

# CLASSIC DRIVER

## [Into the Twilight: De Havilland's Vampire jet](#)

### Lead

What's a jet fighter doing in a mid-engined Porsche special? Well, it IS mid-engined, innovative and fast: 548mph fast, to be precise.

The Vampire is a slightly odd-looking device. The twin booms and stubby central engine/cockpit nacelle do make it look like a refugee from Star Wars. And the name of the de Havilland company's own jet engine, 'Goblin', adds further out-of-worldly mystery.

The reason for the configuration is to keep the engine's jet pipe as short as possible. In the early days of jets, twin engines were the norm due to the poor power outputs of the time. Fitting the Goblin into a conventional fuselage would have stretched the unit's modest thrust a little too far.

The Vampire was conceived in WW2, but did not see operational service until after the war. It and the Gloster Meteor were Britain's early post-War answer to the growing Soviet threat, as well as fighting in small colonial territory conflicts around the world.



It also set many records and 'firsts'. Legendary Royal Naval Air Service pilot Captain Eric 'Winkle' Brown became the first pilot to fly a jet aircraft off an aircraft carrier and land it again, when he accomplished the feat in a Vampire on 3 December 1945.

One of the most bizarre stories of Vampires concerns 'Operation Snowball'. The Swiss government had ordered 75 de Havilland Vampires to be delivered in 1949. The jets were to be flown in by the Hatfield company's pilots, one of whom was WW2 night fighter ace and chief test pilot for de Havilland, Group Captain John 'Cat's Eyes' Cunningham. Using typical British resourcefulness, Cunningham combined the everyday trip with a little time on the slopes.

But how to take his skis? Quite simple. For Operation Snowball, as it became known, Cunningham strapped his trusty pair of wooden skis to one of the tail-booms of the jet.

### Related Links

Artcurial will offer an ex-Swiss Air Force 1959 De Havilland Vampire two-seater at its 17 February Aeronautics auction. You can see full details of this entry in the [Classic Driver Marketplace](#)

*Photos: Artcurial*

## **Gallery**

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