

**Michael and Rosemary Fopp  
with their Lancair**



## ***Fopp takes the reins at GAPAN***

*AOPA member and new GAPAN Master Dr Michael Fopp talks to **Pat Malone** about his extraordinary career in aviation*

**F**or a mover and shaker in aviation, Dr Michael Fopp has unusual antecedents. He was neither a Service nor an airline pilot, and his original career had no aviation aspect to it at all; nonetheless he manages to be more RAF than the RAF and his judgement is prized by the politicians, Air Marshals and civil servants who dominate the lives of those who fly. He has an unparalleled knowledge of the aviation industry, particularly military and general aviation, and is a world authority on aviation history. A technophile and a polymath, he has built his own high-performance aircraft and flown all over the world. But trying to get him to talk about certain intriguing facets of his life is like pulling teeth;

he dismisses being stabbed and beaten up with an airy wave – nothing to do with flying, he says. His three commendations for bravery are ‘of little relevance’, but I beg leave to submit what little I have discovered in evidence, because it goes to the character of the man, and that’s the important thing. He is hard-working, impatient of inertia, an innovative and driven slayer of sacred cows, but he is also self-effacing and reticent, and when you start to look into his background, you begin to see where he gets it from.

Michael Fopp may never have been an RAF pilot, but he was born in a blue uniform and its traditions are etched into his bones. His

father Desmond came from Australia in 1937 to join the RAF Volunteer Reserve, and as a Sergeant Pilot fought in the Battle of France, flying Hurricanes with 17 Squadron. He clearly shared the reticence of his son, for it’s taken Dr Fopp a lifetime to piece together his father’s story, from speaking to his contemporaries, and from the archives. “I would find something out and confront him with it, and he’d confirm that yes, that had probably happened, they just didn’t speak about it. I know a great deal about him, but most of it is from talking to other people.”

Desmond was shot down during the Battle of Britain and badly burned. “It was September 3rd, 1940,” Dr Fopp says. “Over Brentwood two of them attacked a formation of 60, mostly Do 17s – not uncommon odds at that time. My old man ran out of ammunition, so he turned into them and they scattered. The formation was protected by Me 110s, and one got underneath him and shot through his radiator. His clothes and his parachute were smouldering as he came down. He was blinded for a month and spent three months in hospital, then when he got out, like a typical fighter pilot, he rolled his MG and was sent straight back to hospital again.”

Dr Fopp’s earliest memory is of standing in an RAF-issue wooden playpen by the perimeter track as his father led out a line of

Meteors a few feet away. “All the pilots waved to me as they went past,” he says. “I was perhaps three years old, and I’ve had a particular interest in the Meteor ever since.”

With such a background, it was a given that Dr Fopp would join the RAF, but for a brief period in his youth he was stricken with debilitating hay fever. “That was a complete no-no in terms of RAF flying,” he says. “My father took me aside and said, ‘You might be able to conceal your hay fever from them for a time, but eventually it will catch you out.’” However, there was an alternative enthusiasm to aeroplanes, and that was horses. “I had been taught to ride properly by a former Wehrmacht officer in Germany and had grown to love everything equestrian, so I planned to make a career with horses.”

But how? At six foot two he made a poor jockey, and Army riding didn’t appeal. “I saw in the police force everything I was looking for as a horse master,” says Dr Fopp. “I was determined to become a mounted policeman, but it was far from a sure thing. The year I got in, only four people were chosen from 80 applicants. What’s more, I turned up with a broken arm and a stab wound, which I’d suffered while arresting a drug dealer in Soho.”

He is very reluctant to discuss that part of his life. “My time riding horses in the police was a minute part of my overall career,” he says. “Suffice it to say that in those days – and I hope we don’t go back to them – London was a fairly violent place and you couldn’t do the job without meeting with violence on a fairly regular basis.” In 1979 the National Front was



Far left: a young Michael Fopp with the Museum's Hurricane



Left: in the Lancaster cockpit; Dr Fopp was still a service police officer at the time



Below: Michael Fopp commentating at Oshkosk



Above: Dr Fopp lecturing in the USA on behalf of Jaguar cars



Left: Dr Fopp at Nameu in Chile in 1994

Below: Dr and Mrs Fopp in the Lancair in Tucson, Arizona



exercising its right to freedom of speech by holding rallies in ethnic minority areas, the Socialist Workers Party set out to disrupt them, and the police were present to protect the public. During a riot in Southall Dr Fopp suffered a serious back injury when the mob tried to drag him off his horse, and his riding career came to an end. But while a serving policeman he had been lecturing and writing on 'aviation history from 1936 to 1955', and his courses at three colleges were extremely popular – some of his students are now working in museums or are noted aviation historians. He'd become well-known at the RAF Museum, Hendon and set up the Friends of the Museum. Hearing of his injury, the then-Director wrote to him saying that if he wanted to change careers, there was a job for him at the Museum. He didn't have to ask twice.

