



Neville Duke, the Hunter and me

via Philip Jarrett

The dreams of an eight-year-old come true as Chris Royle consummates a fifty-year love affair

It's early September 1955 and about 6am on a cold, dark and misty morning, and we are taking a break somewhere on the A303 between Torquay and Farnborough. We've just got out of my Dad's new Austin A30 which, being a deluxe model, has a heater, making the damp cold air outside doubly unwelcome. My teeth are chattering, as much with excited anticipation as with cold, as I wait for my Dad to uncork the Thermos flask of tea, sealed with greaseproof paper between the cork and the glass vessel. The tea tastes good, as does the egg and bacon sandwich made up by my mum the evening before.

My present for Christmas 1954 had been a book, *Neville Duke's Book of Flying*, in which my Dad has written on the flyleaf, 'Hoping it will give you much pleasure and useful instruction'. I've read it over and over again, and now at last we are on our way to see him, and all the other test pilots, flying at the Farnborough Air Show. The newspapers and radio have been full of it all week, making the anticipation almost unbearable. I could hardly sleep last night with that pent-up excitement that one only seems to experience as a child. We are going to the Farnborough Air Show tomorrow! Every time an aircraft has passed over the house I've dashed outside to see what it was – Vampires, Mosquitos and the occasional Balliol, all probably from Exeter, the nearest airfield to where we live in Torquay. Although it's only 25 miles away, it might as well be on the other side of England to an aviation-mad eight year old.

Up at 4 am in the silent, still, pitch-dark

morning. It's a long way from Torquay to Farnborough on the roads of the 1950s. The day does not disappoint. Sounds, sights, and smells almost overwhelm the sensations of an open young mind. The crackling roar of the Canberra as it climbs steeply after take off, the gentler music of Leonides and Dart engines, the chest-trembling sensation produced by the majestic white Vulcan as it bores its way skywards (flown by Roly Falk in a chalk-stripe three-piece business suit, I later learn). But perhaps most enthralling are the eerie sounds of the double boom of the 'sound barrier' being broken, and then the seconds of silence before the speck on the horizon ('Ladies and Gentlemen, if you look to your left over Laffan's Plain...') materialises into a Hawker Hunter silently flashing past – then that moment when the noise hits one, literally with a bang. Fantastic! I'm going to fly when I grow up! I'm going to be a pilot! I'm going to be a test pilot and fly that most beautiful of aircraft, the Hawker Hunter, just like Neville Duke!

Aircraft and flying dominate all of my thoughts and dreams. Exercise books are filled with drawings, I haunt Woolworth's waiting for the latest plastic kit releases from Airfix (in a polythene bag, two shillings). I watch aviation films, go to air displays (Exeter RAFA organise

Top: that was then - Neville Duke in the record-breaking Hawker Hunter
Right: this is now - 50 years on, Chris Royle follows in Duke's wake



these annually, and the star of the show is always a Hunter from nearby Chivenor), read books and *Flight* magazine. Eagerly I consume anything connected with flying. But there's a snag. I wear glasses – those round pink plastic covered wire-framed NHS ones, and for the early part of my life I have to endure the right hand lens being taped over with thick fabric Elastoplast in an attempt to improve the performance of my left eye, which is deemed to be 'lazy'. People tell me that 'you'll never fly with glasses'. I vow to prove them wrong and send the prescription for my glasses off to the Board of Trade at Shell-Mex House. Back comes a terse letter informing me that my eyesight 'will not permit the issue of any type of pilot's licence, including that for a private pilot'. This was a mortal blow to my hopes and aspirations. I develop an interest in music and



I join a group, modelled on The Shadows, playing bass. Ironically, we name ourselves The Hunters. This keeps me out of trouble during turbulent teenage years, but although I'm still interested in aviation, it's not the same as before.

The years pass and family, career, exams, house renovation all conspire to distract me from thinking too much about flying over the next 10 years or so. But the thoughts are still there and I keep in touch with a good friend who flies Tridents for BEA. He introduces me to a friend of his who is a part-time instructor. He agrees to give me a lesson or two in his Cessna 150. Magic! All the old feelings about flying come flooding back. Discussing my commitments, he suggests that it would be a good idea to take a month off work and go to the USA to do a full-time PPL course. My eyesight doesn't seem to worry the crusty old AME, and I leave his office clutching an FAA Medical Class III. Off to Merritt Island, Florida, and I get my licence the day before returning home (thanks Ray Mason, my instructor). After converting to a CAA PPL, I'm in that dangerous time where many PPLs give up, finding it difficult to make the time and the money to maintain currency, just flying locally or a few circuits, and not knowing many others at the flying club. But I join a new group of 12 being formed around a PA 28-140. Suddenly flying takes on a new meaning and I start to build hours, often flying with other group members to destinations that I wouldn't consider on my own, enjoying mutual fun, fellowship and a few frights. Much later, an IMC rating is a challenge, but comes in useful on several occasions. Trips to France, Corsica, Ireland and Scotland open up new vistas.

