

Captain Concorde



*From white elephant to golden eagle –
Jock Lowe tells Pat Malone how they rescued Concorde*

Kibblesworth was a one-street mining village in the Durham coalfields where boys coming of working age traditionally laboured in the brickworks or went down the pit. There in the waning years of World War Two was born William Dennis Lowe, son of a Co-op sales rep and a woman of coal mining stock, profoundly working class Geordies whose idea of success was for him to stay at school beyond the age of 15.

Dennis Lowe was always set apart. He was the first boy at Kibblesworth Junior Mixed and Infants School to pass the eleven-plus exam for six years. At Chester-le-Street Grammar he shone at science, and winning a place at Birmingham University made him a rarity in his circle. But that was just the start. We know him today as Captain 'Jock' Lowe, the first man since Sir Sefton Brancker in 1929 to be President of the Royal Aeronautical Society and Master of the Guild of Air Pilots and Air Navigators, Concorde Chief Pilot and the

world's longest-serving Concorde pilot, Director of Flight Operations for British Airways, lecturer, broadcaster and tireless cheerleader for aviation in all its forms.

Brilliant though he is, Capt Lowe is no dry academic, ponderous analytical engineer or regulatory apparatchik; he is a gregarious and clubbable man who has an extraordinary facility with people, a natural leader with the knack of making you *desperate* to do what he wants, someone of whom few bad words have been said despite his having been both a trade union stalwart and a senior management innovator. He may hobnob with royalty, advise government ministers and survey the world from the pinnacle of his profession, but when he's in the company of Novocastrians the

Right: Jock Lowe with a prized possession, a Newcastle United short signed by one of his fans, Alan Shearer



rounded vowels of Tyneside creep increasingly into his speech, and if you're especially favoured he will show you one of his prized possessions, a Newcastle United No 9 shirt signed: 'To Jock, from Alan Shearer'. A flyer to the bone, he keeps a half share in a Chipmunk and a tenth share in a Bölkow Monsun at Booker.

More than any other, Jock Lowe was 'Captain Concorde'. She was the reason he stayed in aviation; he flew her, he trained on her, he managed the fleet and was a major force in turning her from white elephant to

embodiment of national pride. We would all be poorer if we hadn't had Concorde."

Unusually for a man who has achieved so much in aviation, Capt Lowe had no interest in flying as a youth. At Kibblesworth school, housed in the former joiner's shop of the coal mine and still in the 1950s lit by gas lamps in winter, horizons were narrow. "My first memory of aeroplanes was in the fifties when I was out picking blackberries with my father," says Capt Lowe. "Two Vampires from RAF Acklington came running down the field 150 yards away, well below treetop height – and

pressure wind tunnel to look at droplets of carbon dioxide evaporating to their critical temperature, to see whether the heat transfer in was quicker than the mass transfer out and you were getting unstable liquid droplets. The heat transfer-mass transfer all matched up as far as I could tell, but it took me three years to find that out.

"In the first term of my PhD there were eight of us sharing a flat, and one evening some of them came in and said, 'We're a bit short for the Air Squadron list, can we put your name down?' And I thought, okay – and that was it. Had I not been in that night, my life might have gone in a completely different direction.

"We all went to RAF Shawbury and everyone was to have a flight in a Chipmunk. It was my first time in an aeroplane, and I was sick. But I was also intrigued and interested, and I was not sick again. I went solo fairly quickly and started doing aerobatics. I did about 250 hours in the UAS, met some lovely people, saw both the good and the bad sides of the RAF because we stayed in the Mess, and got to like flying more and more. I won the squadron aerobatic competition, then the area competition, then the national competition, the Hack Trophy, at Little Rissington. It was named for the man who designed Hack Cough Sweets and I've still got the watch he gave us."

After getting his PhD Capt Lowe went



Most photographs via Jock Lowe

**Left: Jock Lowe's Chipmunk - his first flight was on the type, and he was sick
Lower left: Capt Lowe also has a tenth share in a Bölkow Monsun at Booker**



golden eagle, producing in one year 25% of BA's profits from 5% of turnover. It comes as a surprise, therefore, when he says he always thought her a commercial blind alley, he knew she could never be an overall financial success, and that we're unlikely to see her like again – the era of the large supersonic passenger transport died with her.

