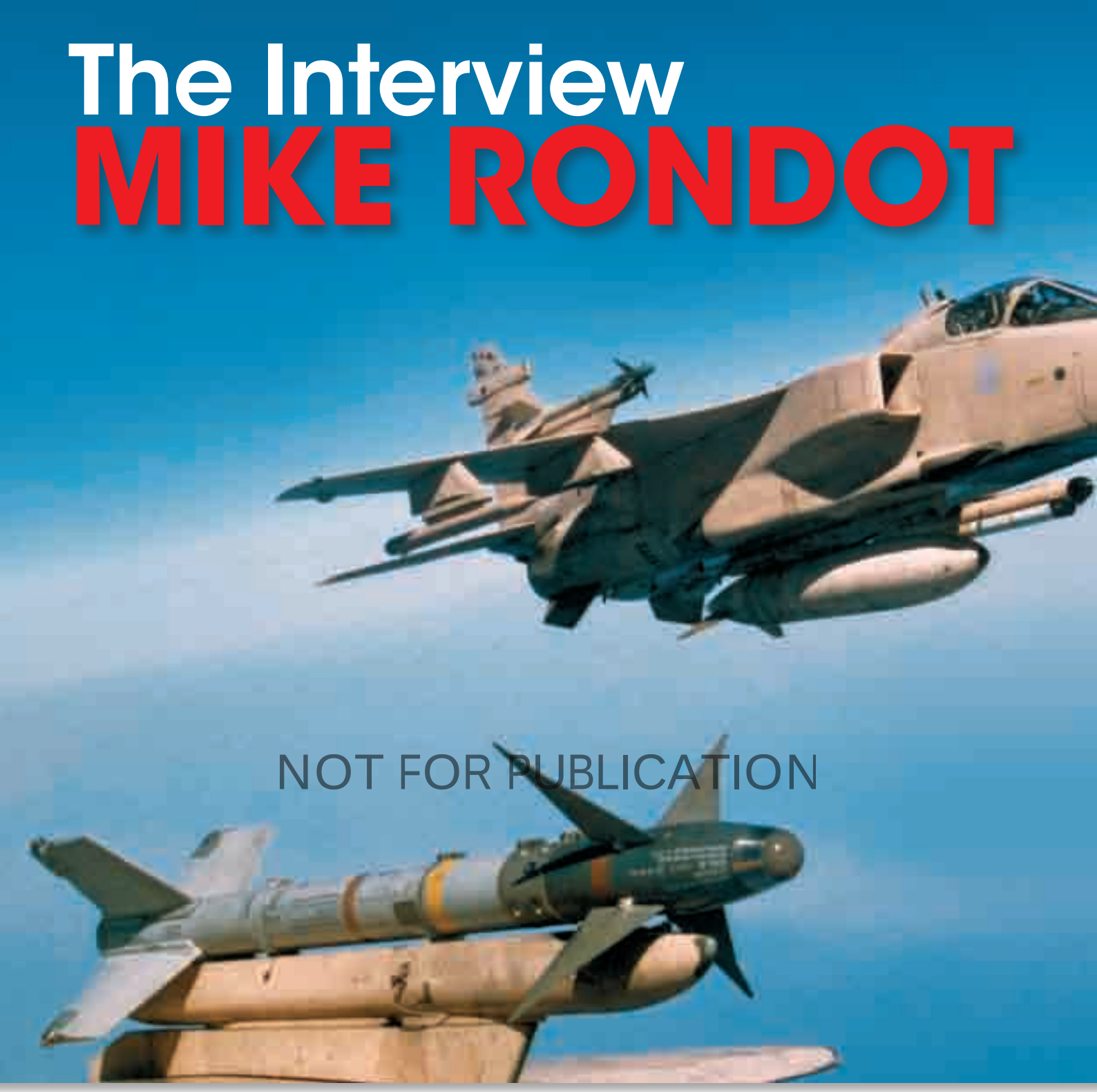
The Interview
MIKE RONDOT



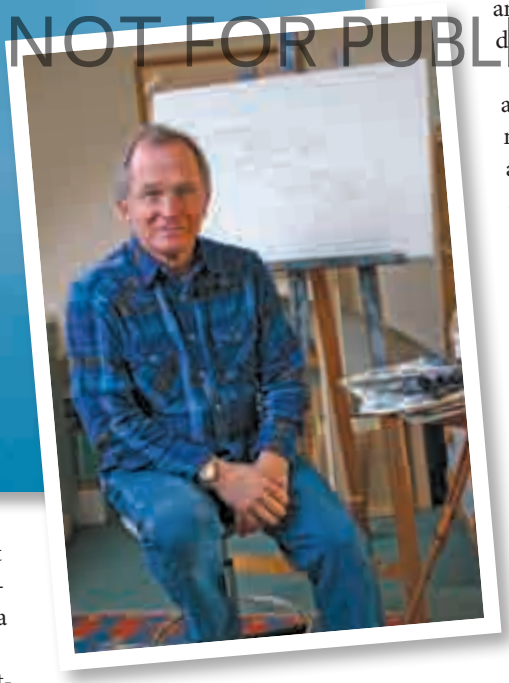
The work of this renowned aviation artist has long been influenced by his experiences as an operational RAF pilot — and not least his years on the Jaguar

words: BEN DUNNELL

The SEPECAT Jaguar always had its detractors. Underpowered and uninspiring, they would say, especially in its early RAF service days. But many of those who flew it, those who really knew it, thought differently. They would, and still do, defend the 'Jag' to the last. And in Mike Rondot, who spent 13 years as a Jaguar pilot and notched up 29 combat missions in the Gulf conflict of 1991, it has long had a most eloquent advocate.

Mike left the RAF just over a year after 'Desert Storm', whereupon there lay before him the various options that present themselves to the retired military pilot. Many go to the airlines, or take up some other job in the commercial aviation world or the defence industry, but not this one. Already highly acclaimed as an aviation artist, his work informed by his flying experiences, Mike decided to make this his full-time career. He chose to stay in Norfolk after spending 10 years stationed at RAF Coltishall, and now lives and works in splendidly rural surroundings out in the sticks near Dereham. The peace of this setting comes as quite a contrast to the noise, heat and adrenalin of

▲ The Jaguar surprised me in the Gulf. I didn't think I'd get an aeroplane touching supersonic at 34,000ft with four bombs on it, plus a full war fit ▼



This photograph: Mike Rondot's pilot's eye view from within a pair of Jaguar GR1As en route to their target during 'Desert Storm' in January 1991.
Mike Rondot

Right: Mike in his studio in Dillington, Norfolk, during December 2009. He's just started work on a new Jaguar painting.
Ben Dunnell

operational fast jet flying, about which Mike speaks so authoritatively, and with more than a little dry humour.

