

THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Just when a replica Fournier RF6B project seemed to have stalled, a possible solution emerged from the dusty hangar of a French flying club



Words & photos: Bob Grimstead

It was the surprise I had been waiting for. For a variety of reasons, I had been stalled on my project to build a replica Fournier RF6B fuselage. I already had the beautifully restored black and yellow fuselage (plus most of the other bits) of RF6B G-BLWH, and I just couldn't bear to forsake it or - worse still - cut it up to get out the metal fittings, control cables and other components for my replacement fuselage.

But then something entirely unexpected happened. On a Fournier Facebook group up popped the notice 'Aile et fuselage de RF6B a vendre'. Further enquiries established that these components were in good, dry condition in the back of a hangar at L'Aero Club Du Vexin in Brittany, where they had been stored for many years pending completion of a restoration that had foundered. Subsequently everything else had gone missing, and now that club just wanted to get rid of this relic of their past.

Unfortunately my enquiries revealed that the only components available were the wing and fuselage. It may seem this is the majority of an aeroplane but, believe me, they are really only a small proportion of the whole, which is mostly made up of lots of tiny specialised parts. You know, **unimportant** things like

minor

an engine, propeller, fuel tank, undercarriage, wheels, brakes, tail units, canopy, instrument panel, seats, controls, engine mount and systems – that kind of unimportant stuff.

Nevertheless my devious mind came up with two ideas. The first was that, if I got it, maybe I could saw and strip this abandoned fuselage into its major structural elements and incorporate some of those into my 'homebuilt' RF6B. This would of course mean utilising the most challenging built-up components – predominantly the seven fuselage frames plus the four major bulkheads which attach to the wing and tail, plus the firewall. All those were made up of many individual pieces of plywood and fir, and would originally have been built on jigs to ensure that, when they were fitted to the longerons and skinned, the exterior would taper nicely and progressively towards the tail.

My Google-translated e-mail exchanges with the club were necessarily brief, so I went 'sur Internet', to find out more about this club and their Fournier. Their airfield was easily identified by its bright blue hangar, and the field itself seemed delightful with a single, 675-metre grass runway. The redoubtable Alan Brown even came up with a photo of the fuselage in the back of their hangar.

But my idea of cutting it up was scotched when my French counterpart revealed that the

F-BPXV (formerly F-WPXV...

airframe on offer was none other than the RF6B prototype F-BMKC (formerly F-WMKC when registered as Experimental for test flying). Being made of Sitka spruce rather than the Douglas fir of later production examples, it would be significantly lighter, and therefore should perform better. Moreover, this was the actual aeroplane that had appeared at the le Bourget Paris Air Shows, had been aerobatted all over France by test and demonstration pilot Bernard Chauvreau and appeared in all those contemporary magazine articles. I could not possibly hack up this historic aeroplane, but now I seriously wanted it!

A 1970s Paris Air Show regular

Furthermore, one of the very few clauses allowing an aircraft to be transferred from an EASA C of A to Annex 1 (and thus go on to a British Permit to Fly, which is what I wanted) was the following: (a) the historic aircraft must (ii) have 'clear historical relevance, related to a participation in a noteworthy historical event'. This prototype participated in the 1974/75/76 Paris Air Shows, so maybe I could persuade the authorities to allow it. Surely that must be worth a punt, anyway?

Since meeting my wife Karen, I have been persuaded that, while one can exercise some degree of control over one's life, it is never sensible to ignore serendipity. In →

MAIN: A French flying club had in store the wings and fuselage of a Fournier RF6B, exactly what our Bob Grimstead was looking for

BELOW: In the 1970s the RF6B was featured in a number of magazine articles

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FOURNIER AVIONS FOURNIER
HEAD OFFICE AND WORKS:
Aérodrome d'Athée-Nitray, 37270-Montlouis
Telephone: (47) 50-68-30
DIRECTOR GENERAL: René Fournier
Avions Fournier is producing a two-seat light aircraft, designated RF-6B, of which details follow. A related design by M René Fournier is the RF-6 Sportsman, manufactured by Sportavia (which see) in Germany.
FOURNIER RF-6B CLUB
The prototype of this two-seat aerobatic aircraft, designed by M René Fournier, flew for the first time on 12 March 1974; certification was obtained in April 1975. Production by Avions Fournier of five pre-series RF-6Bs began during the first half of 1975, and the first of these (F-BVKS) flew for the first time on 4 March 1976. It