"That's not to say Concorde was a failure," Capt Lowe says. "They didn't take many passengers to the moon, but the Apollo programme was no failure. We, the British and French, had gone for speed as the route to success in commercial aviation, based on the fact that all previously successful aircraft had gone faster. But they'd also been bigger, so the jumbo was the real commercial breakthrough. Perhaps we tried to do too much, we tried to make a technical success – which undoubtedly it was by any measure – as well as a commercial success. But look what we had! An international icon, the very

boy, did they make a noise! But it never crossed my mind to be a pilot. I thought I'd be an engineer; I was good at maths, physics, chemistry, I was fascinated by the way things worked.

"I looked at aeronautical engineering but thought it was on the way out. The best-paid job was chemical engineer, so I thought I'd do that. And I think it gave me a better grounding because it has great breadth and encompasses many other disciplines."

Birmingham University had one of the best chemical engineering departments, and impressed Capt Lowe with its thriving social scene. On his first day, a fellow student's question: 'And what's your name, Jock?' gave him a nickname for life. He got a 2:1 and decided to go for a PhD, sponsored by the Ministry of Aviation's Rocket Propulsion Establishment, which was keen to find out why so many liquid-propelled rockets were blowing up. "I had to build and operate a high-

looking for work. "I was offered a job at Mars in Slough as a production engineer, and they paid twice as much as anybody else," he says. "I had a two-day interview and they gave me a big bag of chocolates to take away. I was taking them to a girlfriend who was a stewardess with BEA, and on the way I drove past Heathrow. It was dusk – there were no fences in those days – and I saw all the lights, red and green, and the aeroplanes coming and going, and I thought, you know, if I don't try flying as a career, every time I fly from now on I'm going to regret not trying..."

"At 24 I was old for the RAF, and I just didn't fancy having as a career objective, killing people. I don't want to make too much of that, but I thought as long as there's enough people willing to do it, then I'd rather not. If we'd been back in the Battle of Britain days I'd have been at the front of the queue, but the combination of that and being six years behind some of them led me to choose commercial flying, and I was lucky enough to be offered a place on the BEA/BOAC sponsored training scheme at Oxford. So I put on my blazer and went back to school, back to first principles of flying. It was all a bit unexciting, so I was soon having second thoughts. But on my 25th birthday, on a Saturday afternoon in 1969, I switched on the TV and watched Concorde take off for the first time. I thought to myself, that's it! That's what I'm going to do.

"I got through all the tests reasonably quickly and had 40 or 50 hours left to do. They had a Zlin 526, and nobody liked flying the thing. It was cramped, it was difficult to start compared to the Cherokees and the Comanches, so I found I had my own aerobatic toy to play with for two or three months, and I just had great fun.

"Then we went to Shannon to train on the VC10 and my first flight was with Bob Knights, who'd been a Pathfinder pilot, did a lot of

missions and had aeroplanes shot out from under him. He was determined to get this VC10 up to 50,000 feet and the flight engineer was determined to stop him – the Conways didn't like it, they were banging away like fury, and these two were fighting over the throttles. And I thought, what have I got myself into here? Bob Knights got it up to 48,500 feet and it would climb no more – but it was an interesting introduction, a good foundation for knowing the aeroplane.

"During training I went to Doha, Dubai, Lagos, all around Africa, and there were some very knowledgeable pilots, many of them ex-wartime, who knew how to fly aeroplanes. I did the flight navigators course, learning astro-navigation, using the sextant, Loran, and Consol, and after that I could fly to America. I used to go westbound to Australia once a month – New York, LA, Honolulu, Fiji, Sydney, Melbourne, turn round and come back again. What a job to have!

"At the same time I got involved in Balpa, helping to form the new entrants sub-committee because I felt there were lots of new pilots who didn't have a voice. I went on to become finance chairman of Balpa, so I saw unions from the inside. I never changed the principles I thought we should go for whether I was on the board of British Airways or the executive board of Balpa. To me it seemed obvious – if you work together and make the cake bigger your slice will get bigger with it, so making the cake bigger was the philosophy rather than arguing over every last crumb.

