

My Days at 612 Gliding School Martlesham Heath

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Who was CFI at 612 Gliding School RAF Martlesham Heath.

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It all started one Sunday morning in 1958 when a friend who was an air cadet told me that the gliding school would possibly let me help them. So I cycled over one early Sunday morning and waited near the glider hanger. I have to say at this early stage in my memoirs that most of my recollections are from a rather faded memory so if I have made any mistakes, I apologise now.

Very soon two officer looking gentlemen in flying suits walked down from the wooden hut which was situated amongst the trees behind the control tower. I said could I help them. I was only 14 at the time but this did not seem to worry the two officers. Yes they said, you can help us pull these gliders out to the launch area. These two officers I later learnt were Ron Page and Arthur Pryke who both said I should join the air cadets if I wished to carry on helping. I dually joined the Ipswich ATC at 14 and helped out at the GS at weekends doing odd jobs such as retrieving gliders and operating the 'Aldis' lamp.

At the age of 16 I became a staff cadet and was shown how to drive the Bedford 15 hundred weight trucks and later the 'Wild' winches which were used to launch the gliders. The two Wild winches were originally parked when not in use in an old open ended 'Nissen' hut which was on the perimeter road along side the A-12 not far from where the Suffolk County Police HQ is now.. Due to increasing vandalism by local kids they were eventually parked in the glider hanger under lock and key.

Both Wild winches were replaced around 1960 with a purpose built Bedford twin drum winch. For those interested, the Wild winch was built by the firm Wild and Co for barrage balloon operations during the war. They were powered by a Ford Mercury Flat head V-8 engine which were built by Ford UK under licence from Ford USA.

This same engine became surplus after the war so Ford UK decided to make the Ford Pilot car to use up the engines. It is now a very collectable classic car.

The CO at 612 gliding school at the time I was there was Arthur Pryke and the CFI was Ron Page who was an absolute Harry Secombe character. There were other instructors but their names now escape me.

612 gliding school had 3 Kirby Cadet Mk 3's, WT910, WT911 and XE786, One Slingsby T-21 Sedberg WB927, and one Grunau Baby 2b VT921. The 3 Cadets were later fitted with 'spoilers'.

The Grunau Baby spent most of its time dismantled in the hanger as by the late 50's the glue joints had become brittle and it was grounded for safety reasons. Ron Page informed me that he obtained his 'Silver' C certificate some time in the 50's flying the Grunau Baby from Martlesham Heath up to the Norfolk coast where he landed. The Grunau Baby was basically war 'booty' and it became part of the RAF's glider inventory and assigned to the air cadets where it was loaned out to various gliding schools in East Anglia for periods of time. I flew all the gliders mentioned with the exception of the Grunau while I was at 612.

Over my 4 year stint at 612 I logged over 275 flights, all dual, but gained my solo wings [when I was 16] after an add hock end of day training flight each weekend. My main duties as a staff cadet were winch launching the gliders and driving the trucks to retrieve the cables and gliders.

Quite often during Sunday afternoons while manning the winches especially at the Foxhall Road end of the air field, the local ice cream vendor on his 3 wheel tricycle would stop and shout at us from the public road. One of us would run over and buy the ice creams. It was Nielson's ice cream and I always had their Velvet Lady, the best ice cream I have ever tasted.

I eventually was deemed ready for my solo flight and Ron Page gave me the thumbs up, I was still 16 years old.

After releasing the cable on my 3rd solo at about 1200 Ft I hit a strong thermal and circled in it to about 2000 Ft. There seemed to be panic on the ground as I could see the 'Aldis' lamp being flashed at me from the launch area. I took this to mean get down so I did with a huge telling off from Ron Page, but I had thermalled for over 15 minutes from release so was granted an 'A' 'B' and 'C' certificate. From there on I was given one or two of 'solo' flights each weekend, usually at the end of the day and the last one quite often being the hanger flight.

Later when I moved to London I joined the Essex Gliding Club at North Weald but with marriage and work now more important plus the costs I had to give gliding up.

I now occasionally fly radio controlled sail planes but this is pretty expensive too. I still have friends in the gliding world who I see now and again.

