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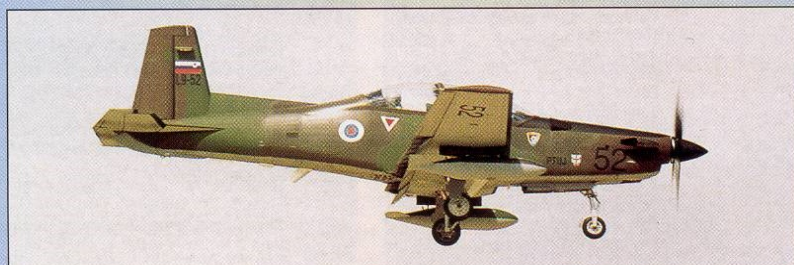


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Season's 1997 End AIRSHOWS IN REVIEW

The 1997 UK airshow season promised much and, indeed, delivered with a vengeance. In *Aircraft Illustrated's* annual 'Review of the Year', **BEN DUNNELL** takes a personal look back at some of the highlights. Photographs by the author and **JOHN DUNNELL**



Sabre dance

Above: The Golden Apple Trust's lovely F-86A Sabre G-SABR, operated by the OFMC, was a feature of many USAF anniversary tributes. Among them were RIAT, Waddington, Biggin Hill and Mildenhall, where it is seen here. *BD*

Slovenian surprise

Top left: One of the season's great surprises was the UK airshow debut of the Slovenian AF, which sent this Pilatus PC-9 (one of three in service with the small air arm) from 15 Brigada to Air Fete '97. It had been flown in direct from its base at Ljubljana-Brnik, and was joined by an L-410. *JD*

Thunderbirds are FAB

Centre left: Naturally, the special one-off European visit by the *Thunderbirds* and their immaculate F-16Cs for 'one day only' to Mildenhall was a highlight of Air Fete '97. This immaculate box-four formation was just part of their polished sequence which closed the Saturday display. *BD*

Swedish thunder

Left: Impressive handling qualities on the ground as well as in the air were illustrated by the Swedish AF JA37 Viggen, a powerful solo favourite at Mildenhall (where this photo was taken, the Swedes making their first Air Fete showing) and again at RIAT. *BD*





Slovak 'Fulcrum'

Above: The Slovak AF only contributed aircraft to one UK show in 1997 — this being Waddington, where Maj Ivan Hulek gave his powerful solo display in the MiG-29A from 31 SLK/311 Letka at Sliac. *BD*

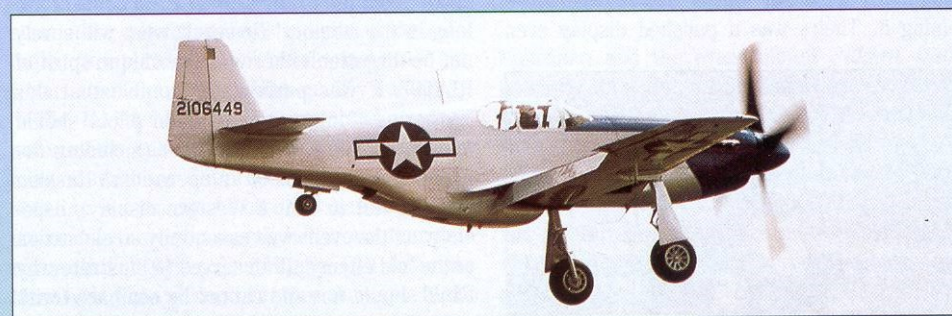
Goose-wing

Right: There were two examples of the Grumman G21C Goose on display at Flying Legends, making an unusual sight. This aircraft, Bob Swainston's N4575C, gave a lively account of itself in the air while Tom Friedrich's N93GS had to remain on the flightline. *BD*



Norwegian wood

Below: After missing the first couple of months of the 1997 season, Shuttleworth's Gladiator was back for a first appearance in its new Norwegian livery at Flying Legends. It again formed part of the Bristol Mercury-powered formation with the Blenheim and two Lysanders. *BD*



Rare 'razorback'

Above: The warbird highlight of 1997 was the arrival and subsequent displays by The Fighter Collection's splendid P-51B Mustang, N51PR — the first 'razorback' to fly in this country since the 1940s. It soon became a popular Duxford item after its inaugural appearance at Flying Legends (without its full colour scheme, applied later on). *BD*

