

The Rhodesian Air Training Group: 1940–54

by Dave Newnham



Introduction

Whenever the Rhodesian Air Training Scheme (RATG) is mentioned many people appear to think that it refers to RAF wartime training, and that Rhodesia played a small part in what was, essentially, a Canadian venture. RATG was an important part of the Empire Air Training Scheme (which became the Commonwealth Air Training Scheme) and whilst most of the Commonwealth Air Training Scheme was disbanded after the War, RATG continued for many more years. Herewith an overview of the RATG organisation and the units of which it was composed.

General

From the 5-Jan-40 until the 31-Mar-54 the Royal Air Force had a presence in Rhodesia in the form of the Rhodesian Air Training Group (RATG). RATG trained over 9,900 aircrew for the Allied Air Forces during WW II, and continued training RAF aircrew after the War, until 1954.

During the years of World War II and after, the Royal Air Force was the sole military force to fly in Rhodesian skies; until 28-Nov-47 when the Southern Rhodesia Air Force was re-established as a permanent unit.

Some idea of the size of the RATG operation can be gained from the table below, which shows the total quantity of each aircraft type on the strength of RATG. Full details can be found in the RATG aircraft serial listings.

Aircraft Quantities:

DH Tiger Moth	-	535	
Fairchild Cornell	-	464	includes 156 stored, ex SA Air Training Scheme.
DHC-1 Chipmunk	-	70	
NA Harvard	-	675	
Airspeed Oxford	-	527	
Avro Anson	-	144	
Fairey Battle	-	25	
Hawker Hurricane	-	32	
TOTAL		2,472	

There were four incarnations of RATG; the “wartime” RATG, the post war RATG, the Air Training Wing and the “nineteen fifties” RATG. They are discussed below.

The "Wartime" RATG



Basic flying instruction on DH Tiger Moths at 25 EFTS, Belvedere.

Historical

The formation of RATG was announced on 4-Jan-40 and preparations commenced for the introduction of this part of the Empire Air Training Scheme. Training started on the 1-May-40 and a sizeable flying training organisation continued to operate throughout the war years. This "wartime" RATG continued its training activities until late in 1945 when the throughput of trained aircrew was no longer needed (there being enough aircrew available). The force was re-organised on 1-Jan-46.

Units

The units comprising RATG during the War are shown below: -

Headquarters:

RATG HQ Belvedere Suburb, Salisbury

SRAS Belvedere (RATG Communications Flt)

Initial Training Wing: ITS Hillside, Bulawayo

Elementary Flying Training Schools:

25 EFTS Belvedere 26 EFTS Guinea Fowl

27 EFTS Induna

28 EFTS Mount Hampden

Service Flying Training Schools:

20 SFTS Cranborne 21 SFTS Kumalo

22 SFTS Thornhill

23 SFTS Heany

Navigation, Bombing and Gunnery Training:

24 CAOS/24 BG&NS Moffat

Flying Instructor Training:

RhCFS/33 FIS Belvedere (till 2-Oct-42)