"I got on the Balpa Concorde Evaluation Committee in 1971. We were each given a system to look at, and I got the hydraulics. Concorde's hydraulics were terrible – they'd been based on the Caravelle. They interconnected at too many points and it remained one of the weaker elements of the aeroplane. They also asked me to look at a little rocket motor they'd intended to put on the aeroplane to give standby power for ten minutes if all four engines stopped. I talked to people at the Rocket Propulsion Establishment, and they agreed this was one of the daftest things they ever thought of. It had a hydrazine-type fuel – you'd only need a few gallons to



British Airways

Above: "He was determined to get this VC10 up to 50,000 feet and the flight engineer was determined to stop him, and I thought, what have I got myself into here?"

destroy an airport.

"At the time BOAC sponsored people to do a GA instructor rating at Booker, so I started instructing in my spare time. Then along came the opportunity to do what was called assistant instructor in British Airways, where some first officers got the IRE/TRE examiners licence. You could then instruct on the simulator, mainly co-pilots and engineers, but I did do captains when they agreed – the system was a bit more hierarchical than it is now. We had two primitive simulators, all valves and wires and one black and white camera-driven visual between them, and it was cutting edge stuff. It meant I was on the inside, I got onto the training flights, practised things like double engine failures and built up good experience. While you're pretending you know everything as the instructor and examiner, really you don't – you just have to think on your feet, and it's a good learning experience."

In 1975, a year before Concorde was due to come into service with BA, Capt Lowe wangled a couple of flights with test pilots John Cochrane and Brian Trubshaw. "They wanted some line pilots to fly it and asked Balpa," he says. "I walked around the corner of the hangar at Fairford on a misty February day, and there she was, looking absolutely gorgeous – I'd never seen her before, and 45 minutes later I was in the left seat, taxiing out.

My first flight simulated a heavyweight 31L take-off from New York, where we bank just after lift-off for noise abatement. They thought well, if some dumb third pilot from BA can do it, anybody can.

"I managed to get on the first BA first officers' course which started on June 1st 1976. In that legendary hot summer we were down at Filton working very hard; I'd been right around the academic merry-go-round, but this was the most intense learning experience I'd had. North was still north on the compass but everything else was new. The systems were all particular to Concorde – it's still an aeroplane, with electrics and hydraulics and air conditioning and fuel, but they were far more complex than anything before them, and all different.

"At the end we all passed. Half of the captains failed the course – they were older, in their 40s and 50s, the bar was set high, and they couldn't cope with the amount of data or process it quickly enough to make the right decisions on the simulator. We trained in the aircraft at Brize Norton – we did 40 landings each in those days, then went route flying with a cadre of training pilots on the Bahrain run, and after about six months I started to instruct the next course."

Capt Lowe designed an approach profile in order to minimise fuel burn, always critical on Concorde. "I just fiddled about with flexicurves," he says, "and by having the INS spots in the right place you could do a continuous turn onto finals with the radius of turn constantly changing as the speed decreased. I negotiated it through with air traffic control at Heathrow and we were cleared from Ockham to do our own approach, so we'd plug it into the INS and off it flew. And very kindly BA gave me a staff suggestion payment of £5,000 for that, which I was very pleased with, and so were they because it saved about a million quid a year."

Concorde lost money from the start and there were constant debates about whether it could continue. Capt Lowe was critical of marketing strategy and lobbied BA chairman Sir Ross Stainton about it, subsequently making presentations on cost-cutting, revenue

