

OBITUARIES

Alex Henshaw 1913 – 2007



Alex Henshaw was an Edwardian gentleman adventurer. Well-found thanks to his father's good fortune as a prospector in Canada, he lived at a time when, as he himself said, "anything was possible if you had the money." It might be more apt to say anything was possible if you had the money, the drive, the courage, the skill and the sheer bloody-mindedness to do it. The feat for which Henshaw is chiefly remembered, the "Cape Town caper" (his words) of 1939, was an act of superhuman will, described by Henshaw's contemporary and rival Arthur Clouston as "probably the most outstanding solo flight ever made." Nothing since has surpassed it, and it's a fair bet that nothing will.

Henshaw flew from Gravesend to Cape Town and back in four and a half days in a modified single-engined Mew Gull which could not be flown hands-off, in which he was unable to sit fully upright – the seat had been replaced with a thin sheet of rubber – and with dead-reckoning his only navaid. The story is told in his book *Flight of the Mew Gull*, without which any aviator's library is incomplete. The extraordinary risks that he ran while crossing and re-crossing the Dark Continent are set out in breathtaking detail. More than once, the only thing that stopped him baling out was the fear of what would happen if he survived to reach the ground, and the likelihood of his



Far left: Alex Henshaw with his dog Purdy - at 91, he looked and acted 25 years younger
Above: an exhausted Henshaw is lifted from the Mew Gull after setting his Cape Town record
Left: Henshaw's famous Mew Gull G-AEXF

having to use the Browning pistol sewn into his shoulder harness on himself. The famous picture of Henshaw being lifted from the Mew, fevered, delirious and exhausted beyond measure, gives a flavour of his epic achievement.

He went on to be chief test pilot at the Spitfire factory in Castle Bromwich, Birmingham, where he flew more than 3,000 Spitfires during the Second World War and crashed quite a few, professing himself amazed when the war ended that he had survived. In one spectacular accident after his skew gear failed he tried to put the aircraft down in some gardens but hit an oak tree. The nose sideswiped a house, knocking the wall out and leaving the prop on the kitchen table, the wings were ripped off and the fuselage tobogganed along until it hit a post and slewed sideways, ripping away everything apart from the cockpit, which came to rest upright. Henshaw slid back the canopy and stepped out without a mark on him. His book *Sigh for a Merlin* tells the story of those days, and is another must-read.

Alexander Adolphus Dumfries Henshaw was born on 7th November 1913 in Lincolnshire and went to work as a salesman for one of his father's companies. As a teenager he learned to fly on a Gypsy Moth, and bought first a Moth then a Comper Swift, with which he won

the Siddeley Trophy at the 1933 Kings Cup only two days later. He was to amass a cupboard full of silverware for his air racing achievements.

Henshaw learned about flying in the school of hard experience. He once landed in a field in a fog so thick that having staggered a few yards from the aircraft, he couldn't find it again. Inexcusable, he said, but a wonderful education. He was dismissive of rote-learning about aviation and scathing of bureaucrats who are paid to prevent adventure. In an interview with *General Aviation* magazine in 2004 he said: "I could never have done the things I did if people were hell-bent on protecting me from myself, as is the case today. There will never be progress without casualties."

Henshaw flew in his last Spitfire in March 2006, when he went up in a two-seater during a Spitfire flypast to commemorate the maiden flight of the Spitfire 70 years previously. On that occasion he confessed "I'm feeling my age and it's not good having ideas in the mind that the body cannot carry out."

Outside flying, he was a fearless horseman, and as a young man came off a motorcycle at almost 100 mph, surviving virtually unscathed. It was somewhat surprising that Alex Henshaw should die of old age in his bed. For a man for whom a calculated risk was meat and drink, it was an unlikely demise.

He said the three major influences in his life were the Mew Gull, the Spitfire, and his wife Barbara, Countess de Chateaubrun, whom he married in 1940 and who died in 1996.

Pat Malone

William Walter 'Dickie' Dougan 1917 – 2007

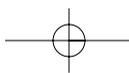
Does this name bring you fond memories? For people like me, it does. Many in the world of aviation, both civil and RAF, will have had the pleasure of flying with, being trained or tested by this great aviator and personality. Even if you did not have this pleasure, I expect that you have been flown, or trained, or tested, by somebody who knew and had been trained by him.

