

CRANWELL'S EARLIEST DAYS

A 40th Anniversary Reminiscence

By J. C. CORLETT



"**S**UPERNA PETIMUS. The Cranwell motto. . . It is an ambitious motto, and if we can only live up to it and seek the highest things, whether they be merely top marks in one's class, the highest score in a cricket match, or highest marks towards cock squadron, we are moving in the right direction."

These words, written as an introduction to the first number of the Boys' Wing Magazine, characterize the Cranwell spirit fostered by their author, Air Cdre C. A. H. Longcroft, CB, CMG, DSO, AFC, and his successors.

During the First World War a piece of land was acquired near the small Lincolnshire village of Cranwell for the purpose of training RNAS pilots. Officially titled HMS *Daedalus*, the station opened on April 1, 1916, the choice of date providing inspiration for subsequent wits. By the end of 1918 its area embraced more than three thousand acres and in the intervening period many hundreds of officers had undergone courses of instruction on current types of aeroplanes as well as on rigid and non-rigid airships.

It owes its recognition today to the far-sightedness and clear thinking of one who, as Maj-Gen Sir Hugh Trenchard, GCB, DSO, was reappointed Chief of the Air Staff on January 11, 1919. His principal task at that time concerned the reduction in size of the Royal Air Force and the provision of a scheme for its permanent reorganization on a peacetime basis. Among other recommendations, he proposed the establishment of a Cadet College at Cranwell and Apprentice Wings at Cranwell and Halton for the training of boy mechanics. It was intended that boys of a satisfactory educational standard should be eligible for enlistment from the age of 15½ and undergo a three-year period of training. This scheme was designed to provide a continuous, if small, flow of well-educated young men of high technical proficiency into the various branches of the RAF.

Thus, on February 5, 1920, the Royal Air Force Cadet College and School of Technical Training for Boy Mechanics came into being at Cranwell. The station was then divided into three principal areas: East Camp, housed the Boys' Wing and Technical Training Departments; West Camp comprised the Cadet College and Flight Sheds; and Lighter than Air, the third area, contained a large and a small airship hangar, a number of brick-built barrack huts and a thriving pig farm which was part of the station economy. The huts were occupied only occasionally, when an outbreak of scarlet fever or some such contagious illness required isolation for a period.

The first Commandant was Air Cdre Longcroft, who had already had a distinguished career, having been commissioned into the Army direct from Sandhurst and seconded to the RFC in 1912, after obtaining his Royal Aero Club pilot's certificate (No 192) in March that year. Soon afterwards he made the first long-distance flight by the RFC, non-stop from Montrose to Portsmouth and back to Farnborough in 7hr 20min.

The Boys' Wing was commanded by Wg Cdr C. F. Kilner, DSO, and Wg Cdr R. H. Verney, OBE, was in charge of Technical Training. Wg Cdr Verney had previously been Inspector of Engines, AID, and Chief Inspector in the Ministry of Munitions. His insistence upon quality before quantity, which became the rule of the Cranwell workshops, doubtless stemmed from the valuable experience he had gained in his previous appointments.

Lt-Col A. F. S. Caldwell, DSO, MA, was the first headmaster of the Boys' Wing School and when he was transferred to Halton in 1922 he was succeeded in the headmastership by H. A. Cox, MA, late of Oundle School.

On arrival the embryo mechanics were accommodated in dormitories and their first week was occupied with medical tests, a further examination to classify their educational standard and, for those who survived, swearing-in for ten years' service and two years' reserve. Two suits of khaki were provided, one comprising slacks and tunic with leather buttons for everyday wear and the

other a tunic with brass buttons, worn with breeches and puttees for special occasions. The camp barber was kept busy; but, as most of his work was done with clippers, his customers were not kept waiting.

Then followed a lengthy period of daily drill and PT. The instructors in these arts were mostly ex-guards NCOs, and the standard in arms drill, marching, saluting and general bearing was aimed at Brigade of Guards' level. It was generally conceded that this aim was achieved, and in 1921 a detachment accompanied by the Boys' Wing band—trumpets, flutes and drums—gave a display of drill and marching at the Royal Tournament, Olympia, which was widely acclaimed.

These same NCOs evidenced a curious unwillingness to accept some of the new titles of rank which had been introduced with the amalgamation of the RFC and RNAS into the Royal Air Force on April 1, 1918. The CO was always referred to as Colonel Kilner and squadron leaders were called major. Flight lieutenants, however, were always flight lieutenants and flying officers were called "Mr."

When proficiency on the barrack square had reached an acceptably high standard, technical training was begun and the boys got their first introduction to the theory and practice of such trades as fitter aero-engine, jig and tool and motor transport, carpenter-rigger, coppersmith, turner, fitter armourer and draughtsman. Meanwhile, their classroom studies continued as they had previously done, between drill and PT periods. They learned by practical experience to erect and rig a D.H.9A, Bristol Fighter and two Avro 504Ks. A Monosoupape engine which had been reconditioned in the training workshops was installed in one of the latter and a number of boys had an opportunity of air-testing the efficiency of their work. A Vickers Vimy was allotted from Henlow on February 9, 1922, and many boys enjoyed their first air experience in it.

