



FORGOTTEN AIRMEN

From May 1940, vital training was carried out by the Rhodesian Air Training Group, but today its work has largely been forgotten. **Gerry van Tonder** sets the record straight.

As the war progressed in favour of the Germans during the dark days of 1940, the RAF desperately needed new pilots to replace those lost in combat. A training network was in place in Britain but, as Luftwaffe fighters prowled British skies, it was fast becoming untenable. The Air Ministry, therefore, turned to the Commonwealth and asked for help in turning fledgling airmen into fully qualified flyers in their less-dangerous skies. Southern Rhodesia was one of several nations to answer the call.

The RAF established a presence in the self-governing British colony as part of the Empire Air Training Scheme in May 1940. Named the Rhodesian Air Training Group (RATG), it was activated for the instruction of RAF and RAF Volunteer Reserve (RAFVR) pilot cadets, navigators, air observers and air gunners. Elementary

flying was in de Havilland Tiger Moth trainers, shipped from Britain, by RAF instructors, with a high percentage of them being RAFVR sergeants.

In January 1940, Gp Capt Charles Warburton Meredith (later Air Vice-Marshal Sir Charles Meredith KBE, CB, AFC) was tasked with the formation and command of the RATG. He established his headquarters in the centre of the colony's capital, Salisbury (now Harare). All funding came from the Air Ministry in London and the Southern Rhodesia government.

Open For Business

The training scheme was officially activated on January 23, 1940, at the established RAF Cranborne (formerly Hillside) in suburban Salisbury, with the establishment of 20 Service Flying Training School (SFTS). The instructors had at their disposal four serviceable Hawker Hart biplanes, ►



RIGHT: DE HAVILLAND TECHNICIANS BY A TIGER MOTH, WITH FLYING INSTRUCTOR JOHN SCOTT-ROBERTSON IN THE REAR COCKPIT. (BERYL SALT)





an Audax (Hart variant) awaiting rebuild, eight training aircraft (de Havilland Tiger Moths and others), one Tiger Moth undergoing repair and two Hornet Moths. The Communications Squadron had six de Havilland Dragon Rapides and three Leopard Moth monoplanes.

In March, a special train from South Africa arrived in Salisbury, bringing with it 100 RAF officers, pilots and technicians, together with their families, who would kick-start the RATG programme. A further 260 RAF ground staff followed that May, including wireless operators, mechanics and recruits.

The first unit, 25 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS) at RAF Belvedere, was officially opened on May 24. It was assigned Tiger Moths, Fairchild PT-26 Cornells and North American Harvards. Additionally, 27 EFTS was formed at RAF Induna, Bulawayo, and opened prior to the official activation of the RATG. Over the ensuing months, elementary and service

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training schools were established at RAF Guinea Fowl (near Gwelo, now Gweru), RAF Mount Hampden (near Salisbury), RAF Kumalo (Bulawayo), RAF Thornhill (Gwelo) and RAF Heany (Bulawayo). RAF Norton (south of Salisbury) was home to the Flying Instructors School, while

RAF Moffat (Gwelo) was the base for 24 Combined Air Observers School (24 CAOS) and the Bombing, Gunnery and Navigation School, operating multi-role Avro Ansons. The Kabanga bombing range was situated near Gwelo. Bombing ranges were also established at Miasi, northwest of Bulawayo and at Mielbo to the east of the city.

By this time, the programme had at its disposal 295 Tiger Moths at EFTS; 217 Airspeed Oxfords and 222 Harvards at SFTS; and 33 Airspeed Oxfords, 19 Fairey Battles and 19 Avro Ansons at CAOS. In addition, there was a Hornet Moth, a Leopard Moth, a Rapide, two Gloster Gauntlets, a Hawker Hart and a Percival Vega Gull, the latter for the communications squadron.

Demanding Syllabus

Almost all of the trainees would come from Britain, with a small number accepted locally and from the Hellenic, Royal Australian and South African air forces. The Reception Depot and Initial Training



Wing (ITW) were situated at Hillside Camp, where students would undergo a primary and a secondary course, each of a six-week duration. This included basic military training such as drill instruction.

Pupil pilots attended lectures on the theory of flight, aircraft engines and elementary navigation, and were shown how to communicate in Morse code with a lamp. Solo flying would be introduced once a certain level of competence had been achieved, interspersed with in-flight instruction and night flying by instrument. The EFTS phase culminated in course examinations.

Successful candidates were then sent either to the Post Initial Training Wing Pool or to an EFTS. About one-third of those who did not pass – an average of 6% – were accepted into 24 CAOS for air gunner instruction. The remainder were given trade training to be absorbed into the RATG, were repatriated to the UK or posted to the Middle East.

Each EFTS intake comprised 320 pupils: 50 from Post Initial Training Wing Pool and 270 directly from the ITW secondary



course. The RATG set a target of 80 hours flying time at EFTS level per phase, and 160 hours at SFTS.

