

# Southern Rhodesia Air Services 1939-1946

by Dave Newnham

On the 9-Sep-39, the Southern Rhodesia government announced the formation of the Southern Rhodesia Air Force (replacing the SR Air Unit) and at the same time formed Southern Rhodesia Air Services. SRAS had three roles to fulfil: -

- 1) To continue, maintain and expand "Airline Services" within and outside Rhodesia.
- 2) To act as a Communications Squadron and provide RATG with all its comms requirements.
- 3) To provide Meteorological Services in Rhodesia.

Civilian aviation within the colony went onto a war footing with the formation of the SRAS. The administration of the SRAS is somewhat blurred since everyone was 'doing his/her bit' for the war effort and little attention was paid to the 'paperwork'. The organisation of the service is not comprehensively covered, such things as Operational Record Books and unit diaries were not kept and the researcher has to rely upon a patchwork of memoirs and snippets gained from perusal of individual accounts and pilots logbooks.

Details of SRAS aircraft are reasonably well documented, (see Aircraft Listing) the aircraft inventory comprised impressed civilian aircraft, those SRAF aircraft that had not been deployed to their war stations (in Kenya) and the complete RANA fleet.

The manning of the SRAS was by: -

- A) SRAF personnel who remained in Rhodesia after the SRAU deployed to its war stations (unless they were scheduled to join the Rhodesian Air Training Group of the RAF).
- B) Rhodesian volunteers/conscripts called up for the duration. It should be said that there were very few "conscripts", the vast majority of individuals being volunteers.
- C) The complete RANA staff.

For legal and accounting reasons, Rhodesian civilians (including RANA staff) were attested into the SRAF upon being called-up. This enabled them to fulfil war duties. The SRAS remained a SR government unit throughout the war and was not classified as a military service. Thus avoiding legal problems when its aircraft flew to destinations outside Rhodesia.

In practical terms; the Southern Rhodesia Air Force ceased to exist when the vast majority of its personnel and aircraft deployed to its war stations in Kenya. Those few members left in Rhodesia either joining the SRAS or the Rhodesian Air Training Group.

The SRAS's main base was at Belvedere, Salisbury which had been the site of the pre-war civil airport, and it was joined by RATG's No.25 EFTS there on 24-May-40. It was from here that most of its airline services and some of the Met flights were performed. The SRAS also operated sub-stations at both Lusaka, Northern Rhodesia and Blantyre, Nyasaland from whence it flew some of its routes.

## **Pre-RATG**

It was agreed that prior to the formation of RATG, the SRAU/F instructors (who were now SRAS personnel) who had conducted training of the SRAU personnel before the war would continue flying training of Rhodesian volunteers, until such time as RATG commenced operations, and that the SRAS would provide the aircraft for this training. This training was conducted, at Belvedere

airport.

The first course started on the 02-Oct-39 and the intake was from existing commercial flying schools and air services. 14 members completed this course on 22-Nov-39 as fully-qualified military pilots. Most of them; with air gunners and ground crew, who had also received training, then proceeded to Kenya to join No. 1 Squadron SRAF.

This first course 'vacuumed' up most of the experienced pilots in Southern Rhodesia, and it was further agreed that until RATG took its first intake (planned for Apr-40), the facilities at Belvedere would be used to teach Rhodesian volunteer pilot recruits to elementary level. These trainees were then to be sent to RAF advanced flying schools in the UK and Middle East for further training.

Two further Elementary Flying Courses of 50 hours were run. These courses enabled the pilot cadets to fly "solo" on the Tiger Moth but did not qualify them for the award of the flying badge (Wings). After the course they were posted to the RAF for advanced training. The 40 pilot cadets from the first course went to the UK or Middle East for further training and the second of 22, all went to the Middle East (RAF Habbaniya).

In parallel with the pilot training a number of air gunners, fitters & riggers and photographers completed training courses.

I have the flying logbook of Neville Bowker who was on the last of these courses and it shows that he undertook basic flying on Tiger Moths at Belvedere, from 13-Feb-40 to 26-Mar-40, with instructors Flt. Lt's Longmore, Finnis and Greenshields.

He then proceeded to the Middle East where he joined No 4 SFTS, RAF Habbaniya. There he completed an advanced flying course (60 hours) from 17-Jun to 21-Aug-40 on Hart and Audax aircraft. Having gained his Wings, he remained at No 4 SFTS, Habbaniya for "battle training" (50 hours) from 27-Aug to 04-Nov-40, again on Hart and Audax aircraft. He then moved to No 70 (Middle East) Operational Training Unit at RAF Ismailia and completed an operational flying course (45 hours) on Hardy, Hind and Gauntlet aircraft; before joining No 112 Squadron flying Gloster Gladiators and later Curtis Tomahawks.

Incidentally, Neville Bowker is one of the unsung hero's of the second world war. Between 01-Mar and 27-Dec-41 he flew with No 112 Squadron in Greece, Crete and North Africa. Was wounded, hospitalised, captured and escaped from Crete, and during his period on the squadron, gained two victories in a Gladiator and a further eight in a Tomahawk against the Italians/Germans. One wonders how many more he would have gained had he not been shot down by ground fire on a strafing sortie in the desert and spent the rest of the war as a prisoner.

Training of Rhodesian volunteers ceased with the activation of RATG.

We now look at the main activities of the SRAS during the war. In addition to the flying training mentioned above, the SRAS continued to fly RANA scheduled airline services. It also became the RATGs Communications Squadron and undertook the daily Meteorological flights for the Meteorological Office.

