

Second Wind

CityJet Avro RJ85



Aero-Flite Avro RJ85 Airtanker

Laying a line of retardant on the
Eight Mile Fire - Idaho, USA
Photo by Melissa Kimsey

By Aidan Nolan

New Beginnings for Former CityJet Avro's



N355AC Aero-Flite Avro-RJ85
Quenching flames
Photo by Ian Gains

In today's *disposable society*, an important 'first world' dilemma is just how long should one expect to get from a pair of the latest trainers or that must have kitchen appliance for squirting out miniature cups of coffee or whats the realistic life expectancy of the class leading, driveway impressing, all-look-alike SUV. Questions which many ponder.

However, these concerns not only keep Joe Consumer awake at night, scaled up to more lofty levels where serious finances are at stake we find airline executives loosening



their tie's with moist palms. Apart from the many concerns aviation is infamous for, of major concern to airline senior management is aircraft depreciation. While approximately half of all commercial aircraft are leased, in which case the aircraft can be

returned after the lease period has passed, without taking a financial hit as the aircraft ages, the remainder are purchased outright by airlines. When spending \$100 million on a Boeing 737, accountants are looking for value and the big question is, what is the aircraft's flight-life-time.

The answer is, it varies. Some aircraft endure hectic lives with far more than average, short cycle careers, reducing life span in some cases to just ten years. Many enjoy gentle and well maintained operations seeing their 30th

"CityJet - The Go-To Airline for business & leisure travelers"

CityJet Avro RJ85 (EI-RJT)
with a powering departure
Photo by Thom Luttenberg

Anniversary, and even some, Antonov An-12's in particular, remain active well into their twilight years, approaching half century's and not out.

For enthusiasts, one of the more unpleasant sides of aviation-interest must be an aircraft departing an airline for it's final flight. If it's lucky to a desert bone-yard to live-out it's days or if less fortunate, to face the pneumatic jaws of an excavator.

Age catches up on us all and aircraft are not immune either. Only so much maintenance and servicing can keep them flying safely and economically. Eventually that difficult decision needs to be made.....To stay or to go?

CityJet, experienced a transformation from an airline previously performing scheduled services with it's own aircraft to a wet-lease operator, providing aircraft for other airlines and crew when required. This brave transition appeared positive in it's approach but some observers are of the belief it was as much to do with survival as it was with spotting an opportunity in the market. Time will tell.

From it's base at Dublin

Airport, the Irish airline became the go-to-airline for business and leisure travelers dashing off to London City or Paris CDG rather than an airline of choice for sun, sea and sand seekers. The long-time preferred aircraft was of course the BAe-146 & later Avro RJ series. The distinctive *wing-over-fuselage* design found favour with passengers and enthusiasts alike, giving clear uninterrupted views below and bringing something different to the "spotters table".

"WhisperJets" as they became affectionately known, stood out from most other aircraft, with that impressive T-tail, wings above the fuselage, four turbofans hanging from the wing undersides like icicles and that sound.....in fact, very little engine noise as it happens. A friend of many residents living close to London City Airport for not being an early morning wake-up call and enjoyed by pilots for it's STOL capability, crucial for services into and out of the UK's capital in the heart of the city.

BAe-146 & Avro RJ aircraft also familiar to many in close proximity to Dublin Airport not to mention several other European airports served by reasonable numbers of the type



"WhisperJets - as they became affectionately known"



Spokane - Washington State
Commons Wikimedia.org

N354AC Aero-Flite Avro RJ85
In Action - California
Photo by Steven Whitby



in the past but not so for many other enthusiasts. However as time marches on and the dynamics of CityJet continue to evolve, sadly the number of Avro RJ's will only decline. With a fleet renewal within CityJet well underway, RJ's have been slipping away from the airline in recent times, each usually on a one-way ticket.



