

Flying the Tiger – then and now

Terry Earl gets his hands on an old friend and flies back across five decades

The red flare lay burning on the ground beside the control tower as I lined up the Tiger on final approach. I was somewhat surprised to see it, as just a minute or so before I had clearly seen a green light flashed at me as I circled the airfield waiting to land, just as my instructor had briefed me. That red flare must have been for someone else, I concluded, as I turned my attention to landing the Tiger on the grass strip beyond the main runway. I was slightly lower than ideal and was about to correct when something made me look to my right... to see a Mosquito bearing down on me. He must have just landed and was about to pass behind me as I finally crossed the runway and settled onto the grass. My word, I thought, they run things a bit close here!

But that was 50 years ago, and now I was again sitting in the rear seat of a Tiger Moth, but not at Plymouth where I had trained for my PPL under the Flying Scholarship scheme, nor at Exeter where I had the above memorable experience, but on a private strip in France on a perfect summer's day. Despite the passing of so many years I felt very much at home in the cockpit, although the large bone-dome John Shaw had given me, for good safety reasons in the event of a significant

misfortune, did not seem quite right. The tiny throttle lever on my left, the notched trim lever below it and the similar slat selector on the right, the paucity of instrumentation, and the bowl-shaped P-type compass all fitted comfortably with my memories. The complete lack of forward vision beyond John's head in the forward cockpit reminded me of the challenges of landing the Tiger, but looking out at the wings, struts and bracing wires on each side – bright gleaming yellow against the surrounding green – evoked the strongest feeling of nostalgia. Could it really be 50 years ago, in the August of 1960, that as a 17 year-old just out of school I had found myself learning to fly at the then grass airfield that was Plymouth Roborough? With Mr. Lucas, ex-World War Two bomber pilot and a dedicated exponent of speechless flight instruction – sitting in the front he expressed his requirements and opinions by pointing and gesticulating with his gloved hands out in the slip-stream – as my mentor and often tormentor.

But back to the moment, with John coming over the intercom to say that he would taxi the Tiger out onto the runway and hand it over to me for the take-off, and suggesting that once airborne and having achieved 70 mph I should turn right and





Top: the Tiger at her best, on a fair-weather tour of French chateaux

Left: John Shaw preflights the Tiger at a private airstrip in the Loire Valley
Above: John Shaw and Terry Earl try goggles for size

overfly the hangar before climbing out. Now that sounded very much to my liking and would give me an early opportunity to see how well I remembered how to fly a Tiger. OK then, lined up, throttle forward, try to keep straight mostly by glancing to the side, stick forward to raise the tail – and sure enough the Tiger slowly accelerated as the engine note changed to that comforting and purposeful Gypsy Major at 2000 rpm sound. Slowly the nose sank down to a level attitude so that I had a view ahead, and I managed to resist the temptation to do anything but let her fly off of her own accord. In fact the take-off in a Tiger is a perfect demonstration of how wings generate lift – you just gain speed and levitation occurs. I could now see that we had cleared the line of trees to our right and with the speed just approaching 70mph I banked over to the right and held the height to pass over our friends watching jealously from below. Fans of Charles Schultz's famous 'Snoopy' cartoon character will recall that when he was

flying his Sopwith 'Kennel' over the battlefields of the Western Front he used to express sympathy for the 'poor blighters in the trenches' – that's about how I felt as we wheeled away and commenced an unhurried climb to 1000 feet and headed for our first chateau.

John had recommended a tour of several chateaux as a good way to exercise his beloved Tiger and to give me the chance to see the local scenery, as well as to adjust to a different way of aviating – as opposed to my usual diet of CPL/IR instructing in light twins and the like. Once settled in the cruise and just able to interpret the direction in which John wished me to head – the intercom was rather noisy and my old Shackleton ears aren't what they were – I settled back to enjoy the ride and especially the rare pleasure of being in an open cockpit again. The scenery was stunning and the river below attracted clusters of houses to its banks and away from the wooded areas beyond. This river was a tributary of the Loire, running

parallel to and to the south of the main flow and passing close to the VOR at Amboise. Sure enough there were some striking chateaux to be seen, and as we circled over the first one I struggled to dip the wing sufficiently to see all I wanted, yet at the same time keep the Tiger in balance. I soon began to realise that I wasn't doing this very well at all so I resorted to looking in the cockpit for guidance, just a peek at the balance ball should be all I needed. Ah... no ball, just a slip needle pointing up and a turn needle pointing down – or was it the other way round? By now John had suggested another feature on the ground to steer towards and as I set out in that general direction I tried to tidy up my flying, but only learned the old lesson that chasing needles is not the answer. Another chateau and another untidy turn as I still struggled to remember how to treat a Tiger properly – I used to know when I was slipping rather than turning because the slipstream came around the side of the windscreen onto my cheek, but today I didn't seem to



Above: Terry tries to remember whether the slip needle pointed up and the turn needle down, or...

