



SAXAVORD THE SAXA VOICE

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Tributes flow in for pioneering founder and CEO

Everyone at SaxaVord Spaceport was hit hard by the death in August of our pioneering CEO and founder Frank Strang after a short battle with cancer.

Tributes to Frank have flowed in to us from around the world, serving to highlight just what an impact he made and how big a loss he is to the UK space industry.

He recognised the potential for a commercial spaceport in Unst back in 2017 and together with his co-founders Scott Hammond and Debbie Strang assembled a small team of highly skilled people to turn it from a paper concept into reality, winning considerable financial backing in the process.

The task of the much bigger team now working at Saxa is to cement his legacy by delivering first launch and long-term commercial success.

After his death Saxa board member Brian Wilson wrote Frank's obituary for *The Guardian*, and we think it appropriate to reproduce it here.

Reaching for the stars

This image of one of the dishes that comprise our flight tracking and telemetry system against the night sky complete with Milky Way was taken by Callum Ward from our operations team.



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The serial entrepreneur Frank Strang, who has died aged 67 of oesophageal cancer, seized an unpremeditated opportunity to deliver the first licensed spaceport for vertical launches in western Europe, overcoming multiple barriers along the way.

Having acquired a disused RAF radar station base at the most northerly point in the Shetland Islands a decade earlier – without any thought of spaceports – by 2017 Strang had realised the potential of his asset as the government sought to promote a UK launch capacity.

Long-haired and cowboy-booted, Strang weaved his way through the corridors of power to persuade government, regulators and private investors that the answer lay in the former Saxa Vord base on the island of Unst. Step by step, he and his small team overcame safety, planning and political challenges while walking a financial tightrope to keep the vision alive.



One of the more unlikely delays came from Historic Environment Scotland on grounds that the launch site would mean demolition of RAF Skaw, a second world war radar station that had been designated “a monument of national significance”. The quango eventually withdrew its objection, recognising the spaceport’s national importance.

SaxaVord Spaceport was licensed in 2023 by the Civil Aviation Authority and the first launch is due within the coming months, with international clients signed up.

A serial entrepreneur, Strang was also a former RAF officer and coach to the Scottish freestyle ski team.

It is poignant that Strang will not be around to witness the climax to his endeavours; his cancer diagnosis came just two months before his death.

The Saxa Vord RAF base had closed in 2006 and was bought shortly afterwards by Frank and his then wife, Debbie. The site included 23 houses and became an eco-tourism centre with accommodation, restaurant and bar. They diversified into a facilities company, providing the workers at the new Shetland Gas Plant with accommodation and catering, and founded the UK's most northerly gin distillery, on Unst, in 2014.

The lightbulb moment came when the UK government commissioned the Sceptre Report to advise on potential for establishing a vertical launch site in the north of Scotland. It concluded that "the Shetland Isles has the best orbital access, but the remote site means it is logistically the most challenging".

The Strangs, along with a former RAF fighter pilot, Scott Hammond, in 2017 founded Shetland Space Centre (of which I later became a director); it was renamed SaxaVord Spaceport in 2021. The challenges, as well as the remote location, also included the fact that the Scottish government put its weight and money behind a virgin site on the Sutherland mainland, close to land owned by Anders Holch Povlsen, a Danish businessman who has extensive interests in the north of Scotland.

Povlsen's well-founded environmental objections to the Sutherland option developed into wholehearted enthusiasm for SaxaVord and, as the need for investment grew to fund its construction, his sustained support and faith in Strang's ability to deliver kept the show on the road.

"Against the odds," said Povlsen, "and with many headwinds, even a few unfair ones, he built the solid foundations of what will likely become Europe's largest commercial spaceport. No matter what happens, many people, including me, are going to stay right behind Frank, doing our utmost to make sure SaxaVord becomes the success it's set up for."

Hammond, who has succeeded Frank as chief executive, said: "We are determined to make the UK Europe's leader in vertical launch spaceflight. That will be Frank's legacy for Shetland, for Scotland and the UK."

Frank was born and spent his early years in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where his father, Tom, was a physical education teacher. His mother, Barbara, also a teacher, died when he was 13. The family had its roots in the Highlands, and Frank completed his schooling at Dingwall Academy, Ross-shire. He then graduated in PE from Jordanhill College of Education, Glasgow.

