

From Southern Rhodesia to Walthamstow: One RAF pilot's journey

Royal Air Force welfare case officer James Baillie shares the story of high-flying pilot Norman Enders, now aged 96... In 2018, as a volunteer [...]



Norman Enders. Image courtesy of Julie Enders.
By Waltham Forest Echo 24 March 2021

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In 2018, as a volunteer befriender and welfare case officer with the Royal Air Force (RAF) Association, I was introduced to a Walthamstow man of German ancestry who had served in the RAF in the Second World War.

His name is Norman Enders. Norman, who sports the obligatory RAF moustache, is quietly spoken with a ready laugh and has lost none of his old-school charm. He also has an endless supply of RAF anecdotes.

In 1943, Norman, then an Air Training Corp Cadet, received his call up to the RAF – following his father, who served in the First World War in the RAF and the Royal Naval Air Service (RNAS).

Norman's journey would lead from RAF Aircrew Reception Centre in St John's Wood to Africa.

Initial training – mainly square-bashing drill – was conducted in Scarborough. He laughingly recalls how his section would frequently collide and crash to the ground to the despair of the drill instructor.

Selected for pilot training, he learned to fly on the De Havilland Tiger Moth biplane at 4 EFTS Elementary Flying Training School, RAF Brough, Yorkshire. Norman's unit was then sent via Manchester to Liverpool, where he embarked to an unknown overseas destination to continue training under the Empire Air Training Scheme.

He recalls the escort ships' guns being fired as practice and, on occasion, to warn off high-flying enemy reconnaissance aircraft. He also remembers the U-boat attack drills, requiring muster (safety drills) on deck. The convoy called at Freetown, Sierra Leone, before docking at Cape Town, South Africa.

At the RAF No.27 SFTS Service Flying Training School in Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia – a British colony until 1965, is now modern-day Zimbabwe – Norman and fellow trainees were issued with tropical kit: pith helmets and shorts, plus the formal Cadet Pilot cap with white hat band.

The trainees were a mixed bunch of RAF and exiles from occupied Europe. Norman particularly recalls the Belgians, including some aristocrats, and Greeks, who wanted nothing more than to be in combat. From speaking with them, he says he can understand – many had lost family.

The Rhodesian Air Askari Corps – a unit of black volunteers, who were under white command – guarded the airfield and performed other ground duties. Norman says racism was never an issue for RAF trainees, but he does recall the bad treatment handed out to the Askaris by visiting South African Air Force personnel, with orders being issued in clipped, Afrikaans-accented English.

Life on and off camp contrasted with life in wartime Britain. The base had its own swimming pool, and fresh food (especially fruit) was un-rationed.

The weekly highlight was the Friday night bus into the local town to visit the pubs and dance halls, where South African wines and beers were readily available.

He recalls his billet mate, a Glasgow chap inevitably known as 'Mac', had expertise in a useful combination of unarmed combat and dancing, often having to be dragged away from the mirror to ensure he got on the bus. No wonder the RAF was known to the locals as the 'blue plague'. On leave, Norman was able to visit Victoria Falls on the Zambezi River.

Continuing his flight training, Norman progressed to the Harvard advanced trainer. The serious business of flying started at dawn each day to avoid the intense midday heat.

He remembers the huge, radial Pratt and Whitney engine vibrating as he opened the throttle building revs for take off speed – each flight unit, consisting of three Harvard aircraft, roaring off in dust clouds. It soared over the Rhodesian bush landscape for navigation, aerial gunnery exercises and light bombing practice.

The instructor in the rear cockpit always gave a constant commentary throughout the flights, which included aerobatics and evasive manoeuvres.

One particular incident Norman tells me of is misjudging a landing and his instructor, increasingly agitated, shouting “pull up, pull up!” – accompanied by coarse language – before gaining control, whizzing at low-level along the runway before roaring over the boundary fence, climbing and banking to go back round for another attempt.

Norman’s group concentrated on training for the war with Japan and he was probably destined for No.1670 (Thunderbolt) Conversion Unit in Bangalore, India before front line service over in Myanmar (then Burma). The RAF however decided to retrain Norman on Radar, and he was transferred to No.9 RDF, RAF Yatesbury in Wiltshire. It was there he celebrated VE Day in May 1945.

Norman’s flying days were not yet over. In August 2019, I joined him as he co-piloted a light aircraft flying out of North Weald to the Shuttleworth Aircraft Collection, Bedford. Norman was obviously delighted and nervous to be back in “the office” – and a small crowd from the RAF Association Chingford branch assembled to see him off.

During our visit, a De Havilland Tiger Moth landed and taxied up. Norman and the notably young pilot chatted about the aircraft – a true meeting of minds separated by seven decades of life experience.

On our return flight, we flew low over the Chingford reservoirs, the site of the former RNAS Chingford airfield, before landing back at North Weald.

In recent years, Norman and I visited the RAF Museum Hendon on several occasions, as a VIP to renew his acquaintance with his Harvard aircraft

And happily, on Orford Road in summer 2020, we met an elderly lady whom Norman discovered had also served on Radar in the RAF in 1943-45. Waltham Forest still has its members of the greatest generation.

Now grounded, Norman is now a resident of a Walthamstow care home, but he continues to avidly read his monthly *Aeroplane* magazine. He celebrated his 96th birthday this February.

James Baillie was an aerospace export manager based in UK and Germany. His father served in the RAF. He recently completed an MA Theology and is seeking Ordination

He is also a NHS Dementia Research Champion. Learn more at [Join Dementia Research](#)