

Episode Four

A career breakthrough

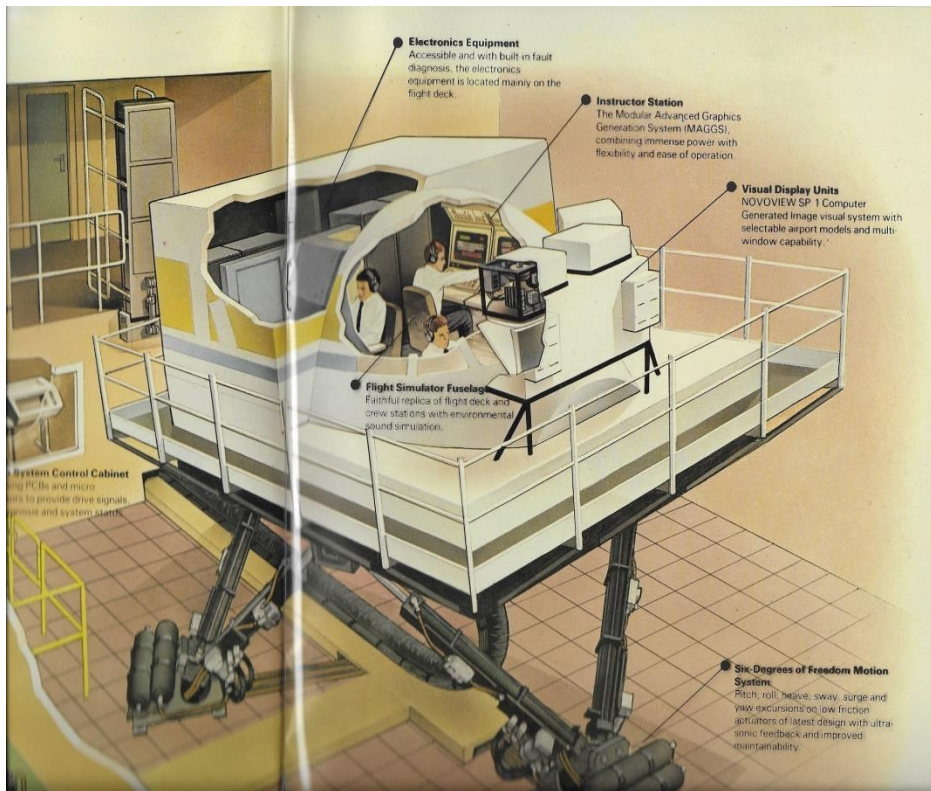
Having returned from my wonderful globetrotting adventures it was now time to adapt back into the real world. I had never been sales trained at Heinz and I decided that, given the opportunity, I would join the famous Thompson sales training scheme. I became a member of 'The Times' newspaper sales team and was given the horrific task of selling personal column adverts, which in those days were on the front page.

A sales trainer would follow me into every door and onto every floor of both shops and offices in West London. My task would be to identify what the sales need was and to subsequently sell a personal column advert to them. If it were a legal partnership, (who in those days were not allowed to advertise), I would try to sell their car or to advertise the country cottage in Devon of the senior partner by writing a personal column advert for them! I put up with that job for six months, but I hasten to add that I learnt a lot which was clearly to help me in my future career.

It was at this stage that I was planning to become engaged to Mary-Anne, my old flatmate from Queensgate, and I started to look for a job in Surrey where we intended to settle. I was offered a job working with Friends Provident, the insurance company in Dorking, as a member of their very unexciting pension department!

I put up with that for six months and then, practising what I now preach to everybody, if you are not enjoying your career, move on and take a risk. That's exactly what I did -and found myself about to embark on my first ever exciting career breakthrough.

I joined a company called Redifon Flight Simulation, based in Crawley, Sussex. It was a STEM wonderland with six axis motion systems, computer generated imagery, sound simulation and every technology that made it both look and behave like the real aircraft. This was the ultimate training environment for pilots of every type of aircraft that you could imagine in the sky.



I joined their Personnel Dept as a recruitment officer. My boss was the incredible Harry (an ex-Hong Kong Police detective) who gave me more rope to make or break my early career than I deserved. At the time, Redifon had a recruitment crisis following a big order from an airline for several simulators. I was tasked to find a way to plug the

gap for some 600 new employees ranging from systems engineers to sheet metal workers. Having never had any formal training in this field, thinking completely out of the box and being a little off the wall, I recommended having an Open Day. I organised leaflet drops by pretty girls outside the gates of surrounding competing factories, ran radio ads and told the world that they could fly Concorde, a helicopter or airliner and all they had to do was turn up on a Saturday. My project experience from both school and Heinz planned for every company manager and supervisor to be on-site and ready to interview anybody that walked through the doors that day.

