

# FLYING HIGH

When it comes to performing at your peak under pressure, Justin Hughes is something of an expert – as a Tornado pilot he had mere milliseconds to make life-or-death decisions. Now he's turned his attention to the corporate world, advising business leaders how to achieve high performance. **Jane Lewis** went to meet him

WE MEET IN RICHMOND ON ONE OF THOSE EARLY January days before work gets underway proper and when the New Year still seems fresh and full of hope. In other words, before naked fear begins stalking the financial markets, the FBI announces a criminal investigation into Wall Street's crumbling banks and George Soros – the man who broke the Bank of England – comes out of retirement to say that the world faces its worst economic crisis in 60 years.

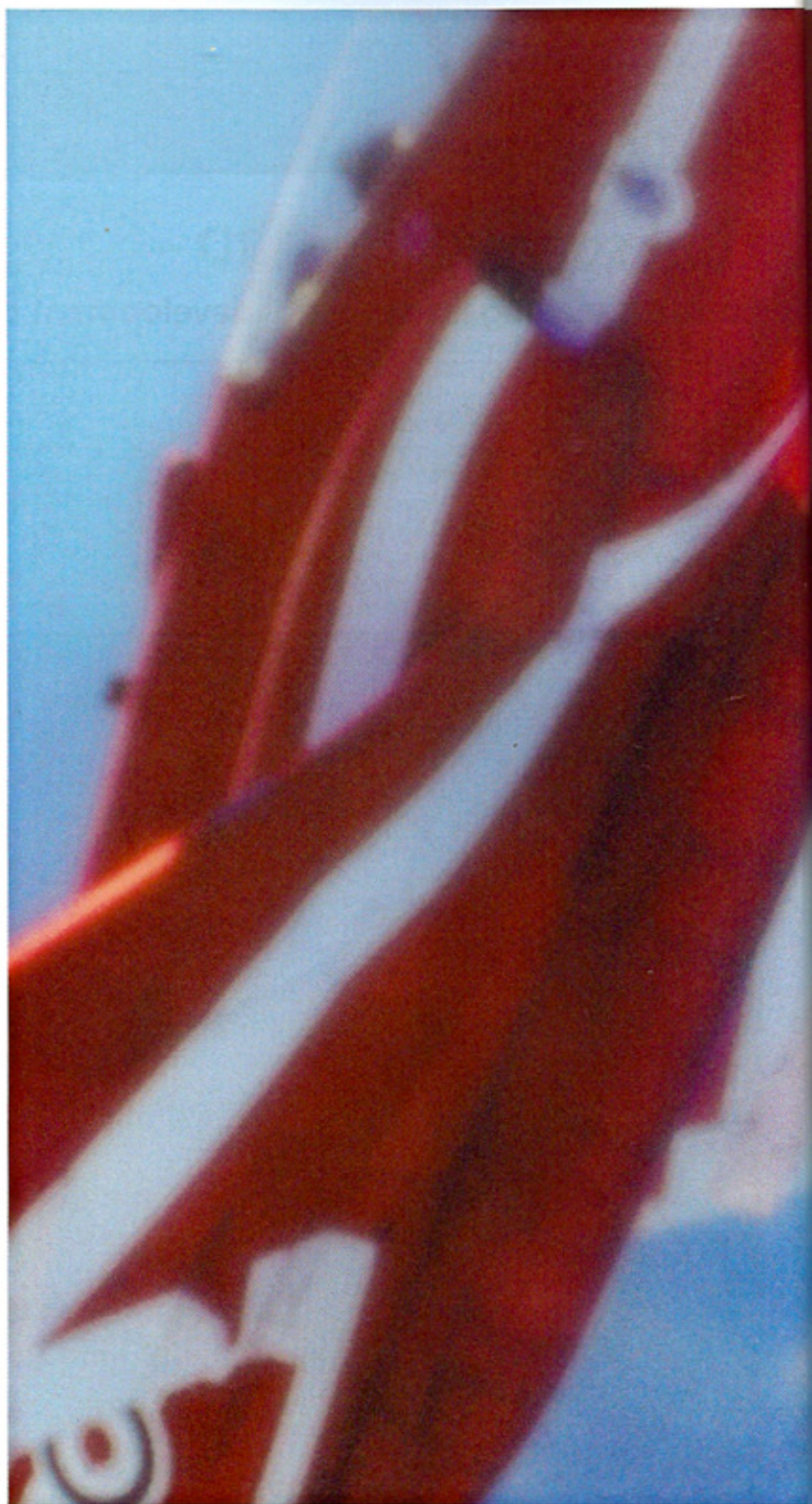
Over the next few weeks, the financial world seems desperate for a leader – someone to guide it through the chaos of fiscal meltdown, someone to pilot a route back to financial stability. Well, reader, I have found your man. And he's even prepared a module.