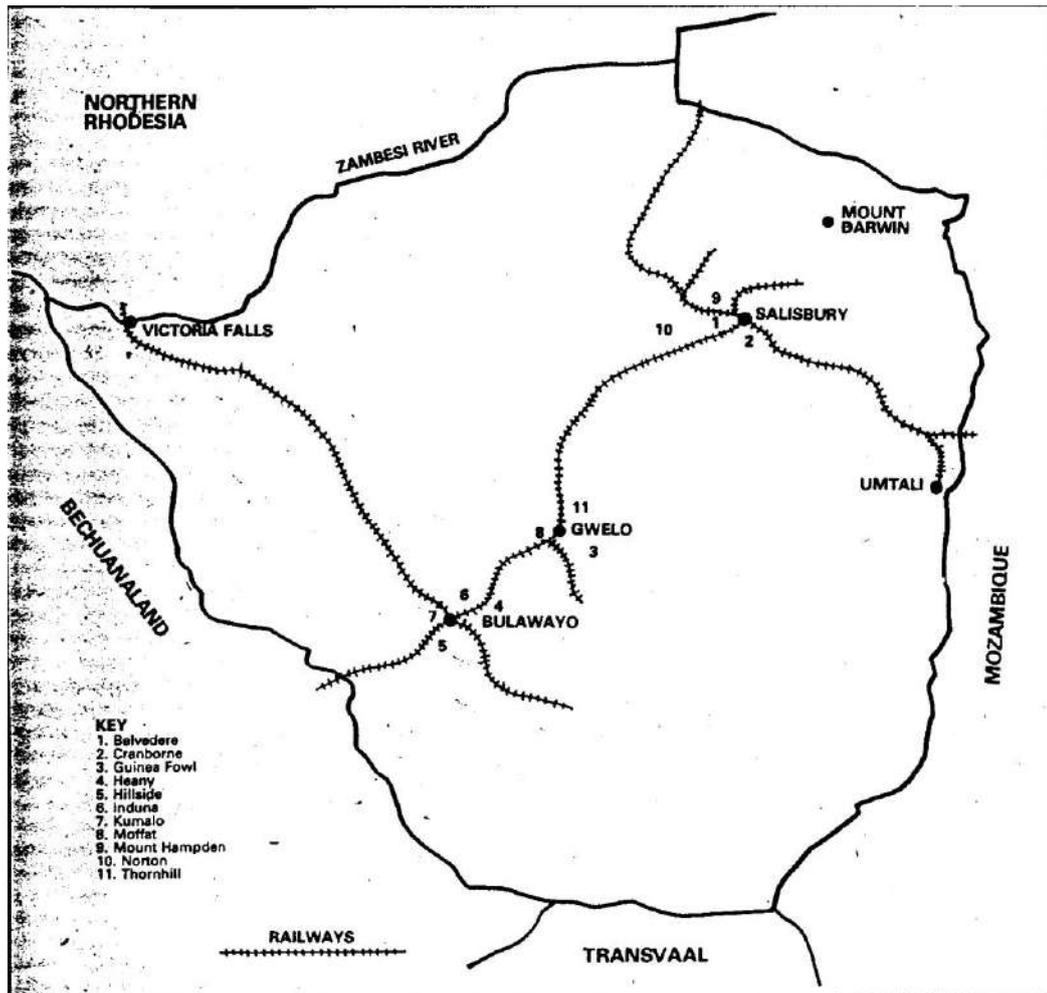
33 FIS/CFS(SR) Norton

Maintenance Units:

31 ARD Cranborne

32 ARD Heany

The locations of these units are shown below,



Organisation

RATG was organised as a headquarters with training units and supporting units reporting to it and operated from 5-Jan-40 to 1-Jan-46. **RATG Headquarters** was located in the Salisbury suburb of Belvedere. Providing communications services for RATG and tasked by RATG headquarters, were Communications Flights of the Southern Rhodesia Air Services (SRAS) whose headquarters were at the nearby Belvedere Airport. From Oct-45, SRAS became a civil airline, and RATG assumed responsibility for its own communications. Full details of SRAS will be found in the SRAS files.

Training

Prior to the formation of RATG, The SRAF trained local (Rhodesian) recruits at Belvedere on basic

flying to 'solo' standard. These trainees were then sent to an RAF advanced flying schools in the UK or Middle East for further training to "wings" standard and then onto an OTU for "battle" training.

Once RATG was in being, new trainees joined RATG from England, Australia, & other nations which included local (Rhodesian) recruits. They were sent to the Initial Training Wing (ITW) at Hillside, Bulawayo for RAF induction training [square bashing].

The pilot cadets were then sent for elementary flying training at an EFTS, which trained them up to 'solo' standard on basic training aircraft. At the end of the 'basic' phase they were 'streamed' onto single or multi-engined aircraft and posted to advanced training at an SFTS. Both streams trained to 'wings' standard at the completion of which the cadets were awarded their flying badge (wings).

The Navigator, Bomb Aimer and Air Gunner cadets, after completing ITW, went to 24 CAOS/24 BG&NS, RAF Moffat to complete their training.

