

THE RAF IN ARIZONA
FALCON FIELD
1941-1945



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While I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of all of the above individuals and organizations, I take full responsibility for any errors, omissions, or lapses in sanity.

PHOTO CREDITS

Falcon's most active photographers were David Thiele, Ray Shelton, and Cy Cartwright. Thiele and Shelton were Southwest Airways flight instructors, and Cartwright was the United States Army photographer assigned to Falcon Field. Some photographs may be the work of Southwest executive John Swope or company photographer Clarence Cozby. Other photographs were taken by shutter-bug cadets. The photographer's name, when known, accompanies the photograph.

ABOUT THE COVER

"Gas on, switches off, throttle closed and cracked — contact. J. T. Anderson at the controls" reads the original caption for our cover photograph as it appeared in the photograph album of British cadet Leading Aircraftman George Peter Alexandra of Course 7, No. 4 British Flying Training School, Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona.

No one who researches military history can escape the realization that war is certainly hell on earth and that good people die, but some researchers may be able to keep an emotional distance from the lives they study. I apparently can not — did not. Such was especially the case with John T. Anderson and George Peter Alexandra, known as Peter to the family who loved him.

During a drive through Mesa with World War II historian Steve Hoza, I asked Steve for his thoughts on including the names of each cadet and as much information as I could find of their World War II activities. Steve, who specializes in personal histories and who is the author of the book *First-Person Accounts of German Prisoners of War in Arizona*, thought for a moment and then said words like "hard work" and "rewarding," but cautioned, "You'll get involved."

I knew that Peter Alexandra had been killed in the war. Steve had told me as much and gave me the address of Peter's brother. Mike Alexandra provided photographs, his brother's flight log, and his letters home. Whether or not I intended to, I got to know and like George Peter Alexandra. Peter graduated with Course 7 and was commissioned on August 1, 1942. He flew every heavy bomber in the British arsenal, and on November 2, 1944, he was assigned to a 170 Squadron Lancaster crew. He flew as pilot on the night of February 3, 1945, for a bombing mission from Hemswell, England, to Bottrop, Germany. The last entry in his flight log — brutally compelling in its chilling simplicity and written in the hand of his wing commander — "Missing." His Lancaster crashed at the Gelsenkirchen-Buer railway station, one of eight Lancasters lost that night. Flight Lieutenant George Peter Alexandra, RAF, is buried with his crew at the Reichswald Forest War Cemetery. He had been at war his entire adult life. He was twenty-two.

John Thomas Anderson, whose photograph graces our cover and title page, was a friend of Peter Alexandra in Course 7. The moment I saw his photograph I was intrigued by the image of the smiling pilot in the Boeing-Stearman PT-17, and I set out to find out what had become of Cadet Leading Aircraftman John Thomas Anderson, service number 1495454. Throughout the next year, I wished a hundred times I would find him to be a retired gentleman enjoying his life and grandchildren. That wish would not come true. Research efforts by Robert Brown, Falcon Field Association registrar, revealed that Flight Lieutenant Anderson was killed in action on October 20, 1943. He was flying as pilot of a 115 Squadron Lancaster II bomber that took off from Little Snoring Airfield at 1817 hours for a bombing mission to Leipzig, Germany. His second pilot, flying as extranumerary crew, was Flying Officer Ronald Cyril Saville Clements, Course 9, Falcon Field. Their Lancaster came down at Engersen, 12 km. east southeast of Klotze. All eight crew were killed. They are buried in the Berlin 1939-1945 War Cemetery, Brandenburg.

On our trip through Mesa when Steve Hoza had warned, "You'll get involved," I muttered something like "I know." As we pulled away from yet another Mesa traffic light, Steve seemed to smile a little and shake his head ever so slightly as if to say, "No, you don't. Not yet anyway." Of the fifty-two British cadets in Course 7, twenty-four did not survive the war — and Steve was right. I did get involved. At first, I wanted to tell a story. Now, I want that story told and remembered.

FOREWORD

Prior to 1997, I did not know that thousands of RAF pilots earned their wings at privately owned airfields in the United States or that the flying schools established at those airfields were presided over by British commanding officers.

In early 1997, I was busy teaching and promoting my book on Japanese military swords when a fellow teacher named L. P. Overstreet asked about the book. Guessing L. P. to be in his seventies, I asked him what he did in the war. He replied that he was a mechanic at an air base in Arizona where British pilots were trained. Would I like to see some photographs? The fuse was lighted. Over the next few weeks, L. P. kept me enthralled with fascinating stories about civilian barnstormers who taught RAF cadets to fly American airplanes. In his forty-five year aviation career, L. P. went from the mechanic's shop to airline management, but he never relinquished his beloved mechanics credentials. Fifty-five years after leaving Falcon, he still knew the correct bolt size to use when attaching the wings of the advanced training aircraft used at Falcon, the North American AT-6 "Texan" — "Harvard" to the Brits. Would L. P. accompany me on a trip to Arizona? Yes, he would.

L. P. and I made the trip in June 1997. We visited Falcon and the grave sites of the twenty-three British cadets killed there. I read their names and photographed the markers. We talked with present-day Falcon Field administrators and visited with many folks who spent the early 1940s at No. 4 British Flying Training School, Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona. Those contacts led to many, many more. Everyone who was in any way associated with Falcon Field during WWII was anxious to share information, photographs, and stories of that time in their lives.

I began corresponding with members of the Falcon Field Association of Great Britain, and with Association Registrar Robert Brown, we reconstructed the course rosters. Robert "Trigger" Brown is rightly known as "The Oracle" by fellow Association members. He knows more about WWII Falcon than anyone else. My authorship of this book does not change that fact. He also has the patience needed to spend hundreds of hours poring over Bomber Command lists and Commonwealth War Graves Commission reports and the patience needed to answer hundreds of questions from me. Surely, he had to wonder why he was helping a retired American naval officer from the southern United States write a book about RAF cadets training in the deserts of the American west. This book would not exist without Trigger Brown.

