



Photo: Tyson Riningger

Bob Hoover

FLYER spends an afternoon with aviation legend Bob Hoover, former test and airshow pilot, and WWII fighter pilot. Interview by Ken Scott

The email from editor Ed Hicks practically froze me in my chair. **FLYER** magazine had arranged an interview with Mr R A 'Bob' Hoover. Would I like to conduct it? Bob Hoover (Mr Hoover to lesser mortals like me) is the closest thing in American aviation to a living legend. From teaching himself aerobatics (in a 37hp E-2 Taylor Cub) to test flying hundreds of newly-assembled airplanes in North Africa, from combat in Spitfires to German PoW, from military test pilot to civilian test and demonstration pilot, and an airshow pilot... Bob Hoover's life story is a series of hard-to-believe episodes, all of which are true.

Slightly intimidated and more than a little excited, I headed for Los Angeles to talk with the man Jimmy Doolittle called "the greatest stick-and-rudder pilot who's ever lived".

When I arrived at his home, his assistant ushered me into Mr Hoover's private study and invited me to wait and take a look around. The room is filled with sunlight and the windows offer a spectacular view of the Los Angeles basin. A few miles below, airliners crawl into the sky from the runways of LAX. From nearby Torrance, a Cessna on floats flies by the window with an Extra 300 tucked in tight on its right wing.

The study is filled with awards, models and memorabilia, and the walls lined with photos, both of airplanes and people. A Douglas A-20 Havoc, bellied-in with all the hatches open, on some long-ago African runway. A Martin B-26 rescued from a short, sandy beach. A P-39 Airacobra, gutted by an engine fire. A yellow P-51 Mustang touching down on one wheel. A Rockwell Shrike, also touching down on one wheel, the wingtip barely a foot off the ground, both props feathered. A snapshot of Mr Hoover, his wife Colleen, Neil Armstrong and Charles Lindbergh at a dinner table — think about that combination for a minute!

A glass case contains models of many of the 300 or so types Mr Hoover has flown... airplanes from a Stearman biplane to a vast, single-engine Boeing fighter/bomber with a P&W R-4360 Wasp Major, and contrarotating props on the nose. And of course there's a Focke-Wulf 190... there's a story there. If this was a room commemorating the exploits of a long-lived squadron, it would be impressive. To think of all of it all held together by the thread of one man's life is mind-stretching.

I'm still gazing through the glass windows of the model case when I catch a reflected movement. I turn and there he is. Mr Hoover, now aged 93, has been physically slowed by age and the effects of injuries suffered bailing out, several times, from fast-moving aircraft. But nothing has slowed his mind or memory, and though he no longer flies, he still speaks at airshows and events. His gracious manners and hospitality quickly make a somewhat awestruck interviewer feel at home. His trademark grin is still there, too.

Spitfire downed

Today, most people remember Mr Hoover for his airshow performances. For decades he showed crowds just how precisely a P-51 could be flown, flying *Ole Yeller* through a low-level aerobatic routine, usually culminating in a one-wheel landing. Impressive as that was, audiences could expect a Mustang to fly like that. What they didn't expect was a low-level aerobatic routine, flown in a stock business-class piston twin, much of it with one or both engines stopped. Mr Hoover's 'energy management' demonstrations in a Rockwell Shrike became the gold standard of the airshow world.

But first of all he was a fighter pilot. In 1942, he shipped out to England, a sergeant in charge of 60-plus pilots, most of them officers. When he arrived, nobody in the Army Air Corps had a place for him or his men. He hadn't

come to Europe to sit around and wait, he'd come to fight. He managed to find a place on a British fighter base, in the cockpit of a Mark V Spitfire.

"My first mission went to France. My flight leader told me that if we got higher than 25ft, German radar would pick us up. Twenty-five feet! Sure enough, I found myself over the English Channel and it seemed lower than that. I'll tell you, I was locked, locked on that man's wing!"

He was soon posted to North Africa, where, to his disgust, the Air Corps put him to work test-flying airplanes assembled from crates shipped from the USA. He flew everything: bombers, fighters, captured Italian aircraft. "I probably averaged a couple of engine failures a week. And that was between landing-gear failures. As much as I wanted combat, I later realised what a great learning opportunity that test flying was."

He finally found his place in the Mediterranean, flying Mark IX Spitfires. "It was a better fighter than the Mark V, more power and a terrific dog-fighter, but never enough fuel."