At this point the newly qualified aircrew were dispatched from Rhodesia to an Operational Training Unit (OTU), to learn how to fight an aeroplane and (for multi-seat aeroplanes) to become a "crew" [not necessarily on the aircraft that they would fly on an operational squadron]. Late in the war the newly qualified aircrew were sent to a Refresher Flying Squadron, to keep their hands in whilst awaiting a posting to an OTU.

Training Units

Having completed **ITW**; the trainee pilots started flying training at one of Four Elementary Flying Training Schools which undertook basic flying training; or the Combined Air Observers School which trained Navigator/Air Observers and Air Gunner cadets.

The Elementary Flying Training Schools comprised: -

No. 25 EFTS

Opened at Belvedere on 22-May-40 and located there until it closed on the 16-Nov-45, with a relief landing ground at Parkridge from May-43. The unit flew DH Tiger Moths and later Fairchild Cornells.

No. 26 EFTS

Operated from RAF Guinea Fowl from 5-Aug-40 till the 14-Aug-45, with a relief landing grounds at Senali, Carpenter, Larne and Safago. It flew DH Tiger Moths and later Fairchild Cornells.

No. 27 EFTS

Sited at RAF Induna from 31-Jan-41, until the 21-Sep-45 with relief landing grounds at Rouxdale and Imbesu from Nov-44. DH Tiger Moths and Fairchild Cornells were used by the unit.

No. 28 EFTS

RAF Mount Hampden was the site of this unit from 29-Mar-41 and it absorbed No. 20 SFTS on the 7-Sep-45. It closed on the 30-Oct-45. It's relief landing grounds were Oldbury from Mar-43 and Rainham from Apr-1943 and it flew DH Tiger Moths and later Fairchild Cornells.

Upon successfully completing basic flying training, the trainees were streamed on to a Service Flying Training School. These comprised: -

No. 20 SFTS

Flew from RAF Cranborne from 10-Jul-40 to the 7-Sep-45. From Sep-43 it had a satellite at New Martinsthorpe and relief landing grounds at Sebastopol by Apr-43, Hienzani from 7-Sep-43 and

Inkomo from Sep-45. For single engined training it flew NA Harvards, but was absorbed into No. 28 EFTS.

No. 21 SFTS

Operated from RAF Kumalo from 11-Oct-40 to the 18-May-45 and out of its satellite Woolandale by Feb-1943. It had a relief landing ground at Marrony by Aug-1943. For multi-engined training it flew Airspeed Oxfords.

No. 22 SFTS

Based at RAF Thornhill from 7-Mar-1941 to the 30-Sep-45. It used relief landing grounds at Sendi by Apr-43 and from 29-Jun-45 and RAF Moffat from 10-Apr-45. For single engined training it flew NA Harvards.

No.23 SFTS

From 9-Jul-41 to the 30-Sep-45 it flew from RAF Heany with relief landing grounds at White's Run by Mar-45 and Sauerdale from Apr-45. For multi-engined training it flew Airspeed Oxfords.

No.24 Combined Air Observation School (CAOS)

Navigation/Air Observer and Air Gunner training was conducted at RAF Moffat from 25-Jul-41 using Airspeed Oxfords, Avro Ansons and NA Harvards. Its staff pilots also flew Fairey Battles as target towing aircraft for gunnery training. On the 12-May-43 the school was re-designated No. 24 Bombing, Gunnery and Navigation School (**24 BG&NS**). Two new units, No. 29 Elementary Navigation School and an Aircrew Pool were formed and these three units continued the training task, with the same aircraft, until 13-Apr-45.

Rhodesian Central Flying School (RhCFS)

Provided flying instructors for the groups' training schools and standardisation of Instructors. It was established at Belvedere on 3-Sep-41 flying DH Tiger Moths. On 20-May-42 the unit was re-designated **No.33 Flying Instructors School (33 FIS)** and although it remained at Belvedere the aircraft inventory had increased to include DH Tiger Moths, NA Harvards and Airspeed Oxfords.

