

Register

David Leney

Concorde pilot whose passengers included the Queen and who once 'lost' his tail while flying a charter of American lawyers

The most worrying incident in David Leney's long career as a Concorde pilot happened while he was flying a charter for a group of American lawyers in 1989. One of them started to film a frenetic dance macabre that had begun among the crockery in the rear galley. Leney, a long way off on the flight deck, had no idea of the cause of the intense vibration, which started as Concorde soared high above the Tasman Sea. As the aircraft approached Sydney, air traffic control had some news: "Speedbird, your tail is missing."

Leney's immediate reaction was to say "Pull the other one!", but when he looked at the rudder he saw that a piece of it was indeed missing. It transpired that moisture had penetrated inside and that a chunk of rust had blown away. The captain kept his cool and, after landing safely, none of the lawyers threatened to sue for damaged equanimity, a tribute perhaps to Leney's own.

It was in Barbados in 1977, however, that Leney's considerable sense of humour and enjoyment of the ridiculous were most tried. He flew the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to the opening of the Barbadian parliament. To ensure as far as possible that the proceedings would go without a hitch, Leney carried out a reconnaissance mission to the island a week beforehand, familiarising himself with the airport, talking to the local authorities about royal protocol and discussing the exact positioning of Concorde on the tarmac after landing. This was to prove tricky, as there had been high winds in Barbados for several days before the royal visit.

One of Leney's tasks on the landing run was to hold the royal pennant in its scone and make sure it did not get whipped away, which in the turbulence was not easy. The landing run was perfect, but at the end of it a snag was discovered, in that the painter Leney had briefed had made a mistake in the

positioning of the nose wheel marking. The result was that while the nose-wheel was aligned perfectly in relation to the painted marker, the marker itself was about 3ft too far forward.

This meant that the Queen was trapped inside the aircraft, because the hatch was at the wrong angle to the red carpet, and the carpet could not be moved because it had been nailed to the tarmac to stop it being blown away by the wind. In the confusion, the airport manager arrived to welcome the Queen, and be presented to her, only to be greeted by a closed hatch. Undeterred, he stood on the platform at the

A Bahraini prince demanded that Leney change Concorde's route

top of the gangway steps and started hammering on the hatch and yelling at the invisible monarch.

Kenneth David Leney was born in Bolton in 1934, the son of Kenneth, a dentist, and Margaret, a dancer. He chose flying as a career while still at University College School, London, in 1952.

After completing National Service in the RAF, he passed all the requisite tests for selection, including leadership exercises. However, his parents had other ideas. They prevailed upon him to apply to the University of Cambridge to read French, German and economics. He complied and was offered a place there, but then, much to their consternation, turned it down in favour of a place at a flying school.

During his training Leney, who was 5ft 5in, took to the air in numerous aircraft, including a Tiger Moth, Chipmunk and twin-engined Meteor, which had been the RAF's first jet. "I was too short to fly Meteors," he recalled, "so was transferred to Vampires," which had more compact cockpits.



Leney flew Concorde for 15 years, including appearances at Farnborough airshow

In 1954 Leney applied to BOAC for a job after obtaining his commercial pilot's licence and began flying a series of large airliners—the elegant triple-finned Constellation, Argonaut and, in 1958, his first turbojet airliner, the Britannia.

His first pure jet, the VC10, took Leney to Africa and the Far East during the 1960s. After that he took the command course, which was designed to move the pilot from the right-hand seat occupied by second pilots to the captain's seat on the left.

Despite his concentrated work and training load, Leney had found time to court Janice Rose, whom he had met at an RAF ball. They married in 1958 and had a daughter, Susan, who is a schoolteacher, and three sons — Martin, a businessman specialising in flooring, Andrew, an electrician, and Tim who has an advertising and printing firm — as well as nine grandchildren, including a granddaughter, Roseanna, who is a ballerina with the Scottish Ballet Company.

The other love of Leney's life was

Concorde. "She flew in 1969 and I looked at that beautiful aircraft with wonder. Was I good enough to fly such an advanced and superb machine? Then I realised that she was an airliner and I was an airline pilot."

Leney wrote in his diary: "I remember my first take-off vividly. It was from Brize Norton, and I had never experienced such power and acceleration, which made Concorde such a delight to fly. Her operating height was nearly twenty thousand feet above a subsonic aircraft's, and she cruised at twice the speed of sound, Mach 2."

Leney flew Concorde for 15 years, including appearances at the Farnborough airshow, and a display flight over the QE2 with the Red Arrows.

The short stature that had made flying a Meteor on one engine ergonomically difficult for Leney helped to facilitate flying Concorde from her rather cramped flight deck, and several other Concorde pilots shared the benefits of being below average height.

What all Concorde pilots and crews enjoyed was an intense and palpable camaraderie, which all visitors to the flight deck discovered; they included members of the royal family, film stars — any rich people in a hurry. The Queen, who occasionally tarried to talk, once chatted to Leney for 15 minutes. The intense affection and aesthetic delight felt for Concorde by her crews was shared with her passengers.

