

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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Audio Typist name	John Martin	Transcription Date	04 to 05-04-14
Transcription file name	FCH - Fred Hambly		- OH Transcription.doc
<div>Web Pages:</div> <div>Oral History article: https://nfknowledge.org/contributions/memories-of-the-early-days-of-helicopter-testing/#map=10/-1.5/50.81/0/20:0:0.6 34:1:1 35:1:1</div> <div>Project information: www.newforestnpa.gov.uk/wwii</div>			

File name	FCH	015	_0001M0.WAV	Interview date: 15-08-13
<p>00-00-00</p> <p><i>OK Fred, so tell me about how you ended up at Beaulieu airfield?</i></p> <p>Well, I joined the air force originally as an aircraft apprentice in February 1943. I split in half, went to RAF Halton. I did my apprenticeship there and at the end of the war I was posted to RAF Orford Ness, which was a secret research unit doing armament experiments. I was then posted to RAF Beaulieu on the rotary wing section. The main work of the unit was the Airborne Forces Experimental Unit, which was testing various types of parachute. Dropping men, obviously with parachute. Also dropping guns and small vehicles. It was a very convenient airfield because the dropping zone was over East Boldre, which was only a mile or so from the main airfield, so the aircraft could take off, usually a Hastings, it would circle round, get the requisite height and then the men and the equipment would jump. It would land down there, sometimes in the gorse - and we're still on about gorse in the pants - and a vehicle would pick them up, take them back to the camp, get into another aeroplane and do another sortie. And they could do up to six a day.</p> <p><i>How many different kinds of aircraft were there on the airfield at the time?</i></p> <p>00-01-40</p> <p>Well, I can remember there was Hastings, Dakota, Halifax, various types of gliders 'cos we also did glider trials. We had the Horsa, Hamilcar - American one, I can't remember what it's called now. We had lots of visiting aircraft come and go. The usual thing on a RAF</p>				

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station. The occasional Spitfire, but the main working aircraft was the Hastings, the Dakota, Halifax. I think we did use the Liberator at one stage. I can't remember precisely about that, but it was a very busy airfield. Lots going on.

My particular role was on the rotary wing. It was the first helicopters had been delivered to Beaulieu and they were being evaluated and tested, and we were training pilots to fly them. The chap in charge was Squadron Leader Cable, was a fantastic pilot. He'd been to the States to Sikorsky, learnt to fly and he was bringing his knowledge to Beaulieu. And we had Royal Navy pilots, Air Force pilots of course, and latterly we had some army pilots. There was a small air cooperation flight, flying Austers. The army came and they used to fly in the helicopters, and we used to service their Austers as well, and keep them in the same hangar.

00-03-29

One incident I can recall with the Auster, one of the pilots said to me one day, could I come with him on the flight. I said "Where you going?" He said "Well, not far, just going up to Salisbury. I need somebody to swing the prop". Because we had to land, someone's got to get out and swing the prop because we didn't have self-starters on them. So I said "OK, it's nearly lunchtime now isn't it?" He said "Yeah, don't matter, we won't be long". So we flew up to near Salisbury, landed in a field, he went off and I was left there with this aeroplane all on my own. He came back loaded with loot, including a dozen eggs, which he said (chuckling) "I want you to have these on your lap". So I swung the prop, we took off and we ran into a violent storm. The aircraft was flying all over the sky and all he kept saying to me "look after those eggs, look after those eggs". (laughter) Finally landed and he said "Oh, thanks ever so much Corporal. Here, have a few eggs". I said "Oh I couldn't face an egg now to save my life". (laughter) That was by the way; that's what - we weren't there for that purpose.

00-04-39

What was life like on the airfield at that time?

Well, it hadn't changed at all from the wartime airfield. It was a typical dispersed airfield. It was what they called an A-type landing ground. That was two main runways and a short one across, but the main one was for larger aircraft and the short one for Austers and things. That occupied a large part of the ground, but the living quarters were Nissan huts, and they were scattered around the area miles from the runways, based on the theory that if the airfield was attacked, most of the troops would survive, or the airmen would survive. But as a consequence of that, if you wanted to go to the airmen's mess, you had to walk a long way or bike it if you had a bike. If you had to go to work you had to walk a long way and I was unfortunate to be there in the worst weather they'd experienced for many many years. That was in '46/'47. The whole of the area was snowed up. We couldn't get in and we couldn't get out and we ran out of fuel. Remembering we lived in Nissan huts, the only heating was a big round black stove in the middle of the hut and to keep it going, keep the messes going, they formed working parties and we were sent out into the Forest with

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instructions only to pick up wood that had fallen on the ground. Which was a little bit oblique when you think about it because the ground was covered in snow, several feet deep, and so I'm afraid we did a bit of heavy pruning on the Forest at that time and dragged the wood back. Most of it went to the messes, the airman's/officers, to keep the food going and we were lucky what we could glean ourselves.