Dr Fopp says: "I did a Masters in Arts Administration, which covered ballet, theatre, visual arts, art galleries – nothing too similar to museums because I felt that they needed updating, and other areas of the arts world were further ahead. The organisational culture of museums was more suited to the civil service model than an entrepreneurial

went to the London School of Flying at Elstree and was taught on the Grumman AA5a Cheetah. To me it was much the same as riding a horse, in terms of hand-eye-foot co-ordination, and I just loved it. Elstree is a great place to be trained – you've got noise abatement everywhere and the London zone to contend with, but it's still quite informal; when I was downwind on my first solo the FISO said, 'Negative RT, I'm going for a pee' - typical of those days. I became the average GA pilot on a low budget, flying when I could afford to. Then in 1985 I became Director of the London Transport Museum, earning a little more, and I could afford to fly more frequently."

The LT Museum in Covent Garden was also to thrive on Dr Fopp's inspired lateral thinking. One of his innovations was to invite visitors to 'Test Drive the Museum' with a 'Stay & Pay' scheme which allowed people in free, and charged them if they chose to stay more than 30 minutes. It was an extraordinary success. Visitor numbers rose from 100,000 to over 700,000 before the scheme had to be stopped because the museum couldn't physically handle the volume. Dr Fopp also became chairman of the London Transport Flying Club at Fair Oaks, having convinced LT that he could

30% for five years in order to eliminate the outstanding loan, so from the day I walked in we lived in lean times. I recruited people with business and marketing backgrounds, and we emphasised attractions and activities that gave us a good margin. Admission charges came in and other commercial ventures were launched. We introduced simulators, and I asked Cathy Pacific to sponsor the first one. I knew Cathay wanted to build business in Europe – we sold tickets which were facsimile boarding passes, these went into a draw every month for two first-class tickets to Hong Kong; this gave Cathay a mailing list of people in Europe who were interested in their new services from Heathrow. It was good marketing, and wholly new to the Museum. We turned offices into conference rooms and brought in staff to run a conference business. Sotheby's held historic car auctions, with the cars parked under the aeroplanes."

Dr Fopp, who taught himself to programme computers in three languages when most people of his era were looking askance at PCs and hoping they would go away, also started the digitisation of the photograph and archive collections with a view to selling them online. For ten years he was Chairman of 'MDA' (now 'The Collections Trust'), the national organisation which sets and controls documentation standards in museums and galleries. He was instrumental in helping all UK museums enter the digital age we now take for granted. He was also the President of the International Association of Transport and Communications Museums for ten years in the 1980s and led that organisation through fundamental changes in attitudes and practices throughout the world. Apart from the potential to make the museums money, the digitisation of collections made accessible a lot of information that was previously indexed only in the curators' heads and was lost when they retired.

Dr Fopp threw himself into the Museum at every level – he was known for having cleaned the Sunderland with a broom and bucket; he sand-blasted the crashed Hurricane displayed in the Battle of Britain memorial area – and as he built up a team that shared his vision and his enthusiasm, the Museum went from



**Left: Michael Fopp at the Lancair's stick over the Adriatic off Dubrovnik**

attraction, which is what they had become. I went on to gain my PhD on managing non-profit organisations, which allowed me to write the standard textbook for museum studies students on managing museums and galleries.

"The Battle of Britain Museum had opened in 1978 and was already losing money. So I put a proposal to the trustees that we should run it commercially, and they agreed to try. Within a year I went from Research Assistant to Keeper of the Battle of Britain Collection. I recruited new people on different terms and conditions and we ran what is now the Battle of Britain Hall separately from the main RAF Museum, but on the same site. We charged for admission, which was anathema to national museums at the time; we put on temporary exhibitions, installed audiovisuals, TV, film, talking heads – and we had more visitors than the RAF Museum on the other side of the car park, and it was free! I set up a trading company to handle the commercial activities of the whole museum, and very soon we were funding part of the deficit at the main museum."

At the same time, Dr Fopp learned to fly. "I

restructure it into a stand-alone business and transfer it to its members. The LT Flying Club is still thriving today, partly because of the disciplines that were put in place at that time.

