

William F A (Bill) Ison AE

1921 - 2011

a Celebration of Life



The history of the Cambridge Flying Group (CFG) and the life of Bill Ison are inseparable. Others may have had the idea of a private flying school in Cambridge but that was the easy bit, making it work and enabling it to survive over more than 50 years while building an enviable reputation for producing pilots of quality required a very different person: not just a first rate instructor but a strong willed, focused, principled and conscientious character. It was Bill Ison personified.

In 1945/7 Britain the legacy of WW2 meant many trained pilots joined the RAF Reserve so they could continue to fly. As a local boy Bill joined 22 Reserve Flying School RAFVR based at Marshalls airfield. On the advice of Marshalls Chief Pilot he took the opportunity to train as an instructor in 1949 leading his mentor to recommend him as CFI of the fledgling CFG. It got off to an inauspicious start: an aged Taylorcraft two seater kept in a disused hangar and briefings in Bill's car but, word spread quickly and Bill was able to persuade CFG's hierarchy that a training aircraft was required. Even today his choice cannot be faulted, the Tiger Moth remains a safe aeroplane yet demands the highest levels of skill and concentration to fly it properly and therefore draws the best performance out of any student pilot.

From its modest beginnings CFG has grown into a fully fledged training organisation with eight instructors and more than sixty active pilots comprising a mix of PPL's, conversions and students.

Bill's fascination with aviation was fostered by his mother in 1931 when she invested half a crown (2 shillings & 6 old or 12.5p new pence) to enable her precocious 10 year old to fulfill a dream. She had an interesting ally as Sir Arthur Marshall himself helped the excited youngster into the DH 60's cockpit. It sowed a seed that grew rapidly: a few weeks later, while his parents were safely ensconced in the pub at Caxton Gibbet, Bill sneaked off and exchanged his pocket money for another flight in a Phillips and Powis (possibly Miles) monoplane.

Aged 17 and keen to get involved Bill entered the RAF's highly respected Technical College at Halton qualifying as an Engine Fitter in two, rather than the normal three, years because the war had started and he was required to man one of the ever expanding number of RAF squadrons. He joined Coastal Command at Bircham Newton and within a short while had volunteered to move from servicing engines to flying as an air gunner in the venerable Avro Anson. A design triumph in 1934, and the first monoplane in RAF service in 1936, by 1939 the Anson was obsolete for frontline duties but, it was all they had and continued in use for anti submarine patrols with Bill strapped in a rotating perspex topped dorsal turret fitted with a single Lewis machine gun. The catch was that the turret only rotated if the gunner pushed it round! Aiming a gun at the same time was an extra skill. It wasn't long before the death of good friend flying in the same aircraft brought home the realisation that war was a serious business.

With the Battle of Britain won the RAF considered where else it could operate effectively against the Axis powers, in Bill's case the answer was Egypt and he joined 14 Sqdn in 1941 as an air gunner in Blenheims, another aeroplane well beyond its best years (as Bill would frequently attest) but still capable of making anti-shipping strikes, provided there was no air cover around.

Towards the middle of 1942 Bill was with the Advanced Photographic Recce Flight providing up to date target photographs for those planning operations. Commuting across the desert also gave him the opportunity to impress his flight commander with his flying skills and this led to a recommendation for pilot training. After a medical in Cairo it was off to Rhodesia for *ab initio* training in Tiger Moths before moving to twin engined Airspeed Oxfords as a prelude to flying multi engined machines. The skills that enabled him to complete operational training in six months were rewarded with a posting back to the desert flying increasingly obsolescent Blenheim he already knew so well.

Back in England and after further training and conversion Bill joined a Lancaster squadron at Waterbeach and flew missions against the heavily defended "ski" sites used to launch V1 flying bombs. His 'tour' over he was in Edinburgh when hostilities ended but mercy missions began and he flew food supplies to the Dutch as part of Operation Manna.

Returning to work in his father's business Bill, as a Regular officer, opted to remain in the reserve and continued to fly regularly including the two week summer camp when pilots were brought up to current standard through refresher courses.

In the clubhouse Bill was always the focus of attention, an accomplished accordion player and raconteur with a huge fund of wartime memories and aviation stories, he could tell jokes like a variety performer. However he never lost sight of CFG's purpose and would readily quiz a new member on the type of cloud that day or discuss a student's progress with him. He wanted to perpetuate a "squadron" atmosphere of efficiency mixed with *bon hommie* and insisted on maintaining and caring for the aeroplanes as he had been trained. Bill was renowned for not suffering fools gladly and his forthright manner could disconcert the unwary, even in his twilight years he could be the epitome of belligerence in the club house yet remained the supremely cool professional instructor in the air and, more importantly, in an emergency!

Bill was CFI from 1953 to 2009 and probably last flew in a Tiger Moth in November 8th 2009 with Alan Hartfield, on a regular check flight. His career spanned well over 10,000 flying hours in at least 63 different types of aircraft. During that time over 200 students completed a PPL with CFG, countless more successfully converted to the Tiger Moth.

His achievements were recognised at a personal level with both the leading awards for instruction and standards of airmanship: the Lennox-Boyd trophy by AOPA (1980) and the Pike trophy by GAPAN (2005). A unique achievement. In his last years the Group also acknowledged it's debt by inviting Bill to become CFI Emeritus to ensure that his sublime flying skills and vast technical knowledge remained available to the Group.

One star pupil was Bill's first lady student a young nurse called Betty Willink, who joined in 1956 and not only gained her PPL but, also a night rating on Tiger Moths, a unique achievement. Another unique achievement was marrying Bill in 1991.

Memories are made of this

Many of you will have many happy memories of Bill, if you would like to share them with other Group members we are planning to include them in a Book of Reminiscences and, possibly, in future issues of Wind in the Wires eMagazine.

If you would like to offer a tribute, memory or photograph(s) either by letter or email we would be pleased to receive it. Photographs will be scanned and returned. To ease administration please put a name and address on the obverse.

Mail should be addressed to Cambridge Flying Group, Gate F, Cambridge Airport, Newmarket Road, Cambridge CB5 8RX marked for the attention of Doug Collyer or John Gilder

Emails should be sent to:

info@cambridgeflyinggroup.co.uk or John.gilder2@btinternet.com