The ablution block in each of these sites was some distance away from where you lived, so you had to get out in the open to walk towards those in all weathers. No hot water; shave in cold water, or if you were lucky could brew a bit up on the stove, but of course with twenty five men in a billet, you were very lucky if you got any hot water at all.

Food I imagine was OK, we all survived. I can't recall really what it was like but it must have been pretty reasonable I suppose. The memory is the distances to walk in bad weather and of course, in those days our kit was a ground sheet, which you just put round your shoulders, you didn't have any of the modern wet weather gear, and a pair of wellingtons. So we plodded around in the mud and cold and snow in wet wellingtons. The theory was that we could keep the helicopters flying, they could be used in an emergency, but the weather was so cold and bleak that we very seldom got them airborne. Too risky!

00-08-05

And what were the other men there? What – where had they all come from?

Oh, they came from all over the Britain. Mostly from London area, Scots, Welsh, some Paddies. Very few actually from Brockenhurst or round about. I mean, in the Air Force, if you got posted, they used to say "Where would you like to go?" and you'd give your three choices, and you always gave the three choices nearest to home. And of course you got posted as far away as they could get you. (chuckles) So there were very few local boys there. So we all relied on the railways to get home. I was fortunate, I lived in Portsmouth, so I didn't have far to go and I used to go home on the odd weekend when I could afford it.

I mean, again, money was very tight. We didn't get paid very much, so we couldn't afford much entertainment. (loud cough) The main entertainment was to go to the Moran Hall in Brockenhurst, which was a mecca for the young men of the area. Most of 'em from East Boldre, Sway, Brockenhurst, Lymington, some from Southampton, and the Air Force that was in the area. It used to be quite feisty at times as you can imagine, and we all tried to chase the local girls. Some successful, some weren't.

I was never successful at the dance floor, but I did actually meet my future wife, but not there. Not at the dance hall. (loudly clears throat) I don't know whether you want me to tell you about how I met her.

00-09-53

Well, yeah, tell me about how you met your wife.

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My chum – Arthur - and I went to school when we were five. Eleven plus; he was clever and he passed for the grammar school. He went to what was called the Southern Secondary School. What happened then was that the (cough) school was evacuated and the boys were due to go to Salisbury and the girls to come to Brockenhurst. There was a mix-up and the things were switched, and the boys ended up in Brockenhurst. My wife's parents had put down that they'd have a girl. They didn't obviously get one, and they ended up with a boy, Arthur who was my friend, escorted there by Jim who was the boy of the house. He was a boy scout and he had his pointy hat on, and he brought Arthur home and I remember Mrs Brown saying to me, "Oh you won't stay here long, lad". It was September the 1st, he said "you'll be home next week" (bad cough) and it was five years. It was in 1946 that I bumped into him in Southsea on the seafront. He was walking along - (coughing; continues in next file).

End: 00-11-21

Keywords:

Beaulieu airfield, testing parachutes, aircraft, Hastings, Dakota, Halifax, gliders, Horsa, Hamilcar, glider trials, Liberator, training pilots, Auster, helicopter, A-type landing ground, Nissan huts, bad weather in 1947, dances, Moran Hall, Brockenhurst, evacuees.