In fact, the course of his post-service life harks back to his first year out of school, spent as what he calls 'a very non-professional artist'. But upon joining the RAF in 1967, it soon became clear that many other young men who had grown up through the '50s and '60s, an era when British aviation still seemed to reign supreme, had had exactly the same idea. Even with significant numbers of students dropping out at every stage of the training process, by the time Mike graduated from the Gnat-equipped No 4 Flying Training School at Valley in 1969 there was a significant backlog of newly-qualified pilots, exacerbated by the drawdown of the RAF's overseas commitments and the retirement of numerous older types. 'The figures that were thrown around were that there were 700 surplus aircrew in the RAF, plus us going through the machine at the same time', Mike recalls.

Eight members of Mike's Valley course ended up on Canberras for their so-called holding postings, in his case No 85 Squadron at Binbrook, a target facilities unit with a mixture of Canberra T19s, B2s and T4s. 'It was a pretty hard pill to swallow', he told *Aircraft*. 'We sometimes found ourselves flying a Canberra target for mates of ours who were on the Lightning OCU. We also used to make a big thing of it that there we were, 23 years old, and some of the aeroplanes we were flying were 21 years old. Now, if you're fortunate enough to be flying a 21-year-old aeroplane in the RAF of 2009, you'd think yourself lucky.

'In 1970 this was seen as a kind of punishment posting. There were still strike Canberra squadrons in Germany, and a lot of the 'bad boys' or people who'd had an interesting career or interesting moment, to put it politely, found themselves back in the UK on No 85 Squadron. On my first day a couple of these old 'hairies' came up to me, took me to one side and said, 'What have you done? How did a fresh-faced, innocent-looking young man like you end up here?"