Tiger teaser

Left: It is perhaps worth having a final look at the Mirage 2000C from the French AF's EC 05 330/CEAM that was an understandably popular RIAT Tiger 97 exhibit (for the rarity value of an appearance of an aircraft from this unit, of course. . .)! *BD*

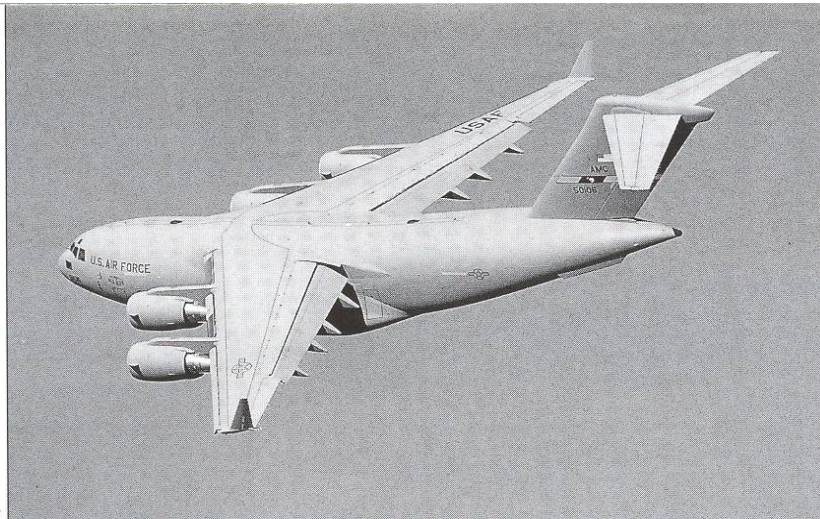


This, without doubt, will go down as the year that the Americans took over the UK airshow scene. Hardly a big event went by without a celebration of the USAF's 50th anniversary, but, looking back, who's complaining? From beginning to end, there was quality on offer, including some of the best air displays seen recently in this country.

Take for instance Air Fete '97 at RAF Mildenhall, where all the stops were certainly pulled out to put on a special celebration of 'Golden Legacy, Boundless Future'. It was made all the more exceptional by the one-off appearance of the *Thunderbirds* giving a polished performance with their six F-16Cs (albeit accompanied by the sort of music normally associated with American local TV ads), and the UK public debut of the B-2A Spirit, 93-1085 *Spirit of Kitty Hawk* (only delivered to the 509th BW last year). Add to these the demonstrations by B-1B 83-0065/DY of the 7th

A good 'Flogger'

Below: Although a single aircraft appeared on static at IAT91, this was the first time that a Czech AF MiG-23ML 'Flogger' had flown in a UK display programme. Here, it taxis out on the Sunday of RIAT before giving a fine account of itself in the air. *JD*



Sweet 17

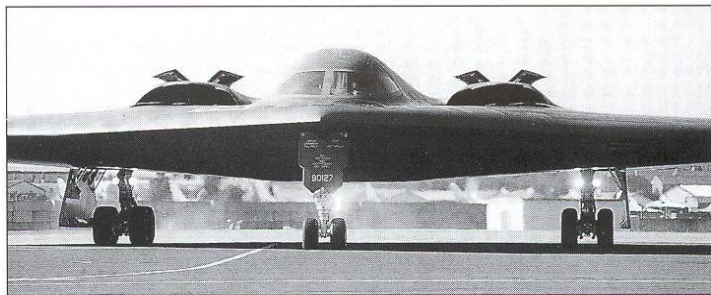
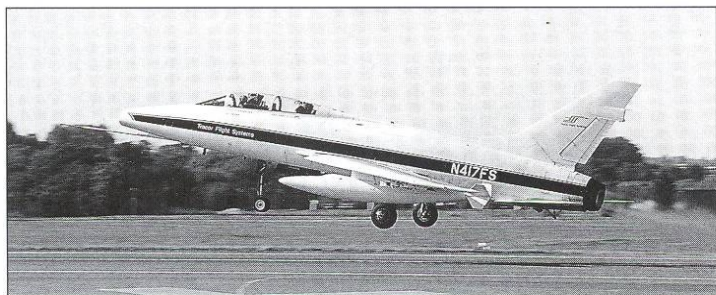
Left: One of the author's favourite aircraft. Displays by C-17A Globemaster IIIs of the 437th Airlift Wing at RIAT (seen here) and Mildenhall gave superb illustrations of the new USAF transport's agility, in the air and on the ground. JD

