

RAF COLLEGE CRANWELL

“Pit Off Ralph Farmer No 2 CFS at Cranwell - WWII”



With many thanks to Philip Roe & Brent Thistle
for their valued inputs

In its electronic form, this document contains underlined, hypertext links to additional material, including alternative source data and archived video/audio clips.
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Introduction

From time to time, we are very fortunate to receive feedback on the albums we have created for the Cranwellian Historical Society (CHS) website, adding to information that we have discovered during our analysis of archived items and, thereby, increasing our understanding. Normally, the feedback enables us to amend or revise an existing document. On this occasion, however, we are prompted to create a new document to record a piece of RAF College history that is omitted from the College archives.

In February 2022, we were contacted by Brent Thistle, from Newfoundland. He had discovered in a family collection a photograph of Pilot Officer **Ralph Farmer**, RAFVR - his partner's grandfather. Having found the CHS site, he thought we might be interested in the photograph that shows Ralph with his cohort (No 1 Course at 2 CFS between September and October 1940) in front of the inner West Wing entrance to the RAF College. Interested? Indeed we were.

Unaware 2 CFS had been a lodger unit at Cranwell, we have attempted to redress the omission by creating this short booklet inspired by Brent, to record the exploits of fellow Cranwellian - Ralph Farmer - and the wartime and subsequent relationships between the CFS and the RAF College.

We start by reproducing an extract of Pre-WWII history of CFS, taken with our gratitude from their website: <http://www.centrflyingschool.org.uk/History/History.htm>. Thereafter, we add a tribute to Ralph Farmer, before closing with an extract on CFS history post WWII. With thanks also to Ralph Farmer's son-in-law, Philip Roe, for his contribution to this story, hoping one day that the family will be able to make a nostalgic trip to the RAF College.

Though the information is limited, we know it will be of interest to the CHS community and trust it pays a worthy tribute to yet another Cranwellian who gave so much in the service of his country. The moving letter from his wife that inspired Brent to start his research is commended to your reading. *Lest we forget.*

