

Pilot profile:

Cliff Spink



A view from the summit

Display pilot Cliff Spink talks to **Pat Malone** about his extraordinary journey from farm labourer to Air Marshal

Cliff Spink is entitled to a full measure of fighter pilot swagger, having risen from Halton apprentice to Air Marshal via the Hunter, Lightning, Phantom and Tornado. With hundreds more hours on exotic aircraft like the Hurricane, Spitfire, Mustang, Corsair, Wildcat, Bf 109 and F-86 he stands at the pinnacle of his profession and might easily adopt the hard-to-be-humble demeanour that afflicts some who have achieved so much. But Air Marshal Clifford Rodney Spink CB CBE FCOMI FRAeS RAF Rtd carries no such burden. He is not given to immodesty and decries it in others, and he is an indefatigable champion of all aviators down to the meanest PPL and the weekend microlight jockey. He is active on behalf of AOPA, GAPAN and countless other groups engaged in the promotion of aviation, and he retains a wide-eyed delight in flying aeroplanes of any sort. His political skills, sharpened by years at the top of the RAF, give him insights which are invaluable in the uphill battles we must fight. The going may be hard, but life is easier when we've got Cliff Spink on our side.

There's no room in aviation for arrogance, he says. "Because I fly old planes, I meet a lot of veterans – people who did extraordinary things, in a hostile environment, and they are all very modest. If you ever feel a bit bumptious, think of these people, whose stature is all the greater for their modesty. The really solid chaps, the absolutely professional aviators, don't use their experience like a mallet."

Cliff's 6,500 flying hours include almost

1,400 on the Lightning and about the same on the Phantom, and his total continues to rise on some of the most beautiful and expensive historic warbirds imaginable. 'Active retirement' doesn't quite cover it for Cliff Spink. He is President of the Historic Aircraft Association, President of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Association and President of the Royal Observer Corps Association. He is a Liveryman and Warden to the Court of the Guild and a member of AOPA. He flies in the RAF reserve, holds a display authorisation for jet and piston aircraft and is a Display Authorisation Evaluator for the CAA. He's Managing Director of Spitfire Ltd, which operates a small fleet of vintage aircraft, Director of an international security consultancy, guest lecturer on aviation safety, acts as an expert witness, he's a partner in a small firm of Swiss watchmakers and in his spare time he has a wife, a family, a house and a garden to look after. There is not enough room here to cover half of what Cliff Spink does and has done, but in a brief conversation at Duxford we covered some of the salient points.

It is Cliff's good fortune to work from a glass-fronted office at the Aircraft Restoration Company on the end of the runway at Duxford, from which he gets a world-beating view of every aircraft that comes and goes at that historic heaven. Even after 45 years as a pilot Cliff, a remarkably youthful-looking 64, still allows his gaze to wander to whatever flying thing is passing his window. In the hangar stands a Mk XVI Spitfire which carries his

initials CRS – not at his instigation, but on the wishes of the owner, an indulgence which has cost Cliff many beers. His concerns range from the difficulties of enthusing young people about flying to the run-down of our armed forces and the burden of unthinking regulation under which we operate. If you want to help general aviation to thrive, he says, joining AOPA is a good start.

"It is essential in aviation that we work within the proper framework, whether that be the checklist for the aircraft, the rules of the airfield, or the ANO," he says. "But within that, people feel they have to write a rule to 'protect' individuals or aircraft operations, and some of these rules are badly thought through and are not always written with the right level of consultation with industry, and sometimes that consultation is after the fact. We need to be embedded in that process to give a level of objectivity to regulation. AOPA is an essential organisation that can, as a group, fight the corner of the general aviation pilot. Without that voice we are not going to get anywhere. AOPA's roots are in aviation, and far from banner-waving, they are thinking through in a professional and objective way the concerns that aviators have."