"The RAF Museum, in my absence, had built up a debt of £1.8 million on a loan it had taken out to build the Bomber Command Museum," he says. "The Trustees had gone to the Treasury for help, and one of the conditions of a bailout was a management review which recommended a more commercial approach. In 1985 I received a call saying that the post of Director would become available; so I applied and got the job. It turned out to be very hard work because the Museum was in serious trouble.

"We needed a profound change of attitude. I made it clear to the staff that this was not a democracy and that I made the decisions – that's what they needed at that time, but they certainly don't today! They felt they were civil servants who worked for the public, who owned the collections and shouldn't have to pay. Some were moved, some left, and we started introducing commercial disciplines.

"The Museum's grant funding was cut by

strength to strength. Following the period of debt it took a number of years to regain the confidence of MOD, but by the end of the 1990's Dr Fopp's measures allowed grant funding to be used for marketing, education, interactive exhibits and other non-heritage elements that made the Museum so successful, including the reintroduction of free admission. This success encouraged the Trustees to embark on a series of ambitious expansion projects at both the Cosford and Hendon sites. In the last ten years of his time at the Museum Dr Fopp and his team raised £30m and built "Milestones of Flight", the Grahame-White factory, watchtower and offices, at Hendon; a new Reserve Collection Store at Stafford; and a Visitor Centre, The Michael Beetham Conservation Centre and the National Cold War exhibition at Cosford. He also founded the country's only full-blown historic aircraft apprentice scheme and set up an American Foundation to raise funds in the USA.

The RAF certainly appreciated his dedication. "They were very kind to me even before I became Director of the Museum," says



Above: Dr Fopp as Chairman of the London Transport Flying Club

Top right: Michael and Rosemary with his seven-year labour of love

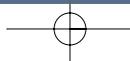
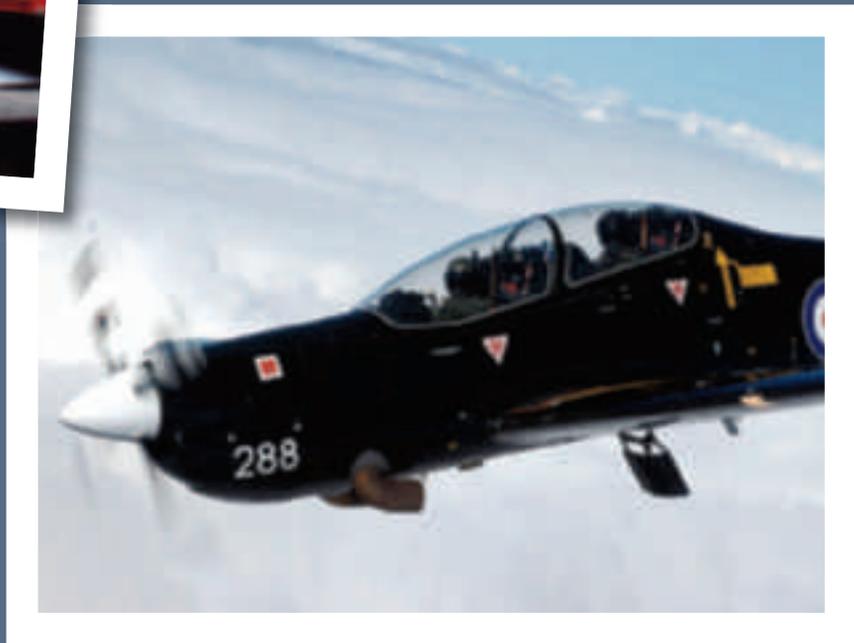
Right: a happy pilot aloft in his own handiwork