The DH Vampire Incident

Back to my school days, I was cycling down 'B' Flight road one weekday on Martlesham Heath airfield where I had to stop at the traffic light controlled runway threshold crossing. On finals was a DH Vampire. He seemed very low yet still some way off the runway. He actually touched down on 'B' Flight road first, bounced up and touched down on the runway rather hard only to lose his nose wheel; the vampire came to rest down the runway with fire engines racing out to meet him. The canopy flew up and out jumped two pilots with one beating the other round the head with what looked like a log book. It was so funny to see and thankfully no one was hurt.

The F-84 Thunderstreak incident.

In the late 50's, the USAF were flying F-84 Thunderstreaks out of nearby RAF Bentwaters. One such aircraft had to make an emergency landing at the Heath as he apparently had engine trouble. He landed but the engine had died so he was towed off the runway and parked on the apron near the small hangers. The F-84 sat there for nearly a week before there was any sign of USAF ground crew to fix it. Rumour has it that the RAF issued an ultimatum to USAF Bentwaters that if they didn't come a fix it and fly it out, it would become part of the RAF's inventory. It was repaired a couple of days later and flown out.

The F-100 Super Sabre Incident.

This incident can probably be better described by Dennis Smith who is a member of the MHAS, but here are my observations.

One Saturday morning Dennis and his friend John Riches [of Riches garage Kesgrave] were kicking a football around on the RAF's football pitch which was adjacent to the A-12 when an F-100 flew low over them towards the village of Kesgrave. They both noticed it had no canopy and the engine was very quiet.

Dennis said jokingly to John, that's on your house. Seconds later there was a huge explosion some ¼ mile down the road and with that they raced down the road to Riches garage only to find it flattened, on fire with the houses each side on fire as well.

I was lying in bed late that Saturday morning when I heard the explosion, it was more of a thump that you felt through your body. I looked out of my bedroom window to see a huge plume of smoke only about 20 houses away. I was dressed and on my bike and there at the scene within 2 minutes. The local Bobby was there on his own trying to keep the local villagers back.

The engine of the F-100 had ploughed a furrow across several gardens and there were Calor gas bottles exploding in the now flattened Riches garage. Very quickly the Foam tender from RAF MH arrived and put all the fires out including the houses. 45 minutes later a USAF fire engine arrived from Bentwaters but it was all out by the time he got there. Sadly, a woman working in the petrol forecourt office was killed but Mrs Riches had just gone up the garden to feed her chickens and had escaped the impact, how lucky is that.

Mr Riches apparently received compensation from the USAF for the loss of his business and house but I have no details. The pilot had ejected some where over Crown Point Martlesham and had floated down into Bealings woods. The USAF was there for weeks after searching and retrieving all the parts that were left of the F-100 Super Sabre.

The WAAF Ghost

Several of the gliding school staff had mentioned this phenomena and at least two who I can't remember their names claimed they had seen her. I never did.

Apparently, a WAAF in WW-2 uniform is sometimes seen walking always at dusk across the airfield from the direction of the old mess which was not far away and behind the control tower in the direction of the smaller hangers opposite the tower. She apparently was always at least a hundred yards away and vanished from view when she reached the other side of the airfield.

I'm told that no WAAFs were stationed at the Heath during the war which I find hard to believe. The old mess was knocked down in the 60's because of an asbestos hazard and a school now stands on its old site.

The Glider crash incident or more to the point, the glider that landed in the trees.

I was on winch duty that Sunday up at the Foxhall road end of the airfield and had launched a cadet on his first solo. We never knew at the winch end if cadets were on solo or not. It was just another launch to us winch drivers. I recon I got him to at least 1100 ft and he started his down wind leg but he seemed a tad high. A few seconds later I noticed him some where over the control tower but a lot lower then he turned away from the airfield towards the A-12 road and just disappeared. I then noticed every body either running or driving away from the launch area towards the A-12 road.

The long a short of it was he tried to lose height [when he didn't need to] by starting a 360 degree turn or at least an 'S' manoeuvre but made the fatal mistake of turning away from the airfield too low. He came to rest in the tops of some Silver Birch trees inside the airfield and at the back of the houses in Deben Avenue. Ron Page was one of the first to arrive at the crash site to find the cadet standing on a compost heap crying his eyes out with the glider still perched in the trees. He obviously had climbed out and was not at all injured apart from a few bruises.

