Furies For Sale!

TWO VERY DIFFERENT HAWKER SEA FURIES AWAIT NEW OWNERS

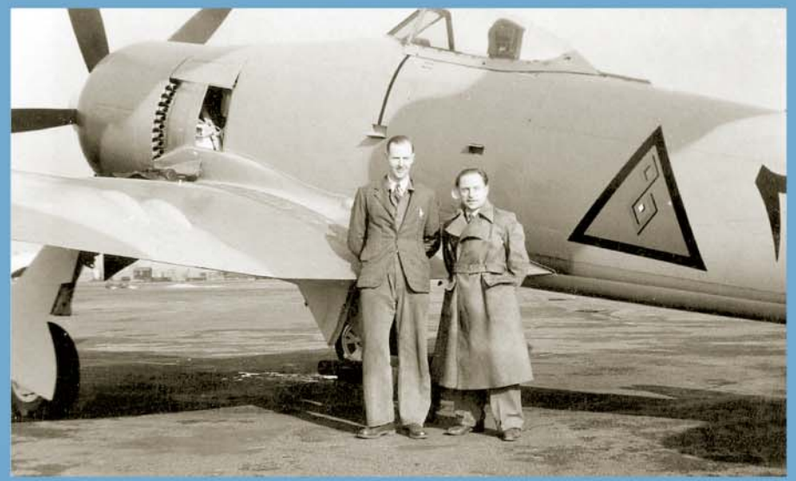
BY DOUG FISHER

Looking back at it now from a distance of four-decades, the incredible discovery, purchase, and importing to the USA of the entire collection of Iraqi Hawker Sea Furies serves as one of the milestones of the Warbird Movement. The ultimate piston-engine fighter, the final propeller-driven step before the introduction of jet warplane, and the importation of these aircraft was a major boost to the new Warbird Movement.

The Iraqi Air Force *(Al Quwwa al Jawwiya al Iraqiya)* was created during 1931 as the Royal Iraqi Air Force (RIrAF). At the time, Iraq was a League of Nations mandate and was administered by the United Kingdom. To create an air force, the first batch of Iraqi pilot candidates was shipped to RAF College Cranwell for training. Being in control of the nation's military destiny, it was obvious that the British would sell as much British equipment as possible. Hawker became a prime supplier of warplanes such as the Audax and elegant Fury single-seat biplane fighter.

In 1932, the nation achieved independence as the Kingdom of Iraq. This led the new government to begin acquiring warplanes from other countries — notably Italy. The force remained small and by 1936, the RIrAF could field only 55 aircraft and 37 pilots.

As it is today, the area is a hotbed of insurrection, rebellion, and religious fanaticism. Thus, the RIrAF went into action in 1934, attacking rebelling tribesmen in southern Iraq.

