

## FORUM

# UTILIZATION OF THE DEFENCE FLYING CLUB AS A SUPERNUMARY SQUADRON

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In today's sophisticated military environment the modern soldier has come to rely heavily on air support. Consequently the number and diversity of tasks allocated to the air force has increased dramatically.

In order to perform these tasks efficiently an air force must have ready access to both serviceable aircraft and the highly trained aircrews required to fly them.

Due to the critical shortage of pilots which is currently being experienced throughout the free world, most western air forces are finding themselves hard pressed to cope with these responsibilities, even during the comparative calm of peace time operations.

Aircraft too have become more complex, so much so that operational proficiency can no longer be induced into a pupil pilot during the short duration of a crash course designed to mass produce aircrews in a time of emergency.

It is obvious therefore, that, in order to meet with the exhausting demands posed by potential combat situations, air forces will have to be able to draw on substantial reserves of trained airmen.

For this reason the South African Air Force has established Citizen Force and Commando Squadrons comprised of ex-military and civilian pilots. The latter, who have had to qualify at considerable personal expense, can be regarded as a dwindling and endangered national resource. The continually escalating cost of private flying has effectively put pilot training out of the financial reach of many would be airmen while at the same time making it extremely costly for the qualified pilot to maintain his ratings.

As a result there are fewer and fewer pilots available. The question is, can any air force afford to lose this potential reserve.

The RAF felt not. During the early 1970's it began to revitalize its University Air Squadrons which

had led a rather haphazard existence under the auspices of the RAFVR since the second World War.

The University Air Squadrons (UAS) came into being in 1925 and were at first little more than civilian flying clubs established with a view to '... encouraging an interest in flying and promoting and maintaining liaison with universities in technical and research problems affecting aviation'. It was also hoped that these squadrons would assist those who wished to take up aeronautics as a profession, either in the RAF or in a civilian capacity whilst rendering part time service in the non-regular air force. During World War II these squadrons more than proved their worth as a source of high quality recruits.

Faced with an impending pilot shortage, the RAF decided in 1971 to place the UAS under the wing of training command so as to stabilize and develop this valuable source of aircrews. Funded from the RAF budget these squadrons have made rapid progress. Today there are 16 squadrons manned by full time RAF personnel and instructors and operating a total of 81 BAe Bulldog trainers, which provide training for 689 students. As such the UAS represent the largest flying training organisation in the RAF.

Membership of every UAS is divided into two categories. 50% or more of the students are undergraduates who wish to fly and may eventually join the RAF although the membership usually ceases after they graduate. The remaining members are RAF sponsored university cadets. Very few members have received any previous flying training when they join the squadron.

The full flying syllabus allows for 95 hours training spread over three years and conforms with the RAF's systems approach to flying training (SAFT) and each student must reach the required standard for each training task.

Thus the scheme provides the RAF not only with

entrants with a thorough academic and aeronautical back ground but also with a reserve of military orientated pilots within the society on which it can draw should the need arise.

The astronomical financial implications of establishing a similar scheme in South Africa combine with the critical shortage of manpower and military aircraft to make such a project unpractical at present. However, the enormous value of a reserve of trained pilots with strong military back grounds cannot be denied.

Private flying is a recognised sport in the SADF and as such is catered for by the Defence Flying Club (DFC).

Although the club operates from Swartkop Air Force Base, where it is provided with free hangerage and free use of the runways and air traffic control facilities, the DFC is essentially a civilian flying club. As such flying and pilot training are done in accordance with the Air Navigation Regulations as promulgated by the Department of Transport's Division of Civil Aviation.

Besides an annual grant from the Defence Sport Club the DFC is financially dependent on its own means. All flying done by club members is done entirely at their own expence while the club itself has to deal with the private sector when it

comes to aircraft maintenance and the purchase of fuel, aircraft and spares.

Despite these financial burdens many members of the SADF have obtained their private and commercial pilots licences through the club. Training in advanced navigation techniques, advanced aircraft handling and the use of flying instruments are also offered.

The fact that all the flying done by the Defence Flying Club is purely recreational is surely indicative of the fact that the value of the potential reserve of pilots has been overlooked.

Surely, if courses in the operational flying of light aircraft were to be offered to the members of the club, these pilots could be used to fly the many light aircraft communications flights required during any operation thus releasing the highly trained regular pilots for other operational duties. Further, if the SADF was to make fuel and maintenance facilities available to the DFC at SADF tariffs, the club would be able to reduce the cost of training offered, thus make it available to a greater number of potential pilots at no extra cost to the SADF.

Utilisation of the Defence Flying Club as a supernumary squadron in this manner has many other possibilities. Faced as we are with a serious pilot shortage one is tempted to ask if some serious investigation of these possibilities would not be prudent.