



PILOT BIOGRAPHY

Hugh Verity

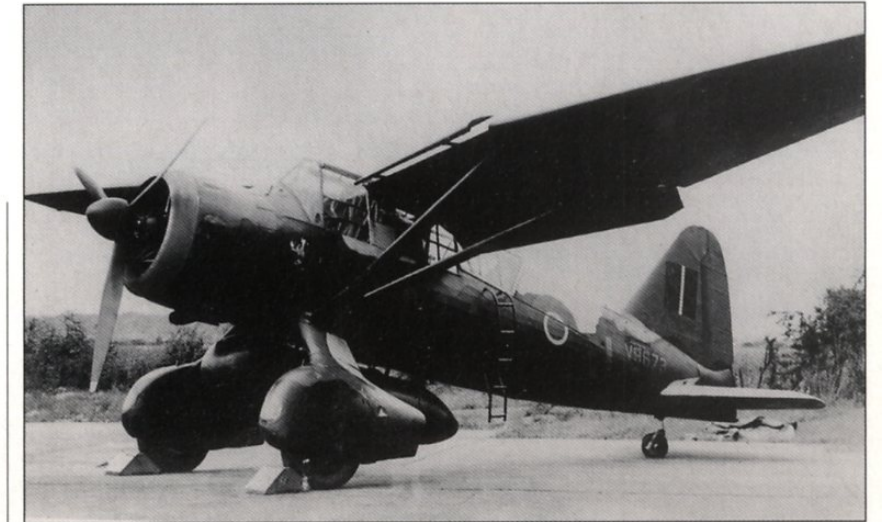
JOHN MAYNARD recounts the extraordinary flying career of Hugh Verity DSO & Bar DFC, who during the Second World War flew Westland Lysanders with No 161 Sqn on clandestine night flights into enemy-occupied France to deliver and pick up Allied agents

OF ALL THE roles performed by the versatile Westland Lysander, perhaps the most famous were with the RAF's Special Duties squadrons in the UK and in South East Asia Command. Within these squadrons, which utilised the aircraft's short-take-off-and-landing (STOL) capabilities and excellent low-speed handling to deliver and collect Allied agents in occupied territory, usually in the dead of night, the best-known pilot was undoubtedly Hugh Verity.

Hugh Verity went up to Queen's College, Oxford, in the autumn of 1937, and soon joined the University Air Squadron, learning to fly on Avro Tutors and the big Hawker biplanes. At the outbreak of war he was fortunate to be selected to complete his advanced flying training at the RAF College, Cranwell. Perhaps owing to his competence in mathematics, he next found himself on a specialist armament officers' course, despite his having indicated his wish for a day fighter posting. With the start of the Battle of Britain only months away, Hugh now reflects that this unexpected sideways move most probably saved his life.

His next posting was even more unwelcome, since it involved flying Coastal Command Avro Ansons with 608 Sqn on East Coast convoy patrol duties from Thornaby, North Yorkshire. It was, he recalls, a very down-market posting, and the attempted replacement of the Ansons by the dreadful Blackburn Botha did nothing to improve it. One day during his time at Cranwell Hugh had been given the job of washing an Airspeed Oxford. This unusual activity — he has never heard of anyone else doing it — coincided with a visit by Lord Trenchar, in the course of which he came upon Hugh putting the finishing touches to his handiwork and fired a searching question at him. Would he prefer to fight in an aircraft armed with cannon or machine-guns?, asked the Marshal of the RAF. "I would prefer to be armed with both, sir", he replied. He remembered this rather bland response some months later, when he came off Ansons and joined 252 Sqn at Aldergrove, flying Bristol Beaufighters with their impressive 4 x 20mm cannon and 6 x 0.303in Browning gun armament. It seemed that his preferences had been admirably recognised!

