

Signed by the artist...

No point owning a masterpiece if the artist hasn't signed it; **Robin Nash** goes in search of **Stelio Frati**



Since I acquired the Nibbio, G-OWYN, I haven't needed much of an excuse to take it flying. The aircraft makes up for its Italian rarity and consequent quirkiness in the parts department by being a delight to fly and cruising easily at 140kts on 38 litres per hour.

In the course of trying to recondition a worn undercarriage part, I took advantage of Enzo Calogero, a friend and former Italian air force pilot, to communicate with the designer,

Stelio Frati, in Milan. Dott. Ing. Stelio Frati is celebrated throughout the aviation world as the creator of a string of stylish, often wooden designs, of which the most famous are the two-seat Falco (still available as a kit from Sequoia in the US) and the SF260, an all-metal military trainer adopted by air forces around the world and still in (occasional) production. The Nibbio (Kite) is a four-seat version of the Falco and shares most of its features, including the relatively high wing-loading.

Despite being in his eighties, Sig. Frati is still very active and proved to be most helpful, responding personally to my enquiries with photocopies of the original drawings and material specifications. Back in the air and

with the annual out of the way, it occurred to me that it would be a fine escapade to take the Nibbio to Milan and ask Sig. Frati to autograph it. The final incentive to put the plan into action came when I was contacted by Tim Spurge, who owns Great Oakley airfield near Clacton. He was interested in buying the only other Nibbio known to be airworthy, which had come up for sale at Ozzano di Emilio, south of Bologna, and offered to share the cost of the trip. Between us, we hatched a scheme to cross the Alps via Annecy and Aosta, visit Ozzano on a day when there just happened to be an air show, check out I-CAMI (the other Nibbio), and continue on to Milan to try to meet Sig. Frati the next day.

Italian AIP has a good website but somehow, VFR information seems not that easy to come by so gathering it took some time. We cleared through Southend in order to pick up our life raft and left as early as possible with as much fuel as we could carry. The weather was clear and we even had a bit of a tailwind. Stopping briefly for lunch (and more fuel) at Troyes, we arrived at Annecy while there was plenty of daylight left, so we decided to try to get over the hump to Aosta on the Italian side before they closed at 5pm and filed our flight-plan accordingly. We still had about four hours fuel, and I was reluctant to load more in view of the 1,400ft elevation of



Annecy and the need to climb rapidly to about 12,000ft to cross into the valley where Aosta is located. However, by the time we reached 8,500ft, it became clear that the ridges ahead, which I knew went to 10,500ft, were going to be obscured by cloud. It was all looking rather grey and uninviting so we made a gentle 180 into the hazy sun and decided to investigate the overnight attractions of Annecy. It seemed a long way down and, although we were talking to the lady in the tower right up until we were parked, by the time we'd secured the aircraft for the night, the field was closed, everyone had gone home and we found ourselves locked in. We had to roll a wheelie bin up to the fence in order to climb out!



Left: two-seat Falco (still available as a kit from Sequoia in the US)

Above: Stelio Frati carefully applies his autograph to Robin Nash's Nibbio at Milan Linate

Above right: Signed by the artist – the autograph of Stelio Frati on Nibbio G-OWYN
Right: this wheelie bin gave us an escape route from Annecy after we were locked in





Day two dawned beautifully clear but we had to wait for the pompiers to unlock the gate and let us onto the airfield. We still had over three hours fuel remaining and I was keen to exploit our lighter weight and the cooler morning air to get to altitude as quickly as possible. After a few careful calculations, we filed our flight plan (with a request for customs) to Piacenza, which seemed to be more or less en route for the air show at Ozzano. We managed to depart a few minutes after the field officially opened and about 30 minutes later, found ourselves apprehensively

passing Mont Blanc in clear skies at just over 12,000 ft. Mont Blanc rises to 15,781 ft and is quite impressive from where we were. Tim was busy snapping away and I was busy trying objectively to monitor the Nibbio's physical well-being, while paying some attention to my own, checking for symptoms of hypoxia and figuring out what best to do if it all went quiet. At best glide of 85 mph, I could expect to lose 900 fpm, and the landing options were few and far between. After a while, however, we settled down and began to enjoy the experience. It was a spectacular day!

It hardly seemed to matter that the Italian side appeared to be completely covered in cloud as far as the eye could see. After all, wasn't this the exact definition of VFR flying - clear of cloud, in sight of the surface and in visibility of 5nm or more? Or was that hypoxia talking? It was a little alarming to note the manifold pressure at 19 inches at full throttle and the vacuum showing below the green but I realised this was probably normal at 12,000ft. I remember also thinking that the aircraft's listed service ceiling of 18,000ft was definitely a tad optimistic.