If Trigger Brown were the most important single human resource involved in this project, my wife Diane comes in a close second. In order to save her house from the stacks of files that engulfed first the computer room, then the spare bedroom, and finally the dining room table, she spent endless hours organizing materials and typesetting the book. Most importantly, she continually reminded me that our most compelling discoveries were not aircraft serial numbers or the exact dates when something or other happened — our most important discoveries were the first person accounts of many people who were involved with Falcon Field during World War II.

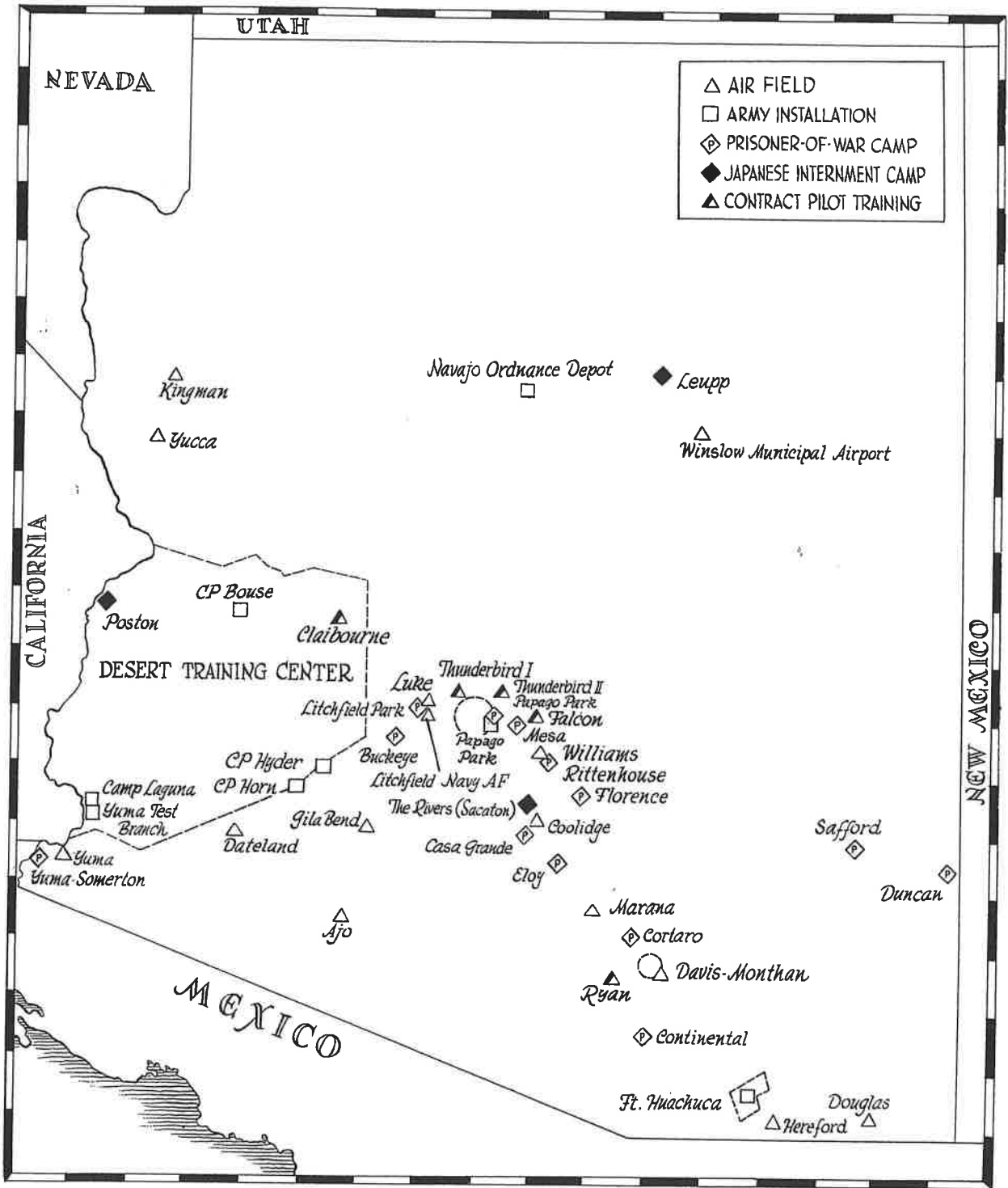
The true authors of this book are those thoughtful individuals from both sides of "the pond," the Americans and the British, who preserved that scrap of paper with the name Falcon on it, cherished that old black and white photograph, or took the time to tell their story to someone else.

For the cadets from Great Britain, Falcon was a brief respite from the war, a magical wonderland with fresh oranges, beautiful girls, and 600 hp airplanes that literally screamed over the desert sand. And then there were the two hundred automobiles that lined up at the main gate each weekend to take the cadets to private homes for fellowship and home cooked meals. Thirty-four years after the war ended, the "boys" of Falcon formed an association and held — still hold — reunions, not because they served in the same combat squadrons, but because they learned to fly at the same place, a place called Falcon Field.

Gas on, switches off, throttle closed and cracked — contact.



From the Rex Griswold Collection, Anzio Landing Restaurant, Falcon Field, courtesy of Mary Lou (Turner) Bustrin



World War II Military Installations in Arizona

From *The Arizona Republic* magazine, December 3, 1978, page 10.
Used with permission.

CHAPTER ONE

A FRIEND IN NEED

The need for the training of Royal Air Force pilots in this country is past, and all of the Royal Air Force personnel are gone. There are many officers and cadets who said they would be back, however, and when they return, those of us who have known and worked with them will be glad to see them.

The last paragraph of the last periodic *History of the 3044th United States Army Air Forces Base Unit, Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona*, dated September 11, 1945, Captain Marvin R. A. Grant, Army of the United States, commanding.

Since his arrival in September 1943, Marvin Grant had seen a thousand students come and go, and there had been a thousand before his time. Now, with all of the students — and just about everyone else — gone, he handed the last of his correspondence to Tech Sergeant Morgan.

All government property had been sorted into classes for packing, shipping tickets had been prepared, everything was packed into wooden boxes and weighed, bills of lading were prepared, and the wooden boxes were picked up by trucks and taken away from Falcon. Lieutenant Cleveland's supply department had seen to every detail.