Apprentice days

Cliff's career has been a succession of high points ever since he forsook the farm with a yen to fly the Meteors, Vampires and Mosquitos he saw flying overhead as he hoed weeds in vast fields on the North Downs in Kent. As an ATC cadet he had his first

Above: Clifford R Spink with Spitfire adorned at the owner's insistence with his initials, a fact which has cost him much beer



Above: Cliff at his first ATC camp, RAF Chivenor, 1960



Left: Cliff, centre, passing out at No 1 Technical Training School, RAF Halton, 1966



Right: Cliff as a 56 Sqn Lightning pilot in Akrotiri, Cyprus, in 1973

Below: Mk 6 Lightning of 56 Squadron at RAF Wattisham in 1976

Below right: Flt Lt Spink celebrates with W/C Al Blackley after logging 1,000 hours on Lightnings, Wattisham 1975



experience flight in a Chipmunk from RAF West Malling at the age of 13; it was everything he hoped it would be. He left school at 16, too young to follow his chosen path of deck officer cadet on a Shell tanker, and was taken on as an apprentice electrical engineer at the No 1 Technical Training School at RAF Halton.

"I've always had admiration for such schools and for the apprentice tradition which we quite foolishly abandoned," he says. "They provided levels of discipline and skill, a depth of understanding and a work ethic which is invaluable – the diminution of apprentice schemes is probably one of the biggest errors we have made nationally."

At the end of his apprenticeship the Commandant, the Battle of Britain ace Al Deere, called him in. 'We don't think you're going to be much good as an engineer so we're sending you to be a pilot,' he was told. At 19, Cliff found himself at Cranwell sitting in a Jet Provost. "We were becoming an all-jet air force and it was reasoned that we should train on jets from the outset," Cliff says.

"I went solo in ten hours and loved every minute of the course. That's not to say I didn't experience personal hurdles – I found instrument flying difficult until I flew with a Shackleton pilot who corrected my scan, and once the penny had dropped I had no more trouble."

Streamed onto fast jets, Cliff applied to go to a University Air Squadron between courses. "There was an element of leg-pulling about us not being real pilots because we couldn't fly the Chipmunk," he says, "so I went up to RAF Ouston outside Newcastle to get checked out on it. And this was one of the best moves I made in my career, because whenever there was a gap between courses I could do some flying somewhere, towing gliders, giving air experience flights, where others had to put up with ground jobs, and my wider experience stood me in good stead."

After the Gnat at RAF Valley Cliff aspired to Hunters – and the Hunter OCU was in his words 'magical' – but was assigned to Lightnings. "It really was a rocket ship," he says. "You were constantly watching weather, fuel, operating the weapons systems, you had to do it all. Low level at night it could really work you very hard, and it caught some people out."

After the course at 226 OCU at Coltishall Cliff joined 111 Squadron at Wattisham on the Mk 3 Lightning. "We were upset if we didn't fly four times a day. We were getting 25 to 28 hours a month, good hours with a lot of recoveries. We flew all over Europe against other NATO forces, taking on F104s in Germany, the Mirage in France, F100s in

Denmark. I was selected to go on the Intercept Weapons Instructor Course, and life was very good. Then my wife Christine died of cancer; she was 24 years old and I not much older, and that was a very difficult time.

"I found the RAF to be a hugely caring organisation in the hard times. They thought I needed to be got away and sent me to RAF Akrotiri on Cyprus, where I joined 56 Squadron on the Lightning Mk 6 as a qualified weapons instructor. 'The Big A', we called Akrotiri; there was a transport squadron of Hercules and Argosies, two Vulcan squadrons,

pretty comprehensive debrief on what he'd photographed, and four or five days later the Turks invaded using some of those sites as parachute landing grounds.

"Turkey was a vital Cold War ally so we merely intercepted the Turkish planes and flew alongside them. It was an exciting time and we were flying a lot. By the end of 1974 the Green Line had been established, and soon afterwards we were astounded to hear that all squadrons were being recalled to the UK apart from some helicopters. It was such a strategic base, but 1975 was the start of withdrawal from a lot of places overseas."