100-up

Below left: Flown in from its then operating base at Decimomannu (but apparently normally based at Wittmundhafen in Germany), F-100F Super Sabre N417FS of Tracor Flight Systems Inc was one of the real stars of RIAT97, and indeed the whole season. Here, piloted by 61 year-old Frank Damischen, it gets airborne for its display. BD

Spirit of RIAT

Below: On the ground for the first time in the UK, the aircraft which provided one of the enduring memories of 1997 — B-2A Spirit 89-0127 *Spirit of Kansas* taxis in at Fairford. After 1hr 10 min and a crew change, it was off back to Whiteman AFB. JD



Wing and the 2nd BW B-52H, 61-0028/LA; an impressively agile showing by C-17A 95-0105 from the 437th AW; and a range of fighter/strike types comprising F-117A, F-16C, F-15C, F-15E and A-10A, and you had a fine USAF flying line-up.

Its static contribution was also of a high order — former *Looking Glass* command post EC-135C 63-8054/OF from the 55th Wing was most welcome, heading two of its counterparts from Offutt AFB — an *Open Skies* OC-135B and an RC-135V *Rivet Joint*, plus the based 100th ARW's celebratory KC-135R and a 552nd ACW E-3B. On an international note, I was impressed by the Swedish JA37 Viggen and Spanish EF/A-18A routines, while in the static the PC-9 and L-410UVP of 15 Brigada, Slovenian AF were real surprises. There was also 1997's most exotic non-display visitor, the Croatian AF's Sabreliner 75A. One cannot really criticise anything about Air Fete '97 — organiser Roger Hoefling promised and delivered high-quality flying and static displays (and, not to be forgotten, an excellent exhibition hangar), the event's unique atmosphere naturally remained, and it was again perhaps our best-value major airshow.

However, even higher accolades must be reserved for **The Royal International Air Tattoo** which will surely go down (for now, anyway) as the best ever. Its themes provided great opportunities for bringing in some very exciting aircraft. Within the USAF celebration, the inaugural landing in the UK by a B-2A Spirit of the 509th BW (this time 89-0127 *Spirit of Kansas*) was an exceptional first — with B-1Bs from the 28th BW and the Kansas ANG's 184th BW, and a 917th Wing B-52H also airborne plus more of these on the ground, this was a formidable 'Global Power' presence. Additionally, the F-16Cs from the 20th and 27th FWs were most welcome, as was the sight of four 52nd FW A-10As flying together. However, for me the appearance of Tracor's F-100F Super Sabre N417FS was the highlight, even if it did only do a couple of flybys.

After all, the noise of that afterburner engaging is special enough on its own!

On a wider international note, there was much which is seen only very rarely in UK flying displays — the Spanish AF Mirage F1CE, Austrian Saab 105OE and the Italian AF RSV's F-104S/ASA for instance. The same applied to the East Europeans — not least my favourite, the Czech AF MiG-23ML, while the Hungarian and Polish MiG-29s presented new variations on a more familiar theme. It was also interesting to contrast the Ukrainian AF Su-27 and Russian Su-30 'Flanker' routines, the latter's pilot providing one of the year's unintentional comic turns with his very much overhead Friday rehearsal and thus taking our new award for '1997's Funniest Directional Error'.