On September 5, 1945, all forty of the Boeing Airplane Company PT-13D Stearman primary trainers had been picked up by pilots from Marana Army Air Field for storage at that base. The thirty-one North American Aviation AT-6D advanced trainers had been flown to Luke Army Air Field by pilots from Luke. Marana pilots came back on September 13 to ferry twenty-one of the twenty-five AT-6A advanced trainers to Ontario, California. All sixteen of the AT-6Cs were flown to Marana on September 16, 1945. In the next few days, two more AT-6As were picked up, and the decision was made to leave AT-6A serial number 41-16107 at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where it had been bent up a little while on a cross-country flight. It could be repaired there.¹

The hour was approaching six in the evening on Friday, September 21, and Marvin Grant was tired.² He still had no instructions on what to do with the two remaining AT-6As or his beautiful AT-7C Beechcraft, not to mention the forty Boeing-Stearman PT-17s and PT-17As that had been heavily damaged in a storm.³ Those Stearman were not exactly flying anywhere, and Captain Grant had marveled at the incredulous looks registered on the faces of the ferry pilots from Marana and Luke as they walked among the sad PTs.

¹ Capt. Marvin R. A. Grant, *History of 3044th Army Air Forces Base Unit (Primary — Advanced) and Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona (July 1, 1945 to September 11, 1945)*, pp. 15-16.

² Captain Grant and remaining U.S. Army staff were assigned a transfer date of September 11, 1945, the official closing date for No. 4 British Flying Training School, Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona, but were assigned temporary duty at Falcon until there was "no further need for him [them]." The final closing date would be October 25, 1945.

³ Grant, *History (July 1, 1945 to September 11, 1945)*, p. 16.

Destroying forty aircraft in one day had to be a record, and newcomers gaped in astonishment at them. Tonight there would be no worry about an AT-6C returning late from a cross country; no worry about past due parts holding up repairs on Number 212. In fact, no worries at all. Captain Marvin Grant had done all he could do. On the way to his car he took a detour through the AT-6 hangar. The hangar was empty. He locked the doors.

Skillfully painted above the hangar doors, the British bird of prey — the Falcon, “their bird” — was frozen in flight just seconds away from locking an unseen prey in razor sharp talons. The Falcon’s namesake had done its job and done it very well. In an experiment born of the greatest necessity, a civilian corporation used U.S. Army aircraft to train British pilots. Those boys and thousands more like them had won the war. The consequences of losing were unthinkable.

It was over, and Captain Grant went home to dinner.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. Stuka dive bombers with their terrifying whistles attacked Polish troops while heavier bombers destroyed fortifications and industrial plants. German tanks, followed by infantry, raced across Poland. The German *Blitzkrieg* faced heroic but futile resistance. Britain’s Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain had pledged that Britain would support Poland if Poland resisted a German attack. Two days after the invasion of Poland, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Hitler’s ferocious 1940 aerial attack on Britain, known as the “Battle of Britain,” and Germany’s naval blockade were designed to weaken Britain prior to “Operation Sea Lion,” Germany’s planned invasion of Britain. A frantic fight for survival occupied the British in 1940. Squadron Leader R. S. “Stuart” Mills, who would later be sent to the United States to help establish British flying training schools, summarized the desperate situation facing the Royal Air Force, “Following the Battle of Britain and the operations against the Germans, all the RAF Commands were suffering heavy losses, and these losses could not be replaced through the existing training organization due to a shortage of training aircraft, suitable training airfields, and instructional staff.”⁴

On May 10, 1940, King George VI had asked Winston Churchill to form a new government, and Churchill’s staff immediately began wrestling with the problem of how to train enough new pilots. In America, President Roosevelt believed that the United States would inevitably be drawn into the war, and he also recognized the desperate need Britain had for trained pilots. He and his staff began to investigate ways to bypass the usual bureaucratic red tape and to provide solutions even though, at the time, America was neutral and Congress was embroiled in debate over “isolationist” policy.

⁴ Group Captain R. S. “Stuart” Mills DFC, “How it all Began,” *The Falcon* (a Reunion booklet of the Falcon Field Association of Great Britain), 1984, pp. 4-5. On December 30, 1940, Squadron Leader Mills was posted to Washington, D.C., on temporary duty, and on February 4, 1941, he was named Assistant Air Attache, Washington. (Service record of Group Captain R. S. Mills, file 302468/36, RAF record of service, Records, Innsworth, Gloucester, England). His orders were to help select fields and supervise the training of British airmen in the United States. He crossed the United States evaluating base locations in California, Arizona, Texas, Oklahoma, and Florida.

Meanwhile, young men and boys in Great Britain were watching the war unfold and dreaming of flying Hurricanes and Spitfires against the German Luftwaffe. One of these young men was William Earnest John "Bill" Bishop who would later earn his wings at No. 4 British Flying Training School (No. 4 BFTS), Falcon Field, Mesa, Arizona.

"The war came and I found myself in a 'Reserved Occupation' [building airplanes at the Bristol Aeroplane Company]. I tried to join the Tanks, but was told I was too old. I had a go at an anti-aircraft unit, but was told that I was too young. I joined the shortest queue at a main recruiting centre in Bristol, but found (after a wait of about three hours), that I was in the queue for conscientious objectors. Momentarily I considered the amount of time I had spent queuing and considered what my objection might be, but decided to call it a day. The tribunal clearly assumed that I had changed my mind. They were right, but for the wrong reasons.

"Air raids on Bristol in 1940 caused me to review my options and it became clear that if I wanted to get into the services the only one open to me would be the Royal Air Force as aircrew, although I was somewhat worried whether I would meet the high standards of fitness required. I therefore volunteered to join as aircrew, which was the only category of service which would enable me to obtain my release from the 'reserved occupation'. . . .

"After a very considerable lapse of time I was called to No. 5 Aviation Candidates Medical board at Weston-super-Mare on 16 October 1941 where I spent two days being assessed. I heard from them shortly afterwards advising me that I had been medically examined and found fit for Pilot, W. Op/AG [Wireless Operator/Air Gunner] or Obs (Radio) but not as Observer. I also received a slip stating my service number trade as AC2/Pilot and giving me a service number (1586166) and advising me that, in the meantime, I would remain on the Reserve with no pay or allowances. Well, I was still working at the Bristol Aeroplane Company!

