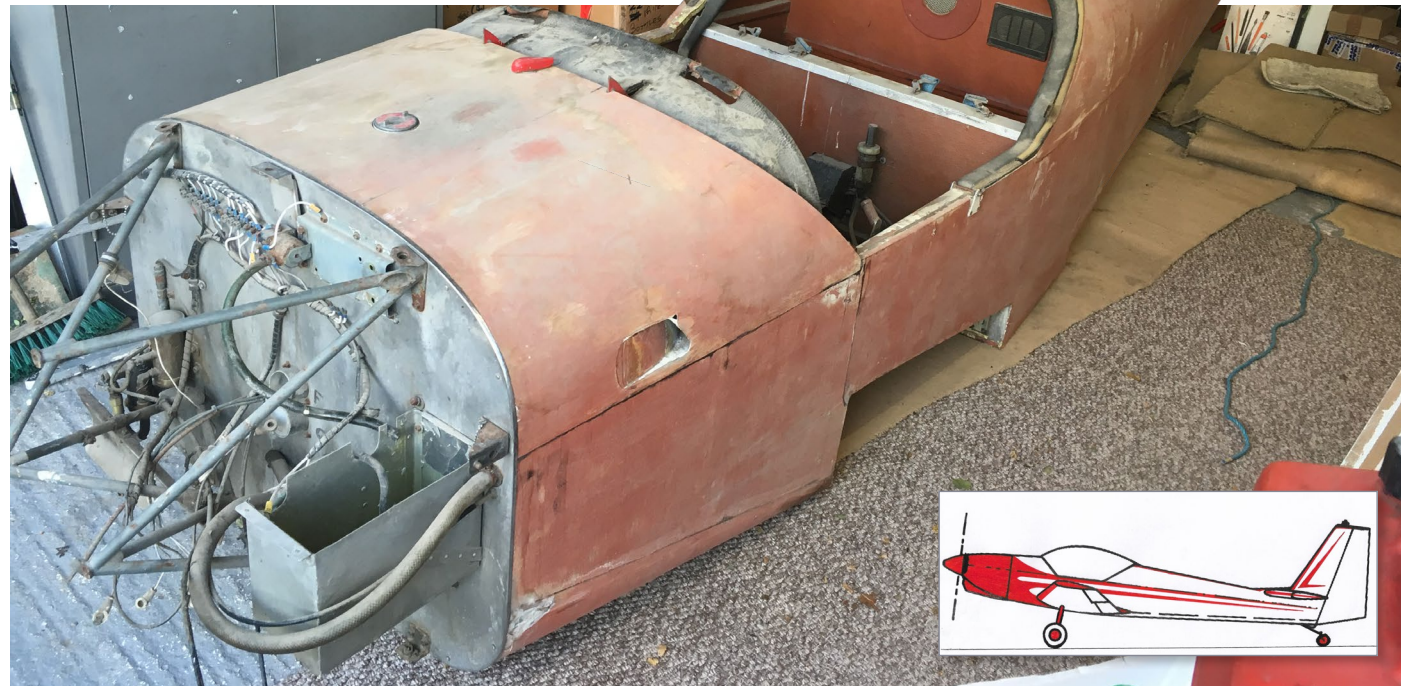


TRAPPED DOWN UNDER

In December 2019 our Fournier display pilot and serial rebuilder headed off to Australia for a three-month holiday...

Words & illustration: Bob Grimstead



After our French adventure ('The French Connection', *Pilot* March 2022) I had all the components of Fournier RF6B G-BLWH except for an engine, plus the prototype F-BPXV's wing and fuselage. Nobody can have too many aeroplanes, right?

Sadly and frustratingly, and despite these aircraft being 'orphaned' with no factory support for a full 45 years, bureaucratic hurdles made their re-assembly problematic and expensive, despite it being well within my experience and capability. If they were sensibly allowed to transfer on to Permits to Fly from their onerous EASA Certificates of Airworthiness, then I could merely buy a second-hand Continental O-200 engine and finish the first within a few months, although the second airframe would obviously take longer.

I am a lazy bugger. I only work with any determination when I have a deadline to meet. To quote that great musicologist Leonard Bernstein: 'To achieve great things, you need a plan and not quite enough time.'

So I set myself a limit: yellow-and-black RF6B *Whisky Hotel* would be ready for flying to René Fournier's planned 100th birthday celebrations in mid-April 2021. That gave me twelve months after my return to England from my annual Australian holiday in early 2020 to find an engine, fit it, and reassemble everything. Easy-peasy.

Unexpectedly there was optimistic news – after another bureaucratic *volte-face*, Grant Shapps announced we would quit EASA when Britain left the EU. I received a prompt e-mail from LAA Chief Engineer Francis Donaldson: 'If indeed the UK does exit EASA in December, which is now the plan, then the RF6B would be a huge leap closer to qualifying for an LAA

Permit as an orphan, so it's a very good thing you didn't cut up the fuselage yet!' So the three months before my April return would be more than long enough for those administrators to change the rules. But despite flying being by far the fastest means of transportation, the wheels of aviation bureaucracy move glacially slowly.

Meanwhile British airshow spectators were no longer satisfied with a mere display of aerobatic skill in my RF4D. They also wanted spectacle! Many display pilots now offer pyrotechnics, so I clearly had to do the same with my RF4D *RedHawk* to secure future bookings.