With such a delicate load (on a very long trailer) it was important to choose a land and sea route, among the many options, that would minimize the potential for complications



Handling the wings and fuselage was a team effort that was made possible by the help of several members of the local flying club. Here the wing is getting loaded onto the trailer



Although far from ideal condition, the cockpit section still had several of its instruments and controls

fact, in the past thirty years this principle has influenced most of the major decisions in our lives, and we have always benefited from it. So I took the plunge and told the French club that I wanted these mortal remnants.

Although Karen and I had previously transported the RF47 to Oxfordshire and Dave Bland and I had picked up 'WH (another Fournier aircraft) from Staverton, we had done both of those in two journeys. This RF6B collection, instead, was not only going to have to be completed in one go, but we'd be doing it in our twenty year-old right-hand drive Jaguar on unfamiliar French roads. We clearly couldn't undertake this more ambitious project alone, so I enthusiastically called our new best friends Tim and Emma, to ask if they were up for a French adventure. How silly of me. Of course they were. And they would bring their delightful little Maltese terrier, Spinner.

After sorting out the paperwork for transporting the aircraft, however, I became concerned about the Jaguar's clutch. We were not the car's first owner. That was my late mate Alan Washington – Redhill instructor, examiner and helicopter pilot extraordinaire. Alan was a Jaguar enthusiast, but drove his cars hard, and I don't 'go gently on it' myself. The S-Type's clutch had recently been disengaging with its pedal depressed less and less. Before venturing one hundred kilometres or more 'sur le Continent' I thought I'd better get it replaced. It turned out this was a wise decision, because there was very little friction material left on the old, blackened plate.

Now to book our ferry tickets. I had originally planned transiting between Portsmouth and Caen or le Havre because the driving seemed easier, but a chance conversation with Recovair's ever-helpful Tim Wakeman resulted in

a recommendation that we should route via Newhaven and Dieppe instead. But I could not get the ferry company's web site to cooperate. It's one of those incredibly annoying ones where blocks of text and pictures keep popping up and scooting around the screen. I could see what my car and four occupants plus trailer would cost and check their timetable, but I just could not get the damned thing to accept my booking. After spending a whole frustrating evening grappling with

BELOW, LEFT:
The Fournier factory
in the 1970s

that site, I gave up. However, I was at least able to obtain a Dover phone number for them.

The following morning I called DFDS, the ferry company, in a rather irate frame of mind, but found myself chatting with a delightfully helpful young man. This guy had initiative too, because a few minutes into our conversation he guessed my age. 'Oh bugger, I thought, now we're in for an insurance surcharge or some such'. Not a bit of it. Instead

he offered a generous discount. A win, for once!

Next thing, then, was Tim, Emma, Karen and I on our way to collect the prototype Fournier RF6B's wing and fuselage from l'Aero Club du Vexin in Normandy. With us was Tim and Emma's characterful Maltese terrier, Spinner, and Tim wore classic French attire. We were booked on the 0900 ferry, with last boarding at 0815. Facing a two-hour drive on the other side, and relying on

local club members to help us on to the trailer with this aeroplane, we were on a tight schedule, so I typed up and laminated four sets of A4 'Marching orders' for the day.

We mustered at the appointed hour, boarded, secured the car and trailer on the car deck with Spinner guarding them, watched the white cliffs drop astern in surprisingly chilly weather for September and repaired to the lounge. Thinking our appetites might not be enormous, and

BELOW: Preparing the trailer for the 10.5m wing and the fuselage was a challenge, especially since the wing would be wider (and longer) than the trailer, and the fuselage would sit on top of it, raising the centre of gravity



as ever wanting to save a few pennies, I suggested that Karen and I might share a cooked breakfast. After recovering from the subsequent ear-bashing I enjoyed my own ‘full English’ in a strange sense of isolation.

