

Chapter Two

Pre-War in the RAF

‘Superna Petimus’ – We Seek Higher Things

RAF College Cranwell Motto

RAF Cadet College Cranwell – September 1928 to July 1930

Stephenson arrived at RAF Cranwell in early September 1928. He was one of 24 new Flight Cadets to join course S28. The ‘S’ stood for September, while ‘28’ reflected the year the course started. The two years were split into four terms, with four courses running simultaneously. The new flight cadets were divided between two Squadrons – A and B. The 24 new Flight Cadets were a select group of individuals. The vast majority, like Stephenson, were privately educated and from affluent families. However, the RAF also catered for those from a more humble background that had already demonstrated the aptitude and ability to lead the Junior service. Consequently, several Halton apprentices were also added to each Cranwell intake. For S28, three Halton apprentices, including Paddy Cootes, joined those from more privileged backgrounds.

Although the airfield at Cranwell was set up during the First World War, the officer training element formed in 1920. Marshal of the RAF Sir Hugh Trenchard was the power behind what would become the RAF College. His intent was that ‘first, that the doors of the Air Force should be thrown open to boys of sufficient physical, mental and moral capacity; secondly, that they should be trained for the Air Force rather than general culture by instruction in special technicalities.’¹ From their first day at Cranwell, the Flight Cadets were a small, select cadre of privileged, capable and driven individuals; the camaraderie and bonds formed at Cranwell would last a lifetime and the ‘old boy network’ certainly aided many throughout their careers. However, their progression and graduation were not assured, and several would fall by the wayside, either through poor academic performance or an inappropriate attitude. The intent for a Cranwell graduate was to ‘have a general although somewhat elementary knowledge of the Navy, Army and Air Force – will be a first-class pilot of the Avro – will have an elementary knowledge of the work carried out from flying machines and will have a solid grounding in the duties of the mechanics of an aeroplane squadron.’² To meet that goal, the cadets had a focused academic programme. During their first year, the curriculum included the traditional subjects of English, Mathematics and Physics. However, the remainder of the syllabus was more bespoke and incorporated: Aerodynamics, Aeronautical Science, Engines, Rigging, History and Organisation of the RAF, Armament, Wireless Telegraphy, Morse, Air Pilotage, Army Organisation as well as Drill and General Efficiency. In the second year, Naval Organisation, Law and Administration, Sanitation and Hygiene, Meteorology, Signals as well as Practical Flying were added to the programme.

Academically, Stephenson sat in the middle of the pack, finishing 13th at the end of the first year but rising to tenth by graduation. After barely meeting the minimum academic grade for the first year, Bader became more focused and rose from 19th to 17th. Some were less fortunate. Three of the 24 students from S28 were back-coursed due to failing to meet the academic requirement. Two of the three would eventually graduate six

months later than Stephenson. The remaining student withdrew from officer training in July 1930 to return home and 'fly for a firm of fur trappers in northern Canada.'³ Beyond academics, the Cranwell curriculum had several practical elements to it. The most prominent feature was the flying instruction conducted from Cranwell's grass airstrip, with sport a close second.

The one area where Stephenson stood head and shoulders above his compatriots was flying. Stephenson excelled in the air; he was a natural pilot a point reflected in his assessments. Stephenson scored 1115 out of a possible 1200 in the Practical Flying examinations and tests. His closest rival was a distant Bader. The students started flying in September 1928 in the two-seat Avro 504N trainer. By the end of the course, Stephenson had accrued 256 flying hours and added the Bristol Fighter, the De Havilland DH9A and the Armstrong Whitworth Siskin to his logbook. Of note, one of his flying instructors at Cranwell was the New Zealander, Squadron Leader Arthur Coningham. The Kiwi would rise through the ranks and become one of the most successful RAF commanders of the Second World War. Stephenson and Coningham would reunite in the post-War era. However, this was some way off. More immediately, Stephenson's stellar performance in the air ensured that he was awarded the RM Groves Trophy for the best pilot of the course. Beyond the classroom and the cockpit, Cranwell invested significant effort in sports, particularly those that built team cohesion and leadership amongst the Flight Cadets.

