



A burning 707 and an Aztec crash illuminate the flying history of Concorde captain and passionate GA pilot John Hutchinson. Paul Smiddy reports

The wind beneath my delta wings

Best known as being the voice – if not the face – of Concorde, Captain John Hutchinson has flown the globe faster than most. While he has undoubtedly been blessed with more than his fair share of aeronautical fun, he has also witnessed plenty of aviation sadness. He can look back on a remarkably successful career spanning an era in which Britain took the airline passenger supersonic, then largely withdrew from the field of airline manufacture, and at a once-thriving general aviation industry which now staggers under the weight of endless regulation and crippling cost.

Like many who have become great pilots, John was obsessed with flying from a very tender age. Surprisingly, he was raised in an aviation-free environment. His father, Wynne, was an officer in the Indian Army, and the family lived in Simla – there was never an aircraft to be seen. Nevertheless, although he occupied himself with ice skating and riding, he collected aircraft recognition books (this was WW2 after all) and other aeronautica. The family had a hazardous departure from India when the nation fragmented during the independence process, and John had his secondary education in England. He set his heart on a career with the RAF. Through a family connection he was able to attend (as a mini-VIP) all the classic Farnborough air shows of the Fifties – including the fated Derry one. He vividly remembers meeting Neville Duke “a very inspirational person – everything one expects a pilot to be”.

Not over-exerting himself in the

schoolroom, John gained a direct entry commission in 1955. At that time the RAF was using NATO flying schools in Canada for basic flying training, and the young Hutch enjoyed a Stratocruiser flight across the Atlantic. Whilst the Harvard had been used on both sides of the Atlantic as a trainer since WW2, John’s course was one of the first to use the formidable machine as an ab initio tool. John admits: “I was absolutely terrified of the aircraft for the first 25 hours.” He witnessed several colleagues suffering from its tendency to ground loop or flick a wing. “It was good at weeding out very early on if one was not up to the mark,” he says. His early lessons were a trial, but, as often the case a change to a more sympathetic instructor allowed John’s true talents to emerge. He enjoyed solo aerobatics, and, as is the RAF way, had logged four hours of such delights even before reaching 35 hours of total time and progressing to the Lockheed T33 in Manitoba. Returning to the UK with his wings, he acclimatised to the more crowded UK airspace with a Vampire course at Worksop. This was the period when the loss of aircrew in training was running at what would now be considered unacceptable rates. While he was fortunate to avoid the Meteor, which had the worst record, John nonetheless went to his fair share of colleagues’ funerals. He endured a canopy exploding on him, and as he discovered on landing, taking a chunk out of his tail.

Hoping for a posting onto the Hunter, he must have offended some Air Force god, for he was instead sent on to the Varsity for

multi-engine training, and thence onto Shackletons. He was soon given a two and half year posting to Singapore. Whilst this location had its attractions for bachelor pilots it presented a few problems for John, who had already decided to marry Sue, who was completing her nursing training in London. A complicated international courtship followed. John was appointed P2 for the flight to deliver the first Shack from the UK to Singapore and gained a taste for long-haul flying. A less pleasant task was searching for a fellow 205 squadron crew (VP254) which had disappeared over the ocean. Only one body was ever found.

A medical problem meant that John (and Sue – by now they were married) had to return to the UK. When he recovered he had a spell instructing on Provosts at Syerston but decided to leave the Air Force at his eight-year point as he had heard the airline industry was booming. His RAF

Left: flying Concorde provided John Hutchinson with the most enjoyable years of his long career in aviation
Below: John had been hoping to be streamed onto Hunters but was instead sent to Shackletons



mates thought he was mad to leave such a good job. With 2000 hours in his log book, he had aspirations to be a long-haul pilot.