"The certified copy of attestation stated that if it were found that you had knowingly or wilfully made a false answer to any of the questions you would be liable, under the Air Force Act, to a maximum punishment of two years imprisonment with hard labour. On the other hand they stated that 'The age given by you on enlistment will be accepted as your true age'; so one assumes you could easily be dishonest over the question of age.

"A few days later in October 1941 I received a printed letter from Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air, advising me that I was now an airman and welcoming me into the Royal Air Force. 'To have been selected for air crew training is a great distinction. The honour of the Royal Air Force is in your hands'; as I read it my chest expanded a little. . . ."⁵

Bill Bishop

⁵ *The Diary of Bill Bishop*, private manuscript compiled by William Ernest John Bishop and his wife Baroness Detta O'Cathain OBE in 1989 from the extensive diaries Bill kept during his flying career, pp. 2-3.

United States British Flying Training Schools Are Approved

While Bill Bishop waded his way through the British bureaucracy to begin his flying career, the United States and Great Britain were arranging a most unusual plan to train British pilots. Bill Bishop could never have imagined that he would someday be transported across the ocean to learn to fly in the deserts of Arizona, but the wheels were already turning to bring Bill and thousands more like him to the United States of America for training.

Group Captain D. V. "Andy" Carnegie, director of United Kingdom training, asked Air Commodore G. C. Pirie,⁶ Air Attache British Embassy, Washington, D.C., to explore the possibility of flying training in the United States. In a letter to the U.S. War Department, Air Commodore Pirie made the following observations.

"It is understood that, as a result of Mr. Harry Hopkins' ⁷ visit to England, he represented to the President that the British Air Ministry was in urgent need of additional flying training facilities and that the President directed that this requirement be sympathetically investigated by the War Department.

"Presumably as a result of this instruction, the War Department, through General Arnold⁸ most kindly offered on March 7th to the British Air Ministry, through the British Air Attache, 260 Primary training aircraft and 285 Advanced training aircraft all to be used in this country on Lend-Lease terms for the primary and advanced training of British civilian students.

"The War Department thereupon selected six of the civilian flying training schools, with which they themselves have contracts for the primary training of Army cadets, and indicated to us that they would be suitable for the training of British civilian students in aviation. On March 7th the operators of these six schools met the British Air Attache in General Arnold's office in the War Department when the proposition was formally submitted to the General."⁹

[Air Commodore Pirie uses the expression "Lend-Lease terms." On March 7, 1941, Lend-Lease was still only a U.S. House of Representatives Resolution (H.R. 1776) and not law; and respecting America's neutrality, he refers to "British civilian students" when, in actuality, everyone knew they would be RAF cadets.]

The program under which the RAF cadets would train was called the British Flying Training School (BFTS) scheme or the All-Through scheme. The name "All-Through" indicates that the three phases of flight training — called primary, basic, and advanced — would be taught at the same location, a practice unique to this program. Each phase of American Army Air Corps flight training was conducted at a different flight school. All British flying training schools would be located in the western or southern United States where year-round flying was possible.

The Lend-Lease Act of March 11, 1941, officially placed America on the Allied side. President Roosevelt could now transfer weapons, food, and equipment to any nation whose fight against the Axis aided U.S. defense. Roosevelt quipped to his staff that Lend-Lease was like helping to put out the fire in your neighbor's house before your own house caught fire and burned down.

⁶ Air Commodore Pirie would later become Air Chief Marshal Sir George C. Pirie.

⁷ Harry Hopkins, a close friend of President Roosevelt, would become director of the Lend-Lease program.

⁸ Major General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, later General of the Army, was Chief of the Army Air Corps.

⁹ Letter from Air Commodore G. C. Pirie, Air Attache, British Embassy, Washington, D.C. to Major Lawrence Higgins, Chief, Foreign Liaison Branch, General Staff, War Department, Washington, D.C., dated April 5, 1941.

In the following letter to the U.S. War Department signed just twenty days after Lend-Lease became law, Air Commodore Pirie gives his government's go-ahead for the BFTS scheme.

Air Attache',

British Embassy,

Washington, D. C.

Please quote
T-1/5/9
31st March, 1941.

Dear Major Alexander,

As a result of our talk this afternoon, I am writing to tell you that we have now received from the Treasury and Air Ministry in London authority to proceed with the six-school training scheme on the understanding that the aircraft, gasolene, oil, spares, periodical overhauls, cost of hangars and workshops can be covered under Lend-Lease terms. You mentioned this afternoon that your legal experts did not think that overhauls could be so covered, but I still hope some way may be found of meeting this requirement.

The situation now is that we are informing the operators unofficially that we have received the "go-ahead" signal and we have asked them to submit detailed estimates of their costs, both for facilities and running costs.

At our meeting with the operators on Friday afternoon we reached a provisional agreement that the charges per flying hour should be \$21.60 for Primary Trainers and \$32.70 for North American Trainers, plus \$5 an hour for Link Trainers on the understanding these were supplied to them. We are now awaiting the considered replies of the operators.

As a result of our talk with the operators on Friday afternoon, I have produced a schedule of requirements of aircraft based on the operators' ability to take in students. This is attached as Appendix "A" to this letter. Please regard it as very provisional, as the dates for the arrival of the students are still very much guesses. The requirements in aircraft do not take into account those I mentioned to you, and about which I have written to you today, for our refresher flying training schools.

Kindest regards,

Yours sincerely,



G. C. Pirie
Air Commodore
Air Attache

Major E. H. Alexander,
Office of the Chief of the Air Corps,
War Department,
Washington, D.C.

On Tuesday, April 22, 1941, Major General Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, Chief of the U.S. Army Air Corps, submitted to the War Department a detailed plan to put the BFTS program into action. The plan was approved by the Under Secretary of War on April 24. A follow-up memorandum from the War Department on April 26 cautioned that Judge Advocate General clearance was needed concerning the "legal aspects" of the matters involved. Nevertheless, the memorandum went on to state, "It is the expressed desire of the Under Secretary of War that preparations for the training involved be not delayed pending receipt of legal clearances."¹⁰ Final approval for the BFTS program came just two days later in the form of the following memorandum:

WAR DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE UNDER SECRETARY
WASHINGTON, D. C.

