



**Sir Richard recalls
his time as the Flying Instructor to
the then Prince of Wales**

CHAPTER 9 GOLDEN EAGLE

Time has not dimmed the memory of that verbal bolt. I cannot remember my exact answer or the subsequent questions and points I was invited to discuss. The interview lasted about 30 minutes and I was dismissed with the instruction not to reveal its purpose. I would be told the outcome in due course.

Then, as June approached, word came that the captain of The Queen's Flight wished to speak to me before the visit of The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh who were to honour the Royal Air Force College with their presence at the parade to mark the 50th anniversary of Cranwell's foundation. The captain, Air Commodore Archie Winski 11, my former station commander at RAF Duxford, told me that I was to take over from Squadron Leader Philip Pinney as the Prince of Wales 's QFI to instruct him through the full jet training course to wings standard in the summer of 1971.

Beforehand I would be detached to The Queen's Flight to convert onto the Basset CCI - a small twin-piston-engine five-seater communications aircraft - to achieve an instructional category on that aeroplane and an Air Transport Command instrument rating. This

was to be completed by the end of the year so I could start flying with Prince Charles after Phil Pinney departed for Staff College in January. This was a lot to take in and marks an appropriate moment to place on record a broad outline of Prince Charles's flying training. As an outside observer it seemed to me that both Prince William and Prince Harry went through their flying training with the minimum of fuss and, pleasingly, were allowed to progress to full operational status in their respective roles. However, back in 1969, there was considerable concern in the RAF hierarchy when Prince Charles stated his ambition to complete the full jet training syllabus so to earn his 'wings' without fear or favour. In a nutshell, concern centred on the risk to the life of the heir to the throne. Although the horrendous accident rate of the early 1950s had abated in parallel with a considerable reduction in the size of the service and assimilation of hard lessons learned, in 1968 the RAF wrote off 51 aircraft with 43 aircrew killed. Given that the air officers of the 1960s would have survived World War II and lived through the introduction of jet aircraft to front-line service with an eye-watering accident rate, it is perhaps not surprising that their concern for Prince Charles's safety was so evident. This anxiety

was apparent in the HQ Flying Training Command Operation Order issued for Exercise Golden Eagle, the rather pretentious nickname for Prince Charles's flying training. At the RAF College the overall responsibility for all aspects of his training was vested in the commandant, Air Vice-Marshal Desmond Hughes. The routine supervision of flying training and associated ground subjects was exercised through Group Captain Gerald Pendred, the station commander, and the chief flying instructor, Wing Commander Brian Huxley, to me as the authorised QFJ with specific responsibility for flying instruction and tutorials in the ground subjects. The more specific definition of my duties was qualified with the concluding order that I was "to treat as absolutely overriding the requirement to ensure HRH's safety throughout all aspects and phases of his flying training" . I was tasked to give a minimum of 80% of the dual instruction and was allowed to authorise my appointed deputy, Squadron Leader John Robinson, to carry out those sorties necessary to provide a check on standardisation and progress. Instrument flying tests were assigned to the senior instrument rating examiner at Cranwell, while the night flying and final handling tests were to be flown with the

CFI. An air traffic controller was appointed to be on duty whenever Prince Charles was flying at an ARI radar position with associated communications for his exclusive use. A Golden Eagle discreet radio frequency was also allocated as, when clear of the circuit, Prince Charles was to be under radar surveillance when flying either dual or solo. The engineering orders concerning the Golden Eagle aircraft, two Jet Provost Mk 5s, required their servicing to be carried out by tradesmen selected and trained to The Queen's Flight standard. Supporting bay servicing was also undertaken by similarly selected and authorised personnel. Composite servicing was forbidden. Primary servicing and special servicing were required after 50 hours flight time and primary star servicing at 100 hours. Complementary to ground servicing, flight air tests were flown on completion of acceptance checks, within two months of the previous full air test, if the aircraft had not flown for six days and on completion of routine scheduled servicing. Further detailed instructions covered the servicing documentation, servicing procedures, aircraft preparation and appearance and security. Not a single aircraft unserviceability was recorded during Prince Charles's flying training! There was one aspect