Flying the Spitfire over Southern France, he ended up in a shooting match with a quartet of FW-190s. Hampered by an external tank that wouldn't release, he was shot down and spent the next year-and-half in a PoW camp near the Baltic. He spent his time planning and making escape attempts. Finally, as the war wound down, he and a buddy managed to get past the wire and make their way to a German airdrome. Somehow, they'd acquired a small pistol and used it to convince a German mechanic to help them start a Focke-Wulf 190. "It had a few bullet holes, but it was full of fuel," Mr. Hoover remembers. "I didn't taxi it anywhere. I just pointed it out the opening of the revetment and took off. It got me to Holland, where I landed in a field, ground-looped to get stopped and started looking for Allied troops."

Precision flying

After the war, he became a full-time test pilot. He just missed being the pilot of the X-1 on its historic Mach 1 flight. He was flying the F-80 chase plane when Chuck Yeager streaked into the history books.

After a stint of military test flying at Wright Field, he joined North American Aviation. "I'd flown a lot of airplanes by then," he said. "North American's were the best. I was excited to go to work there."

There was plenty of excitement over the next few years as he tested the first generations of swept-wing jet fighters, to their limits, and beyond: the Sabre, the Fury, the F-100 Super Sabre. The film record, calmly narrated by Mr Hoover, of an F-100 in a flat spin and refusing to recover, even when anti-spin rockets were fired and a spin recovery chute deployed, is enough to make the hair on any pilot's arms stand straight up.

I have a tenuous personal connection to the NAA days; my father and Mr Hoover worked together there, my Dad as a flight test engineer and Mr Hoover as an experimental test pilot. Framed photos of F-86s and the men who tested them hung on the wall of my childhood home. Late in my father's life, bush fires roared through his mountainside community. He had just enough time to throw a few things in the boot of his car and run. Out of a houseful of possibilities he chose a couple of family portraits, and all the flight test photos. Dad's house and everything in it was incinerated, but those photos hang on my own wall today. I took them with me, hoping Mr Hoover could fill out the backstory and identify some of the men in the photos.

The pictures triggered more memories, not just test flying, but going to war again, but this time in a jet. He went to Korea to show fighter pilots just what a Sabre could do if it was flown with confidence and skill. One of the

skills he taught was precision bombing... not something fighter pilots really wanted to do, but critical for the war being fought. The relatively slow-moving P-51s and B-26s employed in ground attack were taking terrible losses. It was essential that fast-moving jets be adapted to the tactical role, interdicting enemy supply routes and hitting targets like bridges and trucks and ammunition dumps. Hoover was asked to develop a method that would allow fighter pilots to deliver bombs on targets like these.

"The key to it," he remembers, "was precision flying. If the pilot could fly an exact airspeed, altitude and dive angle, the bomb would land in the same place every time. The only variable would be the wind and the atmosphere, and we couldn't do anything about that. Now, the average fighter pilot, if you asked him to climb or dive at a 45° angle, he couldn't come anywhere close, especially if you asked him to do it the same way twice in a row. The nose would be up here, or down there... they'd trained for combat, not precision aerobatics."

Hoover developed his technique over American bombing ranges, using the same methods he later used to develop airshow routines... experiment and accurate, repeated practice. He soon found the combination of angle and airspeed that allowed him to place a bomb exactly where he wanted it. By putting marks on the canopy, similar to the grids used on aerobatic aircraft today, he made a tool that allowed him, or any other pilot, to learn to judge angles exactly. An extra airspeed indicator mounted next to the gunsight let him see his speed in the same glance, without looking down and inadvertently changing the angle. Call it an early heads-up display. Eventually he could put 20 bombs in a row into the target.

"The worst part of that," he says, "was that to get the smooth air we needed for accurate data. I had to get up at 3am every morning!"

He took his method to Korea and, after some initial scepticism, was allowed (as a civilian) to participate in a bombing mission. Flying as wingman in a borrowed F-86, he convinced the doubters when he stuck his first bomb directly into a bridge in use by enemy trucks.

"At first everyone in the flight thought our flight leader had hit it, but when we rejoined, we found he'd had an electrical glitch and his bombs were still on his wing. The only pilot who had dropped was me. After that the guys were willing to listen! My method of teaching them the precise angles and airspeeds they needed to hit targets proved pretty successful."

Final approach

Our meeting had run much longer than planned, but Mr Hoover wanted to tell me one last story... and this one I already knew. At least, I knew half of it.

"A wealthy friend had an F-86 he was restoring as a private airplane and he wanted me to fly it. I agreed and helped supervise the restoration. We decided that I'd make the first flight and land at an airport where he'd build a magnificent hangar to keep it in. Everything went pretty well until I came in to land.