### **Airline Activity**

The Southern Rhodesia government had recognised the need for the maintenance of airline services both within the colony and to external destinations during the war and on the 01-Feb-40 Rhodesian

and Nyasaland Airways Ltd (RANA) was impressed into the SRAS, lock, stock and barrel (equipment and personnel). This fleet provided SRAS with the ability to run adequate airline services. The extent of its operations can be judged by the fact that, by 01-Jun-41, it was running weekly scheduled services from Salisbury to Bulawayo, to Johannesburg [in South Africa], to Lusaka, Ndola & Kasama [in Northern Rhodesia], to Mbeya & Dodoma [in Tanganyika] and to Nairobi & Kisumu [in Kenya].

Upon impressment, all aircraft were allotted an SRAS Serial in the hundreds range by aircraft type. It was soon realised that external flights would need to be marked with international civil registration marks to conform with international agreements. There was much changing of marking between serials and civil registrations dependent upon the duty for which an aircraft was scheduled. However, some SRAS aircraft which were continuously employed on external flights (principally those to, or over Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique), never did have the SRAS serials applied. These aircraft remained marked with their civil registrations and those to which this applied were Dragon Rapides VP-YAU and VP-YBT and Leopard Moths VP-YAT and VP-YAZ.

The practice of using SRAS serials was eventually discontinued and by Apr-42 all SRAS aircraft on airline duty had reverted to civil registrations.

SRAS continued commercial activity throughout the war, however, as a government organisation it was obliged to give preference to "government sponsored" passengers. Thus fare paying passengers were only accepted once government requirements had been met. It is believed that government sponsored passengers were frequently a minority on its flights.

### **RATG Communications Flights**

RATG began forming on the 4-Jan-40, SRAS provided communications services for it, from the outset, communications tasking being issued by RATG Headquarters.

The communications flights were made up of impressed civilian and ex SRAF aircraft. Occasionally, ex RANA aircraft would be drafted in as a need arose. The exact number and location of the SRAS Communications Flights, providing RATG with its needs, is not known; but it is believed that several flights were positioned at various military airfields around the country. Communications flight aircraft were marked with a SRAS serial in the hundreds range by aircraft type. This practice continued throughout the war, until RATG took responsibility for its own communication services in Oct-45.

The SRAS serial was supposedly the only marking carried, however, photographic proof exists that at least some ex SRAF aircraft continued to carry military roundels after joining SRAS.

### **Meteorological Services**

SRAS took over the provision of Meteorological flights from the SRAU.

Initially, Gloster Gauntlet aircraft, intended for delivery to the defunct SRAU were used. Their arrival in Rhodesia coincided with the advent of the SRAS. They flew from Belvedere, with markings in the same format as the RATG communications flights.

Due to a shortage of aircraft, RATG made an increasing contribution to the task. By mid 1944, RATG was providing Hawker Hurricanes at the CFS and each of the 4 Service Flying Training Schools, for met flights.

## **Post War**

In Oct-45, with the war over and RATG rapidly running down, SRAS ceased its military activity and began operating as the national airline. From this point onward, RATG covered its own communications needs.

Returning Rhodesian airmen selected for the regular force were attested into the Southern Rhodesia Staff Corps and formed & manned a "Communications Flight". In due course, this "Communications Flight" became responsible for Meteorological flights once again.

## **Postscript**

It had been the intention of the Southern Rhodesia Government to re-instate Rhodesian And Nyasaland Airways Ltd (RANA) after the end of hostilities. However, the governments of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland co-operated in the formation of a new regional airline to serve the three territories and on 01-Jun-46 Central African Airways Corporation (CAA) was born. SRAS's airline assets were absorbed into the new organisation (including all remaining ex-RANA assets).

No ex-SRAU aircraft had survived the war, the remaining ex civilian aircraft were disposed of and the SRAS was dissolved.

## **Notes on the SRAS Aircraft Listing**

Details of SRAS aircraft will be found in the Aircraft Listing. Photos of SRAS aircraft are scarce and those found are detailed, in the Captions file.

**Note 1** Former SRAU aircraft remaining in the colony were transferred to the SRAS between Sep-39 and Apr-40. Exact dates unknown.

**Note 2** 6 x Hawker Audax aircraft were in service with the SRAU (later SRAF) prior to WW2, serialised SR09 to SR14. Four were deployed to their war stations in Kenya and the remaining two transferred to SRAS. Tie-ups between SRAU and SRAS serials are not known.

**Note 3** Rumours persist of further Hart and Audax aircraft being delivered both to the SRAF and SRAS early in WWII, from RAF Middle East sources; but no evidence has been found to support the claims.

**Note 4** DH Tiger Moth serialised SR7 served with the SRAU pre Sep-39. This aircraft was c/n 3653 and the only Tiger to serve with the SRAU. As per Note 1, this aircraft was transferred to SRAS. A Tiger Moth serialised 200 was in use with the SRAS in Feb/Mar-40. No c/n has been established for SRAS200 but it is almost certain that these are the same aircraft.

**Note 5** YP-YAT was transferred to CAA on the 1-Jun-46 and then to the SR Staff Corps (fore-runner of the post war SRAF) on 6-Nov-46 as SR22.

**Note 6** Serials for both Hornet Moths and Moth Majors are known but tie ups with airframes are unconfirmed. The table is thought to be the correct allotment but may possibly show SRAS serials against the incorrect airframes.

**Note 7** The SRAS serials are "best guess" based on available evidence.