

# Wales in the Wet

Past Master HUGH FIELD

Photograph by courtesy of Ian Verner.



Cynics suggest that the weather is always wet in North Wales. While normally untrue, the influence of a Guild visit was enough to ensure a downpour. We were, nevertheless, treated to a splendid programme coupled with generous hospitality.

From far and wide 28 Guild members, led by the Master, descended on two hostels near RAF Valley for the nights of 27 and 28 February to be in position for a full day (and evening) of activity at one of the busiest stations in the Royal Air Force. Just how busy was to emerge from the introductory

briefing by the Station Commander, Group Captain Les Garside-Beattie - a man with his hands full by any standards.

The dominant unit at RAF Valley is No 4 Flying Training School whose task is to train combat pilots for the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy to the required standard for entry into Operational Conversion Units. Other significant units include C Flight of No 22 Search and Rescue Squadron, SARTU, the Search and Rescue Training Detachment from the Defence Helicopter School at Shawbury and the Air Guided Weapons Evaluation Unit, all of which we were to learn about during the day.

For most of the 4FTS intake, pilot training will have started on either the Tutor, operated by the University Air Squadrons, or the Firefly flown at the Elementary Flying Training School at Barkston Heath. Basic fast jet training is undertaken on the turboprop Tucano and the quality of selection and basic training has now reduced wastage at that stage to 15 per cent. A further 15 per cent may be lost at Valley but these can be recovered by restreaming into either multi-engined or helicopter schools.

The students receive their introduction to fast jets on No 208 Squadron flying the Hawk and begin with five weeks of ground training provided under contract by BAE Systems. The quality of this training was described by the CO as "Excellent" and he was equally full of praise for the

simulator training from the same supplier. BAE Systems invested £18 million in a triple-simulator installation, each of which can operate individually or jointly to provide formation or combat training. Students complete 57 hours of simulator training while at Valley but Gp. Capt. Garside-Beattie stressed that this was augmenting airborne time and in no way replacing it.

Across the airfield No 19 Squadron is responsible for weapons and tactical training but not all the graduates from 208 progress there. Ten per year are "creamed off" to become flying instructors and recently the squadron has begun to supply 20 per year to the NATO Flying Training College at Cold Lake where the Canadians operate a more advanced variant of the Hawk.

The breakdown of operational types currently in service or planned in the near future calls for 60 per cent of new pilots to go to two-seat aircraft and 40 per cent to single seat. While it was easy to regard the arrival of Eurofighter Typhoon as challenging to the new pilots, Group Captain Garside-Beattie affirmed that in pure flying terms it is not as tricky as the Harrier.

Valley is the busiest flying station in the United Kingdom having recorded 65,000 movements last year. To this must be added a further 30,000 flown at the relief landing ground at Mona, six miles away to the east. In airspace terms Valley is hedged in with controlled airspace but has some 85 square miles to call its own. Typically, for flying a tactical hi-lo-hi sortie the low flying area north of



Head for heights: Assistant Michael Glover demonstrates how to wear the helmet correctly.

Photograph by courtesy of Ian Verner.



*Ready when you are:  
Hawks line up ready for a  
full day's training programme.*



Newcastle can be reached in 20 to 25 minutes. Normal fuel allows 20 minutes in the "target" area.

Turning out 84 qualified Hawk pilots per year, Valley serves the RAF (67) RN (12) and also produces five at the behest of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. When it came to some of the financial numbers the Group Captain said that he was responsible for a £45 million budget and he was proud to offset £3.8 million by earnings from overseas students.

The scale of the flying operation at Valley is massive. Looking for 160 sorties per day calls for a launch rate of 17 aircraft per hour and turnrounds are tasked at not more than 30 minutes. IT

technology comes into play in managing the programming. As we were to see later in the engineering control centre both of the squadrons is established for 28 Hawks and a float to allow for heavy maintenance takes the total to 69.

Valley is a contractorised operation with most support functions covered by what is termed a Multi-Activity Contract. At the core is a consortium formed by Brown and Root and Marshall Aerospace (BRAMA) which handles aircraft engineering, line operations, MT and supply functions. Granada provides the catering services and the "works and bricks" is in the hands of Amey. Group Captain Garside-Beattie noted with pleasure that, after a shaky start six years ago, the system was working well. He put a lot of the success down to his having one central point of contact to all the companies involved so that, regardless of whether he was dealing with a problem of aircraft service or food he still dealt with the same centralised team.

Valley was perceived as being "the back of beyond" and its isolation meant that particular efforts needed to be made to look after personnel welfare. A community centre and a learning centre were popular facilities and £1.25 million was being spent on a new airmen's facility in a joint project with NAAFI. The officers' mess, in which most of the students spend their ten months of residence, has been undergoing a complete refurbish at a

cost of nearly £8 million but the CO admitted to being frustrated by lateness of this project.

Wing Commander Neil Meadows, commanding No 208 Squadron spoke of the quality of the students. He endorsed the view expressed earlier by the Station Commander that the present-day intake was every bit as good as its predecessors and made the point that the two-crew glass cockpits of the C-17 and C130J called for just the same quality of pilots as Eurofighter.

