

Snippets from a Flying Career – Captain Brian Greeves FRAeS

Brian Greeves began his career in the Royal Air Force before becoming an airline pilot ending his flying career as a senior captain with Cathay Pacific in Hong Kong. He was the International Federation of Airline Pilots Associations (IFALPA) Design and Operations Committee chair and a member of its Aerodrome Ground Environment Committee. He now runs his own aviation consultancy providing services to airports, air navigation service providers, air operators, pilot associations, regulators, and training organisations nationally and globally. He is a Fellow of the Society, a Liveryman of the Honourable Company of Air Pilots and a Member of the International Society of Air Safety Investigators.



You could say that I was born into the Royal Air Force, as I started my life in No 52 Officers' Married Quarters, RAF Lindholme (Yorkshire, UK) on a snowy day at the end of April. My father was a squadron leader, having joined the RAFVR (Voluntary Reserve) just before the outbreak of the World War II from Queens University, Belfast, where he was a research physicist. (My younger son thinks it is very amusing that Lindholme is now an open prison!)



Fast forward 16 years, when I attended the Officer and Aircrew Selection Centre at RAF Biggin Hill for the five-day selection process. I was awarded an RAF Scholarship and a Special Flying Award, the latter giving me 30 hours flying at a civilian flying school. I chose to go to the Oxford Air Training School (Kiddlington) where I learnt to fly on a Piper (PA 28) Cherokee 140 going solo on 07 September 1967. During one of my "circuits and bumps" sorties, I narrowly missed an Andover aircraft that was dropping paratroopers at Weston-on-the Green...I am not sure if this was an "omen" of things to come.



My RAF Scholarship provided two years of school fees and a guaranteed place at the RAF College, Cranwell to join the Engineering Branch, subject to me obtaining the necessary grades in my A Level" (Advanced Level is like the HSC). Following the exams, the RAF informed my mother (I still have the letter) that my "A Level" results (due to my lack of application) were not good enough to become an engineering officer, but I could join as a pilot, a secretarial officer or a supply officer. My real ambition was to become one of the rare engineering officers that obtained their wings and were used as maintenance pilots. I naturally chose to become a pilot, though I was disappointed about the engineering.

The day after entering the RAF College, as a flight cadet, I was ordered to retake my A Levels and to go to university. The RAF College could only award degrees to cadets on its approved engineering course, so all other degrees had to be obtained from an external university. 50 of us out of 144 (do not ask me why I was on the list) were selected and we spent the next year doing all the usual cadet things (cleaning kit, marching, physical training, cross country runs, on exercise, academic and military subjects) whilst also re-studying advanced mathematics and physics.



At the end of the year, I obtained a place at Exeter University to study Engineering Science. I was promoted to an Acting Pilot Officer on 15 September 1969 (the anniversary of the Battle of Britain) and started my course in October of the same year. At the same time, I was posted to the Bristol University Air Squadron (BUAS) (formed in 1941) being the one that catered for Exeter University. BUAS was based at Filton, where the Concorde was built! (The University Air Squadrons were formed to provide an alternative way to train pilots and recruit potential officers.)

I had 3 years of bliss, flying the Chipmunk T10 every third weekend and being given priority without having to attend the weekly lectures held at the BUAS HQs. Each vacation, I either flew at Filton or attended the



summer camps at different RAF Stations. At RAF Binbrook, I was almost taken out by a target cable released by a Canberra of 13 Squadron. 13 Squadron was the "punishment" squadron and was filled with pilots that had CAT points to their names. CAT stood for category of repair with 1, minor and 5, a write off. Several of the pilots on 13 SQN had over 10 CAT points each!

In 1971, I was temporarily detached to the Central Flying School, RAF Little Rissington, as a supernumerary, ostensibly to work in operations. In reality, I became "rent a stude" for the instructors under training. Instead of having to fly with another "would be" instructor, they would fly with me and give me the "instructional patter". In return, I got to fly the Varsity, Jet Provost 5 and my beloved Chipmunk. The highlight was a sortie in the Gnat, where we went supersonic (the only time in my life) in an inverted dive. The last summer camp was at RAF Manston. The weather was perfect



and as a senior student (substantiated pilot officer and holder of the Preliminary Flying Badge, affectionately known as "Budgie Wings"), I got to do the morning weather flights, formation and aerobatics and even a spares delivery flight. At the end of the camp, I flew across England to RAF Kemble in a 4-ship box formation. At the time, it was a "big deal"!