PC-ac
(Defense Aid)
British Flying Schools

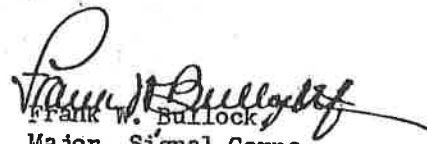
IMMEDIATE ACTION

April 28, 1941.

MEMORANDUM FOR THE CHIEF OF THE AIR CORPS:

1. Under date of April 22, 1941, a proposed plan of procedure for provision of six (6) primary-basic flying schools and one (1) "refresher" flying school for the British Government was submitted by your office, and under date of April 24, 1941, the proposed plan of procedure was approved, subject to clearance from The Judge Advocate General as to the legal aspects involved. At a meeting this date attended by representatives of the Lend-Lease Administration, the Under Secretary of War, the Quartermaster General, the Chief of Engineers, and the Chief of Air Corps, a detailed plan of procedure was evolved and the clearance from The Judge Advocate General referred to is considered unnecessary at this time. Immediate steps will be taken to carry out the detailed procedure agreed upon this date.

By direction of the Under Secretary of War:


Frank W. Bullock
Major, Signal Corps,
Assistant to the Director
of Purchases and Contracts.

¹⁰Memorandum from the War Department, Office of the Under Secretary, Washington, D.C., Frank W. Bullock, Major, Signal Corps, Assistant to the Director of Purchase and Contracts, by direction, dated April 26, 1941, paragraphs 2 and 6.

The Boys From Hollywood

Southwest Airways, Inc., was chosen to build and operate No. 4 British Flying Training School to be located in Arizona. Southwest was a corporation formed in 1940 to provide pilot training for the U.S. Army.¹¹ Their principal officers were Leland Hayward, chairman of the board; John H. "Jack" Connelly, president and general manager; John Swope, secretary and treasurer. Leland Hayward was a Hollywood film producer-director, Jack Connelly was a pilot and aircraft inspector, and John Swope was a former actor and the son of General Electric Corporation's board chairman.¹² Many Hollywood actors financed the new corporation. Principal among them was Jimmy Stewart, who believed that the United States was ill prepared for an air war and that war was imminent. He convinced other Hollywood actors, including Henry Fonda and Cary Grant, and songwriter Hoagie Carmichael to become stockholders in the new company.¹³



Air Commodore D. V. "Andy" Carnegie visits Falcon, September 1943.

Front, left to right: W. J. R. "Bill" Sims, Southwest Airways field manager for Falcon; John H. "Jack" Connelly, president and general manager of Southwest Airways; Carnegie; Leland Hayward, chairman of the board for Southwest Airways; Al Storrs, Southwest Airways director of training for Falcon.

Rear, left to right: Squadron Leader R. Edwards, ground training supervisor for Falcon; Captain Hadley B. Elikser, commanding officer of Falcon's 15th Army Air Forces Flying Training Detachment.

Photograph courtesy of Betty (Storrs) Downing

¹¹ Southwest Airways, Inc., is not the same corporation as today's Southwest Airlines.

¹² Louise DeWald, "Teaching Flyers for Fight and Profit," *The Arizona Republic*, December 3, 1978, pp. 73-74.

¹³ "Employees Ask How Come?" *The Thunderbird*, Vol. 1 No. 3 (May 1943), p. 7. This issue of *The Thunderbird*, Southwest Airways' company magazine, lists the names of thirty-one Hollywood luminaries as stockholders. Jimmy Stewart served in the United States Army Air Forces during WWII, and he frequently found time to visit Falcon. He later retired from the United States Air Force Reserves at the rank of Brigadier General.

Site Selected for No. 4 British Flying Training School

Prior to their selection to build No. 4 BFTS, Southwest had built Thunderbird Field in Glendale, Arizona, to train U.S. Army Air Corps pilots and Chinese pilots. Southwest also operated a Civil Pilot Training Program (CPTP) at its Sky Harbor air field in Phoenix. (Southwest would later build Thunderbird II to train Army Air Corps pilots, add Overhaul Division to repair Army aircraft, and launch Cargo Division which the company saw as the forerunner of its post-war airline.)¹⁴

Southwest was anxious to begin building the new air base. In early June 1941, John Connelly sent a telegram to Group Captain D. V. Carnegie describing the proposed location. As director of Royal Air Force United Kingdom training in the United States, Carnegie would coordinate such matters. On June 10, 1941, Group Captain Carnegie forwarded Connelly's comments to the U.S. War Department:

"[The site is] 4 miles north and six miles east of Mesa. The field is entirely levelled, cleared and finished and has one 3,000 gallon permanent well installed and concrete irrigation ditches around the field. The use of this site will save from \$75,000 to \$100,000. The site is designated as Section 3 of Range 6 East Township, One North. . . . Mesa has bought this land and is prepared to lease it for any number of years at a nominal sum.

"Connelly is prepared to commence building within 48 hours of receiving your approval, so I hope that you will manage to get this through."¹⁵

Southwest Airways leased the 720 acres from the city of Mesa for two dollars per acre per year,¹⁶ and building began almost immediately. The principal contractor was C. T. and W. P. Stover of Claremont, California, who entered into a cost-plus fixed fee contract with Southwest Airways. The Stover company hired architect Millard Sheets to design the facilities for the new airfield. Forty percent of the construction financing was acquired by Southwest; sixty percent, by the British Government. Effective June 30, 1942, Southwest Airways sold the buildings and permanent equipment to the Defense Plant Corporation, an instrumentality of the U.S. Government.¹⁷ Southwest Airways, now the lessee, paid \$4.50 per flying hour to rent the school facilities and \$0.75 per day per cadet to rent the barracks. Defense Plant Corporation added \$152,000 in improvements after the purchase date.¹⁸ The final accounting by the Defense Plant Corporation on October 1, 1944, shows a total expenditure of \$352,915.30. That figure included \$48,893.43 for land improvements, \$289,277.15 for buildings and structures, \$14,157.59 for machinery and equipment, and \$587.13 for "other" disbursements.¹⁹

¹⁴ All of Southwest Airways' records pertaining to their WWII training activities were lost in a hangar fire in San Francisco in the 1950's; consequently, no company records exist today. The information about Southwest's history comes from the following sources: period newspaper articles; the company magazine *The Thunderbird* published from March 1943 to July 1944; the few company records retained by former employees; and the former employees themselves.