Stephenson was highly competitive, it would be an enduring trait. At Cranwell, his competitive nature was given an outlet in the sports arena, specifically athletics, cross-country, boxing, horse-riding, and swimming. Given his slight build, Stephenson was a natural long-distance runner, and it is no surprise that he won the 2-mile race against the Old Cranwellians in April 1930.⁴ However, he was only placed fifth of 85 cadets in the inter-Squadron cross-country race earlier in the same week. There was some mitigation for the poor form. 'Stephenson's run was especially creditable ... taking into account his previous very "late night."⁵ It is clear that Stephenson was following the old RAF adage of working hard and playing hard!

In the boxing ring, Stephenson fought in the Lightweight class. He would always put up a good fight, but while at Cranwell, he appears to have been vanquished by most of his opponents.⁶ In the annual encounter with their Sandhurst counterparts, Stephenson faced the same opponent in 1929 and 1930 – Gentleman Cadet Arkwright. After being beaten in the 1929 competition, Stephenson sought revenge the following year.⁷ The 1930 re-match produced 'the best boxing of the evening ... They wasted no time in preliminaries, and there was hard, fast and clean punching for three rounds. Stephenson lost by very little, his opponent having an advantage in reach, which probably won for him.'⁸ Despite his defeat, Stephenson would continue to box throughout his career. Another lifelong passion was horse riding. At Cranwell, Stephenson was one of five riders representing A Squadron in the inter-squadron riding competition. Although A Squadron ultimately lost, Stephenson had the joint highest individual score.⁹

While Stephenson may have had the edge on Bader in academics and flying, Bader had the advantage regarding sporting prowess and leadership qualities. During the fourth and final term, the senior course would undertake leadership roles. The senior student within the Squadron would be assigned the position of 'Under Officer' supported by two Flight Cadet Sergeants and two Flight Cadet Corporals. In January 1930, Bader was selected as one of the two Under Officers, the lead cadet within A Squadron. However, Stephenson's leadership potential was also recognised; he would be promoted to one of the Flight Cadet Sergeant positions for A Squadron, subordinate to Bader. The

B Squadron Under Officer was Paddy Coote, the former Halton apprentice and the other Sir Charles Wakefield Scholar, who would go on to win the Sword of Honour for the best cadet.

In what little downtime they had, Stephenson and his friends made the most of it. Although Flight Cadets were barred from having cars, they were allowed to own motorbikes. Most of their off-base escapades involved their motorbikes, usually overloaded, travelling too quickly and ending up in hedges or gardens!¹⁰ The RAF created a group of young, fearless individuals trained to push boundaries and take risks. Evidently, these traits manifested themselves both at work and at play! Despite their various misdemeanours, 21 of the original 24 Flight Cadets graduated on 25 July 1930. In Stephenson's end-of-course report from Cranwell, the RAF College Commandant, Air Vice-Marshal AM Longmore wrote, 'smart efficient Cadet Sergeant who set a fine example to others by his energy and enterprise in work and sports. Will make a valuable officer and good mess mate.' 20-year-old Pilot Officer Geoffrey Stephenson was now a commissioned officer in the RAF with a new set of pilots' wings and heading to a front-line unit as a fighter pilot. He was also heading there with his best friend.

23 Squadron – August 1930 to January 1932

Semper Aggressus - Always on the Attack

On 23 August 1930, the 23 Squadron Operations Record Book highlights that 'Pilot Officers DRS Bader and GD Stephenson posted to unit from Cranwell.'¹¹ The two Cranwell friends had made it to a front-line fighter squadron. The Squadron was based at RAF Kenley on the southern edge of Greater London and commanded by Squadron Leader Henry Woollett DSO MC and Bar. 45-year-old Woollett had arrived on the squadron in January 1930 following the death of the previous squadron commander in North Africa following a failed attempt to break the world's long-distance record.¹² While Woollett may have been older than his peers, he had a distinguished flying career. During the Great War, Woollett had initially served with the Lincolnshire Regiment in Gallipoli before transferring to the Royal Flying Corps in 1916. Already an ace by the time of the German Spring Offensive of 1918, he added ten kills in March 1918 alone. While the Stephenson brothers suffered on the ground during Operation Michael, the soon-to-be-defunct Royal Flying Corps and Woollett with his Sopwith Camel were honing their fighter skills in the air. Indeed, on 12 April 1918, Woollett shot down six German aircraft in a single day. By the War's end, he had amassed 35 air-to-air kills.

