Ann Bihan:

I first flew with Tommy during March 1967 and immediately realised how lucky I was to be flying with such a great character and a lovely man.

Our first flight as a crew was on the 2 March 1967. Not a terribly inspiring debut, Fairford to Bahrain and return but we were soon enjoying the delights of “The Legendary Changi Slip” Akrotiri, Bahrain, Gan, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Tommy’s skill as a pilot became obvious to me in September 1967 on a Battle of Britain fly past at South Marston airfield, now the site of the Honda Factory in Swindon. We had completed several circuits over Marston when a call from the flight deck asked me to
strap myself in, so I assumed that we were returning to Lyneham. We made one last approach to South Marsden doing a touch and go along the runway. Tommy used the power of the four mighty Conway engines and climbed out almost vertically. I am sure he thought he was once again a fast jet pilot and as for me I knew that it would certainly be the maximum g-force I would ever experience in my life. The crowds must surely have been very impressed to see this large passenger aircraft climbing into the sky like a fighter aircraft, leaving a trail of black emissions behind it. I don’t think it probably did the surface of the runway any favours.

Tommy was never keen on flying West about on the schedules to Washington or New York during the cold winter months. He always remarked, "wait until the warmer weather arrives", but my log book shows a trip to Chicago, New York & San Francisco in October 67. This was obviously too good a trip to turn down, much to the delight of the crew.

In July 1968 we flew to India, Singapore, Australia and New Zealand to collect the holders of the Victoria Cross & George Cross Medal for their 6th Reunion and a reception in London with the Queen. In Delhi we picked up Gurkha Rambahadur Limbu VC and in Auckland Captain Charlie Upham VC & Bar, the only double VC winner from WW11 and Sir Edmund Hilary of Everest Fame amongst other VIP’s.

Tommy invited Rambahadur to sit on the flight deck, which he must have enjoyed immensely as he attached himself to the crew and spent all his time with us on our stop overs. I recently saw him on TV, a venerable old man who has done much for Gurkha welfare. He is one of only six living recipients of the VC still living.

January 1969 took us on a Changi slip with an extension to Hong Kong. Our course took us from Singapore to Hong Kong over the eastern coast of Vietnam. This period was the height of the Vietnam War. On the flight deck the crew were able to listen into the radio frequencies being used by the Americans beneath us. Tommy handed me a spare headset and I heard the constant frenzied chatter between helicopter gun ships and air traffic control. It seemed unbelievable and bizarre that we were flying above a war zone. Below us was the carnage of a war while we flew overhead with the passengers blissfully unaware at what was being played out beneath them. It was an unforgettable experience.

These are just a few memories of the time I flew with Tommy. He was a kind man and an amazing captain and colleague to fly with. We all laughed a lot with Tommy and his wicked sense of humour. He was greatly admired by of those whose lives he touched and I think we would all have flown to the ends of the earth with him. I thank him for all the happy times and wonderful memories. I will always think of him when I look up at the sky and see the contrails and think we once did that.

Ann
Heather Barrett:
The Daily Mail Air Race May 1969

In May 1969 The Daily Mail sponsored an Air Race between London and New York to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Alcock and Brown's first crossing of the Atlantic by air. The race was between the top of The GPO Tower in London and the top of The Empire State Building in New York. 10 Squadron decided to compete independently in the subsonic category under the auspices of a North American Training Flight. The aircraft captain was Tommy Thompson and I was selected as “the runner”.

On the 5th May I clocked out of Post Office Tower and rode pillion on an RAF police motorbike to a goods yard at St Pancras Station where a Wessex helicopter flew me to Wisley Airfield. VC10 XR 810 was waiting on the tarmac with engines running to whisk me off to JFK Airport in New York.

On arrival another Wessex flew me to a heliport in Manhattan and thereafter a sports car painted in the “Stars and Stripes” took me to the bottom of The Empire State Building. I clocked in at an overall time of 7 hours 17 mins and 52 seconds. We knew that this was not a winning time and that the return flight with tail winds across the Atlantic would give us a better chance of success.

As a crew we flew on the next day to Chicago and San Francisco thereby continuing the training flight. We returned to New York on the 8th May in preparation for the return flight. Race rules had stipulated that all modes of transport used on the outbound flight were to be replicated on the return flight but at the last minute the “Stars and Stripes” car was not available and I had to travel by motorbike. This was to be a critical factor in the final result.

I clocked out of The Empire State Building and rode pillion to the heliport. The bike rider looked like a Hell’s Angel and I clung on for grim death as we sped along the New York streets. The Wessex again took me from Manhattan to JFK. I entered the VC10 via the forward belly hold freight door and was hauled inside by George Sperring the flight engineer. We braced ourselves for the take off. No health and safety in those days.

Once airborne I went onto the flight deck to find the crew ecstatic at the short time it had taken me from The Empire State. The Nav’s calculation of the flight time led us to believe we could win our category for subsonic flight. We landed at Wisley after a flight time of 6 hours. The Wessex Flight and the ride on the motorbike followed and I clocked in at a time of 6 hours 29 mins and 11 secs. It was a winning time.

However the broadcaster Clement Freud realised that we had changed the mode of transport in New York without notifying the officials. This had been a complete oversight
but rules are rules. It transpired that Mr Freud was unhappy at the number of prizes that had already been won by the military and he was key to us being disqualified.

It was a bitter disappointment but Rothmans of Pall Mall, the sponsors of the sub-sonic category, recognised that the VC10 had indeed completed the crossing in record time. So at a party held at 10 Squadron Headquarters at Brize Norton they presented the squadron with a silver salver engraved with “For meritorious achievement and good sportsmanship for the fastest subsonic time from the centre of New York to the heart of London.” That salver remains with the squadron silver and is a fitting reminder of the wonderful VC10.

Heather

RIP Tommy
xxx