Unfortunately his timing was appalling, and no airlines were hiring. After some diligent searching he unearthed a job with McAlpines at Luton, where their pilot had just lost his medical. As well as flying for their own construction business, McAlpines flew third party customers, and John carried a lot of horse racing folk – sometimes from paddocks or fields next to a trainer or jockey’s house. He recalls that whilst most jockeys read the *Sporting Life* in the back, the taciturn Lester Piggott always read the *Financial Times* (whilst endlessly smoking cigars)! It was heavy-duty single pilot flying: pre-GPS John had to find these fields with the aid of a one-inch OS map. He enjoyed the sturdy Helio Courier for this sort of STOL work. The company also had a Piaggio P166 (twin pusher) for more passengers, and airways transits. But it too was very solid, and the passengers enjoyed easy access to its low-slung fuselage, and good vision beneath

the cranked gull wing. Surprising that it did not sell better in the UK. I asked John if he ever went in to Leeds/Bradford in this machine – as a spotty schoolboy I would cycle up to Yeadon for the day with my box Brownie and spotter's notebook and well remember the McAlpines' P166, a noisy beast, as I recall. "Oh, yes indeed," he said... so our paths crossed, after a fashion, many decades back. John also went rotary and was taught on a Hiller 12B. He was lucky to escape more or less unharmed from a crash after a tail rotor driveshaft failure. He returned to fixed wings...

At McAlpines John amassed a further 2000 hours of very intense flying, but in 1966 came the siren call of the airlines – they were hiring again. John received



Sydney flight. The 707 often had two first officers – one was needed for navigation, and John had yet to gain his nav licence; there was of course a flight engineer, too. On this flight there was a route check captain occupying the left seat, so in this crowded flight deck First Officer Hutchinson was relegated to a rear seat. Just after rotation G-ARWE shuddered. The captain prepared to make a return from 28L from which they had just lifted, but Geoff Moss, the route check captain, looked back and shouted some Anglo-Saxon words when he saw the port wing aflame. Although not in command, he insisted they make an immediate turn for the long-ago closed 5R. (ATC, which had seen the fire immediately, had offered them any runway). In John's opinion, this action saved all their lives. The crew had to work very fast with post-take off, top of descent and approach checks all compressed into a three-minute flight – together with the emergency drills. The captain pulled off "a beautiful visual approach to 05" followed by a flawless landing not a moment too soon. As soon as the aircraft halted, without cooling airflow, the fire really took hold at the tail. The cabin crew organised a text-book

many passengers clutching their duty free bags as they leaped onto the slide!

In the analysis afterwards, BOAC decided to merge two significant emergency drills – the "severe engine failure" and the fire drills. The WE crew had not initially fired the extinguishers because they had not heard a fire bell, nor seen a red fire light. They had performed the severe engine failure drill.

In the summer of 1968, when Parisian students were revolting, BOAC pilots went on strike. (As far as I know there was no connection between the two events). To keep his hand in during this enforced abstinence, he accepted a request to fly a BBC film crew to France in an Aztec. During an instrument approach in bad weather he flew into the ground. The French Bureau was not interested in making an investigation: no-one died, and the injuries were only to Britons, after all. John realised that, in the absence of an investigation, BOAC would assume pilot error, and his career with them would come to an abrupt halt. Fortunately he and the Aztec's owner managed to persuade the French to launch an enquiry. This established that the altimeter feeds were waterlogged, causing the instrument to



**Top left: John flew the Piaggio 166 for McAlpines when the airlines weren't hiring
Left: Boeing 707 G-ARWE at Heathrow, three minutes after taking off for Sydney
Bottom left: by 1977 John had been a junior captain on VC10s for eighteen months**



offers from all three of the airlines to which he applied – BOAC, BEA and Qantas (the Australians, way ahead of their peers, had already started using psychometric testing). Short haul was not really his bag; he was very tempted by the Qantas offer and may have taken it had it not been for the illness of his mother. So he joined BOAC that September and was sent to the Boeing 707 fleet, to be trained, amongst others, by one Norman Tebbit. His career had a serene (if noisy) trajectory until April 1968 when he was rostered on the

evacuation from the only two emergency exits available. John stood by one exit barring its use as the slide had melted and there was burning fuel on the tarmac. One panic stricken passenger barged past John's outstretched arms and leapt to the ground, breaking both legs. The flight deck crew exited by rope from a cockpit window. All but four of the 120 passengers survived; stewardess Jane Harrison, who had returned from the rear door to try to save the passengers, also died. She was awarded a posthumous George Medal. The incident reaffirmed in John's mind that cabin crew are there primarily "to rescue people when in dire straits". Their role as trolley dollies is very much secondary. He was particularly impressed with how the chief steward had been "most assertive" – but also sufficiently pragmatic not to slow up the evacuation by trying to prevent the

over-read by 300 feet – the altitude he thought he was descending through when he hit the ground. Bloodied but very much unbowed, he returned to BOAC and progressed to the 747 fleet.