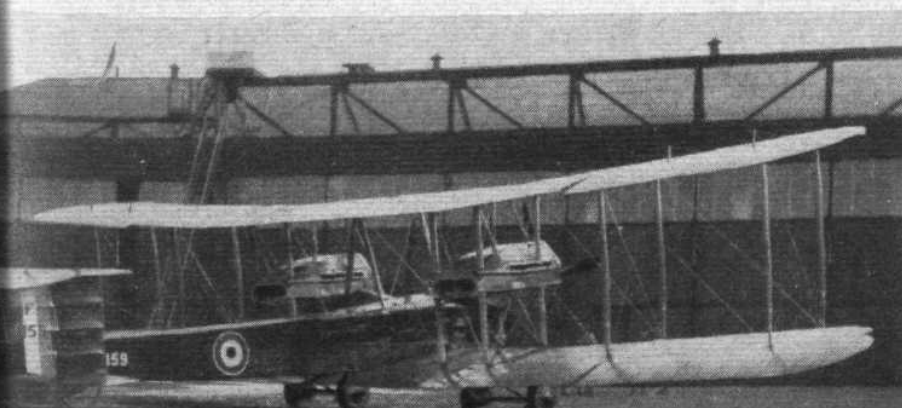
By now some thought was being given to spare-time activities, in addition to sport. A reference and lending library, which had earlier been established, was extended; a literary and debating society was formed under the presidency of the headmaster and administered by a committee of Leading Boys. This was quickly followed by the Boys' Wing engineering society, a camera club, rifle club, music society, wireless society and a model aircraft club.

The long-awaited air-force-blue uniforms became available and were issued in exchange for one suit of khaki. The other was retained for everyday wear and, though the issue of "best blue" had been eagerly awaited, much disappointment was expressed at its inferior quality. The tunics were ill-fitting and the breeches, unlike the well-cut cavalry type which had been handed in, were little more than baggy knickerbockers. The puttees were of the same coarse material and suffered from the added unattractiveness of frayed edges, while the greatcoats could only be described as voluminous.

A bold and somewhat knowledgeable lad set to unpicking seams, pinning here, cutting there and sewing up again. A flat-iron was somehow acquired and soon he was in business (spare time), a walking advertisement for his own tailoring skill. He soon had his copyists, whose dexterity improved with each garment tackled, until eventually they had sufficient confidence to alter their own. These, for a time, were the barons who were enviously seen on a Thursday night entertaining themselves and sometimes charitably extending to their less fortunate brothers the price of "tea and wads" at the YMCA.

An enterprising shopkeeper in Sleaford got in a stock of Fox's puttees in air force blue. They were made of smooth cloth and cunningly cut so that they moulded themselves to the legs; but their wear on parade, except by officers, was quickly forbidden and the struggle to achieve a presentable appearance with the standard issue was resumed. Puttees had to be worn so that their top spiral finished two fingers' width below the kneecap, and the end of the puttee had to coincide with the seam of the breeches (a point for examination on parade inspections). Puttees were cursed things which refused to conform to any known law. If in putting on these "horse-

The Vickers Vimy allotted to Cranwell from Henlow in February 1922





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Wg Cdr L. W. B. Rees, VC, OBE, MC, AFC (left), Assistant Commandant of the RAF Cadet College in 1920; above left, Wg Cdr C. F. Kilner, DSO, OC the Boys' Wing in 1920; and above right, the famous Boys' Wing Band in 1922



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bandages" a start was made on the inner ankle bone and the end of the puttee then finished in line with the centre of the kneecap, it was logical to assume that unwinding and bringing the starting-point around to the centre-line of the bootlaces would result in finishing at the required position. Alas for logical assumption! It would now finish either at the back of the knee, or (more frustrating still) within an inch either side of the seam. In order to avoid unsightly pockets around the calf it was necessary to wind them tightly, which felt a little uncomfortable and restricting at first; but after twenty minutes' marching with no blood circulating below the knees, the discomfort became acute. Some research was applied to this problem and it was eventually proved that if they were first thoroughly damped, then carefully wound on and allowed to dry on the legs, the cloth took a permanent set which, provided you remembered to mark "R" and "L" permanently on the insides, would enable them to pass the critical eyes of Leading Boy, Flight Sergeant, Flying Officer, Flight Lieutenant and Wing Commander in successive inspections before church parade.

Church service was held originally in the gymnasium at West Camp but later a hangar was converted to a church, and there can never have been another quite like it. "I" hangar was originally filled with captured aircraft from the 1914-18 War and was out of bounds to members of the Boys' Wing. Perhaps there was a subtle reason for this, because it thus became a "must" for a clandestine visit which could be achieved by squeezing through a gap between the doors; and a most rewarding time, full of technical interest, could be had there on a summer evening.

