

# BOOK Reviews

## Alan Bristow, Helicopter Pioneer

The Autobiography

Pen & Sword, £25

80 illustrations, many never before seen

Despite the prosaic title this is a rip-roaring book, telling the extraordinary story of one of modern aviation's most compelling characters. As anyone who worked for Bristow

Helicopters in his day will tell you, the 'Old Man' was an almost mythical figure, sometimes frightening, bombastic, capricious, unpredictable, sometimes generous and forgiving, but always a one-man show, able to do any job in the company from writing the

contracts to flying the helicopters to maintaining the engines and even sweeping the hangar floor.

Bristow was 16 the day war broke out and joined the Merchant Navy. Twice, ships were sunk under him before he ran away to join the Fleet Air Arm and learned to fly in Canada. Diverted to helicopters against his will, he became Westland Aircraft's first helicopter test pilot, working with the great Harald Penrose, but characteristically he was sacked after knocking out the sales manager. He flew Hillers in North Africa and had many crashes and incidents, then went to Indochina where he won the Croix de Guerre evacuating wounded French soldiers under fire. He fell in with some ex-SS mercenaries who were going whaling and sold helicopter services to Aristotle Onassis, who had a pirate fleet in the Antarctic where Bristow had many narrow squeaks, including one where he landed an iced-up Hiller on an iceberg when it would fly no more.

His big break came in 1955 when he met Douglas Bader, then managing Shell's aviation assets, and began supplying oil rigs in the Persian Gulf with piston-engined Whirlwinds. Bristow clearly loved the camaraderie of the camp fire and kept flying in Bolivia until the late 1950s, but when Freddie Laker bought Bristow Helicopters on behalf of Air Holdings Ltd in 1960, Bristow was already a tax exile in Bermuda. During the 1960s the company expanded across the world and launched the North Sea services which it was eventually to dominate, with Bristow at the

helm except for a three-year secondment as CEO of BUA. Ousted by Lord Cayzer in an argument over a Board position for the son of the Indonesian President, Bristow launched a takeover for Westland, which led to the 'Westland Affair' of blessed memory. Bristow's insider take on the political events of the time is fascinating.

Perhaps the man himself sums up the flavour of the book in part of his own summary: "I have drunk champagne with billionaires in the best hotels in the world and hauled my men out of some of the seediest warehouses in South America. I have been court-martialled for desertion and awarded the Croix de Guerre and the Order of the British Empire, I have triumphed in shipboard brawls which would have appalled the Marquis of Queensbury and have represented my country at four-in-hand carriage driving with the Duke of Edinburgh. I have put a lot of backs up and disjointed a lot of noses, physically and metaphorically, and in an era when most companies are controlled by risk-averse men in suits shuffling other people's money and creaming off their cut, my way of doing business is perhaps an anachronism. But by god, it was fun while it lasted!"

Full of adventure, full of humour, a great life properly celebrated. Well worth the money. – *Keith Hayley*

## Pegasus: The Heart of the Harrier

By Andrew Dow

Pen & Sword, £35

Lots of illustrations, many previously unseen

The title tells only part of the story. This is an extraordinary insider account of an engineering triumph that was buffeted and battered by every external influence that could be devised; personal rivalries and commercial imperatives, inter-service arguments, airline diktat, government chicanery – and in the case of Tony Benn, out and out spite – all eventually overcome by eccentric boffins who cycled to work in sandals without socks and

produced the engine that made the Harrier a great British success story.

Did I say British? I did not realise the extent to which the Americans bankrolled the project that became the Harrier through the Mutual Weapons Development Authority; their vision, and their

contribution to Pegasus was greater than that of the British government. I didn't know that the system of vectored thrust that made the aircraft possible was French – the patents were owned by Michel Wibault, a prophet without honour in his own country. But money and ideas were transformed into a living, breathing machine by British hands and the brilliance of British engineers. And it wasn't easy, which is why nobody else in the world

has managed it, even now.

