

Chapter Four - Post-War Training (with thanks to S. J. Bond)

With the end of the war came the return to St Athan of flight mechanic training including, once more naval ratings for the Fleet Air Arm in fact, from October 1945 until February 1947, the numbers of navy personnel on the station were such that a Naval Wing of 4 S of TT was established, commanded by a lieutenant commander.

A new addition to the school was the training of administrative apprentices, which commenced in June 1947. These were 15 to 16 year old boys who had come from grammar schools and were trained for 20 months as suppliers, pay accountants or secretarial clerks. The first entry numbered 59, but the number of trainees never exceeded 140 and after the 16th entry had passed out at the end of 1953, the school moved to RAF Hereford, to be replaced at St Athan by the School of Physical Training.

Other early post-war arrivals included safety equipment workers and assistants, who commenced training in March 1947, and both military and civilian personnel for Aeronautical Inspection Service courses in the same year.

However, the bulk of 4 S of TT's work was once again flight mechanic training; the Harts and Vildebeest used for instruction had been superseded by Spitfires, Mosquitoes, Oxfords and the like, but in essence little had changed, as Mike Graham recalls:

'RAF ST Athans was still only in its middle age when I arrived in the winter of 1950 for trade training. I was selected for the liquid-cooled engine course and my first sight of the workshops was a moment of sheer joy. As someone devoted to aviation, the world now seemed my oyster, for there were engines everywhere: Merlins, Hercules and the then mysterious gas turbines. There were engines that I could lay hands on to take apart; there were engines exploded on rods so that every working part could be seen. There were tools of every description, and even a complete Beaufighter, which had been cut-away to enable every technical system to be seen and understood. On the walls there were hydraulic systems, with the pipes and pumps all labelled to show how they worked, It was an Aladdin's cave for the enthusiast, but even for those who never had the slightest interest in aeroplanes, the atmosphere was catching; they became enthusiasts and learned to have pride in their work. Could there be anything better? Yes, there could and was; progressing from the engine workshops, we moved into the hangars. One was filled with Spitfires and Hurricanes, another with Mosquitoes. There we all learned how to change an engine and then run it up. Outside there was a York with sawn-off wings, and a Proctor, which was taxied around by an instructor to give us practice in aircraft marshalling methods.'

On March 12th 1950, many of the trainees found themselves involved in the aftermath of what was at the time, the worst air disaster to have occurred in Great Britain. Avro Tudor 5G-AKBY, belonging to Airflight Ltd of Blackbushe, had been chartered by a party of rugby fans to fly to Belfast for an Ireland v Wales match. At the end of the return leg via Dublin, the aircraft made its final approach into Llandow, which had a longer runway than Cardiff airport. Due to incorrect loading, the aircraft became uncontrollable and crashed near the hamlet of Sigginston between St Athan and Llandow, killing the crew of five and 75 of the 78 passengers.

One of the wards in the RAF hospital was used as a mortuary, and many 4 S of TT personnel employed as crash site guards.

By the early 1950s, it was becoming apparent that the days of National Service were drawing to a close and that consequently, a scheme for voluntary recruitment and training had to be worked out. There was already in existence a school at RAF Cosford for boy entrants, who came from secondary modern and grammar schools at the age of 16, signed on for 12 years' service and received 18 months' training in aircraft engineering, it was decided to form a second such school at St Athans, which would take over entirely some of the trade training already being done at Cosford.

In February 1955 there were over 2,000 airmen under training at 4 S of TT in the airframe and engine trades, and plans were drawn up to gradually transfer these tasks elsewhere to make room for the boy entrants. By July of the same year, all fitter training had ended and the commitment transferred to Kirkham and Weeton. St Athan's new job was to train in the trades of airframe, engine, armament, electrics and instruments, to which mechanical transport mechanic and general mechanic were later added.

On August 15th 1955 the first 729 trainees arrived in two special trains at Gileston station, where a fleet of buses was waiting to take them to St Athan to complete their training. Much work had gone on to prepare both the workshops and the accommodation for them and in October the first entry to commence its training at St Athan arrived. Shortly thereafter, yet more trades were added to those being taught at the school, including sheet metal worker, turner, welder, carpenter and draughtsman.

All training courses lasted for 18 months and in many ways the school took on the feel of a large boys' school. In addition to technical training, further education figured in the syllabus and the daily routine was broken up by occasional visits to places of interest, flying experience in the school's own Chipmunks and summer camps. Set leave periods further enhanced this feeling, with breaks at Easter, Christmas and in August, mid-term breaks, parent's days and passing-out parades. One continuing problem remained - accommodation. Large numbers of boy entrants were still occupying the original wooden huts, and these were added to in 1958 when an Athletes Village was built on the station, to house competitors in the Empire and Commonwealth Games in Cardiff.

