



AUGUST 15, 1978, was a day on which events unfolded that, for some 40 years, have remained untold. It was the day when the RAF took its first “passenger” aloft in a Panavia Tornado. On that Monday, as a member of the *Flight International* magazine team, I had arrived at Boscombe Down, Wiltshire, after a two-week period of uncertainty.

Panavia, the conglomerate of British Aerospace (BAe), Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm (MBB) and Fiat, had built 14 Tornados since 1974, and the RAF had just one, XZ630. It had flown barely 30hr at Boscombe Down, where four aircrew, all Squadron Leaders, comprising two pilots — Chris Yeo and Don Thomas — and two navigators — John Grey and Jim Stuttard — were cleared to fly the aircraft.

In the last week of July, and with five weeks to go to the biennial SBAC show at Farnborough, Ministry of Defence (MoD) mandarins had decided to get on the publicity bandwagon. When the offer reached the *Flight* office that someone should become the first outsider to sample a flight in the Tornado, my credentials as the magazine’s scribe who wrote mainly about avionics led me to being offered the chance to face the aircraft’s new-generation cockpit.

Naturally, I jumped at the chance. Mark Lambert, our Assistant Editor, was planning the Farnborough special edition, so he selected a suitable Tornado picture for the front cover and allocated pages within. A few days later, after being summoned to the RAF Central Medical Establishment in London, it was time to admit that I had neither experience in the RAF nor fast-jet aircrew medical clearance; to my great relief the medical check proved to be a formality.

To Boscombe Down

On the day preceding the planned flight, Boscombe Down hosted a busload of press visitors. We were briefed and later taken to the Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment’s “A” Squadron apron, where XZ630, the 12th Tornado of the pre-production batch (P12), awaited us.

The Turbo-Union RB199 engines were started. The pilot for the sortie we were about to witness was Don Thomas, his navigator Jim Stuttard. With cameras clicking all around they taxied out. Don took off around 1130hr and flew the aircraft impressively for about 15min before landing back. He taxied in and we all got back on to the buses, and went to the officers’ mess for lunch.

The informal lunch was hosted by the Squadron Commander, Wg Cdr David Scouller, and the four Tornado-cleared aircrew. Chris Yeo quietly approached me and, as we brandished plates of nibbles, he confided, “You’re flying with me tomorrow”. We affected nonchalance as the rest of the journalists began to trek towards a coach by the mess door, and I hid away until colleagues had departed.

Work began as soon as the bus disappeared, starting with another medical check followed by a briefing on the Martin-Baker Mk 10 ejection-seat. After that, navigator John Grey became my mentor for the afternoon. It surprised him that my knowledge of the aircraft’s controls and displays was only at the functional level, so he sat me in a crew room with a mountain of manuals, and for an hour or so reviewed the major elements of the cockpit. Visually, the equipment was familiar to me from visits to manufacturers, but seeing it all stitched together was a joy in itself.

While we had been office-bound, two MoD security agents had been at the aircraft; having completed their task, they joined John and me. John suggested to them we should go to the laboratory cockpit rig, where he and Jim would practise sorties, so that I could familiarise myself with the kit. The response was a very firm “no”.

This rather chilled John’s politesse. He decided that the best alternative was to see the aircraft, and led the four of us across to the hangar. The Tornado was snuggled to one side and surrounded by equipment, technicians and engineers. John led the way and climbed on to the cockpit platform. He was horrified to discover that our accomplices had used masking tape and black bin-liner plastic to conceal about 50 per cent of all the aircraft’s panels. First, he regarded the tape and patches as a safety hazard — they could catch on garments and even impede ejection. Secondly, he questioned why I was being allowed to fly at all. They were security men, but as I — not appropriately cleared — was present, they declined to answer. John’s politeness declined from chilled to frosty.

“You haven’t seen this... right?”

That evening over dinner, John passed me a copy of the next day’s proposed flightplan. It was down to the south-west and included mock toss-bombing releases and navigation system

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP Panavia Tornado XZ630 was the 12th pre-production example and made its first flight from Warton on March 14, 1977. OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM The author (right) and Sqn Ldr Chris Yeo beside XZ630 at Boscombe Down during the former’s visit to the A&AEE in the summer of 1978. TOP: BAE SYSTEMS / BOTTOM: MoD VIA AUTHOR



The TORNADO & me

Test-flying the Tornado for *Flight*

In the summer of 1978 *Flight International*’s avionics specialist **MIKE HIRST** was invited to the Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment at Boscombe Down to sample a flight as a “back-seater” in a pre-production Panavia Tornado. He recalls how his “scoop” was scuppered by a rather reluctant star performer

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