Soon gaps started to appear in the clouds, and before long we were able to spiral down to a hazy, hot and humid 6-7 km vis day below the cloud at about 5,000ft. Approaching Piacenza, I could raise nobody on the frequency and no signal from their VOR, despite having the field in sight. When someone did finally pick up the mike and respond, it was to inform me that the (military) field was closed and to tell me in no uncertain terms to go elsewhere. Requests for fuel fell on deaf ears, and since by now we were down to about half an hour left, plan B had to be invoked. This involved back-tracking to a small grass strip adjacent to the river that runs south from the town of Piacenza itself. We found the strip, but although there was an aircraft (a Stampe) visible, there was no sign of any fuel point. I decided to have one last shot at the military airfield and headed off back towards them, requesting fuel again. The response was the same as before - go somewhere else! We headed back to the grass strip, which naturally enough proved harder to find this time, made blind calls on what we thought was the correct frequency and landed on the westerly runway in a strong southerly crosswind. Welcome to Italy.

Gragnano Piacenza airfield comprised a row of private hangars, a small control tower, a restaurant/clubhouse and a shed with the fuel pump. The good news was that they were friendly, some of them spoke English and they could close our flight plan. The bad news was

Top left: At 12,000 feet we were almost 4,000 feet below the summit of Mont Blanc
Centre left: although forced landing grounds were rare, we began to relax over the Alps
Left: during an unscheduled stop at Piacenza-Gragnano we managed to cadge some fuel

that although they had fuel, they were unable to sell us any since this was a kind of commune where the fuel was owned individually by aircraft owners. Eventually, they found someone who might sell us 100 litres of 100LL. A deal was struck, but I had the distinct feeling that had we been flying a Cessna or Piper instead of an interesting old Italian machine, things may not have gone so smoothly.

I taxied to the extreme end of the strip and gave it my best short-field technique. We were off in just over 400m and jostling through the turbulence on our way to Ozzano. There is a maze of controlled and restricted airspace around Bologna and we were pleased to be able to exercise the Garmin 196 to work our way around it to the south east. The fly-in made the field easy to spot but they cautioned us on the radio about strong crosswinds. As we over-flew the runway, the windsock confirmed the story and we were pretty sideways on finals but the wind diminished as we approached the ground and I managed one of my smoother arrivals - must be the pressure of having an audience!

The air show was billed as a microlight

affair but the Italian definition seems to be somewhat wider than our own. There was some spectacular low-level display flying of the sort that I doubt would ever be allowed by our own CAA. One particularly spirited sequence sticks in my mind. This was flown by one of those stubby little Rotax 912-powered CT microlights and featured all kinds of unlikely manoeuvres, including loops with rolls off the top and stall turns. It was all the more impressive since the CT was wearing amphibious floats!

Our priority was to contact the owner of the other Nibbio and get a look at it. We managed to persuade one of the organisers to contact him, and he turned up in the afternoon to show us over it. The aircraft was for sale at €50,000 and has subsequently been sold to an Italian. The owner, Dr Verna, was good enough to drop us off at a nearby hotel.

We had not been able to contact Stelio Frati to warn him of our imminent arrival, and despite having his address, we had no idea how to find it. Nevertheless, there seemed little point in remaining at Ozzano next day, so we bought fuel and planned for the one-hour trip

Right and top right: some of the colourful microlights gathered at Ozzano for the show
Below: At Ozzano we inspected the only other Nibbio known to be airworthy
Right: G-OWYN at Ozzano, where we landed in a serious crosswind during an airshow
Bottom right: Nibbio at 6,000 feet – 23 square and 150 knots indicated

suspected Sig. Frati was based. The plan was to get the hotel concierge to look him up in the phone book and make contact. The chap at the Hotel Napoleon, despite having a manner and bluster worthy of Benito himself, proved to be a real star, not only finding Stelio Frati in the phone book but calling and explaining that a Sig. Nash was here to see him from England and making an appointment for us to meet him at his studio at 10 am the following day. We couldn't have hoped for a better result.

Next day, Stelio Frati was very hospitable and seemed pleased to welcome us to his studio, but communication was difficult. He



to Milan Linate. It was a bumpy but straightforward flight and the Linate controllers only gave us a little bit of a runaround. The concrete was clearly visible from a long way out and I thought I'd better keep my speed up due to the jet traffic. However, I was suddenly cleared direct to final and realised that I was far too high and far too fast (160 kt) to make a realistic approach to the 2,440m runway without drastic action. The realisation that my recent experience with short grass strips had left me expecting an entirely unrealistic mental picture was little consolation, especially when it occurred to me that I might be about to have to call for an embarrassing go-around from such a huge runway in perfect VMC! Fortunately, the Nibbio likes to go down as well as up, so it was nose up, power back, carb heat, drop the gear passing 125 mph, full flap at 95, prop to fine, pump on and descent rate off the clock until it became clear that we would make the last third of the runway. Then a gentle power increase to a more normal descent profile and a reasonable landing to turn off at the first available taxiway. Must have been interesting to watch, but at least we were safely down.

We parked among the Citations, Avantis and LearJets, secured the aircraft and caught a cab to a hotel in the general area where we



speaks little English and our Italian was even less impressive. Eventually, we made it understood that I would like Sig. Frati to sign the aircraft. I offered to go to the airport, remove a panel and bring it back for him to sign, but he insisted on coming out to the field himself.