On completion of the Games, boy entrants took over the Athletes Village until 1961 when a major rebuilding programme was started, which ultimately replaced all the old wooden huts. The new accommodation was opened in 1962 by Lady Baker-Carr.

At the start of the boy entrant scheme, it had been anticipated that it would run for a ten-year period. This was to be almost exactly right, for the last entry, number 51, passed out in July 1965. By then, boy entrant training had moved on to RAF Halton, and yet again, St Athan resumed its old role of adult engineer training. In addition, it was tasked with absorbing the training previously carried out at 8 S of TT RAF Weeton, which closed in 1964.

Yet more accommodation was built, plus new airmen's and sergeants' messes. In October 1964 the redeployment of 8 S of TT began with the arrival of the Driving School. 2nd line servicing and TSTT (Driving) followed in December by the Armament, Aeronautical Inspection and Motor Transport Servicing courses. Finally, in April 1965, came General Engineering, Safety and Surface, Aircraft Servicing Chiefs and Volunteer Reserve (Technical) Officers courses.

An unusual development in 1967 was the setting up of a Government Training Centre within 4 S of TT. The aim was to train or retrain civilians for employment in their local industries, and the courses on offer included general fitting, welding and motor

vehicle maintenance. The centre was opened by Mr Merlyn Rees, the parliamentary Under Secretary for Air, and during its four year existence a large number of people from all over the United Kingdom were sent to St Athan by the Department of Employment. In addition, numbers of service personnel were put on courses as part of their pre-release resettlement training. During that same year, 1967, RAF Police driver training also arrived on the unit, closely followed by weapons fitter training, but a major change was about to take place in St Athan's organisation. Up until this time 4 S of TT had, in many people's eyes, been the essence of St Athan but on March 18th 1968 it became a lodger unit on the station with the maintenance unit side taking over the dominant role. Although it was not generally known at the time, this was in preparation for the gradual transfer of a good deal of the technical training task to RAF Halton. However, for the next few years, life continued much as before. In 1969 the aircraft engineering, physical training and driving tasks were added to the new trades of General Fitter Workshop and Ground Support Engineer and the first direct entry aircraft fitter courses. 1972 saw the writing on the wall, with a directive from Headquarters Training Command to the effect that all aircraft engineer training would move to Halton. At this point St Athan was still an exceedingly busy station, with not only RAF trainees but also large numbers of army drivers and overseas students present on various courses. During these twilight years 4 S of TT trained people from Jordan. Malaysia. Sudan. Kenya. Argentina. Pakistan. Nigeria and the United States.

In 1973 the author arrived on the unit for engine mechanic training. Tuition was given on the Leonides and Griffon piston engines, and the Avon turbojet, and the training airframes now included early marks of Jet Provost. Pembroke's for engine changes and marshalling practice, former Royal Navy Buccaneers (can't run the engines, we haven't got any spares"), plus the odd Lightning, Chipmunk, Argosy and Whirlwind. The large fleet of Hunter F4 and F6 aircraft, for so long a part of the St Athan scene, had almost entirely been bought back by Hawker Siddeley, who were busy dismantling them for roading back to their factory at Kingston. There they were refurbished and sold to a variety of overseas air arms, after having spent so many years being used and abused by RAF trainees!

The many achievements of St Athan men and women at this time are impressive to say the least. In June 1968 Corporal Cronin a driving school instructor, won the regional Lorry Driver of the Year award, the first time it had gone to a serving member of the RAF. For several years, teams from the MT and PT schools participated in such events as the Royal Tournament at Earl's Court and the Royal British Legion Festival of Remembrance. In 1975 men on the metalworker's course built box sledges which were used on Sir Ranulph Fiennes Transglobe Expedition, which circumnavigated the world through the Poles.

Just two years later, the major run-down of the school commenced. In January 1977 survival equipment fitter and parachute packer training moved to Halton followed by propulsion fitters and mechanics in April and the airframe people in July, thus ending the long association with aircraft trades, stretching back to the opening of the station in 1918. Also in July, the School of Physical Education moved to RAF Cosford after a stay of 23 years.

To slightly redress the balance, the Civilian Craft Apprentice School, previously under the control of St Athan's Air Engineering Wing, was transferred to the charge of the school and continued in its role of training civilians for employment on the station. What must have been a rather depressing year, closed with Operation Burberry, called in response to the national firemen's strike. This resulted in many

instructors being provided to help man a fleet of some 60 Green Goddess fire engines to provide emergency fire cover throughout the counties of Glamorgan and Gwent.

A minor increase in the school's task was introduced in 1978 with the arrival from Halton of electrical engineering courses, and even a trace of aircraft work came back in 1981 when a glider repair course was established. Nevertheless, the glory days of St Athan as the largest station in the RAF - with 14,000 personnel on strength at its peak - had gone for good.