



SILVER CITY ASSOCIATION

CITIZEN'S PROFILE

KEITH DAGWELL

I was born in Tonbridge, Kent on 13th January 1938; the family moved to Tunbridge Wells in 1947 where I completed my education. I was then faced with the prospect of being 'dumped' in the army with no chance of learning a useful skill for later years. Consequently in 1954, aged 16, I joined the RAF as an instrument mechanic. I was posted to RAF Middle Wallop where I spent all four years of my service with the Joint Experimental Helicopter Unit (JEHU) whose purpose was to evaluate the potential of various helicopters in the field support role. JEHU operated the Bristol Sycamore (the RAF's first operational helicopter) and later the Westland Whirlwind - both of these aircraft were piston engine powered and they could barely lift a pile of sandwiches! However, they were all that was available to practice carrying 'under slung loads', dropping troops from ropes and practicing night flying. The unit took part in the Anglo-French-Israeli Suez invasion of 1956. Embarked in the aircraft carrier HMS Ocean were 'B' Flight and their eight Whirlwinds; their task was to fly Royal Marine Commandos into the centre of Port Said and bring the wounded back to the carrier. On the second day of the operation I moved with 'B' Flight to the captured El Gamil airfield where I had the dubious distinction of being one of the few people to be strafed by a MiG-15, resulting in a colleague losing a leg.

Completing my four years service in 1958, I left the RAF on a Friday and started work as an Instrument Engineer with Silver City Airways at Lydd on the following Monday. I worked there for ten years during which time (with a lot of help and encouragement from 'Timber' Wood) I gained my first ARB (now CAA) licence enabling me to take his place in the post of Inspector when he moved to Gatwick. In 1968, I also joined him as an Inspector Supervisor and Bill Kerr who was the Engineering Manager at Gatwick with British United (BUA). The BAC 1-11 and VC 10 were technically light years ahead of the Dak and Freighter and there was a lot of studying to do to get a multi-category CAA licence to cover these new types. In 1970 I took the life-changing decision to join the BUA Engineering Training School located in the old 'Beehive' building. Here I instructed engineers and pilots on the technical systems of the BAC 1-11, Boeing 707 and later the DC10.

Around this time Caledonian Airways and BUA merged to become British Caledonian Airways (BCAL). The BCAL fleet was growing fast and training was a major factor; as part of the expansion plan, a purpose-built training centre was built at Manor Royal Crawley embracing all aspects of training. I was fortunate enough to be appointed to the new position of Flight Operations Ground Training Manager. As part of a new joint venture with Rediffusion - the flight simulator manufacturer - BCAL formed a new independent company 'BCAL Flight Training' and it acquired the American Airlines business and premises in Fleming Way, together with a DC10 and Boeing 737 200 simulator. David Kemp was the MD and I became the Training Manager.

After British Airways took over BCAL there were a number of ownership changes (all American). Finally the dust settled and the huge General Electric took control, the name changed to GECAT (General Electric Commercial Aviation Training) and the operation grew so that there were twelve simulators at Gatwick and a further six near Heathrow. Over one hundred airlines were customers and I had a full time job being the Training

Manager. After a few years the opportunity came to retire early and I was ready for a break. I retired aged 57 only to be back again as a consultant three weeks later. I had been involved in so many things within the company that my knowledge was still useful. I remained there doing two or three days a week for another twelve years, finally retiring in 2006!

Ever since my Silver City days like so many I still have fond memories of the old company and its staff. Graham Kneath handed over the organisation of the annual reunions to me in 1987 - a hard act to follow. I soon realised what a wealth of unique experience was amongst us and set about collecting and preserving it for future generations before it was too late. With Sally Maycock's help the Silver City Association was formed and at its peak we were up to over 450 members.

My one ambition was to create a lasting record of our unique company. I managed to write a script for a talking book CD and with the help of Alina Jenkins (narration) and Colin Van Geffen (Art work) produced a twin CD set. I still needed to SHOW what the company was all about - so no alternative, I had to write a book. I was lucky enough to have the book 'Silver City Airways' published in February 2010 after considerable help from Paul Ross and Ken Honey plus encouragement from Sally Maycock and my partner Liz. I feel that now is the right time to hand over the Chairmanship to a younger mind for the next part of the journey. But what an unpredictable life I have had with Silver City at its roots.

