

THE CAMBRIDGE FLYING GROUP

By

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[The major part of this article was first published in 'Vintage Aircraft', no. 20, April – June 1981 and was then updated by Bill Ison himself. Bill was CFI of Cambridge Flying Group until 2009, and remained CFI Emeritus until he died in 2011.]

At the end of 1953, as the RAFVR was thinning out, I was approached by John Peak to join with him and his associates in forming No. 22 Flying Group under the auspices of the Popular Flying Association. I was at that time instructing with No. 22 Reserve Flying School on Chipmunk aircraft but the writing on the wall said this was to end and it was with some trepidation that I agreed to the proposition. I had certain misgivings because I have always had a great respect for the 'bull' of the Service and little time for the slapdash of some private owner operations. Now that I am responsible for civilian aircraft I have tried to adopt and preserve some of the discipline which I am sure is the backbone of safety and the reliable operation of aircraft.

John Peak was operating Gemini G-AKHV in those days and I was flung in at the deep end by giving dual instruction to would-be twin pilots on this very pleasant aircraft. The Cirrus Major engines were never the most reliable, as I found out on the day when I chopped one for a student to carry out a forced landing. On base leg we were treated to a loud bang and the live engine packed up, having pushed out a cylinder. Oh, the joys of civilian aircraft! For that matter it had happened to me a year before when flying an Oxford at 8,000 feet in cloud over Yarmouth, but on that occasion we were all wearing parachutes and it had not seemed so bad!

During this period the other members of No. 22 Flying Group were operating a Proctor and a Chrislea Ace, G-AKVB, neither of which were suitable for *ab initio* training. By forming themselves into a Group they availed themselves of a rebate payable by the Government on hours flown. However I was interested in the basic training aspect and the committee enlisted the aid of Mr Reg Marsh who loaned his Taylorcraft Plus C/2, G-AFWM, for this purpose. I viewed this aircraft with some disdain – not only was it lacking in paint, but it was powered by another bloody Cirrus engine. In all fairness it proved most reliable and after a respray looked and flew quite well. The fuel tap fell off during one flight but since the cock was in the 'ON' position at that moment, the flight proved uneventful.

We commenced a training programme and I enlisted an FARVR pal of mine who had joined with me back in 1946, one Jimmy Taylor. I think he shared my views that were instilled into the gang of cowboys calling themselves No. 22 Private Flying Group. Jim had flown Stirlings with No. 7 Squadron until a Luftwaffe night-fighter brought him down on the way back from Stuttgart and he had ended his RAF flying in Stalag Luft III. Jimmy proved a great help with instruction, and we became busy enough to look for better things.

My idea was to obtain an aerobatic and spinnable machine and after looking at a very smooth Magister (with canopy) my adrenalin speeded up quite a bit. Unfortunately this aircraft, nice as it was, was very cramped because of the canopy, and we looked further afield. Joy of joys – a Tiger Moth, G-ANLG, as new, nil-hour engine, price with full CofA. £275, and off I went to Panshanger to collect. This was a real ex-Service machine and it was put to good use on its immediate return to Cambridge.

More students appeared (we called them 'pupils' in those days) and I was delighted to get more help from Den Cash, another ex RAFVR pal who had joined at about the same time as Jimmy Taylor and myself.

It was obvious that as things were going well we needed more aircraft. Marshall's our hosts at Cambridge, did all our servicing and, since they operated Tigers, spares were readily available. I opted for another Tiger, and in January 1956 we bought G-AHIZ from Panshanger – the price I think was £325, and the aircraft was finished in the London Aero Club colours of yellow and silver. We liked the colour scheme and adopted it as our standard since the London Aero Club had ceased to exist as such. She remains with us today and has proved to be a delightful aircraft for aerobatics.

It was a sad day for us when poor old 'NLG ended its days on a hangar roof at Luton in May 1958; a badly judged 'touch and go' with considerable swing caused it to sink with a sigh onto the roof. Fortunately no casualties, although my blood pressure suffered for some time.