Without doubt though, the French Mirage 2000C deserved to be among the flying prizewinners, and I was delighted to see the (even more delighted!) Irish Air Corps *Silver Swallows* joining it. Theirs was a polished display even



Wayward 'Flanker'

The first visit to the West by aircraft from an operational Russian IA-PVO unit was another feature of RIAT97 — the Su-30 'Flankers' from 142 IAP were also making the type's in-service debut. This example gave a fine aerobatic display, thankfully over the correct side of the airfield at the weekend! In this taxiing view, the air-to-air refuelling probe that is so vital to the operational role of the type in PVO service is clearly visible. JD

without considering the age or lack of power of the CM170 Super Magisters. However, they were well and truly beaten by the *Frecce Tricolori* and, courtesy of 'Uniwersal (sic) Studios, ex-Hong Kong. Turkish King Kong!', the *Turkish Stars* when it came to the flamboyance of their narrators, Capts Riccardo Rinaldi and Orhan Tamir respectively who both again proved most entertaining (and better than the poor main commentary). As for the *Ukrainian Falcons* with yet more MiG-29s, I was not so much amused as mildly worried by their reluctance to clear the runway on arrival with the *Frecce* streaming in behind, or their wobbly formation changes into figures that bore no resemblance to those being described!

On the ground, it goes without saying that excellence was maintained with some very choice Fighter 97 exhibits, and the typical flamboyance of the Tiger gathering. *That* Mirage 2000C from the French AF's CEAM 330 will live long in the memory! However, what will surely not be forgotten either was the unique spirit of RIAT97. It was particularly notable that this 'gathering of international fighter pilots' should feature so many from the East (including the first representatives of an operational Russian IA-PVO unit to visit a Western display), especially as the event was essentially a celebration of the 'old enemy'. It all served to illustrate why RIAT should not and cannot be compared with any other event.

The RAF's premier International Air Show at **Waddington** was again another of my favourites of the season. Once again, a B-1B from the 7th Wing had something to do with this — Capt Eric Gilliland and his crew on the Saturday taking my award for the best individual demo of 1997. The French AF's always-dynamic Mirage F1C pair, the powerful Danish and Norwegian F-16A performances and Ivan Hulek's fine Slovak AF MiG-29A routine were all most impressive as well, while the static was as good as we have come to



Starfighter return

Above: What a pleasure it was to watch the F-104S/ASA Starfighter from the Italian AF's RSV in the Fairford flying programme. Not only was this an excellent display, but it had also been nine years since a '104' appeared in the air at a UK show (a German example at Lakenheath in 1988). *BD*

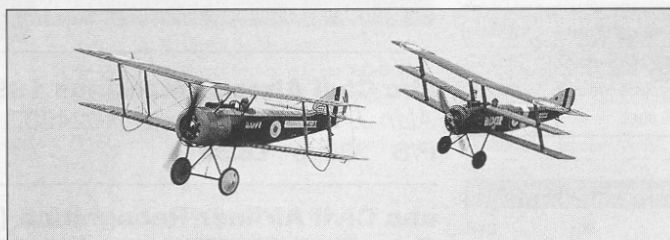
Swallows make a summer

Left: It was a delight to see the Irish Air Corps *Silver Swallows* winning silverware at RIAT, making their first and last visit to the event with their CM170 Super Magisters. Let's hope that they return with the type's replacement, whatever that may be. *JD*



Sopwith duo

Right: A fine feature of Shuttleworth's Military Pageant in August was a spirited WW1 sequence. Two of the protagonists were the Sopwith Pup and replica Sopwith Triplane, not often seen in formation. *BD*



expect with two Italian F-104s and three French AF Epsilons starring. Waddington always offers fine value — two gripes that remain every year though are the use of some dreadful photos in the souvenir programme and the low standard of commentary, which was full of errors.

Still further north, **Leuchars** provided its traditionally sizeable mix of home favourites and overseas interest, thankfully in flyable weather. The same could not be said about conditions at some of the other larger Service events — **St Mawgan** and the RN International Air Day at **Culdrose** (whose programme ended later than any other, at 19.00hrs, but which had only started three hours before) were badly hit by the elements. **Cosford** could at least feature most of its scheduled items in spite of the rain there, this perhaps often overlooked RAF 'At Home' again delivering a high-quality line-up.