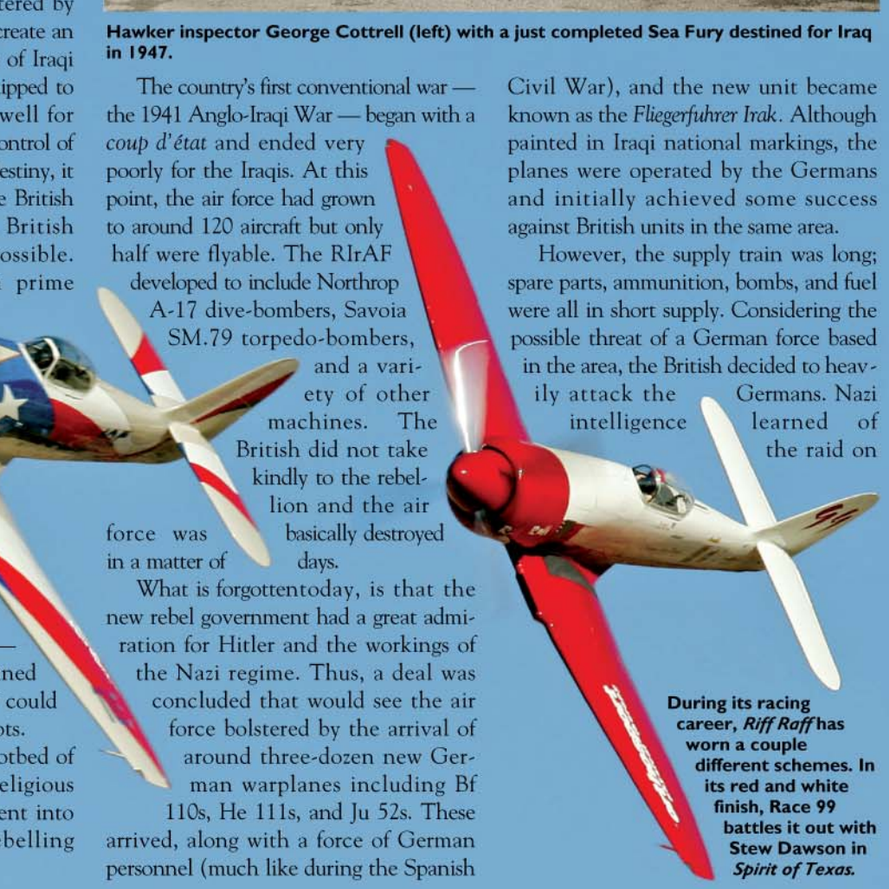


Hawker inspector George Cottrell (left) with a just completed Sea Fury destined for Iraq in 1947.

The country's first conventional war — the 1941 Anglo-Iraqi War — began with a *coup d'état* and ended very poorly for the Iraqis. At this point, the air force had grown to around 120 aircraft but only half were flyable. The RIrAF developed to include Northrop A-17 dive-bombers, Savoia SM.79 torpedo-bombers, and a variety of other machines. The British did not take kindly to the rebellion and the air force was basically destroyed in a matter of days.

What is forgottentoday, is that the new rebel government had a great admiration for Hitler and the workings of the Nazi regime. Thus, a deal was concluded that would see the air force bolstered by the arrival of around three-dozen new German warplanes including Bf 110s, He 111s, and Ju 52s. These arrived, along with a force of German personnel (much like during the Spanish Civil War), and the new unit became known as the *Fliegerfuhrer Irak*. Although painted in Iraqi national markings, the planes were operated by the Germans and initially achieved some success against British units in the same area.

However, the supply train was long; spare parts, ammunition, bombs, and fuel were all in short supply. Considering the possible threat of a German force based in the area, the British decided to heavily attack the Germans. Nazi intelligence learned of the raid on Mosul (main base for the Germans) and decided to "get out of town." By 29 May 1941, all German personnel (and as much equipment as possible) had been evacuated with just two non-flyable He 111s left behind. The British defeated the *coup d'état* and executed many of the leaders. This left the RIrAF in ruins. Recovery was almost non-existent and when the Arab-Israeli War began during 1948, Iraq was compelled to join but lacked sufficient combat aircraft to contribute much and this is where the Sea Furies came in.



During its racing career, *Riff Raff* has worn a couple different schemes. In its red and white finish, Race 99 battles it out with Stew Dawson in *Spirit of Texas*.

The Hawker Sea Fury was a known quantity and had become a mainstay of post-war Royal Navy aviation. The arrival of increasing numbers of jet warplanes meant that many of these aircraft would become available for "third party" sale. Since the majority of the planes would be utilized for operations from ground bases, navalized equipment was usually (but not always) removed and the name was shortened to just Fury.

Attempting to rebuild its air force and with strong British ties still in place, initial Iraqi interest in the type began back in 1946 and this interest translated to a December order when the nation purchased 30 reconditioned aircraft. The fighters and fighter-bombers quickly picked up the nickname "Baghdad Furies." Britain was in post-war economic downturn so these were welcome orders and Hawker hired back laid-off employees to complete the work.

A competitive Gold racer, *Riff Raff* really showed its stuff when being piloted by Hoot Gibson.

For its last few years of racing, Race 99 was finished in this very attractive scheme.

The first batch of Baghdad Furies began arriving in 1948 and proved a huge boost. Britain also provided pilots and mechanics for training purposes and some of the pilots were "seconded" to the Iraqi Air Force. It quickly became obvious that the Fury was a huge step ahead of anything flown by the surviving Iraqi pilots so the country ordered four of the two-seat dual-control trainer variants but only two were delivered.

The Fury proved popular and was an excellent machine for repressing local tribal rebellions. This led to a further order for 25 single-seat and three dual-control trainers and deliveries of this batch began in 1953.

The operational use of the type is beyond the scope of this article and we need to move ahead to 1978/1979. That is when David Tallichet and Ed Jurist were scouring the globe for vintage aircraft. It was a good time to buy since many of the machines were only recently withdrawn from service and still in relatively good condition.

"Frankly, I was surprised by the number of Furies in Iraq," recalled Tallichet. "Ed wasn't much of an aircraft guy. He was in it for the deal and he also enjoyed finding vintage autos. However, I could not believe the sheer quantity of airframes, engines, parts, and tools that comprised the Iraqi collection. What we found comprised basically 30 aircraft and these were shipped back to Orlando, Florida, and stored in a