It went rather surprisingly well- even to me! Some 1000 people turned up and queued round the block- we filled all the vacancies within a week. As the success story got around the area, my evening class lecturer, who was a Personnel Director working for the Phillips company decided to make me an offer to defect. Luckily for me, the Managing Director of Redifon realised that I was not really a personnel chap at all, but that I was meant to be in marketing. I stayed with



Redifon as their Marketing Services Manager for the next five fun filled years. This was the beginning of an exciting whole new lifestyle change for me and my family.

Redifon bought a company in Fort Worth, Texas to help us break more into the US market. I now frequently found myself sitting on the plane to spend a few days each month in Texas. These trips alone were fun. At the time, Braniff Airline ran a jumbo 747 named 'The Big Orange' which flew direct from Gatwick (next to Crawley) to Dallas. I quickly discovered that for a £50 upgrade, I could enjoy a full dinner party in the bubble for ten seated at a beautiful dining table, complete with white linen, silverware, cut glass, superb food and wines. This was definitely the way to travel by air! How sad that this experience is so difficult to find today on any Transatlantic flight, let alone at the price.

I experienced a far less comfortable flying experience one day near the East German border. I was asked to give a short lecture on helicopter simulators somewhere in West Germany. As a 'reward' I was given a flight in an American military helicopter. The pilot looked like a nineteen-year-old, who flew me at a ridiculous speed about 100 ft off the ground, dodging trees, and electricity cables (so this is what they call 'nap of the earth flying'!). At one stage we flew through a forest, with our rotor blades clipping the tree branches on either side. On arrival at a pseudo village, we flew down the main street before lifting ourselves above a house roof and firing a dummy missile into East Germany.



Each alternate year we attended the Airshows at Farnborough and Paris. My job was to design and build the exhibition stand and to develop our customer entertainment chalet with a full restaurant, having selected the chef and catering staff (no guesses which location served the best gourmet lunches). One year in Paris I witnessed

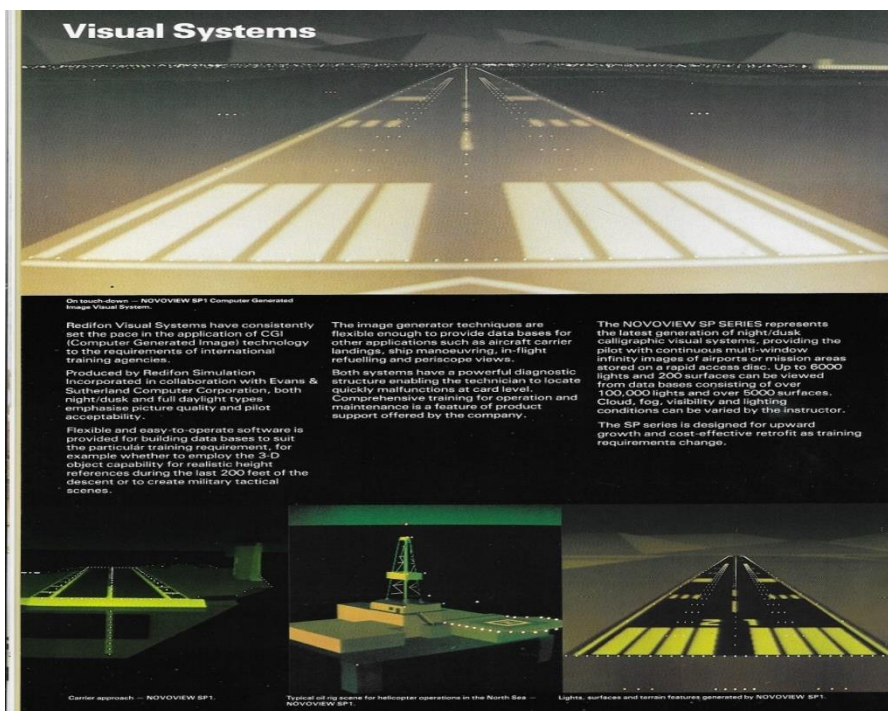
the fatal crash of the USAF A10 fighter plane right in front of my chalet. Tragically, the wife of the pilot was dining with us and it fell to me to prevent her from running on to the runway. Not something that I shall ever forget or wish to experience again.

