

# A Foxbat Affair

By Peter Harlow

*It was love at first flight... I was sitting in the passenger seat of a high wing aircraft, on a beautiful May afternoon, watching the ground fall away below me at a breathtaking rate - certainly far faster than I was used to in the Beagle Pup I usually flew. A glance at the panel showed us climbing at almost 1,200 feet a minute. Soon we were at 3,000 feet and cruising along, the countryside laid out below like an intricate model landscape. 'Good, eh?' said Gordon, my pilot. My grin was as wide as the horizon.*

I originally got my private flying licence courtesy of the Royal Naval Fleet Air Arm back in 19 something or other, first soloing on a Piper Colt at Oxford Air Training School in the UK. Since then, I have flown over 30 different types of light aircraft, including Piper Cubs, various ultralights and the Beagle Pup - of which I was a group ownership member. After many, many years of hankering, in July 2000 I was at last in a position to buy and build an aircraft of my own.

But finding the right one was not as easy as I thought it would be - although I was very clear about what I wanted. High wing - I like to see the ground below while I'm flying. Two seats - it's always more fun with a friend. Single engine - cheaper and simpler than a twin. Fixed undercarriage and a fixed pitch prop. Simple?

I spent the best part of a year looking at alternatives. As a result of looking at, sitting in, and even flying in quite a few different options, I further refined what I wanted - metal airframe, side-by-side seats, wide cockpit (for my 90 kg, 6'2" frame), and short take off and landing - I was prepared to sacrifice a bit of cruise speed for the flexibility of getting in and out of small, un-surfaced strips. So far, on paper at least, the Aeroprakt A22 Foxbat looked like a good candidate - but I had seen only pictures and specifications in adverts. Time to go and see the real thing.

For once my timing was good - within a couple of weeks it was the Popham Microlight Fair - the UK's version of Natfly at Narromine. So I called the UK Foxbat agent, Gordon Faulkner of the Small Light Aircraft Company, and asked if he was going to Popham and could I go for a flight with him. The answer to both questions was a definite 'Yes!'

On the first morning of the fair, I took off in the Beagle and flew the 60 or so miles to Popham. To say the place was buzzing was an understatement - there were aircraft everywhere in the sky around the airfield. Trikes galore, 3-axis ultralights, even powered paragliders were in the circuit. Flying the Beagle felt like I was flying a bus - at least three trikes circled inside me to land - no radios! - one of them just turning off the



Foxbat Australia demonstrator.

runway ahead of me as I landed. With rising anticipation, under the directions of the ground staff, I taxied to a parking space and shut down.

After a great cup of coffee and a sticky bun in the airfield cafe, I was off to look at all the shiny aeroplanes and the Foxbat in particular. Needless to say, there was a queue of people looking at it, resplendent in its silver paint. Gordon and Ray Everitt, his engineer colleague, were engaged in non-stop question answering. I listened in: 'the aluminium airframe's made in the Ukraine'. 'Yes, it's the 100 hp Rotax 912S'. 'Cruise? About 85-90 knots'. 'Usable load? About 190 kg'. 'It comes as a quick-build kit. The wings and fuselage are mainly done for you'. 'Yes, you can put up to 25 kg of luggage behind the seats'. 'Stall speed? 27 knots true, flaps down.' Did I catch that last bit right?!

The Foxbat was (at that time) not yet certified in the UK,



Foxbat kit.



Digital flight, engine instruments and data recorder.

although demo flights were allowed. From mid-morning, Gordon was busy flying people but eventually my turn came. From the ground, the take-offs looked spectacular - the Foxbat was at 500 feet about where the Beagle's wheels came off the runway. I was looking forward to this.

My heart was definitely beating a little faster as I sat in the passenger seat and strapped into the 4-point harness while Gordon audibly went through the checks - remarkably few after the Beagle. Doors closed, he started up and we taxied away to join the queue waiting for take off. My first sensation was of space in the cockpit - the doors are glazed down to the floor and they bulge out between hip and head height. In no way wishing to offend Gordon, neither of us is exactly slender, yet there was plenty of room to spare in between us - try that in your average GA aircraft!

The tricycle undercarriage rode well over the bumpy grass and before long we were at the head of the queue. 'Here we go' said Gordon, and almost before he'd finished, it seemed we were off the ground and climbing steeply. Levelling off in the cruise at 3,000 feet, we prepared for an into-wind stall, no flap. Engine back to idle, stick back, and back, and back, (was it ever going to stall?) and eventually at an indicated 25 knots (32 knots true) we stalled. Well



Comfortable seats - plenty of room

anyway, the nose dipped slightly, with an un-measurable height loss. 'Good, eh?' said Gordon. After that, we flew around the area for 20 minutes doing turns of all kinds before it was time to get back to the circuit and join the approach queue. Landing downhill on Popham's runway 03, we stopped easily in 70-80 metres. 'Good, eh?' said Gordon.

The rest, as they say, is history. I paid my deposit there and then, relying on Gordon and the Popular Flying Association to sort out the UK airworthiness, which they did, later in 2001.

However.... just before the airframe kit was delivered in July 2001, my wife, Louise, and I finally reached the inescapable conclusion that Australia was the place we wanted to be - not west London. Plans were put in action, which had us moving home just before

Christmas 2001. To put the icing on the cake, after discussions with Gordon and the Aeroprakt factory, it was agreed that I would be the Australian agent for the A22, my own aircraft becoming the demonstrator. Pause for breath.

My Foxbat eventually arrived in a container at Brisbane docks in early June, complete with its UK BCAR Section 'S' Airworthiness Certificate and special permission from a helpful CASA for it to fly on the UK register - as G-XBAT - until it was Australian certified. Based at Heck Field, next to the Jacobs Well VOR beacon, about 40 km south of Brisbane, we bolted the wings on and minutely checked every detail. I put 30 litres of premium unleaded in the tanks, ran the engine for half an hour and, on 24th July 2002 at 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon, G-XBAT left the ground for its maiden flight in Australia. Maybe it's the air in Australia, but I'm sure it flies much better than it did in the UK!

A few months later, G-XBAT became VH-VPH after certification as an amateur built 'experimental' aircraft. Future kits can be certified either VH- or as ultralights, depending on the builder's preference. Although the A22 is certified in Europe at 450 kg, it was designed to a 500 kg MTOW limit - so amateur built versions can be certified at the higher weight. Sometime in the first half of 2003, factory finished A22 Foxbats will be available in Australia, probably certified at 450 kg MTOW based on an empty weight of around 255-260 kg.

Foxbat VH-VPH has now visited quite a few airfields up and down the east coast of Australia, including a visit to Aviex 2002 at Wollongong, south of Sydney - a round trip of about 910 nautical miles. There and back, actual time in the air was 10 hours and 50 minutes, including comfort stops at Port Macquarie. Total fuel burn was 145 litres - giving an average speed over the ground of 84 knots at 13.4 litres an hour. 'Good, eh?' Gordon would have said. And I agree - like I said, it was love at first flight! →

*Peter Harlow is a Director of Foxbat Aircraft, agents for the Aeroprakt A22 Foxbat in Australia. He lived mainly in the UK until December 2001, when he and his wife, Louise, moved to Queensland. The Foxbat Aircraft website is at [www.foxbat.com.au](http://www.foxbat.com.au)*