



Bill Gunston
PLANE



SPEAKING



A personal view of aviation history

© Bill Gunston 1991

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission in writing from Patrick Stephens Limited.

First published 1991

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gunston, Bill, *1927-*
Plane speaking
1. Aviation, history
I. Title
619.1309

ISBN 1-85260-166-3

Patrick Stephens Limited is a member of the Haynes Publishing Group,
Sparkford, Nr Yeovil, Somerset BA22 7JJ.

Typeset by Harper Phototypesetters Limited, Northampton
Printed in Great Britain by . . .

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Contents

Acknowledgements	9
Introduction	11
1 Nineteenth Century The Flying Machine: Why did it take so long?	13
2 1849 Taildraggers: Why was the ‘tricycle’ almost extinct from 1918 to 1938?	16
3 7 October 1903 The First Aerodromes: Why do it that way? Could they have flown?	20
4 17 December 1903 Inform Press: The world’s amazing ignorance of the Wrights’ achievements and prolonged attempts to discredit them	23
5 March 1912 Greak Oaks . . .: Once the monoplane was branded ‘not a good type’ the British shunned it for 25 years!	27
6 August 1912 Start The Way You Mean To Go On: The British Government’s involvement with aviation has from the outset been one of self-inflicted injury	32
7 26 August 1914 Death of the Aces I: In so many cases, strange	36
8 January 1918 Cancel the Others . . .: How could the useless Dragonfly become Britain’s near-standard aero engine?	39
9 5 August 1918 ‘They Taught Us to Navigate . . .’: Lady Luck sometimes works overtime	41
10 4 April 1922 Head-on: On the other hand, she sometimes turns her back	43
11 9 May 1923 What Were They For?: Some 1923 examples of British between-the-wars aircraft whose purpose is obscure	45
12 July 1927 Lateral Control: Ignored by the pioneers and ever since a bit of a problem	48
13 25 May 1928 Lost in the Arctic: How can a giant airship vanish?	53
14 16 January 1930 ‘The Invention of F/O Whittle . . .’: How unbelievable that nobody showed any interest, and that it was left to the inventor to find his own backers and make an engine seven years later	55
15 5 October 1930 The Bad Ship: For nearly 60 years everyone has known airship R.101 was an accident waiting to happen; then an eminent investigator showed this to be quite untrue	59

- 16 26 January 1932 **‘Prepare to Dive!’**: Can you believe a British submarine was dived with hatches and doors wide open? 61
- 17 6 September 1933 **Sky Louse**: The unique story of the Flying Flea 63
- 18 September 1933 **How It Used To Be**: Nostalgic anecdotes of aircraft factories 65
- 19 12 February 1935 **The New Idea of ‘Stealth’**: Reducing visual signature goes back to 1912, reducing radar signature to 1935 71
- 20 1936–43 **The Treason of Tupolev**: A.N. Tupolev was just one of many Soviet designers who faced trumped-up charges and were put behind bars 73
- 21 Late 1938 **Comrade Silvanskii is Banned!**: Now perhaps he *ought* to have been put behind bars! 75
- 22 1937–9 **The Luftwaffe That Was**: The aircraft that equipped the Luftwaffe but remained unknown in Britain 77
- 23 1938–42 **The Luftwaffe That Wasn’t**: The aircraft that appeared in the British magazines and recognition books but never equipped the Luftwaffe and in some cases never even existed 83
- 24 25 February 1938 **Sources of Trouble**: They are seldom radical features 90
- 25 6 April 1939 **The P-400**: The excellent, or perhaps awful, P-39 Airacobra 94
- 26 18 September 1940 **Discovering the ‘Zero’**: For more than a year after Pearl Harbor the Allies desperately tried to find out about the dreaded ‘Zero’, while all the while a captured example was being flown by British and American pilots in China 129
- 27 25 November 1940 **The Widow-Maker**: The B-26 Marauder was a killer, until the aircraft and the pilots matured 132
- 28 20 April 1941 **Death of the Aces II**: Never the way they expected 137
- 29 22 June 1941 **The Red Air Fleet**: We in the West could hardly have been more ignorant, nor made more wrong guesses 139
- 30 7 December 1941 **The Rising Sun**: Our knowledge of the Japanese was near-zero (no pun) so we filled in by pure invention 142
- 31 23 June 1942 **Air or Water**: Everyone knows that water-cooled engines are better than air-cooled, or is it the other way round? 148
- 32 13 June 1944 **Flying Bombs**: Reminiscences of cruise-missile attack 153
- 33 8 May 1945 **The Jet Lead**: Everyone knows the Germans were ahead on VE-day (8 May 1945), unless it was the British who were ahead 157
- 34 July 1945 **‘Haven’t We Won the War?’**: Britain was in no mood to learn from captured technology 163
- 35 31 January 1946 **Through the Barrier**: Why Britain threw away the world’s first 1,000-mph aircraft still remains a mystery 166
- 36 6 March 1946 **More Poke, Less Speed**: Aeroplanes often go slower if you fit more powerful engines 171
- 37 July/August 1951 **Swift and Hunter**: The successors to the Spitfire and Hurricane caused enough trouble to last a lifetime 180
- 38 March 1952 **Superpriority and Offshore Procurement**: Crash programmes to try to produce more warplanes, sooner 191