Under Woollett's command was a squadron of 10 officers and 88 airmen (including four airmen pilots) looking after 12 aircraft.¹³ Stephenson initially flew in the basic Gloster Gamecock before converting to the more advanced Bristol Bulldog towards the latter stages of his tour. Woollett was aided in running the squadron by his flight commanders, Flight Lieutenants Richard Atcherley and Harry Day. Both would shape, inform and influence Stephenson not only on the squadron but throughout his career.

26-year-old Atcherley was also a Cranwell graduate but graduated six years earlier than Stephenson. Like Stephenson, he was a Flight Cadet Sergeant and was awarded the RM Groves trophy for his piloting skills. After a brief front-line tour, Atcherley became a flying instructor and would arrive at Kenley following a stint with the RAF High-Speed Flight and their participation in the 1929 Schneider Trophy competition, a prestigious and highly competitive seaplane race between the major global air power nations. Although Atcherley would only briefly overlap with Stephenson and Bader on 23 Squadron, the other flight commander would be there for Stephenson's entire

tenure at Kenley. 32-year-old Harry Day was older than his fellow flight commander and had a less flamboyant approach. However, he was a capable, credible and experienced pilot who had served in the latter stages of the First World War, not as an airman but as a Royal Marine. He moved to the Fleet Air Arm in 1924 before transferring to the RAF permanently in 1930 and joining 23 Squadron.

The squadron flew affiliation sorties with bomber squadrons and conducted cooperation exercises with Royal Artillery anti-aircraft units as well as searchlight units. The squadron also honed their own fighting skills. For example, on 26 May 1931, the squadron would spend the next three weeks practising air-to-air gunnery at Sutton Bridge during their annual air firing camp.¹⁴ A week after completing their air firing camp, 'four aircraft of squadron participated in Andover air display,' that included Day, Bader and Stephenson.¹⁵ On 27 June 1931, the 23 Squadron pilots headed to the highest profile airshow of the year - the Hendon Air Pageant. Although the Squadron took three pilots to Hendon, only Day and Bader flew in the display, with Stephenson relegated to the reserve pilot role. Although Stephenson may have been disappointed to not fly in the display, his time would soon come. 'Two months later, on 22 August ... at Cramlington in Northumberland, Bader and Stephenson, flying the pair together for the first time in public, fashioned a sequence over the top of the airfield which set the great northern crowd alight.'¹⁶ According to Lucas, the duo 'had lifted their dual and individual skills to a level which was out of reach of all save a small handful of Service pilots. Squadron pride and quest for perfection – to be, in a word, the best – was their spur.'¹⁷ Moreover, Stephenson's tactical flying skills were also recognised. After the successful squadron air firing camp earlier in the year, Stephenson and Pilot Officer AE Dobell were selected to compete in the Brooke-Popham Cup and 'proceeded to Sutton Bridge for best firer's competition.'¹⁸ Stephenson impressed his seniors. In his 1931 confidential report, his squadron commander assessed Stephenson as an 'exceptional' flyer. Woollett also highlighted that 'his energy and enterprise are a fine example, smart and efficient and a great asset. "Full Out" at everything.' The RAF Kenley Station Commander, Wing Commander Robinson, suggested that Stephenson was 'a keen and energetic officer of the right type.'

Despite the accolades and their natural ability, Stephenson and Bader were still inexperienced with relatively few flying hours, less than 500 hours total. To be a truly experienced pilot you needed maturity, ability, and luck. So far, Stephenson's luck had held despite a few close calls. During an aerobatics practice, he 'fell out of a slow roll but luckily was just beyond the end of the Kenley escarpment and had enough space to recover.'¹⁹ On another occasion his engine failed, resulting in a 'forced landing in the grounds of a country estate.'²⁰ Stephenson had been fortunate; others would be less so. A change in aircraft type would prove to be the undoing of his squadron colleagues. In mid-1931, the squadron retired its Gloster Gamecocks and replaced them with the larger, heavier, but faster Bristol Bulldog. The bulkier Bulldog was more of a handful than the more docile Gamecock. On 30 September 1931, 23 Squadron lost Pilot Officer Ireland, who was killed when his Bristol Bulldog failed to recover from a spin.²¹ Ireland had been on the squadron a mere three days. Sadly, the Bulldog would bite closer to home. As the end of 1931 approached, Woollett handed over command of 23 Squadron on 9 December 1931.²² Five days later, tragedy struck.