Cliff returned to Wattisham with 56 Squadron and in 1976 was promoted to Squadron Leader and told he was going on an exchange tour. "I had visions of going to the States to fly some intriguing aeroplanes," he says, "but then my posting came through – Sandhurst. I protested that I knew nothing about the infantry and was sent to the School of Infantry at Warminster, and I'm probably the only fighter pilot to have graduated from it. At Sandhurst I taught tactics, map reading, weapons skills and so forth, but my speciality was air power. I also ran the Sandhurst Flying Club



Above: Tu-95 Bear intercepts – 'You'd see a chap in a leather helmet looking out, and it all looked pretty basic'

a helicopter squadron, and 56 Squadron on Lightnings with a Canberra flight, and it was busy. We flew a lot of intercepts against the Russians and the Egyptians; there was great tension between Israel and Egypt, who fought the Yom Kippur War in 1973, the year I arrived, and it was a very important strategic base.

Battle Flight

"The troubles in Cyprus were just starting. There was bitter in-fighting between the Greeks, and some dreadful atrocities, and the Turkish communities were very apprehensive. I intercepted the first Turkish aircraft to come over; I was on Battle Flight and the controller warned me of a group of six aircraft coming in from the north. Our rules of engagement were that we should only shoot second, which gives the other fellow the edge, so I was on my guard. As I took off I was heartened to see my flight commander Henry Ploszek running to his aircraft.

"I met the first RF84 Thunderbolt coming in over the coast. The pilot, who must have been pretty nervous, gave me all the NATO hand signals and I shadowed him as he flew around the island. I knew he was taking pictures because I could see the camera door open and close, so I had a pretty good idea of what he was interested in. Eventually Henry came alongside and this chap decided he had enough and headed north. I was able to give a

and flew Chipmunks with the AEF at Abingdon. Most army officers only did 18 months at the Academy, but I was still there after two and a half years and I was pestering my posting officer to the point of stalking. Finally I got back onto a Hunter refresher, and then I was sent to Coningsby to learn to fly the F4 Phantom.

"The F4 didn't initially impress me particularly with its cold power performance – it felt stodgy after the Lightning, but it had a second chap in the back and as a warplane it was something to be reckoned with. At the OCU you did two sorties with another pilot, then went out to fly with a navigator. Mine was Willie Felger – a very experienced F4 recce nav – and as we walked out to the aircraft he put his arm around me and said, 'Spinko, you know bugger-all about Phantoms and I know bugger-all about air defence, so perhaps we'll survive this sortie.' I got to really like the Phantom; in reheat it could really go, and for its time and place it was as good a warplane as I ever flew.

"I joined my old squadron, 111, at Leuchars and spent three years as a Flight Commander. It was a great tour with the added bonus of doing long sorties, getting intercepts against Tu-95 Bears far out into the Arctic. You'd get up next to a Bear and there'd be a chap looking out in a leather helmet and it all looked very basic in there, and in fact it turned out that it was basic..."

During the Falklands War Cliff was attending the National Defence College Latimer in Buckinghamshire, where he and his colleagues effectively followed the campaign as



Above: Cliff leads the 111(F) Squadron Phantom four-ship display at Leuchars, 1981

Right: the display team at Leuchars, with Cliff front and centre

Below: in command of 74 Sqn Wattisham, Cliff was flying F4J Phantoms



Above: Cliff raises a glass with Sqn Ldr Dave Jones, his navigator in his early days with 111 Squadron at Leuchars, following his last flight in a Phantom F4 at RAF Mount Pleasant, Falkland Islands, when he was Deputy Commander British Forces there

Left: more alcohol - a celebration of Group Captain Spinks last flight in an F3 Tornado when he was Station Commander at RAF Coningsby in 1992



part of the course. Then, promoted to Wing Commander, he did three years at Rheindahlen, responsible for air defence matters in West Germany, the Inner German Border and the Berlin Air Corridors. "The intelligence associated with that was fascinating – I can't talk about it even now," he says. "I flew the Phantom at Wildenrath, but not enough, and I was getting withdrawal symptoms from flying. After bugging my posting officer I was sent to command 74 Squadron flying F4Js at Wattisham, so I found myself back once again on my old stamping ground. I had a wonderful bunch of pilots and navs. At one of the NATO meets we won the Silver Tiger trophy, we won gunnery trophies, the Dacre Trophy and I had to do very little with such a wonderfully talented bunch."