40 has come and gone, 50 is well behind me and I finally arrive at 60 years of age. My

wife organises a bumper surprise party, but there is more to come, she assures me... A few weeks later we are on the road to Torquay, where we spend a pleasant evening in one of the seafront hotels. The weather is not good, but this does not worry me unduly (but as I later learned, was worrying my wife considerably. Months of detailed and secret planning could be wiped out.)

The following morning, after a very large English breakfast (again, to my wife's consternation, as she knew what was coming and I didn't...) we are collected, to my surprise, in a taxi, and our journey takes us towards Exeter and the M5. We turn off on the road towards Honiton. There are a number of pointed questions about how I am feeling. The penny is beginning to drop, as we are heading towards Exeter Airport. I think there may be a

and its beautifully streamlined fairing (which caused Hawker's aerodynamicists a lot of trouble before they got it right, so much so that I believe the contours were supplied to English Electric when they were developing the two-seat Lightning) adding a certain muscular dolphin-like look to the aircraft.

I'm introduced to Sqn Ldr Chris Heames, my pilot for the day. Chris is an RAF fast jet pilot with Lightnings, Phantoms and Tornados in his log book. He needs to regain currency on the Hunter, and his check pilot turns out to be none other than Flt Lt Charlie Brown, he of the archetypal RAF moustache, famous for his display flying of Historic Aircraft Collection aircraft and an instructor at RAF Cranwell. Over coffee they tell me that they both know the aircraft well, having flown her many times when she was based at Cranwell. They plan to go off for 30 minutes or so to re-familiarise Chris with the aircraft, and to have a look at the local weather. Chris gives me a thorough briefing on what Charlie describes as the exploding furniture, more properly known as a Martin Baker Mk4 ejection seat. This is relatively straightforward in the fully automatic mode. Just pull the handle and we go. There is a delay of just under a second between pulling the handle and the ejection sequence starting. Chris tells me that from his own personal experience, this is a *very long time* indeed at such moments. But in manual mode, I have difficulty remembering the correct separation sequence and which arm to use. I have visions of plunging to earth beneath a canopy, still attached to the seat! I am instructed to don a flying suit and a pair of flying boots. Having struggled into them, I find it almost impossible to walk without a slight

**Above: Royle in the Hunter hangar, an 'Aladdin's cave' of 1950s gear
Right: what else could they be? Ex-RAF jet jocks Chris Heames (left) and Charlie Brown**

plot afoot for a chum to pick us up in his twin and maybe go to Jersey or France for the day. But I am way off the mark. I am presented with an envelope containing a ticket for a ride in a Hawker Hunter at the Hunter Flying Club. Emotions crowd in as I remember that day long ago at Farnborough, all the years in between, and how tickled my dad would have been had he been with us. But most of all I'm grateful for the thoughtfulness and organisational skills of my wife, who had been planning this day for nearly a year. I can't believe it. To fly in a Hunter. Today. Soon! In a few hours!

We arrive at the gate and are greeted by Hunter Flying Club Chief Engineer Brian Sparks on his bike. More surprises as Devon friends and relatives, previously briefed, emerge from hiding. They have come along to see the fun, and it's a whirlwind of excited greetings. Off to the hangar to see 'my' aircraft. There she is, a T8B, WV322, resplendent in wrap-around green and grey camouflage (she has her own website, www.hawkerhunter.co.uk). Access panels and hatches are off, cables and plugs are distributed seemingly at random around the aircraft and several engineers have their heads inside. The hangar is an Aladdin's cave of Hunter fuselages, wings, tail sections, engines and 1950s hydraulic and electrical test gear around the walls. It smells good in here.

The Hunter is a beautiful aircraft, and in its single-seat form has a purity of line that looks modern even today. But the two-seater has a handsome look all of its own, the wide canopy



swagger. The helmet is next, and it's a tight fit. I make an arse of myself by lowering the tinted visor and not being able to raise it again.