On 5-Nov-42 the unit re-located to RAF Norton. From Apr-43 Hunyani and Glenluce were used as Relief Landing Grounds. Another change of designation occurred on 9-May-44 when the unit became the **Central Flying School (Southern Rhodesia), CFS(SR)** and used Knockmalloch and Parkridge landing grounds. It remained at Norton using the same aircraft types, with the addition of Fairchild Cornells and Avro Ansons, until 19-Oct-45. From Jun-44 its staff pilots flew Hawker Hurricanes on familiarisation and staff continuation training flights.

Aircraft Repair Depots

Supporting the flying effort and providing aircraft servicing and repair were No. 31 Aircraft Repair Depot at RAF Cranborne from 19-Jul-40 and No. 32 Aircraft Repair Depot at RAF Heany from Jun-41. Each had a NA Harvard on strength for communications work. A Central Maintenance Unit was established at Bulawayo in 1941.

Rhodesian Air Askari Corps

For airfield guard and defence duties the Rhodesian Air Askari Corps was established in 1940.

Rhodesian Womens Auxiliary Air Service (WAASsies)

Was formed in 1941 to provide administrative support to the Group.

The "Post war" RATG

General

After the end of World War II, in common with all other RAF groups, RATG was run down and continued its training task at a much reduced rate. RATG Headquarters moved from Belvedere suburb to RAF Kumalo and, effectively, RAF Kumalo was the only station to undertake any training activity – and not much of that!

The Group was re-organised on 1-Jan-46 and continued to barely function until the 1-Dec-46 when it was again re-organised, losing its Group status and being re-designated the Air Training Wing (Southern Rhodesia), [ATW(SR)], under which title it continued its training function until 10-May-48, still at a low throughput.

On 28-Nov-47 The Southern Rhodesia Air Force was re-established as a permanent unit and from that date until RATG closed in Mar-54, both the RAF and the SRAF took to the skies above Rhodesia.

The Air Training Wing

On 1-Dec-46 the position of RAF training in Rhodesia was rationalised and the organisation modified to reflect post war needs. The Air Training Wing (Southern Rhodesia) was established, in place of RATG, which comprised the headquarters at RAF Kumalo and two stations, RAF Heany and RAF Thornhill. This organisation remained in place until the 10-May-48.

Headquarters ATW(SR) remained at RAF Kumalo, which also housed the HQ RhATW Communications Flight, flying Avro Ansons (albeit the more modern communications version), DH Tiger Moths and NA Harvards.

No. 4 FTS

Conducted both elementary and advanced flying training and was housed at RAF Heany from 1-Feb-47, flying DH Tiger Moths, NA Harvards and Avro Ansons.

No. 5 FTS

Flew from RAF Thornhill from 23-Apr-47 until 4-Jan-48. Like 4 FTS, it ran both basic and advanced flying courses, using DH Tiger Moths, NA Harvards and Avro Ansons. However, on 4-Jan-1948, it disbanded into No. 4 FTS at Heany and No. 3 ANS at Thornhill.

No. 3 ANS

On 5-Jan-48, 3 ANS was formed from the navigation sections of No's 4 & 5 FTS. It flew Avro Ansons, from RAF Thornhill with a relief landing ground at Gwanda.

Supporting the flying effort were No. 394 MU, the Aircraft Repair and Storage Depot at RAF Heany and No. 395 MU at RAF Bulawayo. Both opened on 1-Sep-47.

The "Nineteen Fifties" RATG

The escalation of the Cold War and the post-war run down of the RAF resulted in a shortage of trained aircrew. With a renewed need for aircrew training, the RAF re-vitalised the group, re-establishing its "Group" status and once again designating it, the Rhodesian Air Training Group on the 10-May-48. The advent of the Korean War re-affirmed the need. Training activity then

continued at a faster pace, although the organisation did not grow to its wartime level.

Unit Locations

The designations and unit locations of the post war RATG are shown below: -

Headquarters:	HQ RATG Kumalo	RATG Comms Sqn Kumalo
Flying Training Schools:	4 FTS Heany	5 FTS Thornhill
Air Navigation School:	3 ANS Thornhill	
Maintenance Units:	394 MU Heany	395 MU Bulawayo

The Group continued in this form until its closure on the 31-Mar-54.