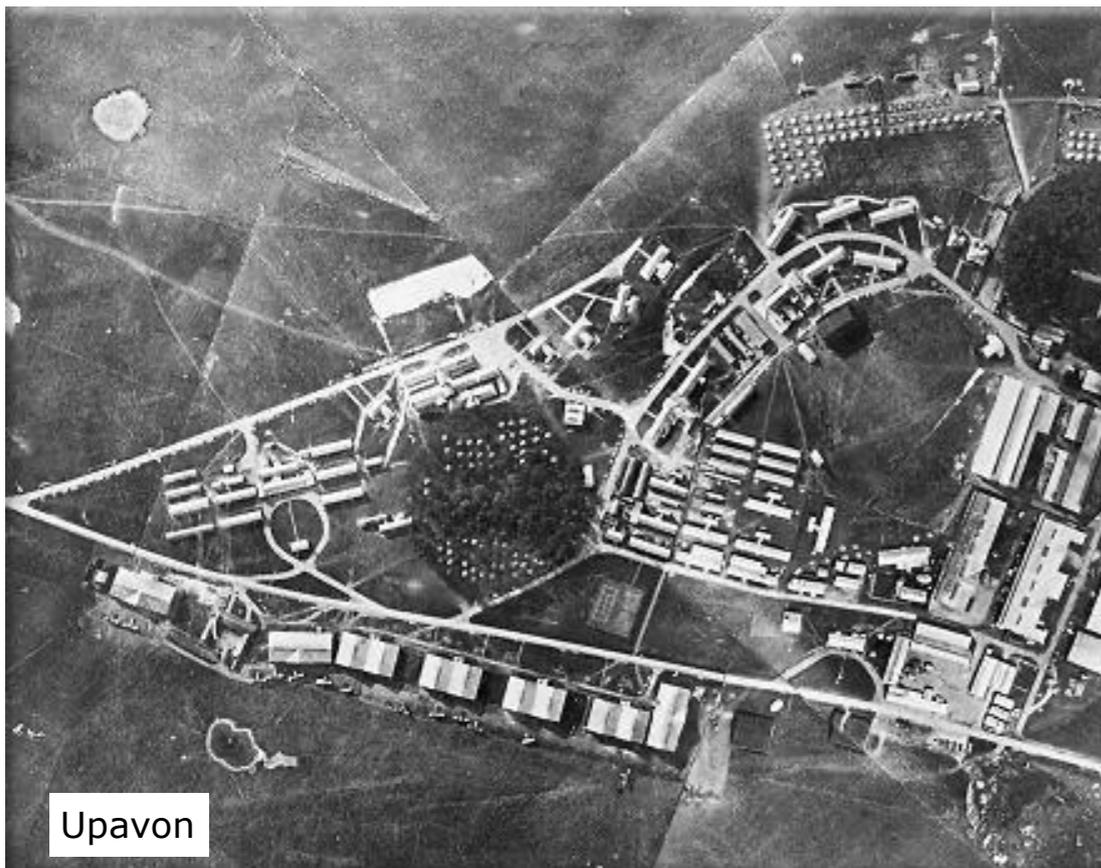


Central Flying School (CFS) - Pre-WWII

Extracts taken, with thanks, from the CHS website <http://www.centralflyingschool.org.uk/History/History.htm>

The Arms symbolize the origin and work of CFS.
The pelican represents a seat of learning, the Crown and Tower the Schools military genesis, the pilot's brevet, the anchor and caduceus, the three services. The white and blue wavy lines serve as a reminder of the original site of the CFS which was close to the banks of the River Avon.
The motto can be interpreted to mean "Our Teaching is Everlasting".

CFS was formed at Upavon in Wiltshire on 12 May 1912. The primary aim was not to produce aviators as such, but professional war pilots. This was to be achieved by accepting for advanced training only men who already held a Royal Aero Club Certificate, although they were offered a refund of part of their expenses incurred in private tuition. Having obtained their Pilots Certificates in order to qualify for the course, the students were taught to fly all types of aircraft available at the school. The inventory then consisted of Maurice Farmans, Henri Farmans, Shorts, Avros and Bristol Bi-planes. No 1 course was completed on 5 December 1912 and graduates could carry out short cross-country flights and local flights of 20 to 30 minutes, at heights around 1500 feet. The ground training syllabus included theory of flight, map reading, strength of materials, military and naval aviation history, hints on flying and practical work on Gnome and Renault engines and aircraft repair. The standard for a pass was 50% in each subject and 60% overall. One of the successful students on this first course was Major Hugh Trenchard, who later became founder of the RAF, the RAF College, RAF Apprentice School Halton and RAF Staff College (also of Upavon).



Upavon



Maurice Farmans Aircraft



Henri Farmans Aircraft



CFS Engine Shop January 1913



CFS Repair Shop January 1913

As a result of a reorganisation in 1926, CFS moved from RAF Upavon to RAF Wittering and in 1931 became one of the first Royal Air Force units to receive its own armorial bearings. By 1934 the international situation had deteriorated to such an extent that Mr Ramsey MacDonald, the Prime Minister, announced a new expansion programme for the Services. CFS was again enlarged and became a unit within Flying Training Command and moved back to RAF Upavon in 1935. With powerful and modern aircraft coming into service and squadrons re-equipping rapidly, a new role for CFS began to develop. Careful conversion training was necessary during the transition from comparatively slow bi-planes to the new generation of Hurricanes and Spitfires and standard publications explaining the handling characteristics of the new machines required.



Central Flying School (CFS) - WWII

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It was in this form, carrying on the high rate of production of Qualified Flying Instructors (QFIs) and testing new aircraft, that CFS entered the War. The first QFI course of the war, which began on 18 September 1939, was reduced from 9 weeks to 4 weeks and RAFVR uniforms began to appear as full mobilisation took place. The Refresher Squadron began to receive an assortment of pilots from all backgrounds who had volunteered for the newly formed Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA), which was to relieve the pilot shortage by ferrying aircraft from the factory to the squadron. The ATA became locally constructed as 'Ancient and Tattered Airmen' when elderly and bald pilots, young pilots and not particularly fit pilots, some with only one eye or arm, arrived. But by no means all the ATA pilots were of these categories. Early in 1940, there arrived at CFS some young ladies who were far from ancient and tattered. Some were old hands like Amy Johnson and Winifred Crossley, who had given aerobatic displays with Alan Cobham's Circus, but at least one, Jean Hughes, was only 17 years old and almost certainly the youngest pilot ever to pass through CFS.