Somehow, I was spending lots of time in Washington DC. at what were called the AFA (American Airforce Association) shows. The AFA were often sponsored by a rich and fascinating Mrs. Taylor, who owned vast vineyards in New York State. As you can imagine, we were never short of wines and port (which to be honest were not a patch on European ones and which Mary-Anne declared only fit to cook with).

The first time that my boss asked me to make a presentation on the AFA stand I was determined that it should cause a stir. I had heard of what was then, a brand-new technology of using an 'auto queue' to deliver my speech. Nowadays of course we see them every day, used by politicians around the world (how Biden and Trump could ever exist without them I cannot imagine). It caused quite a sensation when it appeared for the first time in Washington, and I am sure that my mediocre pitch was more than made up for by the appearance of some modern technology, which was about to storm the world.

Another fun part of traveling in those days was catching the plane from Heathrow to New York. There was a helicopter service that I caught at Gatwick airport, which then flew across the runways at Heathrow (looking both ways first!) and which took me to my relevant terminal for your transatlantic flight. On arrival at New York, I transferred to a further helicopter, which would then promptly land me on the top of the Pan Am skyscraper downtown. Yes- it was the helicopter that was later blown off the top of the building by the wind and killed everybody. I must confess that the adrenaline was always pumping during the landing approach!

Redifon also bought an interest in a Salt Lake City based company, the Evans and



Sutherland Computer Corp, which was based on the Utah University campus. They were world leaders in CGI. (computer generated imagery) and I began to visit them frequently and enjoy learning about a different religious culture. As a Mormon community I used to enjoy spending the weekly family evening with them. Apart from the numerous wives of several

community members, I learned to have a high respect for their faith (or was it just jealousy?)

My first visit to Salt Lake City happened to coincide over a US Labor Day weekend. As I announced to my friend that I was going to drive my Hertz rent- a- car from Salt Lake City back to Fort Worth, Dallas I noticed that he had a slight smile on his lips. I soon found out why. I clearly had no idea of the enormous size of the United States and in addition to driving the most direct route had decided to go to such places as Tombstone, Bryce Canyon, the Alamo and all the other famous places I had heard of enroute. I eventually arrived at my factory in Fort Worth ten minute before it opened, having driven well over a thousand miles. All the wiring in my Hertz Rental car was smouldering.

On route, I soon made my first of several acquaintances with US Sheriffs. On the first occasion it was by a police light aircraft that I had not spotted in the desert. Far ahead of me two police cars had been swung across the road to stop me, explaining that I had been driving at over 80 miles per hour. They were initially confused by my driving license, which bore no photo ID, but were soon intrigued by my address of 'Ramblers the Cricket Green, Chiddingfold. Surrey.' After a bit of a chat, these kind and tolerant gentlemen were incredibly lenient. One Sherriff insisted on calling back the aeroplane, who duly performed a wonderful flypast for me, waving out of his cockpit as he almost touched one of his Highway Patrol wing tips on the desert floor. This was to prove one of many future encounters with the American law, all of which ended very satisfactorily for me -and please may my good luck (and their congeniality) continue to look kindly on the 'stupid limey.'

Having realised that I was a bit of a liability driving a car in the US, I started each year to do aviation media tours in both the USA and Canada-but these were always wisely now by air. The tours were great fun events enabling me to hire wonderful suites in the best hotels and



for the first time to explore Canada a little bit. My first impressions were not that good on arriving in Canada because they turned out to be the most bureaucratic of all customs officials I had met anywhere in the world (apart from India)!

We were working extremely hard as a major UK export company to secure more business from the United States with either civil airlines or military customers. I was given the unusual task of lobbying a most delightful US General in the Pentagon (what a fascinating place this was to visit on a regular basis). Our main competitors were based in both the US and Canada, so we had to wrestle hard to win business away from them.

The British Embassy in Washington was my secret weapon when holding press or product launches for the US military. Invitations would go out under the name of Lord



Bridges (the UK Ambassador) on good traditional 'stiffy' cards. I could purchase all the booze for the receptions at NAFFI prices, to be consumed in the beautiful gardens of the Embassy. The 'enemy' had to rely on using the local Marriott at twice the cost!