Spokane International Airport
Washington, USA IATA: GEG
3/21 3,353m 8/26 2,499m
[Commons Wikimedia.org](#)

However, while news of their departure may at first appear disheartening for those who hold RJ aircraft in high regard, bouts of depression have been diverted when one takes a closer look at what the future has in store for each of the aforementioned planes.

One in particular, EI-RJX became quite a 'hit' *on the scene* with spotting folk due to the interesting livery it had operated in since May 2012 - Leinster Rugby.

It's true to say, the British designed and manufactured Avro RJ, the same Avro responsible for producing the iconic Vulcan V-Bomber, required some regular TLC to keep on the right side of reliability. The four Lycoming ALF502 turbopfans on BAe-146's or Honeywell LF507's on RJ's could be 'diva-like' in operation.

Several aircraft in particular have in more recent times, departed the CityJet fleet, including EI-RJX, EI-RJH & EI-RJT and while not many tears were shed, these are three more aircraft that will be missed by the enthusiast community.



N366AC Aero-Flite Avro RJ85
Photo by Rei Ueda



Aero-Flite Canadair CL-415
Pioneer Fire - Photo by Kari Greer



N354AC Aero-Flite Avro RJ85
Photo by Joost De Wit

This RJ85 began operations with Mesaba Airlines in the US before joining CityJet in 2007. The 95 seater was a firm favourite with enthusiasts whenever it arrived at their local.

EI-RJX performed it's last commercial flight for CityJet on 5th of April 2019 when it returned to Dublin from Paris CDG. It would be nice to think the Captain made his passengers aware of this significant final flight on approach to Dublin. Shortly after, titles were removed at the CityJet hangar, Dublin Airport and the aircraft prepared for retirement from the fleet. With preparations complete it was time for EI-RJX to bid farewell to Dublin, it's home for the previous 12 years, Ireland and indeed Europe, as this RJ85 was beginning its next chapter on the opposite side of the world, on the US - Canadian border.

The multi-sector flight departed Dublin on 21st of April last, bound for Aero-Flite in Spokane, Washington State where EI-RJX would be converted from 'Jumbolino' to aerial firefighter. Ferry flight included tech-stops at Keflavik, Kangerlussusq, Iqaluit, Timmins, Regina, Bellingham, Abbotsford arriving Spokane 24th of April. Quite the journey, transiting the North Atlantic and the entire width of Canada where a new registration N403AC was waiting.

Aero-Flite have been fighting fires from the Air since 1963 and have operated an array of aircraft suitable for the task in hand, including Boeing B-17's, Douglas C-54's & DC-4's, Canadair CL-215's and currently

**"the same
Avro
responsible
for producing
the iconic
Vulcan
V-Bomber"**



CityJet Avro RJ85 (EI-RJX)
Photo by Hervé Champain



CityJet Avro RJ85 (EI-RJT)
Photo by Bas Bonsel



CityJet Avro RJ85 (EI-RJT)
Photo by Guillaume Besnard

(Bombardier) CL-415's and the latest additions to the fleet, Avro RJ's. Since joining Aero-Flite the 'next generation' RJ's have proven efficient, quick and reliable retardant delivery aircraft.

Where the CL-415 is capable of reloading from various water sources and delivering large volumes of water in a short period of time in support of wildland fire management and ground firefighting, the Avro RJ fleet does not 'scoop up' water mid flight but returns to an airfield to replenish it's vast 3,300 US gallon tanks by pumped system or reloading with powder fire retardant. A benefit of the Avro RJ's aerial firefighting capability is its fast dash performance at high speeds, enabling it's fire retardant to be delivered accurately on target.

Of the 13 or so BAe-146 / Avro RJ's listed with Aero-Flite, currently seven are former CityJet aircraft, with others from Brussels Airlines and Lufthansa CityLine. In July 2019, EI-RJB (N635AC) reported for duty with Aero-Flite having completed it's term with CityJet after flying with the



Irish airline since 2007. In March 2019, EI-RJH departed CityJet at Dublin Airport and made the long route to the North American west coast to join Aero-Flite as N416AC. Another aerial firefighting recruit has been EI-RJT, arriving at Spokane in May 2019, re-registered N430AC. A trio of quad-jets more recently made the role change as EI-RJW, EI-RJR & EI-RJY traveled to join Aero-Flite between October and December last year.