In the 12 months before September 1939, the fighter defences of Britain had improved from a force of about 600 aircraft of which all but about 90 were obsolescent bi-planes, to one of 35 squadrons of which 22 were equipped with the Hurricane and Spitfire; these were to increase to 38 within another 6 months. CFS played its part in this expansion by writing Pilots Notes for the new types but it became obvious that the efforts were on too small a scale. There was a lack of uniformity in handling techniques and furthermore, the new aircraft were not giving the increased fighting power and efficiency that had been hoped for, because they were not being flown to best advantage. To overcome this the Air Ministry introduced the 'Examining Officers Scheme' that established a flight of 8 experienced officers to maintain liaison between CFS and the operational squadrons and to instruct the latter in up-to-the minute techniques.

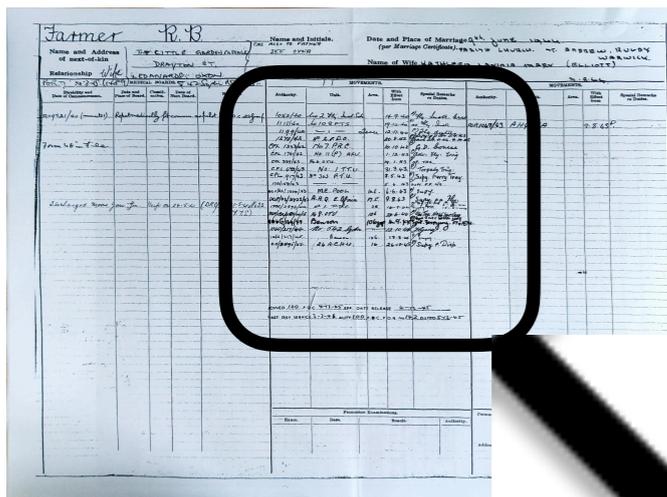


Twice in 1940 the intake of pupils was increased and by the end of the year 90 pupils were accepted in each 5 week period. The examining officers had by now been absorbed into the Refresher Squadron and continued their duties worldwide. Some of today's familiar procedures can be traced back to this period.

CFS became much like any of the other flying instructor schools and the Air Ministry felt the need for a 'training conference in permanent session'. Thus, in 1942, a new unit was formed, the Empire Central Flying School (ECFS), at RAF Hullavington under the command of Group Captain Down. ECFS took many of the staff from RAF Upavon, but left behind sufficient to form the nucleus of No 7 Flying Instructors' School. The ECFS was intended to draw the wide experience of the course members into a common pool for the benefit of all the training schools. Handling Squadron was responsible for preparing Pilots Notes for all new types of aircraft coming into Service and for advice on aircraft handling.

Nowhere in this account is there reference to a No 2 CFS located at RAF Cranwell, but there was!

Ralph Farmer - Service Record



According to Brent, Ralph Farmer had been a Sergeant pilot since 1937, went on to be a flying instructor at 10 SFTS Tern Hill, which later became 32 SFTS Moose Jaw as part of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCAPT), a joint military aircrew training program created by the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand during the Second World War.

In a later email, Brent provided a snapshot of Ralph Farmer's service record (expanded below), which lists 2 CFS as "No 2 Flying Instructor School" and tracks Ralph's career through 10 SFTS, No 2 Personnel Despatch Centre Wilmslow, 7 Personnel Reception Centre Market Harborough, No 1 (Pilot) Advanced Flying Unit, 6 OTU Sutton Bridge, 1 Torpedo Training Unit Turnberry, 303 Ferry Training Unit Stornaway, Middle East Pool, AFQ East Africa, 1 Personnel Despatch Centre Uxbridge, 8 OTU Fraserborough, RAF Benson (twice), either side of 542 Sqn at Benson, and 24 Aircrew Holding Unit prior to discharge on 3 March 1946. The underlined units above contain [hypertext links](#) which you can click on to gain extra information of interest.