Top right: Moth cockpit, as authentic as it's possible to make it in modern times

Right: John Shaw checks the pristine Gipsy Major prior to flight

sense this. Perhaps the bone-dome was preventing it, but frustratingly I had not sorted things out properly by the time we turned back towards the airfield and John took control to ensure that our return did not go unnoticed. After one pass he suggested I circled the field prior to trying a few touch-and-goes. "Just fly along the runway below tree-top height and then bank around past the hangar" was his helpful suggestion... Snoopy would have been proud of us!

The good news was that at low level with other things to think about my flying was becoming much tidier as I stopped worrying about how much rudder to use and let things happen naturally. So now it was time to find out how I would manage with landing the Tiger. At the end of the





Above: low and slow, the right environment for a Tiger Moth

Right: John Shaw and his wife Shaunne flew the Tiger from Cornwall to Amboise

down-wind leg I tried to judge a position from which I could make a landing in proper Tiger fashion, that is a glide approach. To save time in the climb I was flying the circuit at about 400 feet so I closed the throttle and turned in early, setting up a glide at 65 mph as John had recommended. Rolling out on final approach things looked pretty reasonable but inevitably I started my flare a little too soon and thus lost a little speed. John quickly pointed out my error and I managed to readjust things and make a reasonable three-point touch-down, if a little slow. The next attempt was a little better, but still tending on the slow side – perhaps I was reluctant to use power as that would have proved I had mis-judged the glide! But fortunately the benign handling qualities of the Tiger at low speed helped cover my lack of skill. Right, one last attempt – and for this I wanted to





get high on the approach so I could try a side-slip. Well, I probably didn't get high enough so my attempt was both rushed and inelegant, and resulted in an untidy arrival – a disappointing way to finish. However, the flight had been an hour of

Left: the smile says it all – Terry Earl in post-flight satisfaction mode

absolute magic. It had transported me back 50 years and reminded me of sights, sounds and feelings long forgotten. And John's beautiful Tiger had made it quite clear that I needed a little more practice if I was to regain the skills required to properly master this classic training machine.

And that Exeter business at the beginning of this story? Well, not

An Englishman abroad



Above: John and Terry in John's workshop, where four Sopwith Camels are under construction

John Shaw is building four full-sized Sopwith Camel reproductions in his workshop, which he has turned into a small-scale aircraft factory bursting at the seams with beautifully hand-crafted carpentry and lovingly-machined metalwork. John is one of these immensely able and practical obsessives, a man with the highest regard for the engineers who first made these machines, and a determination that his own work should match theirs for quality. His track record in rebuilding his Tiger Moth to the most exacting standards proves that the Camels will be as near to authentic as it is

possible to make them in modern times. The Tiger was an eight-year labour of love, and just one example of John's quest for authenticity is the fact that the tiny letters on the cowling – 'C-G DATUM', it says, and 'TRESTLE' – are painted, rather than applied as a transfer. That would have been the easy way but it's not the way they did it when they made them, and to John, these things have got to be right.

Today he is researching the rubber that was used to cover the spade grip on the Camel; the nearest he's come so far is the dimpled sub-structure of a table tennis bat he bought in a car boot sale...

Unfortunately, John Shaw is an Englishman building reproductions of English aircraft abroad, because England is not the best place to get the job done. There are many reasons; in France, where John keeps his workshop, there are still many small factories, foundries and machine shops where skilled artisans can make you what you need – they may sometimes have to get their grandfathers in

surprisingly I was directed to report to the control tower where I met a controller with his hair still standing on end. Apparently, after he had given me a green light the Mosquito (locally based on target-towing duties) had called up with an emergency requiring an immediate landing, for which he was cleared while a red Very was fired to send me around. Unhappily by that time all my attention was on the landing point

and somehow I never saw the flare until too late. Eventually the controller calmed down and said it was all very unfortunate, and it would be best if no more was said about it. This was fine by me and I hurried back to my Tiger and with it to Plymouth, where Mr. Lucas indicated he wanted an explanation for my late return. "A bit of a delay at Exeter, sir," I said, which elicited a grunt as he turned his back on me and

walked away. Thanks to that eventually sympathetic controller it seemed I had got away with my misdemeanour. And what did I learn from this unhappy incident? The answer is – never trust an air traffic controller, as the next student to go on his qualifying cross-country was told by Mr. Lucas "...and when you get to Exeter don't do what that fool Earl did".

But that was half a century ago. ■

to show them how, but the knowledge is not lost. Secondly, the barter system is in better shape in France, and when you're dealing in priceless relics, price can be a distraction. Thirdly, dealing with the authorities in France is a different kettle of fish.

