

27th April 2012

Comet pilot unveils anniversary exhibition

Wednesday 2nd May 2012

11.30am

On the 2nd May 1952 a BOAC de Havilland Comet 1 carried 36 passengers on the first leg of a journey from London to Johannesburg on what was the first fare paying passenger flight in a Jet Airliner. To mark the 60th anniversary of this historic flight, the Royal Air Force Museum Cosford will be unveiling a specially commissioned temporary exhibition which charts the Comets story and includes previously unseen archive film footage. The exhibition will be displayed alongside the Museum's Comet, the only complete Comet 1 remaining anywhere in the world.

The exhibition includes display cases with a collection of artefacts including photos, log books and airline memorabilia. In addition to this information, display boards highlight key facts and figures on the Comets checked history plus archive film footage shows Comets during their route proving flights in Africa during 1951/52.

The exhibition will be unveiled on Wednesday 2nd May by Comet pilot George Aird, now aged 84. As a test pilot for de Havilland, the manufacturers of the Comet, George flew the Museum's Comet extensively throughout the 1960s. Although George never flew the Comet for an airline, he was a Captain of the Museum's example when it was used as a flying laboratory, carrying scientists and test equipment in its cabin during guided missile tests. George flew the Museum's Comet on its final flight to RAF Shawbury in 1968, for storage for the RAF Museum.

Also attending on the day is Comet 4 Air Stewardess Judy Lerrigo who will be bringing along her uniform and original flight plans and offering a perspective on what it was like to work within the passenger cabin of a Comet.

In the Early 1950's the Comet was a pioneering aircraft that could fly higher, faster and further than any other commercial aircraft of its time. When the de Havilland Comet entered service with BOAC as the first commercial jet airliner, it marked a new era in civil aviation and left other aircraft manufacturers years behind. The new aircraft could carry 36 passengers at a cruising speed of 720 km/h (450 mph) over a distance of 4000 km (2500 miles). BOAC became the envy of world airlines by operating the first jet fleet.

After only eighteen months of service two aircraft disappeared within three months of each other. The Secretary of State for Civil Aviation ordered a full investigation into the causes of the disappearances. One part of the investigation examined cabin pressurisation. Through the water tank testing of another ex-BOAC Comet, and the reconstruction of the recovered remains of one of the crashed aircraft, evidence revealed that metal fatigue in the pressure cabin was the cause of the accidents.

Once this was known the Comet was redesigned and went on to serve as a transport aircraft with the RAF and as a commercial airliner in its larger Comet 4 guise, flying around the world with various airlines until the late 1970s.

The Comet 60th anniversary exhibition will be on display from Wednesday 2nd May to Monday 11th June 2012 in the Museum's Hangar 1. The Museum is open daily from 10am to 6pm and admission is free of charge. For more information on the exhibition or the Museum please call 01902 376200 or visit www.rafmuseum.org.

The media are invited to the Museum on 2nd May at 11.30am to meet with George and Judy and have exclusive inside access to this unique aircraft, marking its 60th anniversary. Please confirm attendance in advance.

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Notes to Editors:

Brief biography of George Peter Aird AFC

Joined the RAF in 1947 and trained as a fast jet pilot, flew with 3 and 118 Squadrons in Germany on de Havilland Vampires and Venoms, before returning to the UK and a posting to 111 Squadron at North Weald. Here he was the A Flight Commander and one of the founder members of the RAF Black Arrows, the Hawker Hunter display team. For his service with Treble-One Squadron, George Aird was awarded the Air Force Cross in 1957.

He left the RAF in 1959, taking up a post as a Development and Production Test Pilot for de Havilland in 1961. As well as testing aircraft off the de Havilland production line, George Aird carried out specialised de-icing trials and guided missile development work, it was during the latter that his association with the RAFM's de Havilland Comet 1 G-APAS/XM823 began. The Comet was a flying laboratory, carrying the scientific "boffins" in its cabin with all their test equipment as infra-red measurements and data link trials were performed. George Aird's career was interrupted by a flying accident on 13 September 1962 when he had to eject at low level from English Electric Lightning XG332.

George Aird was appointed Chief Military Test Pilot for the de Havilland bases at Hatfield and Chester in 1967, and was Captain and pilot for the final flight of the RAFM's Comet from its Hatfield base to storage at RAF Shawbury on 8 April 1968.

George Aird retired from test flying in 1983 but continued flying for various civilian companies, his final employer being Janes Aviation at Blackpool, operating Hawker Siddeley HS748 aircraft on night cargo work. He retired in 1993.

- Royal Air Force Museum Cosford, Shifnal, Shropshire, TF11 8UP
- Open daily from 10am
- FREE admission
- For further information and all media enquiries please contact Michelle Morgans on 01902 376212 or michelle.morgans@rafmuseum.org
- RAF Museum Cosford images & logo available at: <http://www.rafmuseum.org.uk/cosford/media-enquiries/downloads.cfm>