

# Michael Smith

Born 1939. Helicopter pilot and entrepreneur.  
Available online at [www.livesretold.co.uk](http://www.livesretold.co.uk)

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*Acknowledgement and thanks to the internet sources from which this life story was archived by Alex Reid.*

# 1. Mike Remembers the Navy

*Now is The following is archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Ministry of Defence website at [www.royalnavy.mod.uk](http://www.royalnavy.mod.uk). It was published in April 2016.*



*Mike Smith with his son Quentin, both record-breaking helicopter pilots.*

## **Veteran Borneo Wessex pilot returns for nostalgic Culdrose visit**

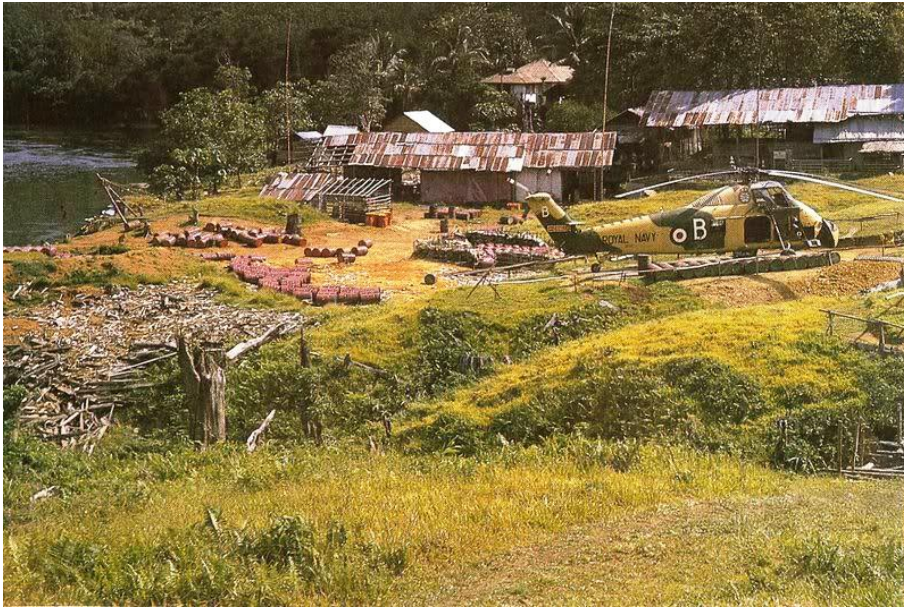
When veteran Royal Navy helicopter pilot Lieutenant Mike Smith was last at Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose he was part of 848 Naval Air Squadron, flying Wessex Mk 5's.

50 years on and Mike still remembers working at the Base in the early 1960's, on flying courses and living locally in Breage, near Helston with his young family. In those days the skies around West Cornwall were full on Whirlwinds, Hillers and Wessex helicopters - mostly training for exercises with the fleet at sea or operations in the far flung corners of the world.

“I joined the Royal Navy in 1958 and began flying helicopters at Culdrose with 705 Naval Air Squadron, then moved onto Whirlwinds and Anti-submarine warfare at Portland in Dorset before joining 814 onboard HMS Hermes,” said Mike. “When I converting to Wessex 1's I served on the old Ark Royal before becoming an instructor and joined 848 NAS, flying Wessex 5's.”

Mike's time at Culdrose was only part of his colourful Naval Career and with 848 NAS he deployed to the Far East 1965 onboard HMS Albion – one of new Commando Carriers re-rolled from Light Aircraft Carriers in support of the Royal Marines and Amphibious Warfare. His mission, as a flight commander was to take him deep into the jungles of Borneo with four Wessex 5's to 'Nanga Gaat' Forward Operating Base (FOB). It was during this time that the Commando helicopter

squadrons were given their nickname 'The Junglies' because of their long involvement in the jungle, combating Indonesian insurgents.



*Wessex helicopter at Nanga Gaat, Borneo.*

“We took over from 845 Squadron and our tasking came direct from the Army who were operating all over the country. Some of the jobs we did also involved the Borneo Survey, flying from hill top to hill top. They were charting the region for the very first time. Our maps were handed from squadron to squadron, all hand-drawn and very precious. In fact several of the features they charted were named after our pilots. The Wessex was a great ‘Work-horse’, it managed to do at least 90 % of the things we needed it to do.”