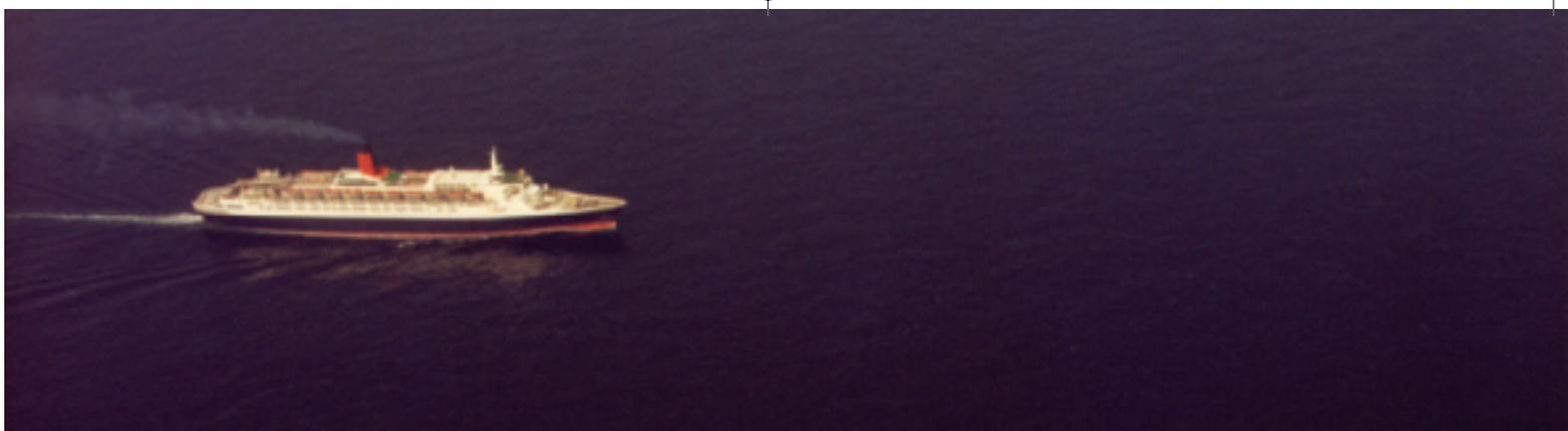
Four's company

"We needed something special to show off the new Landor livery. We didn't ask anybody, we just said we were going to do it, and everybody from the Chairman on down thought somebody else had given permission. We told the CAA and invited them along, and we had 100 staff on



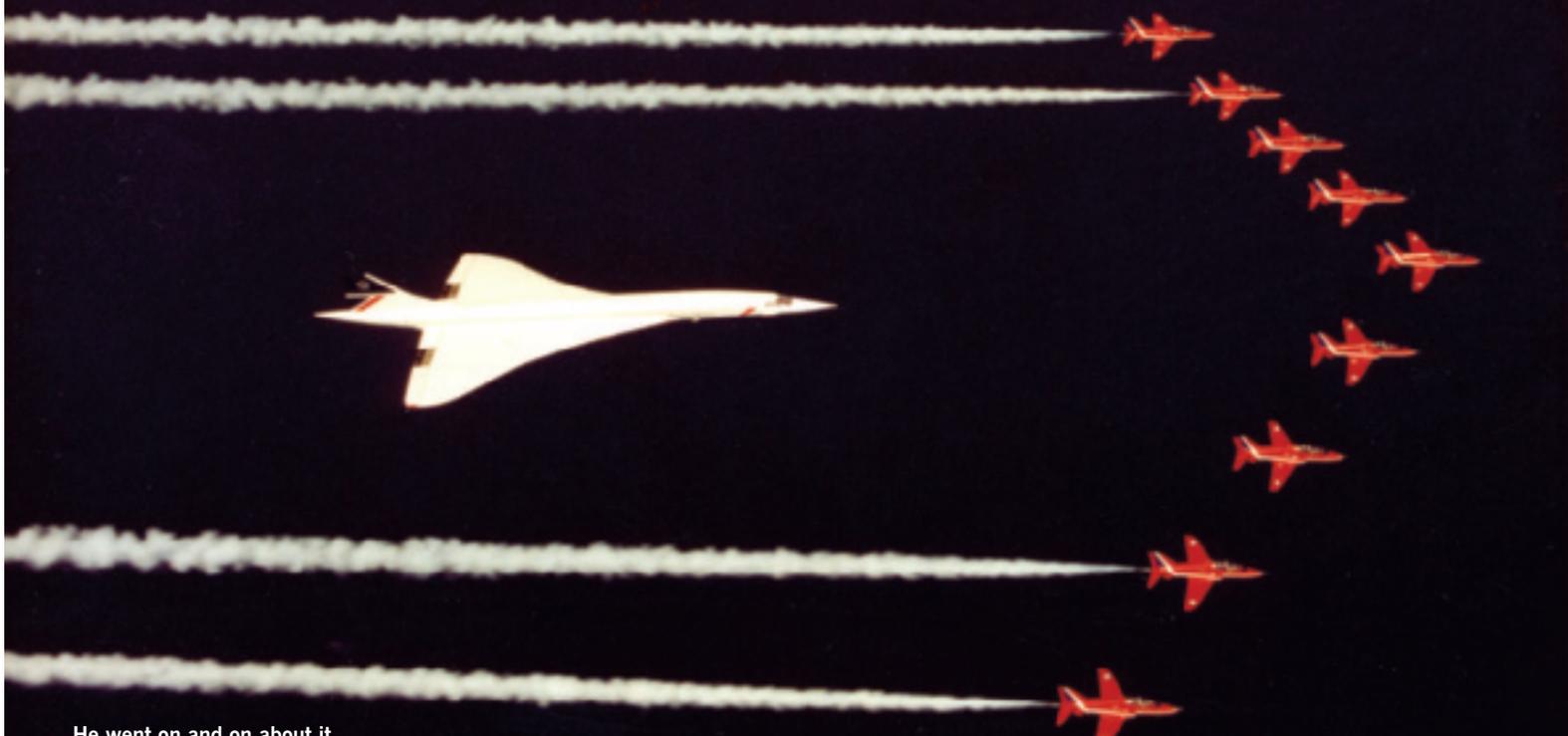
each aeroplane. It was Christmas Eve, and the guys hadn't done formation flying for years – they'd all done it in the RAF, and I had done some on the Tomahawks at Booker. But we just had to wing it. We had a two-hour briefing and went for it. We're not very close in the pictures, more than a wingspan, which with a delta is not close, we weren't silly. But our taxi light failed, so the picture was retouched to put it on, and they put it in the wrong place – it would take an anorak to spot it, but it's too far forward. When the Chatham livery came in, we cheated by retouching it with the new scheme and reissued the pictures – a lot of people thought we'd done it twice."





