

The end of a long line



Made for the military but happy in civilian life, flying the Miles M38 Messenger was a hands-on business, says David Ogilvy

Above: Messenger 2A G-AIEK, modified by Jim Buckingham to represent Monty's wartime Messenger RG333, which he and Chris Fielder flew on the airshow circuit
Right: with fine pitch prop the M38 could take-off like a Storch; one prototype appears also to have leading-edge slats

The last in the long line of single-engine low wing monoplanes created by the Miles family, the M38 Messenger was intended as an Air Observation Post, but after many disagreements in military and ministry circles the type entered service as a communications machine. Following a first flight on 12th September 1942, only three months from the start of the idea, just 23 were produced for the RAF, but at the war's end its suitability as a tourer for the private market became very clear; 21 of the Service batch survived and were released in 1948. Before then, though, Messengers had earned their fuel and oil by providing 'field' transport for Service chiefs, including Marshal of the Royal Air Force Lord Tedder and Field Marshal Lord Montgomery. It was claimed that with a fine pitch propeller the short take-off and landing performance was as good as that

of the famous German Fieseler Storch. For its military role, the Messenger was built to be robust, requiring only casual maintenance from relatively unskilled labour, with a single strut undercarriage to withstand heavy landings; whilst this aim may have been achieved in the early days, more recent civil experience has shown that access to some critical parts of the airframe is difficult. As with all Miles designs of the time, the structure was all wood, but with plastic bonded ply skin.

The military Messenger was powered by the 140hp Gipsy Major 1D, but when the type entered production for its civilian role this was replaced by the 155hp Blackburn Cirrus Major. A total run of 81 machines included 58 for home users, with the last to leave the line in January 1948. The airframes were built at Newtownards in Northern Ireland, but flown to the makers' home at Woodley for final painting.

As had been expected, the M38 proved popular for touring as, with 18 gallons in each wing root, it can carry four average people and provide a range of 450 miles. If luggage is carried, though, either fuel must be reduced or a seat left empty. The maximum weight for service and civil versions is identical at 2400 lbs.

In its post-war role the M38 has performed well and served a variety of private and commercial interests. For several years one example, G-AKKG, was to be seen at almost every aviation event, flown by larger than life Vivian Varcoe who was in charge of Shell's aviation operations. Other airframes were used as test-beds for the Blackburn Bombardier and Praga E engines, while another crossed the finishing line first to win the 1954 King's Cup Air Race. Perhaps the most significant experience in the type's history was when a propeller blade broke

away causing the engine to fall off, yet by crowding the rear-seat occupants forward over the instrument panel, the pilot made a successful forced landing.

I had the good fortune to carry out a few hours of twin-conversion instructing on the Messenger's younger sibling the M65 Gemini, so when I had the opportunity to climb aboard the earlier machine I was pleased to do so. The specimen concerned was an ex-military example, known in its civilian form as the Mark 4A, powered by a Gipsy Major 10 of 145hp instead of the original Major 1D. The Messenger has

typical Miles auxiliary aerofoil flaps protruding behind the wing trailing edge; access to the cockpit is by a step on each side, then up to a walkway on each wing root, with essential handholds on both sides of the fuselage. As with many light aircraft of the era, getting in is not the easiest of tasks.

Once aboard, I found the cockpit to be comfortably spacious and the only adverse comment that I have heard is that the leg room is insufficient for a very tall person. The kit includes a Kigass primer, a large low-geared trim wheel on the left and an



All BVM photos via Philip Jarrett



equally low-geared wheel between the seats to work the flaps; these can be drooped to 30°, with a position marker protruding through the top of the port wing. The Bendix cable-operated brakes are mastered by a fly-off lever on the left, with the rudder pedals providing helpful differential action. There is a large and very useful cubby hole for maps et al to the right of the instrument panel, which on both military and civil variants is of the standard RAF layout.

For a taildragger the view for taxiing is good, helped by a large wrap-around windscreen, but the rudder has less effect than I would choose and there is a strong weathercock tendency: this must be due largely to the machine's triple fin design, which becomes more beneficial in the air.

On take-off there is relatively little swing except where affected by a crosswind, when the weathercock tendency comes back into play. The get-away is quite good, but the 4A has a Hoffman propeller of coarser design than when in Service use, as the very short-field ability of the military machine has given way to a more usefully improved cruise performance. The resulting rate of climb remains very acceptable at about 740 feet-per-minute.

In level flight the M38 has light – but not very effective – ailerons and this quality is retained even at higher speeds. Using a comfortable 1950 rpm for the cruise generates about 103mph and an

increase in power to 2050 adds about 10. The three rudders remain relatively ineffective and accurate flying in all but the calmest conditions requires full-time control inputs. Today many pilots would not like this, but as an old fogey who puts *flying* the machine at the head of the list I have no criticism!

Although I have not needed to operate the Messenger in conditions of poor visibility, it can potter along happily at about 65mph with 10 degrees of flap and

reasonable conditions and I finished the flight with a general feeling of satisfaction.

Today eight Messengers remain on the home register and five are airworthy. Of these, G-AKIN warrants a special mention, as it has been based at Sywell almost since new in 1947 and is owned by a Trust that exists solely and deservedly to protect its future as a living flying machine. I hope that this is not the only example of the type that will be with us in the years ahead. ■



Peter R March



Engine test beds – Blackburn Bombardier (above) and Praga-engined version (below)

1800 rpm. Taking it further down the scale, slight buffet begins at just over 50 mph and the published clean stall occurs at a reduction of a further 12. The break-away behaviour is benign.

The flaps can be extended to 30° and when these are lowered the ailerons droop in useful sympathy. Even in this condition the angle of descent is not as steep as might be expected, but the rudders are not sufficiently powerful to provide effective side-slipping in compensation. An initial approach at 65 reducing to 55 over the fence makes realistic sense, but those with expertise on the type claim that the final figure can be reduced to 40 for getting into a really short field, which was essential in the machine's days on military service. However, out of respect for someone else's aeroplane and my lack of time on the type, I avoided putting this to the test.

The hold-off angle to achieve a three-point touch-down is quite large, but this is to be expected with a machine intended for short-field operation. There is no problem in keeping straight when able to land into wind, but the weather-cocking tendency calls for active use of the differential braking when not so fortunate. However, it remains fully controllable in all



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Above: Messenger will potter along happily at 65mph with 10 degrees of flap
Top right: cockpit may be a little tight for a long-legged pilot
Above right: weather-cocking tendency calls for judicious use of differential braking
Right: Messenger G-AKIN has been based at Sywell since 1947