This book is clearly a labour of love. Author Andrew Dow started out as a Bristol apprentice and rose to be Commercial Manager for Pegasus, and he has done an amazing job of rustling up documents and talking to those still living who were directly involved; the sourcing footnotes alone would fill a book. This is a truly authoritative work, which makes Dow's excoriation of Rolls Royce as being 'like a bankrupted itself taking Bristol out of the picture in order to muffle competition, all the more telling. I particularly liked Bristol Managing Director Hugh Conway's characterisation of Rolls Royce as being 'like a whorehouse without a madam – everybody screwing around and no money coming in'.

The late 1950s and 1960s were a time, of course, when Britain was squandering its aeronautical heritage through government short-sightedness, bureaucratic meddling, management short-termism, union intransigence and taxpayer parsimony. As a history lesson for those who are making the same mistakes today, it couldn't be better.

For us aviators, we are briefly introduced to some great test pilots – Bill Bedford, Hugh Merewether, John Farley. If you fancy your chances in that line of work, consider the skills of the great American pilot Drury Wood, who test-flew the ten-engined Do-31 with two Pegasus driving engines and eight Rolls Royce lifting engines. FOD damaged one RR engine and flying bits took out two more, all on one side; Wood evaluated the problem, diagnosed it correctly and reacted by shutting down three engines on the other side – not one, not two, but three, simultaneously. The instrumentation showed this entire process, from FOD through evaluation to three throttles on the idle stops, took 1.7 seconds. – *Pat Malone*

## Due South

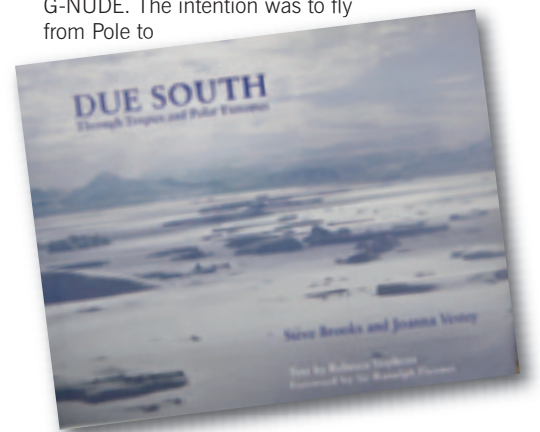
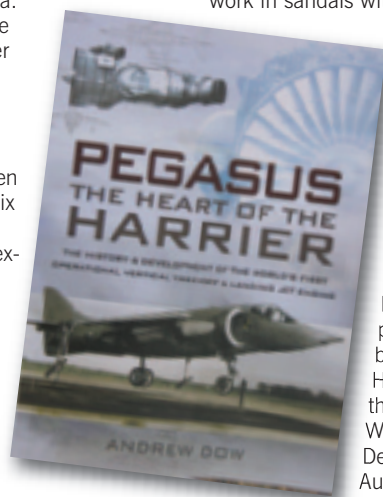
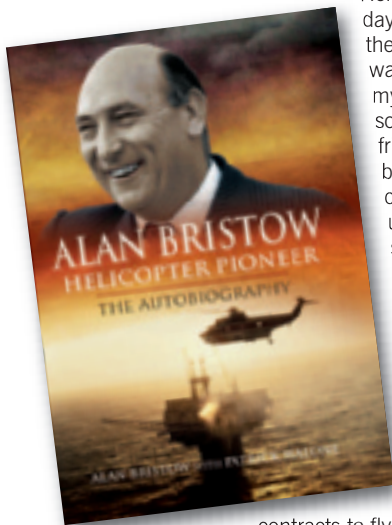
Steve Brooks and Joanna Vestey

Wigwam Press, £25

Copiously illustrated, at the highest quality

This book tells the story of what must be the most extraordinary helicopter journey ever made, not simply because of its ambition and scope but because of who did it; two PPLs with little more than 200 hours between them. Due South charts the flight of Steve Brooks and Joanna Vestey from the northern extremity of the planet to the southern, much of it accomplished on their honeymoon.