Mike was on 85 for just under three years. 'The bulk of it was a very uninspiring job, and it was difficult to be motivated, but we made the best of it', he says. There was still a significant pilot backlog, and having to be an air traffic controller for the next three years was even worse. 'But after that things started looking up', Mike continued, 'and I joined No 39 Squadron at Wyton in 1976 to fly the Canberra PR9. The great thing about flying PR9s in the '70s was that the role was tactical low-level reconnaissance, so here was this big plank-winged aeroplane with plenty of power, big cameras, lots of range, and instead of being up in the ether we did most of our flying down at 250ft.

'Our war role was to deploy to our forward operating base at Ørland in Norway, and our theatre of operations would be north Norway up to the Kola Peninsula. We deployed there, and all over the rest of Europe; we also had occasional but interesting operational deployments to places like Hong Kong and Belize, in order to regularly update intelligence.'

Actually going to war in the unarmed PR9 was a different prospect. As Mike describes, 'The only real defence the PR9 had was that it was very fast — surprisingly fast for an aeroplane like that. It was limited to 450kt indicated, but you could pretty much get to 450kt on one engine. I once took a PR9 up to 510kt before I realised that I'd mis-read the airspeed, and I wasn't the first, nor the last, to do that'. But a very senior Israeli Air Force commander who visited the squadron in 1977 offered a note of realism. After a detailed tour, he addressed the Canberra pilots. 'He shook his head and said, 'I admire what you do, and you get great results with the aeroplane that you've got, but I have to tell you that anything below 600kt is not survivable."

As much as he liked the PR9, Mike wanted out. 'All I'd ever I wanted to do was fly single-seat. As far as I was concerned, I'd been marking time since 1969. It was now 1979, and it had taken me 10 years to get into a Hunter... What I really wanted more than anything else was to fly something that had paint on the rudder pedals, something that was factory-fresh, so I plumped for Jaguars.'

After 'six weeks of fun' on the Fast Jet Lead-in course at Valley on the Hawk, and, finally, that hitherto elusive Hunter course with No 2 Tactical Weapons Unit at Lossiemouth, Mike stayed at the Morayshire base to learn to fly the Jaguar with No 226 Operational Conversion Unit. 'Probably the greatest asset the Jaguar had for most pilots coming straight to it was that it was a very easy aeroplane to fly',

he says. 'It was pretty much viceless in terms of basic handling'. Yes, its 'phenomenally noisy' cockpit, caused by the air conditioning, was an annoyance, but nonetheless Mike thought the Jaguar 'felt great, really nice. Gone were the days of every aeroplane you got into having the switches in a different place... Here in the Jaguar was an aeroplane which had switches that just said 'ON OFF AUTO'. The briefing was just to put everything at AUTO. Fantastic! The best-known one was the fuel system. It had a very complicated fuel system, with tanks all over it — in the wings, drop tanks, fuselage tanks, collector tanks — but only a brave man moved the switch out of AUTO.

'It didn't seem particularly underpowered at first, because on the OCU you were doing most of your early flights in an aeroplane that didn't have any underwing stores. Flying it clean-wing it seemed very adequately powered. Once, I'd come down for the weekend from Lossiemouth to Wyton, where I was still living, and Dave Bagshaw, who was the display pilot at the time, had also been down to East Anglia for a display. He landed at Coltishall, where he lived, and I was to go on the Monday morning to collect that aeroplane and take it back to Lossiemouth. That was my second solo flight in a Jaguar. I took off from Coltishall on the southerly runway, turned right in the climb, and I remember the climbing speed was 450kt. I was climbing at 450kt, going through about 12,000ft; I was still over Norfolk, I hadn't coasted-out, and I looked inside to make sure everything was as it should be and was horrified to see the Mach meter just nudging Mach 0.99. There I was, going up in a very steep climb at 450kt, and just about to go supersonic. Another few seconds and I would have been. So it didn't strike me as an underpowered aeroplane.