My third-year project was on the "Jet Flap" and I visited Royal Aircraft Establishment Bedford to see the prototype Hunting 126 (XN714) powered by the Bristol Orpheus engine (later to be developed into the Pegasus for the Harrier) and talk to the engineers. Although, its last flight was a few years earlier (on loan to NASA), it was still a useful visit. Whilst there, I grabbed the chance to fly an Auster.



Returning to RAF Cranwell, as a graduate officer and with an honours degree in engineering, initially in the rank of flying officer and soon to be promoted to flight lieutenant; hence the derogatory "nickname" of "Green Shielders"...named after the stamps that were given out with petrol and other purchases and could be exchanged for gifts. I flew the Jet Provost (JP)3 and then the JP5. My memories of my time there include "Winking Willie", the light on top of the College that provided an incredible lighted beacon on the flat Lincolnshire landscape (the highest point is 551 feet (168m) above sea level), the power stations on the River Trent that could be identified by the number of chimneys and were another essential navigation aid; carrying a screwdriver to wind back the fatigue meter (5.5



G was the maximum but sometimes manoeuvres did not quite go as planned and the G limit was exceeded); low level flying and being able to DR position (I would definitely get lost now!); and finally getting my "wings".

I was posted to the multi-engine No 5 Flying Training School at RAF Oakington (just outside Cambridge) where I flew the Vickers Varsity, known as the "flying pig". The aircraft had two large radial engines (Bristol Hercules 264) with an incredible device known as the Hobson injection carburettor. My disappointment at not making it to fighters was tempered after my first overseas flight to RAF Gatow and experiencing the delights of Berlin years before the wall came down.

After I graduated, I did a spell at the Joint Airmiss Centre, RAF Uxbridge (where I had lived as a child), before being posted to the Varsity Refresher Squadron as a "professional co-pilot".



These were wonderful months crewing up with pilots returning from ground duties and undertaking regular training flights to Berlin, and, of course, visiting Cambridge's bars and clubs!

I finally got the posting of my choice to No 46 Squadron to fly the Andover. The Andover CMk1 was a "zipped up" HS748 which had been purchased as a short-range tactical transport aircraft. In order to produce the required thrust, it was refitted with larger RR Dart engines and



propeller blades (14 feet disc). The longer blades required a longer undercarriage, which meant it was extremely hard to load and unload the aircraft. The answer was to enable the aircraft to kneel! Our party trick was to do a high approach and short field landing (selecting reverse at around 5 feet above the ground); stop the aircraft; kneel



and off load a small armoured vehicle; unknelt and reverse to the beginning of the runway; and then perform a short field take off and a high rate of climb. I have out climbed a Jaguar, albeit with a PR Pod fitted, to 1000 feet!

As a "singly", I volunteered for weekend flying and enjoyed dropping paratroopers from the Territorial Army (TA is like the Reserve) on to remote landscapes in England and Scotland, after first making them airsick by flying low level across the countryside. This was also the first time I nearly died in an aircraft, when one of the 1 tonne containers, we were dropping, caught up on the ramp and we began to stall. We were less than 200 feet with the stick shake operating, when the dispatcher (an Army corporal) cut the cord that had caught up in the rollers and was able to push the container off the ramp. Afterwards, we saw that his thumb was sliced and bleeding as he had initially used the wrong edge of the knife!



No 46 Squadron was disbanded in August 1975 as part of the defence cuts, but I was posted to No 32 Squadron at RAF Northolt, some months before this happened.



No 32 SQN was the VIP Squadron and carried anyone of significance except for the British Royal Family, who flew on "The Queens Flight". TQF has now been disbanded and 32 Squadron has been rebranded as 32 Royal Squadron. No 32 Sqn had Andover CC Mk II (a regular HS748); HS125 business jets and Whirlwind helicopters. I arrived shortly after the demise of the Beagle Basset CC1 aircraft originally procured to carry V-bomber crews

During my time at Northolt flying "VIPs" (including the PM, cabinet ministers, foreign royalty, 3-5 Stars of every armed service and other passengers, whose details are still restricted) all across Europe, including many trips to Northern Ireland, because of the troubles. On one of the latter flights, Tom, a Special Branch superintendent, was "flying" the aircraft and pulled his handkerchief from his top pocket only to see the "rounds" (bullets) that he had taken from his pistol fall onto the floor and under the rudder pedals. As the smallest member of the crew, I was "volunteered" to retrieve them which I fortunately managed to do...it would have been an interesting entry in the "Techlog"!



