

Seven years ago I made one of life's big choices and bought a cute little Italian number who I'd fallen in love with some, years before. OK, getting married and buying a house may be bigger decisions but investing in a new aeroplane is potentially as expensive and you literally trust your life to it. It's fair to say that I've now well and truly bonded with the SIAI Marchetti SF260W and pleased to report there is not a hint of a seven year itch.

How did I come to the decision that the SF260 was the aeroplane for me? I spent many years, in fact 13 years, flying a Cessna 340, hauling around six seats, four of which rarely got used, and burning humongous amounts of fuel as well as racking up telephone number maintenance bills. Add to this the fact that my main hobby is air racing and it's plain to see that the Cessna 340,

whilst an enviable mini airliner, didn't quite hit the mark for a couple travelling light who wanted to move fast and win air races yet have something that was practical transport.

My earlier acquaintances with the type enamoured me of it. I was lucky enough to carry out some mock combat flying from Kissimmee, SF260 on SF260, in the late 1990s and it would be fair to say I was mightily impressed by the type: Italian looks and performance coupled with superb handling characteristics that for an aeroplane capable of aerobatics can only be described as outstanding. Despite extreme combat manoeuvres, rolling and looping scissors, the SF260 failed to flip or spin inadvertently; there is so much airframe buffet as the aeroplane comes to the stall that I didn't even need to check the air speed indicator to know how things were going.

This was an aeroplane I imagined as a capable air racer, which could also provide a Ferrari type platform for my wife and I to make our frequent transits between the Isle of Man, UK and Europe. Designed as a two plus two, it was clearly capable of carrying a considerable amount of luggage: and I had fallen for those Latin looks.

I soon discovered that finding an SF260 was not the easiest of tasks. There may have been 1,000 built but there are very few on the market at any one time, and some people's ambitions in price are optimistic to say the least. A piece of luck put me in touch with a chap called Matt Clark from Teesside. I was sent on a Flyer magazine mission to flight test his late D model that had been used by the US Air Force in their evaluation of the type. They rejected the SF260 in favour of the Slingsby TM260 and we know



## ***Frati's racy Italian***

where that ended — in tears. This particular aeroplane had been fitted to the US fighter training spec with the right hand seat configured for P1. The flight test was great fun, to say the least. Better still, I persuaded Matt that he might let me use the aeroplane with him flying as my navigator in the next season's air races.

We only managed two venues but I achieved a 1st, 3rd and 5th on less than half the fuel burn of the C340 and about the same speed. The controls were light, with a quick response in roll, even quicker with a little rudder assistance, and with the wonderful bubble canopy the view outside was spectacular, not only of the countryside but my fellow competitors; I could roll nearly inverted over the turning points.

It's fair to say that this was a spoiling exercise for any other type. Sadly Matt

decided to sell his aeroplane back to the US for more money than I felt sensible at the time, so my loaner was lost.

The air racing continued, and the search continued. Whilst racing from rural Shobdon I tripped across what was to become my new aeroplane sitting a little forlornly in the grass. This was an aircraft with a history, and not without its own problems, but it was love at first sight. The camouflage scheme of this

warrior version of the SF260 immediately identifies it as an erstwhile warbird, and in fact the aeroplane's history confirmed that. The aeroplane had had a varied career, starting off as a straightforward civilian type which was then modified in Belgium to the warrior version by strengthening the wing and adding hard points for machine gun or rocket pods. It was then sent to Burkino Faso as a ground attack/training plane. The

Photos: mostly Austin Brown



*Italian in looks – and occasionally in temperament – the SIAI Marchetti SF260W doubles as **Geoffrey Boot's** personal fighter*

Burkina Faso government seems to have run out of money, and it latterly the aircraft returned to Europe via France where, stripped of its hard points and semi civilianised, it was granted a French C of A.

Sadly, when I bought the aeroplane the French C of A had expired and despite the union with Europe and the JARs it took the best part of a year and a mammoth paperwork trail to get the UK CAA to register and certify the same. It also involved a pot of money that started to make Matt's aeroplane look like a good deal. However, at the end of it I had an ex military aeroplane that not only looks and sounds the part but does in fact enable you to live that dream.

During the following seven years I've flown 500 or 600 hours, and as with every relationship there have been tensions and strains, most of which seem to sort themselves

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**Right: no glass cockpit, but the panel is interesting for the number of placards required! Lower right: with few weight restrictions, space behind seats is useful for baggage**

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out with copious quantities of cash.

Starting with the air racing – ten out of ten here: the handling's great, the visibility superb and we've collected an impressive array of trophies, so no complaints.

