

Conrad Philip Bristow

1899 - 2001

by W A Vandersteen

In early November 2001 Conrad Philip Bristow died just two weeks short of his 102nd birthday. He was the last surviving RNAS pilot in Britain. There is believed to be one other surviving pilot living in Canada.

Philip Bristow had been interested in aviation from the time he was eight and avidly followed the exploits of pioneer airmen. When the First World War started he began to think seriously about in which of the Services he would serve and, as he also had an interest in maritime affairs he decided to volunteer for the Royal Navy's air arm, the Royal Naval Air Service. In due course he completed the necessary application form. This, together with evidence of educational attainments and character references, was submitted to the authorities. Some weeks afterwards he was required to report to the Hotel Cecil for an interview and a medical examination.

After a further two or three weeks he was informed that he had been accepted as a probationary flying officer and told to report to HMS *President* (Greenwich Naval College). He arrived at the college on a Sunday in November 1917. Here he received all his preliminary training in a squad of thirty men many of whom were Canadian.

After two and a half months of preliminary training, he was sent to Vendome in France to start his flying training.

‘ Vendome – we lived in huts, 24 to a hut. The mess was a much bigger building, where we sat at tables and the temperature was kept up with large coke-burning tortoise stoves. I remember them vividly because the rations we had came obviously from the French countryside, large loaves, oval shaped, which used to be cut across into very long slices. These we would take and slap against the side of the stove and when they were toasted they fell off and we’d turn them around and put the other side on and then that fell off. We fed very well. We had butter and things like that which were severely rationed at home. ’

Philip arrived, with about five or six other potential pilots, at night. The very next day he was detailed to fly. His instructor was a young sub lieutenant called Samms who, having asked Philip to place his hands and feet on the controls of a Caudron, demonstrated the use of the elevators, rudder and wing warping, asking Bristow if he understood their function. The Caudron was started up and took off with Samms communicating with his pupil by means of a Gosport tube. After several hours of dual control Philip was deemed ready to go solo and one evening he was sent off with instructions to climb to 1,000 feet turn in a very large circle and land, a task he concluded with a perfect landing. After 10 or 12 hours flying solo he

was sent to the other side of the aerodrome to fly Curtiss Jennies, an aeroplane he never really liked. After 50 minutes of dual control he was allowed to fly solo and eventually qualified as a fully trained pilot. However, this was not the end of his training as he was sent back to England to learn to fly seaplanes at Lee-on-Solent, flying several types

FSL Bristow (right) and a colleague out for a drive in a sporty Morgan three-wheeler while stationed at Westgate-on-Sea in 1918.