At the latter, student pilots were 'promoted' to Harvard trainers, substantially more sophisticated than the aircraft they had cut their teeth on, with variable-pitch propeller, a greater range of instruments, retractable undercarriage and flaps. Lecture content intensified, with subjects ranging from the physical dynamics of falling bombs to the air recognition of enemy and Allied aircraft. Considerable time was dedicated to 'blind' flying, relying entirely on two points on a map and instruments. Night-time sorties became more frequent and longer in duration. Dual-control Oxfords were employed to train bomber aircrew such as navigators, bomb aimers, radio operators and air gunners.

Once rewarded with their wings, most of the now fully-fledged pilots were posted to the Middle East and the North African theatre for conversion to Spitfires or Hurricanes.

The RATG trained more than 8,300 Commonwealth and Allied airmen during the war, which represents 7% of the Empire Air Training Scheme's global total. ▶

OPPOSITE: AVM CHARLES WARBURTON MEREDITH, AIR OFFICER COMMANDING THE RATG, 1941-1945. (LAC J H ADAMS)

ABOVE: THE FIRST RAF FLYING INSTRUCTORS IN SOUTHERN RHODESIA, FLT LTS VICTOR 'MAXI' MAXWELL (LEFT) AND JOHN 'JIMMY' POWELL, BY A HAWKER HART IN SALISBURY. (BERYL SALT)

LEFT: HARVARDS IN FORMATION OVER THE SOUTHERN RHODESIAN HIGHVELD. (BERYL SALT)

Dangerous Work

The work with raw recruits, some only in their late teens, in an unfamiliar environment would, inevitably and tragically, lead to fatal air crashes. A major cause was turn-induced stalls while climbing at low altitude. Lack of experience was the main underlying factor, compounded by pressure from London to combat Hitler's seeming unstoppable military juggernaut which was rapidly threatening British shores. Some of the flying instructors also lacked the necessary experience which may have prevented nose-dive crashes into the ground.

The first fatal casualty was student pilot Sgt Ivor Campbell Smith (25), who came down just south of Salisbury on June 20, 1940. Based at RAF Belvedere (25 EFTS), Smith had been briefed to perform repeated medium and steep turns to hone his skills in these manoeuvres. Observers on the ground witnessed his aircraft go into a spin before crashing into the ground, totally destroying his Tiger Moth. There was no obvious reason for the aircraft entering a spin and it was surmised that the biplane had stalled during a steep turn, causing a wing to dip which led to a spin.

Only 18 years old, trainee pilot Sgt Denis Edward Smith, from Clerkenwell, London, entered low cloud on approach to RAF Thornhill (22 EFTS). Having completed a cross-country sortie in a Harvard, Smith reversed course and started to head back toward the town of Que. For reasons never ascertained by the board of enquiry, at this point Smith made the decision to abandon his aircraft. However, upon making a clean exit, he punched his parachute's quick-



release catch instead of pulling the ripcord. He fell to his death and is buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) Cemetery in Gweru (Gwelo).

In some instances, the exuberance of youth, fuelled by the euphoria of flight in an exotic country, led to cases of indiscipline. Deviation from sortie briefings and standing orders had fatal consequences as some airmen found it difficult to resist performing illegal acrobatics or low-level 'buzzing' to impress those on the ground.

In one such incident, flying instructor Flt Lt Michael Patrick O'Reilly had been authorised to conduct a training sortie to include map-reading instruction on a cross-country flight. His pupil was 22-year-old Sgt George Herbert Loomes from Wellingborough, Northamptonshire. Flying from RAF Cranborne (20 SFTS) in an Oxford, en route O'Reilly broke off from his designated course and started circling a friend's farm near the village of Wedza, east



was flying crashed on final approach at RAF Heany, Bulawayo (23 SFTS). At the conclusion of a low-level dive-bombing exercise, the pilot omitted to change to the aircraft's port auxiliary fuel tank. As he turned into land, the port engine cut out, causing the starboard powerplant to yaw the aircraft to the left. At about 40ft the engine stalled and the Oxford smashed into trees before hitting the ground. The pilot survived. Hearn is buried in the CWGC Bulawayo (Athlone) Cemetery.

Thermal updrafts and fast-developing thunderstorms undoubtedly contributed to crashes. Lacking adequate navigational skills in such scenarios, trainees faced significantly increased accident risks as they diverted from fixed routes. On January 28, 1941, 21-year-old trainee pilot Sgt Roy Charles Pedley, from Chingford, London, crashed his Harvard after climbing too steeply into cloud, causing the aircraft to stall and enter a fatal spin from which he could not pull out because he had been flying too low. As he was on a formation-flying exercise from RAF Cranborne at the time, Pedley's death led to fresh RATG instructions forbidding

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of Salisbury. While flying at around 400ft (122m), the aircraft was seen to suddenly nosedive into the ground, killing both occupants instantly. There was speculation that the pilot's seat may have unexpectedly moved back, or that he may have fallen against the control column, but it was more likely that his aircraft had stalled in a turn. Post-mortems and the magistrate's inquiry simply concluded 'death due to injuries received in a flying accident'. They were both interred in the CWGC Harare (Pioneer) Cemetery.