The aircraft is at last declared serviceable and we watch her being pushed out to the pan. Difficulties with the brake parachute are soon overcome, the starter cartridges are loaded and the access hatch locked. The cartridges are in fact a brass case shell



containing an explosive charge of cordite. When fired, the expanding gases spin a turbine starter, which in turn spins up the engine then disengages automatically. Fuel is drawn through the engine by this process and ignited, hopefully leading to a self-sustaining running engine. I later learn that each cartridge costs around £150. An expensive business... One after the other, all three cartridges are fired, each time to the accompaniment of a loud WHOOSH and clouds of exciting-smelling black cordite smoke, but without engine start. (I was presented with a few empty cartridges at the end of the day, and one of these, suitably polished and engraved, graces my aviation bookshelves).

Consternation, with engineers peering up the jet pipe and the Chief Engineer having a conversation with Charlie and Chris in the cockpit. Another three cartridges are loaded, the Houchin starter truck revs up, and at last the low hum of the Avon spooling up can be heard. The canopy closes, a brief wave and off

Above: with a gratifying amount of drama but no ignition, £150 goes up in smoke
Right: Chris Royle with his prized possessions, two expended starter cartridges
Below: even with the help of an expert, strapping in is a complicated and difficult task

they go in a haze of hot avtur fumes. Twenty minutes later they are back, and I am instructed to put on leg restraint straps, lifejacket and gloves. My pulse is beginning to quicken, and I say a fervent inner prayer not to screw up and make a fool of myself in any way. I try to get my helmet on, but there is a last minute problem. My glasses are obstructing the helmet, so I leave them off. Glasses and flying again... I am trussed up like a turkey. Somehow I make it up the stepladder without falling off and lower my bulk into the seat. Now starts a ten-minute pantomime of doing up straps, buckles, harnesses, restraints, and finally, the face



mask with microphone built in. Once the over-centre clip on the mask is fastened, I am unable to move anything but my arms and my head, and that very little apart from side to side. I can hear my breath rasping on the intercom. 'OK?' Chris asks. 'Yes. No problems,' I reply. I am busily trying to assimilate anything on the panel that may be familiar, but I'm interrupted by the ceremony of the removal of the safety pins from the ejection seat. All five are stowed by the ground crew on the cockpit coaming, in plain view of both of us. The seats are armed, and it's now time to light up the Avon. We expend one cartridge with no success, but she comes to life on the second. I can sense Chris's grin as he looks over at me. Hands clear, and the canopy is lowered and locked. The reduction in noise level, even with the helmet, is significant.

A quick call for taxi clearance and we move forward. To my surprise, I learn that the nosewheel is fully castoring, directional control being achieved by a combination of thrust management (which is rather slow in a jet), pushing the appropriate rudder pedal and simultaneously squeezing the brake lever on the column. "All a bit of a cake and ass job," says Chris. The view forward is superb, as the nose slopes away nicely. Chris flips a switch and the wipers move from their central stowed position to park at the outer windscreen frame. This makes a surprising improvement to our view. No power checks, just a quick check of the pressures and temperatures and we are cleared for take off on Exeter's runway 26. There is one IFR inbound, but little else around. A short roll forward to straighten the nosewheel, and then full throttle and we're

rolling, the acceleration giving us a firm progressive push in the back. 150 knots and the lightest of pulls unlocks the box of magic. We climb out at a shallow angle, banking left to follow the Exe estuary down to the coast. WOW! Doesn't the countryside go past quickly at 300 kts and 2,000 feet! It feels so smooth, rock steady and purposeful. I look over to my right, and my eyes travel along that swept leading edge with the blue and red RAF roundel on the upper surface of the wing. I still can't quite believe that I am here, in a jet, in a Hawker Hunter.

In no time at all we are over the sea off Exmouth. 'OK', says Chris, 'you're a fighter pilot and the aim is to get on the other guy's tail.' At full throttle (80 gallons/minute of avtur), he snap rolls us 90 degrees to the left and simultaneously pulls

the West. Chris tells me that our nominated diversion would be St. Mawgan if it all turned to mud. But all is well as we join left base for 26, in a long curving descent, undercarriage down, 3 greens and, to me as a Cherokee driver, the attitude looking very flat and *bloody hell, very FAST* at 150 -160 knots, 140 knots touchdown. A reassuring but gentle thump and then we stream the 'chute. We turn off down the taxiway, and I

have an embarrassing fumbling few moments as I repeatedly try to re-insert the seat safety pin between my legs. Eventually it's home and the seat is safe, much,

I guess, to Chris's relief.

I can only say, 'That was ***ing amazing'. Fairly predictable, but it's difficult to find the words to describe the elation and the immense feeling of privilege of having had a flight in such a wonderful thoroughbred, and with a pilot who clearly enjoys every second of flying this lovely aircraft.