The cadet told Ron he was very upset about the damaged glider. The RAF's fire tender and a field ambulance turned up and the cadet was taken off to the sick bay to be checked over. I believe he was never considered again for flying training. The glider was fairly damaged and was removed from the tree tops by RAF maintenance.

The Woman on Horse incident

One Sunday morning we were waiting for a low cloud base to rise, we had all the gliders out on the launch area but it was taking its time to lift. I was manning one of the winches along with a pal in the other winch at the Foxhall road end of the airfield. We could hardly see the launch area due to the poor visibility. We just sat there waiting.

Now I'm not sure who decided to fly and if I knew I wouldn't tell you, all I know is that it was an instructor and a cadet. The Aldis lamp started to flash take up slack for my winch. So, I launched a glider which was a cadet Mk 3. It went out of sight at about 600 Ft but I continued the launch until I felt him release. Its pretty weird launching a glider you cannot see but that's what I did.

Ironically, there was no signal given for the other winch to launch a glider so we sat once again waiting. Soon the cloud lifted but down at the launch area, they were missing one glider. I guess about 45 minutes later a woman on horse back came galloping over to the launch area to say in a very posh voice " I say have you lost a glider, its in my field in Brightwell". Landing 'out' is forbidden by cadet gliding schools not to mention flying in low cloud. A retrieval crew went out to this field in Brightwell which was about half a mile away, and wheeled the glider back by hand down the country lanes to the airfield. Both cadet and instructor were OK. I'm not at all sure what the consequences were for those concerned but I guess some one got a rocket.

The Horizontal Joggers Beat up

I was up in the T-21 with Ron Page and were around 1000 Ft altitude when Ron nudged my arm and said look there's a couple 'at it' in the middle of that corn field. The field was part of Jolly's farm and up at the Foxhall road end of the airfield. With that Ron put the T-21 into a dive and we swooped at very low level, about 20 feet over this couple who were still horizontal. Now a glider at speed whistles like mad and this had the desired effect because as we pulled up from our swoop into a stall turn we could see two people sit up half naked shaking their fists at us. To add insult to injury, Ron let out one of his famous Harry Secombe laughs which they no doubt heard.

In the early 60's the grass alongside the runway on the control tower side was dug up to make a dirt landing strip for the HS 748 [Andover] rough landing trials. The gliding school had to abandon its hanger and squadron hut and move to the other side of the runway where the RAF had provided one of its smaller hangers for our use.

In 1961 I moved to London with my parents and in 1962 Ron's civilian job had moved him near RAF Henlow Bedfordshire where he joined 616 GS Henlow as an instructor. Just under a year later Ron's job moved him back to the Ipswich area but by this time 612 Gliding School had closed and the gliders, winches etc. returned to the RAF's inventory. Over time the RAF started selling off a lot of the older gliders to private buyers. This was due to a modernisation program where the air cadets were equipped with more up to date gliders which included the new self launching gliders.

One such private sale was WT-911 which ended up in East Lothian and was last heard of in 2004 waiting to be converted to a motorised glider with the registration G-BODG.

My latest information is that it went out to the USA sometime after 2004 but I'm not sure where or if it was converted or not before it went.

By September 1963 Ron had been given promotion as CO in charge of 611 gliding school at RAF Swanton Morley where he served as CO for over 25 years. During Ron's time at Swanton Morley he was visited by Douglas Bader one weekend and Ron gave Bader 3 training flights in a glider and then sent him solo.

You won't believe this but Ron was given a good sorting out by the 'brass' for letting a civilian fly in an RAF aircraft. When Ron retired he was the longest serving VTR Officer in the UK having gained his commission in 1946. He was awarded the MBE and now lives in retirement in Woodbridge Suffolk.

When RAF Swanton Morley closed 611 moved to RAF Watton in Norfolk [now army] and are still active today flying the 'Viking' gliders. Some time later, I'm not sure of the time span, the old 612 gliding school was re established at RAF Abingdon Oxfordshire where they fly the 'Vigilant' T.1 motorised [self launching] gliders.

If there is anybody that can recall their days with 612 gliding school Martlesham Heath, please get in touch with me via the MHAS.