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'However, a bit later on in the OCU course when we were flying with underwing stores I remember flying down a fairly wide valley with some weather at the end of it. The last time I'd done that I was in a Hawk, and if you want to go round a corner in a Hawk you just stand it on its ear and pull, and the wing will lift it round the corner. At 420kt in the Jaguar, I did the same thing, and not a lot happened. The nose moved, but the aeroplane didn't, so I had to put on full afterburner and as much pull as I could take. I was thinking, 'This aeroplane is not going to go round the corner'. That was pretty much when I figured out that it could do with a bit more wing and a bit more power.'

That said, when Mike was posted to No 31 Squadron at Brüggen in September 1980, he soon found that the Jaguar 'was the one to be in when it came to flying in the standard north German bad weather'. In those conditions, the USAF and every other NATO air arm remained firmly on the ground, but not the Jaguars. 'We used to say that if you followed the black smoke you'd get to your target, because that was where the Jaguars were going.

'It was a very interesting time at Brüggen, the height of the Cold War, four Jaguar squadrons there, and the place was just... it's hard to describe it, really, but the people there were very good at what they did. Because of the nature of the role, all of the squadrons had to be able to operate to a very universal standard so a pilot could go from one squadron to the other, to lead a four-ship, to lead an eight-ship, to make up a four-ship and so on. There wasn't time to brief individual squadron characteristics, so everybody was singing from the same sheet.

'The great thing at Brüggen was the Taceval — the sign at the front of the station read 'The peacetime role is to train for war', and someone had scrubbed out 'war' and put 'Taceval'. It was taken really seriously, and there were lots of boxes that had to be ticked in order to get a '1' at Taceval. Some of them just couldn't be ticked, but they would never accept defeat on that. You couldn't score a maximum if the aeroplane didn't have self-defence armament; what they meant was 'You need Sidewinders'. Well, we didn't have Sidewinders. We didn't have the pylons, we didn't have the switchery, we didn't have anything. But an engineer rigged up a Sidewinder on a Jaguar, pretty much bodge-taping the wiring from the underside of the wing into the cockpit, and with a five-amp light switch to fire the missile. They did this in a hangar to show the Taceval team that, in theory, given a box of Sidewinders and a box of bits, they could put a Sidewinder on a Jaguar.

'Similarly, we didn't have a night role. We didn't have night vision goggles in those days, and we didn't have a radar. We had a RADALT, so we used to fly around Germany at night 500ft above the highest obstacle. On a nice clear moonlit night, it was a pretty good experience, because you would fly a route, you'd go to Nordhorn range and drop a bomb. It became almost a 'rite of passage' to get a night DH on time. We trolled around Germany in all kinds of weather at between 500 and 700ft. You'd be there on an inky black night thinking 'Why am I here?', relying on the RADALT and the nav kit.'

Mike's decade at Coltishall began when he was posted to No 41 Squadron in 1982. Taceval was taken very seriously there, of course, despite yet more limitations — for instance, using dummy Rapier missile batteries mocked up using oil drums and plastic drainpipes because there weren't enough real ones — but Mike remembers that there were significant differences. 'The great breath of fresh air about coming from Germany to Coltishall was that Coltishall somehow managed to achieve exactly the same results, the same flying hours per aeroplane, with absolutely a fraction of the stress and in a fraction of the working day.'

Squadron exchanges were a regular occurrence at Coltishall, and while on 41 Mike participated in a particularly interesting one with F6 wing of the Swedish Air Force at Karlsborg, flying the AJ37 Viggen. Right from the start, he and his colleagues realised that much was exceptional about the way the Swedes trained and operated, not least considering that the majority of the pilots were effectively doing national service. 'When you looked at the people who were flying the aeroplanes, I thought that we could learn from this, definitely. The guy who flew me was a Honda 500cc works motorcycle rider; they had rally drivers, go-kart racers, all kinds of things. These weren't people with good degrees in underwater basket-weaving, these were people who were recruited to fly the Viggen.