In 1975 he moved onto VC10s, and by the summer of 77 had been a junior captain for eighteen months. Concorde had recently become the airline's flagship, and in a very speculative way, John put his name down for course No. 3. The selection procedure was somewhat haphazard. Initially the airline had started by selecting the most senior (i.e. oldest) captains available. But in John's words, many of these veteran aviators were not able to "think ahead of the aircraft" – which is quite understandable when it travelled at 23 miles per minute. Thirty to forty percent failed the course. Senior captains soon became less keen on going forward for Concorde training – they were not about to start failing courses in the twilight of their careers.

John's face fitted, and he was accepted. And so began the most enjoyable years of John's career. Concorde was "an easy aircraft to fly, but a difficult aircraft to operate". It demanded a high degree of teamwork from the flight deck, with fuel balance a particular priority. He remembers that, although the cruise was relatively

relaxed, and allowed passengers to come up to the flight deck, 10 degree position reports came up a lot more quickly than normal. More importantly, on the Atlantic crossings the crew always had to monitor their alternates. For if they lost an engine, they would become subsonic, have to descend to normal flight levels and routings, and fuel consumption would rise 30%. Points of no return were more than a theoretical exercise.

John is full of admiration for the teams at BAC and Aerospatiale who designed and built the aircraft – without, as he reminds me, the computing power of today's companies. He describes it as a “jet version of the Spitfire”, and endorses Sir Hugh Casson's description of Concorde as being a “Twentieth Century sculpture”. It was generally very reliable. However on one flight the number 3 engine surged and the aircraft shook violently “as though in a train crash”. The problem was soon sorted but the passengers soothed their anxiety by stepping up their alcohol consumption. Despite BA's generous catering policy they managed to drink the aircraft dry, and John recalls a very happy bunch disembarking later.

The best part of John's Concorde phase was his posting to Singapore (again) at the end of 1979. This was as a fully formed crew – who happened to have already become his closest colleagues – Jock Lowe as First Officer (later Chief Concorde pilot) and Bill Brown as Flight Engineer. John remembers this three-month posting for the connection between the three of them: they barely needed to speak to each other, they were all at the top of their game, and knew each other's thoughts – three skilled aircrew working in perfect harmony.

Flying such an iconic aircraft lead to all sorts of opportunities. John flew many air shows – with passengers aboard. On a round the world trip, he recalls taking off from Tahiti, and flying around Moorea at 1200'. The most spectacular instance of legal low flying was in New York. The 0830 Sunday departure from Heathrow was scheduled to arrive at JFK at 0750, but nearing the US coast it became apparent to the crew that they would arrive at 0730. Company ops told them to be prepared to wait on the stand until 0800, when the customs and immigration staff would have opened shop. The pilots did not fancy keeping their VIPs in the confines of the cabin in such circumstances; Mike Bannister, the FO, mused whether they could not do an aerial tour of Manhattan. John decided “well, if we don't ask, we don't get”. To their astonishment JFK Approach gave them a VFR clearance at 1500' (and 250 knots!) over Central Park,

down the Hudson River past the Twin Towers, and over the Verrazano Narrows Bridge. Another example of high level customer relations skills – which just happened to provide some stimulating flying!

In 1985 John and Sue attended a party in Hertfordshire, where they had lived for many years, to celebrate the Queen Mum's 85th birthday. She asked John if he realised that when he approached

LHR he flew right over her home, Clarence House. Naturally he was aware of this fact. But it was news to him that his overflight often coincided with Her Majesty's first G&T of an evening, and she always enjoyed looking at the beautiful aircraft. Thereafter John's passengers were treated to a sedately wing waggle as they flew over the Mall.

