

Burning fashion issues

Photo: James Farn



*Fire is a serious threat in aviation; **Pat Malone** looks at one way of enhancing your survival chances*

A few years ago I got a letter from the Robinson Helicopter Company (Safety Notice SN-40, if you keep yours on file) and it stuck in the mind because it wasn't about blade debonding, wire strikes or loose objects getting stuck in the pedals, but about what I ought to be wearing when I fly.

'There have been a number of cases,' it read, 'where helicopter or light plane occupants have survived an accident only

to be severely burned by fire following the accident. To reduce the risk of injury in a post-crash fire it is strongly recommended that a fire-retardant Nomex suit, gloves, and hood or helmet be worn by all occupants.'

Well, what do you make of that? I had no idea what 'Nomex' was; maybe I confused it with Spandex, but I had visions of dressing up like the pink Power Ranger and stepping out of an aircraft to gales of laughter from doubled-up bystanders. Dressing for aviation can be a minefield; the only person I know who can carry off a sheepskin flying jacket is Brendan O'Brien, and even then... I suppose your attitude would change if you were actually on fire, but a competing

Above: this year, the fashion-conscious aviator is wearing Nomex...

imperative is not to look like a prat.

So it piqued my interest when I was thumbing through the Transair catalogue and came across a page with a Nomex flight suit on it, and the bloke who was modelling it didn't look like a prat at all. In fact, he looked like an ordinary bloke wearing a flying suit, the kind you see on military fellows and civilians who take their flying seriously. I realised as I looked at it that Robinson's safety notice (from 2006!) must have been nagging in the back of my mind all along, so I sent away for one.

You can judge for yourself from the pictures, but I don't think it looks at all bad. My apologies for not getting a fit bird to model it, but I don't know any fit birds who weigh 15 stone and have a 38-inch waist, so this is what a fat middle-aged bloke looks like in it. But the serious aspect of this is its flame retardant properties. Nomex has been around since the 1960s and is widely used in clothing for firefighters and others for whom getting burned is an occupational hazard. Google Nomex and you'll learn more about it than any sane person would want to know; suffice it to say that military pilots and Formula One drivers wear it for good reason. It'll burn in a flame but goes out as soon as the source of heat is removed, and it neither melts nor drips. If you're going to sit through a flash fire, you want one of these, you do.

It's easy to slip into and comfortable to wear. I've done a couple of longish flights in it and you don't get steamed up, it breathes well, and it's as warm as jeans and a medium jacket. It comes in two colours, green and greener – apparently Nomex is very difficult to dye. The frontal zip works from the top or the bottom, for obvious and very useful reasons. There are Velcro fasteners on the sleeve and trouser cuffs and zips on the trouser legs so you can get them on over your flying boots (see 'Brendan O'Brien', above).

You wouldn't want to sit down to play poker with a bloke who was wearing one of these because there are pockets everywhere. So far I've found ten pockets and seven places to put your pens. It's got two pockets at shin level and they're really big – I had a Marks & Spencer all-day breakfast sandwich and an apple in one of them and it was easily reached from a sitting position. On your knees you've got the same arrangement left and right; a big downward-pointing pocket with a Velcro flap, an upward pointing pocket the same size accessed from the top, with two Velcro pads to close it, a recess for your flight log or chart with a Velcro sidepiece so you can slide it in, and two padded pen-holders.



With these ones, the pens go in either end, which is handy. There are also two small ring-tags like the things you hang your jacket up with – I haven't worked out what they're for. Further up you've got two ordinary side pockets, inside which are

ROYAL AERO CLUB

AIR RACING

**The Royal Aero Club
Air Racing School**

North Weald Airfield
 Sat. 24th March 2012
 10am-4pm
 To book places at £25/person
 please call Roger Hayes
 on 01285 851311
 or rogerhayes@dial.pipex.com
 www.airraceuk.co.uk

A one day event designed to introduce pilots and navigators to handicapped air racing. Learn the methods and skills required, along with the theory to obtain an FAI competitors licence and race entry. We look forward to meeting you.

Be part of
 Aviation History
 and win
 The Schneider Trophy
 The Kings Cup
 The Rolls Royce Trophy
 &
 The Battle of Britain Trophy

slits for reaching into the pockets of whatever you're wearing underneath, with reinforced Velcro strips. These two strips were a bit scratchy until I'd worn it a few times and they moulded to my contours. Then you've got two breast pockets, and three more pen-holders high up on the left sleeve. It's got Velcro waist adjusters for crimping the waist in (or more likely, letting it out).

I must say I've got very fond of it. You can throw it in the washing machine, so I don't have to worry about crawling around under the plane to fasten the straps on the

Left: Brendan O'Brien wears it well

covers. It's supposed to last 'three to five times' longer than your usual flight suit, and it's certainly very well made – no hanging thread or dodgy stitching I can see. There are a few things I can't figure out; why it's got three hooks to hang it up

with, for one. It's got Velcro patches on the left shoulder and sleeve so you can stick patches on – and there's another minefield we won't go into.

But of course, there's a deadly serious side to this, and that's the fact that fire is an ever-present danger in aviation mishaps, and doing anything you can to increase your chances of survival amounts to good airmanship. There's a video on www.transair.co.uk showing various items of clothing reacting to fire... Nomex comes up very well. It's all to the good that it looks okay so people won't point at you and laugh, but given that you get change out of £200 it's got to be a worthwhile investment in your own safety..

Downsides? I really don't see any – nobody has pointed at me and laughed.

I'm still trying to get my head around (or vice versa) Robinson's helmet idea. And the gloves – maybe just one glove, like Michael Jackson and my old CFI? Now I find myself looking at big watches... ■