We docked on time at 2pm (French o’clock) and set off into the Normandy hinterland. What wonderful, wide, smooth highways – such a delightful change from England’s innumerable potholes. And where was all the traffic? We had the roads to ourselves. The weather was perfect and the countryside looked delightful in that glorious late summer light; open vistas alternating with bosky woods and interspersed with charmingly scenic towns and villages.

It was important we arrived at the airfield before 4pm because we were relying on that help from the club’s members, because even the four of us couldn’t do it on our own - wings are astonishingly heavy. As it happened, we arrived nicely on time. I introduced us all to the half-dozen assembled members. None of them spoke English and between us we had only the most basic French, but we all spoke aviation, so we got along fine. Furthermore Spinner was in her element. Very used to airfields, she chased and bounced around in the long grass after the scent of smaller animals. The place was a mixture of rustic French charm and modern equipment. I can’t wait to return

in a Fournier one day.

That red-doped RF6B fuselage was just outside the hangar on trestles, but at that stage I hardly glanced at it because I was being led into the dark interior, where I discovered the wing hanging halfway up the back wall. Still in its centre section were control columns, seat belts, and brake and flap levers in their quadrant. I was surprised but pleased to see this wing hadn’t been stripped of its covering. That might make it more difficult to handle, but would at least keep it weatherproof not only on the journey home but for the foreseeable future.

I reversed the trailer inside and as close to the wing as I could, given the proximity of other aeroplanes parked in there. It was a real struggle to get down that big, heavy wing, operating at arms’ length as we were, but eight of us soon manhandled it off the hangar wall before staggering over to the trailer with it. Something was lost in translation initially as our helpers wanted to load it upside-down at first. With that sorted out, it went neatly on to my central pallets. We then worked together to strap and rope it in place, using my new ring bolts, with additional pallets and carpets under the ends to wedge it in place.

Much better than the pics

Then I towed the trailer back out of the hangar beside the fuselage. Here I was amazed and delighted to see that there was much more

than just the bare wood structure that I had expected from the low-res photo I had seen. It included not only the instrument panel with several dials and stall warning horn still in place, but also the fuel tank, filter and pump, engine bearers, battery box, shoulder harnesses, centre console and brake reservoir. Delight of delights, on its turtledeck was that awkward rear canopy fitting missing from my collection of components.

Again willing hands lifted the fuselage on to its wing, with lots of carpeting between the two to protect everything. We soon had it strapped down. This all happened in much less than the two hours I had estimated. Time for celebratory libations then, but first of course Tim and I had to fool about by jumping up on to the trailer and into F-BPXV’s cockpit for a couple of goofy photos. I had brought some traditional British beverages, including Scotch and a selection of ciders from my parents’ village. Little did I know we were right in the middle of France’s prime cider-producing country! They were received gratefully nevertheless.

Our overnight lodgings were about ten kilometres away, and after a long day I didn’t much fancy dragging that trailer, now elongated by our valuable cargo, back through the narrow streets of Étrépagny to Doudeauville-en-Vexin. So I got permission to leave it in the club’s car park, behind their locked gate, having

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been assured that the gate would be open at a reasonable time in the morning. Our ferry left at 12:30pm the next day, so we didn’t want to be delayed.

Our accommodation turned out to be a major win. Previously googling ‘Étrépagny hotel’ had brought up what looked like a reasonable establishment, the Domaine des Près du Hom. The site said ‘no dogs’ but when asked, the reply had been, ‘Okay if it is small’, so I reserved two rooms.

The hotel turned out to be even better than I had anticipated. It was an impressive, slate-tiled, multi-windowed nineteenth century red brick residence directly behind the twelfth Century Eglise Saint-Aubin. Proprietrix Madame Caroline Hennel was delightfully welcoming, inviting us to join her on the patio for an aperitif. Our overnight home was to be in the Pigeonnier annexe, housing us upstairs and Tim and Emma with Spinner below. It was perfect for us all, and any qualms we may have harboured about bringing Spinner were immediately dispelled by Caroline’s delighted cry: “Ah, un Yorkshire? Adorable.”

