



# LATER, CONCORDE

The world's fastest  
commercial airliner  
is grounded

BY PHIL SCOTT

**I**t's the dream of any self-respecting, FBO-trained, small-airplane pilot to fly supersonic—or it should be. (The rest probably want to fly into space, but it's not like *that's* going to happen anytime soon.)

You used to be able to take two, maybe three routes to pass the sound barrier. You could fly in a military jet, a fighter, but those flights tend to be reserved for members of the press for good PR value. Usually the pilot does enough high-G aerobatics to make the passenger blow chow or at least pass out, and he tends to succeed in one of the two. Or both. (One fighter jock told me he flew a prominent network newsguy in the backseat of an F-15, and the newsguy was so shaken up that it took him 40 minutes to get out of the seat after they landed.)

You could also sign up for the Air Force or Navy, but you'd need to be young, with two or three engineering degrees—and be a perfect human specimen. Just pray you



don't get cut from the training program or you'll end up in public affairs or something. If you make it into a fighter squadron you get a goofy nickname, nothing like *Top Gun's* Maverick or Iceman, but one usually fraught with sexual innuendo.

The easiest route: Concorde. Or so it used to be. Now Air France and British Airways have grounded their Mach-2 machines, the only supersonic airliners in the world. Ridership dropped precipitously after the fiery crash in France in July 2000. In one fell swoop, Concorde's image went from that of the safest airliner to the most dangerous. When it was first conceived, Concorde was somewhat an attempt at one-upmanship. The Superpower Club—the United States and the Soviet Union—had their space race to the moon. France desperately wanted to be in the Superpower Club, but couldn't afford to spend the \$20 billion or so it would take to make it to the lunar surface and return men safely home. Next, the United States and the Soviet Union announced they were building supersonic transports, or SSTs.

Former French President Charles de Gaulle, a tall man with a Napoleon complex, decided his country could afford

The Concorde's distinctive needle nose was as much a trademark as its supersonic speed. Inside the cockpit, the flight crew had about as much room as in the cockpit of a King Air.







such an airplane. Almost. So he approached England, still smarting from losing its empire and its fortune fighting both World Wars, and both parties agreed to develop an SST. They would call it Concorde, to connote harmony between two nations that had been fighting one another constantly from the Dark Ages up until the 1800s. And what they designed was grand. It would carry around 100 passengers in Mach-2, leather-seated comfort. A trip from New York to London would take just three hours. None of those high-G maneuvers along the way, either.

Customers from all over the world lined up to buy their very own Concorde; 12 airlines filled the order books for some 70 supersonic jets. The sun was once again rising on the British Empire, and, in theory at least, Charles "Napoleon" de Gaulle struck fear in the hearts of Europe. The two nations formed a consortium, and it took around a decade to develop the airplane.

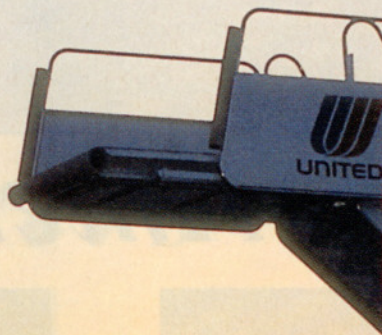
In that time the world changed. There was the oil embargo of the early 1970s that drove fuel prices—forgive the pun—

## Concorde's four Rolls-Royce Olympus 593s drank fuel like a frat boy slamming down keg beer.

sky-high, and Concorde's four Rolls-Royce Olympus 593s (each developing 15 tons of thrust) drank fuel like a frat boy slamming down keg beer. With its double sonic boom Concorde would break windows, teeth, hearts, and who knows what else, so it was forbidden from flying over land. With its limited range, that pretty much consigned it to transatlantic flights. All 12 airlines with orders backed out, and ultimately the two governments built just 12 Concorde, and sold them for just one pound each to their national airlines: Seven went to Britain and five went to France. Sorry, Charlie.

If they ever made a profit, as their rabid British and French advocates maintain, it's because no one (outside of those governments) had to pay for research, development, and building the SSTs. But that didn't make flying them any less spectacular.

I had the privilege of flying in a Concorde twice—first from New York to London and second from London to New York—before the crash of the Air France jet. On my first ride we pushed back from John F. Kennedy International Airport at precisely 3 p.m.; as the captain poured on the gas my body made a deep impression in the plush leather seat, and I swear I could feel my cheeks flapping back like those in films of pilots riding rocket sleds. Nothing like takeoff in a Cessna 172, or even a Boeing 767. The captain lifted the nose of the delta-wing aircraft at a high angle, since deltas need the speed and the angle to take a bite out of the air. Once we lifted off and gained some altitude, the captain leveled off and cut power; once we were safely over the ocean, he cranked up the afterburners. You could tell because there was a digital gauge at the front of the cabin that showed us crossing the sound barrier: "Mach 1, 770 mph," it read. As far as sound went, well, we were leaving that all behind. I was probably the only one impressed by this. Most of the other passengers kept on reading their newspapers; they were businesspeople who needed to get to London in a hurry.





The fuselage is only 9 feet 6 inches wide, and that's outside diameter. Because of frictional heating, Concorde expands almost 6 inches by the time it reaches its cruising altitude. There are two seats on each side and a narrow gangway down the center for the trolley and the crew.

My wife, Pam, and I found Concorde to be very noisy because of the air-speed—we had to almost shout to each other to be heard.