of the operation order that caused me considerable concern. HQ Flying Training Command decided that Prince Charles, authorised as aircraft captain, should be accompanied by a navigator for safety reasons during some general handling sorties involving aerobatics, on some navigation sorties at day and night and on solo formation sorties. This decision reflected anxiety about the collision risk in the local training airspace, an obvious area of high air traffic density. The collision risk was real and I agreed that two extra eyes would supplement radar protection. However, my constant worry was the thought of an engine malfunction, caused by bird ingestion or mechanical failure, in the critical period after take-off or shortly before landing, when the decision time concerning possible abandonment of the aircraft was absolutely critical. The decision would have been Prince Charles's alone. To confront the problem I frequently briefed and discussed the considerations of aircraft handling and captaincy when faced with such situations and during dual sorties often checked Prince Charles's reaction to unexpected situations in the circuit. Even so, it was impossible to cover all permutations of circumstances and as authorising officer I had to put my complete

faith in Prince Charles's own judgement. I felt, and still do, that consideration for Flight Lieutenant Malcolm Gaynor, the lookout aircrew, may have added a vital second to any critical decision. The question also arose as to whether or not this imposed an unfair responsibility on Prince Charles who had only limited captaincy experience, principally on the Chipmunk, before the start of the course. The accompanied solo policy was amended before the start of the formation flying phase of training when the AOC-in-C authorised formation sorties to be flown as true solo after Prince Charles had requested this through the commandant. Malcolm Gaynor came with me in the lead aircraft. In the event, the birds steered clear and the engines performed to specification so it's all history with a happy ending. But I like to think that Prince Charles's pilot training, programmed within rigid guidelines with an emphasis on risk avoidance that arguably went too far and was potentially counter-productive, had some influence on the shaping of flying instruction given to Prince William and Prince Harry. By the time I started flying with Prince Charles he had passed the Private Pilot's Licence flying test and qualified for the award of the preliminary flying badge on the Chipmunk aircraft. After

graduating from Cambridge and still with Phil Pinney as instructor he moved on to the Basset CCI in which he notched up a further 90 hours flying before I took over. My first two instructional sorties with Prince Charles were flown in the Basset at night in January 1971 from RAF Marham where strong winds and rain showers made circuit conditions difficult. He coped well and I digested one painful lesson; Prince Charles's check of full and free movement of controls was a vigorous and full-blooded examination. My avoiding action was too slow. Two bruised kneecaps so symbolised our first flying association. Shortly afterwards I returned to Cranwell to prepare for a CFS Examining Wing visit. Squadron Leader Brian Jones examined me and John Robinson in general handling, instrument flying, formation and night flying to ensure we were officially up to scratch for the task ahead. The tests were flown in the new Jet Provost Mk 5, a significant improvement on the earlier marks of that aircraft in terms of performance, cockpit layout and, dare I say, aerodynamic shape. Happily we passed and I returned to Benson to fly some continuation training on the Basset and to make the necessary air traffic arrangements for Prince Charles's arrival at Cranwell, flying the Basset, on 8th March 1971 where he joined No.

1 Graduate Entry (GE) in the rank of flight lieutenant. It had been decided that Prince Charles would not be out ranked by any other member of No. 1 GE. Several were flight lieutenants through accumulated time spent in the reserve as members of university air squadrons. Failing finals and staying on for an extra year achieved sufficient length of service for promotion to flight lieutenant. This was news to many of us. As the station commander, Gerald Pendred, commented during his welcome, "fail finals often enough and I suppose you will end up as group captains" . After settling into his accommodation, which Prince Charles shared with three other No. 1 GE students, there followed the inevitable round of arrival briefings, interviews and the fitting of flying clothing. With the necessary preliminaries completed we got down to two weeks of ground school covering technical subjects concerning the Jet Provost Mk 5, combat survival, emergency drills and cockpit procedures. As the course progressed Prince Charles was to spend 1 ½ days per week at lectures as the ground syllabus expanded to cover airmanship, aerodynamics, meteorology, aviation medicine and navigation. I shared technical instruction with John Robinson and parts of other subjects were farmed out to