RATG Headquarters remained at RAF Kumalo as did the RATG Communications Flight which was upgraded to Squadron status, but still flew Avro Ansons, DH Tiger Moths (until 1951), DHC Chipmunks and NA Harvards.

No. 4 FTS

Continued to fly from RAF Heany. It flew Avro Ansons, DH Tiger Moths (until 1951), DHC Chipmunks and NA Harvards until its final closure on 26-Jan-54.

No. 5 FTS

Was re-established at RAF Thornhill on 22-Jan-1951. It absorbed No. 3 ANS on 28-Sep-51 and flew Avro Ansons, DH Tiger Moths (until replaced by Chipmunks), DHC Chipmunks and NA Harvards until it closed on 30-Dec-53.



Basic flying instruction on DHC Chipmunk at 5 FTS, Thornhill.

No. 3 ANS

The Navigation school remained at RAF Thornhill, flying Avro Ansons until it was absorbed by No. 5 FTS on 28-Sep-51.

Bombing ranges used by RATG during the 1950s were located at Inkomo, Kabanga, Miasi and Mielbo.

Relief landing grounds used by RATG for training during this period included Gwanda, Kabanga and Pendennis.

A Station Flight was also established at RAF Thornhill but details of dates of existence and aircraft flown have not been found.

Both 394 and 395 MU's continued their support of the flying effort from RAF Heany and RAF Bulawayo.

Aircraft

With strict post-war economy in situ, the RATG Cornells were destroyed and further deliveries of DH Tiger Moths were made (from the SAAF), to provide basic training aircraft. These Tiger Moths continued in use until replaced by DHC Chipmunks in 1951.

The NA Harvard continued in use as the advanced trainer and further deliveries of these aircraft were made as required.

By the end of the war, hard usage and climatic conditions (deterioration of the glued joints) had rendered RATG's Airspeed Oxfords beyond economical repair and they were scrapped. They were replaced, in multi-engined pilot training, navigator training and communications roles by Avro Anson T.20 and C.19 aircraft.

Camouflage and Markings

Post war Flying Training Command colour schemes were in accordance with standard RAF practice (silver with yellow training bands). Unit and Individual aircraft codes are shown in the accompanying aircraft tables, where known.

For a number of reasons (mainly financial) it was decided to close the Commonwealth Air Training Scheme and return RAF aircrew training to within the British Isles. In compliance with this policy, the group ceased training in 1954, and was disbanded on 31-Mar-54.

Postscript

Upon close down, the groups' personnel returned to the British Isles. The Ansons were flown back to the UK (losing a couple on the way). The Tiger Moths, Chipmunks and Harvards were sold or disposed of (it being determined that repatriation to the UK would be uneconomic). However, it is of interest that several DH Tiger Moths and NA Harvards were passed on to the SRAF.

Between Sep-48 and Feb-49 at least 10 DH Tiger Moths were acquired by the SRAF from RATG scrap dumps (with the connivance of RATG). It is thought that the number may be higher but 10 have been positively identified. Also in Feb-49, 12 NA Harvard 2A's were presented to the SRAF by the RAF. Between Mar-52 and Feb-53 the SRAF and RATG arranged for the swap of 12 of SRAF's Harvard 2B's for a similar number of RATG's Harvard 2A's. Of these, 23 have been identified.

About a dozen RATG Instructors and NA Harvard aircraft were sent from RATG to Eastleigh (Nairobi, Kenya) from the 23-Mar-53 as No.1340 Flight which conducted anti Mau-Mau operations

until the 30-Sep-55. 14 Harvards have been identified.

Aircraft Serial Files

General Note

A serials file is provided for each aircraft type flown by RATG. NB: The files contain only those aircraft that actually served with RATG. Aircraft that were allocated to RATG but that were either lost during delivery or diverted to the SA Air Training scheme before delivery to Rhodesia, are not included.

Dates showing dd-mmm-yy are extracted from flying logbooks and show that the aircraft was on the unit on that day. It is certain that most aircraft were serving with the unit prior to and after the dates given. Dates showing mmm-yy are from data supplied showing an individual was on a course at the unit during the dates specified and I have a list of the serials of the aircraft he flew. Most of the aircraft will have been on the unit for the complete length of the course but this is not guaranteed. Dates shown in Red are best estimates based on available evidence. Comments on individual aircraft appear below.

