

The strange happenings at Airspeed (1934) Limited

Who-sells-what-to-whom rows between governments are far from new. Drawing on his memories of the days between the wars, when famous aviation firms struggled for a very small aircraft market, R. W. Cantello (director, Air Holdings Ltd) tells the tragicomic tale of two simple mechanics who tried to override a government ban.

Early one summer morning in 1936 two Airspeed mechanics approached a hangar at Portsmouth Airport and, breaking open the hangar door, pulled out an Airspeed Courier aircraft.

The Airspeed Company had sold four Courier aircraft to the Spanish Government at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War and these aircraft were made ready for flight, fully fuelled for the journey to Madrid. Just before their scheduled departure the British Government banned the sale of these aircraft to Spain and they were therefore put into storage pending negotiation with the British Government.

The two mechanics referred to had very little aircraft experience, one of them having once flown in an aeroplane as passenger. They succeeded in starting the Lynx engine and taxied into a take-off position on the airfield, opened the throttles and attempted to take off in a northerly direction. There are some Napoleonic War ramparts at the north end of Portsmouth Airport which are approximately 70 feet high, and although the men actually got the aircraft off the ground it crashed into the top of the rampart, falling into trees and undergrowth. The time was approximately 7.50 a.m.

I arrived at the Airspeed factory just before eight o'clock and, hearing a garbled

eye-witness account of an aircraft disappearing, picked up a colleague of mine who was standing by and drove straight across the airfield to see what it was all about. We climbed up the rampart and, to our astonishment, there was the badly broken Courier aircraft with one of the mechanics crawling away from the wreckage. The other mechanic was still in the cabin but was found to be dead.

We were both quite speechless about this because we knew neither of these men was a pilot and it was some time before we realised what had happened. It gradually dawned upon us that these two had tried to fly a somewhat difficult aeroplane. We summoned an ambulance and the surviving mechanic was taken to hospital. Although he was dazed he did not appear to be badly injured.

Enter the heavies

This immediately became an international incident and the company was suspected of trying to break the ban on the sale of aircraft to Spain. Within a few hours the aerodrome was inundated with police and Special Branch representatives. All flying was stopped. The ban on Airspeed lasted for nearly two weeks but eventually the directors of the company (including the author

Neville Shute) were found blameless.

When the mechanic was well enough to discuss the matter it appeared that the two men thought they could take the aeroplane off the ground, head for France and follow the coast down to Spain, learning to handle the aircraft on the way, and eventually land at Madrid Airport. He said it was their intention to deliver the aircraft, collect the money and pass it back to Airspeed.

After a lapse of some days it was agreed that Airspeed could move aircraft from one building to another and permission was asked to transfer a twin-engined Envoy aircraft from the factory to the flight shed and this was given providing a policeman accompanied the aircraft. So a policeman complete with helmet sat in the second pilot's seat, and another policeman was detailed to hang on to the tail of the aircraft while one of Airspeed's pilots, Percy Coleman, taxied it across the aerodrome to the hangar—with sufficient speed to cause the policeman hanging on to the tail to become very agitated and very frightened. All this caused great hilarity.

Another interesting point about this queer business was that the surviving mechanic received a sentence of ten months' imprisonment for "breaking open a hangar door".

The remaining aircraft never went to Spain.

■ Taking off: Airspeed AS5a Courier similar to the machines described above. Built by Airspeed at Portsmouth, the Courier had one 240 hp Armstrong Siddeley Lynx 1VC engine. Its range was 635 miles, speed 153 mph and payload 1,200 lbs. This one was operated by Bouts Airlines on a London-Manchester freight service. Picture: Flight International.