Our station commander and squadron boss were outstanding people, encouraging us to make the most of being on a "mixed squadron" with the Royal Navy and with the opportunity to fly (unofficially) different aircraft types. I learnt to fly the Whirlwind (definitely an amateur). I remember returning from RAF Benson to pick up extra glasses for the mess party and landing the helicopter in a strong wind with the encouragement of the squadron QHI. Paddy Graydon, the squadron boss, walked out to the pan and told us that he had seen his career "flash before his eyes"! My flights in the HS125 were less dramatic and I enjoyed flying the "pocket rocket".



I also did some short detachments to RAF Germany (Wildenrath-another RAF station where I had lived and gone to school) to crew the Air Officer Commanding in Chief's Andover and to Norway to cover for the General's (Allied Commander Northern Europe) crew while one of his RAF pilots went on leave. At Wildenrath, I took up the offer from the Army Air Corps to fly a Beaver and, after a nearly ground looping it, I remembered how to use the rudder!



After Northolt, I was posted to 115 SQN (Flight Checkers) as a captain. 115 SQN was reequipping with the Andover (E 3A) aircraft (previously Argosy aircraft) and wanted a mix of Andover and flight checking experience. I completed the captaincy course and, whilst waiting for the refurbished aircraft to arrive, I was sent to HQ British Forces in Belize (Central America) as OC, the Tactical Air Operations Centre. Guatemala had made threats to seize disputed territory and the British Government



had responded by setting up a semi-permanent force under the command of an Army colonel. My job was to task the helicopters (Pumas and Scouts) and, when required, the Harriers. (I also got the chance to fly the Pumas and Scouts.)

There are so many stories from my time there but taking the helicopters to the Cays (small islands)



and sunbathing with the Clansman radio, in case of a call out, was the ultimate in "cool dude". My adventures with the Puma QHI (must be something about helicopter instructors), included landing on HMS Antelope (later sunk in the Falklands) and leaving wheel dents in the heli-deck; striking the rotors on a tree whilst descending into a non-authorised clearing; and escaping without a Board of Enquiry or other disciplinary action. Just as well as I was the Forces' Flight Safety Officer. I also used the opportunity to travel to most of Central America (Guatemala excluded), Mexico and parts of the USA.

Returning to Brize, I started my flight checking role conversion and quickly discovered that what appeared to be a boring flying job was the opposite. There was a large amount of precision manual flying required and we were tasked to carry calibration at every RAF, RN and Army Aviation Base that had any sort of navigation, approach, and landing aid in the UK, RAF Germany, and Cyprus. We also were given a few "secret squirrel" tasks which resulted one day in an unauthorised formation with a Phantom (F4), an Avro Shackleton (a 4 piston-engined aircraft like a Lancaster) and, ourselves, an Andover. The picture won "Photo of the Month" at 11 Fighter Group, but fortunately never made it to 38 Air Support Group!



My secondary duties on the squadron were Survival Instructor, having completed the Army Combat Survival Instructor's Course with the 22 SAS Regiment; and Unit Flight Safety Officer (FSO). My greatest contribution as the FSO was to be involved in two very near misses with Jaguars, one at RAF Coltishall and one at RAF Lossiemouth. We were carrying out routine checks of the ILS which involved flying a 5-mile arc across the ILS beam. Despite the briefings, the fighter aircraft were allowed to make approaches and the result was a near miss on both occasions. The good news was that the two incidents resulted in the squadron's long standing bid (I authored the paper) to have strobe lights fitted and the aircraft repainted in conspicuous colours (red and white) being finally actioned by "the powers that be".



Brize Norton was home to the "shiny fleet", the VC10, and though I never got to fly it, I did sit on the jump seat during their Monthly Continuation Training. I did, however, get to fly the Jetstream (which replaced the Varsity Trainer) when one of our ex-squadron members brought the aircraft to Brize on a land away for one of his students.

It was Belize that made me decide to leave the “peacetime” air force. I had enjoyed a high level of autonomy and responsibility...the concise job description from the Force Commander was “Do the job and don’t exceed the flying hours”. On my return to the squadron, even as an aircraft captain, squadron adjutant and the other appointments, I never achieved the same level of satisfaction..

At the end of 1981, I left the RAF, having married 3 months earlier, into a cold and uninviting civilian world. In retrospect, it was the right move and provided me with many opportunities to fly a range of large and small airliners, to build an expertise in operational, safety and technical matters, and to have a lot of fun, but, as they say, those stories are for another day.



Captain Brian Greeves FRAeS