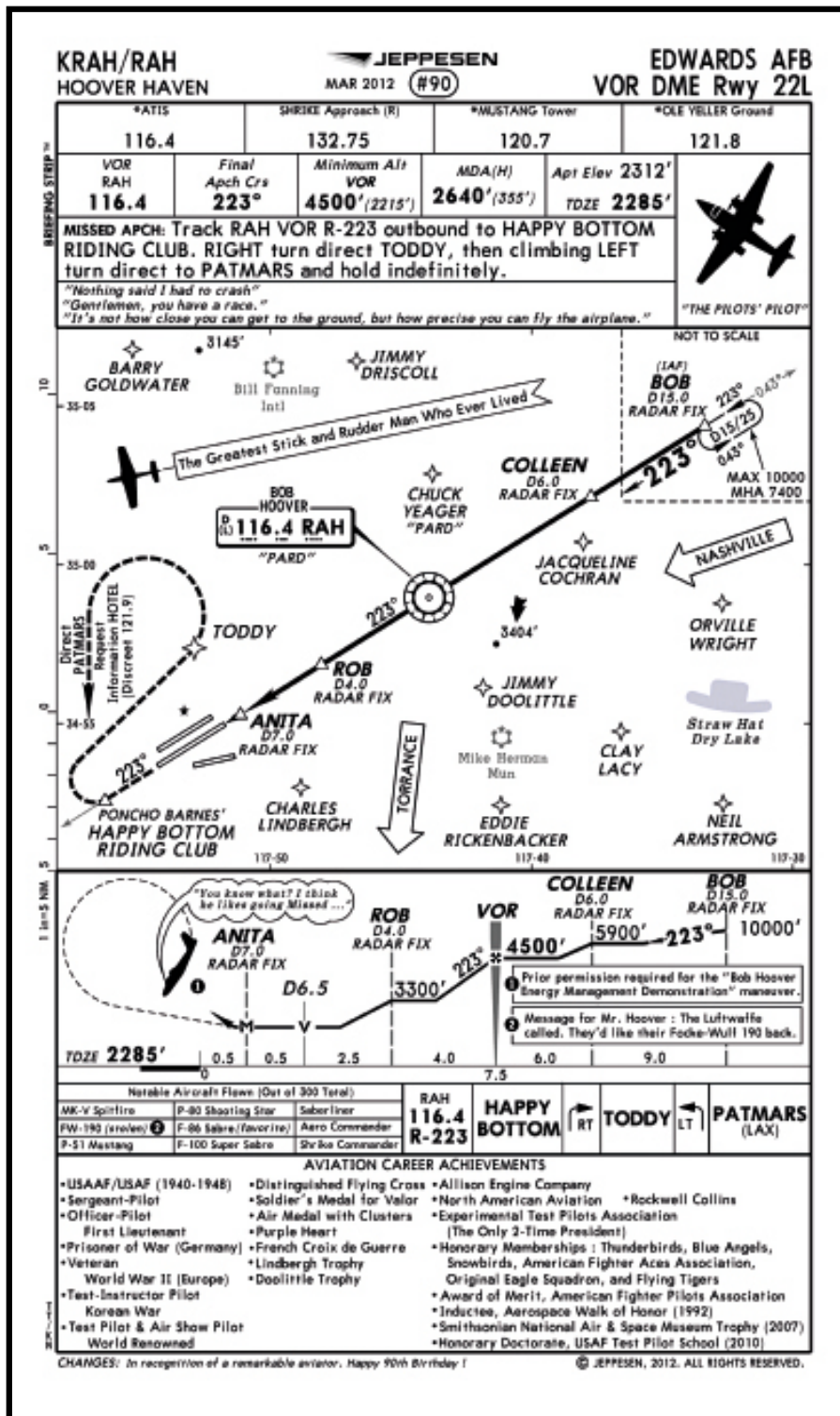
"On final approach, the stick just froze in my hand. I couldn't make it move at all. I still had rudder and power so I managed to land it all right. When I got on the ground I called your Dad. He was the man I wanted. He drove all the way out to the desert and had it sorted out in a day."

Well, I was home when Dad got that call. I heard him downstairs: "Bob, I'd be happy to come if you think I can help... yes... sure... OK. I'll be there as soon as I can..."

He came upstairs, his eyes a bit wide. "That was Bob Hoover," he told me. "He wants my help to sort out a problem with an F-86. I don't think he realises I haven't thought about one of those things in 25 years!"

Eventually it was time to go. Mr. Hoover shook my hand and went upstairs to join his wife of almost 70 years.

I stepped outside and I don't think it was entirely the sun that made me feel a little dazzled. I'd just spent three hours talking flying and listening to stories told by the best who's ever been. ■



To celebrate Hoover's 90th birthday, Jeppesen produced the ultimate anniversary card