Gulf War

In 1988 Cliff was promoted to Group Captain and posted to the Falklands as Station Commander Mount Pleasant and Deputy Commander British Forces Falkland Islands. By 1990 he was back at Coningsby retraining on the Tornado, but during his course Iraq invaded Kuwait. "The AOC told me I was going as detachment commander to Dhahran in Saudi Arabia – and just after Christmas that is where I found myself. Two weeks later we re-invaded, and that was an exciting three or four months, some of it rather tense. I did fly into Iraq but the AOC got to hear about it and forbade me to cross the border. Dhahran took 11 Scud hits, and those three months seemed as long as a complete tour. I was one of the last to leave, coming back to Teesside having hitched a lift with the RAF Regiment. There was a reception for them and I sneaked out at the back thinking I'd have to find my own way home, but the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight Devon arrived to chauffeur me home; just as we got airborne there was a pop behind me and a glass of champagne was put in my hand; all highly illegal and thoroughly enjoyable."

Commanding Coningsby brought Cliff into closer proximity with the BBMF, and he arranged to fly the Hurricane and Spitfire. "I had a lot of hours on the Chipmunk and they gave me two flights in the Harvard, the OC BBMF Paul Day briefed me on the Hurricane's systems and away I went. I was terrified lest I damage this priceless piece of aviation heritage – in fact I almost turned back because he hadn't briefed me about how much noise it makes!

Had the ground crew looked askance at it I would have shut down, but it turns out they all do that. The Hurricane is a wonderful aircraft, but the Spitfire is something else, graceful inside and out. Everything feels so well balanced, and it really does fly like it looks."

Flying the Spitfire brought Cliff into contact with Ray Hanna, and he was invited to fly for the Old Flying Machine Company in his spare time. "I flew the Spitfire, Hurricane, Mustang, Corsair, Wildcat, the Bf 109 Black Six, I flew the F-86 and I still do; next year I will have to retire from my job in the Reserve and when I sign off I'd like to depart in that aircraft, too old to fly the Tutor but leaving in the Sabre..."

After Coningsby Cliff was promoted to Air Commodore and joined the Royal College of Defence Studies. He then became senior air staff officer at 11 Group, Bentley Priory, and some two years later moved to Northwood as Chief of Staff to 18 Group. Six months later the two Groups were amalgamated and he became the first AOC of 11/18 Group as an Air Vice-Marshal, which he calls "a quite fantastic job... To lead the air defence and maritime forces of the UK was a singular honour, and my NATO 'hat' of Commander Allied Air Forces Eastern Atlantic gave the post a wonderful international dimension." He became Director

General Saudi Armed Forces Project in 1998 and was promoted to Air Marshal in 2000. He had been asked by the Chief of the Air Staff if he wanted to be Air Secretary, but he declined on the grounds that he'd never been a strategic manpower planner and felt that were others better qualified. He retired from the RAF in 2003 after more than 40 years service.

The RAF is in his bones and he feels keenly the pressures upon it. It's now a shadow of the force he joined in 1963, when it comprised some 150,000 personnel spread across the globe. "Now it's about 42,000," he says, "and while the capability of individual airframes is much greater, even the most capable airframe can only be in one place at a time."

"We must avoid getting into the situation we were in between the wars when we ran down our capabilities almost to an irrecoverable degree. We cannot now ramp up defence production like we could then. It's an awfully difficult equation to square – the government has got to shore up the place, because failing

Below: the F-86A Sabre is one of the historic aircraft Cliff flies from Duxford



to balance to books would mean we'd lose our forces altogether. But it must make sure that the integrity of the system does not fall in pieces, and that we do not lose the vital core competences.

"We live in a geopolitical system that is difficult to predict, and if we again get to the stage of nation against nation – and let's hope we don't – we have to be able to back up our political intent. We have to protect our airspace, sea space, land space, and the military must be equipped to do the job. What may make short term financial sense is not attractive when measured against the long-term stakes. I'm concerned at how far they've

gone already, and it's posing enormous problems for the Chiefs of Staff. We are reducing our forces to a level inappropriate for our needs, and we are going to have to take risks – but is there any alternative for the government? We will have vulnerabilities in core areas, core skills, but we will have to work with that because we cannot currently do otherwise."