After a spell teaching, he was accepted for training at the RAF College Cranwell, and joined the service as a physical education officer latterly based at Lossiemouth, in Moray, where he met Debbie Hope, a fellow RAF officer; they married in 1991. Part of Frank's role lay in community relations, and in 1994, the year of his departure from the RAF, he was appointed MBE for charitable fundraising. He was also coach to the Scottish freestyle ski team for five years.

He left the service after suffering an injury in a parachuting accident. His first business venture was to promote the US region of New England as a winter sports destination for UK skiers.

This took Frank into a project to redevelop a former military airport near Boston, which opened his eyes to similar possibilities in the UK, as the Ministry of Defence disposed of property assets. These were pursued with mixed results but his most fateful decision proved to be the purchase of Saxa Vord.

The Shetland Islands Council chief executive Maggie Sandison, who was involved from the outset, noted that the project was conceived and constructed with the community in mind: "Frank's commitment to a spaceport education strategy created opportunities for children and young people to engage with astronauts, attend space camps and participate in national space competitions."

Frank and Debbie, who is deputy chief executive of Shetland Space Centre, separated two years ago.

Recently, he married Dani Morey. She survives him, along with Tom and Emily, the children of his first marriage.

SaxaVord deputy CEO appointed as new boss

Scott Hammond has taken over the role of chief executive following the death of his friend and co-founder Frank Strang.

Until now deputy CEO, Scott will steer the company as it prepares to host a first test flight by rocket company RFA from the site at Lamba Ness in Unst, Shetland.



Scott Hammond and Debbie Strang

Debbie Strang, Saxa's chief operating officer, is the new deputy CEO. Mairi Prior has been appointed to the board as finance director.

"Of course these are not the circumstances in which I would wish to be taking over – Frank's death has come as a huge blow both to myself as a long-standing friend and colleague and to everyone in the Saxa team," Scott said.

"But it was Frank's firm wish that we should complete the mission that he and I and Debbie Strang set out on way back in 2017, of turning SaxaVord into a commercial success story.

"We have come a long way since then, with all the infrastructure and personnel in place, as well as the requisite licences, to become the UK's and Europe's leading vertical launch rocket site.

"I am honoured to have been chosen to lead the company and will continue to give my heart and soul to this project as CEO.

"I look forward to working closely with the team, our clients, investors, government and regulators to put the UK on the map as the gateway to space."

Scott was a co-founder with Frank and Debbie of the original Shetland Space Centre, now SaxaVord Spaceport, in 2017 and as a former RAF Tornado pilot, staff officer and flight commander played a critical role in the technical set up of the site, including trajectory analysis, rocket evaluation and operating procedures as well as leading the planning, design and build of the ground infrastructure to meet market needs.

He was also key liaison with government and regulatory agencies over the formulation of the UK's first spaceport regulations.

Debbie trained as an RAF supply and logistics officer and was operations officer at RAF Lossiemouth before joining the Cairngorms National Park Authority as tourism and economic development manager.

As COO, Debbie led the strategic development of the company and oversaw SaxaZero, education, visitor management and tourism opportunities.

SaxaVord strengthens operations with two new senior appointments

SaxaVord Spaceport has bolstered its growing team with two new senior appointments in operations as it prepares for first launch.

Ian Palmer has joined as Director of Operations and Nadine Armiger-Drake as Spaceport Operations Manager.

Both bring a wealth of skills, expertise and knowledge that will be invaluable to the company as it transitions from developmental to operational phase.

Ian began his career in the RAF as a weapons technician and among other roles served as a lead engineer officer on 14 Squadron Tornados, leaving after 23 years to join GE as senior business operations manager.

He then moved into the whisky industry with William Grant & Sons and Whyte & Mackay before joining LevertonHELM as director of engineering and operations in the UK.

Nadine was the programme lead for secure infrastructure projects (counter-terrorism/counter-espionage) for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Offices Services Agency, most recently leading complex and award-winning RAF secure infrastructure projects in challenging environments globally.

Her first project for projects in remote and challenging locations for the RAF was the re-installation of the radar at RRH Saxa Vord in 2017-18. Prior to that she lived and worked in Japan, Syria and Belgium.