The aircraft were eventually removed and broken up; and the alterations, which resulted in a beautiful church, capable of seating comfortably the full complement of the station, were completed. The whole interior was painted in air force blue with the bracings picked out in black. At the east end a platform two or three feet high was built to accommodate the choir and the Cadet College band, which took the place of an organ. Beyond the platform the sanctuary, simply designed in new oak with small blue curtains following the platform outline, had as a background a large hanging curtain in a rich shade of red, above which a blue pelmet carried the Cranwell motto *Superna petimus*. The altar cross was a truncated four-bladed propeller. Other complete four-bladed propellers of polished mahogany were suspended horizontally from the roof and carried pendant lighting.

The font at the west end was similarly unusual—an upturned rotary-engine cowling, complete with nine polished cylinders radiating from a centre which comprised the bowl of the font, and supported by four truncated polished mahogany propellers, the whole assembly standing on a mahogany plinth.

The church was formally dedicated to St Michael and All Angels by the Bishop of Lincoln in the autumn of 1921. In his sermon the bishop said that he had never before been called upon to dedicate such a remarkable building; he referred to the prestige and great future of the RAF and to the hopes England was building on the increasing numbers of young men who would be regularly drafted from Cranwell.

The results of the passing-out examinations of the first entry showed the need for an extra period of training in certain technical subjects, which was concluded in May 1923, and concurrently a modified advanced course was held with a view to selecting a certain number of boys for promotion to NCO rank. As a result

of the course, nine were promoted to the rank of corporal; and of these, four were recommended for future training as NCO pilots.

The Air Council awarded three cadetships to the boys with the highest honours in all subjects. Of the remainder, almost 50 per cent achieved the rank of LAC. On being posted to various RAF units, the ex-boys found they got a mixed reception: some of the old sweats tended to sneer at "Trenchard's brats" and to resent the authority of the corporals and LACs. However, what they may have lacked in experience was amply compensated for in tact and tolerance, for the very conditions they encountered had been foreseen before they left Cranwell, and they had been carefully schooled on how to meet such situations.

The passing-out examinations at the completion of training were followed by a ceremonial parade which was taken by an Air Staff officer who afterwards presented prizes and addressed the boys. The fourth entry of Aircraft Apprentices, as they then were designated, completed training in the summer of 1924 and the reviewing officer on this occasion was Air Chief Marshal Sir Hugh Trenchard himself. After the parade the whole Wing assembled in the cinema to hear the Apprentices' Wing CO, then Wg Cdr R. J. F. Barton, OBE, read his report, after which "Boom" addressed the assembly. The famous voice which earned him his affectionate nickname reverberated from the bare brick walls.

"I have been shown some of your notebooks," he said in his talk. "Beautiful pieces of work, neatly written on clean pages and carefully illustrated with coloured inks."

The smug satisfaction with which these remarks were received by those who considered themselves eligible for praise was quickly dispelled as he continued in even gruffer voice: "But I don't want to see clean notebooks and coloured inks. I want to see soiled, well-thumbed notebooks with pencilled freehand sketches."

The burst of enthusiastic hand-clapping and foot-stamping which followed this observation was instantly silenced as the great man roared: "Be quiet! I haven't come here to make a popular speech!"

The remainder of his address was listened to in such respectful silence that at the end no one dared to applaud until the CO and platform party indicated by example that it was in order to do so.

Halton Takes Over

The first entry of aircraft apprentices to Halton was in January 1922, and in the ensuing years it gradually supplanted Cranwell as the principal training establishment for aircraft apprentices. Meanwhile, the Cranwell boys were making their mark wherever they served at home and abroad, many of them achieving promotion to higher ranks. With the exception of the three or four from each entry who were awarded Air Council Cadetships, the expiry of their enlisted period from 1930 onwards faced them with the problem of "taking their ticket" and starting a new career in civilian life or signing-on for a further twelve-year period.

The scales were weighed heavily against making a Service career, for this was the time of the disarmament conferences. The rising tide of unemployment, associated with worldwide trade depression, promoted little enthusiasm for spending money on air defence, so the rate of promotion in the RAF was discouragingly slow.

In 1935, however, the picture began to change. Germany had withdrawn from the League of Nations and was known to be rapidly building up her air strength; and, as the threat of another conflict loomed larger as time went by it became clearly inevitable that Great Britain could not afford to lag behind.

Now the Trenchard plan began to show its real worth. The ex-aircraft apprentices who had elected to stay on in the RAF found well-deserved promotion at a rate far exceeding their most optimistic expectations. When the nation at last began fighting a war for which it was ill-prepared there can be little doubt that survival was due to adherence to the policy laid down in 1919.

Nor must the contribution of those who had gone back to civilian life be overlooked. Some rejoined the RAF, others brought their skill and experience to bear on the problems associated with increased output from the factories and the repair and testing of engines and aircraft.

Among the top ranks in the RAF today are many ex-Cranwell boys; and they also have a fair representation among the senior executives of the aircraft industry, with which is included the principal air lines, the AID and the ARB. Like Cranwell's, their motto has always been *superna petimus*.