*Landing in a clearing in the Borneo jungle.*

The squadron also provided emergency rescue cover across Borneo and Mike played a prominent part in evacuating an army patrol which included two injured soldiers. The rescue took three days, during part of which Mike was flown for seven miles hanging from a strap beneath the helicopter holding a stretcher at the end of a rope from the wire winch.

“It’s been brilliant to come back and see today’s Fleet Air Arm today. The aircraft have changed so much, the Merlin is amazing; it’s big and very technical in comparison to our Wessex. Culdrose has also changed, but there are a few areas that still look familiar, it’s always been a very nice place to work.”



*Lifting Gurkha troops in Borneo.*

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## 2. Mike's Round the World Record

*The following was archived in December 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the website of the Boeing aircraft company.*

### **British Pilots set a Speed Record for Around the World Helicopter Flight**

Two British pilots flying a 16-year-old Boeing MD 500D helicopter have set a speed record for flying around the world, knocking four days off the previous record.

The pair, Stephen Good and Michael Smith of HeliAir Helicopters, Wellsbourne, Warwick, England, used only 13 1/2 days and about 200 flight hours to complete their 20,000-mile trip. The journey began July 29 at Boeing Field in Seattle and concluded Aug. 11 at the same location.

The trip included flight segments of up to 730 miles over open ocean between Greenland and Labrador and a visit to the North Pole. The journey was virtually trouble-free, with only a partially blocked fuel filter that was corrected in flight, and head winds and heavy turbulence that buffeted the helicopter during most of the trip.

The MD 500D helicopter, which Good purchased in 1996, had previously accumulated about 3,000 flight hours in service with the Albuquerque, N.M., Police Department.

Good and Smith made their record-setting journey without financial sponsorship and with limited outside help. The pair did their own mechanical work and used existing facilities for fuel and maintenance. The helicopter required a mid-trip 100-hour inspection, which was performed overnight by March Helicopters in England.

Other record-setting trips have received assistance from manufacturers, often including an accompanying fixed-wing aircraft carrying spare parts and licensed mechanics. "We couldn't have done this better in any other helicopter," Smith said. "All we had to do was put oil in it."

The pair were inspired to make their trip after meeting previous record holder Ron Bower. "After talking to him, we knew it was a challenge we had to take," Good said. "It was a good, fun thing to do."

The trip, which was flown mostly over the northern ice pack, including the North Pole, covered more than 19,800 miles, which is the required minimum to establish an around-the-world record. The miles flown were about the same as flown by Bower in his record-setting flight and covered all meridians. The helicopter was equipped with a 100-gallon auxiliary fuel tank, a global positioning system for navigation and a satellite telephone for communicating. The pair said the arctic terrain, over-ocean flying and heavy turbulence made the trip exceptionally difficult.

### 3. Quentin's Antarctic Rescue

*The following is archived, with acknowledgement and thanks, from a post by Cacophonix in June 2018 on the normal.org website. Quentin Smith is the son of Mike Smith.*

Two British explorers hoping to be the first pilots to fly a helicopter to both the North and South Poles were rescued yesterday when their aircraft ditched in the Antarctic. An international rescue operation was launched after Quentin Smith, 38, and Steve Brooks, 42, were forced to land in the sea, 35 miles from a remote island.

They drifted for nine hours in a liferaft before they were picked up by a Chilean warship. They were said to be "safe and well".



*A Robinson R44 helicopter.*

The two men were flying a Robinson R44 helicopter from Cape Horn on a 400-mile flight to the Pole when they were forced to make an emergency landing.

In October they had used the same helicopter to become the first pilots to fly a piston-engined craft to the North Pole.

With sea temperatures at around 1C (34F) they were able to clamber into their liferaft and activate emergency beacons to alert search and rescue services.

Mr Brooks also used a mobile telephone to call his wife, Jo, a photographer, at their home in Shepherd's Bush, west London, urging her to raise the alarm.

The emergency beacon signal was eventually picked up by the Chile Mission Control Centre, which contacted the RAF Air Rescue Co-ordination Centre at Kinloss in Morayshire.

Controllers immediately alerted rescue teams on the Falkland Islands and the Royal Navy's ice patrol ship Endurance, which launched two Lynx helicopters to search for the men.

However, shortly after 6am, a Chilean twin-engined Otter aircraft located the pair. Its pilot alerted a navy vessel, which rescued them a few hours later.

