

The History of Central Flying School

On 13 April 1912 King George V issued a Royal Warrant that approved the establishment of 'an aeronautical service for naval and military purposes under the designation of the Royal Flying Corps'. In a just a few words that Royal Warrant heralded the advent of British air power, which represented one of the most significant revolutions in modern British military and naval history. A Special Army Order, issued two days later on 15 April 1912, laid out that the Royal Flying Corps 'will supply the necessary personnel for a Naval and Military Wing, for a Central Flying School and for a Reserve'. A little over a year later, on 12 May 1912, The Central Flying School (CFS) was formed at Upavon, in Wiltshire, under the command of Captain Godfrey Paine, Royal Navy. The First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, offered Captain Paine the position on the condition that he learnt to fly in only two weeks, a feat he achieved with the help of one of the first CFS Aircrew Instructors, Lieutenant Arthur Longmore. A joint organisation equally funded by the Royal Navy and the British Army, CFS would become one of the most innovative institutions in the British fighting forces as it began formulating techniques with which to teach service personnel to fly and maintain the novel and rapidly evolving military flying machines of the day.



Capt Godfrey Paine





Candidates for CFS courses were selected from those who had already learnt to fly privately owned heavier-than-air machines. However, the emphasis of CFS was to prepare aircrew for war duties. Those selected were taught to fly on the array of aircraft available at CFS which, at the time, included Maurice Farmans, Henri Farmans, Shorts, Avros and Bristol Bi-planes. The first course commenced on the 17 Aug 1912 with 32 Officers and lasted for four months. It consisted of ground school, practical aircraft repair and airborne instructional sorties including solo flying time. The topics covered were remarkably similar to those taught to today's students demonstrating how well thought out the early syllabus was. Students who gained 50% in each subject, and 60% overall, graduated on 5 December 1912 and were authorised to fly short cross country flights of up to 30 minutes at heights around 1500 feet.



17 August 1912 to 5 December 1912

The first course included a particularly notable student, Major Hugh Trenchard who would later become the first Chief of the Air Staff and also the first Marshal of the Royal Air Force. Upon his arrival at Upavon, Captain Paine appointed him to be the Station Staff Officer (later Assistant Commandant) of CFS before he had completed the course. His new duties included setting

the examination papers, invigilating the examinations and correcting the papers. Thus, he found himself in the somewhat bizarre position of setting his own flying and ground examinations and correcting his own papers, thereby awarding himself his own 'wings', a practice CFS tries to avoid today!



Major Hugh Trenchard



Lieutenant Colonel Robert Smith-Barry AFC

CFS quickly became a centre of innovation, experimentation and research flying. In 1914, CFS was able to demonstrate that aircraft could fly beyond what were previously considered limiting wind speeds for those fragile flying machines. CFS also demonstrated the airborne attack role by dropping a torpedo from a sea-plane. This coincided with the beginning of the First World War which saw CFS expand rapidly to deliver advanced training for Royal Flying Corps pilots.

As the numbers of pilots increased, patterns in flying emerged and a Major Smith-Barry noted, in December 1916, that 'the mental attitude towards flying of an instructor is reflected in all the pilots he turns out'. One of the most gifted of the early RFC pilots, he recommended that a flying school for instructors be established both to improve the flying standards of flying instructors and also to provide them with 'definite lines upon which to instruct'. He also emphasised the importance of the use of dual controls to allow pilots to be shown techniques such as steep turns, high rates of climb and spinning rather than experimenting themselves, with often fatal results. Smith-Barry was immediately sent to establish a School of Special Flying at Gosport where he and his

students expanded the envelope of what was considered possible in aeroplanes and developed methods of teaching instructors that shaped flying training across the world, earning British aviators a fearsome reputation. Indeed, a Pittsburgh newspaper wrote in 1918 that 'Men who graduate from the Gosport Aviation School enter what is referred to in the British Army as the Legion of Death. They are the trickiest airmen in the service, and the most feared by the enemy'. In 1920, Wing Commander N K D MacEwen incorporated Smith-Barry's techniques into CFS, which took on the role of instructing instructors and maintaining the standards of pure flying of the services. In 1926, The Air Ministry decided that CFS staff should visit flying training schools between courses to check whether the system and standard of instruction was being maintained, thus the CFS Examining Wing was established.



In 1927 CFS received its own armorial bearings in recognition of its importance in the setting and maintaining of the highest standards of flying and flying instruction. The Pelican represents learning; the Crown and Tower represent the School's naval and military origins while the bearing also displays the pilot's brevet, the anchor and the sabre of the 3 Services. The White and Blue wavy lines serve as a reminder of the original site of the CFS which was close to the banks of the River Avon. The motto, 'Imprimis Praecepta' is translated to mean 'Our Teaching is Everlasting'.

1939 saw the outbreak of WWII and CFS broadened its responsibilities. For example, CFS was tasked with writing pilot notes for new and complex aircraft such as the Spitfire. It was also required to expand its output of Qualified Flying Instructors to cater for wartime expansion. An 'Examining Officers Scheme' was created comprising eight officers who ensured that rapidly evolving operational practices were passed back to CFS through regular liaison. This was similar to the current system CFS uses in which CFS Agents are embedded across all aircraft types of the modern Front Line.

Following 1945, aviation underwent significant change due to the introduction of jet and rotary wing aircraft. Consequently, a two-stage process of flying training was developed to include basic and advanced training. In addition to fixed wing instruction, CFS expanded to include rotary aircrew and rear-crew instructional courses, thereby overseeing all of the flying activity of the three services. Today, CFS remains at the cutting edge of flying training development. Its principle aims are to maintain the highest possible standards of pure flying and instruction on both fixed and rotary wing aircraft across the three services whilst innovating new approaches and techniques for the future. It achieves this through the dedicated work of personnel in CFS Exam Wing and CFS Flying Training Support Wing. CFS has now trained personnel from over 60 countries and is held in extremely high regard across the world in the art of military flying training instruction. CFS receives frequent invitations from friendly nations to help assess their training systems, thus playing an important role in UK Defence Engagement overseas.

Central Flying School and The Royals

Meanwhile, the precision, skill and innovation advocated by CFS is epitomised by the world famous Royal Air Force Aerobatic Team, The Red Arrows which is also under the command of the Commandant of the Central Flying School along with CFS Exam Wing and the CFS Research and Development Wing.

In 1960, Her Majesty The Queen Mother accepted the appointment of Commandant-in-Chief of the CFS establishing a strong Royal link. This was followed by a presentation of a Queen's Colour in 1969 from Her Majesty the Queen. Today, a new Queen's Colour will be presented in a ceremony that marks a particularly proud moment for all members of CFS both past and present.