The ultimate formation

"We took the aeroplane to Farnborough and managed to squeeze it into the show; Dave Loney was there, and Trubshaw, and I was sort of third pilot. Rick Gardner was the BBC director, we were all in the pub and he said, what I'd really like to do is that flight they did in test flying, with the Red Arrows. So I laughed and said, Red Arrows? No problem, why don't we just throw in the QE2 as well, shall we? And he thought I was serious! 'Can you?' he said. And I thought, what have I done?"



He went on and on about it, and it took ages to get right because there were only a couple of days in the year when it was possible, and the first date was rained off. On the second date we found out that the QE2 was ahead of schedule, and it was in the Portland Danger Area and we couldn't get permission to go into this Navy firing zone. We got airborne on a Saturday morning, joined up with the Reds at Lyneham, and over Start Point, we still hadn't got permission. Then there was a shift change at the Naval air traffic control, and this lady's voice said, 'Okay Concorde Red Arrows, turn right heading 270, sorry we still haven't got permission to enter the warning area. But we've got an aircraft carrier five miles south of the QE2, it's a family open day and the wives and children are on board – if we let you fly over the QE2, will you fly over the aircraft carrier?' Of course we will, we said. 'Okay, turn 090 and find the QE2'. They arranged to stop all the firing, we found the QE2 and got Rick Gardner the shots he wanted."

enhancement and route possibilities to marketing director John Jennings and planning director Keith Wilkins. "A few months later there was a reorganisation and Concorde division was formed with the technical boss Brian Walpole as general manager and me as his number two," Capt Lowe says. "It was May of '82, I was 38 years old and we were pitched in at the deep end. The government had announced they were going to take away all financial help, which was running at £20 million a year – the Farnborough test rig and support to Rolls Royce and BAC – and everybody thought that was it. We were losing money, there were no new routes, and it couldn't stand the loss of another £20 million.

"Keith Wilkins became our champion – he was in charge of negotiations with the government on support costs, which dragged on for 18 months. In the meantime we started

to show how we could cut costs in every sphere except direct customer service. And we decided that we would just put the fares up.

"I got some market research done asking the passengers if they knew what the fare was. Most of them had no idea, and many guesses came in higher than they actually were. So I thought, let's charge them what they think they're paying. This wasn't about decreasing price to get increased volume – there was a fairly fixed volume, we had to get as much as we could from them. So we just added a few more percent to the fares every two or three months, and the load factors started to increase.

"Then we looked at New York and asked why we had two flights there in the morning. We'd been told there was congestion in the evening, and thunderstorms, but that had last been looked at ten years before. We talked to



air traffic control, and lo and behold there weren't any delays at five to seven o'clock, and there were five days a year when they got thunderstorms coming through. So we moved one of the flights from London to the evening, and that was probably the biggest breakthrough after the fare increases because we now had an evening market.

"Lord King was chairman by then and he was hugely supportive, as was Colin Marshall when he came along as chief executive. King was a lovely man, a superb leader.