As a means of transport the Ferrari of the air probably hits the mark. We've done some fairly long transits, including Menorca and back, but the low back seats and seating position becomes decidedly uncomfortable after two and a half to three hours; the noise and vibration levels are fairly high, although the sound deadening headsets take the sting out of this. On the plus side, the two spare seats in the back with very little weight restriction make it an ideal two-plus-baggage aeroplane for 200 to 400 mile legs. At a modest power setting of 23 square, we burn around 45 litres an hour with an indicated air speed of 155 knots. Burn a bit more fuel and you can cruise at nearer 170 knots; climb a little bit and that trues out even better. Still, the ethos of the aeroplane is flying at lowish level VFR. Although it has an IFR panel, flying in IMC is not my favourite for long periods of time: the aeroplane diverges fairly quickly if you don't keep your eye on it. An autopilot would be a distinct advantage. The bubble canopy has its advantages but the two weeny air vents don't alleviate the greenhouse effect in hot weather. During our transits to Menorca and back the cockpit temperatures went to 40C, and we emerged in our immersion suits thoroughly steam-bathed.

When it comes to reliability there are some of those Italian traits: the screws holding panels on back out, and need checking every two or three hours; the radio initially caused a lot of problems mainly I think due to the fact that it hadn't flown for nearly 20 months. Damp ingress takes its toll and we've had the usual niggly things like vacuum pump failure and the artificial horizon went U/S. It's also an aeroplane that needs a hangar. Although we have a waterproof cover, if the aeroplane's left outside the seal round the sliding canopy is anything but watertight. The fuel caps are also the primitive bung type, which tend to shrink with usage and heavy rain will overwhelm drainage, so it's a case of careful fuel drainage before flight, particularly if the aeroplane's been left outside.

SF260s also like their runway and they certainly don't like soft grass fields, as Suzie and I discovered on our first-ever flight. Taking

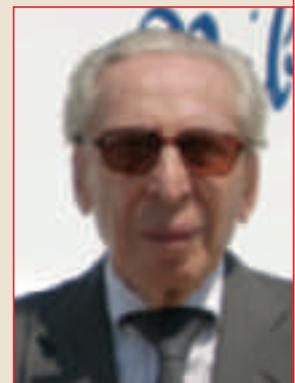
off from Oaksey Park on what turned out to be softer ground than we anticipated, we only just made it. Well, the book said we could and I guess we did so without damage, but learning both take off and landing technique is essential. The aeroplane has a habit of trying to wheelbarrow if it's held on the ground too long, and once airborne a bootful of right rudder is the order of the day. It's not uncommon to have the stall warner blaring for the first few seconds. On landing, if you come over the hedge too fast she'll float; force it down early and you'll bounce, and you have to be particularly careful not to be riding the



## Another Frati masterpiece

Sadly the SF260 designer Stelio Frati died this year aged 91. A genius in aircraft design, it is his hand behind the wonderful Falco homebuilt machines with pleasing lines and thoroughbred handling.

The design evolved into the SF260 which first came on the market in the mid 1960s when it was built by Avia Milano. Production then went to SIAI Marchetti, who marketed it as SF260A, B, C, D and W versions through the 1980s. Many air forces round the world still fly different versions of the SF260 and the type is still available but now manufactured by Aero Marchetti. There is even a turbine version but the limited fuel capacity, while adequate for a piston engine, restricts the turbine version's range.




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**Right: designer Stelio Frati, pictured in Milan last year Below: Frati's beautifully proportioned Falco homebuilt, designed in the 1950s and still being made today**

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**Above: canopy slides all the way back for easy access**  
**Right: strong gear, but she'll bounce and wheelbarrow readily**  
**Below: the 260F is good for 170 knots when pushed**  
**Bottom: military markings make Geoffrey's 260 stand out**



brakes, which are exceptionally effective, or you'll have a flat spot on your tyre. The technique is to use full flap than hold off until the aircraft nearly stalls onto the ground.

Another trait – and I guess this is a large six cylinder Lycoming problem not a SIAI Marchetti's – is that particularly in warm weather, let the RPM drop and you get oily plugs. It's a matter of leaning, and this applies airborne as well.

So all in all I've had a small seven year itch here and there, but a simple scratch has solved the problem. This is an aeroplane that you can't help loving. Strapped on, it feels like a little fighter and if you want to throw it around and show off. Not only does it look the business and sound the business but it's fairly safe, with no nasty flying traits. In seven years we've had a 100% despatch rate, which can't be bad. I guess the way to sum up is – it's the closest I'm likely to get to owning my own Spitfire at a tenth of the cost. ■

### Specification

Manufactured by	Siai Marchetti Spa (Italy)
Range	805 nautical miles
Crew	2 (in civilian version + 2 in rear seats)
Original manufacture date	1968
Rebuilt to military spec & acquired the Warrior designation	1972
Engine	Lycoming O-540-E4A5, 260 hp
Prop	Hartzell constant speed, two-blade, 76-in dia
Length	27.4 ft
Height	7.9 ft
Wingspan	23.3 ft
Wing aspect ratio	6.3
Max takeoff weight	2,430 lbs
Wing loading	22.3 lbs/sq ft
Max usable fuel	62 gals/372 lbs
Best rate of climb airspeed	110 kts
Max rate of climb	1,800 fpm
Ceiling (service)	19,000 ft
Max speed at sea level	187 kts
Cruise, 8000 ft, 75% power	180 kts
Fuel flow, 8000 ft, 75% power	13 gph
Endurance, 8000 ft, 75% power	4.5 hrs
Stalling speed, clean	69 kts