At this stage in the war it was intended that 252 Sqn would be used to intercept Focke-Wulf Condors out over the North Atlantic, where they were shadowing convoys and directing U-boat attacks upon them. However, other priorities soon arose, and the squadron was despatched to Malta to give long-range air cover to convoys battling their way through the Mediterranean. Thirteen aircraft flew out via Gibraltar to Luqa, but one was lost en route, forced-landed at Lisbon. Once there, the rate of attrition, principally owing to air attacks on the



ABOVE Hugh Verity's Westland Lysander IIIA, V9673 "J for Jiminy Cricket", in 1943. Note the access ladder to the rear cockpit, with its white-painted rungs to help agents find a foothold in the pitch dark; and the belly tank and extended inboard leading-edge slats.

aerodrome, was particularly high, and by May four largely unserviceable Beaufighters were patched up to return to England. Only two actually got there, and Hugh, bedevilled by appalling weather, finally made landfall in Eire, landing, wheels up and out of fuel, near Dublin, where he was promptly interned.

Fortunately there was an MI9 presence in the city who set about organising an escape, as a result of which nine internees, including Hugh, managed to break out. Heavily disguised, he was able to cross the border by train to Belfast and thence to London. Still in disguise he arrived home, rang the bell and was gratified when his father came to the door and totally failed to recognise him! Of the nine who escaped, only four achieved a home run.

Hugh's next move was to a Beaufighter night-fighter Operational Training Unit (OTU) at Church Fenton. While there, during a night training exercise, he was alarmed to see a burst of tracer streaming past his port wing and took violent evasive action. There had been no warning of enemy activity, but Luftwaffe intruders were known to prowl around picking off aircraft from OTUs and other training airfields.

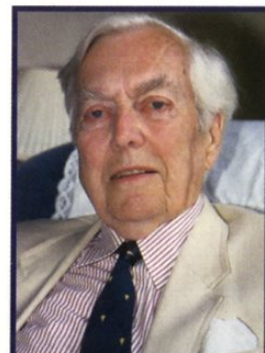
Hugh went on to join 29 Sqn at West Malling, where Guy Gibson was his flight commander, and he teamed up with Sgt Lawrence as his radar operator. Gibson, he remembers, was an excellent boss who drove himself without mercy and demanded only the highest standards from his team. He was "resting" from bomber operations while nightfighting in Kent! Hugh Verity and Sgt Lawrence did not manage any successful interceptions. It was a relatively quiet period for enemy activity and the weather was particularly challenging.

At the end of his tour Hugh went as an acting squadron leader first to 11 Group and then to Headquarters Fighter Command at Bentley Priory, as intruder controller. The gamekeeper had perhaps turned poacher, and his job was to scramble long-range nightfighters to intercept incoming, or returning, German bombers in the vicinity of their own home bases. WAAF girls plotted the movements of aircraft on a large map in the Intruder Ops Room, covering the Channel and Western Europe from Holland down to Central France.

OPPOSITE Hugh Verity at his Surrey home on August 30 this year. This portrait was taken especially for *Aeroplane* by IAN FRIMSTON/FUJI LAB.



ABOVE Hugh Verity during his time with Air Liaison Operations, SOE, early in 1944.



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One night in the summer of 1942 he noticed the plot of a single friendly aircraft moving across from France. He had noticed these before, of course. They were referred to as "specials", said to be engaged on some secret activity, and this night a colleague who had been senior flying controller at Tangmere happened to be in the room. In answer to Hugh's questions he said that the "specials" were Lysanders involved in carrying agents to and from France during moon periods. They used Tangmere as a forward base, although the squadron was located at Tempsford in Bedfordshire.

Looking back on his operational career at that time, Hugh felt that he had achieved very little, and the more he thought about this special squadron the more he thought it would be an ideal next job for him. He had, after all, accumulated a useful number of night-flying hours, he was due to return to operations shortly and, having read French and Spanish at Oxford, he had proven language skills. He determined to seek an interview with Sqn Ldr Guy Lockhart, who led the Lysander flight of 161 Sqn.

Arriving at Tempsford, Hugh was introduced by Guy Lockhart to Wg Cdr P.C. "Pick" Pickard, who commanded 161 Sqn, and to Gp Capt E.H. "Mouse" Fielden, the station commander. Before the war Fielden had been captain of the King's Flight, and Hugh noticed that his uniform tunic sported the scarlet silk lining favoured by the pre-war Auxiliary squadrons, in one of which he had been adjutant!