John's Tiger Moth was rebuilt and certificated in Britain, and he doesn't want to go through that again. He wanted a full Certificate of Airworthiness, which meant dealing with the CAA; his CAA inspectors insisted on visiting him as often as once a month which, given that he lived in Cornwall and they charged travelling time at £120 an hour, cost him thousands of pounds. Moreover, there was no continuity or standardisation in what they wanted; the first two passed and signed off his paperwork, the third rejected it so the whole lot had to be done again. "He'd been an engineer on 747s and knew absolutely nothing about fabric aircraft," says John, "yet he cost me endless labour and money for no good reason.

Right: Patrick Siegwald with the extraordinary Albert A110 he found derelict in a barn



"In France, they appraise your ability and they look at your work, and they visit you twice – once before the fabric goes on, and again after you've flown the aircraft. And the cost of the entire registration and inspection regime is €100. Even the classification adds only €800."

There are very few jobs to which John Shaw cannot turn his hand. He did a five-year apprenticeship as a carpenter before learning to dive and winding up managing the biggest diving project in the world, the Thames Barrier, where he was in charge of 150 divers working in preposterous conditions. He got his PPL at Stapleford in 1973 and along with his wife Shaunne he later ran the Cornish Gliding Club at Perranporth, where both were instructors for 15 years. Now, they spend alternate months at homes in Cornwall and France, flying between the two in the good months in their Mousquetaire.

John had originally intended to build one Camel, but making four is a good fit with the French barter market. In his search for original plans he approached the museum at La Ferte Alais and found they had a Le Clerget engine that had never been fitted

into an aircraft and had only two and a half hours' running time on it. What did they want for it? Well, he could have it for nothing... if he made them a Camel, too. One thing led to another. "Once I'd decided to make jigs and templates instead of building a one-off it didn't really matter how many Camels I built," says John. "One of them was planned as an exchange with a company which could machine most of the metal parts I needed, and one for stock which in the end will go to Patrick."

Patrick Siegwald is the owner of the private airfield on which John keeps his Tiger Moth, and the two of them were made for each other. John's French is even worse than Patrick's English but they speak the same language, and ideologically they could be twin brothers. Patrick retired as one of France's top aviation engineers and is utterly immersed in old aeroplanes – if it doesn't drag its tail, it's not a real aircraft. In his time-warp hangar he and his friends are rebuilding an exotic selection of planes including a Miles Monarch, a Stampe, a Potez Type 60 and two of the most amazing aviation finds in

recent history. Patrick takes up the story.

"A friend of mine was at the airfield at Amboise and he met a very old man who said he had an ancient aeroplane in a barn, and could anybody save it? My friend wrote my number on a cigarette packet and the old man called me. His wife's father had died, his farm was to be auctioned and the barn pulled down to make way for a road scheme, and there was only three days before it had to be demolished, and nobody was interested. We went to see it, and it took us one and a half hours to cut our way through the brambles into the barn.

"There was certainly an old aeroplane in there, but when I saw it I didn't know what it was. The old man said his father in law had been a First World War pilot and had had this plane for 60 or 70 years. It had been hidden from the Germans during the Second World War, but they found it in 1945 and they were going to shoot the whole family, but the Allies came just in time and the Germans ran away.

"Whatever it was, it was clear that all the parts were there – the wings were tied to the fuselage, the engine was complete



and had been beautifully greased and oiled for storage, the three log books were there and all the original bills and documentation.”

Then it became clear there were not one but two aircraft in there, the second also unidentified. Patrick and his friends worked until almost midnight to get the planes onto their trailers, and it was four-o'clock in the morning before they arrived back at their home airfield near Orbigny, south of Tours. In the light of dawn they discovered they had the only two Albert aircraft still in existence, a single-seater A110 built between 1926 and 1929 and a two-seater A61 from 1930.

The Albert company made 60 to 70 planes, many of which set world records for speed, altitude and distance in the 1920s. This machine was the last of 22 A110s built and had a 60 hp Walter five-cylinder radial engine, and it was an important design because it was the first time monocoque construction had been used for series production.

Patrick goes on: “Once the news got out, the whole of the aeronautical world descended on us, including a writer for the museum at Le Bourget who went home

Above: the Albert A110 will fly again but meticulous restoration will take several years
Right: the Albert company made more than 60 planes, several of which set aviation records

and told his wife about it. She said oh yes, our neighbour Monsieur Albert, his father used to design aeroplanes. So he went and knocked on the door, and it turned out he was living a few doors away from the designer's son. The Albert family are still in business, they have a big bakery in Paris. We have formed a special association to save this plane, and the Albert family gave us a generous donation so we were able to give the original owner's family some money.”

The two-seater will be restored as a static exhibit but the A110 will fly again after a lengthy and meticulous restoration. Authenticity extends to the nails used in construction; Patrick has had copies of the originals made, but the minimum order was 56,000, so if you need several kilograms of 1920s nails, you know where to go.

Which will fly first, Patrick's Albert or John's Camels? It doesn't matter – it takes



as long as it takes, it costs as much as it costs. “The preservation of skills is as important as the preservation of aircraft,” says John. “This is all history, which we cannot afford to forget.” ■