Mr Brooks's wife said yesterday she was "absolutely relieved" that her husband had been found safe and well.

"He phoned me in the middle of the night to tell me they were both all right and to call 999," she said. "I was in touch with the rescue services throughout the night.

"I wasn't in absolute shock when I got the call because I know the risks involved when doing these trips. For our honeymoon last year we spent three months travelling 18,000 miles in a helicopter from Alaska to Chile.

"This certainly won't put him off doing other adventures. I think my only hope is to buy him a set of golf clubs."

Mr Smith's father, Michael, who runs HeliAir, a helicopter training school, said he had received a message from Mr Brooks at about 5am yesterday.

"Only the first bit of the message was intelligible. It said, 'This is an emergency. We are down 35 miles north of Smith Island'. I couldn't understand the rest," he said.

"I started phoning around, but by that time everyone was already on the case. We are all delighted."

Mr Smith, a former world champion in helicopter aerobatics, lives in Holland Park, west London, with his wife, Juliette, and eight-month-old son, Maximus.

She said she was "extremely proud" of him. "This is absolutely not a failure," she said. "Exploring is his life. I knew that when I married him, and that will never change."

It still remains unclear why the men were forced to ditch. According to Mr Smith's mother, Mary, the helicopter in which they were travelling is among the most reliable available. "I just can't understand what could have gone wrong," she said.

"It's just a real pity. Steve and Quentin had flown a helicopter together to the North Pole and really wanted to reach the South Pole."

The men were yesterday taken to Marsh Island, just off Antarctica, and are expected to travel on Endurance to Port Stanley.

With their taste for adventure, it is unlikely that their abortive trip to the South Pole will be their last expedition.

When they landed at the North Pole in October they dug a small hole in the ice to serve as an ice bucket and raised their glasses to toast themselves.

Last year, Mr Brooks and a fellow adventurer went into the record books for becoming the first explorers to drive across the Bering Strait between Alaska and Siberia.

## 4. Quentin Saves Two

*The following article, by Delphine Chui, was archived in December 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Esquire website at [www.esquire.com](http://www.esquire.com). It was published in November 2017.*

### **How My Watch Saved My Life: One Man's Story On How He Cheated Death**



Google Quentin Smith and you'd be forgiven for thinking you've stumbled across someone's obituary. As one of the world's most renowned helicopter pilots (who casually first sat in the pilot seat aged five), 52-year-old Quentin, or Captain Q as he's known in the industry, seems to have a habit of cheating death on repeat.

The two-time helicopter aerobatic world champion has circumnavigated the world twice and made headlines this year when his Eurocopter AS350 hit the rear deck of a 195ft Bacarella yacht, before dramatically flipping into the water.

But that wasn't his first dice with death. Breaking records as the first helicopter pilot to fly to both the North and South poles, and gaining his pilot's license at 20, means on any given day, Captain Q can find himself in a fair share of sketchy situations. Like when he crashed into the Antarctic in 2003 and drifted on a life-raft for almost ten hours before being rescued by the Navy.

He shared his amazing (and mostly terrifying) stories with us at Esquire Townhouse during his Breitling talk this year (scroll down to watch the video), and it appears the way to survive if you're caught in dire straits is a combo of a) being a badass and b) having the right tech. The right tech being a Breitling, the master of technical watches.



"It is slightly embarrassing," he admits. "The first time was in the Drake passage (famously known as the 'roughest sea in the world' with one degree centigrade water). "People were reluctant for us to fly across because they said it was impossible. And, within 20 seconds, we were hitting the water.

"It was enough time to reorganise our lives and we did it in a relatively positive frame of mind. I pressed send on a satellite phone, I called the air traffic control telephone number but it was in Spanish and neither of us understood each other.

"So, I phoned my Pa and said, 'Hi there, don't worry too much but I'm probably not going to make it. I'm in a dinghy and we're all fine and this is where we are."

Stuck in a life raft for nine and a half hours with his co-pilot Steve, Quentin said they had no prospect of surviving. "I guess that makes you less fearful of dying," he tells us.

"So it was much more pleasant except that Steve felt seasick and I just remember feeling terribly sorry for him that he would die feeling ill."