At a time when most of us are just venturing away from the circuit, Brooks and Vestey set out from Alaska to fly the length of the Americas, she with just 75 hours total time. He had 150 hours, some of which had been gained flying to the North Pole in his R44, G-NUDE. The intention was to fly from Pole to



Pole, but Joanna realised that she hadn't the experience for the Polar legs, and Steve needed an able professional to accompany him. Hmm... where could one find someone who was qualified, competent, and crackers? Step forward Quentin Smith, who flew with Brooks on the first and last legs of the flight, and who almost died with him when the engine failed 30 miles off the Antarctic coast, a story told in this magazine in 2005.

In between, Brooks and Vestey shared every minute of this life-affirming flight; they fought the weather, their fears – the 'anxiety of inexperience' which gradually wore off – they crossed deserts, mountains and inconceivably vast rainforests, and they battled the constant enemy, the self-important petty official who wears down souls in every country on the planet. They overcame the fact that you're not allowed to fly a private helicopter in Belize, and that many countries have no VFR charts. They flew across Colombia, Venezuela and Peru, where they'll shoot you down as a drug smuggler if you don't know the password – the Catch 22 is that nobody knows the password. They reached density altitudes of 10,000 feet, they faced extortionate charges in many places, they were caught out by fog and darkness, they flew over jungles in which forced landing meant certain death, and they lived to tell the tale.

We all have that nagging idea that life is brief and is there to be lived; Brooks and Vestey fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds worth of distance flown. They are a beacon to all of us who quail at the thought of overwater flights or iffy weather. I can't go where they've been, I can't suffer the privations and store the memories, but I've got the book. – *Pat Malone*

## Clearer Horizons

By James Allan

£12.50. Paperback, 173 pages, well illustrated

Most GA pilots know James Allen from his 'How Air Brained Are You?' quizzes in *Pilot* magazine or his regular disseminations of good sound Scottish common sense for aviators in various publications and books. I hadn't previously read this book but was sent a copy of a newly updated edition by my insurance brokers Haywards, who I'm sure sent it out to all their clients – if not, they're trying to tell me something...

The book has the laudable aim of showing PPLs the way forward – how to improve their skills, take on new challenges and keep flying when the obstacles seem to render the pursuit increasingly onerous. In that regard it has the same aim as the AOPA Wings Scheme and the nascent Mentoring Scheme. If, as the book says, the 'to' and 'from' columns in your log book are largely composed of dittos, you're on the slippery slope to a lapsed PPL. At a time when 70 percent of pilots don't renew their PPLs after five years, any contribution to the cause of continued aviation is welcome.



Clearer Horizons covers most aspects of GA flying, from aerobatics and formation flying to floats, fly-outs and air racing, but there's a lot of wisdom here on peripheral matters such as taking good care of your passengers, spreading the gospel to the unenlightened and (gasp!) flying *sur le Continong*. Mastering complex aircraft, knowing your own limits, borrowing money, facing psychological hurdles – some of this stuff you don't often find in flying textbooks. I found particularly interesting a section that might come under the heading of

'Do you really want an instrument rating, even if they make it a bit easier?' It's very expensive, it's a lot of time out of your life, and when you get it you have to invest a lot of time and money in keeping it, and are you really going to use it? Even if you do, says James, it takes some of the spontaneity out of flying. Spontaneity? There's a word I haven't seen used in relation to aviation in a long time. If I want to fly, I check my medical, I make sure I'm LPC'd up and in check for the type, I decipher the weather and download the Notams, I gather together all the charts and the guides and the frequencies, make sure the aircraft's in check and the paperwork's in order, I decide where I'm going to go and I draw lines on the chart that skirt all the bogies, make my PPR calls and get ready to do battle with ATC and the elements... but sometimes I think 'Sod it' and go and play golf. – *Pat Malone* ■

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