We had been looking for another Tiger to replace 'NLG and I found one dismantled at Old Warden which emerged in July 1958 as G-AOEI, priced at £700. This machine had a history: she had been in service with No. 81 Squadron B.E.F. in France during 1940 and was a genuine Hatfield built Tiger. She is still with us today and going well, having been written off twice and rebuilt since those early days.

Looking back over those years we enjoyed the use of many types at the Cambridge Flying Group. One of these owned by Mr D. Jackson was a Miles Monarch G-AFJU. This was a good aircraft – a three seater behind a Gipsy Major 1 at 115 m.p.h, what have we today to better this? Not much. We also flew for a time the little Zaunkoenig, G-ALUA, with a Zundapp engine; great fun – 'chicken' if you used it at an airfield as you could land it in the dispersal area. We flew a Messenger, G-ALAI, known as '*The Skyhook*,' but the owner left Cambridgeshire and took this aircraft out of the local scene. We had the use of an Auster G-ANIO, a lively old brute, but oh! Dear, no self starter, and if you went on a cross-country with this little beauty you were lucky to get back the same day!

One of our trained pilots bought a Piper Cub, G-AKAA, and several members flew this; we also tried an Ercoupe, G-AFKC, owned by Stan Parkin, who let us amaze ourselves with this little machine. One of the most interesting types was a Magister, G-AKRR, which was flown in by one of our members, and we managed a solo or two with it. This particular Maggie now resides in the Manchester Museum of Science and Technology.

When John Peak sold his Gemini he bought a Rapide, G-AHEB, and, fool that I am, I introduced several people to the gentle art of twin-engined flying on this machine. Those who have rolled down the field whilst standing behind the trainee pilot, with little opportunity to grab the pole and none at all in checking the swing with rudder, will share my view that there is an easier way to spend your leisure time.

After the Rapide was sold, John purchased a remarkable aircraft, the Percival Q,6 prototype G-AEYE. This particular aircraft was demonstrated at Cambridge when the present airfield opened in 1937 or thereabouts. Since Mr Peak was a friend I was glad when he got rid of this aircraft, which, although ahead of its time, was not a placid aeroplane and would bite rather hard unless you came in like a jet.

What of our Group today? We continue to operate G-AHIZ and G-AOEI. I have reason to believe we are the only organization in the world still training to P.P.L. standard on Tiger Moths, although the major part of our training is conversion from tricycles to taildraggers. Students today tend to find the Tiger very demanding, which it probably is compared to a Cherokee 140 or Cessna 150, but it is still, in my opinion, one of the best basic trainers ever built. Let us remember in the early days we took off at Cambridge into wind, today we are obliged to use our grass strips which are not necessarily into wind. Cope with your Tiger out of wind on take-off and then landing and you are beginning to learn something about cross-wind components. And, my friend, you have no brakes, so don't taxi so bloody fast, especially crosswind. Back in 1981 when this article was first written, we were experiencing problems resulting from the loss of 80 octane fuel. Since then we have enjoyed the use of it again for a while with better performance and less in the way of running problems as a result. Regrettably, we are now back to square one in 1997 – 80 octane has again been withdrawn as uneconomical to produce by the fuel companies.

However both our aircraft G-AHIZ and G-AOEI are now sporting Gipsy Major 1C engines with aluminium cylinder heads and sodium filled exhaust valves and running on 100LL fuel. We are now on Public Transport Category maintenance and have a strict programme in that respect.

Betty Willink, one of our first lady members to qualify on Tigers (and additionally to get a night rating), became Operations Manager and is now Mrs Ison!

One of the problems today is to find instructors for the Tiger Moth aircraft, and anyone wishing to do this is very thoroughly checked in all the exercises. It is hard basic flying and the aircraft, although easy to fly, are difficult to fly *accurately*. *Any* instructor will not do – he/she has to endure limited instruments, cold cockpits *and* be prepared to get oil on the hands *and* watch out for cross-winds – the Tiger does not let you get away with it!