

May Dinner Meeting

Topic: "The United States Army Air Force Recruiting Program WWII"

Speaker / Presenter: John Bertram

Reporter: Bob Winson



Speaker: John Betram
Photo credit: Neil McGavock

On the evening of May 3rd. as the members and guests settled into the dining room for the start of the seventh annual CAHS Toronto Chapter Dinner Meeting... a sudden realization began to make its presence... the guest speaker was not in attendance! Phone calls were made to no avail. A very quick-thinking Chapter Director, Mr. John Betram, set up his computer and proceeded to show a series of WWII recruiting films that were made for the United States Army Air Force (USAAF). Following the attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, the United States realized that it needed to quickly train thousands of combat pilots to counter the very real and dangerous threat of the axis powers. The USAAF turned to the film studios in Hollywood for assistance. Among the many films that John showed was the notable, "*Winning Your Wings*" an 18 minute documentary / recruiting film produced by Warner Bros. in 1942. The film was directed by John Huston and was hosted by the famous actor, Jimmy Stewart. Stewart had been serving in the Air Corps for a year as an instructor when the recruiting film was produced. The USAAF estimated that 100,000 pilots enlisted as a result of seeing this film. The film itself was nominated for an Academy Award in the 1943 "Oscars" in the documentary category.



Actor Jimmy Stewart from the movie *Winning Your Wings*
Photo - Courtesy Warner Bros

The film started off with Jimmy Stewart taxiing up in a Consolidated Vultee BT-13 Valiant basic trainer. He then got out and removed his parachute before launching into his recruiting message. He stated that "this war was going to be a War of the Air" and that the USA was undertaking the greatest ever mass mobilization of manpower and material. He outlined that 65,000 warplanes and training aircraft would be built in 1942 alone and that two million men would be required by the USAAF to man and maintain the massive air force that was being planned. Mr. Stewart then outlined the many options to potential aviation cadets (the term then used for air force trainees), including a deferred entry if someone was completing high school, college

or university. The major requirement was to join the air force reserve until graduation and then join the regular service. Athletes were singled out as perhaps having the necessary skills of coordination and team work for air crew. Education standards were lowered with the notion that "formal education was no standard for intelligence". A candidate had to be at least 5-0' foot in height and between 18 and 26 years of age. For agreeing to serve, new cadets would be paid \$75 / month with all board and lodging covered! Mr. Stewart went on to explain that cadets would first go to "Reception Centres" for a haircut, be fitted for a uniform and start attending ground school. He continued to point out that cadets when assigned to operational duties would earn \$245 / month as a pilot, bombardier or navigator with a yearly bonus of \$500. He concluded the very patriotic movie by saying that "your wings are waiting".



British Pilots practicing formation flying over the Arizona desert - Note distinctive British markings
Photo courtesy - Grub Street London

The requirements for new pilots resulted in a massive expansion of the Aviation Cadet Program, which eventually had so many volunteers that the USAAF had to establish a reserve pool to hold qualified pilot candidates until they could be called to active duty. The need for airbases, bombing and gunnery ranges, to handle all of this expansion resulted in the accelerated building of new permanent bases and the use of municipal and private airfields, college and factory sites. At the beginning of 1941 the Air Corps had 156 airfields, but by December 1943, the wartime peak was reached with 783 airfields in the Continental United States. These airfields had a combined land area of 20 million acres. The need for aircraft was met by American industry which produced nearly 300,000 aircraft of all types from trainers to transport, bombers and fighters in WWII.

The individual training of a pilot recruit from the first day of training to graduation to an Operational Training Unit (OTU) flying combat type aircraft normally took approximately six months. Those cadets that passed the initial Pre-Flight courses were sent to pilot training schools starting with the Primary Pilot Training Schools which were usually run by civilian contractors, colleges and universities. Aircraft used were the Stearman, Ryan or Fairchild trainers on 60 to 65 hour courses. Next step was Basic Pilot Training at schools which used the BT-9 or BT-13 Valiant trainers. Cadets were taught to fly in formation, fly by instruments, fly by night and navigate over long distances. The final step was Advanced Pilot Training, where the cadets were placed in single engine or multi-engined courses. Single engine pilots flew the AT-6 (Harvard) and multi-engined pilots flew the AT-9 or similar

trainer. After 75 to 80 hours of training the cadets would be granted their “Wings”. This was followed by transitional training at OTU (operational Training Units) where the cadets learned to fly fighters, transport and bomber aircraft before going into combat. Other specialized schools taught Liaison Flying, Bombardier, Navigator Radio operator or Gunnery courses.