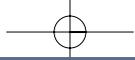
"We have enormously well-qualified and experienced individuals in aviation, yet we must go through awful bureaucratic channels which do not add value in terms of safety, or by any other measure"

Has the RAF made a good job of getting where it is today? "Given what was known in the past, what you have today is about the best you could do," he says. "The crystal ball is cloudy, and long

lines of procurement leave you in the dark. Procurement processes have not been good, now or in the past, and you've had change upon change upon change. We need change, but it became almost an end in itself – if you weren't undergoing change you were doing something wrong. Things did not get a chance to develop in an evolutionary way. Some of this was forced on the military and some was our own fault, but it almost confused the internal structure, and it certainly confused industry. There was constant meddling, political, bureaucratic and internal. If I can make an analogy with flying an aircraft, you can make adjustments until the controls are a living blur to try to overcome every little departure, but it might be best to ride with it and just make the big corrections – you'll get where you want to go much more efficiently."

Inter-service rivalry exacerbates problems. "The most destructive military man is all dark blue, all light blue or all khaki," he says. "I see some pretty silly comments from senior officers who've lost the overall picture. We need sensible, measured debate, not irrational and damaging internal debate. When I hear people say the RAF should be subsumed into the other services, I say that is rubbish. An independent air force gives us a professional view of air matters; the protection of airspace or the projection of air power is not an adjunct to sea or land imperatives, and to treat it as such is just blindness."

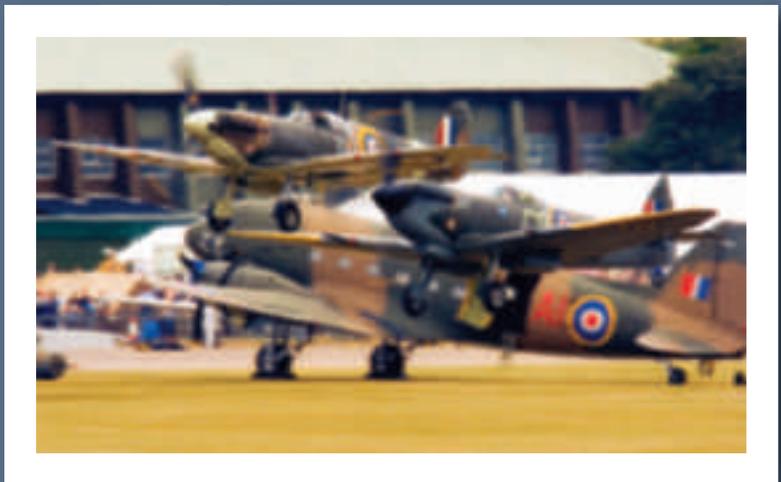
It's a long leap down to the concerns of general aviation, but Cliff believes the need for action is equally urgent. "There is insufficient recognition among regulators that we in the industry have the knowledge and the expertise," he says. "We have enormously well-qualified and experienced individuals in aviation, yet we must go through awful bureaucratic channels which do not add value in terms of safety, or by any other measure. Where the professionalism of an organisation is proven, they should be allowed to get on with it. In engineering, for instance, there are companies that have all the experience, yet they must defer to people who know less than they do – who make stipulations which not only add nothing to safety but make operations difficult, almost impossible, and sometimes arrived at because it's easier to say 'no' than 'yes'." ■



Left: as an Air Vice Marshall Cliff Spink was the first AOC of the combined 11/18 Group



Below: Spitfire 434, which Ray Hanna invited Cliff to fly for the Old Flying Machine Company at Duxford



Cliff flying a selection of historic warbirds.
Top: P51 Mustang at Duxford, 1997
Above: OFMC's Buchon, 1996
Above right: Cliff in Mk XVI Spitfire leading Charlie Brown in Mk V, Duxford 2007
Right: display pilot's lunch with Al Walker at Lydd, 2007