Anson

The Mk.1s were scrapped but the C.19s and T.20s were flown back to UK upon the closure of RATG, losing a couple along the way.

Battle

The Battles were used by No.24 Bombing Gunnery and Navigation School. Their main duty was to tow targets for Air Gunner training.

Chipmunk

Chipmunks replaced Tiger Moths and Cornells as basic trainers in the post war RATG from late 1951. Several of the last to be delivered were placed straight into storage and never used.

To check the suitability of the aircraft for Rhodesia's hot & high climate, Chipmunk ZS-BOB was flown up from South Africa in 1951. After arrival at Thornhill, The OC Flying demanded the first trip but neglected to wait for the daily early morning inspection of the compacted earth runway, for antbear holes. The aircraft was badly damaged upon striking a hole. Fortunately, previous flying tests in Bulawayo had already established the suitability of the aircraft, but this did little to mitigate the Wg Cdrs' embarrassment.

Cornell

Side codes were not used on Cornells, the serial number being used as the aircraft identifier. Many aircraft were marked with their RCAF serial instead of their RAF serial upon arrival and whilst in service with RATG. Where applicable the table shows both serials. Some Cornells were later re-marked with their RAF serial and instances occur where pilots logbooks show both RAF and RCAF serials at different times.

A batch of Cornells (156) were delivered to the SA Air Training Scheme, however, the South Africans had already decided not to use the Cornell for training and sent them straight on to RATG. These are shown in the table and, on arrival, they were placed into storage and the vast majority were never used.

After WW2, the UK government was reluctant to spend "scarce" US Dollars upon spares and replacements. They were struck off charge and destroyed; none were transferred to civilian ownership.

Harvard

All marks of Harvard flew with RATG. Some of the early delivered Mk.1s had remarkably long lives. It was two of the Harvard aircraft that were involved in the infamous mid-air collision in the formation fly past for the Queen Mother on the 14-Jun-53.

Hurricane

Obtained from RAF Middle East stocks and used mainly by CFS(SR). They were used to provide continuation training of instructors (to keep their hands in on high performance aircraft), and in the daily Met Flights at CFS and SFTS's where they replaced SRAS aircraft.

Oxford

The main multi-engined trainer used by the war-time RATG. Mk.1s and 2s were converted by the ARDs to the Mk.5 with improved engines and other refinements; they are shown as separate entries in the table.

All were built in the UK and had their serials applied by the manufacturer. In mid 1940, the Airspeed company were constructing a batch of Oxford Mk.1's. Twelve of these had been assigned to fulfill a New Zealand Air Force requirement and were marked with New Zealand serials. The Air Ministry diverted the order to RATG. They were delivered to Rhodesia in their New Zealand serials which were not replaced. There is some evidence to suggest that at a later stage some of the aircraft had their UK serials belatedly applied.

It was an Oxford which being lost, forced landed out of fuel, in Bechuanaland. And this led to the infamous incident where local tribesmen ate the crew in an act of cannibalism.

Tiger Moth

Initially, 75 aircraft manufactured in Australia were delivered without serials marked on the aircraft, although they had been allotted RAF serials. The documentation giving the serials appears not to have arrived in Rhodesia and the aircraft were marked with serials equating to their c/n. Later, some were marked with an MC [Machine] prefix. At some stage, it seems to have been assumed that the non-prefixed Tigers must have DX serials and some were then simply marked with a DX followed by c/n; thus often duplicated existing genuine DX serials. Where identified, MC and False DX serials are shown in the table.

In 1943, Tiger Moths with over 2,000 flying hours were scrapped. They were replaced by Fairchild Cornells. Those Tigers deemed worthy of further use were transferred to the SAAF via Induna, where several were not accepted by the SAAF due to their poor condition.

In the late 40s/early 50s, many 4 FTS Tiger Moths carried the letters "SE" on the nose as well as the 2-letter code on the fuselage [eg "A-"; "B-"; "C-"], the latter representing the relevant Flight.

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