



CRANWELLIAN ASSOCIATION

Peter Bennett RIP



We regret to announce the passing of Peter Bennett of 94 Entry (C Sqn) on 3 June 2024.

His 2 ½ year course was one of the first where basic flying training was on jets (Jet Provost) and Pete already showed signs of being an exceptional pilot.

After fast jet training at Valley on Gnats, Al Holman (also 94 Entry) recalls: *“Peter and I were selected as the first two newly qualified pilots to train on the Harrier. We were the guinea pigs to see if inexperienced pilots could cope with the complexities of the Jump Jet. Both of us had wait until the two seat Harrier T2 arrived 18 months later.”*

So, during this time, Pete joined 72 Sqn as an 'Ops Officer' and spent this period flying the Wessex at Odiham.

During his 18 months at Odiham, Pete went on exercise in Malaya and also Singapore. It was there he persuaded his CO to let him go solo at Changi qualifying him as a helicopter pilot which was to prove very useful during his

later test flying career. He also spent a couple of months in Northern Ireland at the height of 'the Troubles'.

In October 1970 Pete was on the Gnat refresher course and then the Hunter Tactical Weapons Unit at Chivenor. He completed lead in courses including one on helicopters at Ternhill and, by the beginning of May 72, was at Wittering on the second Harrier conversion. The comprised seven members: all experienced Hunter pilots except Pete and Al Holman. It is a testament to Pete's talent as a pilot that he finished up winning the course trophy.

Pete joined 4 Sqn at Wildenrath becoming a Fighter Reconnaissance Instructor before moving to 1 Sqn at Wittering. As well as numerous deployments to the North and South flanks of NATO, he was part of the initial Harrier deployment to Belize when Guatemala threatened to attack.

Pete's most hair raising experience was being hit by lightning while flying a Harrier between two dark clouds. The lightning bolt welded the top of the sideslip vane about 50 cm in front of his eyes and left a neat 8mm hole in the tail cone where it departed.

In 1977 Pete went to Empire Test Pilot School and, after graduating, did experimental test flying at the Royal Aircraft Establishment (RAE), Bedford. During nine years with the RAE, he undertook Harrier Ski Jump trials for the Navy, was project pilot for the Sea Harrier Poor Weather and Night Approach System, and developed the symbols used in the new RAF fast-jet Head Up Display (for which he was awarded the L G Groves memorial prize for aircraft safety).

Together with a scientist, Pete conceived and developed the novel Control System for Vertical and Short Take Off and Landing aircraft that is now in the RAF's new F35 Stealth Jets. This involved both many hours in advanced simulators as well as in the air.

He once managed to fly test sorties in a Harrier (fast jet), BAC 1-11 (airliner) and Wessex (helicopter) as Captain, all on the same day! He was very proud of this particular achievement.

Thursday 7 January 1982 Pete was involved in a near fatal accident when, on final approach to Bedford, his Hawk was caught in vortex wake. On instinct he ejected but he hit the ground in the ejection seat before the parachute deployed and he suffered severe and life changing injuries.

Whilst recovering, he transferred to RAE Farnborough to direct a research programme which involved converting a two seat Harrier to use Forward Looking Infra-Red and Night Vision Goggles.

After retirement from the RAF, Peter was a manager with Selex ES (a subsidiary of Finmeccanica, active in the electronics and information technology business, based in Italy and the UK) and Business Development Director of Euroradar.

He was also a Civilian Instructor with 870 (Dreghorn) Squadron, Air Training Corps.