Another lesser-known air training plan in the US was the “British Flying Training School Program”. It was initiated as part of the overall Lend-Lease Plan to aid Britain in its battle against the Axis Powers before the US entered the war in December 1941, following the attack on Pearl Harbour. Approval of the plan was given by US President Roosevelt in May 1941. Under the direction of US General Hap Arnold the initial plan was for the US to provide 500 training aircraft and civilian instructors to accommodate 50 RAF cadets arriving every 5 weeks for a 20 week course. This plan was later changed to every 7 weeks for a 28 week course. Seven training schools were set up in five different states, including California, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma and Florida. The training syllabus was similar to the USAAF program with three parts: Primary, Basic and Advanced.

One person that was directly affected by the British Flying Training School Program was the late Philip Gray, former Chapter speaker, CAHS Toronto Chapter member, RAF Bomber Command veteran and author. Philip's story starts on March 2, 1943 when he and hundreds of other potential air crew hopefuls crowded into the Heaton Park Cinema, Manchester, to await their training selection for the American draft. He had just missed the Canadian draft due to a case of shingles, otherwise he would have been sent to Canada to train under the British Commonwealth Air Training Program (BCATP). As the names and grades were read out, “destinies were being dispensed with clinical efficiency in a mere moment of time: Goodman, 324-Navigator; Gray, 847-Pilot; Hanson...”. One word boomed back at Philip like a thunderstorm: Pilot! Shortly afterwards, Philip was on his way to America, aboard the RMS *Queen Mary*, no less. After docking in New York, the trainees were sent up to Moncton, New Brunswick for two weeks of reorganization. After the stint at Moncton, Philip was then headed south-west to Arizona by rail, now attired from neck to toe in US issue uniform. The only piece of Royal Air Force clothing retained was the wedge cap with its coveted white flash, signifying air crew training.



Philip Gray just before going on operations
Photo courtesy - Grub Street London



Two AT-6C Texans (Known as Harvards elsewhere!) in flight 1943 near Luke Field
Arizona Photo Courtesy - Wikipedia

Arriving at Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona, located on the edge of the Sonoran desert, Philip was now at the home of No. 4 British Flying Training School. On the flight line, he could see rows of Stearman PT-17 primary trainers and AT-6 (Harvard) advanced trainers all painted silver. There were no basic trainers on the field, such as the BT-13 Valiant, since the basic training step had been dropped from Course 9 forward. The jump from the Stearman to the AT-6 was going to be a considerable one. The living accommodation for the

British trainees included an outdoor swimming pool, a comfortable lounge, pool room with jukebox and Pepsi machines; soft drinks and ice cream server in the old drugstore style. This was all very alien to the British who had just come from a country that had been bombed, lights blacked out and was under strict rationing. On May 31, 1943 the serious business of flying training got underway. Philip joined Course 16 made up of eighty-three cadets from the Royal Air Force and seventeen US Army Air Corps cadets. The instructors were all American civilians, despite their official Army Air Corps uniforms which bore no rank insignia on the shoulder epaulettes. Philip was assigned to a group of four and thrived under the professional guidance of his instructor. Philip worked through the course meeting the challenges of aerobatics, formation flying, cross-country exercises and finally night flying. Philip, in later conversations in Canada, had nothing but praise for his American instructors who provided him with many insights that he claimed saved his neck in combat. Philip ultimately joined 186 Squadron, RAF Bomber Command and flew sixteen missions over Germany as the captain of a Lancaster bomber.



BT-13 Trainers Awaiting Delivery at the Downey California Plant of Consolidated-Vultee.

Amazingly, this plant produced 11,537 BT-13 & BT-15 Trainers During WWII.

Photo Courtesy - Wikipedia

John was thanked by Chapter President, Sheldon Benner, on behalf of the Chapter membership and guests for stepping in at the last moment to rescue our dinner presentation. It was an impressive show of documentary films, many of which the membership had never seen before. John's effort was appreciated by all, and it provided a reminder of an important time in history for our US ally.

References:

Movie: "Winning Your Wings" Warner Bros. 1942

Ghosts of Targets Past, Philip Gray, 2000, Grub Street London

Conversations with Philip Gray, 2003-2013

Website: www.ask.com



BT-13 Valiant Basic Trainers
Photo Courtesy - Wikipedia



WWII USAAF Primary Aviation Cadets receiving preflight instruction session
with Stearman trainers in the background
Photo Courtesy - Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

The contents of this article were originally presented to the CAHS Toronto Chapter at a previous meeting or event. All / or some material has been edited and adapted for this website. Many thanks to CAHS Toronto Chapter for their courtesy in the use of this material. CAHS Toronto Chapter Meeting & Membership information is available elsewhere on this website.