

On 8th April 2005, Air Chief Marshal Sir Brian Burridge, then C-in-C RAF Strike Command, gave a speech at RAF Cranwell's Warrant Officers' and Sergeants' Mess. The event was to commemorate the cessation of Air Engineer training in the RAF.

One of those present, Alec Aspden, was so impressed by the speech, he asked for a copy of it to keep. It has been our pleasure to faithfully reproduce that copy here. We have contacted Sir Brian and he is delighted to endorse our actions, remembering the evening and Air Engineer flying fondly.

It's interesting, he quotes the date he was cleared to train Air Engineer students on the Varsity, as many of our current members were on the course at Topcliffe at the time. Indeed, he was my pilot, as a Flt Lt, on my final flight from Finningley to Gibraltar and return in June 1974.

A final thank you to Alec, but for his forethought, we may have lost this remarkable document. It's good to see the effect we, as a branch, had on our flying peers. In my civil aviation career, it was my experience, the skippers were always very happy to have a good flight engineer on board with them for the myriad of reasons we all know well . . .

Brian May
Historian
13 November 2014

PERSONAL STAFF OFFICER TO THE
COMMANDER-IN CHIEF
HEADQUARTERS STRIKE COMMAND

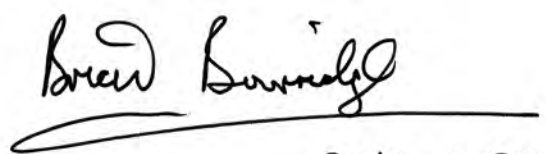
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FS Aspden

Attached is a signed copy of CINCSTC's
speech at the Air Engineer Dinner which
the CINC has asked me to send you.

Should you wish a soft copy then please
let me know.





CINC STRIKE

ADDRESS AT CESSATION OF AIR ENGINEER TRAINING DINNER
BY AIR CHIEF MARSHAL SIR BRIAN BURRIDGE
AT THE WARRANT OFFICERS AND SERGEANTS MESS
ROYAL AIR FORCE CRANWELL ON 8 APR 2005

CMC, Stn Cdr, distinguished guests, current and former members of the Air Engineer Training School, 218 course, ladies and gentlemen.

The 9th of December 1973 was an auspicious day. The historic Sunningdale agreement on Northern Ireland had just been signed. The nation was full of hope for a solution to the 'troubles'. Gary Glitter was at the top of the hit parade but being challenged by Marie Osmond and the New Seekers. It was also the day on which I qualified as an engineer instructor pilot in the Varsity.

The 20th of December 1973 was also an historic day. The Basque nationalists killed the Spanish Prime Minister with a car bomb. More happily, Slade were now Number 1 with 'Merry Christmas Everyone' although Alvin Stardust was coming-up fast. It was also the day I flew my first engineer instructional sortie.

Since then, I have flown with many of you here either as students, on the Nimrod or on the many aircraft that now represent my train set! I am honoured to be here to speak at this dinner to mark the formal ending of Air Engineers training. The only trouble is that many of you know far too much! Not least Bob Hall and Taff Ashman.

Those were the halcyon days at Finningley where Brian Spurway and his clipboard reigned supreme. Given my background in Air Engineer training, I am particularly pleased to see Number 218 Course wearing their brevets tonight. Sometimes, it is both necessary and appropriate to bend the rules.

Before I go on to mark this special occasion, I would like to say a few thank yous. The Mess has produced a marvellous dinner and so on behalf of all your visitors I would like to pass on our thanks to those involved in making it an evening to remember:

| | |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mess Manager | Mr John Slee |
| Head Chef | Mr John Pratt |
| Band | Brass Quintet of the Central Band under Chf Tech Terry Gardner. |

No history of the RAF would be complete without considering the role of the Air Engineer. After Fighter Command had won the narrowest of victories in the Battle of Britain, it was the role of Bomber Command to commence offensive action. There was no other way to take the battle to the enemy in 1941. The introduction of the heavy bombers prompted a period of turbulence whilst the composition, rank and responsibilities of their crew-members were decided. It is therefore good to see the veterans of that campaign with us tonight.

The first operational sortie by an Air Engineer occurred on 10 Feb 1941 when 3 Short Stirlings of No 7 Sqn dropped 10 tonnes of bombs on an oil storage depot in Rotterdam. Each of the 3 aircraft carried an LAC Flight Mechanic whose duties were defined as Engineer/Air Gunner and indeed wore an air gunner's badge. Despite this humble start

the pressing needs of the front line squadrons required a robust solution. Consequently a formal training course was established at number 4 School of Technical Training at St Athan which originally trained engine and airframe fitters. Direct entry was established in 1943 in which, new entrants would undertake a 33 week training course including a 3 week gunnery course. During this time, the Air Engineer in addition to carrying out what might be considered normal duties, also had to act as a standby gunner, bomb aimer and to be "a pilot's assistant in certain types of aircraft to the extent of being able to fly straight and level on a course". By 1944, the training time had increased to 53 weeks and by the end of World War II almost 18,000 Air Engineers had been trained.