It was then Captain Q thought of his watch, the key to his survival and one that every adventurer should wear based on the following. "I then signalled my 1215 VHF Breitling watch which you twist and pull to get an antenna up and it sends a bleep to headquarters as an automatic emergency notification. And, then a Chilean icebreaker came and found us after being alerted by the watch."

This wasn't Quentin's only qualification as a member of 'The Goldfish Club' (the worldwide association of people who have escaped an aircraft that crashed into the water), though.

As the founder of HQ Aviation flight school in Buckinghamshire (which holds the biggest helicopter fleet in the UK, naturally), the Guinness World Record holder and 'God in a flying suit' (as referred to by The Stig), you'll have a few under your belt. Some more dicey than others.

During the incident with the yacht earlier this year, it wasn't just Quentin's life that was in danger, but his passengers' too. "We had a very nice day," he recalls. We were 8000ft looking out over the glorious North Sea...we wound up in the water in 6seconds.

"We started in London, flew up the length of the country and it was stunning. We went up to the Scottish valleys, found a great pub for lunch, continued up into the Shetlands and right across the North Sea. Then, we found ourselves 178 miles across the Shetlands to Bergen and it was a beautiful day. We were 8000ft looking out over the whole of the glorious North Sea.

"We arrived in Bergen, cleared customs and tried to pick up fuel - but on approach, something blew up into the rotor and broke something. The accident report isn't out

yet so we don't know exactly what happened but we do know that we wound up in the water in six seconds.

"It wasn't that cold there - about eight degrees centigrade - so that was okay but we were in the sea with people stuck inside. The vibrations were so strong and although they didn't break our neck, it did strain our muscles. We were doing at six hertz a second so our heads were seven and a half times heavier going left to right."

What came next sounded particularly dramatic.

"My leg got hammered to smithereens by my watch that was on my wrist while I was trying to control the thing. It's tricky under those circumstances as it's quite violent on your body. The controls went absolutely rock solid and were very hard to move as the hydraulic system was overwhelmed. It was a narrow escape."

But, it wasn't until Quentin had made his exit straight up to the surface that he realised he left his passengers inside. "I was very lucky because I got down and I found an arm floating in the murk".

"I was embarrassingly unmoved by it while it was happening. I opened the door, undid my seatbelt, got out, then I realised the guys are sinking so somebody has to do something."

However, Quentin's strict military courses always teach people that you never go back into the aircraft once you've managed to get out.

"A lot goes through your mind in a short time," Quentin remembers. "There are a lot of considerations about whether the helicopter is sinking and if it's the best and easiest time to get out. I tried to work out if I could inflate the helicopter floats so I went back in and turned the float switch and that made the helicopter float but it made it much harder to get out."

Eventually everyone exited the aircraft and are now all fully recovered - but it wasn't easy. "The reality of it is that it's difficult. It hurts to pull people out and you're a bit exhausted. Plus, you can't see anything in the water as the visibility is very bad. I was very lucky because I got down and I found an arm floating in the murk and pulled it and that was my friend - so, he was very happy about that."

At the end of the day though, no matter how many times he almost dies it's not collisions or misadventure that scare him most. "The most dangerous thing that anyone can do is not live. I spend a reasonable proportion of my day about 2/10s of a second from death," he says.

"I remember reaching 21 and feeling like I'd failed. I hadn't intended to live that long and I didn't want to live so gently. I thought everyone was like James Dean in that live fast, die young kind of way. Now I'm married with kids and my children say, 'Dad, I'm going to fly a helicopter across the world' and I say, 'Sure! The worst that could happen is that you die'".

"The whole relationship with danger is very funny," Quentin says. "I regard danger as the execution of things which people might consider to be dangerous and executing it well for it to not be dangerous."



*Helicopter retrieved after the Norway crash.*

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## 5. Sasha's Air Covers Business

*The following interview was archived in 2020, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the flightglobal.com website. The interview was published in June 2020. Sasha is the daughter of Mike Smith.*



Sasha Pattinson has had a passion for aviation since childhood. She is now co-owner and director of Air Covers, a UK company specialising in designing and supplying bespoke protective covers for the aerospace and marine industry worldwide

*How did you get into aviation?*

Helicopters have always played a large part in my life. My earliest childhood memories are of flying in Aerospatiale Alouettes and Hughes 500s. As a very young girl, I would career around the hangar at weekends on an engineering wheelie board, disappearing under bellies of helix and ducking under their tails. My father managed several companies before founding HeliAir. He ran it with my mother Mary, and built it up to be the most successful Robinson dealership in the world. After 50 years in aviation they finally sold the company. My brother, Quentin Smith, founded HQ Aviation and has continued to push boundaries, flying twice around the world from North to South Pole. I met my husband, John, when my father and brother were training his aunt Jaffa Murray to fly her R44. Jaffa became the first woman to circumnavigate the globe and fly to both Poles. John worked for Lindstrand Technologies where he developed an inflatable habitat for the ISS. You could say we are total aviation people.

