

Aerospace talks to

Capt Eric Brown



Capt E. M. Brown, CBE, DSC, AFC, MA, FRAeS, RN(Retd), Chief Executive of the British Helicopter Advisory Board, took office as President of the Society at the close of the Annual General Meeting at Hamilton Place on 13th May. A few days previously Gordon Wansbrough-White had interviewed him for Aerospace. We are sure our members will be glad to welcome such a distinguished pilot as their President. Members and staff join in wishing him a very successful year.

GW-W: *What led you into aviation?*

EMB: My father was a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps. Naturally this aroused my original interest in flying. He used to take me to our local aerodrome at Turnhouse, Edinburgh where a Royal Auxiliary Air Force unit was based and as a small boy I managed to wheedle some trips as a passenger from his friends. Later I went to Edinburgh University where an Air Squadron was being formed. I was very keen to join this and get into the RAFVR. At the outset of the Second World War I was called up in the VR but found myself in a period of relative inactivity. The Fleet Air Arm, however, was rather keen for pilots to transfer and since this seemed to be the scene of all the action I decided to move over.

GW-W: *Can you please outline for us your wartime career in the Royal Navy and on the carriers?*

EMB: I had always wanted to be a fighter pilot. Possibly because I was already a qualified pilot the Fleet Air Arm drafted me into that particular area of its activities and inevitably I soon found myself headed for an aircraft carrier. I had never seen one at close quarters when I was asked to make my first deck landings. These took place on *HMS Audacity* (or *Empire Audacity* as it was then known) in the Clyde. It was a good hard way to start because *Audacity* was the smallest aircraft carrier in the world.

I found myself doing a period of convoy work and my Captain seemed to think I had a particular ability for deck landing. This really shaped my career for the next few years because he had reported on this to the Admiralty. Almost immediately I was posted to a Service Trials Unit and from there eventually graduated to the Naval Test Section at the A&AEE Boscombe Down. After a very short spell there I moved to the RAE Farnborough in January 1944 as Chief Naval Test Pilot. My predecessor had been killed in a deck landing accident.

At Farnborough I was involved mainly in naval work at first but this gradually expanded into work on the High Speed Section of Aero Flight. We had the very first jet aircraft in the country so this was a very fascinating period for me.

After the war I was sent out to Germany to pick up captured German aircraft. I had studied German at Edinburgh University and indeed had taught in Germany before the war so I was probably a natural choice for this work. In many ways this was one of the most fascinating periods of my career. After a year commuting between the RAE and Germany I returned to be made the Commanding Officer of Aero Flight, the first naval officer ever to achieve this. I was very proud of this rather unique situation and stayed at the RAE for three years acting in that capacity. It involved me in testing many different types of aircraft. They were flooding into the UK from all sources — captured aircraft as well as, for example, aircraft developed in the United States which the RAE was to test under interchange agreements.

When I left Farnborough I was posted, at the request of the Americans, to the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River. This was at the outset of the Korean War and everything was in top gear. I made a few deck landings in America on some of their carriers, which were immense compared with what I had been used to in the UK, where I had tended to specialise on the smaller escort carriers. In the course of my various duties I have made an enormous number of deck landings — it now stands at a world record 2,407.

After test flying ended I became first the Commander of a Sea Hawk squadron, then I headed the British Naval Air Mission to Germany. Later I did my stint at the Ministry of Defence as Deputy Director of Naval Air Warfare and finally before I left the Navy in 1970 I commanded the Royal Naval Air Station at Lossiemouth. This was a very happy time in my career but unfortunately it coincided with government decisions to abolish carrier aviation.

GW-W: *How did you become involved with helicopters and the British Helicopter Advisory Board?*

EMB: While I was at Farnborough in 1945 the first helicopter arrived in this country. The Sikorsky R-4B was really the first production helicopter in the world and needless to say we had no helicopter pilots at the RAE. As a naval test pilot I was somehow given the job to make the first helicopter test flight. Initially without any instruction I managed to quite frighten myself and eventually persuaded the RAE to send me on a course. I became the helicopter test pilot specialist at Farnborough and enjoyed flying them so much that I decided to keep both fixed wing and helicopter flying running in parallel throughout my naval career — a very pleasant mix indeed.

As my naval career drew to a close the British Helicopter Advisory Board was being set up to be the mouthpiece of the helicopter industry. Many of my ex-service friends in the industry urged me to join this organisation and I became its Chief Executive in 1970, where I have remained ever since. The BHAB was set up at the instigation of the CAA and is really the trade association of the helicopter industry. It is very involved with offshore operations for North Sea oil and this takes up much of my time. It is concerned with regulatory control of helicopters in all phases of operations throughout the UK. There are other aspects, a sporting side — we run the British Helicopter Championships — and there is some association with the Services and with the fixed wing side of the business, such as the integration of air traffic control.

