

## **On becoming a Platinum Member of the Army Flying Museum**

As I travel deeper into retirement, the key date in 1985 of my wings parade of No. 289 Army Pilots Course prompted me to commit to the home of British Army Aviation and the Army Flying Museum. So, some 40 years on I have become a Platinum Member.

I had been well aware of the significance of its collection of venerable aircraft, and its archive of a considerable part of British and Commonwealth aviation history.

Even on first visiting Middle Wallop, and its museum in 1977, I had noted the details of Major Lanoe Hawker, VC, DSO, as the OC of No 24 Sqn RFC in 1916. The significance of this was that he was my grandfather's OC when he joined that Sqn as a fledgling RFC DH 2 pilot that year. Luckily my grandfather would survive that war, even though he was shot down in the disastrous run of bad luck for the RFC in 1916/17. The names of the Fallen recorded in very sad detail on the Memorial Wall in the grounds of the museum.

### **Army Aviation was for me**

Born in 1957, I was from an army background, as my father was a doctor the RAMC. He initially served in Malaya and Borneo in the 60s, and I distinctly remember the Austers and helicopters of that era buzzing around those tropics. I also knew them as my father's flying ambulances over the jungles of Borneo. I also had the great experience of the intercontinental flights from the grey boarding schools in England of the 60s and 70s, to exotic family holidays in Singapore and Australia following fathers' world-wide army postings. Flying was naturally a very attractive career.

I joined RMA Sandhurst in 76 from school, and from the onset wanted both an engineering degree but also to fly in the army. Conveniently whilst at Sandhurst I completed a flying scholarship and realised I could fly, albeit with a civil pilot's licence. REME was a natural choice for a specialist engineering career, and that naturally lead to completing my Officers Long Aeronautical Course in 81 at Middle Wallop.

Even then I was privileged to mix with the respective courses of army pilots, soldiers, instructors, both flying and aircraft engineering; all full of the very interesting and charismatic characters from many army regiments and corps. Personalities with a fantastic range of skills and experiences who were to make Army Aviation and the AAC in particular grow in expertise and status within the Tri-services during my career.

Obliging the investment REME had put into my training, I was initially an aircraft engineering officer in 70 Aircraft Workshop. The workshop even then supported the museum in those days as I remember re-doping the wing of an Auster. I then joined 657 Sqn AAC as the OC LAD, based at Oakington in Cambridgeshire, which then immediately went south to relive our sister Sqn 656 with its war weary Scout and Gazelle, just after the Falkland Islands conflict in July 82.

However, in 84 REME let me then go for aircrew selection, and in 85 with a Gazelle 'captain' qualification of those days, I then spent 3 years flying with 662 Sqn AAC in 3 Regt AAC. Crucially our Sqn was affiliated directly with the novel 6 Airmobile Brigade. An interesting role in fledgling air-mobility manoeuvring all over BOAR. We also saw the cessation of the aircrewman role and the introduction of the P1 and P2 aircrew roles, so anticipating the clear future for Army Aviation with attack helicopters!

At the end of my flying tour, I returned to REME Aviation because of some great inducements for furthering my career and engineering credentials, including an aeronautical MSc at Cranfield, and also establishing 9 Regt AAC at Dishforth as the OC Workshop REME. The later made possible with the new build of the Mark 9 Lynx given to the AAC, and the amalgamation of extant anti-tank and new AAC Sqns at a brand-new camp and airfield. This time we were the main Army Aviation asset of 24 Airmobile Brigade.

## **Apache – cry Geronimo, and unleash the dogs of war**

Not unsurprisingly I always avoided ‘steam’ REME, and the armoured bias of the army, by nailing my colours to Army Aviation and so spent a majority of my career closely associated with the Apache Longbow - Model D; clearly a formidable beast which I had always believed we needed. I saw it in from the down-selection competition in the late 90s, its introduction in the 2000s and lastly supporting it in Wattisham and more importantly in Afghanistan.

This included a tour stateside with the American Army Aviation Apache project office milking them for all their knowledge of the technology, engineering, logistics and fielding of this magnificent weapons system. It was hard to tell the Americans, that despite their gung-ho for getting the Apache straight out to the then theatres of war, the AAC was going to work up this system up its own unique and very successful British way within the rapidly developing JHC.

## **Joint Helicopter Command – the jointery**

On reflection my whole working life has revolved around aviation, firstly directly with the AAC units and our Scout, Gazelle and Lynx, but latterly as a senior aircraft engineer in the whole range of Army Aviation; Apache, A109, Islander and even helicopters taken up from the civil register. I also naturally broadened out Tri-service having senior aircraft engineering responsibilities for RAF Wessex and Chinook and also RN Seaking. This effectively culminating in a senior aircraft engineering officer tour in JHC.

My final Army Aviation appointment in 2010 was to set up the fledgling role office for the then Hermes 450 and other army UAS operated by the RA out in Afghanistan. Interestingly this harking back to that army principle of getting a novel technology up in the air to look over the horizon at the enemy, and then destroy him, with Apache of course!

## **Army Flying Museum**

But when I want a reference point for Army Aviation, I can see it all in the Army Flying Museum, each airframe there with a well-travelled history and having been piloted and supported by characters I most probably knew and had camaraderie with, both in the field and the home base!

The Army Flying Museum still has the echoes of the buzz of Middle Wallops fleets of Bell G4, Chipmunks, Scouts, Beavers and of course Gazelles, but crucially it now has the background soundtrack of the new Apache Model E strutting its stuff. Thus, showing the museum continues as a place to visit to inspire the next generation of pilots, soldiers and technicians. Long may it prosper.