After lunch, and a searching conversation, Fielden and Pickard said they would like Hugh to join 161 Sqn and, if all went well, to take over the Lysander flight when Guy Lockhart left. On November 15, 1942, he drove his Morris 10 up to Tempsford and The Hassells, a local manor house which provided accommodation for senior officers. He next met the other Lysander pilots, Flt Lts John Bridger and Peter Vaughan-Fowler, and Fg Offs Jimmy McCairns and Frank Rymills. Hugh's immediate task was to learn to fly a Lysander, to fly it by night, to navigate it with absolute precision by moonlight to absurdly small fields and to land it short with the aid of a tiny L-shaped pattern of three battery-powered hand torches.

BELOW A group in front of "Jiminy Cricket" at RAF Tangmere in 1943. Left to right: McCairns, Hugh Verity, Gp Capt P.C. "Pick" Pickard and his dog Ming, Peter Vaughan-Fowler, "Bunny" Rymills and his dog Henry. Note the Jiminy Cricket cartoon below the windscreen.



The squadron's Lysanders differed from the norm in several respects. Their undercarriage spats no longer carried winglets for light bombs, all the machine-guns had been removed, a fixed access ladder led up to the rear cockpit, and a streamlined 150gal fuel tank was carried under the fuselage. The last gave the aeroplane a range of 1,100 miles at the expense of some 25 m.p.h. off the cruising speed. Climbing up to the cockpit, Hugh was impressed by the field of view, although it was somewhat obscured forward and downwards by the Bristol Mercury engine. Behind the pilot's seat was a 98gal fuel tank, and above that the oil tank. The flying instruments and controls were straightforward, but a vital element was the adjusting wheel for tailplane incidence, which gave the aeroplane its extraordinary STOL capabilities. The cockpit was light and roomy, with plenty of space for stowing and studying maps.

In the course of that first November Hugh built up his Lysander hours until he felt completely at ease in the aeroplane, and with the requirement to land with great precision on a 150yd L-shaped pattern of torches. The major challenge, however, was navigation, and 161 Sqn had evolved an excellent system. This involved cutting strips out of a 1:500,000 map so that the track to be followed was in the middle of each panel, leaving about 50 miles on each side. The whole was carefully folded so that two panels could be studied when held in one hand, while flying the aeroplane with the other. The size enabled the map to be stuffed into the top of a flying boot, or into the cockpit map pocket. The last two panels, covering the final approach to the target field, were to 1:250,000 scale to give more of the necessary detail. Finally, the maps were marked-up to show latest intelligence of flak defences and distances from the French Coast, while "gen cards" were stuck on to blank areas, giving the heading and duration of each leg/and identification code letters of the day. Normally, too, there would be vertical photographs of the landing field provided by a PRU Spitfire sortie from Benson a day or two before.

All of this was a matter of meticulous preparation once an operation had been agreed by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), or the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). In general, the proposals for specific landings, or pick-ups, arose from requests by resistance organisations in an occupied country, usually France. The Resistance would also identify a suitable field by map reference and description. Once SOE or SIS approval had been given, Air Ministry authorisation for a sortie would be secured and the squadron would begin its planning, finally determining an appropriate date. The BBC's European Service broadcast coded personal messages to France daily as a matter of course, and within these were included notifications of landings to take place that night. These were meaningless sentences to all but those listening for their own prearranged phrase indicating that the flight was on. Needless to say, such transmissions were continually jammed by the Germans, and listeners had many difficulties penetrating enemy radio countermeasures to hear their signal from London.



From this point it was up to Hugh Verity and his 161 Sqn colleagues. The dangers facing them were enormous, but it is easy today to attribute the highest risk to what was actually for them the lowest danger. German military opposition to the flights was negligible. The Luftwaffe had other overwhelming priorities, and the location and interception of low-level flights by single, slow, highly manoeuvrable aeroplanes did not figure large in their thinking. Furthermore, their intelligence suggested that it was far better to penetrate the Resistance, identify the time and place of landings, and then shadow the new arrivals. Thus their contacts and hideouts could be established and a whole resistance group finally wiped out in a single operation.

