

Book Reviews

Back Bearings: A Navigator's Tale 1942 to 1974

By Group Captain Eric Cropper

Reviewed by Group Captain Clive Blount

Eric Cropper's military career started in late 1940 when he joined the Local Defence Volunteers at the age of 17. Accepted for Aircrew training in 1943, he had a short period of pilot selection flying on the Tiger Moth before starting what was to be a long and varied career as an RAF Navigator. After training, he was posted to Lancasters and completed a tour with 103 Sqn - which included operations over the D-Day beachheads. It was over Caen that the aircraft in which he was flying was hit by another Lancaster, a harrowing experience that is described well in the book.

'Back Bearings' is so much more than a wartime memoir, however. After his operational tour, Cropper was posted to a training role and completed the staff navigator course just before the end of hostilities. Cropper then embarked on a 30 year career in the peacetime RAF and this book provides rare insights into the life and challenges facing officers in the fast-developing service. Cropper's post-war career was quite varied. As a specialist navigator, he saw the development of the science and art of navigation from drift sight, dead reckoning and astro-compass, through several iterations of electronic navigation aid, to early inertial systems and the eve of ubiquitous satellite navigation.

He spent several tours in the trials and evaluation world and saw the advent of the current General Duties Aerosystems Course, as it developed from the 'spec n'. Colleagues who have attended Aries Association dinners in the last few years will recognize many of the cast of *'Back Bearings'* as stalwarts of such events... albeit, I suspect, vaguely through a hangover! Ironically, the very success of the developments in avionics, in which Cropper played a part, soon called into question the need for a specialist navigator, with the eventual demise of the profession being discussed very soon after he left the service. Away from mainstream flying, Cropper filled a number of staff posts, served at the RAF College, Cranwell, enjoyed an exchange posting in Alaska serving with the USAF, and also spent a year in command of the RAF airfield on Gan in the India Ocean. His description of these tours provides a fascinating insight into life in the RAF during the period and, although the service was much bigger and had a more global outlook, the reader is able to draw many parallels with today.

Although far from the usual 'blood and guts' wartime autobiography, this book is quite compelling. Told with feeling and a touch of humour, it encapsulates the 'feel' of life as a

post-war RAF officer. The mundane details of staffwork, married quarters and the ordinary day-to-day gripes of a regular officer add colour and shade to the historiography of the period and, for most of us currently serving, is sufficiently recent for the reader to be able to empathize with the author and make interesting comparisons with service today. Cropper writes with honesty and openness and quickly draws the reader in; his light touch keeps non-specialists interested and engaged without patronizing those with more experience in the field of navigation technology. This is an excellent memoir by an RAF navigator that describes both the revolution in navigation technology during the post war period but also the everyday life and career of an 'ordinary' RAF officer.

This article has been republished online with Open Access.

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL
AIR FORCE**
**Centre for Air and
Space Power Studies**

OGL