File name	FCH	015	_0002M0.WAV	Interview date: 15-08-13
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I bumped into my friend in Southsea who was in the Navy at the time. We went for the usual drink and he asked me what I was posted to these days and I said I was at Beaulieu. He said "I'm coming over to Brockenhurst to visit my old landlady where I stayed all through the war, and I'll look you up". Which he did. One day I got a message to say that there was a chap asking for me at the Guard Room and at 5 o'clock I went down. We met up on our bikes. We went down to Millford, had a swim, came back and he asked me if I'd like to go back and see Mrs Brown. I said well, I didn't really feel I ought to, didn't know her, never met her. We stopped at the level crossing and Bert, Mrs Brown's husband, was the signalman there. In those days it was a manual gated crossing and Bert was leaning over the fence and shouting down to Arthur "Nice to see you boy" and he said take Fred home. So I went round there and I met Mrs Brown, I met Jim who I'd heard about and there was this girl there, Eileen, who I'd never heard of. I said to Arthur "Who's the girl?" He said "Well, it's Jim's sister". Anyway, to cut a long story short I used to revisit to meet Jim. We used to go and play darts. I used to come home for a bit of supper and I finally bucked up courage to ask her to the pictures with me, and after a few hits and misses – the biggest miss was, I was at Ashurst. I'd been selling some mushrooms up there that we'd got on the 'drome. I saw Eileen go by on a motorbike. I gave her a wave and she waved back and I went back to Brockenhurst and picked up Jim and I happened to say to him "I've just seen Eileen on a motorbike". "Where, where, where?" I said "going into Southampton". "Oh my God!" His face was a study. And when I came back two or three days later, Eileen wouldn't talk to me. She said I'd dropped her in it and I was a rat and all that sort of thing, and we didn't speak for a while. But it did thaw because eventually we carried on our relationship. Courting they used to call it in those days. And I was just getting on when I was posted

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abroad to Middle East, Canal Zone, and then on to Iraq. But we carried on writing to each other and I came back eventually and we got married.

00-02-45

So Fred, going back to your time on the airfield, I understand there were some captured German aircraft that you were involved with while you were there.

Yes, there was a twin rotor helicopter that the Allies had captured and it was taken to Beaulieu for evaluation and there was a Focke-Achgelis kite, (See Focke-Achgelis FA 330 Bachstelze) which was a rotor-kite, which was used by U-boats. They used to release this thing on the surface, and it used to get airborne purely on the basis of the speed of the wind and the speed the U-boat was doing, and the observer in the kite would be able to look over the horizon and spot any Allied shipping. In the event of a British destroyer or Allied destroyer coming up, he could be cut away and left to his own devices and the submarine would crash dive. I wouldn't have thought a very popular position.

Anyway, we had three of these at Beaulieu, and my job was to try and get them to fly. 'Course, we had no manuals, no information on them. But we rigged them up best we could, had them on the back of a flat top lorry and when there was no flying we used to drive down the runway at high speed and slowly release the kite from the back of the flat top with a chap in it and try to get it airborne. We weren't terribly successful. We had one or two mishaps and had to rebuild. But later on when I got posted abroad I was sat in a cinema in Habbaniya in Iraq and the British News came on, and it said "We're now going over to Calshot" and there was an RAF launch, and on the back of the launch was our rotor-craft, and they were testing it in the Solent, and I was able to turn round to my mates and say "Oh, I worked on that". And it did actually get up off the ground.

00-04-57

And I think there were some German prisoners of war involved weren't there?

Yeah, well because we had these German aircraft, we'd also brought some German technicians over with them. Equivalent to us, airmen, and a Nazi type officer, and they were housed in a small compound the other side of the road. We mixed with them during the working day and they were OK. They were just ordinary lads like we were. They didn't stay there long. The twin rotor crashed and the last we knew, they were taken away. Whether they got repatriated home or whether they went to another prisoner of war camp we never found out. The lads were OK, the officer was a bit of a pig and I remember one occasion when Squadron Leader Cable, our boss, happened to be in the hangar when he was shouting at his men, and he called him to one side and in no uncertain terms, told him we don't do that in this country, much to our amusement, and I think to the amusement of the German troops.

00-06-12

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So Fred, tell me about the work you did on the rotor-chute.

Well, I didn't do much on it myself personally, but a chap called Raoul Hafner who turned out to be a very famous helicopter designer. He invented this rotor-chute and the rotor-buggy, the idea being that they could drop them from aircraft using a free-wheeling rotor in place of parachute. Parachute silk was very short supply and they thought this was a very good way of landing troops. They weren't particularly successful, and there is one in the Middle Wallop Museum I know, I've seen that there, and my Focke-Achgelis German kite I saw last year, and that's up in Cosford. But Raoul Hafner went on to design the Bristol Sycamore.

And it was just a corollary of all this, years later I was working at Bristol on the Concord, people who went through from Beaulieu to Bristol to work on the helicopter had come back to work on Concord, and two of the officers and one of the civilian boffins were well known to me, and we all met up again at Filton on Concord, many, many years later. So quite unusual really.

End: 00-07-43

Keywords:

Rotor helicopter, Focke-Achgelis, rotor-kite, U-boat, Raoul Hafner, rotor-chute, rotor-buggy.

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