*What do you most enjoy in your business life?*

Working all day and all night with my husband! Joking aside, having been brought up in a family aviation business, it feels totally natural to work together – albeit sometimes a little stressful. I love it when our talented machinists receive glowing feedback from our customers all over the world. We enjoy seeing the photos pilot customers send us of their covers in fabulous locations, doing the job they were born to do. Winning The Queen’s Award for Enterprise this April has, without doubt, given all of us huge satisfaction as it validates everything we have all worked so hard for. Another highlight is attending the HAI Helix Expo. We always organise a pre-show event pulling together fellow exhibitors, pilots and operators, which is great fun. Last year it was axe-throwing in Atlanta... this year fire-eating in Anaheim. New Orleans next year, who knows? “We have a ruling principle of ‘can-do’ - we look for trouble and love designing the solution, says Pattinson.

*How did your business evolve and what are you focused on today?*

John and I have spent the past 15 years building up Air Covers, and are lucky to have such an impressive team helping us. We started with one sewing machinist and paper patterns, but quickly evolved exploring new technology and technical fabrics. We now 3D scan every aircraft, which enables us to create the exact “skin” from which we design the best fitting covers. Working closely with engineers and OEMs we have developed covers that meet our exacting quality standards.

The goal is to reduce aircraft maintenance and increase aircraft availability. In the early days it was necessary to re-educate prospective customers who believed that all covers were heavy, poorly fitting and difficult to put on, which is not true nowadays. Product innovation is what drives us. Every one of our 2,500-plus designs have been created from scratch. In this hiatus we are looking at new materials and manufacturing processes and asking clients how we can improve. My role within the business covers finance and HR, but as with any small business the owners have to be multi-skilled. I enjoy managing our team even through these very difficult times of coronavirus. Since the pandemic got serious we have been volunteering production and machinery to the NHS, operating with a reduced workforce. I am also using the time to rewrite our website and planning our marketing strategy. Now, more than ever, it’s important to be connecting with our customers and suppliers.

*How do you see technology and design evolving in the coming years?*

Air Covers is always ahead of the curve in adopting new technology. We started laser scanning in 2009, and now have the entire western helicopter fleet 3D modelled – from the Hiller 12C to Leonardo AW609, Airbus Helicopters H160 and Bell 525. We are excited with new developments in textile coatings. The “cloak of invisibility” is not so very far away!