**Sgt Ralph Farmer
NCO Aircrew ahead of 2 CFS**

1052/40	No 2 Fly. Instr. Sch	14.9.40	P Fly. Instr. Grad			
1118/40	No 10 S.F.T.S.	19.10.40	P as Fly. Instr	POR 1067/43	AHQ EA	9.8.45 P.
1199/40	— — — — —	12.11.40	P Fly. duty			
1278/42	No 2 P.D.C.	20.8.42	P Supy. P.D.C. 11.4.42			
CPL 1353/42	No 7 P.R.C.	10.10.42	G.D. course			
CPL 1701/42	No 11 (P) AFU	1.12.42	Adv. Fly. Ling			
CPL 339/43	No 6 O.T.U.	19.1.43	OP. TRG			
C.P.L. 672/43	No 1 T.T.U.	31.3.43	Torpedo Trng.			
CPL 917/43	No 303 F.T.U.	8.5.43	Supy. Ferry Trng.			
176/158/43	5.6.43	supy. P.P. of/s			
DC/EC/1404/43	M.E. POOL	M.E. 6.6.43	Supy.			
DCP/05/3192/43	A.H.Q. E. Africa	M.E. 9.8.43	Supy. P.P. Fly.			
EPDC/2596/44	No 1 P.D.C.	28. 14.5.44	Supy. P.P. 15-6-44			
760/120/485/44/5	No 8 OTU	106 28.6.44	Ops Trng. Hold Sp. Trng.			
1066/164/44	Benson	106 28.9.44	Spit. Ferrying. FT & ADM.			
1066/217/44	No 542 Sqn	11 12.10.44	Flying			
1066/217/45	Benson	106 28.8.45	P Supy.			
EC/8895/45	24 A.C.H.U.	16 26.10.45	Supy. P. Disb			

JOINED 1.00 P.D.C. 4-12-45 EFF. DATE RELEASE 4-12-45
 LAST DAY SERVICE 3-3-46. AUTY 1.00 P.D.C. P.O.R. No 142 DATED 5-12-45

Ralph Farmer - 10 & 32 SFTS



Ralph with R MacAuley and Batway
at 32 SFTS Moose Jaw
with a Havard in the background.

On completion of his course at CFS Cranwell, Ralph was posted as a QFI to 10 SFTS at RAF Ternhill on 19 October 1940, just a month before it was disbanded and reformed as 32 SFTS Moose Jaw, Canada.

The declaration of World War II saw the Moose Jaw Flying Club initially contracted to provide pilot training for the Royal Canadian Air Force; however this was soon replaced by the far larger British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (BCATP) which saw the Government of Canada acquire the aerodrome and completely reconstruct it into **RCAF Station Moose Jaw** in 1940 with the new aerodrome opening in 1941.

Initially the RAF trained exclusively at the base under the RAF's 32 SFTS, using Harvards, and later, Oxfords.

32 SFTS eventually broadened its intake to train 1,200 pilots for the air forces of:

Canada;

United Kingdom;

Norway;

New Zealand;

Poland;

France;

Czechoslovakia;

Belgium;

United States;

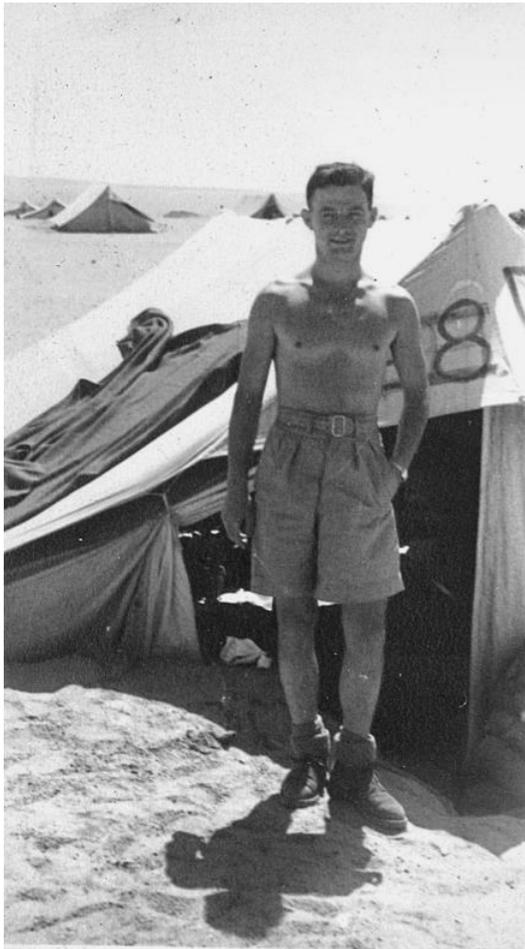
Netherlands.