While much of Bader's near-fatal crash is well documented, there is still some debate on who was involved. All agree that on Monday 14 December 1931, Flying Officer GW Phillips led the formation of three Bulldogs, including Bader, and left Kenley for a lunch stop at the Reading Aero Club at Woodley. The area of contention is the identity of the third pilot. In Bader's memoir, he suggests that Richardson was the third

pilot, while Laddie Lucas, Bader's brother-in-law, informs that it was Stephenson.²³ While the group's construct does not influence the tragic outcome, it does question the timing and type of posting that Stephenson moved on to subsequently.

After lunch at Woodley and some interactions with aero club members, the 23 Squadron trio performed a 'Prince of Wales' Feathers' manoeuvre after take-off. Phillips was in the lead aircraft and pulled up vertically while the wingmen on each side of Phillip's aircraft peeled away in their respective directions. However, this was not enough for an incredibly capable but equally overconfident aerobatics pilot like Bader. Upon completing the initial manoeuvre on Phillips' left-hand side, Bader returned to the airfield at a low altitude. However, and showing his relative inexperience on the heavier and less manoeuvrable Bulldog, Bader's aircraft lost what little height it had during the subsequent slow roll, which resulted in the left wingtip striking the ground. Bader's aircraft now collapsed around him as it careered across the grass airfield. Overhead, Phillips and the third pilot could only watch on in horror as their squadron colleague fought for his life in the remnants of his fighter.

While Bader started to come to terms with his life's defining moment, the RAF Court of Inquiry convened to determine the cause of the accident. As the most senior of the three pilots, Phillips was ultimately court-martialled for not restraining Bader and flying into a civilian aerodrome contrary to service regulations.²⁴ Pending the result of the court martial, Phillips left the squadron on 21 January 1932 to 12 (Bombing) Squadron at Andover.²⁵

Two days later, Stephenson also left the squadron. On 23 January 1932, just over a month after Bader's crash, the 23 Squadron operations record book informs that 'Pilot Officer GD Stephenson posted from unit to No1 Armoured Car Company, Iraq.'²⁶ The proximity of the posting to an overseas ground unit so soon after Bader's crash has raised questions by some. Bader suggests that in the summer of 1931, the RAF released the 'A List' roster detailing the young permanent commission officers due for an overseas posting.²⁷ As recent Cranwell graduates, Bader and Stephenson fell firmly into that category. Consequently, 'it was routine that after a year on a squadron, a young permanent officer would go overseas.'²⁸ Also, the timing of Stephenson's posting is in keeping with other Cranwell graduates from 23 Squadron of that period. Moreover, there is nothing untoward written in Stephenson's Record of Service, and his confidential report shows no dip in performance or criticism. Additionally, his next post came with a promotion to Flying Officer. However, if indeed Stephenson was the third pilot and was deemed culpable, the punishment doled out may have been limited to moving him into a ground-focused appointment with limited flying opportunities. By comparison, most of Stephenson's Cranwell peers were sent to flying-related second tours, such as flying instructional duties. Irrespective of the rationale for his move to Iraq, the decision to post Stephenson in early 1932 may have prolonged his life. He would return to the United Kingdom two and a half years later, a more mature, experienced and wiser pilot. Ahead of him was a more sedate flying in older, more docile aircraft on simple transits with senior officers as his passenger. There was always an inherent risk in flying military aircraft in an unforgiving environment, but it involved less risk than flying in a testosterone-laden front-line fighter squadron.

While Bader and Stephenson barely survived their first tour, many of their Cranwell cohort would not be so lucky. By the end of 1932, less than 18 months after their Cranwell graduation, five, nearly a quarter, of Stephenson's graduating class would be dead, four due to flying accidents.²⁹ Peacetime flying in the military during the 1930s was a brutal affair, in 1931 alone, the RAF suffered 40 fatal accidents and 97 serious