Below: Dr Fopp being interviewed in his Lancair at the LAA rally



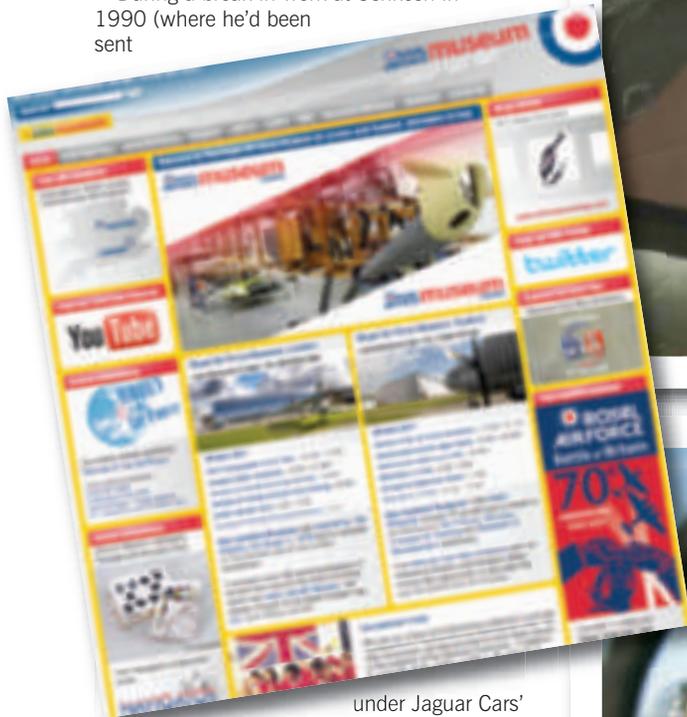
Below left: the RAF has treated Dr Fopp to a Lightning initiation flight

Below: Dr Fopp gets a front seat ride in a Tucano



Dr Fopp. "They let me fly the induction sorties on many of their aircraft – this was the orientation flight a new pilot gets on first joining a squadron. I flew in aircraft like the Lightning, Canberra, Tornado, Tucano... the actual control of the aeroplane I found relatively simple, but the mental acuity needed to keep ahead of it was beyond me. Those sorties left me with an impression of professionalism in flying that not many GA pilots get, which is why I decided on a CPL/IR."

During a break in work at Oshkosh in 1990 (where he'd been sent



under Jaguar Cars' sponsorship to convince American buyers that cars built in factories that had made Spitfires had to be quality products) he had his head turned by a Lancair, and he came home and told his wife Rosemary – also a pilot – that he'd met the aircraft of his dreams. He spent the next seven years building his Lancair the Fopp way – night classes in DC electronics gave him the sort of in-depth understanding he needed, he made five sets of nose gear doors before he was satisfied enough to put one on the aeroplane, and he did everything except paint it. "I swore I would stick faithfully to the plans, then of course I made lots of modifications," he says. "I put a completely new tail on it because, halfway through the project, the CAA said the tail was too short in span and there was insufficient longitudinal stability – and they were right. Before the factory responded I built a bigger tail out of carbon fibre to keep the weight the same. I spent 550 hours making a second set of wingtips which give me a 10knot increase in cruise speed for the same fuel burn at altitude; I made the second stick removable for in-flight comfort, and I put in long-range tanks."

Dr Fopp is a member of the Air Squadron and has participated in a number of their ambitious expeditions. He has also flown a large number of interesting and historic aircraft around the world, including flying a homebuilt Glasair from coast to coast across the USA in a couple of days. The Lancair has taken Rosemary and Michael to many far-flung corners of Europe, but he is currently 'between medicals', having suffered mild heart attacks last year, the result of an unfeasibly heavy workload. Mindful of the stresses of his upcoming year as Master of GAPAN, he has

**Top: Dr Fopp in his RAF Museum Director's uniform**  
**Above: about to get airborne in the BBMF Lancaster**  
**Above left: Dr Fopp brought the RAF Museum into the modern era and left it with sound finances**

retired from the RAF Museum and is close to regaining his medical, having decided to fly to as many Guild events during the year as possible. He remains a Senior Advisor to the Museum and is heavily involved in the proposal to raise £85million to erect 'The Battle of Britain Beacon' in London – a project which, given Dr Fopp's involvement, seems unlikely to fail.

He has prepared meticulously for his year as Master, taking soundings, listening to suggestions and looking for consensus. "I've spent the last couple of months talking to everybody involved – people like Martin

Robinson of AOPA – to find out the issues they think are important to GA," he says. "My list is likely to include disproportionate regulation to small operators and airfields; the proposed Ofcom charges on VHF, lack of consultation before legislation, the risk of maintenance and training 'tourism' because the CAA, uniquely in Europe, is obliged to surcharge in order to return 6% on capital. If costs in the UK are significantly above those of other countries, then maintenance and training will move abroad. The other issue is VAT on training. The fact that you can get VAT relief on air transport management degree courses but not on an Air Transport Pilot's Licence seems to be totally unfair."

All these issues will be pressed with determination and diplomatic skill. "I've made a few people unhappy over the years because I fought to preserve the RAF Museum against everything from threats of closure to poor funding," says Dr Fopp, "but worthwhile results were achieved, and I hope I can say the same at the end of the coming year." ■