Nine Lives

The compelling memoir of a Cold War Harrier pilot

Chris Burwell

Grub Street, 2022

Just the two words “Harrier pilot” let the (informed) reader know that the man concerned (for there were no female pilots in the Harrier era) was at the pinnacle of the fast jet world in Great Britain. Or at least in their own opinion! It also means that there is bound to be some demanding, and therefore interesting, flying involved. On that count the book does not disappoint. For a man that never fired a missile in anger, Burwell’s memoir has much of interest.

Although the Harrier was involved in hot conflicts, notably the Falklands, and later the early days of the Afghan campaign, Chris, much to his chagrin, did not participate. He clearly loved the challenges and rewards of flying the Harrier, but does not hang back in describing the shortcomings of the earlier marks – the GR3 for example had “an abysmal radio fit”, and an unreliable INS (the primary navigation instrument) - the Jaguar had the same issue.

Burwell & the Harrier Force had their fair share of foreign “rangers” – i.e. overseas trips with night stops. An Italian one provides a good tale. The Harrier Force also did its part in RAF Germany, at the sharp end of any Cold War conflict. Lots of low level flying (at 250’) in poor Northern Europe weather is quite character building. On one such sortie he suffered a catastrophic engine failure, and he describes the ensuing ejection with his usual dry wit. He immediately joins the select throng of the Martin Baker Fan Club.

The joys of the regular Exercise Maple Flag are narrated, with the news that, once upon a time a Harrier hit a tree – and got away with it.

The only oddity of this book is that the narrative sticks strictly to Burwell’s professional life. The reader does not hear of his courtship or even marriage to his first wife. We only know of her existence through a brief note about her sad and untimely death. Similarly the author’s second wife is but a shadow on the pages. Clearly a reader buys a Grub Street Boys title primarily for its flying tales, but in a memoir about a pilot, even a member of the Harrier super-race, one would expect a slightly more rounded picture. Being married to someone who was forever going off to live under camo netting and the trees in some German wood cannot have been a bed of roses, so to speak.

The author’s post-service career is very interesting. Initially he goes to Cobham/FRA to fly their Falcons in MoD assistance roles (simulating air-launched missiles was one of their main roles). He ascends to a management position. Later Burwell is headhunted to join Flight Training Europe at Jerez, again in a managerial role, but still obtaining some instructional time. Few recent books that I have seen cover the challenges and rewards of such jobs.

Overall a cut above the average pilot memoir, written with style and wit, albeit with some gaps in the tale.