

THE ROYAL AIR FORCE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Air Commodore Henry Probert

One day in early 1986 a small group of people met in the Air Historical Branch, among us several very senior retired RAF officers and some eminent air historians. A few weeks earlier we had all been present at the Royal United Services Institute to hear the historian John Terraine addressing us on the theme of his recently published book about the Royal Air Force in the Second World War, *The Right of the Line*.

To some of us this occasion had seemed to offer the ideal opportunity to further a cause very close to our hearts. Plenty of organisations were dedicated to the preservation and study of the artifacts of the RAF and the records of its individual units, but none existed with the prime purpose of considering the policies of the Service, its operations and its personalities. Now we believed we had the catalyst.

We knew that the Society we hoped to form would have to rely on voluntary effort and be self-financing. So to get us started we each contributed £10, sufficient to print a supply of publicity leaflets; we chose a small working committee under the chairmanship of Air Marshal Sir Freddie Sowrey; and we asked MRAF Sir Dermot Boyle—still a great supporter of RAF causes—to sign a letter to the press. The result was that we were able to hold our inaugural meeting at the Royal Aeronautical Society on 20 October 1986, with Professor R.V. Jones—himself already an enthusiastic member of our new Society—delivering the

inaugural lecture. He spoke on the Intelligence War and the RAF, a subject for which he was uniquely qualified, and some 200 members heard him with rapt attention.

The society is now over 500 strong. We include serving and retired members of the RAF (ranging from non-commissioned ranks to Marshals of the RAF), historians, aviation buffs, anyone with an interest in RAF history; there is no other qualification. Moreover, our membership is not confined to the United Kingdom; almost 10% of our members live abroad, including a number of Canadians—doubtless a reflection of the great work done by the RCAF alongside the RAF during the Second World War. Our programme normally contains three events each year. One of them is the Annual General Meeting followed by a lecture delivered by a distinguished personality and



usually held at the RAF Club; last year, for example, Sir Frank Cooper reflected on his post-war experience as a senior civil servant in the Air Ministry, and this year John Terraine will address us on the RAF in the First World War, a special lecture intended to mark the RAF's 75th Anniversary.

Our other events occupy a whole day; each usually addresses a particular campaign or theme by bringing together historians and people "who were there." A series of short talks is delivered and members of the audience then ask questions and contribute their own

recollections. For example, our first major seminar considered the RAF contribution to the Suez campaign, later ones have featured the Berlin Airlift, the development of the RAF's nuclear deterrent forces, and flying training. Next October we shall address the Indonesian Confrontation.

Inevitably, World War II topics figure large in the programme. One-day meetings have been held on clandestine operations and photographic reconnaissance, and two years ago a particularly successful one was conducted at the RAF Museum jointly with the Americans: the subject, RAF/USAAF cooperation. Moreover in 1990, at the invitation of the Commandant, a seminar to mark the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain was held at the RAF Staff College, Bracknell; addresses by several historians, German as well as British, were followed by ample opportunity to capture in informal discussion the recollections of many who took part in the Battle, and the staff and students of today's Air Force greatly appreciated the chance to listen to and exchange views with the airmen of an earlier generation. So successful was the day that the Staff College has continued to play host to the Society once a year; seminars on the Battle of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean War have already been held, the Strategic Bomber Offensive is being tackled this March, and the Normandy Invasion and the Far Eastern War will follow in 1994 and 1995.

Many of our members are, of course, unable to attend functions regularly if at all, and partly for their benefit we record all our lectures and talks, together with subsequent discussions. These are then published in our "Proceedings," which appear twice a year and are issued to all members. "Proceedings" have a further purpose in that they enable what is said at our meeting to be preserved as part of the long-term historical record, and we hope that historians of the RAF and its associated Air Forces will increasingly recognise them as a significant source.

Note: Details of the RAF Historical Society are obtainable from the Membership Secretary, Commander Peter Montgomery, 28 Shirley Drive, Worthing, West Sussex, BN14 9AY. The annual subscription is £15, which includes the cost of the Society Proceedings, published in a handsome hard-cover edition.

Air Marshal Probert has written many articles and delivered a number of papers on various aspects of RAF history. He is the author of several chapters of the unpublished official narrative of the RAF in the Falklands conflict and has written a series of biographies on the RAF's Chiefs of the Air Staff Called "High Commanders of the RAF."