As part of the conversion process from passenger airliner to freighter, each Avro RJ now appears a little *swollen around the gills*, with the center fuselage developing a blister underneath the wings. This helps accommodate water tanks complete with bomb-bay type door mechanisms for rapid deployment to aid quenching flames below.

Having considered several alternatives, Aero-Flite decided the Avro RJ was the correct fit for their operations. Parameters such as the aircraft's positive speed-handling characteristics,

"one benefit of the Avro RJ is its fast dash performance at high speeds"

**Avro RJ85 Airtanker suppressing a wildfire in San Bernardino - California
Photo by Ben Cottman**

Aero-Flite Canadair CL-415
tackling a blaze at
Del Norte County - California
Photo by USFS (Aero-Flite)

"Avro RJ - the Swiss Army Knife of modern aerial fire fighting"

a 415 knot maximum speed, fully pressurised for high altitude long distance dispatches, on board load factors, four-engine reliability with multiple system redundancy and short-field performance all combined, point to an excellent all-round aerial firefighting package operating in an all-terrain environment.

The 'next-generation' land based airtanker is proving successful in it's ability to perform in the northwest US and

southwest Canadian regions. With numerous National Parks within flying range required to preserve and protect, the Avro RJ is the *Swiss Army Knife* of modern aerial firefighting.

Aero-Flite is capable of providing it's own inhouse maintenance and engineering on both CL-415's and Avro RJ's. The nature of the beast, that is forest fires, is ever changing and the wildfire season appears to extend each year.

The unpredictability of their "fiery foe" and the difficult physical terrain of the region, compounded with the natural environment to conspire against Aero-Flite's operations.

While the numbers of Avro RJ's with CityJet continue to dwindle, as of May 2020 just four remain within the the fleet and as time marches on or the Covid-19 Pandemic deepens, less if any will be retained. However, it isn't all doom and gloom where the 'WhisperJet' is concerned. Knowing that several have swapped Paris for Spokane, earning a new life dramatically fighting wildfires from a height is a great consolation for enthusiasts already becoming misty-eyed about the types slow disappearance from European airspace.

Two of the remaining RJ's with CityJet, pre-Covid-19, has been leased to Aer Lingus, operating the Dublin - London City route using EI-RJD & EI-RJI, each painted in the recently revised Shamrock livery.

Aero-Flite "Any Mission at Any Time"



Finishing out active service flying the "Wild-West" performing aero manoeuvres, the sort that aircraft are designed to, is truly stuff of dreams. For former airliner's to execute such daring flights for the sole purpose of preserving the beauty of nature is a tremendously good cause. For the skillful pilots a dangerous task no doubt but incredibly satisfying seat-of-the-pants flying.

Semi-retirement usually signals a more leisurely pace, not so for members of Aero-Flite fleet. Some aircraft slip into a VIP role once scheduled passenger flying ceases, for the lucky few aerial firefighting awaits. Testament to

brilliant aircraft design by British Aerospace Systems.

It could be said they broke the mould or indeed rewrote the manual with the BAe-146 & Avro RJ series. This aircraft goes on and on, to quote Aero-Flite, "*Any Mission at Any Time*" - Onwards & Upwards.

**Written by Aidan Nolan -
Airliner Experience**

**A very special thanks to
Joanne Goodridge & Jeff Berry
of Conair Group Inc.**

**The Management & Staff of
Aero-Flite / Aerial Firefighting
and each of the photographers
whose images have been used
to create this article.**

**Avro RJ85 Airtanker on scene
at a Californian wildfire
Photo by Jeff Zimmerman**