Ian said: "I am absolutely delighted to have joined the team at SaxaVord Spaceport, and look forward to leading the operations team as we prepare for the first launch and beyond."

Nadine said: "It's great to be back at Saxa Vord in such an exciting role, preparing for what will be a historic first European vertical rocket launch. I'm thrilled for what this will mean for the UK, and for the STEM opportunities it could bring for our next generation of space pioneers."

Saxa CEO Scott Hammond added: "We are all pleased to welcome Ian and Nadine to the team – I am sure with their skills and experience they will make enormous contributions as we move into the operational phase of the business."



Nadine and Ian being welcomed on site by CEO Scott Hammond (centre)

'Marseum' paintings

Earlier this year, S2 English students at Baltasound School took part in a "Marseum" project for "Daydream Believers", where they were set the task of designing an exhibition about life on Earth for the first museum on Mars in the year 2050.

The students decided to base their project on SaxaVord Spaceport. They produced some informative posters and some brilliant paintings of spaceport staff, including the late Frank Strang and space educator Mike Mongo



Fifth Astronaut Job Camp

Guests at this year's Astronaut Job Camp – the fifth held by SaxaVord – included Blue Origin astronaut Dr Eiman Jahangir and Advanced Space Research Agency founder Alex Layendecker.

Dr Jahangir is a Professor of Medicine and Radiology and a practicing cardio-oncology physician at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee. He is one of three cardiologists to travel to space.

Dr Layendecker's doctoral research focused on human biological reproduction in space and off-earth environments. Additionally, he served seven years as a USAF space operations officer for spacecraft launch and recovery.

Space educator Mike Mongo, who runs the annual camp, said: "As SaxaVord is readying for its first launch, Astronaut Job Camp 2025 – our fifth year! – was kept very efficient and focused.

"For me, the highlight was having so many returning students, especially from the UK and Shetland."

"Yet there was also an extra dose of reality this year with the passing of SaxaVord Spaceport co-founder and my good friend, Frank Strang, during AJC.

"Indeed, the greatest honour was being reminded by how many of the students had got to hear about SaxaVord in person and in camp from Frank himself. Frank's legacy will always include the success of all the students throughout the UK who through SaxaVord and AJC have been inspired to dream as big as they dare and to pursue that dream."

Visitor room opened up

SaxaVord has opened a visitor room where people can learn about the development of the spaceport and its future plans.

Aimed largely at children, but still accessible to adults, the room at the Saxa domestic site contains a series of information boards and interactive features that provide key information for space enthusiasts.

Chief Operating Officer Debbie Strang said:

“ It is nice to have this open to provide visitors with information about us and all we do.

“ In future we hope to be able to open a much larger and more extensive visitor centre, but our main focus has understandably been on getting the site ready for first launch.”



First live emergency exercise

Safety is the number one priority at SaxaVord Spaceport, and liaison with the emergency services and national and local government agencies has been ongoing for many years.

In July this year we carried out our first live, multi-agency emergency exercise, named Lorday, at our Lamba Ness launch site.

It was designed to test our Emergency Response Plan (ERP) and external Multi-Agency Initial Response Plan (MAIRP).

The scenario involved a commodities pad area deflagration with five casualties, deliberately exaggerated in order to stress test the response and provide a wide range of considerations for the incident command, including missing persons, triage, exposure to commodities and secondary incidents.

SaxaVord teams worked with partners from Scottish Fire & Rescue Service (SFRS), Police Scotland, HM Coastguard, NHS Shetland, Unst Health Centre, Shetland Islands Council and our client Rocket Factory Augsburg in order to initiate the most effective response.

In total over 40 people participated in the exercise as a mixture of controllers, casualties, participants and observers.

Ruaraidh Galbraith, SaxaVord Launch Campaign Assistant, said: "All services enacted their roles very effectively, with inter-agency interaction being highlighted as a key outcome of the exercise.

"The exercise validated the key fundamentals of both our internal and external emergency frameworks. With help via a post-exercise debrief from all participants, Saxa was able to establish a number of key findings and improvements from the exercise. These findings were used to update our emergency response documents, the ERP and MAIRP, and enable us to strive for continuous improvement of our operations."