

Wessex International

For over half a century The College of ATC at Bournemouth Airport has been training air traffic controllers from around the world, as Jeremy Miles discovers



Aerodrome training in the early 1970s - using a light board

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATS

There's an airliner approaching the busy Wessex International Airport. The control tower has been warned that there's a bomb on board. Instantly, procedures swing into action. Emergency services are scrambled. The plane has to be landed with minimum risk to other traffic. Then, hopefully, the hundreds of passengers on board can be evacuated and the bomb made safe.

It's nail-biting stuff but all in a day's work for Britain's air traffic controllers, the backroom boys and girls who ensure the safety of the staggering number of aircraft

flying in and out of the nation's airports. Fortunately, the bomb alert is just an exercise. I am standing in a large room at Bournemouth Airport watching air traffic trainees deal with the crisis on computer screens that simulate those in a real control tower.

Wessex International is a fictitious location but familiar to generations of students who have trained at this legendary College of Air Traffic Control. It's a bit like the airport equivalent of *Holby City*. In real life, Wessex International would have been closed down years ago.

There are bomb scares, terrorist alerts, fires, crashes and chemical spillages all the time. The airliner carrying a bomb is just today's little problem.

Considering the potential for disaster there's a remarkable sense of calm among the trainees. Phil Holt, who has not only taught at the college since 2002 but actually trained there before embarking on a career as an operational controller at Heathrow, Edinburgh and Manchester, looks on with pride. "It's just like the real thing," he assures me. "Air traffic controllers need to be unflappable, methodical and focused. They also have

"Air Traffic Controllers need to be unflappable, methodical and focused"

to be team players who can multi-task and prioritise. No one gets flustered when the unexpected happens. They deal with it quietly and professionally and do everything possible to make sure there's a positive outcome. It's what the job is about."

The college, which is run by NATS, formerly known as National Air Traffic Services, receives around 3,000 applications each year. This year it is only looking for 120 new entrants. Needless to say, standards are exacting. A lot of wannabe air traffic controllers are weeded out by the ongoing selection process. Those who make it join an elite group which have been a vital part of aviation history since the first National Air Traffic Control operation set up business above a London pub in the 1930s.

At the Bournemouth-based college, originally established way back in 1949, there's a tangible sense of its illustrious

Bournemouth

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATS



Computers in use for air traffic control training in the early 1970s

PHOTO: HATTIE MILES



Approach radar trainee Andrew Jackson directs aircraft as part of a training exercise under the watchful eye of tutor Jacqui White

signals. It's part of the exam. The theory is that if everything went down they could still bring a plane in using signals from an Aldiss lamp. Airways control training has gone from procedural control (with trainees keeping the three-dimensional picture using paper strips and no radar) to powerful computers showing a very realistic radar screen and airspace sectors."

Ted, who was the college's Head of Area Radar Studies in Area Radar Control until he retired in 2002, remembers teaching students to be human bird scarers by slowly flapping their arms up and down. "If you do that no more than 20 times a minute, then approach a flock of birds, they think you're a giant bird of prey and steer clear," he explains. Whether it works or not remains debatable, though Ted's nickname was Bald Eagle!

The two old friends have a wealth of stories. There was the day an approaching plane had to be put on hold after a woman was spotted pushing a pram up Bournemouth's main runway. Then there was the former Lancaster bomber pilot who did a double-take when, more than 20 years after the end of the Second World War, he found the freight plane he was flying was suddenly joined by a Heinkel and three Spitfires.

past. Tens of thousands of air traffic controllers from all over the world have trained on this site. But now an era is passing. The college is closing its doors for the final time on 5 August and relocating to a site near Swanwick, just outside Fareham.