I really enjoyed the company of the General and hope in some small way it led to the winning of the contract to build the flight simulator for the world's first E-3A AWACS aircraft. That is the aircraft with a funny mushroom dome on the top which can see

all the surrounding aircraft flights for hundreds of miles around. I am sure that the smoke from my Cuban cigars and our joint delight in the largest lobsters available in Washington had nothing to do with this success!

To my immense surprise I was given the privilege of helping to organize the inaugural flight of AWACS. I invited twelve international aviation journalists to join me on board the flight leaving from 'Boeing Field' in Seattle, landing later at Tinker Air Force Base. In those days, the aircraft was only a third full of sophisticated computing equipment to trace other aircraft movements. Today, of course, it is stuffed full of great computing power. I was able to show the journalists every aircraft currently flying in six different US states around us. I even had a chance to 'fly' the aircraft on our simulator in Crawley, which was built and training pilots well in advance of the real aircraft coming off the production line in Seattle.

I hope that another outcome from my lobbying was a visit by Senator Barry Goldwater, the hawkish US Defence Secretary, to our factory in Crawley. I had heard through the grapevine that the Senator had recently been through a double hip replacement operation. I duly arranged a special VIP platform, operated by a forklift truck, to carry him up to the simulator flight deck. He took one look at my lift platform and declared that 'over my dead body am I going to be seen riding on that!' He promptly climbed every step of the ladder to the flight deck, sadly for me without a single groan (you bet I was listening for one). I guess that is just what American politicians are made of.

I also spent many enjoyable (and 'Happy') hours hosting various other US Generals and senior staff on their trips to Frankfurt to experience the latest in CGI visual flight systems. These flights had to be taken at night as the Lufthansa pilots were being trained on them during the day. I used to drive our guests round the beautiful Rhine valley and surrounding countryside feasting on the wines and dining magnificently during the day. I became an expert at the 'Redlight' areas of Frankfurt -as one should always listen to the requirements of the customer!

Strangely, being a typical British company willing to do business with anyone with tons of cash, we were also negotiating with the Russian aviation ministry to build flight simulators for their civil Aeroflot airline. I well remember my first meeting with our Russian clients. I was forewarned by MI6 that they would request an evening to meet with our families in one of our homes. This was the time at which the KGB member of our Russian guests would attempt to 'recruit' one of us as a spy. I dutifully selected the beautiful Sussex country home of Derek, which was within the permitted mileage from the Russian Embassy. To entertain our Russian guests, and to introduce them to a British tradition, I had arranged for Derek to drink a 'yard of ale' at an appointed time during the evening.

Sadly Derek, alongside amongst all the other family members from Redifon, had been overindulging with the Russian vodka, so generously donated by the aviation minister and delivered to the house that evening. Derek was clearly in no fit state to down a 'yard of ale' and I realized that this could be a catastrophic mistake. The Russian Minister however approached me, commenting on how interesting this custom was and might I let him have a try at downing the 'yard of ale'? I explained to him that there was a special technique and art form that took much practice in learning to avoid being drenched by the ale in the vessel. The Minister insisted on trying to drink the yard of ale (and of course the customer is always right once again!) To my great surprise the Minister consumed the entire yard of ale without dropping one mouthful of beer. He had clearly had lessons on this great art form in Moscow. It was from that day on that I would never underestimate a Russian again.

Redifon also won contracts to build flight simulators for the Chinese airline CAAC. They would send 30 of their best engineers to stay for three months working with us during the build, learning how to service the simulators once they were delivered back in China. On the second night of their stay, having put them in the George Inn, Crawley, I popped down to see how they were getting on with the manager. He explained to me that there was both 'good news and bad news' with his Chinese guests. The bad news was that on arriving back from the factory each evening, they would retire to their rooms and study, thus not spending their newly gained wealth in his bar. The good news, however, was that on each morning our Chinese guests would make their own beds and that the hotel manager was able to lay off the chamber maids! I hasten to add, the three-month training course for the Chinese engineers was completed in no less than two months. Never, ever underestimate the Chinese.

All good things come to an end. After a fabulous six years with Redifon, I fell foul to my first corporate politics. The Commercial Director had asked me to write a private report for him on the performance of our marketing department. Very unwisely for a young man in his early 30's I never mentioned this to my boss, the Marketing Director. O dear, a mistake never to be made again- and clearly time to move on to a new company.