We encountered the usual difficulties with

airport security, especially when we explained that we wanted to take photographs airside, and it took some time and several reminders that Sig. Frati was a famous designer and something of a national treasure before they talked themselves round to our way of thinking. Stelio seemed very interested in the aircraft and inspected it in some detail before



putting his signature on it, close to the Aviamilano logo on the rear fuselage. As we were about to make our way back to the handling agent's building, a rather wonderful thing happened. Two very smart young black-uniformed Italian corporate pilots suddenly arrived, having obviously recognised Sig. Frati, to pay their respects and express their admiration for his designs. I think that Sig. Frati is a fairly modest chap, despite his achievements, but he was obviously touched. In the taxi, on the way back, I was trying to persuade Sig. Frati to join us for lunch but encountering language difficulties. In desperation, I asked him if he spoke French. Of course, he did! God knows why it hadn't occurred to me to ask before. From then on, though he had been claiming to be quite tired after the drama with security at Linate and the heat, he brightened up considerably and we went back to his studio, where he showed us his latest designs, including a six-seat single-engine executive jet, which bore a distinct resemblance to his Squalus jet trainer, which I know is entering production in Canada. We thanked him for his time and patience and left. Mission accomplished, our thoughts turned to

planning the flight home.

Next morning we filled the tanks to within 40 litres of capacity, which put us on the weight limit and just inside the C of G, filed for Dijon and taxied out, requesting the main runway since we were heavy. Unfortunately, we'd left some documentation at the handling agents and had to ask for a return to the apron. This didn't go down too well with the ground controllers, since we subsequently had what seemed to be an extraordinary number of reporting points and instructions to comply with on the way to the hold for the active. There was little wind and they were taking off to the north instead of to the south, for which I had planned). I had asked at the handling agents for advice on the probable VFR departure route to the west. They said I would receive detailed clearance over the radio. In the event the only instructions were to turn left immediately after take-off - no altitude and no reporting point - and, since the controller and I were having difficulties understanding one another, I didn't press the point. I don't think we were even given a squawk.

Nevertheless, we were soon clear of the city and, by the time we were passed off to Milan

Info and they asked my height and position, we were passing 4,500ft in order to be at what I thought was an appropriate level for our track, according to the Italian semi-circular rules. There followed a rather difficult exchange with the controller (whose English wasn't exactly clear), in which I was told that the max VFR level was 2,000ft (no mention of that on my brand new chart!) So I started on down to 2,000, only to be then told to maintain 4,000ft... As we approached the Alps I requested a climb but was told to remain at 4,000 and only climb to 7,500 in the mountains! Well, you're not going to get over the Alps at 7,500ft. Fortunately, radio reception was fading, so progressive radio failure rid us of what I can only assume was a deliberately uncooperative controller. Instead of a gentle cruise to altitude, we were now forced to spiral up to 10,000ft at best rate of climb. There was a bit of cloud but it was only on the south east side of the mountains and easily avoided. Once past this, it was clear all the way to Dijon, and we picked up a bit of a tailwind for a fairly consistent 155-160 kt groundspeed.

**Top left: Proud owner with talented designer – Stelio Frati having just signed his work
Left: designer Stelio Frati inspects G-OWYNB closely at Milan Linate**

Dijon is an active military field with mixed civilian use and has strictly enforced arrival and departure procedures. These are well covered by the Pooley/Delarge manual and, with good vis we had no trouble identifying the sequential reporting points. We were held for a few orbits at 1,000ft agl while they got a couple of jets off but it was otherwise straightforward. We had chosen Dijon because it had fuel, customs, met facilities and a restaurant. Also, it would allow us to reach Southend (or Great Oakley) in one leap. In the event, the weather didn't look good, the restaurant was closed and the lineman filled the rear tank to capacity (despite my request for only 40 litres in it), compromising our C of G. The TAFs didn't look very good but the weather had been so good to us up to this point that it was hard to believe it would turn on us now. We decided to launch and see how it went. We were cleared to remain below 500ft agl till clear of the zone, which was quite exciting at 140 kt. As we progressed northward the visibility began to reduce. We were slowly drifting down to maintain VFR. About 45nm north of Reims, very low stratus started appearing below us. I discussed options with an unusually helpful Paris Info and decided that our best shot was to put down at Peronne St Quentin, about 12nm west of our current position. It was raining, the stratus was now fairly extensive and, by the time we got below it, we were about 300ft agl. After a quick inspection of the runway, we landed and taxied towards the only sign of life we could see.

It was early afternoon next day before we judged the cloud to have lifted enough for us to venture into the air and only after we'd passed the Boulogne VOR that there was a real improvement allowing us to climb above 1500ft. From then on it was a very pleasant flight back to Great Oakley via Southend, for customs. It had been a memorable trip, not without its moments of excitement, and one that was easier to undertake and all the more enjoyable in the good company of a fellow pilot. ■