Describing the syllabus Wg. Cdr. Meadows said that seven sorties were flown to first solo on type and that this could not be replicated in a simulator. "You can't learn how to ride a horse in a simulator," he said. The next seven trips took the student up to Instrument Rating standard and were followed by 10 hours of general handling culminating in a progress check. There followed 13 hours of low-level navigation, six hours of close formation, four hours of night flying, five hours of tactical formation and a final five hours of general handling leading up to the final handling test. This could include any element of the syllabus.

Personal qualities are fulfilling an increasingly important role in selection and training and Wg Cdr Meadows expressed the view that eventually - and probably soon - he would withdraw a student from the course for inadequacy in this respect.

The Squadron operates with two training flights staffed by 30 QFIs (qualified flying instructors) and with a complement of 45 ab initio students. A third flight of eight instructors performed the traditional Central Flying School role of training flying instructors and setting standards. Altogether there are 108 aircrew, making No 208 the biggest squadron in the RAF - and it operates without an adjutant. The squadron performs the role traditionally undertaken by the whole of No 4FTS in former days. One week it achieved 3,000 sorties - unmatched by any other squadron.

Heads full of this impressive information, we boarded a bus for a visit to SARTU, on the far side of the runway. Here training of all SAR helicopter pilots and crewmen is undertaken using three Bell 412 Griffin aircraft. Obviously the seaside location



*Walk this way chaps: Members were divided into groups for a flight in a Search and Rescue Sea King helicopter.*



of the unit is ideal, offering the minimum of wasted flying time for water-rescue exercises, but the proximity of the North Wales mountain ranges is equally relevant. Accidents on mountains form an increasing part of a rescue crew's workload.

Keeping up a cracking pace, we returned to the bus and thus to the mess for a light lunch where a large proportion of the station's officers turned out to mix and mingle. Throughout the day and at the dining-in night that concluded it there was an easy flow of conversation and a refreshing openness about the work of the station. A major problem is the imminent change to the so-called MFTS (Military Flying Training Scheme) for which a new trainer will be required. Despite an extensive modification programme to extend the fatigue life of the Hawk the year 2010 will see it finished so major decisions are becoming urgent.

After lunch we split into groups and went our separate ways - all clearly set out in the comprehensive briefing document produced by our host for the visit, Flt. Lt. Paul Crutchlow. The "goodies" on offer included a flight in a SAR Sea King, a simulator flight to experience the Hawk (and for one of our number an actual flight - there were envious looks at the departing figure of Roger Gault), a display and demonstration of safety equipment and a visit to the "Gaydon" hangar where BRAMA technicians were undertaking second-line maintenance.

We rejoined in the station briefing room to learn about the function of the Air Guided Weapons Operational Evaluation Unit. While there is a degree of evaluation of new weapons the main role is to provide live missile firing on the nearby Aberporth range for every operational squadron once a year. Not surprisingly, this lodger unit belongs to Strike Command since it is responsible for firing some 100 Paveway laser-guided bombs every year (about one third of the total annual worldwide consumption). The value of the unit lies in checking that complete systems do actually work.

For the advanced students learning weapons handling on the Hawks of No



*Hawk eyed: Envious colleagues look on as G-suited Assistant Roger Gault (kneeling right) masquerades as a Hawk pilot following his exhilarating flight with Wing Commander Neil Meadows. The hangar provided shelter from the Welsh wind and rain that persisted during the Guild's two-day visit to RAF Valley.*

19 Squadron, some of the aircraft are equipped with an underbelly, centreline pod containing a 30 mm ADEN gun. Underwing mountings can carry pods whose two 14kg bombs replicate exactly the behaviour of 1,000lb bombs. Even more ingenious are the 3kg bombs of which four can be fitted into a pod; these being retarded-bomb simulators. In place of the pods the underwing slippers can accept Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles conferring considerable versatility on the aircraft for weapons training.

The afternoon concluded with the Guild's contribution, or more particularly the Master's. Most of 208 - both staff and students - piled into the lecture room to hear him relate some of the early history of the Hawk for, not only had he made the first flight in August 1974 but he had also made the first delivery (to Valley) only two years later. He held his audience enthralled and it was interesting to note that in very little time his slides had been converted into a Powerpoint presentation to make them compatible

with the lecture-room equipment. For 45 minutes there was a strong bond between the young men and women in the flying suits and the somewhat older men in the blazers.

With the light fading it was time to return to the bus in the continuing rain and head back to the hotels to change for the dining-in night. The dining-room service may be mounted by a contractor but it had lost none of its dignity. The tables were cleared fully for the Loyal toast and Guild members were reminded that Valley has an Honorary Air Commodore - HRH The Prince of Wales - to whom the second toast was dedicated.

It was a splendid evening to round off a memorable day. We were looked after warmly and efficiently and nothing was too much trouble to keep us fully informed about the working of the busiest airfield in the Royal Air Force. To Group Captain Les Garside-Beattie, Wing Commander Neil Meadows, Flight Lieutenant Paul Crutchlow and all our many unnamed hosts, a most sincere "Thank you".



*Hands full: Group Captain Les Garside-Beattie, Station Commander, briefs his visitors on the activities at RAF Valley, one of the UK's busiest flying stations.*

Photograph by courtesy of Ian Verner.