

SONIC BOOMS

With passion and dedication you can achieve anything – even the restoration of a gigantic Cold War fighter. But money helps too

Words Alan Harper





“IT’S NOT THE MOST AGILE MACHINE,” SAYS HARGREAVES. “IN TEST PILOT TERMS, DESCRIBING ITS HANDLING AS ‘NOT GOOD’ IS BEING KIND”

ANDY ROUSE

The world of heritage aviation is fuelled by big money and big dreams. You have to dream big to put an old aeroplane back in the air, and you need access to rivers of money. There is, literally, no end to the signing of cheques – even when the restoration is complete and the pristine machine is flying again, its demands on your bank balance are unceasing. Perhaps the only thing that can rival a vintage aeroplane’s ability to consume industrial quantities of cash is a vintage yacht.

English entrepreneur Julian Jones, 55, knows this better than most. “It’s not a business that can ever be profitable,” he told *Watermark*. “It’s a question of how much you spend in it.” His entry into the expensive dreamworld of vintage aircraft started modestly enough with the acquisition of a Folland Gnat, a diminutive two-seat jet trainer made famous in the Sixties by the Red Arrows aerobatic team. He entrusted it to Gwyn Jones’s aviation restoration company at Bournemouth’s Hurn Airport, on England’s south coast, in 2005. When that outfit got into difficulties, to keep the work going he bought the company.

It’s a familiar story. Many a classic yacht owner, perhaps ruining the day he accepted the lowest bid, has bought the boatyard to ensure his project’s completion. But it was different for Julian. His project wasn’t the issue – the company’s main problem was a project of its own. Sharing the hangar with his pretty little Gnat was a mighty behemoth that looked capable of swallowing it whole.

With its futuristic, Dan Dare shape and powerful Rolls-Royce Avon engines, the twin-boom de Havilland Sea Vixen is a 20-ton lump of Cold War history. A design that dates back to the 1940s, it can fly faster than the speed of sound in a shallow dive,



The Sea Vixen in its element: low and fast. Top right: pilot Simon Hargreaves. Previous pages: over the south Devon coast, approaching Plymouth.

and its role in wartime was the toughest and most dangerous imaginable: to take off from aircraft carriers in all weathers and intercept Soviet intruders using radar and high-tech guided missiles.

“It is an absolute beast of an aircraft, there is no question about it,” laughs Julian. “It’s very powerful, and builds up massive momentum.” It’s also very expensive, and as Gwyn Jones discovered, it can build up massive debts. Nevertheless, says Julian, whose Gnat quickly found itself on the back burner, “I realised that the Sea Vixen was the main item of interest both to the Royal Navy and to the nation. It was the only flying example left in the world.” Since its restoration to flying condition in 2000, the Sea Vixen had become a star attraction on the air show circuit. Julian took it on.

One of his first decisions was to give the huge naval fighter a fresh coat of paint: in a sign of just how draining the project had become, the Sea Vixen was bizarrely resplendent in the colour scheme of a sponsor, the Red Bull drinks company. To the audible relief of aircraft enthusiasts everywhere, he returned it to its sober and warlike naval uniform.

The Sea Vixen served with the Royal Navy until 1972, so while there were a few ex-Navy pilots

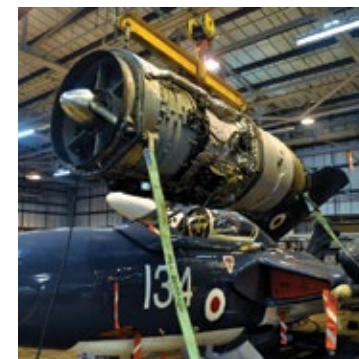
available when it was first put back into the air, since then they have all retired. The only man currently qualified to fly it is Simon Hargreaves, 60, a naval aviator from the next generation. He flew Sea Harriers as a young lieutenant during the 1982 Falklands War and went on to become a test pilot with BAE Systems, working on numerous modern aircraft including the Typhoon and the new F-35.

For a pilot of Simon’s vast experience, with 37 aeroplane types in his log book and 8,600 flying hours, you might imagine that flying the Sea Vixen in air displays on balmy English summer afternoons would be like riding a bike. It’s not quite like that.

“I could teach you fly the Typhoon in ten minutes,” he says with the breezy confidence of the consummate professional. “Your eight-year-old could fly it, because the handling qualities are perfect – it’s fly-by-wire. The Sea Vixen is anything but.” He describes the venerable interceptor as a “typical big old aeroplane”. It has a poorly organised cockpit “with switches and stuff all over it”, a less than ideal field of view, and a “quirky” flight control system. It’s laborious on the controls – “not quite two hands, but to get a good rate of roll it’s extremely heavy” – and it’s difficult to trim for straight and level flight. Imagine driving a car whose steering wheel doesn’t centre itself after turning a corner, but just stays where it’s put: the Sea Vixen’s control stick does that too.