Ralph Farmer - 1 Torpedo Training Unit



On returning from his QFI tour of duty at 32 SFTS Moose Jaw, Ralph Farmer moved to a series of GD Training units (7 PRC, 1 (P) AFU, 6 OTU, 1 TTU and 303 FTU), before moving to Middle East Command an ops in East Africa. The photograph above is believed to be of him as a QFI at 1 TTU. The only information we have found on the TTU - [click on underlined link in the title above](#) - suggests that they were flying Wellingtons and that the brother of Sir Bruce Forsyth was killed at the time Ralph was at the TTU.

Ralph Farmer - 259 Sqn East Africa 1943-44



According to his service record, Ralph entered the "Middle East Pool" of resources in June 1943, preparing for his posting to East Africa.

Brent is able to confirm that he was in fact posted to 259 Sqn where he flew Catalina aircraft in East Africa.

According to Wikipedia, this must have been when the Sqn was flying "anti-submarine patrols over the Indian Ocean equipped with Catalinas".

The photos are of Ralph in East Africa with 259 Sqn, one in his flying gear, when he was flying Catalinas (a restored example in USAF colours also pictured and you can click on the graphic to see a video of the aircraft).



Here is a PBY from Ralph Farmer's collection when in East Africa with 259 Sqn.

(Clicking on the photo reveals a video of a restored Catalina PBY)

Ralph Farmer - Tangling with the Enemy

15-12-44 F/L FARMER DOCKS AT AMSTERDAM, ROTTERDAM, IJMUIDEN ETC
 PL886 ROCKET SIGHTS ON DUTCH COAST

Amsterdam cloud covered, Rotterdam partially obscured by cirrus
 + then spc lost some photos taken. Got photos of some of the rocket
 sights but when taking IJmuiden - was intercepted by 190. So
 returned home safe.



Now a Flt Lt, Ralph Farmer was flying a PR mission over Rotterdam in Spitfire PRXI PL886 on 15 December 44.

The above entry in his log book suggests that cloud covered Amsterdam and Rotterdam was partly obscured by Cirrus clouds. That said, he managed to take some photos, including some of the rocket launching sites, but was bounced at IJmuiden by an FW 190 (an video example of which is shown to above right). PR Spitfires carried no weapons and, carrying only light-weight cameras, relied on their superior speed to avoid being shot down.

Prudence being the better part of valour and exploiting his aircraft's speed advantage, he avoided combat and returned home.

Spitfire PL886

Stats:
 model: PRXI
 factory: ALD
 engine: M70

History:
 6MU 8-7-44 Benson 5-9-44 542S 9-9-44 SOC 23-8-45

* for acronyms please see [Spitfire Production](#)

Pilots:

Name	Date	Rank	Status
Nichol K J H	1944-09-13	P/O	ok
Sturrock I W	1944-09-16	F/L	ok
Lopes D H P	1944-09-17	P/O	ok
Graham A R	1944-10-01	F/O	ok
Reeves H	1944-10-02	F/O	ok
Durbridge K	1944-10-03	F/O	ok
Raby R K	1944-10-06	F/L	ok
Ibbotson J D	1944-10-07	F/O	ok
Brace A H	1944-10-12	F/Sgt	ok
Dixon J H	1944-10-28	P/O	ok
Farmer R B	1944-11-10	F/L	ok
Deighton J A D	1944-11-21	F/O	ok
Fripp J H	1944-11-26	F/L	ok
Clark D J D	1944-12-05	F/L	ok
Roberts L G	1944-12-24	F/O	kia
Lowe J	1945-01-05	F/O	ok
Tardif C A	1945-02-09	P/O	ok
Fray F G	1945-03-15	F/O	ok
Beamish C E S J	1945-03-23	G/C	ok