Engine shut down, open the canopy, and the ground crew go through the ritual of detaching me from the aircraft. Stand up, and careful not to slip or trip as I make my way down the ladder. A huge grin and a handshake from Chris. I turn back to look at the aircraft. She looks good. She smells good. A mixture of avtur, rubber and the sound of the hot exhaust ticking away. She looks beautiful. Suddenly, I begin to well up, and I have to turn away. How very, very lucky I have been. The memories of all those years, all those hopes, all the fun, and thoughts of those who should have been



hard until we can feel the buffet. We are on the limit of an accelerated stall, getting the maximum turning performance out of the aircraft. We roll level, and he invites me to have a go. I'm a bit too timid at first, but keep pulling until the buffet. We roll level, and head along the coast to say hello to Torquay. En route he demonstrates an aileron roll and invites me to have a go. Full power, raise the nose and hard over with the stick. But as we roll inverted I pull too hard and Chris takes over, saying that we need around 5,000 feet to recover from that attitude, and as we are currently at 4,000 feet it would not be wise to

here today to share my proud moment, but for one reason or another, are not.

Life is a game of chance, they say. Well, if that's the case, I have been very lucky. A book at Christmas that inspired me.

Family encouragement, and tolerance of my childhood obsession. Later, a close friend who put me on the road to trial lessons, a medical and ultimately, a

Above: fairing in the two-seat Hunter caused the aerodynamicists no end of problems
Right: "all of a sudden I'm going to wake up..."

continue. This is a swept-wing jet aircraft that will bite if mishandled – a very different animal to the little aircraft that I usually fly. I feel like a complete amateur. A few lazy turns over Torbay and over Berry Head... where was the schoolboy now, casting his eyes to the sky at the sound overhead?

Twenty minutes have flashed past and it's time to start back towards Exeter. We are at 3,000 feet and Chris says we'll try a loop. Nose down, accelerate to about 350 kts and then a firm pull. As we go over the top, my vision momentarily begins to grey out. We are only pulling about 4g, but I am not as fit (or as young!) as Chris. The sea appears to hurtle towards us, but we are level now at about 500 feet over the waves. We spot the stranded container freighter off Branscombe and give the salvage crew a fly-by. Turning inland we call for inbound clearance. Chris asks for a run and break and this is approved. Full power and we reef around in a descending left turn, accelerating to 400 kts. There's the runway, with HFC's hangars to the north and a knot of people outside. Down to 250 feet, the buildings and people disappear in a blur and then the G comes on as Chris pulls us up into a climbing roll to the left. There's a Cherokee joining the circuit, so we may have to hold off (I hope!). Sure enough, Exeter approach ask us hold in the overhead at 2000 feet. So we stooze around a few times, casting anxious eyes at a nasty looking shower inbound from





Damien Burke



Damien Burke

**Above: 'at 150 kts, the lightest of pulls unlocks the box of magic'
Below: the countryside goes past quickly at 300 knots**

pilot's licence. Joining a friendly flying group. Enjoying the company of professional pilots who also enjoy a huge appetite for flying for fun, and who infect everyone they meet with that enthusiasm. Being privileged to put a bit back into aviation by working with colleagues in AOPA and West London Aero Club at White Waltham.

Aviation and a love of all things flying has given me precious gifts. Close friends, fellowship, freedom, something to hang on to through some dark times, fun, challenges, and a sense of purpose. But just for 40 minutes, I had flown in my dream. A Hawker Hunter. I can now appreciate just a little better what

Neville Duke meant when he wrote: *'For me there is no greater satisfaction than sitting in the cockpit of the Hunter, beautiful in design and construction, representing the thought and skill of so many people, and feeling it respond to the slightest movement of your fingers. It lives and is obedient to your slightest wish. You have the sky to play in – a great limitless expanse.'* (Test Pilot, by Neville Duke, Wingate 1953.)

Inspirational words, and that's why I fly and love flying.

Thanks to my wife Shirley, Matthew, my son, my brother Philip and all the others involved in the subterfuge of organising this

most wonderful 60th birthday present. Thanks to John Sparks and all the team at the Hunter Flying Club. For more details see <http://www.hunterflying.co.uk>. A special thanks to Chris Heames and Charlie Brown for a great introduction to jet flying. And finally, thanks dad, for that book. I hope that I've done justice to your words, 'Hoping it will give you much pleasure and useful instruction' ■

**Lower left: sortie of a lifetime over, the Hunter returns with trailing parachute
Below: Chris Royle, having truly had 'much pleasure and useful instruction'**

