

## **Army Flying Museum Platinum Membership**

**Alastair Donald Mellor MRAeS**

### **Why did I become a Platinum Member of the Army Flying Museum?**

The simple answer would be because the Museum's Development Manager asked me. However, that is too flippant, although it is the answer to 'why now?' The honest answer is that I have had a long association with the museum, and I consider the museum to be my museum. I joined the Friends of the Museum in 1988 shortly after I moved to the area and became an 'active member' in 1990 assisting in the fitting out of the Haward Hall prior to its opening. After that I became a member of the 'Sunday working group' which involved a group of Friends attending one Sunday a month to work at the bidding of the Curator on the maintenance of the museum and exhibits. In 2018 my full-time employment came to an end, and I offered my services to the museum to act as one of the wardens. The timing was fortuitous as Project Eagle, the revamp of the museum, was about to start, and I was able to assist the Curator with the aircraft moves and exhibit labelling. As a Warden I am able to keep the museum running but I can also contribute to the visiting public's experience by talking to them and expanding on the stories behind the exhibits. I also find myself assisting both the Archivist and Curator with the queries they receive from the public, very satisfying. So, when the Development Manager jokingly asked if I wanted to become a Platinum Member, I thought, why not?

### **Why the interest in the Army Flying Museum and Army Aviation?**

At the age of four I moved with my family from the inner suburbs of Manchester to a Cheshire village a mile and a half from the end of the runway at Manchester Airport, I was hooked on aviation from that day. As I grew up, I would accompany my elder brother to the Airport where he was a Plane Spotter. He and a group of his fellow spotters formed one of the earliest aircraft preservation groups in the country, The Northern Aircraft Preservation Society (NAPS) and through this I formed an interest in old aircraft and in turn as I grew up, I too joined the group. In time NAPS became a Limited Company and Educational charity changing its name to The Aeroplane Collection (TAC) and as an active member I became one of the company's directors. I also joined the Air Training Corps where I learned to fly gliders and fly in Chipmunks. I remained with TAC even when I joined the Civil Service and moved south to RAF Benson and then RAF Henlow. The distance from Henlow to the TAC's Manchester base now became a problem, it was also compounded with me becoming a member of 612 Volunteer Gliding School where it is my turn to teach Air Cadets to fly, this meant I had fewer weekends for travel North so I let my TAC membership lapse. I still wanted to be associated with old aeroplanes, so I became a Friend of the Shuttleworth Trust as Old Warden was only three miles from my home. I was less active with the Shuttleworth Trust, membership of the Friends was just used as a free entry to the regular airshows. In turn the association with Shuttleworth also came to an end when I got a job at the A&AEE Boscombe Down. Shortly after

settling in at Boscombe I paid a visit to, my now nearest aircraft museum, The Museum of Army Flying. I had previously visited the museum in 1979 when I worked at RAF Benson, but the Museum had grown and moved from its original site on the camp to its present location. As an Air Cadet Gliding Instructor, I was impressed with the collection of wartime gliders and the discovery that the pilots wings I wore were a version of those worn by the Glider Pilot Regiment. I left the museum with the application form for the Society of Friends of the museum of Army Flying (SOFMAF). Over the following years my interest in and knowledge of assault gliders and the Glider Pilot Regiment has grown, and I now enjoy imparting this knowledge to school groups visiting the museum and anyone else who is prepared to listen.

### **Why is the Army Flying Museum special to me?**

I have no personal or family connection to the Army Air Corps, although I have taught two cadets to fly gliders who went on to fly for the Army Air Corps, so I must have other reasons for the Army Flying Museum to be special to me. It started with my interest in old aircraft and a desire to work on them, it then grew with my connection to military gliding. Finally, on becoming a member of the museum staff I found that engaging with the visiting public was very satisfying.

### **On becoming a Platinum Member**

I developed an interest in aviation early in life, I could watch aircraft landing at Manchester airport from my bedroom window and I learnt that both my mother and grandfather had built Lancaster bombers. My elder brother became a plane spotter, and I would go to the airport with him, although I never became a spotter myself. I became a member of the Air Training Corps where I learnt to fly gliders. I considered joining the Royal Air Force on leaving school but the role of Armourer they offered didn't appeal, so I staid at home and became an engineering apprentice with a desire to become a design draughtsman. I kept my interest in aircraft alive by joining the Northen Aircraft Preservation Society (NAPS) which was one of the earliest volunteer aircraft preservation groups in the country. Members of NAPS were prominent in forming the British Aircraft Preservation Council (BAPC) intended to give what was a disparate collection of volunteer reservation groups some level of status with the authorities and sponsors. In turn NAPS became an educational charity and limited company called the Aeroplane Collection, and I became one of its directors. Following my apprenticeship, I joined the Civil Service in reply to an advert for draughtsmen to work for the RAF. Full of ideas of working on aircraft I found myself working on the installation of telephones and teleprinters, but I was close to aircraft. I soon got closer to aircraft as 612 Volunteer Gliding School came to RAF Benson where I was working and asked for anyone interested in becoming an instructor, that'll be me then. I joined 612VGS and stayed with them until the unit was disbanded in 2016. In 1987 I changed jobs within the Civil Service and moved to Boscombe Down to become a Trial Officer testing aerial delivery systems, this meant I flew on Hercules aircraft whilst despatching parachute stores. The move to

Boscombe also meant I was close to the Museum of Army Flying at Middle Wallop with its collection of gliders. I soon became a member of the Friends of the Museum but didn't do much until a call came for volunteers to help fit out the newly built Hayward Hall – I became a kitchen fitter assembling shelves and the counter for the Café. The Friends formed a Sunday working group which I joined doing any job required of us by the curator. The group would continue until it evolved into a group of volunteers assisting with the revamp of the museum under Project Eagle. Shortly before the Project Eagle building phase was to start, I was made redundant at Boscombe Down and deciding to take an early retirement I offered my services to the Museum as a Warden, a role I started the day following my final day in full time employment – some retirement. However, the timing was fortuitous, as I was able to assist during the revamp moving the aircraft and exhibits, regularly taking on the role of move supervisor during the moves of aircraft across the airfield from the museum to the hangars where they were to be temporarily stored whilst the building work was carried out. Following the revamp I have continued in the role of Warden but I have also helped out in the Archive and assisted the Education officer with school and youth group visits giving them guided tours. When the Society of Friends was wound up and replaced with Museum Membership I never became a member of, I just kept turning up as I had become 'part of the museum'. However, when it was suggested (in jest) that I become a Platinum Member, I thought, why not, it is 'my museum' anyway. So that is why I have chosen to become a Platinum Member of the Army Flying Museum.

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