Concorde's career was put into jeopardy by the Air France cash in Paris. John is obviously saddened by that episode, but I

“ if they lost an engine, they would become subsonic, have to descend to normal flight levels and routings, and fuel consumption would rise 30%”

Right: Captain Hutchinson with Concorde AB in the Lander livery
Below: celebrity on the flight deck – Hutch with legendary aviatrix Jean Batten





detect some suppressed anger. In the view of many British pilots, Air France had some time earlier let standards slip in their operation of Concorde. The initial enquiry was something of a whitewash, looking for non-French scapegoats. A maintenance error, and a tailwind and over-weight take-off are some of the real reasons behind this accident, according to John. This episode is well described in John's biography. (*The Wind Beneath My Wings – John Hutchinson, Concorde Pilot*, by Susan Ottaway, Speedman Press, 2011). Concorde's commercial prospects never recovered.

Concorde led to new facets to John's career. He became a very successful air show commentator; to my ears his fruity voice carries more than a hint of an aeronautical John Arlott. Whilst still on Concorde he did a double act with Raymond Baxter several times (the latter on the ground, John on the flight deck). He has also become a popular speaker on cruise ships. In 1999 John became Master of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators (GAPAN), and remains a staunch advocate of the Guild. Whilst he hung up his BA hat in 1991, he has not hung up his headphones. A spell on Duxford's Dragon Rapides followed. Since then he has had

“ A maintenance error, and a tailwind and over-weight take-off are some of the real reasons behind this accident, according to John

wide experience in GA aircraft: Cessna singles and twins, Mooneys, but most particularly the Auster Aiglet. Together with three chums, John owns G-AMZT. Sadly, there were few hours in his log book for 2011. His shoulder made painful contact with a Roman pavement, and operating the Aiglet's stiff (and overhead) flap lever became impossible. But some very clever surgery gives John confidence he will be back in the air soon. With its stall speed of 38 mph, there can be no question that this master of Concorde is thinking ahead of that aeroplane.

“The resilience of the general aviation sector in the UK never ceases to amaze me,” he says. “The passion for flight seems to remain undiminished in spite of an environment that seems to make life for the general aviation pilot as difficult as possible. One cannot escape the view that the EU and, indeed, our own government would be very happy if there was no general aviation for them to contend with; life would be a lot simpler!

“Bureaucratic obstacles are continually erected, an eloquent example being the airspace restrictions to be put in place for the Olympics which caused great stress to many flying schools in the London area. There remains confusion about licensing with the transition to EASA protocols and anomalies with EASA/non EASA aircraft type certificates. Flying costs have spiralled out of control over the last few years and it leaves me wondering how anyone can afford to fly. Fuel costs have escalated to record levels, landing fees have rocketed and there are no VAT concessions for flying training. As I say, it is remarkable that we have any general aviation at all.

“Having had a rant about all the difficulties, I must say there is one item that I regard as very good news and that is the retention of the IMC rating. I regard that rating as an essential contributor to flight safety, so thank goodness that someone recognised its value and granted a reprieve.”

As the time came for me to take my leave from his Hertfordshire home, John related the tale of the funeral of Raymond Baxter at Ewelme, near Benson. Whilst Baxter was well known as the face of BBC's *Tomorrow's World*, and as the commentator at Farnborough, he had of course been a Spitfire pilot in WW2. John recounted how, during the second half of the service, the sound of Merlins overhead could be heard. As the congregation filed out, two Duxford Spitfires flew very low over the churchyard and climbed in a series of victory rolls. I sense that when the time for his last flight has come, John would like to depart to the sound of four Olympus in full song. It is a sadness to us all that that will never happen. ■

Top: since retirement John had a spell on Dragon Rapides

Left: John's passengers were treated to a sedately wing waggle as they flew over the Mall

Below: John Hutchinson at home in Hertfordshire – today he owns an Auster Aiglet