A four-ship of 'Jags' from No 41 Squadron captured in around 1983-84. Mike Rondot

No 85 Squadron operated several Canberra T19s when Mike joined the target facilities unit. This is WH724 climbing out at Binbrook in 1971. via Mike Rondot

A Swedish Air Force Sk37 Viggen landing at Coltishall on 19 September 1983, the start of F6 wing's exchange visit to No 41 Squadron (this jet was in fact borrowed from F15). Mike Rondot's experience of the two-seat Viggen was one of the highlights of his flying career. John Dunnell

Opposite page: In the circuit at Binbrook in 1971 with No 85 Squadron Canberra B2 WP515. via Mike Rondot

Above: At quite high level for a Canberra PR9 sortie during the 1970s, this is XH166 in about 1977-78. Mike Rondot

Below: Jaguar GR1 XX744/DJ of No 31 Squadron on approach to Brüggen in 1981. Mike Rondot

'The first to go up in the Viggen was our boss, Hilton Moses. I remember going out with him to the aeroplane and seeing him laughing and smiling, and then seeing him getting out and coming back to the crewroom looking like he'd just been put through some kind of crazy combination between a fairground ride and a washing machine. Then I went flying in the afternoon, and it changed my life.

'They would fly around at Mach 0.95, 650kt give or take a bit, and they trained at 10m. We flew through firebreaks in trees, we flew all over northern Sweden at 30ft, and we never went below 600kt. All of this, I should add, was done under about a 150 to 200ft overcast with no breaks. In the RAF, anybody who wanted to get old would not have flown in that weather. After about 40 minutes, we pulled up into cloud, and the pilot then flew a 4-degree hands-off approach with his hands on his head into a remote airstrip, landed, reversed into a parking bay, did an engine-running refuel without any communication with the people on the ground except hand signals, taxied out and took off in the direction that we'd landed in. Wind direction just wasn't factored. Then we did some approaches onto roadways, flying at 15 or 20ft to clear the cars and warn them that there were going to be some aeroplane movements before doing practice approaches. And the aerobatics beggared belief.

'The next day, it was time to take the Swedish pilots flying in the Jaguar. I was at a bit of a loss as to how I was going to explain to this guy that we flew at 420kt when they flew at 620kt. So I decided that the way ahead was to leave the part-throttle reheat in, accelerate to 620kt and then give him the aeroplane. That's what I did — I took off, and gave him control at 620kt and about 150ft. He pushed the nose down, took the Jaguar down to 30ft and proceeded to fly it at about 30 to 40ft and 600kt-plus quite happily. It knocked all the myths about who's got the best aeroplanes, who's got the best-trained pilots and so on. The Swedish Air Force had aeroplanes that were light years ahead of anything the RAF had, or was going to get, or has got now, and their pilots were in a totally different league to us. This was not just an individual — I flew with three of them, and all three were like that. Each of them was able to fly the Jaguar faster and lower from the back seat than I could from the front seat.

'After that experience, I didn't think that I would be able to cope with continuing in the Jaguar if I went and flew other aeroplanes. It would have been very depressing. I did fly the F-104, which I enjoyed, but never the F-15, F-16, F/A-18 or anything like that. If I had, I don't know how I would have managed to go back to the Jaguar.'

Mind you, Mike was never anything other than happy with his lot. 'Life at Colt was great. We had the best job, we had the best aeroplane, we were on the best base. Coltishall was always a very happy base — I've said before that the thermometer of morale in the RAF was Coltishall, and when Coltishall started to have morale problems they knew they were in trouble, not that it ever did.'

▲ Anybody who was not absolutely terrified of the low-level mission had not been paying attention at the briefings ▼

Nonetheless, says Mike, 'The knives were out for the Jaguar year in, year out, and when the Berlin Wall came down the knives were seriously out, for both the Jaguar and Coltishall'. Then the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 changed everything. An initial Jaguar detachment went almost immediately to Thumrait in Oman, moving north to Muharraq in Bahrain that October and joined the following month by a second deployment, of which Mike was part.

'At that time it was still perceived that the Jaguar would operate at very low level, so that's how we trained', says Mike. His assessment of those tactics is stark. 'Our mission was not survivable over a period. I think our attrition would have been... well, luckily we never found out. To fly an aeroplane that doesn't have any armour over a lot of people shooting at you, you're not looking at a long-term prospect.'