The weather, on the other hand, posed enormous hazards. Flights were generally limited to the moon periods when still, high-pressure systems attracted ground mists and fogs, particularly in low, wet areas such as the Loire Valley, which was often chosen for pick-ups.

Then there was the mud, the hazards of which could easily be underestimated by the Resistance workers choosing the landing field. More than one Lysander bogged down, another went into a ditch, and since retrieval was impossible they had to be destroyed by fire. In one case a crippled Lysander was manhandled on to a level crossing in February 1943 to await destruction by an early morning train! Pickard got bogged down in a Lockheed Hudson, in which type he had pioneered field pick-ups of up to ten passengers at a time. Despite his best efforts, and much use of engine power, a team of horses was eventually harnessed to pull the aircraft free. "Pick" flew across the French coast just as dawn was breaking, and wondered how the enemy had failed to react to the racket they had made. After Pick left Tempsford, Hugh Verity flew five of the remaining Hudson operations. In 1943 he made 24 successful Lysander landings in France.

The final balance sheet of these special operations is hugely impressive. By the end of the European War, in May 1945, 323 operational sorties had been flown by the Lysanders and Hudsons. Of these, 216 had been wholly successful, the remainder having been prejudiced by bad weather or, in a few cases, by enemy activity, accidents or the inability to locate rendezvous fields. Four Lysanders had crashed on landing in France, two were bogged down in mud, four shot down over France and three lost in flying accidents in England. Six pilots were killed while on pick-up operations. A total of 443 passengers had been safely transported to France and 631 brought to England.

Sadly, there was a negative side to the story of the French Resistance, in the shape of double agents prepared to betray for financial gain, or for their own personal safety. Some ten per cent of all operations were compromised by betrayal, and as a result many brave agents died at the hands of the Gestapo, or in concentration camps. One suspected traitor, Henri Déricourt, was brought from France on a Lysander flight in February 1944 for interrogation. There was insufficient evidence to establish his guilt, although he was kept in England until after the war, when the French court-martialled him. Once again he escaped conviction, finally "disappearing" in French Indo-China in the early 1950s. Hugh Verity remembers him as a friend and great partner on many operations, but has no doubt now that he was a traitor. He quotes Col Buckmaster of the SOE, who said that Déricourt was a Déricourtiste first and last, arrogant and unscrupulous enough to believe he could outsmart anyone.

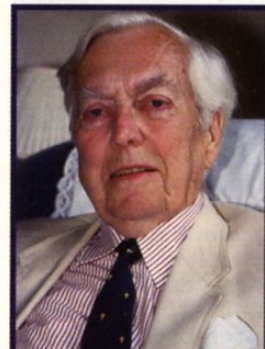
Hugh Verity's first sortie in a Lysander was on December 23, 1942, to Macon, but fog on that occasion prevented a landing. On January 14, 1943, he was successful in touching down in a field near Loyettes, east of Lyons, where the reception and the layout of the landing lights were particularly efficient. The field itself was

ABOVE An intimate air-to-air study by IAN FRIMSTON/FUJI LAB of Trevor Roche flying the Shuttleworth Collection's Lysander, G-AZWT/V9367 in its newly-applied all-black scheme and wearing the codes of 161 Sqn, the unit in which Hugh Verity served. The markings are actually those of Peter Vaughan-Fowler's aircraft; in the back seat is David Upton, who drew the plans for the dummy belly tank and for the colour scheme.

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RIGHT A 161 Sqn Lysander smothered by members of "A" Flight at Tempsford in 1944.



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readily identifiable, lying between two rivers. Nevertheless, the flying time that night was of 8hr 20min duration and at one point, while reading his map, Hugh had glanced up to see a huge wireless mast straight ahead, necessitating violent evasive action. Added to that, on the return journey he was chased by a night-fighter, which he shook off only by very low zig-zagging out over the coast.

