



The Royal Air Force in Texas

By Tom Killebrew

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Reviewed by Gp Capt Neville Parton

There are many aspects of the Royal Air Force's history that are not well known, and this engaging book fills in an important part of one of these — namely

the training of RAF pilots in the United States in general, and in Texas in particular. Whilst many are aware of the instruction carried out in the Dominions under the Empire Air Training Scheme (later to become the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan), the story of the 13,000-plus pilots who trained in America is far less familiar. The need to instruct pilots outside of the United Kingdom was recognised early on by the RAF: limitations imposed by poor weather, blackouts, and in the early war years the threat of attack by enemy aircraft, all combined to limit the number of aircrew that could be produced on the home front.

The first and second chapters provide the background to the setting up of the three programmes which allowed British pilots to train in the United States, these comprising the Arnold and Towers Schemes (integrating British students into extant US AAC and USN flying training programmes) and the British Flying Training Schools (BFTS), and it is the story of one such school in particular - Number 1 BFTS — that this book concentrates on. However, it includes both the most senior-level policy discussions between Governments as well as detailing the individuals at a local level in Texas who would play such a pivotal role in bringing the School to fruition. Chapters three and four examine in detail the setting up of the School, the aircraft and associated training programme, and the experiences of the very first course members who arrived before America had even entered the war. The author does not shy away from some of the more problematic issues either, such as differences over attitudes towards racial segregation — and the culture shock of arriving in affluent America from a war-torn and much rationed Britain. The entry of America into the war, and the impact of this on the School, are covered in chapters five and six; looking at such aspects as the replacement of non-essential staff with women, who rapidly took on the roles of Link Instructors and running the control tower, as well as the take-up of surplus places on the courses by US AAC cadets. The growing interaction of the

RAF cadets with the local population, to their obviously mutual benefit, is well described, as is the obvious pride that the citizens of Terrell had in the exploits of 'their' ex-students, including Flight Sergeant Arthur Aaron who was (posthumously) awarded the Victoria Cross in 1943.

The penultimate chapter follows the School through to its closure as the need for pilots rapidly reduced — although not before showing how clearly the training requirements for pilots had changed over the four years of operation. The original 150 hour all-through training programme involved cross-country flights of up to a couple of hundred miles in length, but by 1945 two thousand mile flights were being carried out by up to 15 aircraft operating together. The epilogue provides a link between the past and the present in the shape of the story of the final memorial to those airmen who had died whilst training such a long way from home. It is clear throughout that the town of Terrell, Texas, is still proud of its British visitors and the part that they played in what is accurately described as "One of the greatest wartime cooperative ventures ever undertaken between nations".

Killebrew's book is an entertaining read at both the macro- and micro- level, describing the policy-level considerations that led to the setting up of the various United States training schemes, as well as conjuring up the emotional responses of both the cadets undergoing training and the local inhabitants who showered them with hospitality. This book clearly illustrates, at the most personal of levels, the special relationship that exists between the United States and the United Kingdom, and is a salutary reminder of whence the foundations of such a relationship come. At times comic, occasionally extremely poignant, it tells its story in a straightforward and eminently readable manner and is recommended to anyone with a specific interest in RAF pilot training during World War 2, as well as the more general reader who appreciates a small slice of social history.

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