“It’s not the most agile machine,” he says. “In test pilot terms, to describe its handling qualities as ‘not good’ is being kind to it.” One wonders if he would have been happy to take it into combat in the South Atlantic: “No, you’d get slaughtered by an A4 or a Mirage, which are relatively agile. But it’s pretty high performance. The only place you’d win is if you went really high level – there wouldn’t be much that could compete with it above 45,000 feet.”

As long as the display pilot does a good job of



ALL INSET SHOTS: LEE HOWARD

showing off the aeroplane, air show crowds don’t care too much about handling qualities. But they’re very keen on performance. The Sea Vixen has been a spectacular air show favourite since its first season on the display circuit, for its fantastical looks, its historical importance as a British Cold War carrier aircraft, for its unbridled power and for the sheer, mountainous quantities of noise it makes. It can do this at almost any speed. “I arrive at 90 degrees to the crowd at 300 knots, which is very slow, but you can do that because she’s got so much power,” says Simon, explaining the start of his display routine. “Up, over the top, and when the nose is about 30 degrees down, roll upright and then do a 270 and come down the crowd line showing the underside.” After a complex series of rolls and turns he brings the Vixen back the other way, this time showing the top. “All this is doing is positioning the aeroplane for photographers – there’s no point pretending to compete with an F-16, because you’re not going to,” he says. “You want it to be graceful and positioned for people to ooh and aah and take photographs, and make lots of noise.” More turns, a steep pull-up, and while rolled upside-down the wheels, flaps and arrestor hook are lowered and the aircraft comes round again, for a tight 360-degree turn at just 140 knots, as camera shutters click frantically. Then a steep climb away while retracting all the gear, one more high-speed blast down the crowd line, and away.



LEWIS GAYLARD

A NEW NAVY WINGS APPEAL HAS BEEN LAUNCHED: “THE SEA VIXEN COSTS £150,000 A YEAR, AND WE NEED £650,000 TO KEEP THE SHOW ON THE ROAD.”



ANDY ROUSE

Hargreaves in the cockpit, keeping a wary eye on the camera aircraft.

“That is the display,” says Simon. “I can take stuff out of that, but I can’t add to it. I would never do anything differently.” In air displays, as in test flying, pilots tend not to improvise.

As the crowds gaze upwards to a chorus of clicking cameras, the Sea Vixen burns 56 litres of fuel per engine every minute. For nine years Julian Jones paid those bills, and plenty of others. “It’s not a cheap aircraft to operate,” he says with slightly weary understatement. “Operating the company with the required staff and all the engineers, at one point it was like having a mini Royal Navy air squadron.”

But all the while an aeroplane not seen since the Seventies was reprinting itself on the national psyche. People loved it because it was not only an important aviation artefact, but an important symbol – a flying memorial to naval aircrew lost in perilous Cold War operations. And the Royal Navy agreed. In 2014 Julian found a sympathetic ear in Jock Alexander, who was then the commander of the Navy’s air base at Yeovilton, and is now, having retired from the Navy after 38 years, the chief executive of the Fly Navy Heritage Trust at the base. The charity already owned a 1940s-vintage Sea Fury, and the Sea Vixen also shares hangar space with the Sea Furies and the

World War 2 Swordfish biplane owned by the Navy’s own historic squadron.

“We had a board meeting and I said, we’re the Fly Navy Heritage Trust, why would we turn down the last flying Sea Vixen?” recalls Jock, 57, an ex-aviator himself. “So we took it on.” A symbolic pound coin changed hands – Julian claims he had to produce it himself, as Jock didn’t have any change – and as the Trust became the Sea Vixen’s new owner, Julian became an ‘ambassador’ for the Trust. Almost immediately, fund-raising for the charity took on a new and urgent importance. “The Sea Vixen costs about £150,000 a year to run,” says Jock, “and we need about £650,000 a year to keep the whole show on the road.”

A new media-friendly brand was created, Navy Wings, which was launched at the 2016 Yeovilton Air Day by the author Frederick Forsyth, one of the Trust’s high profile supporters. “When I came on board last year I said we’ve got to refresh the whole thing, and part of that was the launch of the new brand,” Jock explains. “For a niche charity we’ve got a fantastic network of people who are not only wealthy but also names: the chairman of our ambassadors is Nick Mason, the Pink Floyd drummer, and we’ve got Mike Rutherford, the Genesis lead guitarist, and the actress Kristen Scott Thomas.” A new Sea Vixen appeal was launched in February, to ensure the old fighter can fulfil its air show obligations in 2017.

This year will also see the commissioning of the Royal Navy’s giant new aircraft carrier, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. Jock Alexander doesn’t intend to miss that: “I’ve already said to the Navy that when she comes into Portsmouth for the first time we want to lead the flypast with a Swordfish, a Sea Fury and the Sea Vixen – the story of Royal Navy carrier aviation.”

www.navywings.org.uk



INSET SHOTS: LEE HOWARD