Marshall had a remarkable ear for detail, and as a team they changed the philosophy of the company and turned BA into the world leader. The third influence was Gordon Dunlop, the finance director, who went into the negotiations with the government and said, 'Right, seven Concorde, eighth one down at Filton, all the spares, we'll take on the support costs, but the most we can give you is £16.25 million'. They were expecting an awful lot more; there was a break, then Gordon went back in and said, 'Okay, £16.5 million, that's my last offer.' And they accepted. That turned out to be about three months profit, in the end.

"In the first year the support was planned at £17 million but it came in at £10 million because everybody got the message on costs. It was a great time because we could see the revenue going up, and amazingly the load



**Top right: after the QE2 flight, the ten-ship formation became a regular feature
Right: Capt Lowe in the left seat – not of Concorde, but of a BA 747**

factors were going up, too. Then we started the charter flights. Brian Calvert, the technical manager who had introduced the aeroplane, had retired and did a charter for his local pub. They all paid £100 for a trip round the bay. So we thought, why don't we do more charter? It's seen as the rich man's toy, but if we can make it 'the achievable dream' for everybody, we might change people's perceptions. Out of that, the charter blossomed. Concorde to New York and QE2 back was another breakthrough. Then we did the first round the world trip. We charged John Player £1.2 million, which was a huge mark-up because it was a big marketing and operational risk. But eventually some round-the-world charter operators were getting \$50,000 a passenger. There was demand almost throughout the world, and in the end the aeroplane went to 250 destinations. Everywhere there was spin-off publicity for BA, and it very quickly became the flagship. From white elephant to golden eagle, we used to say.

"Operating profit figures came in and they exceeded everybody's expectations by a factor of ten. Eventually they went to £50 million. It was energetic, enthusiastic, electric – we were all in it together and we had a fabulous time. We saw enormous losses turn into enormous profits, we saw people who had been against it become supporters."

Success brought its share of problems, not least the delamination of a rudder on a charter going into Sydney. "It was far away as it could be, and people were saying, told you, told you! I thought if we could get it out on schedule, it would undo much of the damage. It was a Sunday morning and I had men and parts flying in all directions, all converging on Sydney. Colin Marshall rang me at home, and Colin's habit was to ask questions until eventually you didn't know the answer – he didn't do it deliberately, but he had a mind that



absorbed detail. I answered every one of his questions, until right at the end he said, 'By the way, what colour is that spare rudder you've got halfway out to Sydney?' I was stumped. I said 'Colin, you've got me, I don't know. I think it's green, but it'll be blue when it goes on the aeroplane.'

"So I got onto them and said look, I don't care if you get paint from the local garage but make sure the bloody thing's blue. It was absolutely the right question to ask, because if it had taken off with the green undercoat on the rudder it would have been on every TV screen in the world that night. In fact it was blue, and it looked superb."

In 1986 Capt Lowe was asked to become General Manager of Operations Control. Ops Control is a small team of about 90 people, the spider in the centre of the BA web, which runs the whole show, allocating aeroplanes to flights, fixing maintenance time and troubleshooting problems. "It was a wonderful train set to play with," he says. "They were a great team of people who knew their business and controlled this worldwide operation, and nobody outside knew enough to touch it."

"I hadn't been in the job more than a couple of weeks, it was a Friday night and I went in at 7pm to say cheerio for the weekend. A call came in from Terminal Four to say there was a jumbo that needed an engine change, which meant an aircraft change for that flight, it was going to be tight to get it out before the curfew. Then a cabin crew refused to operate down to Johannesburg because the upper deck hadn't been blocked off as it should have been and they didn't have a rest area. Then we got a call from Geneva to say a 757 had a vibration and probably needed an engine change, then Syria closed its airspace – there's about 20 aeroplanes about to go through Syrian airspace and they've all got to be contacted and in some cases diverted. Are there crews at the place you divert the planes to because they'll be out of time? Then Heathrow Tower called to say the runway lights had failed – it's winter – and where do you want the aircraft diverted to, Gatwick, Manchester, Stansted? That last call came in at 7:25, so all this had happened in 25 minutes. This small team prioritised, allocated and sorted it out, and I just sat back in amazement and watched them deal with multiple crises that would knock most people off their chairs. That was my introduction to Ops Control."