The jet continued to climb to around 50,000 feet. Above, the sky was a dark, dark blue, and I swear I could make out

the curvature of the Earth. A little. The flight attendants started pouring champagne (we covered 10 miles in the time it took to fill a glass) and taking our orders from a menu. A menu! In the seat-back pocket I found a gray satchel with Concorde stationery and a pen inside, and a certificate suitable for framing that said I'd flown on the Concorde. Before our dinner came, the flight attendants covered our seat-back trays with white linen tablecloths and real silverware (emblazoned with the Concorde logo, naturally). Then they served us. I've never had such good pumpkin cannelloni.



Night comes on very fast when heading east at Mach 2, and as our fuel burned off, the SST lightened, and it rose on its own to 60,000 feet. I also noticed that as the flight neared its end it got stuffy inside, and when I touched the window it was warm from the external friction at 1,350 mph.

Odd, considering it was minus 67 degrees Fahrenheit at this altitude, but it was caused by friction. In three hours we blasted across the Atlantic and landed at London Heathrow Airport.

I took a week off to explore the aviation side of London—e.g., the Science Museum, the Royal Aeronautical Society of Great Britain, and the Imperial War Museum—before returning to the Concorde. There's a special Concorde lounge at Heathrow, decorated in English country-house style. We boarded on time and as I took my seat in the fourth row I felt a tingle in the air—a celebrity was boarding! This information from all the passengers who could afford the six grand for a ticket. Liam Neeson, the tall, thin Irish actor, his

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The Concorde's luxury did not extend to the cabin space—the ceiling was low and the seating cramped. However, the comfy leather seats and the gourmet food made up for that shortcoming.

head bent lest it scrape on the jet's low ceiling, made his way to his sixth-row seat. He was unsatisfied, and asked a flight attendant to move him up into an empty seat in the second row once

we had taken off. She answered in the affirmative in a "veddy proper English accent" and, as he returned to his seat, she quietly squealed to me, "I'm in love!"

In a few minutes another attendant leaned over me and said, "The captain was wondering if you'd like to come up to the flight deck for takeoff." Wow! You couldn't do that in a U.S. jetliner even before September 11, 2001. I quickly unbuckled my seat belt and followed him toward the cockpit; as I walked forward past the galley, the ceiling descended until I was leaning over in a cockpit the size of a King Air, or maybe a Baron. It was packed with instruments nothing like you'd see in a new King Air. Everything was analog—not a glass panel in sight. Apparently, British Airways had refurbished the fleet in 1994 and decided not to upgrade the cockpit—all that would have required expensive recertification of the SST. The only digital instrument was the readout in front of the passenger cabin showing the Mach number.

Peter Carrigan, the flight engineer, introduced himself and strapped me into the five-point restraint of the jump seat, which gave me a great view of the pilot and copilot at work. Carrigan then introduced me to pilot Adrian Thompson and

copilot John Graham, who both shook my hand. Thompson gave me a pair of headphones so I could listen in on the trio's conversation with one another and the instructions issued by ground control. I didn't want to ask any questions, since in the United States it's verboten for the crew to discuss anything other than procedure during takeoff and landing. But the guys seemed intent on friendly banter.

"Things seem to be going too well," said Thompson.

"Give it time," said Carrigan.

"Is this your first Concorde takeoff?" the captain asked, turning to me.

"Inside the flight deck, yes," I answered as briefly as possible. But the captain seemed to want to have a conversation.

"This is actually only my sixth unpervised takeoff," he said proudly, still turned around.

"Great!" I said, but I really didn't want to say anything else.

The airplane's needle nose was in the down position, which gave us a clear view of the taxiway. Again, it seemed as though the Concorde had top priority. And it does—it burns fuel fast and the engines get too hot sitting in one place. It taxied to the runway like a champion

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thoroughbred, and took its position on the end of the runway. Number one for takeoff. Once again the captain poured on the power, and the acceleration I felt had previously come only from fighter jets or the time I was catapulted off the aircraft carrier *USS John C. Stennis* in a carrier on-board delivery aircraft (COD).

Eventually the long, bent nose lifted off and once it reached maybe a 45-degree angle it was followed by the rest of the aircraft. The captain cut the power slightly and we slid over London; then he accelerated just a bit, to 200 knots, over the fairly uninhabited English countryside. Inside the cockpit it was as noisy as a Piper Cub.

"The visor's coming up," Carrigan said. "It's going to be a lot quieter now." And then the visor rose into place, adding another layer to the windscreen. It was like driving in a luxury sedan. Now that it had quieted down, the captain explained that the flight engineer spent the flight transferring fuel among the Concorde's tanks to cool the aircraft's skin—that's why it grows so warm toward the flight's end—and also to keep the whole machine in balance. "That's why he's so busy," Thompson concluded.

"And it's not reflected in my pay," added Carrigan.

"We fly at a block altitude between 50,000 and 60,000 feet," the captain continued. "It's unlikely for there to be anybody out there—unless you're watching the *X-Files* at the moment."

After we crossed the Bristol Channel and climbed above airliner altitude, we busted the sound barrier and kept speeding up. Carrigan recommended that I return to my seat and enjoy the food. "There's really nothing to see after we reach Mach 1.7," he said.

"Come back anytime," the captain said.

Now, today, that doesn't seem likely. At one time it was estimated that Concorde could make it into 2025 before it would have to be put to pasture. Then came the crash, and then the recent announcement of Concorde's early retirement.

I don't think they know what they're doing. See, I have one other memory during that trip. Walking in a busy London street I heard a huge roar just above my head, and saw a grandmother lean down and point up at the sky for her grandson. Everyone on the tree-lined streets stopped, looked up, and began applauding. Concorde was passing overhead. **ACFA**

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