'We do a programme called Mission Analysis – how do you cut through all the noise to come up with a clear plan that will deliver results in a complex environment,' says Justin Hughes, Tornado F3 fighter pilot and Red Arrow ace turned high-performance management expert. Someone get Fed chairman Ben Bernanke on the phone fast.

## ROMANTIC NOTIONS

There's a romance about airmen for us ordinary souls in Civvy Street, whether you take your inspiration from *Top Gun*, those dashing pioneers of the Royal Flying Corps, or the gone-for-a-Burton bravery of those who flew Spitfires in 1940. I had rather a dour French teacher who could talk herself into a near-ecstatic trance describing the nobility and self-sacrifice of the airmen who pioneered night flights over the Andes in the 1920s, as described in Antoine de Saint Exupéry's novel *Vol de Nuit*. It was their mental struggle ('la lutte, girls, la lutte') as they reached for the stars while crashing down to earth that really got her going.

But back in the Richmond café where Hughes and I are now installed, it immediately becomes clear that he's not at all prone to such flights of fancy. One thinks of fighter pilots as elite figures – a mixture of 'shapers' and 'specialists' in ►





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◀ the Belbin team-role terminology (though Belbin is something of a *bête noir* for Hughes). Yet this ace flyer is an evangelist for process. In his world, where a high level of technical excellence is a given, it is the homogeneous team that counts far more than any individual star. And no team can function – let alone achieve the precise, co-ordinated manoeuvres of high-speed jets – without a bedrock of disciplined process.

'Being on a fighter mission is disappointingly unlike *Top Gun*,' he says dryly. It's the hard training, the honing of esprit de corps and the plan behind the mission that counts. The Red Arrows is a case in point. 'Members of the public only see the show in the summer,' he says. 'What they don't see – and what most of the Air Force don't see – is that in the winter we're flying three times a day, five days a week; 15 sorties every week – it's just relentless. People only see the end result, they don't see the blood, sweat and tears that go into it.'

His chief bone against Belbin – or, indeed, any theoretical management approach – is that it doesn't get down to the nitty-gritty of how things actually work. 'A lady came and did a book about the Red Arrows and she did some Belbin profiling,' he says (Meredith Belbin, a management theorist, is best known for his work on management teams). 'I didn't agree with her conclusions. Belbin's interesting from a profiling and psychology point of view. But it doesn't really explain how or why a team works.'

The whole set-up of the Red Arrows, he adds, is based on

interchangeability. There are nine display pilots, who each sign up for a three-year stint and each year the three most experienced leave.

'So we've got a 33% annual churn-rate of key personnel,' Hughes says, 'yet consistently we produce performance that is generally judged to be world class. The point is, the team does not depend on one or two stars. We can produce this year-on-year with different people.' That will surely give many companies pause for thought.

The stakes, of course, are even higher on fighter missions, particularly of the international sort that Hughes flew in Kosovo. 'You've got 70 aircraft taking off from different bases,' he says. 'These people have never met before, they've never spoken before, they're from different cultures, different nationalities. The only thing they've done is some remote co-ordination. And yet they have to take off at night, in a really hostile environment, and execute a really complex mission.'

Manage that, is the suggestion, and cobbling together a multinational corporation looks rather a doddle by comparison. Hughes, though, is aware that this kind of 'unthinking' is unfashionable in some companies.

'Business people often say, "Well, we work in an agile, flexible environment, you're from the military world of rules and processes",' he says. 'Well, hello? We're taking off at night in bad weather at 600 miles per hour and people are shooting at us. How much more agile and flexible do you want us to be?'

The point people in business miss, he says, is that 'process doesn't make

us inflexible and rigid – quite the opposite, in fact. It frees up brainpower. You don't have to think about how all the different bits of the machine interlock because they're already defined. And that frees you up to do all the creative, reactive stuff'.

No coincidence, then, that his client list bristles with companies operating in competitive and high-performance industries such as pharmaceuticals and finance.

## ARMY TRAINING

The son of an engineer and a teacher, Hughes says he always had a yearning to fly, though he can't explain where it came from. 'I was just one of those nerdy kids who always wanted to visit the cockpit on flights,' he insists. His initial brush with the forces came at the hands of the army. Before heading off to Bristol University to read physics, he took up a Short Service Limited Commission. It was as intensive as it was inspirational. 'One week I was working at McDonald's in Southport,' he says. 'The next I was at Sandhurst. And a month after that I was on an army base as an officer. I didn't realise the impact at the time. But I probably learnt as much about leadership in that year in the army than in the 20 years since.'