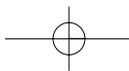
Sadly, the world of aviation has lost a great aviator and gentleman. I was lucky enough to know 'Dickie' for 35 years. I first met him in 1972 at the then newly formed Exeter Flying Club which, along with a group of other keen mainly retired RAF aviators, he had helped to form. Having started at Dunkeswell, the club was moved to Exeter in 1971.

Dickie instructed me in some of my basic

flying training, although he was then only able to offer his services to the club part-time as he had a full-time position as a teacher at Dawlish College.

During the school holidays in 1980 he trained me to be a flying instructor, and after his retirement from teaching he ran a great many AFIC and FI courses at the club. In the 1990s when I had the privilege in holding the position of CFI at Exeter Flying Club he continued to look after the running of the AFIC and BCPL courses for the club, while





examining flying instructors as a member of the Panel of Examiners.

Unfortunately (for both him, and for the rest of us), Dickie lost his medical in the mid nineties. This did not totally stop him from flying, and in particularly indulging his love of aerobatics. Many of us were more than grateful to have Dickie on board providing us with his unique advice and skills. The last time I saw Dickie was approximately six weeks before Christmas 2006, when he told me then that he had been up a few weeks before with a mutual friend, as a passenger of course.

William Walter Dougan came from Ballycross, Co Down, Ireland. His love of things mechanical started with his motorcycle. His life long love affair with flying began in 1934 when he worked at the RAF school at Halton as an apprentice airplane fitter. Fascinated by flying and aviation he joined the RAF and began his aviation career at the age of 17.



His RAF career was to last until 1968, and would see Dickie pass out from Halton as a corporal fitter in 1937, be posted to Scoon for elementary flying training, and continued at Brize Norton, before being posted to RAF Harwell in 1941 as a fully fledged sergeant pilot on their Operational Training Unit for four months. At Harwell he had the frightening experience of having to climb out of a Wellington cockpit window after it had managed to hit the highest hill in Oxfordshire. I should point out that Dickie had been invited along as second pilot and never thought it was possible to get out via the cockpit window, but get out he did.

Following training as a bomber pilot at Bourn, Dickie continued flying the Wellington and other heavies in North Africa. During one ferry flight via Malta he again had a lucky escape. Just as he was landing on the island it was bombed, and the Wellington he was flying

was destroyed.

From 1942 to 1945, and having by then converted on to B24 Liberators, Dickie managed only a few trips back to the UK via the long Atlantic route to avoid occupied Europe and the Luftwaffe. Dickie had lots of stories about these trips, and one concerned his freighting of bananas. Never mind nylon stockings, bananas it seems were the currency in Swindon during Dickie's visits back to the UK.

During his time in the North Africa and the Middle East theatres Dickie had many exploits including once getting lost in a sandstorm and almost running out of fuel. Luck was on his side, for through the storm he spotted a long dark feature and recognised it to be the River Nile. He was then able to land at Cairo with zero fuel.

In 1942 he was involved in the dropping of agents and weapons into Yugoslavia as part of 159/160 Special Duties Squadron. As the



Allies moved on Italy via Sicily, Dickie became part of the Middle East Communications Command, where pigs did indeed fly – meat was in very short supply in Southern Europe, so somehow a pig managed to be loaded onto his B24 Liberator and took a flight across the Mediterranean to Italy. As it was near to Christmas, instead of bully beef, roast pork was on the menu. He accumulated 2000 hours on Liberators and was twice Mentioned in Dispatches.

At the end of the war Dickie returned to the

UK, to Prestwick, Linton on Ouse, Transport Command at Wymeswold, and Bircham Newton. He also had tours of duty at Syreston, Netheravon and Waterbeach. In 1948 he was involved in the Berlin Airlift for a full year. Among his many stories from this time is a testament to another aircraft that he really liked, the Douglas DC3 Dakota. One of the Dakota aircraft, after having been loaded with sheet steel flat to the floor, had to be taken off the line because of a mag drop problem. The ground crew fixed the problem and, not noticing that the aircraft had already been loaded, put it back into the loading line. It was dark and the loaders filled the aircraft with coal on top of the steel sheets. The aircraft did manage to get airborne with the pilot sweating a bit, and made it to Berlin.

