

A Flight in India 99



The Air Support Unit has been with us for almost ten years now. Flying the Bell 222, and lately, due to a mishap, the Aerospatiale Squirrel, air cover is maintained throughout most of the day. Weekend working is for Special Events only. All flights are from Lippitts Hill, Loughton.

The Squirrel is somewhat smaller than the Bell, restricting some of its capabilities, although this has little effect on its use for normal duties. One advantage it does enjoy is its quietness, conferred by a three bladed rotor compared with the two blades of the larger type which emit a loud and characteristic beat as they rotate.

I have had the distinct pleasure of two flights with the Unit since they were formed, one in each type, one at night and one in the day, the following relates to the latter undertaken in the spring of 1990.

Shortly after 10.40 a.m. the five occupants, Bristow supplied pilot, two police observers and two passengers, were seated and strapped in ready for engine start. The firing up of the twin engines and initial warm up takes a remarkably short time before the two turboshaft engines are wound up to a fever pitch for lift off. Vibration is negligible.

We are up, parting company with terra-firma smoothly with only a gentle swing to the right, to hover a few feet above the concrete in front of the control room set into the main hanger building. Gently the Squirrel is swung to the western end of the apron, to sit above the landing spot, steady, and then lift vertically upwards into the blue sky that fortune provided on the day.

The mandatory wearing of head-sets fills the head with voices; a mixture of three channels, each at different volumes, banishes airframe noises almost completely. The quietest - for the passengers - is the occasional feedback from the pilots Air Traffic Control reception, with the internal intercom at the next level. The loudest by far is the transmission from Scotland Yard, on this occasion a rare commodity. The intercom requires no switching; it remains constantly 'open' to the transmission of breathing sounds and careless speech. Passengers have no access to outside transmissions; they are relegated to mere observers.

You can see a great deal more than you might expect from a height of 900 feet. The new vista's unfolding before you take on a mantle of 'toy town with movement' as well as a crisp clean brightness you know to be a lie. Even with un-aided vision - the crew have gyro stabilised binoculars - everything is clearly visible from the interior of the Squirrel. The Bell's are a little more restrictive, affording only a view out

of one side for passenger and rear crew alike.

At last a call. Suspects on premises in Stoke Newington. Transit time is a matter of minutes for the eight mile journey, aided by local police units for the final approach. The Squirrel sinks lower to circle the suspect building, a ramshackle large old house with a grimy court yard to its rear.

It is at this point that an earlier gentle low level turn is greatly appreciated. Now that the novice is trained in the art of not making use of the plastic lined paper bags that poke out of the seat back in front of him it is easy, or easier. Peer intently into the turn at the focus of attention and the feeling passes quickly, dare to look away and it returns with the speed of an express train, fail to lean with the bank of the machine and your body will rebel. It is all very much like an expensive fairground ride.

The Stoke Newington ground units were quickly satisfied with the situation in and around the gloomy old building and call up to release us from the dizzy turn. Off we go on another sightseeing patrol, taking in views that are alien to normally ground based eyes.

After half an hour a short return to Lippitts Hill is called for to exchange passengers. We sweep around to the north of the base and head in across Mott Street and Lippitts Hill a few dozen feet above the long suffering housing adjoining the northern perimeter fence towards the landing spot. We slow into a hover before gently lowering down onto the painted 'H' on the concrete. The engines and rotor continue to rotate, requiring the passenger change to take place from the forward position - in full view of the pilot - to the left hand door. The manoeuvre took only a matter of two minutes. The engines are again wound up to fever pitch, followed by a vertical lift back into the sky.

Very shortly another suspect call drowns out the quiet chatter on the intercom system, as the newcomer is introduced to the four occupants remaining from the previous half of the flight.

East London again, 'a man in an orange shirt, accompanied by a female, attempting to take away a lorry ...' Again ground units beat the Squirrel to the scene, thereby assisting in the final homing in. In this instance it was a good job too. The orange shirt had changed to one of a distinctly green hue by the time of our arrival, a minor factor that may have mattered if the lorry in question had not been the only one present. Again the position is swiftly resolved and we are released from our dizzy turns. On this occasion no discomfort was felt as the routine solution was becoming automatic. A factor that almost led to a downfall as concentration lapsed.

As we set off south towards an intended crossing of the Thames we interlopers were invited to witness for ourselves that the NatWest Tower was built in the shape of the company logo. To demonstrate this fascinating fact (?) the Squirrel was turned almost onto its side in a turn of previously unknown severity. The blasé attitude towards the previous experiences evaporated immediately as it was soon found that the body required superhuman efforts to focus' on the centre of interest. Although I did not let myself down on this 'party piece' it was a near thing. I never did take in the wonders of the design - I have my doubts that I was ever expected to!

We never did make the crossing of the Thames. Barkingside called for assistance in diagnosing severe traffic congestion on the A12, a task easily performed from 500 feet. The results of the observation were to appear on the traffic reports of all local radio stations within minutes.

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The return swoop into Lippitts Hill was as smooth as silk. The only losers in the deal were the hapless golfers on the adjoining West Essex Golf Course. They have suffered so many miss-hits over the years from the sudden appearance of police machines that it is a wonder they remain members!

Into a hover, feet from the ground, followed by a gentle traverse towards the spot in front of the control room and setting down on the precise spot we had left an hour before with barely a nudge. Disembarkation is not immediate. The powerful engines are allowed a few minutes to slowly wind down in easy stages prior to the application of the rotor brake and final shut down of the engines.

When all is silent we are released from our seat belts and free to venture into the coolness of the real world outside our 'fish bowl' on the world. In all helicopter flight is unremarkable. Few of its antics feel in any way unsafe or give cause for concern to the novice - but the view, now that is an entirely different matter!

The crew at the ASU are concerned that insufficient is being made of their services. They request that more calls are put their way as a matter of course. On occasion they will be unavailable, but that must happen. Who knows, one day if sufficient call is made for them it may become economic to provide a seven day service as many of the US police services enjoy.

This article was written for the Metropolitan Police Federation magazine Metline in 1990 but never used. The language is of its time and penned before the writer developed a deeper knowledge of the subject matter.



More images from the flight



Edmonton Incineration Plant from the South and the William Girling Reservoir beyond.



The Lee Valley reservoir from the South in the vicinity of Walthamsow. The helicopter is over Forest Road and the image shows the Lockwood Reservoir, the Low Maynard Reservoir and the High Maynard Reservoir. In the distance is the Banbury.