The true gravity of the task they faced is reflected in the fact that almost 10,000 flight engineers lost their lives in active service and there were many examples of true heroism. In this I could not fail but mention the actions of Sergeant Norman Jackson whose exploits I am sure are familiar to you all. The courage required to climb out onto the wing of a burning Lancaster, in flight, to try to extinguish a fire is hard to imagine. His memory will live for ever as one of the few awarded the Victoria Cross for gallantry. More locally, here at Cranwell the new accommodation block will carry his name for all future NCO aircrew to see.

But Air Engineers were responsible for many acts of bravery that perhaps seemed commonplace at the time and were seemingly almost taken for granted at the time in what was, after all, a war of national survival. Some achieved recognition, others did not. One such who did and whose exploits were typical of the period was Sergeant Malcolm Mitchem who won a DFM in August 1943. His captain, Flight Sergeant Aaron, was awarded a posthumous VC. He, incidentally is the only ex-member of the Air Training Corps to be so recognised. They were flying a Stirling of No 218 (Gold Coast) Squadron on a raid on Turin. Their aircraft was attacked by what we now know to be a 'friendly' Stirling. Aaron was severely wounded and was unconscious at the controls which themselves were badly damaged by the incoming air-to-air fire. He slumped forward over the control column, sending the aircraft into a steep dive. Mitchem, as Flight Engineer, was in the right-hand seat for the bombing run and regained control at only 3,000 feet. Between them, the remaining crew (the navigator had been killed and the pilot remained only barely alive) navigated the aircraft to North Africa where Aaron in a heroic effort truly worthy of his VC, landed the aircraft in spite of his horrendous injuries from which he died hours later¹. Such things happened time and time again. There must have been many similar cases throughout that period where the cool head, courage and quick-thinking of Flight Engineers at the critical moment prevented disaster following the death or injury of the pilot.

These were the formative days and subsequently we saw Air Engineers operating across many types both military and civilian in the airlines. The common theme was technical excellence, deep professionalism and an impish sense of humour. The best example of the latter that I could find in the civil world comes from a friend in the early days of the Boeing 747 Classic with British Airways. In those days, things were very hierarchical, the captain was god and everyone knew their place. Now, at the same time, an object of great veneration was the cheese tray that appeared on the flight deck after meals in the hands of (usually) one of the junior cabin crew. There was a strict protocol as to the order in which the flight-deck crew could make their selection; quite clearly, the captain was first.

¹ For a full description of this remarkable story, see 'For Valour' by C. Bowyer (1992), Ch 38

On one occasion, the cheese tray appeared, as usual carried by a very junior member of the cabin crew. The Engineer reeled back in horror.

“Don’t you know that you should never bring Stilton onto the flight deck!” he said, “it upsets the instruments.”

With that, he took a metal fork (those were the days) from the cheese tray, speared a lump of Stilton and held it next to the standby compass. Not unnaturally, the compass went haywire and wound-off heading by 90 degrees and the poor girl was horrified by her ‘mistake’! Nothing changes.

Following on from the war the 1946 aircrew scheme established the permanent arrangements for the provision of aircrew in peacetime. Again once more engineers were to be recruited from ground tradesmen to serve for a 5 year tour. However, a lack of volunteers resulted in entry being opened up to direct entrants until, in 1950, the introduction of entry as senior NCOs. When the V force arrived Air Engineers were phased out of Bomber Command and ab-initio training was halted in 1951.

But the engineers returned and training was reintroduced in 1960 at Weeton and Melksham moving onto St Athan and Newton in 1964. Moves to Topcliffe and Finingley followed before ending up here as part of the Navigator and Airmen Aircrew School in 1997. And that is where I came in.

This course has trained Air Engineers to meet the challenges of recent shift to expeditionary warfare. Employed on the air transport/AAR and ISTAR fleets, Air Engineers have played a significant role in every major conflict from the Second World War to the present day. The Air Engineer has made a pivotal contribution to the RAF’s history and the cessation of training is a major milestone in that history but it does not signify the end of the branch. Our existing platforms which employ Air Engineers will be in service for many years to come. As those platforms get older, the Air Engineer will be increasingly challenged to ensure that those aircraft can meet the task. It is inevitable that, when those aircraft are retired, some of you will be still be in the Service. Be assured that the skills and experience you have gained over the years will be of value to the RAF beyond the life of the Air Engineer Branch.

So as a member of the Air Force Board, can I acknowledge through you as a representative group of Air Engineers, the professionalism, good humour and sacrifice of your branch. You have much to be proud of but, although ab-initio training has ceased, there is still much to do.

Ladies and gentlemen please join me in a toast to the Air Engineers.