39	10 January 1954 No Fatigue Problem: So we were taught (that was before Comet Is began to burst open)	195
40	10 November 1955 Without a Struggle: Thanks to the national airline, Britain simply gave up competing with the US Big Jet manufacturers	202
41	4 April 1957 The Royal Ground Force: ‘It will all be done with rockets’	209
42	20 June 1958 Obvious: If it’s obvious, then it isn’t so!	216
43	6 April 1965 TSR.2: Let’s buy only American aircraft, and do away with our own industry!	219
44	1984 How to Destroy a Prosperous Industry: They’ll sue me for writing this!	230
45	8 April 1985 McDonnell Douglas v Northrop: Suing people is catching	233
	Index	237

Introduction

This book is a collection of 45 stories about aircraft that I find interesting. They are picked at random. I apologize if some are judged to be pot-boilers, already done to death and unlikely to throw up any new information. Most, I think, have received little publicity, or I have approached well-known stories from a new angle. Almost all are in some way controversial. Some are simply tales of remarkable happenings, often to be explained only on the basis of extraordinary luck (good or bad). Others argue around a particular subject. Quite a few point an accusing finger and draw attention to what in World War Two was called ‘finger trouble’, meaning stupidity or incompetence. It is easy to criticize with the benefit of hindsight, but when you read some of these stories you wonder whose side some people were on.

When relating something that you were not personally involved in you have to do your best to get it right. Often the readily available account turns out to be dangerously biased, and perhaps even wrong in some of its facts. The way of the commentator with hindsight is perilous, and this is especially the case when he feels justified in being critical. In some of the stories in this book I have adopted the attitude ‘How could we have got it so wrong?’ For example, we (that is, Britain and her Allies) could hardly have been more inept before 1939 in assessing the equipment of Hitler’s Luftwaffe, or before 1941 in our knowledge of Stalin’s ‘Red air fleet’ or Hirohito’s imperial army and navy air forces. Could it all have been cunning double-bluff? Hardly.

I have arranged these stories in chronological order, but often each is a potpourri of several related tales, of things that happened at different times. Obviously, they can be read in any order, and the chronological sequence merely gives the book an element of structure.

A few of the tales are, in my opinion, of considerable historical importance. They deserve to have at least a small spotlight trained on them, in the hope that new light may thereby emerge. There are hundreds more, waiting to be discussed.

A book of this nature inevitably tends to generate differing emotions, including amusement, disbelief (or at least incredulity, which is not quite so strong), and anger—anger at what happened or anger at the author for in some way getting it wrong. It is incredibly difficult to be truly impartial and objective, especially when

you feel strongly about something. I assure you that I have tried to be, and that my expressed opinions are held sincerely.

BILL GUNSTON
Haslemere, Surrey



Plane Speaking is the fruit of a lifetime's passion for aircraft. Drawing on a wealth of knowledge and experience in the world of international aviation, Bill Gunston considers 45 moments in aviation history, from the first flying machines, through the two World Wars to the first jet fighter, the Comet and the ill-fated TSR 2.

The stories are united by an abiding affection for aircraft and the people involved with them, but no punches are pulled when it comes to criticizing the shortsighted or downright stupid decisions made by those in authority. As the author admits, he is sure to generate differing emotions, including amusement, incredulity and even anger. But entertainment is assured on every page of this absorbing book.

ISBN 1-85260-166-3



9 781852 601669