"I did that until '89 and had some great times – they were the best team I ever worked with, the most professional, the most fun-loving. When we dealt with the merger of BCal I was sent down to be Gatwick co-ordinator, putting together BA, BCal, British Airtours, and moving to the North Terminal all in one go. There were horrendous problems, but we got through it. In the light of that experience, on the day BA moved into Terminal 5 at Heathrow I flew out of Gatwick with easyJet because I could see chaos coming, and I stayed away for two weeks."

"After that, for some reason they made me chief pilot for Concorde, DC-10 and Tristar, which effectively meant I could dodge the seniority rules and move to the left seat on Concorde. Then one day I was at home in Marlow moving a compost heap and I had a call from Colin Marshall asking if I'd be Director of Flight Operations. That was one of the top jobs you could hope for, so I employed a gardener to finish moving the compost and went to work. We undoubtedly had the best standards, but there was a lot to do. It had to become more efficient, safety had to be



British Airways

Above: after the BCal merger Capt Lowe was made chief pilot for British Airways' Concorde, DC-10 and Tristar fleets

improved even further, and we had to improve morale. Pilots are a cynical lot – when you're sitting for 12 hours and you're tired, and things don't work, the ground starter doesn't turn up, the catering's not right or the push-back's late or people have been upgraded incorrectly, there are lots of things that impact on your thoughts. We did a thing called 'harnessing flight crew potential', and got 500 volunteers doing things that were extra to their jobs, most of them costing no money. One guy prepared a lot of presentations so that anyone who wanted to give a talk to his kids' school had the stuff ready. We got pilots to adopt a station, instead of just flying in and out, and

they took it on enthusiastically. The chap who chose Chicago spent his holidays out there, he'd go out with the sales force, and it was a very successful initiative.

"We looked again at how we were managing safety. There was no blueprint, no format, so we sat down and – you might smile – created a Safety Management System, the first time that term had been used. Some of the meaning has gone out of it now; it's become a routine checklist process rather than a cultural change. But we had only audited things when they went wrong, and you have audit to prevent things going wrong."

"After one of Colin Marshall's 'questions' we jacked up the whole flight data recording system, made it far more interrogative, put more parameters in, looked at how we got the data, analysed it and communicated the results. Capt John Savage was put in charge – he had a good maths degree from Cambridge. We looked at trends and anomalies with a view to changing our way of doing things. For example, we looked at high-energy approaches, heavy landings. There were too many at Brussels, Bangkok, San Francisco and Jersey. Three of them were because of ATC procedures, holding people up high then dumping them down, so we sorted that out. But Jersey was an anomaly, and we spent a long time figuring it out. It transpired that



Blue streak

"In the early days of Concorde trying to shake off the white elephant thing, we arranged for scheduled flights and charters to overfly every major sporting event – Wimbledon, Twickenham, Lord's, the Oval, we were there. The Americans chartered Concorde to fly to Birmingham, and just after we'd won the Ryder Cup Monty Burton flew down the 18th at the Belfry, god knows what rules he was breaking, but that established the concept, so we started to milk this and TV producers couldn't resist turning the cameras up."

"We flew to Rochester, New York, to pick up the winning Ryder Cup team and on the way over the front loo leaked blue fluid all the way along the fuselage, and it baked on, so there's a hundred-foot-long blue streak along the right hand side of the aeroplane. So when we flew up to Rochester, I made all the turns to the left, banking over the course, then a very late turn onto finals, flipping level almost as we touched down."

Above: Capt Lowe proudly displays the Ryder Cup on the flight home from Rochester, New York

people were doing visual approaches – it's a nice clear day, you can see Jersey from far out, you're back in your Cherokee or your Jet Provost and you're eyeballing it onto the numbers. But we weren't teaching people to do visual approaches, we spent all our training doing instrument approaches and autolands. For what should be the safest and easiest approaches, too many were ending up rushed because we'd never given people the parameters. So we addressed the issue in training.

"We looked at the number of Ground Proximity Warnings that were being ignored. We saw that the number that weren't being officially reported was high, and we found that 82 percent of these GPWS warnings were spurious. When we went to Honeywell with this they were amazed – nobody had ever told them, nobody had compiled the data. From that, enhanced GPWS was developed.

"We saw that the rotation rates on 757s were increasing, slowly, over a period of time, so we put it into the recurrent training to stop the slide, and I think we were the only airline never to get a tail scrape on a 757. Refining



the way we used that data gave us a predictive system that made a genuine contribution to safety, and we persuaded many other airlines to adopt the same approach."