The **RAFA Woodford** display was another unfortunate casualty of June's rain, spoiling what would have again been a very commendable day, but among the other civilian-organised favourites, there was mostly better weather and naturally fine flying. The **Biggin Hill International Air Fair** was solid rather than spectacular, but still an enjoyably lively mixture of popular 'acts' and interest for the enthusiast. Much the same went for the **North Weald Fighter Meet**, again more 'general' than its title suggests but which offered an unparalleled British jet line-up, from Meteor to Tornado F3. More relaxed was **White Waltham**, but this friendly venue once more impressed. With a good warbird selection (Avenger, P-51s, B-17, Spitfires and the ex-Autokraft Hurricane) and two Harrier GR7s shattering the peace of the likes of the *Diamond Nine* Tiger Moths, *Crunchie*



Sea Hurricane

Above: After technical problems last season curtailed its inaugural round of appearances, it was good to see Shuttleworth's Sea Hurricane IB, Z7015 flying much more regularly at both Old Warden (where it is seen here in August) and Duxford, at which it joined three 'ordinary' Hurricanes at Flying Legends. *BD*

Stearman and the ever-brilliant *Sukhoi Duo*, flown by Paul Bonhomme and Warwick Brady (in my book, the best sequence of its kind), this was a both informal and dynamic show.

For the **Shuttleworth Collection at Old Warden**, 1997 was a year of change. With new organiser Bill Bowker at the helm, the series of events at the lovely Bedfordshire aerodrome took on a slightly different look, particularly as various unwell Shuttleworth favourites sat on the sidelines. There was nothing as 'ambitious' on the calendar as 1996's two-day Air Spectacular, and it could perhaps be said that there was an air of disappointment among some regular enthusiast visitors. However, a visit to Shuttleworth is always relaxing and enjoyable, and again there were numerous interesting visiting performers — piston warbirds (including Wildcat, Bearcat, P-47, Bf109, Lancaster and more Spitfires) and jets (such as the Sea Hawk, Jaguar, Harrier GR7s and even a Ryanair Boeing 737).

Equally, seeing the Sea Hurricane more frequently, the return to the flightlines from mid-season of the Gladiator, looking lovely in its new Norwegian colours, and the restored Mew Gull added further variety. Hopefully more of Shuttleworth's own machines will be on hand more regularly in 1998, as this will not only bolster the Collection's line-up at its own Flying Days but also bring in money from bookings for such as the Spitfire and Hind which regularly perform away from home.

At **Duxford**, it was The Fighter Collection's **Flying Legends Air Show** that naturally starred, again preceding the week of action at RIAT with the best warbird flying anywhere. It was great to see this year's TFC debutante, the P-51B Mustang, airborne with the usual bevy of P-51Ds and two B-25s, but there were other highlights. Most exciting was the tailchase between the outnumbered Bf109G-2 *Black 6* and eight Spitfires, but for rarity value the sight of Shuttleworth's Sea Hurricane with the ex-Autokraft and TFC Hurricanes (and the BBMF's aircraft in the circuit at the same time) was unique. The Flightline Walk was as successful as ever, and it was again a nice touch to have appropriately-uniformed Battle Re-enactment Group members 'on patrol' — my sole complaint about the whole show (and indeed Duxford's others) was the commentary, which failed to match Jerry Mead's standards from previous years. Between them,

Flying Legends and RIAT created some debate in my mind as to what to spend a big Lottery win on — should I go for a Grumman Goose, which delighted me at Duxford, or the sleek Gulfstream V that was in and out of Fairford with some very comfortable VIPs every day?

The other shows at the Cambridgeshire venue though were something of a mixed bag. In June, the **Anniversary Air Display** suffered dreadful weather, but was still an enjoyably varied event. However, **Duxford '97** sadly was lacklustre. With its American Air Power theme, it could have been much improved — instead, it delivered very little that could not have been seen at most other Duxford displays, except a splendid USAF MH-53J performance. For me, the IWM's September displays tend to be the 'weak link' in an otherwise excellent calendar of events.

With 1997 finished, it must be said that, while there was tragedy abroad, the fact that this was a safe season in the UK was naturally very welcome. In praising the year's events (or otherwise), the new burdens on organisers and participants must not be forgotten either, as costs increase for both year by year. The standards which continue to be set by most top events cannot be taken for granted. Setting our sights on next year, 1998 looks set to be another high-quality season. As far as I'm concerned at least, with RIAT out on its own, Flying Legends easily leading the way for warbirds and Mildenhall as the top military-organised display, there will doubtless be much to excite and entertain at these three alone. Then there's Waddington, Old Warden, Biggin, Woodford, Middle Wallop, Farnborough... I can hardly wait!