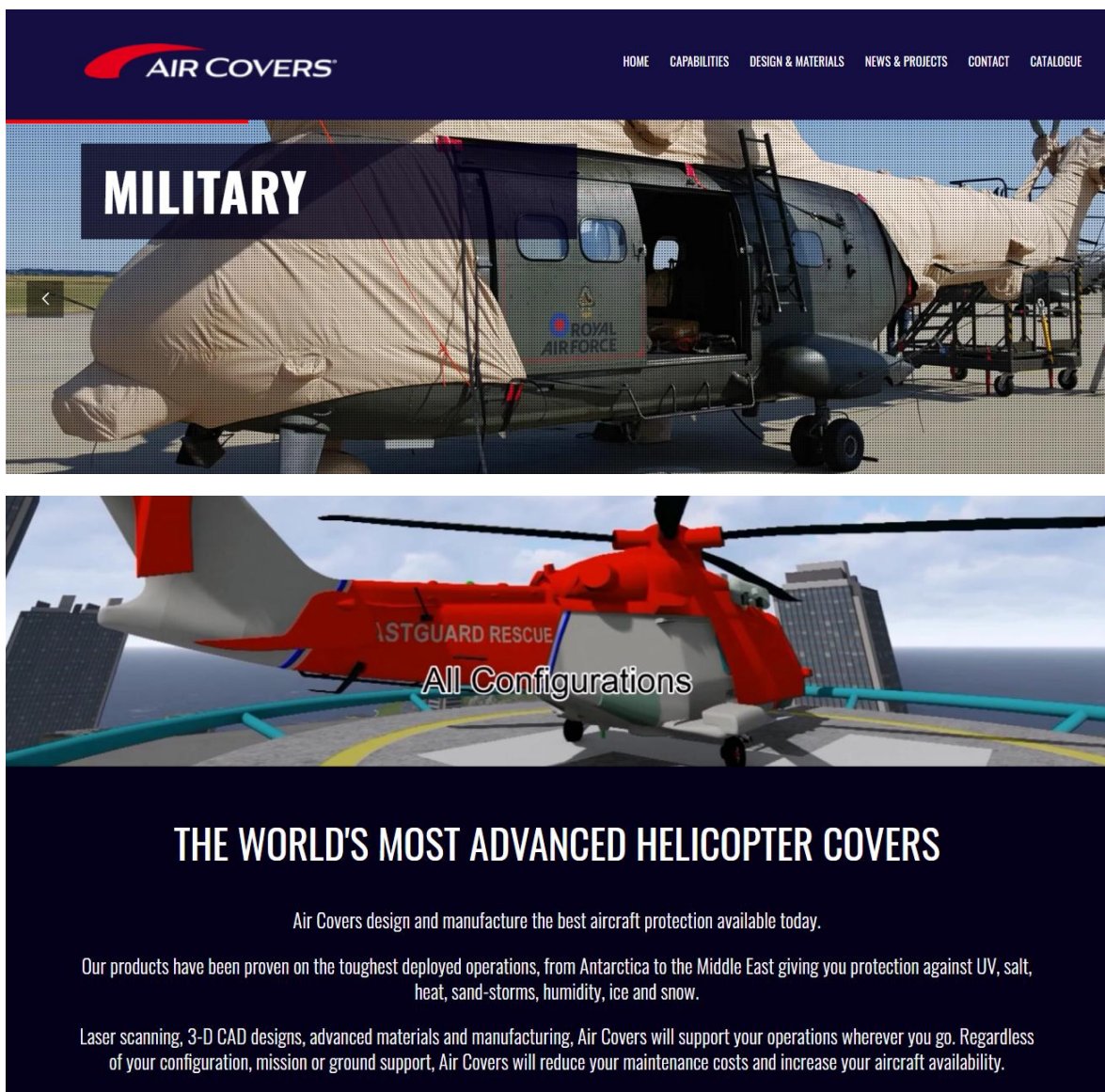
*What is your advice to the new generation looking for a career in aviation?*

Train to be an aircraft engineer. There is an ageing population of aircraft engineers, and when they retire we will need new talent. Ask any MRO. The pay is good. The apprenticeship route is popular as you can be paid as you learn, and career prospects are only limited by your imagination. It’s the gift that keeps on giving.

*Where do you see your business in five years' time?*

Our main focus will remain on supporting the commercial and defence helicopter sector, and we will also look to strengthen our specialist design expertise. It is the reason we are list suppliers to Airbus and Leonardo. They partner with us on their new products and trust us to add value. We have an interest in the USA and have identified two potential partner manufacturing facilities. Alas, Covid-19 has put these plans on hold.

We have a growing customer base in the States including the FBI hostage rescue team, but getting access to the Department of Defence means we have to be on the ground with the users. Our rotary success has enabled us to spin out covers for business jets, furniture on super yachts, thermal cameras, land vehicles and marine craft. We have a ruling principle of “can do” – we look for trouble and love designing the solution.



The image is a screenshot of the Air Covers website. At the top, there is a dark blue navigation bar with the 'AIR COVERS' logo on the left and a menu of links: HOME, CAPABILITIES, DESIGN & MATERIALS, NEWS & PROJECTS, CONTACT, and CATALOGUE. Below the navigation bar, there are two main images. The first image shows a military helicopter with a large white cover over its rotor hub and tail section. A dark blue banner with the word 'MILITARY' in white capital letters is overlaid on the left side of the image. The second image shows a red rescue helicopter with a red cover over its rotor hub. The text 'All Configurations' is overlaid on the bottom of this image. Below the images, there is a dark blue section with the text 'THE WORLD'S MOST ADVANCED HELICOPTER COVERS' in white capital letters. Underneath this, there are three lines of smaller white text: 'Air Covers design and manufacture the best aircraft protection available today.', 'Our products have been proven on the toughest deployed operations, from Antarctica to the Middle East giving you protection against UV, salt, heat, sand-storms, humidity, ice and snow.', and 'Laser scanning, 3-D CAD designs, advanced materials and manufacturing, Air Covers will support your operations wherever you go. Regardless of your configuration, mission or ground support, Air Covers will reduce your maintenance costs and increase your aircraft availability.'