Wiser counsels prevailed, thankfully, and under the leadership of Wg Cdr Bill Pixton the role of the Jaguars was changed to medium-level strike just a few days before 'Desert Storm' began on 17 January 1991. In Mike's words, 'We were very relieved about changing to medium-level, I have to say. There was no doubt that, although everybody was ready to fly the low-level mission, anybody who was not absolutely terrified had not been paying attention at the briefings.'

The 'Desert Cats' were unable to go into action immediately, as Mike remembers. 'We didn't get airborne on the first day. We got into the cockpits and started the engines and sat and waited for the fog to clear, but it didn't clear. Our first proper mission was on 19 January, and even then the weather was not really fit. We'd briefed everything that we wouldn't do — we wouldn't fly in cloud in formation, we wouldn't fly straight and level over the border, we wouldn't go beneath 12,000ft, we wouldn't fly under an overcast or over an undercast. Well, we got airborne on the 19th and we did all of them. I found myself in close formation at 12,000ft over the middle of Kuwait in cloud.'

Mike's target on that occasion was a SAM-2 missile site. Devoid of targeting pods, the Jaguars tended to concentrate on fixed targets — 'artillery, rocket launchers, missile sites, ammunition storage and so on. There were a couple of interesting ones — on one morning mission, we brought back some photographs of what looked like a scrapyard next to a barracks. The photo interpreters were fairly convinced that there were some containers being buried underground, so that was given as a target. Whatever they were hiding, it was probably worth bombing.

'At the time all the missions seemed to be extremely hazardous and it was a huge relief to get back... there were some which didn't strike us as being in the least bit hazardous, but then we would get back and during the post-mission intelligence briefing we'd hear that the Americans had lost an A-10 or an F-16 pretty much in the area where we'd just been. I guess any sense of security or danger is just a perception that you feel at the time that bears no relation to what is really going on.'

Throughout 'Desert Storm', the Jaguars performed brilliantly. As Mike says, 'The aeroplane was as good as it was ever going to get, really, until about 1997. The Sidewinders that were always promised arrived and were wired up, and actually improved the performance in spite of the added weight because the lift from the wings of the Sidewinders

MIKE RONDOT

Clockwise from top:

The first 'pink' RAF Jaguar was XZ104 of No 6 Squadron, which trialled this temporary finish in March 1989. It is seen in formation with a Spanish Air Force Mirage F1CE of 462 Esc at Gando, during a unit exchange at the Gran Canaria base. Mike Rondot

Jaguar GR1A XZ118 and a sister aircraft at low level during 'Desert Storm' in January 1991. The 'Desert Cats' flew 618 combat sorties without loss, in the course of which they dropped 750 bombs and 393 cluster bombs. Mike Rondot

A rare air-to-air view of Jaguar GR1A XZ375 with its nose art and mission symbols. Flt Lt Mike Seares is at the controls here as he and Mike Rondot make their way to a target in the KTO (Kuwait Theatre of Operations) on about 24 February 1991. Mike Rondot

Mike in the cockpit of *The Avid Guardian Reader*. Shots of him in the Jaguar were used several times by the newspaper during the war, and it invited him to lunch afterwards! via Mike Rondot

'Welcome Home Desert Cats' reads the banner at Coltishall in mid-March 1991 as the Jaguars return from the Gulf. On the right, Mike is turning onto the flightline in XZ375. via Mike Rondot

Opposite page: A typically serious post-mission debrief at Muharraq between Mike Rondot (right) and his wingman, the late Flt Lt Mike Seares. Mike Rondot

overcame the weight/drag penalty. Radios were improved, and we got the CRV-7 rockets. The great asset the Jaguar had was that it had fantastic groundcrew, just fantastic. They seemed to love their aeroplane, they liked their job, and they were very pleased and proud to be able to produce 12 serviceable aeroplanes day after day.'

The groundcrew also produced some memorable nose art for the Jaguars. Famously, Mike's was named *The Avid Guardian Reader*. 'People think that I was the *Guardian* reader, but it's nothing to do with me. A good friend of mine called Peter Clarke was a cartoonist on the *Guardian*, and at the time the paper was doing a lot of hand-wringing not just about the war and the legitimacy of it but also the nose art. Peter Clarke sent me a *Guardian* T-shirt and a copy of the paper, and asked if I could get my photograph taken wearing the T-shirt reading the *Guardian* in an aeroplane, so that he could pin it up in the staffroom to annoy Paul Foot. So that's what I did. I got my picture taken with the *Guardian* T-shirt on reading the *Guardian* in a cockpit. Then I folded up the newspaper and stuffed it in my pocket.

