

College of Air Training

12th September 2024 - Memorial Hall

There was such a great interest in this meeting, when Phil Nelson gave an excellent talk about the College of Air Training, it was difficult to accommodate everyone who wished to attend. For over a decade the controversy of the possible extraction of gravel from Hamble's former airfield led to some recent residents asking what was its previous use. The College of Air Training was the last major operator of the airfield and Phil's talk gave newer residents to the village background knowledge of it.

Phil was a flying instructor at the college and he talked about his life there and included some humorous incidents involving the students. The College of Air Training trained pilots for the National Airlines, plus civil and military pilots from Britain and overseas.

Phil started by giving his flying background and how he joined the college. He flew Vulcan bombers for the RAF and then became an instructor for the Southampton University Air Squadron that was based at Hamble flying Chipmunk and Bulldog training aircraft. Phil then took a refresher course at the college and subsequently when flying a Vulcan over the Hamble area he flew low over the airfield on three separate occasions. The college's Chief Flying Instructor phoned Phil and said 'I know what you are doing, the job is yours', so this how Phil became a flying instructor at the college.

He used extracts from films to show how a student progressed from the selection process, through ground and flying instruction, to achieving a commercial pilot's license. The course was to degree standard and flying instruction was first undertaken in Chipmunk and Cherokee aircraft, then moving on to twin engine Apache or Barons. After local circuits, they flew further afield such as the Channel Islands, Birmingham, Stansted and Manchester. To give experience in larger commercial aircraft training in flight simulators at Bournemouth airport were used.

Some of the humorous experiences he had with his students mostly involved night flying. Hamble's grass airfield did not have electric landing lights but used oil gooseneck flares and on one occasion due to a mishap the lorry that put them out and collected them caught on fire. Students when landing often mistook the lights along Hamble Lane for the airfield landing lights until at the last moment being informed by the instructor, they did not want them landing on the road.

Another humorous event that Phil told was of students undertaking day and night flying solo navigation exercises sometimes receiving complaints of them infringing the Southampton control flying zone. To overcome this some of them decided to put an arrow on the top of Bishops Waltham's gasometer to help them navigate back to the airfield. What they did not realise was they painted it on a cold night but when the sun rose in the morning the gas expanded and it turned the gasometer 30 degrees pointing to Southampton and more complaints!

Phil said the facilities at the college were excellent such as student accommodation with a cinema, swimming pool, tennis and squash courts. Flight support such as the ground engineers and air traffic control were also superb. The students also involved themselves in local events such as the regatta and carnivals.

Due to Margaret Thatcher's quest to privatise British Airways and sell off everything except the core passenger flying business the college was put up for sale in 1982 and it was bought by Hamble Airfield Properties Ltd. Specialist Flight Training used the airfield to train military students in Slingsby T67 Firefly aircraft. Helicopter Services also operated Gazelle helicopters for conversion courses of overseas pilots. In February 1984 the receivers were called in and the aircraft and site were then sold.

Unfortunately, during his talk there was a power cut to the presentation equipment and Phil professionally improvised until the power was restored as you expect from a former pilot. Other pilots were in the audience that trained at the college recollecting their time there. A very successful and entertaining talk enjoyed by those who attended.