Flying Wing specialists to save Prince Charles from an undiluted and indigestible diet of one QFI. Although not technically minded, and that made two of us, Prince Charles mastered the essentials of each subject while maintaining a polite interest in even the most dreary aspects of the ground syllabus. Prince Charles started his jet flying on 19th March 1971 and passed his final handling test, examined by Wing Commander Brian Huxley, on 8th July 1971. In between he achieved his first solo on type after eight hours instruction and then moved on through the well tried and tested system of instruction, solo flying and test sorties. A typical general handling progress/test sortie involved a mix of aerobatics, maximum rate turning, full and incipient spins, practice forced-landings and circuit flying. Navigation, instrument flying and night flying were obviously more narrowly focused. Prince Charles's progress in all phases of his training was marked by a pleasing and steady improvement as his confidence grew. This culminated in a final handling test judged as 'well above the average' which was just reward for his hard work and implacable determination to succeed. More than 40 years later I can still remember that some observers, particularly in the media, implied that Prince Charles's

success as a student pilot was assured from the moment he donned an RAF uniform. This was not the case as there are no foregone conclusions in the training of a military pilot, nor for that matter can there be any relaxation of the required standards if a student is to fly solo. I still consider that Prince Charles's decision to undertake the full wings course was a brave one in view of the inevitable public interest that the exercise would arouse. To put it bluntly he was on a hiding to nothing. While Prince Charles was fortunate to possess natural ability he inevitably encountered some minor problems in the various phases of his training as have generations of student pilots. That's when QFIs have to earn their keep even if the instructor talks too much. My only concern prior to a test involved navigation. The system QFIs were required to teach at that time needed a fair amount of mathematical gymnastics using true bearings from ground stations to fix the position of the aircraft. This was not Prince Charles's forte, and from my own viewpoint I thought the time allotted to navigation training would have been far more usefully spent learning the skills of airborne map reading on different scales of maps -a belief borne of my own experience as a fighter recce pilot. However, Prince Charles was quick

to cotton on to the simple fact that the challenge of aeronautical navigation could be largely solved by meticulous ground planning and accurate flying to compensate for any minor deficiency in mathematical processing, a deficiency which I have to admit I shared. I also have to admit being pleasantly surprised by the result of Prince Charles's navigation test, the first of his 'qualifying exams' which was assessed as above average by the examiner, Flight Lieutenant Peter Norriss. At the end of the course Prince Charles, who had clearly revelled in the challenges of military flying and was justifiably proud of the standards he had achieved, asked about the possibility of staying on in the RAF to fly on a front-line squadron. Although he didn't know it at the time, he had been included for consideration by the posting board which decided the future for all graduating pilots of No. 1 GE. Prince Charles was judged as suitable for training on the Phantom FGI (selection to be confirmed after advanced flying training) which had been introduced to service in 1969. However, apart from delaying his planned onward move to the Royal Navy after graduating at Cranwell, I had to explain that front-line service would be a practical impossibility if the aircraft he was to fly, far, far more complex than the Jet Provost

Mk 5, required servicing to The Queen's Flight standard by selected tradesmen. And, I was sure, given the service's earlier attitude to risk and indeed concern in the higher echelons of government about the safety of the heir to the throne, a proposal to implement the recommendation of the posting board would have been rejected out of hand. To round off I retain two clear memories of my time with Prince Charles. The first concerns the formation flying phase, completed in two weeks, which I think from both our viewpoints was the highlight of the course. John Robinson led the dual sorties, I led the solo trips and Brian Huxley flew the final aeroplane to make up the three aircraft formations. Initial instruction covering flying in the echelon positions was easily received and after flying only two sorties Prince Charles was close to solo standard. To my great surprise he found it difficult to master flying in line astern. Slight over-controlling on the ailerons coupled with a barely noticeable lack of anticipation caused some memorable pendulum-like swings. I could see both fault and cause but cure appeared to be beyond my wit. While relaxed in echelon the line-astern position invoked a tenseness which I had not encountered before with students when flying behind the lead