Essential Crew Only

The rigorous enforcement of regulations prohibiting the unauthorised carriage of ground personnel was introduced after one such passenger, 20-year-old LAC Austin Charles Hearn, from Bodmin, Cornwall, was killed when the Oxford a trainee pilot

LEFT: NEARLY 50 HARVARDS AND, IN THE FOREGROUND, AN RAF LOCKHEED LODESTAR ON THE HARDSTAND AT RAF THORNHILL 1942-43. (BERYL SALT)

OPPOSITE: A FATAL HARVARD AIR CRASH NEAR RAF CRANBORNE, SALISBURY, 1942. (BERYL SALT)

BELOW: RAF THORNHILL, GWELO. (BERYL SALT)

formation flying below 1,000ft. Pilots were also told that aircraft should avoid entering cloud were possible. Pedley is buried in the CWGC Harare (Pioneer) Cemetery.

Hazardous Night Flying

On a dark night in February 1941, 23-year-old pupil pilot Sgt Ian Jenkinson (RAFVR) was trying to get his Harvard airborne from RAF Cranborne, while simultaneously attempting to close the cockpit canopy and struggling to hear what his instructor was telling him. The aircraft was, typically, not fitted with any form of internal communication. As the Harvard lifted off at the end of the runway, the hapless Jenkinson crashed into trees and he perished in the burning wreck. The instructor, an Air Force Cross recipient with 5,000 hours' flying time, miraculously survived. Jenkinson is buried in the CWGC Harare (Pioneer) Cemetery.

Aircraft structural and mechanical failure were also contributing factors to the casualty statistics. The fuselage of the Tiger Moth, the mainstay of the RATG's primary pilot training fleet, was constructed from fabric and plywood over steel tubing, while the wings and tail were of fabric-covered timber. High temperatures and the altitude – over 4,000ft above sea level – on the central African highveld were not ideal for such frail aircraft, while the flimsy ▶



RIGHT: TIGER MOTH RUMBAVU AT RAF BELVEDERE, SALISBURY. (BERYL SALT)

BELOW: HARVARD TRAINERS OF 20 SERVICE FLYING TRAINING SCHOOL AT CRANBORNE. (RAF MUSEUM)

structure reduced the flyer's chances of survival when colliding with the ground to almost nil.

On May 12, 1942, an Oxford from RAF Heany (23 SFTS) crashed south of Bulawayo, killing all three on board. An investigation discovered the twin's starboard mainplane leading edge and plywood covering had catastrophically disintegrated, most likely caused by striking a large bird. The pilot was 24-year-old Flt Sgt James Thomas Thackham, from Headington, Oxford. The other two airmen were Sgt George Rufus Joslin (20) from Pirbright, Surrey, and Sgt Bernard Martin Franklin (20) from Brighton, Sussex. All three are buried in the CWGC Bulawayo (Athlone) Cemetery.

Loss of the AOC

The highest-ranking RAF fatality – and one of the oldest at 50 – was the highly-decorated Air Commodore John William Boldero 'Jack' Grigson DSO, DFC and two bars. Born in Pelynt, Cornwall, in 1893, Grigson joined the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1913, before transferring to the Royal Naval Air Service with a commission and operation from the seaplane carrier HMS *Ark Royal*.



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Joining the Royal Air Force after its formation in April 1918, Grigson served in Greece, Southern Russia and in Iraq, during which tours of duty he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order in recognition of his gallant and distinguished service, the Distinguished Flying Cross and two bars.

Promoted to air commodore in late 1940, in 1943 the long-serving Grigson was appointed Senior Air Staff Officer of the RATG in Southern Rhodesia. At the time of his death on July 3, 1943, he was acting Air Officer Commanding for the RATG. On the fateful day, Grigson was a passenger in a Harvard IIA over Kezi District near Bulawayo. Having unwittingly deviated from his intended flight path, the pilot encountered adverse weather conditions and, upon breaking through the cloud base, he realised too late that he was far too close to the ground. The fate of the pilot is not known but Grigson is buried in the CWGC Harare (Pioneer) Cemetery.

Today, in Zimbabwe (formerly Southern Rhodesia), the CWGC maintains the last resting places of 446 trainees who lost their lives during the RATG programme, at cemeteries in Harare (Salisbury), Bulawayo and Gweru (Gwelo).

These fatalities were almost entirely due to air crashes and collisions. Of the 446 men lost, 317 (71%) were RAF and RAFVR personnel. Typical of wartime recruitment, 70% of aircrew fatalities were aged 26 and under, with four only 18 years old.

By the end of 1946, the RATG had been retitled the Air Training Wing (Southern Rhodesia) with a much-reduced post-war throughput. However, the international escalation of Cold War tensions and the threat of nuclear global conflagration saw the RATG re-activated in May 1948. The decision was subsequently made to return RAF aircrew training to Britain, and on March 31, 1954, the RATG was finally disbanded. ●