I set about devising, making, and getting approved, equipment for fitting pyrotechnics to its wingtips, fin and outriggers. Eventually, my Permit to Test was issued on 5 December 2019, so I pulled out *RedHawk*, fired it up, and flew due south to an uninhabited part of the coast to perform the required half-, one-, two – and three-turn spins

ABOVE: Bob was only planning to take a short break from his RF6B projects

in both directions. I also chucked a few high aerobatics including several avalanches to prove, as expected, that the pyrotechnics' weight and drag had negligible effect on handling.

Delighted and satisfied with the results, I rapidly transited back to Dunsfold, quickly performed some minimal winterisation, tied down *RedHawk* and threw on its cockpit cover. Zipping up the hangar with my car inside, I pulled my suitcase from its boot just in time to meet the taxi pre-booked to take me to Heathrow for my flight to Australia.

Just before my flight's departure I had time to complete the LAA's forms and mail them to Turweston. Their acceptance took time, but I was on holiday and my first show was still three months hence. Meanwhile I was in summertime 'Down Under'.

Perth is not like many Brits' preconceptions of Australia. It is a smart, modern, cosmopolitan city of two million, and emphatically different from crowded and chaotic modern Sydney. It's rather more an overgrown country town – locals still expect to see familiar faces when visiting a restaurant, concert or play, and there are plenty of all those here. It's said you can enjoy a different cuisine every day of the year without re-visiting one restaurant. For me it's the ideal chill-out holiday destination.

Ignore Aussies' warnings about their fauna. I've stumbled across more snakes and spiders in England; I only saw crocodiles when we went looking for them during a square-rigger expedition to the far north; the sole jellyfish I've encountered were dead on a beach; and I've never seen a shark except in the aquarium.

As usual I spent January relaxing in the sunshine while flying as much as possible, mostly experimenting with new aerobatic figures in my blue Australian Fournier RF4. I also planned those RF6B rebuilds. We did become aware in a slightly disconnected way of some plague ripping through China, Italy, Iran and Britain, but were reassured by local Premier Mark McGowan's insistence that he had closed the borders and would not allow this virus into our state.

Thus it came as a shock the morning after enjoying a delightful Beethoven concert when we received a terse text message. Apparently, some stupid woman had returned to Perth from the USA via Cuba and the Arabian Gulf and, while waiting for the results of her SARS-CoV-2 test decided, despite her symptoms, it would be fine to attend our concert! So, Karen and I plus 1,700 others began a five-week lockdown a fortnight before everybody else in Perth.

Australians are easy-going, but their powers-that-be are more authoritarian than you might expect. Within weeks the government prohibited all overseas travel, so I was confined to Perth for the foreseeable future and unable to make any progress on my two British rebuilds.

I'm not a patient man. I can't abide treading water or marking time and I don't like being idle so, never one to let the grass grow under my feet, I decided to turn over a new leaf, strike while the iron was hot and make hay while the sun shone.

There was plenty to do: For decades I'd wanted a dedicated office in my hangar. I also needed better lighting and, given the horrific bushfires Australia had recently suffered, it would be sensible to have a proper fire-fighting system – my time away need not be wasted.

Serpentine is the local homebuilders' airfield. It has 103 hangars and around 120 aeroplanes, sixty per cent of which are amateur built. I had swapped my original hangar for a bigger one – fifteen metres by twenty with a four-metre square 'donga' or bedsit in its western corner. For years I'd meant to build a proper office in the opposite corner. There were two major design considerations. It mustn't cost much, and it needed to be well insulated from the summer heat (+45°C is common in there).

I had made a start by drawing a sketch plan and fixing some reflective galvanised corrugated sheeting to deflect sunshine from its outside walls, but I'd stalled. That sheeting was attached with its corrugations horizontal, to give

plenty of insulating air space from the thin hangar walls' vertical corrugations. Now was the ideal opportunity to finish this project.

I'd originally intended using for the internal walls dozens of hollow plywood and honeycomb doors I'd rescued from neighbours' demolished houses. I'd already utilised some as bench tops, but still had plenty left. But then I saw the destruction wreaked on a wooden structure in mere weeks by the local termites, and sought something more permanent.

A local company made commercial cold stores. My mate Rick was passing and saw a pile of offcut panels outside on the kerb, "Maybe those would do?" I whizzed over there and saw the sign 'make an offer'. These panels were constructed of painted steel sheeting either side of a 50mm core of expanded polystyrene. Sizes varied from two metres by 60cm down to 150cm by 40cm, and one edge of each was nicely tongued-and-grooved. I strolled inside and addressed the first bloke I saw. "How much for the lot?" I was lucky, "Oh mate, we just want rid of it; it's piling up out there and people are complaining. Give us a case of beer and take it all away."

The office's main framework would be formed from four surplus lengths of patio tubing – 5cm by 10cm galvanised, thin-walled, box-section mild steel tubing. This plus several shorter lengths fixed end-to-end around the outer walls would support the ceiling panels. Self-drilling Tek screws would hold everything together with self-made brackets fashioned from off-cuts. My structure would be 2.35 metres high to give decent headroom and because that was the length of my longest C-section verticals.

But first I had to make working room by either getting our 1980s V-12 Jaguar Sovereign back on the road or selling it. Like my two little boats, it had migrated to the hangar when we downsized three years ago, and they were now all impeding progress. Getting rid of that Jaguar was easier than I had anticipated. I advertised it at the price I'd paid for it a decade previously and an enthusiast bought it and trucked it away. One job done!