GW-W: *Of the 485 aircraft types that you have flown, which was your favourite and which your especial hate?*

EMB: I probably have a favourite half dozen but at least a head above the others is the de Havilland Hornet. It was a superb aeroplane; it was overpowered and this is every pilot's dream, of course. It was small, neat, a hot rod Mosquito in fact. I found it magnificent to fly — it flew almost as well on one engine as it did on two and indeed it could fly very well with no engines! It was part of my aerobatic routine to cut out both engines at the bottom of the dive and to loop with both propellers feathered. This was quite spectacular and very simple to do provided both airscrews unfeathered as you came out of the loop!

My worst aircraft is easy to select as well — it was the General Aircraft GAL 56. This was a swept wing glider which was being developed for experimental purposes. It eventually killed the great glider pilot Robert Kronfeld. It was sent to Farnborough because it had such dreadful handling characteristics and we were trying to investigate what caused these. The worst characteristic was a tremendous self stalling tendency at slow speed. The aircraft would rear up into a very alarming attitude and to the pilot it felt as if it was going over on to its back. This was the problem which eventually caught out Kronfeld; the aircraft went into a spin from which he never recovered.

GW-W: *The operations in the Falklands area of the South Atlantic highlight the dramatic changes which have taken place since the days of the big carriers. Are helicopters and the Harrier enough and how do you see the present and future role of the Royal Navy?*

EMB: When the decision was made in 1964 to scrap the potentially revolutionary aircraft carrier CVA 01 we had no option but to revert to very small vessels akin to the wartime escort carriers if in any way we were to preserve carrier aviation. After a traumatic period when it looked as if we were to have no carriers at all we have finished up with small carriers, much more sophisticated than the wartime escort carrier, of course. With such a small deck we are forced to operate VTOL aircraft like the helicopter and the Harrier — both very efficient tools of the trade. There is however one gap still in the armoury — these aircraft do not have the weapon carrying ability or the long range performance associated with aircraft such as the McDonnell Douglas Phantom.

For a small nation I believe we have equipped ourselves to the best of our financial ability. I just hope that what looked like a backwards step, when the sale of *HMS Invincible* to Australia was negotiated, will now be rethought in the light of what has happened in the Falkland Islands. I am not suggesting we pull out of the sale but we should rethink our strategy, which should include a replacement.

GW-W: *What are your plans for the Society in your year of Presidency?*

EMB: These are difficult days, but I believe the country is gradually pulling out of the recession and I hope this will be reflected in the Society. I would like to see the RAeS back in the black. We have been losing money over the past few years and I want to see this trend reversed.

With the forthcoming retirement of the present Secretary I have to make sure that, together with the interview board, we find a person who will serve the Society well in the forthcoming years. I want to reinstate the title of Associate Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society instead of Member. To me everyone who is in the Society is a member. The use of the term Member disidentifies people and I am going to make a strong effort to get the old title back. I want to consolidate the establishment of new branches in Pakistan, Malaysia and Hong Kong and I would like to foster closer contact with other international aeronautical bodies. This is vital if the Society is to stay in a position of world leadership.

Perhaps I should make clear that in a short term of office one tries to carry through what one's predecessor started and hopefully initiate some projects for one's own successor to carry through. It is very difficult in the period of one year to start something and complete it.

GW-W: *Have you any interests outside of aviation?*

EMB: Aviation takes up so much of my time that outside interests are necessarily restricted. I write quite a lot of books — but mainly on aviation subjects. I take part in sport whenever I can — I am very keen on tennis and golf. But my real love is for bridge which I find a very fascinating exercise for the brain.

GW-W: *Have you any unfulfilled ambitions?*

EMB: I never managed to become an astronaut. As a test pilot and when I was at Patuxent River I was closely associated with people who did become astronauts and I always had an ambition to become one of this very select group. Unfortunately the UK has not been in a position to send up its own space vehicles and at the time there was no arrangement for us to send people up in American spacecraft. Age has caught up with that ambition and I am afraid it must remain unfulfilled.

GW-W: *Is there any question you would have liked me to ask, and what would have been your answer?*

EMB: I would have liked you to ask me if I feel the Society wields an influence in the aviation world commensurate with its prestigious status. I believe there was a time when it had a stronger influence on aviation affairs than at present. The world scene changes, politics change, but nevertheless I feel that we are too reticent in speaking out as a Society on major issues that affect aviation.

I am sure that we should have the ear of the government on certain issues and make our points not only to it but to the press. I do not for a moment believe that we should pontificate on lots of minor issues. But there are certain major issues on which people ought to be able to expect guidance from a Society such as ours which has so much expertise in its membership.