'There are little things that stick with you, some really simple core stuff about behaviours and values that they do fabulously well – leading from the front, integrity, loyalty, consistency.' When you become an officer you're given 'authority through position,' he says. 'But real moral authority and genuine respect have to be earned.' ▶



## CV

**Born:**  
1967  
**Education:**  
BSc in Physics from  
Bristol University  
**Career highlights:**  
1990  
Joined RAF  
1993  
Became Deputy  
Flight Commander  
flying Tornado F3 at  
RAF Leuchars  
1999  
Became Deputy  
Team Leader &  
Executive Officer at  
the Red Arrows  
2002  
One of the Red  
Arrows in the  
Queen's Jubilee fly-  
past with Concorde  
2003  
Founded Mission  
Excellence  
2007  
Started Executive  
MBA programme at  
London Business  
School  
Spoke at Leaders in  
Dubai conference  
alongside Richard  
Branson and  
Mohammad Yunis

◀ Stirring stuff. Even so, after university he returned to his original love and signed up with the RAF, where he honed the skills that are serving him so well in the business world. But for all the military taught him, Hughes is at pains to avoid casting himself as a war hero. Sure there were some adrenaline-packed moments. 'I've had engines blow up on a Tornado twice,' he says.

But he was lucky. His time flying Tornados preceded the War on Terror and, with the exception of the tour to Kosovo, his stretch was peaceful.

Although he is prone to self-mockery, there's real humility and respect at play when he compares his experiences to those really in the thick of it and, perhaps, a sneaking regret that he wasn't involved.

However, what his time in the forces has given him is a well-ordered mind and he is keen to inform readers exactly what to expect from a session with his team of former Red Arrows, fighter pilots and training experts at Mission Excellence. 'What we bring to the party,' as he puts it.

This list of topics includes intra-team working, communications as a channel or process, and a debriefing model that has proved a particular hit.

'Debriefing is something that we take for granted in flying that rarely, if ever, happens in the commercial world,' he says. One client, a building construction company, has introduced the model, lock, stock and barrel, into their management process.

Even so, isn't it all a bit dry? Not according to the rave reviews his events get. Indeed, the most striking thing about Hughes is that he actually

succeeds in making a conversation involving words like 'intra-team working' not only interesting and meaningful but eye-opening.

This is partly because management is second nature to him – you can almost see his brain flicking over the implications and ramifications of any given situation. This applies equally to whether he is working out a training programme for a particular bank or assessing his business relationship with his girlfriend Susanna, with whom he jointly owns a lingerie company. 'I am left-brained, analytical and very objective,' he says. 'She is Mediterranean, emotional... well, there are strengths and weaknesses.'

Hang on a minute. A fighter pilot consultancy and a lingerie business? That's quite some pairing, with scope for some rather interesting synergies, I suggest. 'Yes,' laughs Hughes, 'it's a cracking combination.' But he doesn't mind admitting that the ins and outs of stock management have their own challenges. 'I can completely understand why people go out of business in retail,' he says. 'You can have an incredibly successful business with people streaming through the door and still run out of cash.'

#### A NEW DIRECTION

Did he, I wondered, plan this thrusting business career while still in the RAF? The nature of the deal is that most people don't really start thinking about what they're going to do until their final year, he says. And, in Hughes' case, it's easy to see why he was distracted. One of his final missions in the RAF was the spectacular 2002 fly-past on the

Queen's Golden Jubilee when Concorde, flanked by a formation of Red Arrows, swooped low down the Mall and over Buckingham Palace. It was an unforgettable and 'sadly unrepeatable' experience. But as career finales go, you would be hard-pressed to find a more triumphant one.

It also led, indirectly, to a lucky break. 'After the fly-past I had the opportunity to fly to New York on Concorde and the co-pilot asked what I was going to do when I left the Air Force,' he says. 'I told him about my plan for this business and he suggested I meet his sister. She was the internal communications manager at Prudential. She took a chance and gave me the work. So that's how I got the first contract for the business – and it was quite a big contract too.'

He hasn't looked back. With business ticking over nicely in the UK, Mission Excellence is gearing up for a sortie to the Gulf, which Hughes – with typical perspicacity – recognises as a major fulcrum of trade in the new world order. He was out there recently, speaking alongside Sir Richard Branson, Kofi Annan and Mohammad Yunis at the Leaders in Dubai conference. 'Pretty high-profile stuff,' he admits.

It was, of course, the rich sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf that rode to the rescue of Citigroup, Merrill Lynch et al in the aftermath of the sub-prime fallout, injecting some \$70bn into America's bluest blooded banks in return for sizeable chunks of equity. And so we come full circle: Justin Hughes may yet find himself flying corporate rescue missions on Wall Street. ■

PA/PHOTOS



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