aircraft. It was Prince Charles who found the solution of relaxation by suddenly delivering a spirited rendering of 'Rule Britannia' followed by perfect mimicry of Noel Coward's 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen'. The problem was thus solved in an unusual way as thereafter his line-astern flying was immaculate although I did miss the musical accompaniment in subsequent trips. Having mastered the three basic formation positions, we moved on to tail chasing - that is following a leader, at a range of 50-100 yards, through a series of hard manoeuvres including loops and barrel rolls. Prince Charles immediately appreciated the importance of visual angle interpretation as a means of gauging cut-off to control range, while his handling of the aircraft was appropriately aggressive. Encounters with slipstream did not perturb him and he was quick to regain position. After my first demonstration and rare comments in the subsequent exercises I had nothing to teach, and so was able to sit back and appreciate flying that showed a wealth of fighter pilot potential. In the last six sorties he was given a rigorous examination in close formation flying which included steep wing overs, formation take-offs, formation radar approaches and formation landings. Prince Charles had the skill and determination to stay

with it and so earned his highest flying assessment of 'above average bordering on exceptional' . After completing the flying course, Prince Charles followed a programme of visits to the front line to fly in a Phantom, a Nimrod and a Vulcan before making a parachute descent from an Andover into the sea after a day's preparatory training at RAF Abingdon. The programme was implemented without incident although bad weather required some adjustments to planned sorties. I accompanied him throughout which was an educational experience for me as well albeit not without occasional embarrassment. We arrived at RAF Leuchars for the Phantom trip early one afternoon in mid-July. After taxiing in I did the shutdown checks as Prince Charles was welcomed by the station commander and whisked off to 43(F) Squadron for briefing. I was left unrecognised, unwelcomed and to my own devices. After signing off the aircraft and banding it over to my ground crew who had pre-positioned the day before, I ambled across to the 43 Squadron crew room where I found Prince Charles sitting at a table accompanied by the station commander, OC 43 Squadron, and assorted QFis and qualified weapons instructors (QWI) all waving their arms around in that rather frenetic manner so typical of air

defenders. Unnoticed, I slipped across to the coffee bar for a cuppa where I had spotted an old chum from Valley days, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Shipley. No sooner had I enjoyed my first sip than the door beside the coffee bar burst open and in entered the squadron warrant officer obviously in high dudgeon. "What are you doing here?" he hissed. "Enjoying my coffee," I replied not unreasonably. "Can't you see who is sitting over there?" asked the WO. "Of course I can," I answered. At this the WO's complexion took on a deeper hue of scarlet. "You can't stay here," he snapped, "you must leave immediately." Feeling rather unwelcome I was about to mount my high horse but by now the kerfuffle had attracted the attention of the briefing group. The station commander turned around to me and enquired, rather rudely I thought, "who the hell are you?" "Oh sir," I simpered, "I am Squadron Leader Johns and I have just flown in with the Prince of Wales" . Up piped Prince Charles: "Oh no he didn't, I have never seen him before." Pandemonium. In the years that followed I have been asked about my feelings concerning the instruction of Prince Charles during his course at Cranwell. It would be patently false to pretend that I was unaware of any responsibility in excess of those accepted by all flying

instructors in the performance of their duties. However, my responsibilities were shared with many others at Cranwell. The airmen of Golden Eagle Flight under Flight Lieutenant Chris Masterman carried out their duties with unfailing zeal and good humour. John Robinson and Malcolm Gaynor were ever ready to fly, to assist or to advise and our airborne ways were smoothed by Flight Lieutenant John Osborne's radar vigil. I was fortunate to enjoy the encouragement and confidence of my superiors throughout an exercise that concluded with No. 1 GE's passing out parade on 20th August 1971 when Prince Charles received his wings from the chief of the air staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Denis Spotswood. My duty was more than just a privilege. It meant that as a flying instructor I enjoyed the pleasure of teaching a student pilot who achieved an above average standard and proved he had the ability to make a first class operational pilot. This is the real reward of military flying instruction.