a single bolt, so his second or third manoeuvre was enough to upset things, and the tank rotated 90° to sit broadside to the airflow. He got down safely, but with a white face, a stomach upset and a very asymmetric aircraft."



## Dogfighting

Dogfighting was a regular activity, either in the form of impromptu tail chases or formal missions.



Ivor "Taff" Davies

"We had frequent dogfights around the Med with Hunters from 111 and 222 Squadrons. I'm afraid we paid little respect to Italian airspace – the war wasn't long over and we felt it was their own fault for

choosing the wrong side. The Hunters were far faster than us of course, and at height they could turn inside us, so we'd always make for the deck. Not that you had that much choice because the Meteor hadn't the power to maintain altitude in a turning fight. Down low we could

sometimes get inside their turn and get cine on them, but it's fair to say they got more of ours than we did of theirs.

"The Navy Sea Hawks were a far more even match. The Sea Hawk was a very accident-prone aircraft and ultimately we were forbidden to engage with them, but there's always inter-service rivalry, and if you see the opposition in a vulnerable position it's very hard to resist temptation.

"We were out in a flight of four one day when we were bounced by a pair of Hawks. We split up immediately, taking our standard response of the first two going high and the second pair – which included me – staying low to avoid the leaders' wake. We were at around 150-200 feet at the time, so there wasn't a lot of daylight below us. The next moment I saw the Sea Hawk overshoot to pass under my right wing. It's possible he'd dived through my turbulence because he rolled inverted, pulled through and became a trail of fire across three fields.



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"Death was always close, and, although our squadron only suffered one fatality while I was there, there were plenty of incidents and the Navy lost quite a few. At that age, you accept death more easily, believing in your own ability, and you have to remember that we'd just come through the death and destruction of WW2.

"The enquiry that ensued became increasingly vicious, with the flight commander being threatened with court martial for engaging the Navy jets against orders. In fact we'd done nothing of the sort – we'd simply moved out of their way while they got whatever was bugging them out of their systems – appearances to the contrary, safety was always the primary concern. Fortunately common sense prevailed and all charges were dropped, but many harsh lessons were learned that day."

"When I'd completed my pass I couldn't resist a low level blast along the flight deck. I got down to my usual height, where the intakes could enjoy a bit of salt water, and aimed straight for the stern, pulling up at the last second. For the second time in my career I was shaken by a huge bang. Had I clipped the flight deck?

Everything seemed OK so I gave the chaps on the bridge a friendly wave and climbed away. Of course it hadn't occurred to me that 22,000 tonnes of metal moving at 20 knots is shifting an awful lot of air. Pop up over his stern at 400 knots and it's like hitting a brick wall.

"It was a bloody silly thing to do of course. If I'd clipped anything at that speed I wouldn't have been the only casualty. Today you'd, quite rightly, be in danger of a court martial, but pilots were regarded as special in those days – the odd burst of high spirits was regarded with a level of tolerance that's hard to understand nowadays. The only rebuke I received was a cable sent to the squadron: 'When making future fly-bys we'd be grateful if you'd break 300 feet above the fleet, not 50 feet below it.'"



## Carrier Attack

There can't be many people who've played chicken with an aircraft carrier or received a broadside from the Royal Navy's flagship.

**"It was an attack exercise against the Navy's carrier force. Of course I made straight for the Ark Royal – you don't want to settle for second best."**

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"I got down nice and low and made a fast run, and got a shock when the whole side of her lit up. I have to trust that they were firing blanks, but you can't help feeling anxious when you're staring down the barrels of that much firepower.

## Happy Snaps

The slightly extended nose of the FR9 housed a reconnaissance camera that could be configured on the ground to look left, right or, on rare occasions, straight ahead. "You didn't have any sighting mechanism, and there was a one or two second delay between frames when you hit the shutter release. The trick was to look at your pitot tube. If you allowed one pitot length ahead and a foot below its tip you'd get a pretty good snap."

Most of the photos the squadron took were what they called "Happy Snaps". "It's taken someone a long time to set everything up and load you with film. It wouldn't be good manners to come back without using it."