In 1950 Dickie was placed at CFS Central Flying School, and as the RAF's first Master Pilot he trained post-war pilots at South Cerney, Oakington, Moreton-in-Marsh and



Dickie Dougan at the controls of the Confederate Air Force B24 Liberator Mk I when it visited the UK. The second picture captures the look on Dickie's face when he was told he'd be allowed to fly it. Aircraft commander Col Ray Krotinger commented: "He even knows where the goddam seat lever is." Dickie booked 1hr 50 P1/S en route to Norwich

Ternhill. He moved to Bavaria in 1957 to train pilots of the fledging German Air Force at Landsberg on Harvards and Fouga Magisters. A tour at Queens University Air Squadron followed before in 1966 he joined No 4 Air Experience Flight at Exeter, flying cadets in Chipmunks.

At his very well attended funeral service at St Margarets Church, Topsham, Devon his good friend Peter Gove read out an insightful script he had compiled on Dickie's life. Peter kindly gave his permission for me to use some pre-1970 parts of this script for this article. Thank you, Peter.

Chris Martin, AOPA Instructor Committee



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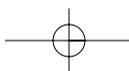
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OBITUARIES

**Fred Samuel Stringer,
BSc, FRIN, CEng, FRAeS
1922 - 2007**



Fred Stringer, always known as Freddy, was born into an army family in Beverley, Yorkshire, on 15th June 1922. He died peacefully, after a short illness, in Farnborough, Hampshire, on 12th January 2007 at the age of 84.

When Freddy was five years old, the family moved to Aldershot and he retained vivid memories of seeing aircraft flying from Farnborough, thus beginning a lifelong love affair with aviation.

Freddy joined the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE) Farnborough as a temporary laboratory assistant at the age of 19 in 1941, eventually retiring in 1982 as Assistant Director Extramural Research responsible for the Cockpit Research Department, Flight Systems Division. Along the way he gained a BSc and became a Chartered Engineer, as well as becoming a flying instructor and a PPL examiner.

Freddy had a brilliant mind with a sharp intellect, and took a keen interest in the personal and professional development of those in his team, particularly the more junior members. He was a demanding taskmaster and expected everybody to strive for the high standards which Freddy set for himself. This trait was first noted when he was the RSM in the school Cadet Force and again as a Captain in the Home Guard!

Much of Freddy's innovative work at the RAE involved the development of cockpit avionics and navigation systems. He played a

significant role in the evolution of the Decca Navigator and the Differential Omega Very Low Frequency Navigation System, particularly its integration into Inertial Navigation Systems. Outside the cockpit he was internationally recognised for his work on IFF (identification friend or foe) and electronic counter-measures, and he was particularly proud that his aerial is still installed on the Bruntingthorpe Vulcan which is soon to fly again.

Following his official retirement from the RAE in 1982, Freddy continued as an advisor to the RAE Board. He became a member of the team involved in the setting up of the Civil Enclave at Farnborough airfield, which was the forerunner of what is now Farnborough Airport and its general aviation operation, subsequently becoming a non-Executive Director of the Carroll Aircraft Corporation.

Freddy learned to fly and gained his Private Pilot Licence at Thrupton in 1958. He went on to be a check pilot with the Tiger Club, and became a qualified flying instructor in 1969. He devoted much time after retirement giving flying experience to the scientists and apprentices at the RAE in a Cherokee 140, which many at Farnborough regarded as

'Freddy's Private Air Force'. Freddy subsequently became the club's Chief Flying Instructor (unpaid), and his diligence in keeping the club's instructional activities alive during the difficult times of change at Farnborough were recognised by the award of AOPA-UK Instructor of the Year in 1997, followed by the Award of Merit of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators in 1998.

His job done in ensuring the continuation of flying training at Farnborough, Freddy moved his instructional activity to the West London Aero Club at White Waltham where he continued as a PPL Flight Examiner until the end of 2006. Remarkably, he maintained a current Class 1 medical certificate by dint of keeping fit via regular visits to the gym and partaking of a daily glass of red wine.

Freddy was a stalwart member of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, and achieved the highest office of Master in 1989. He continued his active involvement in Guild affairs, where his wise counsel was highly valued.

He was also an accomplished artist. His wonderful pictures of aircraft from the early times of aviation are most successful and evocative of what is now another age.

Finally, there was an aspect of Freddy's life which is less well-known. He was a very active President of the Farnborough Branch of the Multiple Sclerosis Society. Even less well-known were the considerable number of hours he gave to supporting young offenders and others in trouble with the law at Aldershot Police Station. Each person he supported would feature in Freddy's prayers, and he felt deeply for those whose lives continued in disarray. This is what Freddy Stringer really gave to the world.

Pam Campbell - with thanks to Professor Michael Bagshaw

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