Life changed for Capt Lowe when Robert Ayling took over as Chief Executive. The two did not see eye to eye over many things, including the notorious 'ethnic tailfin' branding, and Capt Lowe found himself back as Commercial Manager for Concorde. "Profits were down, so I did all the things I'd done before, controlling costs, enhancing revenue, getting more charters, and we got the profit back up to about £40 million. By then the marketing people had changed, but they still didn't quite know what to make of Concorde people. One day they were planning a charter to Cape Canaveral and wanted a major personality aboard. 'Wouldn't it be great if we could get Neil Armstrong!' they said. I'd met Neil through contacts at GE and we played golf together. 'Oh, I've got his home number,' I said. 'I'll call him up.' I cherish that moment...

"I did a lot to protect Concorde's patch, and I can lay a degree of ownership to the fact that Concorde's tail was never painted in funny colours. I kept insisting that we had a Union Jack on it, it had to be based on some part of our heritage. I said they had to be mostly white for heat dissipation purposes, which is correct for the fuselage and the wings, but for the tail I used a bit of licence. And I absolutely insisted they all had to be the same. It didn't endear me to the CEO, but he didn't push to point too far.

"But this is one of the things about

Concorde – it wasn't just for BA, it wasn't just for the Concorde fleet, it wasn't even for aviation. It was iconic for the nation, and for us who worked with her in particular. We felt, I felt, an extra responsibility, that actually the whole country paid for this aeroplane to be built, and people had a degree of emotional engagement with it. It was that achievable dream, and you couldn't buy anything better. You could travel on it and meet the world's richest and most powerful people, because they couldn't buy anything better. And that gave an extra dimension to dealing with it, making sure that it ran, that it ran well, and that it could be something that everybody in the country could be proud of."

Capt Lowe had just returned from a secondment as Operations Director of Olympic Airways when the Paris crash happened, and later, after the aircraft returned to service and it was decided to cease flights, he thought it would be a good time to retire. "Rod Eddington called me in to try to find a way to keep one or two Concorde flying for high days and holidays," he says. "Eddington was very keen, the crews and the engineers wanted to do it,

and there was a way – you needed to create another organisation to hold the type certificate, and as BA knew more about the aeroplane than anybody else, we could have done it. But the enthusiasm had gone from the upper echelons of the airline, they didn't have the will to make it work. It had been losing money, they were running only one flight a day, load factors weren't coming back, the thing had run out of steam. Eddington very kindly invited me on the last charter flight, so I had the finale, if you like.

"But you know, if you'd said to me in 1976 that Concorde was going to have 27 years and you're going to make half a billion pounds net profit, I would have taken your hand off. It would have stopped now anyway – a large chunk of the passengers were American bankers, and this recession would have put an end to it."

And it will not come again. "It's got the laws of physics against it," says Capt Lowe. "You've got noise on take-off and landing, the range, which will always be less than subsonic, you've got emissions in the upper atmosphere which could be far more significant than in the troposphere, and not least you've got cost of development and the political problems that arise from supersonic overflights, be it water or land.

"There may be at some stage, when we get into growth again, a supersonic business jet, but major iconic engineering programmes like Concorde are out of vogue. The Americans are trying to bring it back with putting a man on the moon, but it's been done; maybe there's



Above: Jock Lowe in civvies – he was the world's most experienced Concorde pilot
Left: Capt Lowe and CEO Robert Ayling disagreed profoundly over BA's ethnic tailfins
Below: Capt Lowe impressed the staff by producing Neil Armstrong's home phone number



NASA

not the opportunity now to have national flagship programmes in engineering, as my generation had. Perhaps we need to look for that elsewhere, maybe in medicine – and perhaps it should be less about patriotism and nationalism, and more about human endeavour."

If I had five more pages I could fill them with stories about this remarkable man – his flying adventures, his friendships, his honorary doctorates, business achievements, his work for GAPAN and the RAeS, his expert witness work for Tudor Owen, his GA experiences – but there's no space, so you're going to have to wait for his memoirs, which he is reluctant to write. But must be encouraged, nay forced, to do so because without them the historical canon of Concorde is incomplete. Many people dedicated their lives to making the aeroplane work for British Airways, but Jock Lowe was the pivot on which success turned; his story must be told, and he must tell it. ■