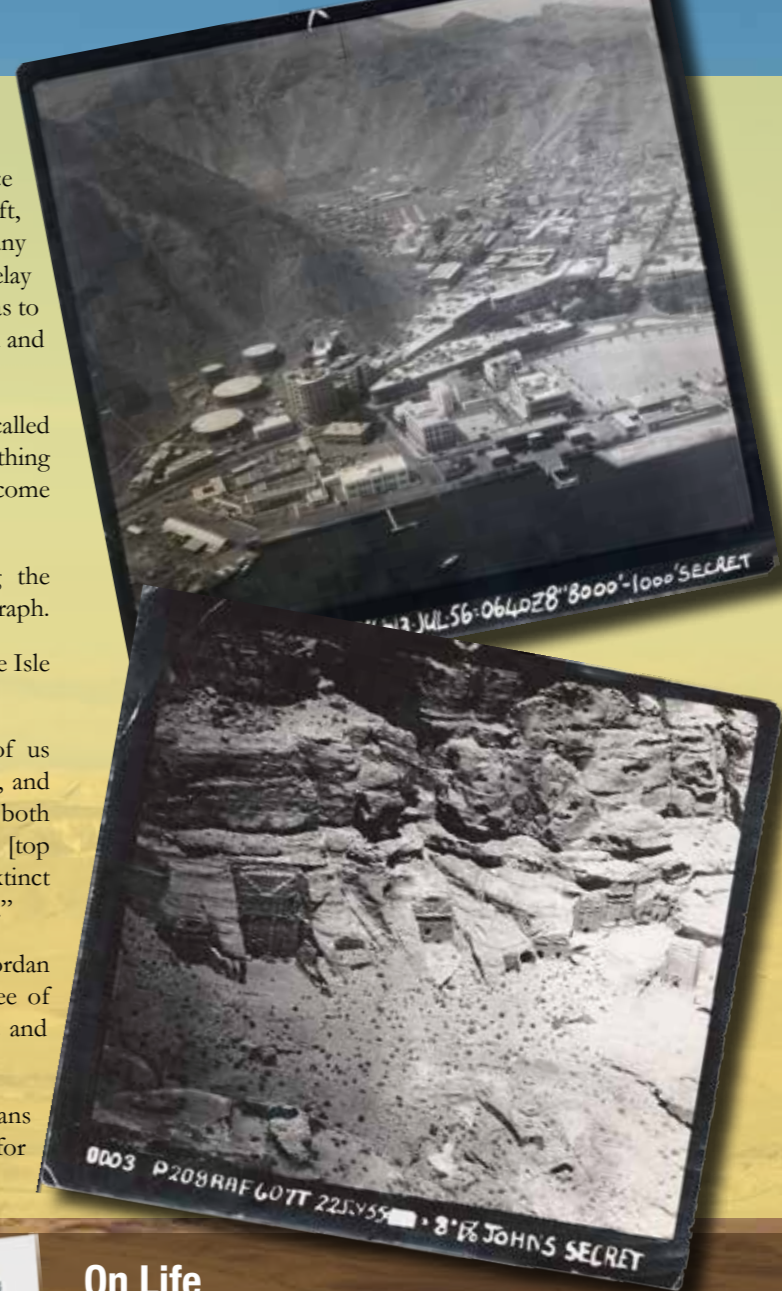
The tactical importance of a dozen Meteors overflying the pyramids may be moot, but it makes for a memorable photograph.

"I did get a good one of Gracie Fields' swimming pool on the Isle of Capri."

Not every photograph was taken for fun. "In 1956, four of us detached to Khormaksar to photograph the Yemeni border, and to find old airstrips upcountry. There'd been growing unrest both in this area, and the major port of Aden. This photograph [top right] is the famous duty free crescent and crater area of the extinct volcano, which was well known to sea passengers at the time."

A splendid image of the rock architecture at Petra in Jordan catches my eye. [right] "This was a practice tac/R for three of us, especially as it was not easy to find, as maps were basic and inaccurate, and Sat-Nav was unknown.

Supposedly the Queen of Sheba set up a treasury to tax caravans as they came through. It's not every day you get the chance for a holiday picture like that, is it?"



## On Life

"I suppose it's not been a bad life. Her Majesty has been kind enough to trust me with a lot of very expensive machinery, and I've met people who'll live in my memory for ever. I've found myself in wonderful places and ridiculous situations, whether it was dancing with AK47-wielding Bedou soldiers or sneaking into the Windmill theatre, a highly salacious and risqué venue in the fifties. The lights went up for the interval and I found myself surrounded by my senior officers."

**"Doug stood for a quiet moment between the Meteor T7 and NF11 in the Newquay hangar and I saw him step back in time, watching a young man scamper effortlessly up into that high cockpit."**



Doug stood for a quiet moment between the Meteor T7 and NF11 in the Newquay hangar and I saw him step back in time, watching a young man scamper effortlessly up into that high cockpit. I asked him if he felt moved to be back with an aeroplane that has meant so much to him. "A bit, but mainly I was thinking about the time I got my foot caught in the step and fell on my backside."...