FARMER, Ralph Bernard

Stats:
 rank: F/L
 status: survived
 airforce: RAF (no: 85253)
 born: 1919-12-26 Rugby United Kingdom

added by: [Kevin Charles](#)

Bio / Text:
 Ralph Bernard FARMER

Flying Instructor 10 SFTS Tern Hill to 32 SFTS Moose Jaw (BCATP)
 Instructor No 1 Torpedo Training School
 259 Squadron flying Catalina
 542 Squadron pilot - photo recon spitfire

Squadrons:

Airforce	Sqdrn	Date
RAF	542	1944-10-29
RAF	10 SFTS Tern Hill	1940-10-19
RAF	32 SFTS(BCATP)	1940-11-01

Aircraft:

Serial	Note	Date
PA948	542	1944-10-29
PL886	542	1944-11-10
PL785	542	1944-11-16
PL921	542	1944-11-26
PL908	542	1944-12-31
PL910	542	1945-02-14
SR396	542	1945-02-17
PL896	542	1945-02-24
PL963	542	1945-02-25
PM149	542	1945-03-12
PL825	542	1945-04-15
PM127	542	1945-04-17

Courtesy of allspitfirepilots.org - click on the graphics and headings above for more on Ralph

Ralph Farmer - A Word from the Boss

The letter below is where Brent Thistle's research started - an account typed by Ralph Farmer's wife, before any service records were requested

Page 1 of 3
He R.A.F. Volunteer Reserve when he was 18 yrs. He started his training as a pilot at Ansty Aerodrome, flying on Tiger Moths, evenings and weekends on Tiger Moths. When the 2nd World War started soon afterwards in 1939, he was requested to go to Hastings, Sussex for Physical training, staying at the 'Alexandra Hotel' which had been taken over by the R.A.F. Several months were spent there marching along the Promenade, doing all kinds of P.T. even horse riding. He was then posted to R.A.F. Cranfield, Beds: where he became a qualified pilot, getting his wings. From being a Sgt. Pilot he was Commissioned and became a Pilot Officer. He was posted to R.A.F. Haverfordwest flying Wellington Bombers and then selected to be trained as a flying instructor on the No.1 (War) course, Sept/Oct. 1940. at the Central Flying School, CRANWELL. He was then posted to Moosejaw, Saskatchewan, Canada, one of the first Empire Training Schools, training pilots to fly Harvards. After 2 years out there, and making many requests for a home posting, he was posted to R.A.F. Turnberry, Scotland, and with a Canadian crew flew Sunderlands training to drop torpedos on Enemy submarines, ships which they had to look for.



The next posting was out to the Middle East, based in Aden, Cairo, Dar-es-Salaam, Mineopolis, Mauritius, Mombasa, Manzibar, Durban, flying Catalina's (flying boats) over the Indian Ocean, searching for enemy craft. After a year or so, he returned to England and asked to be put on light aircraft. Whilst in Canada, skiing, he injured his knee and had to have the cartilage removed, so a lighter aircraft was preferable. He was posted to Dyce R.A.F. station, nr. Aberdeen, Scotland for training on Spitfires and then onto Active Service to R.A.F. Benson, Oxfordshire, on high altitude photographic reconnaissance. This meant a very early A.M. 'take-off' so as to arrive over the designated spot in Europe which our planes had dropped their bombs during the night. He had to go in very low over the target to obtain the photos of the damage so that they could be assessed on return, it was impossible for the pilot of the Spitfire to bale out as the camera equipment took all space, and although flying at great height during the flight to the target, enemy aircraft and their guns, claimed many of our pilots lives. How brave all these very young men were! Pona's best friend - a pilot on Wellington bombers, was shot down in the first year, also two of his cousins. I am quite sure that I have omitted many things of interest, but I haven't anyone to ask.