¹⁵ Letter from D. V. Carnegie, Director of U.K. Training, Air Attache British Embassy, Washington, D.C., to Captain James Price, Training and Operations Division, U.S. Army Air Corps, War Department, Washington, D.C., dated June 10, 1941. A June 27, 1941, article in the *Mesa Journal-Tribune* reported that Mesa had purchased 720 acres from farmer Elias Habeeb for the sum of \$28,740. The article noted that if Southwest Airways did not exercise an option to buy the property, the airport would revert to Mesa control.

¹⁶ "Habeeb Property Chosen," *Mesa Journal-Tribune*, June 27, 1941.

¹⁷ *Engineer's Final Report*, Defense Plant Corporation, Plancor 1484, September 15, 1944.

¹⁸ Grant, *History (July 1, 1945 to September 11, 1945)*, p. 7.

¹⁹ *Engineer's Final Report*, Defense Plant Corporation, Plancor 1484, October 1, 1944.

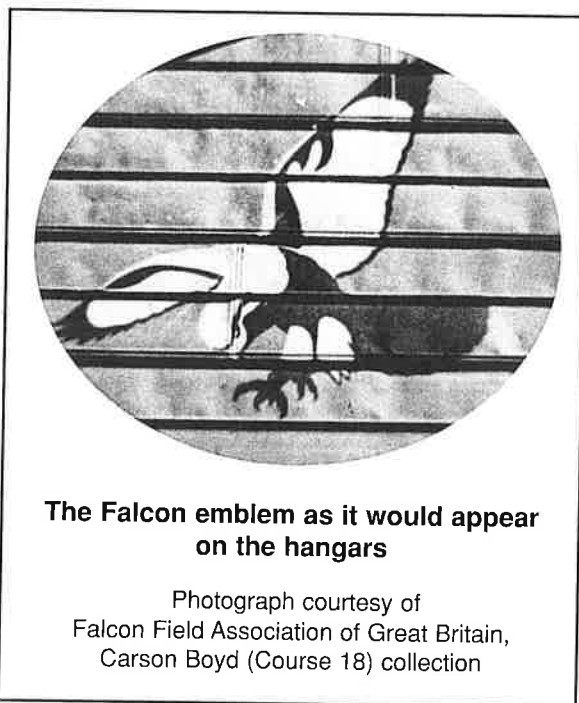
Ground breaking ceremonies were held at 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, July 16, 1941. Mesa's mayor, George N. Goodman, and Arizona's governor, Sidney P. Osborn, turned over the first shovels of dirt, actually desert sand. This ceremony, at the yet unnamed British training base, was held just one and one half hours after the same dignitaries officiated a similar ceremony at another unnamed training base thirteen miles southeast of Mesa in the community of Higley — this one to train U.S. Army aircrew.²⁰ The U.S. Army base, temporarily called the Mesa Military Airport, would become "Williams Field."²¹ The British base would become "Falcon Field."

The Name "Falcon" Selected

Southwest Airways is rumored to have wanted all of their contract training bases to carry the Thunderbird name. Because the British base was their second such operation, it would be named Thunderbird II. The British are said to have objected to the name Thunderbird II. They did not know what a thunderbird was, and whatever it was, it was not British. As the story continues, the British wanted to name the new air base Falcon Field after the British sporting bird, the peregrine falcon. At least, the falcon was a real bird, and he was "their bird."

A completely different account of the name selection appeared in the local newspaper. On July 18, 1941, the *Mesa Journal-Tribune* reported that a contest to name the field would be held by the Mesa Chamber of Commerce, an organization of Mesa business owners. The contest winner would receive an airplane tour for two over the Salt River Valley.²² On August 1, 1941, the *Mesa Journal-Tribune* reported the results of the contest. The name would be "Falcon Field," and the winning entry had been submitted by E. B. Tucker, Mesa city engineer. Mr. Tucker said that he thought the name Falcon was appropriate because the Falcon is symbolic of the famous English fighting spirit and is the name of their renowned fighting and hunting bird.²³

Falcon it was, but construction crews had not waited for the name. The *Mesa Journal-Tribune* of August 7, 1941, reported that construction was well under way, workmen were progressing rapidly on concrete footings and floors, and two carloads of materials had arrived for the big buildings.²⁴ With paved runways not yet a reality, the Arizona desert sand welcomed visitors who flew in for inspections and meetings. Southwest Airways' John Swope claimed the honor of being first to land at Falcon.²⁵



The Falcon emblem as it would appear on the hangars

Photograph courtesy of
Falcon Field Association of Great Britain,
Carson Boyd (Course 18) collection

²⁰ "Ground is Broken for Two Airports," *Mesa Journal-Tribune*, July 18, 1941.

²¹ "Higley Field Gets New Name," *Arizona Republic*, January 23, 1942.

²² "Mesa to Have Chance to Pick Name for Field," *Mesa Journal-Tribune*, July 18, 1941.

²³ "English Air Men Coming," *Mesa Journal-Tribune*, August 1, 1941.

²⁴ "Work Starts on Buildings at Falcon Field," *Mesa Journal-Tribune*, August 7, 1941.

²⁵ "First Plane on Falcon Field," *Mesa Journal-Tribune*, September 5, 1941.



A total of twenty-seven classes (called "courses" by the British) attended the No. 4 British Flying Training School in Mesa, Arizona. In this photograph, RAF cadets of Course 13 arrive at the Mesa train station in November 1942.

Photograph courtesy of
Falcon Field Association of Great Britain,
Dennis A. Bedbrook (Course 12)
collection

Course 5 en route from Canada to
Arizona on the Rock Island Line

Photograph courtesy of Tom Austin
(Course 5)



CHAPTER TWO

THE ROAD TO FALCON

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Chinese proverb

The business of war permeated life in England in the 1940's. Windows were dark and covered with blackout curtains to keep the German planes from locating their targets. There were no street lights, and the headlights of cars wore cloth covers with only a small slit to emit a tiny ray of light. All street and road signs were obliterated. Everything was rationed — fourteen pence worth of meat a week, two ounces of cheese. There was little white bread, few eggs, and even less chocolate. The government controlled everything, and coupons were issued for clothes and furniture.¹

All the men were being sent to various locations for induction, examinations, and training. Queuing up was the business on everyone's mind, and queuing up was the business of life. Young men were leaving their mothers and girlfriends and were housed in temporary holding places like Heaton Park, Manchester, and Lords Cricket Ground, London.