'As it happened, the next day when I went flying the newspaper was not in my pocket but down in the map bag. As I was taxying out to go flying, there was a gaggle of Associated Press photographers there and TV cameras, and I thought, 'Here is a perfect opportunity'. So I pulled out the newspaper and hung it over the side. That got back to the *Guardian* offices at Farringdon Road, so we'd had our little joke. The photograph was used by the *Guardian*, after another huge amount of hand-wringing — here was a picture of a warplane with the pilot waving a copy of the *Guardian* — in an advert for the *International Guardian*. The byline went, 'In time of war, you need to be well-informed'.

'Subsequently, I had a postcard from an anonymous well-wisher who signed the card, 'Best wishes from an avid *Guardian* reader'. On the day that postcard came I'd been told by the Warrant Officer (Eng) that the troops were going to go out and paint one of these women, or one of those politically-sensitive cartoon characters, on my aeroplane, so rather than have that I nipped out with a felt-tip pen and did my own artwork — I wrote on it *The Avid Guardian Reader*. So I wasn't the *Guardian* reader, that well-wisher was.'

Plenty more well-wishers lined the roads around Coltishall when the 'Desert Cats' returned in mid-March. 'I don't think anybody would argue against the fact that the Gulf War saved the aeroplane, and gave it a future', says Mike. 'It surprised a lot of people — it surprised me. I didn't think I'd get an aeroplane just touching supersonic at 34,000ft with four bombs on it, plus a full war fit, and full of fuel. The only reason it wasn't supersonic was because I wasn't in full reheat.'

▲ The reality is quite often that you fly on a really horrible, windy, wet day... that's how my style came about ▼

The Jaguars may now have been far from retirement, but Mike wasn't. He'd resigned from the RAF on 4 July 1989, but had to serve three years' notice, so he didn't actually leave until 4 July 1992. Just before that, he was part of a Jaguar three-ship that escorted the Confederate Air Force's B-24 Liberator *Diamond 'Lil'* across East Anglia into Norwich Airport in early June 1992. 'I was thinking then what it must have been like to fly a Liberator to Berlin at 140, 150mph into a 60mph headwind — four hours to get there, half an hour over the target and four hours to get back. Then three days later I climbed into a Jaguar and flew from Coltishall to Berlin, total time 40 minutes!'

Mike's return from his trip to Berlin's Schönefeld Airport in Jaguar GR1A XZ398, a static participant at the ILA 92 airshow, was his last RAF flight. 'I had taken an ATPL, an instrument rating and everything, and the day after I left the RAF I went down to Bournemouth and renewed them. Then I pretty much put them in a glass box that said 'Break in case of emergency'. Being an airline pilot appealed, but it didn't appeal enough. Quality of life was more important than quality of income.'

A career as a full-time artist duly beckoned. He had already made his name in the field, not least thanks to the characteristic 'Rondot style' of wet runways and moody skies conjuring up images of aircraft in their operational element. 'It's based on experience', says Mike. 'People who don't fly aeroplanes tend to over-sentimentalise not just the aeroplanes, but also the experience of flying them. The reality is quite often that you fly on a really horrible, windy, wet day, you fight your way through the weather to go low-level, when you do get down there it's a real struggle to fly through or around the weather, and then you come back at the end of it all and you find a blustery, flooded runway. That's how it came about — it's part of the reality of flying.'

It's something Mike knows more about than most. In the Gulf, he says, 'There came a point when just going to the target and dropping the bombs was not enough; I wanted to drop the bombs *on* the target, to get them absolutely spot-on'. Now, getting it absolutely spot-on is a principle he applies to his art, just one of the reasons why his work can be found on walls around the world, not least those of countless squadron crewrooms. Whether in the RAF or as an artist, experience has always stood Mike Rondot in good stead.

To buy Mike Rondot prints, contact Collectair Limited Editions on 01362 860890 or e-mail mikerondot@hotmail.com