In his book *We Landed by Moonlight*, first published by Ian Allan in 1978 and recently re-released in paperback by Crécy (see page 57), he says of this flight: "Really it had been very easy". Nearly 30 Lysander and five Hudson sorties later he was on his last operation with another 161 Sqn veteran, Fg Off McCairns, flying a second Lysander. It was November 16, 1943, and this time the field was near Compiègne, about halfway between Rouen and Reims, north of Paris. The weather was bad, the ground signals were indistinct, and the flarepath was dimly lit. Hugh landed first, did his pick-up, and on take-off flashed his navigation lights at Mac in further identification of the field's position. On this operation two agents were landed and one agent, together with five Allied airmen evading capture, were brought home.

The impact of all these hugely courageous clandestine flights into Occupied Europe went far beyond that of landing vital agents amidst the enemy and rescuing those in grave danger of betrayal and capture. To France, deeply humiliated by defeat and occupation, they were a manifestation of her continued value and contribution to the war against Germany. Her most senior resistance workers actually had a means of face-to-face contact with the leaders of the Free French in London, and a line of direct communication, however tenuous, always open, always usable. To the Allies the French Resistance was a valued component within the forces engaged in the war effort. To the French it was the source of their national pride and inspiration, almost of life itself. Its achievements laid the foundations of the resurgence of their post-war national identity and international status.

The French have never forgotten the part played by 161 Sqn's pilots in this great endeavour. There are still celebrations, reunions, din-

ners and solemn commemorations. Hugh Verity has attended many as an honoured guest with his wife. He was made a *chevalier* of the *légion d'honneur* in 1950 at a ceremony presided over by Monsieur Massigli, the French Ambassador in London, who had himself been brought out of France by Pickard on January 27, 1943. In 1990 Hugh's status within the *légion* was elevated to that of *officier*.

On leaving Tempsford, Hugh Verity, promoted to wing commander, went to the SOE as air operations manager, in which capacity he interpreted the requests for parachute drops and landing operations emanating from the whole of Western Europe and Scandinavia. This involved him in fleshing-out bare requirements into a detailed operational response which would then be communicated to the Air Ministry for approval and action. As the war reached its final stages, operations were more widely mounted, for instance, to Yugoslavia, Poland, Norway, and finally to Germany itself.

In the last year of the war Hugh left for South-east Asia to supervise Special Duties work from Air Command South East Asia in Ceylon. He was deeply involved in the growing need to drop supplies and people with special skills into remote, war-ravaged areas in that theatre of war; Burma, Malaya, French Indo-China, Siam and a host of other areas over which war at its most bitter had been fought. Hugh takes great pride in the fact that, as hostilities neared their end, there were more four-engined bombers dropping supplies than dropping bombs.

Finally, the suffering mass of emaciated, sick Allied prisoners of war were liberated and Hugh worked with RAPWI — the Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees. Many doctors and nurses were hastily trained as parachutists, prepared to drop into remote prison camps all over South East Asia Command. He still remembers one skeletal young army officer who refused attention until all his soldiers had been treated and prepared for evacuation.

After a spell in Singapore Hugh was posted to Quetta, then in India, as RAF member of the directing staff of the Army Staff College there. In the course of this duty he returned briefly to

Text continues on page 57



ABOVE One of the operational maps — complete with "gen card" — used by Flt Lt George Turner, a fellow 161 Sqn pilot, on a spy-dropping mission.

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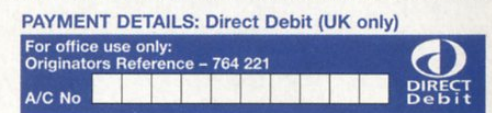
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CODE NA21



Trevor Roche flies the Shuttleworth Collection's Westland Lysander over Tempsford, the wartime base of 161 Sqn, on which Hugh Verity served. Previously finished as "V9441" of 309 (Polish) Sqn, the aircraft was given a dummy long-range 150gal fuel tank and external ladder in

the winter of 1999-2000, and last winter was repainted as Peter Vaughan-Fowler's "V9367" of 161 Sqn. In real life this Canadian-built Lysander IIIA, powered by an 870 h.p. Bristol Mercury, served as a target tug with the Royal Canadian Air Force. Picture by IAN FRIMSTON/FUJI LAB