Homes destroyed by the V-1 flying bomb, the "doodle bug"

Photograph courtesy of Jim Dalmon (Course 26)

¹ Mrs. Robert Hugh Brown, interview with Diane Dawson on March 4, 1999.

Many young men were boarded on ships to cross the dangerous north Atlantic in military convoys flanked by destroyers. German submarines patrolled these waters, and a constant vigil was held to avoid their torpedoes. The young men did not know what to expect or where they were going — only that their voyage was the latest step in coming closer to becoming an RAF pilot and then going to war.

They arrived in Halifax, Canada, and lights were everywhere. Lights illuminated the fir trees and the cities. Girls were wearing beautiful dresses, and the bread was actually white. There were chocolate and ice cream. Cars were everywhere. The young men boarded a train, the Rock Island Line, and crossed America. As the train pulled into Mesa, Arizona, they boarded a bus for their final destination, No. 4 British Flying Training School, Falcon Field. At Falcon, the smell of the orange blossoms was to leave a lasting impression on their minds. They had stepped through the looking glass, and now were on the other side. The war in England was a long way away, and cadet Philip Gray writes that “although they never said it out loud, their eyes carried the message — Please — don’t even try to pinch me. I don’t want to wake up!”²



Four cadets who volunteered to go from RAF Station Heaton Park, Manchester, the holding center for cadets awaiting air crew training, to help clear V-1 flying bomb damage in London in August 1944. The cadets are Noel “Micky” Moss, John Gore, and John “Jock” Russell of Course 24, and Jim Dalmon of Course 26.

Cadets began by scampering up ladders to place tarpaulins on bomb damaged roofs, but they soon became skilled at complete roof replacement according to Kenneth H. Pullan of Course 25. They could felt, batten, and tile a roof “as good as any professionals.” Initially, the V-1 doodle bugs were treated with much disdain, but after a few close shaves, the cadet roof workers learned to head for cover. Escaping danger was not an easy task when three or four cadets were perched on a London three story with just one ladder to the ground.

Photograph courtesy of Jim Dalmon

² Philip Gray, *Ghosts of Targets Past*, (London: Grub Street, 1995), p. 15. Philip Gray is a Scottish RAF cadet who trained at Falcon Field as a member of Course 16. His book details his flight training and covers his tour of duty as a Lancaster pilot. Some later courses disembarked at New York and other locations.

Thomas A. "Tom" Austin was too young to join the military services when the war broke out, but he volunteered in January 1941.

"I did get accepted to go, and they accepted you in the air force as pilot, navigator, or air gunner. Obviously, most of us wanted to be pilots.

"I got called July 1941. We had to go to Lords Cricket Ground. We assembled at Lords and then we got various tests there, and then were accommodated in recently built blocks of flats around Regents Park. We were kitted out there and then got sent to ITW (Initial Training Wing). Here we did basic concepts — signals, airmanship, physical training, all sorts of things related to the air force.

"We were there until the beginning of September when we were told we were to get some leave. We went home on leave and we were told to get some light weight underwear, which wasn't issued to us. In those days we had clothing coupons for civilians, etc., and we were given extra coupons to purchase this light-weight underwear. So we gathered we were to go to some reasonably warm country.

"We traveled [to Canada] on a French ship the *Pasteur*, actually built to take the blue ribbon of the Atlantic at the time. It took ten days to convoy to Halifax in Canada, and then from Halifax we were taken by train to Moncton, and this was the holding place. It wasn't until we got to Moncton, which was actually just being built, that we had any idea where we were finally going to end up.

"We were told to get in groups of fifty, 'get with your friends.' Some went to Texas. We were told Arizona. Naturally this conjured up pictures of cowboys and Indians. My vision of Arizona was naturally from cowboy films.

"We started out in Canada when it was their first snow fall of the year, but when we arrived in Mesa the temperature was way up in the 80's. My first impression of Arizona was the smell of the orange blossoms."³



Ralph Priest, Tom Austin and G. R. Smith of Course 5 pick oranges from the groves to the west of Falcon.

Photograph courtesy of Tom Austin

Tom Austin

Tom Austin and the other members of Falcon's early classes (called "courses" by the British) came to the United States without any previous flight training. Later in 1941 the RAF decided that some flight training should be provided for aspiring pilots so that the RAF could make informed decisions concerning the suitability of individual applicants. RAF "grading schools" were established for just that purpose. In his diary, Bill Bishop related his experience in the Initial Training Wing (ITW) and then at No. 11 Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS), a grading school near Perth, Scotland.

³ Flight Lieutenant Thomas A. Austin, interview with Diane Dawson on March 4, 1999.

"A note dated 14 March 1942 gave me the great news that I had been anticipating. I was to present myself at No. 1 Air Crew R.D. at Lords Cricket Ground, St John's Wood, London NW8. . . . So I trotted along to London and Lords Cricket Ground and found myself ensconced in a luxury block of flats, with about 36 beds to a room. . . .

"Then came the collection of uniforms, the injections, the drill sergeants and the additional medicals and eye tests. . . . We wore a white flash in our uniform hats to indicate that we were aircrew under training. I understand that certain elements of other services had indicated to the local female population that we had to wear the white flashes to show that we were being treated for venereal diseases of many kinds. Anyway, we were not interested in girls as we were already being introduced to elementary navigation. . . .

"After about three weeks, we were posted to various Initial Training Wings, where we were to spend the next twelve weeks studying Air Navigation, Meteorology, Law Administration and Hygiene, Mathematics, Aircraft Recognition and Theory of Flight, etc. . . . We had an interim examination on the ground subjects and a final exam at the end of the twelve week course. Having passed we were promoted to the dizzy heights of Leading Aircraftman (LAC) and given increased pay. . . . On arrival at the hotel. . . we were told to leave our gas-masks and go downstairs, which we did as it was a Squadron Leader who gave the orders. Once downstairs in a passage, the doors were locked at both ends and we were treated to some canisters of tear gas, just as a welcome after a long night's travel and an injunction not to leave our gas masks at any time.