*Images archived from the from the Air Covers website at [www.aircovers.com](http://www.aircovers.com) on 24.1.20.*

## 6. Flying with Mike

*Alex Reid, the editor of the Lives Retold website, served with Mike Smith as a helicopter pilot in the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy. He recounts here two memories of Mike - as an instructor, and when Alex flew with him as a passenger many years later.*

I first met Mike Smith as my helicopter flying instructor at the Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose, in 1964. I well remember that first lurch into the air in a small bubble-like Hillier training helicopter. I had done my fixed wing flying training, in Chipmunk aircraft at RAF Linton on Ouse in Yorkshire. But that had not prepared me for the strange sensation of hovering uncertainly above the ground in a flimsy, noisy helicopter. Mike was my instructor. Mike was a consummate pilot and he could not have been more skilful, professional, and patient. Patience was necessary, since just as I had no natural aptitude for football, cricket, or golf, I had no natural aptitude for flying a helicopter. But Mike persevered, and in due course I did qualify, and spent the rest of my five years in the navy as a helicopter pilot. This included, like Mike, a spell on HMS Albion and detachments into the Borneo jungle at Nanga Gaat.

About ten years later I was living in Cambridge and working in the Long Range Studies Division of British Telecom. I had been asked by an outside organisation to speak at a conference they were organising at a hotel in Torquay in Devon. I was reluctant to accept, because of the travel time involved. However they won me over by the surprise offer of getting me there and back in a day by helicopter.

I was accordingly standing outside a hangar at Cambridge by dawn's early light on the appointed day. Out of the murk appeared a small helicopter and I climbed up into the passenger seat in the cockpit. To my surprise, and by sheer chance, the pilot was Mike Smith. We had not had any contact for at least ten years, and greeted each other warmly. Mike climbed up to a few hundred feet and set off in a south westerly direction. He gripped the cyclic stick between his knees, got out his pipe and tobacco, and turned to me to ask me my news. All this rather took me aback. In our naval helicopter flying days there was certainly no smoking on board, and you were trained to keep constantly scanning the horizon to avoid the possibility of a mid-air collision with another aircraft.

I tactfully asked Mike whether, in view of the number of military airfields around Cambridge he should perhaps be looking out for other aircraft. He explained that was not necessary nor desirable. He said that if he looked out, saw an approaching jet fighter and took avoiding action this would be dangerous. Because if two aircraft both take avoiding action they might turn in the same direction, rather like two pedestrians doing that on the pavement. Much better to continue on his course, and leave the jet fighter to take avoiding action.

He further explained that the chances of being hit by another aircraft in mid flight were extremely small. He asked me to consider two vehicles starting at different points on the edge of a flat desert and driving across the desert in different directions in a straight line. The chances of them being in the same spot at exactly the same time would be tiny. Now, he said, consider the third dimension, which

applies for aircraft. For the jet fighter to hit us it would not only need to be at the same place at the same time, it would need to be at exactly the same height.

Thus reassured, we carried on to land in the car park of the conference hotel in Torquay. The management had helpfully cleared a few parking spaces so that we could land.

On the return journey Mike said that his wife Mary, whom I had known well all those years ago, would like to see me, and suggested we drop into their home in Bicester, near Oxford, before returning to Cambridge. I fell in with this plan, assuming we would land at some nearby airfield. But no, as darkness fell and the lights of Bicester approached, Mike deftly landed the helicopter, in the dark, in their back garden, closely surrounded by other houses. My own night flying had always been with the benefit of runways and runway lighting. I asked Mike whether he got any noise complaints from neighbours. He explained that the neighbours were tolerant because once a year he would give the children of the local school free helicopter trips from their playing field.

Mary welcomed us in for a chat in their living room, which had a small dinghy standing on its end in one corner. We talked about old times, and got back in the helicopter. Mike, with his customary skill, lifted it into the night sky and took me back to Cambridge.

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