

Minutes of the Seventh Ordinary Meeting

Held on Thursday 5th March 2020

Joint Meeting with the Athenaeum Club (held at LMI)

'Forty Years In the Air'

Mr Bill Cotterell, Senior Pilot, British Airways

The President of LMI Steve Ryan welcomed the President of the Athenaeum, Gaynor Bresnen and her fellow members to the LMI with a drinks reception in the Council Room. It was lovely to see a number of college and school students who were very interested in the evening's topic.

Our speaker, Mr Bill Cottrell, was introduced by the President. Bill had practised his talk at Liverpool Women's Institute. They had asked him to wear his pilot's uniform but at the LMI he was allowed to dress in civvies!

He gave his talk with much humility. Bill has been flying for nearly 40 years but stated that flying was not very technical! You only needed your three times table to execute a descent to a runway for example! He admitted that he didn't understand the physics of how a plane stays in the air! But then neither did many theoretical physicists. Following the award a degree in Chemistry and Biology at Kings College, London and an MSc in Management and a stint at Pilkingtons Glass in St Helens, Bill Applied for a short service commission with the RAF. Despite a touch of colour blindness and a pronounced Northern accent (noted on his interview papers) he was selected and began his training with square bashing at RAF Cranwell College.

He first flew as a pilot in a Chipmunk training plane, having never been in the air before. He suffered but overcame a degree of airsickness and performed his first aerobatic manoeuvre on his first flight - a 180 degree turn – sadly before he left the runway. His instructor was not impressed! Nevertheless Bill progressed very well and completed his foundation training in a Jet Provost aircraft. Having done his basic training he then selected helicopters as the aircraft he'd like to pilot.

Beginning in Gazelle helicopters Bill told us that navigating a fast jet was much different; high up and in a pretty straight-line. Helicopters flew low avoiding buildings, trees and even horses! It was much more difficult to keep your bearings especially if your map blew out of the window. It is useful in that case, to have an AA road atlas with you. He then moved on to Wessex helicopters before becoming a Chinook pilot. He was posted to the Falkland Islands shortly after the end of the Falklands conflict. During the conflict itself all Chinooks but one were lost in the sinking of the Atlantic Conveyor. Bill arrived in the Falkland's in a Hercules Transport airplane which had required another several Hercules to refuel it on its way south via Ascension Island. Not built for passengers, you made your own comfort in a nest of mailbags.

A rare picture of the capital Stanley in sunlight was shown. It was difficult terrain and the gusting wind on land and at sea was a constant challenge and the Chinook was pressed into all types of service – a true workhorse that all the service relied on for heavy lifting. Its rotors are large and powerful and create huge downdrafts that can cause snow, dust and water storms that can reduce visibility to nothing; only experienced and capable pilots should apply! Conditions were tough – Bill and Colleagues in the officers' quarters – a deserted farmstead - had to build their own beds out of driftwood. Days were long and a payloads were varied and even included other aircraft. Bill showed a picture of a Chinook carrying a Harrier Jump Jet.

Recreation was limited and being such a long way from home fellow pilots had asked if ladies back in the UK might like to write to them enclosing pictures. Such was the response that sacksful of letters were sent. One memorable evening involved a dinner on the submarine HMS Conqueror.

After the Falklands Bill was posted to Germany and after a short time flying to train in air traffic control, Bill was interviewed for a position as pilot at British Airways and appointed.

At British Airways he had flown 111 Jets (noisy and loud!), with colleagues who flew through the Berlin air corridor with a chance of a Russian fighter buzzing you. He had a colleague whose fellow pilot was half sucked out of a window that fell out of the cockpit – an amazing feat of flying – the fellow pilot made a full recovery and returned to flying. It was then on to Boeings for Bill – the 757, the 737 and the mighty Jumbo 747. He joked that when he first went on board he couldn't find the cockpit – as it was upstairs! Once a colleague flying over the Indian/Pakistan Border and having failed to give the necessary notification, a pilot was asked to identify himself. A colleague in a nearby aircraft overheard and answered, "Don't tell them Pike"! (Fans of Dad's Army take note).

He detailed the ways that medical emergencies were dealt with – including ringing a dedicated call centre in the USA staffed 24/7 by medics. He also talked about how the flight teams were trained in human factors (called cockpit resource management) and noticed how the NHS was adopting some of this approach. The influence of accidents like that at Kegworth had resulted in training for all aircrew - including what we'd call a 360 feedback in the NHS. Some of the more characterful and forceful personalities found out painfully sometimes their behavioural shortcomings – salutary but vital. Bill said that honestly he'd had nothing but excellent colleagues to share the cockpit with. Professor Steve Peter's book, "Cage the Chimp" was an important reference.

Bill then showed us through the protocol for managing an untoward event at high altitude. The key lessons were – to remember to carry on flying, navigating and communicating. In reality it was not often that you had to respond in an instant and giving yourself time was important. Pilots ran through these drills each time they were revalidated every 6 months. A typical scenario would be an engine failing when taking off.

Bill had thoroughly enjoyed his career and shared his fun and passion with us and there were many humorous anecdotes and gasps of recognition and admiration for some of these old jets. A number of audience members had piloted planes themselves including one who had flown a Tiger Moth.

Questions and comments including managing medical incidents and what would one do if a passenger sadly died! An audience member recounted the tale of one lady who refused to have her dead husband removed from a homebound flight at an intermediary airport – because he had paid for his ticket!

The President thanked Bill for a fantastic lecture and he was presented with an inscribed LMI medal as a memento.

This was a wonderful evening – a great speaker, great company and a terrific meal of lamb followed by meringues with rhubarb compote and mascarpone cream provided by Debbie, Dennis and the team.

Dr Steve Ryan