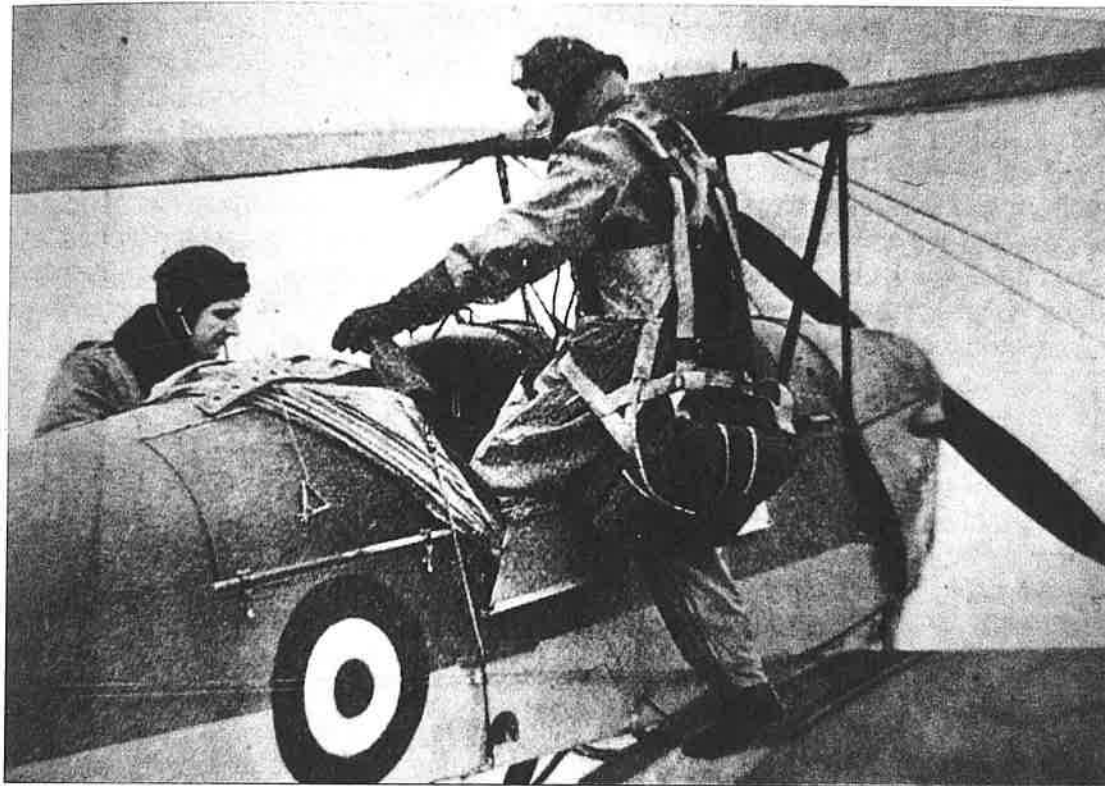
"Aeroplanes now began to loom on the horizon and the excitement was mounting. I was posted to No 11 E.F.T.S. Grading School at Scone airfield, near Perth in Scotland. My first flight was on 15 August 1942 when I flew in the DH82 (Tiger Moth),. . . after 15 minutes we landed. I was hooked. . . . At breakfast the following morning I ate a little of my highly salted Scots porridge and returned the bulk to the counter and asked for my bacon and egg. The Scots civilian lady gave me a steely look and said "you'll no have your bacon and egg until you have eaten up your porridge." So I slunk away, diminished in size. Did she not realise she had been addressing an heroic pilot, veteran of one flight; that is if you discount the 20 minute aeroplane flight I had in a Puss Moth in 1938.

"The weather at Scone during the next three weeks was foul, with high winds and low cloud, but I flew on 16, 18, 19, 22, 23, 24 and 28 August. . . . Then on 2 September I had a Solo test of 15 minutes and on the same day, and after exactly eleven hours instruction, I completed my first solo — a take-off, circuit and landing. . . . I totalled 12 hours and 20 minutes [flying] at Grading School. The die was now positively cast. I was one of the very few who had achieved solo, although the bad weather could have been largely responsible for the low number of solos. . . . I was elated that I was on the way.

"And so to Bristol on leave after Grading School, where I thought on Billy Bishop, the fighter ace of the 1914-1918 war and walked around Bristol with imaginary RAF Wings on my left breast."⁴

Bill Bishop

⁴ *The Diary of Bill Bishop*, private manuscript compiled by William Ernest John Bishop and his wife Baroness Detta O'Cathain OBE in 1989 from the extensive diaries Bill kept during his flying career, pp. 3-6.



Grading School in the United Kingdom

A British cadet climbs into an RAF elementary trainer, the de Havilland Tiger Moth.

Official photograph, courtesy of the Falcon Field Association of Great Britain

At grading school Bill Bishop had been selected to receive further pilot training. Those not selected for pilot training were trained as navigators or air bombers. Bill Bishop sailed for Canada on board the *Andes* on December 19, 1942. One year earlier, RAF cadet George Peter Alexandra described his ocean crossing aboard *His Majesties Transport Bergensfjord* in a letter to his parents:

H.M.T.
Bergensfjord
December 23, 1941

Dear Mother & Dad,

The day after sailing now but we're still in the Clyde estuary, anchored at that. The Mess is just about the nearest I ever hope to approach to the Black Hole of Calcutta and of course we are not allowed on deck during darkness, in case of lights. . . .

The ship is packed and all sorts and manner of people are on it. Standing in the foc'sle yesterday watching them when casting off, we could see more uniforms than anything else. U/t (Under training) pilots predominated but there were also a lot of naval seamen, cadets and N.C.O.s. Royal Marines looked very smart in their uniforms; they are possibly here to keep order. . . . The promenade deck is lousy with officers: a bit of gold braid from the U.S. Navy and plenty from our Navy and Air Force.