Not everyone was a fan of BA's talismanic plane, however. On one occasion, Leney was tasked with inaugurating the new Concorde route to Bahrain, only for a Bahraini princeling to demand the immediate closure of the new route on the grounds that Concorde made such a noise it woke him up and aborted his camels. Leney's route was duly redrawn.

David Leney, Concorde pilot, was born on September 28, 1934. He died after a stroke on September 15, 2018, aged 83

Barbara Harris

Award-winning actress who hated the limelight and was dumped by Warren Beatty as she prepared for her finest hour

One of the most distressing sights in showbusiness was Barbara Harris walking from the back of the Shubert Theatre in New York to collect her Tony award for best actress in a musical in 1967. Her face a grey mask, she received the award and was then interrupted by a gatecrasher who planted a kiss on her cheek.

She eventually whispered: "I'm shy, OK, thank you very much, it's lovely," and shuffled off. She never appeared on a Broadway stage again.

What the millions watching on television did not know was that she had broken down in tears only a few hours earlier after Warren Beatty had apparently told her he was leaving her for another actress, Julie Christie. Harris threatened to miss the ceremony until Beatty agreed to accompany her. The award, for her role in *The Apple Tree*, was to be the high point of her career.

She was nominated for an Oscar for her part as an aspiring singer in an otherwise undistinguished 1971 Dustin Hoffman film, *Who is Harry Kellerman And Why Is He Saying Those Terrible Things About Me?*

Yet she gave arguably her most memorable performance as the wannabe singer Albuquerque in the 1975 Robert Altman movie *Nashville*. The film's final sequence begins with an open-air stage shooting. Albuquerque calms the audience by gradually getting them to join in with her in singing *It Don't Worry Me*.



Harris performs in the film Nashville

The critic Roger Ebert called it "unforgettable and heartbreaking". A year later she appeared in the comedy classic *Freaky Friday*.

Harris made her name in the 1950s and 1960s as a pioneer of improvisation, where actors deliver an unrehearsed scene with minimal information about their character and the set-up. She was the first performer on stage on December 16, 1959 when Second City, the oldest improv theatre troupe still going, opened in Chicago.

"Barbara established the role at Second City of ferociously smart women who refused to be mere adjuncts to the boys," said the improv

historian Jeffrey Sweet. "She brought an emotional complexity to the scenes that has rarely been matched."

Like many actors, however, Harris was never comfortable behind the footlights or in front of the camera. "Who wants to be up on stage all the time?" she once asked. "It isn't easy. You have to be awfully invested in the fame aspect, and I really never was. What I cared about was the discipline of acting, whether I did well or not."

Her first big-screen film was *A Thousand Clowns* with Jason Robards, and from then on she was constantly in demand in a 30-year Hollywood career, but she was never comfortable there either. "I used to try to get through one a year," she said in a rare interview, "but I always chose movies that I thought would fail so that I wouldn't have to deal with the fame thing."

Barbara Densmoor Harris was born in Evanston, a small town on Lake Michigan 15 miles north of Chicago, in 1935. Her father, Oscar, was a tree surgeon who later owned a restaurant, while her mother, Natalie Densmoor, taught piano, played the organ and made theatrical costumes.

The family moved to Chicago, where Barbara attended the Nicholas Senn

High School. "I wanted to be a dancer," she said, "but I stopped dancing in high school."

Shortly after graduating, Harris walked down the street from her home and found a former Chinese restaurant was being converted by students from the University of Chicago. She asked what was going on. "We're going to have a theatre, do you want to be in it?" replied one of the students,

Mike Nichols (obituary, November 20, 2014), who later directed *The Graduate*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and many other films. That was the start of the Playwrights Theatre Club, which became the Compass Players, whose leading lights also included Elaine May and Ed Asner.

The improv element came from another student, Paul Sills, whose mother, Violet Spolin, had written the first book on the subject, *Improvisation for the Theater*. Harris married Sills in 1955 and moved to England a year later when he won a Fulbright scholarship. While there she appeared in *The Tempest* at the University of Bristol.

They returned to the US to discover that the Compass Players had been dissolved in early 1957. A year later their marriage ended too, but she continued to work with Sills and they launched

Second City. Sills died aged 80 in 2008. They had no children.

The troupe opened on Broadway in 1961, when *The New York Times* noted Harris's "unusual and varied talents". For one sketch she played an introverted girl opposite Alan Arkin as a guitar-playing beatnik talking hippy nonsense. She won an Obie (Off-Broadway) award for her portrayal of a sex-obsessed babysitter in *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Hung You in the Closet and I'm Feelin' So Sad*.

Improv fuelled Harris's interest in exploring the nature of acting, which gradually overtook her interest in acting itself. "I'm much more interested in what's behind acting, which is the inquiry into the human condition," she said in 2002. "Everyone gets acting mixed up with the desire to be famous, but some of us really just stumbled into the fame part, while we were really just interested in the process of acting."

Harris's last film was *Grosse Pointe Blank*, a comedy crime drama in 1997. She then moved to Arizona and concentrated on teaching. "I don't miss it," she said later. "I think the only thing that drew me to acting in the first place was the group of people I was working with. All I really wanted to do back then was rehearsal."

Barbara Harris, actress, was born on July 25, 1935. She died from lung cancer on August 21, 2018, aged 83