And Keeping It In The Family



These are Ralph Farmer's wings from 32 SFTS Moose Jaw that his wife gifted to granddaughter, Nicola (below), when she gained her pilot's licence.



A son-in-law of Ralph's, Roger Penney is seen here with his two daughters Nicola and Victoria, both of whom gained their wings through the Royal Canadian Air Cadet program inspired by grandfather (Ralph) and father (Roger).



Here is granddaughter Nicola again after being soaked upon return from her first solo flight at CFB Gander.



Central Flying School (CFS) - Epilogue

Extracts taken, with thanks, from the CHS website <http://www.centralflyingschool.org.uk/History/History.htm>

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ECFS was renamed the Empire Flying School and continued in existence for a few years before being disbanded. The nucleus of the staff was transferred to RAF Manby in Lincolnshire to open the Flying College. Manby later became the home of the College of Air Warfare, part of which was the School of Refresher Flying in 1946.

The Central Flying School opened again in 1946 at RAF Little Rissington and during the severe winter of 1946 - 1947, Little Rissington was cut-off from the outside world by blizzards. After two days of digging, contact was re-established with the outside world in the shape of the Old New Inn at Bourton-on-the-Water, which was to become a second home for generations of QFIs.

In 1948, the CFS task was to turn out 240 QFIs per year and this was increased by the end of the year to 360. Flying took place on the Tiger Moth, Harvard, Mosquito, Lancaster, Spitfire and one hour on the Vampire was included in the course, to give some jet experience. At this time, RAF South Cerney was opened for the basic phase of the CFS Course. The Empire Flying School disbanded in 1949 and the Examining Squadron rejoined CFS. In response to Government calls for further economy, South Cerney was closed for about a year, the course was shortened and type flying was limited to the Meteor. The following year the Korean War broke out, the commitment rose to 750 students per year and South Cerney was re-opened.

In the early 1950s, the first Chipmunks in RAF service were flown by the Oxford University Air Squadron; thereafter, the type replaced the Tiger Moth with all 17 University Air Squadrons, as well as equipping CFS and many RAFVR flying schools. The RAF received a total of 735 Chipmunks which were manufactured in the UK.

RAF flying training became a two-stage scheme in 1953, using the Piston Provost and the Vampire and the following year RAF Little Rissington became CFS (Advanced) and RAF South Cerney became CFS (Basic). The same year the Helicopter Development Flight was formed with 2 Dragonfly helicopters at RAF Middle Wallop and later moved to RAF South Cerney. In 1954, the first RAF Jet Provost students commenced basic training. Their instructors were experienced QFIs who had been previously converted to type. The first CFS course to graduate Jet Provost QFIs was No 199 Course; they left CFS in November 1959. In the same year, the CFS helicopters took the public eye when they formed part of the winning RAF team in the London-Paris Air Race. In 1976 the long stay at Little Rissington ended.

In 1976 CFS Headquarters, Groundschool and the Jet Provost Sqns moved to Cranwell - almost full circle (?) - where Examining Wing was expanded by the formation of Rear Crew Squadron, the first time that the Central Flying School included aircrew other than pilots on its staff. The Bulldogs moved to RAF Leeming in North Yorkshire and the Gnats moved from RAF Kemble to RAF Valley on Anglesey. However, this disposition was not to last for long and, by November 1977, the packing cases were out again and the Headquarters, Groundschool and Jet Provosts moved up to RAF Leeming to join the Bulldogs. The CFS Helicopter Squadron was also on the move over this period, being transferred to RAF Shawbury in Shropshire when RAF Tern Hill was closed.

Today, the CFS is based at Cranwell as part of 22 Group, but a Defence asset; CFS delivers, develops and assures excellence in aircrew instruction across a broad spectrum of organisations. CFS personnel are a mixture of tri-service regulars and reservists, and civil servants who provide a broad portfolio of experience. CFS comprises a small HQ, Exam Wing and Development & Delivery (D&D) Wing. The unit's HQ is at RAF Cranwell, but CFS Examiners are also based at Valley, Shawbury and Syerston .