Old hands like Phil, who at the age of 56 will be retiring in a few weeks, have seen massive changes in technology during their careers. Reminiscing with another former senior tutor, Howard 'Ted' Tilly, at his home just a mile or so from the Bournemouth Airport runway, Phil tells me that the equipment they have nowadays is incredible. "They can simulate real situations with remarkable accuracy, but fundamentally the procedures remain the same. We still train people to use light

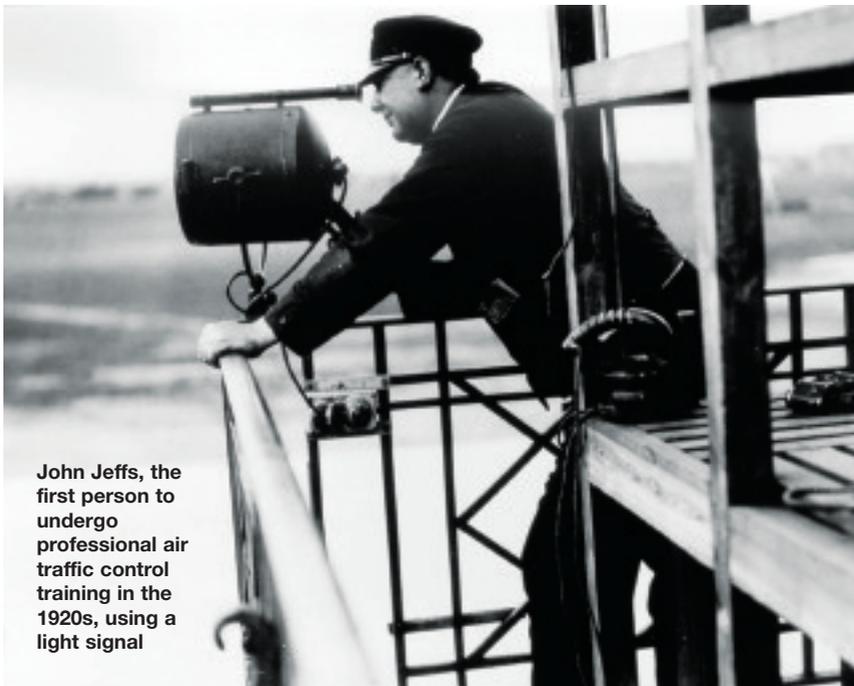
PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATS



Howard 'Ted' Tilly, retired head of area radar studies (centre front in the tartan hat) celebrating the completion of his trainees' courses, outside the college in 1980

These ghosts from the past had strayed off course while making the film *The Battle of Britain*.

There have been tragedies too. Phil, an experienced pilot with nearly 1,100 flying hours in his log book, describes the horror of seeing a pilot at an air show he was controlling, plunge 1,800 feet to his death after his historic Mosquito aircraft got into difficulties and spiralled out of control. "It was awful," says Phil. "In a case like that you know what's going to happen but there's absolutely nothing that you can do to help the poor guy. You just have to get the emergency services out there as quickly as possible."



John Jeffs, the first person to undergo professional air traffic control training in the 1920s, using a light signal

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATS

The former Lancaster bomber pilot did a double-take when he found the freight plane he was flying suddenly joined by a Heinkel and three Spitfires



Trainer Phil Holt (seated) and Howard 'Ted' Tilly, retired head of area radar studies

PHOTO: HATTIE MILES

Phil stresses that air traffic controllers play a vital role in maintaining the civil aviation world's exemplary safety record. To give an idea of the responsibilities of the job he tells me: "Imagine a football stadium with 45,000 people in it. Now imagine 40 of those football stadiums. That's the number of people that are flying around Europe at peak times. Yet how often do you hear of a problem? We really can take our hats off to the guys doing the job." □

Bournemouth Air Festival

Phil Holt is among staff members organising a private party on 6 August to say farewell to one era and to welcome in the next. They're hoping to include a special fly-past by the Red Arrows. The famous display team will be back in action again at the Bournemouth Air Festival, which takes place from 18-21 August. For full details about the festival go to bournemouthair.co.uk



Aerial photo of the college in the early 1970s

PHOTO: COURTESY OF NATS