Retrieval mission turns into French holiday

At Caroline’s recommendation we drove the fourteen kilometres to Lyons-la-Forêt where we had a delicious meal at ‘Restaurant

de la Halle’. There, over possibly our second bouteille de vin, we all agreed that the area was delightful and worth further exploration. Somebody said “I’m not doing anything on Thursday”, and suddenly the pressure was off. I re-booked us on the late ferry two days hence and we were all set for a spot of French leave.

Fortunately Caroline had no booking for the morrow and invited us to bring ‘le petit avion’ to her premises, which we did after a leisurely breakfast, and to the amusement of several locals. Then we investigated her grounds, including a beautiful half-scale children’s Wendy house and, down by the river, the equipment of her

tightrope-walking neighbour.

For lunch Tim suggested we explore Les Andelys, eighteen kilometres away on the banks of the broad, brown and dawdling Seine. What an interesting little town, overlooked by Richard Coeur de Lion’s lofty fortress, le Château Gaillard. Of course it took us no time at all to spot the gorgeous Mirage F1 on a stick down a side street. Boy, these French guys sure know how to design a beautiful-looking aeroplane. This turned out to be part of a memorial to the famed Normandie-Niemen Squadron, the most outstanding pilot of which, Marcel Lefèvre, had been born here, as had Jean-Pierre

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ABOVE: Exploring Les Andelys, a little town in which Marcel Lefèvre was born. The French fighter pilot recorded numerous wins in WWII and fought on the Eastern (Russian) front with the famed Normandie-Niemen Squadron. The town honoured him with a street named after him, and a Mirage F1 monument



LEFT: French elegance at its best: an internet search for a hotel in the vicinity of the flying club had turned up an impressive and elegantly-proportioned nineteenth century red brick residence

RIGHT: The wings and fuselage on the ferry from France to the UK. Surprisingly, the unusual cargo did not draw any interest from customs officers





LEFT: [From left to right] Tim, Karen, Spinner the Terrier, Bob and Emma celebrate the success of their French trip by the eighteenth century roofed market in Lyons-la-Fôret

BELOW: It's only the beginning: the fuselage in Bob's garage, where it will be rebuilt into an airworthy machine

Blanchard, the first airman to cross the English Channel (in a balloon, of course). The 520 colourful umbrellas strung up along Rue Marcel Lefèvre didn't seem to be associated with either of them, but were merely a tourist attraction.

With that sightseeing done it was time for our visit's main purpose. To prevent our trailer from snaking at speed, it was important to have a forward C of G. What better to achieve this than a few boxes of wine but, would you believe, when we located precisely the sort of vintage we wanted in the local supermarket, we were shooed away with cries of 'not until Friday'. Eventually we found some less satisfactory stuff and loaded it aboard the Jag, along with pâté, confit de canard, cassoulet, saucisson and of course French chocolate and biscuits.

Up and out early the next morning we had an easy drive back to Dieppe where we would board our ferry. There, to our surprise, no interest whatever was shown in our unusual new acquisition on its over-length trailer, but Customs took a long time accessing and scanning little Spinner's microchip to correlate with their records.

Then followed a trouble-free crossing and comfortable homeward journey. Here, at the

end, I actually encountered the most difficult part of our journey because I needed to pull across our road and into a smaller one opposite before reversing the elongated trailer up our driveway, in the evening rush-hour traffic.

Then there came a glimmer of light for this rebuild project (and my other Fournier rebuild that I was working on). I learned that, after having left the EU, at the

end of 2020 we were also likely to quit EASA. I glimpsed in that news a faint flicker of hope that my two Fourniers, like similar 'orphaned' aeroplanes with no factory support, might at last become classified as acceptable for Permits to Fly – without needing to rebuild a fuselage as it was the case before.

So now I needed two engines. Any offers?

