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Defending America by Aiding the Allies: British Student Pilots at Arcadia and Clewiston, 1941-1945

by THOMAS D. GREENHAW

Early Monday morning, June 8, 1941, 99 British citizens arrived at the Atlantic Coast Line depot in Arcadia, Florida. Although dressed in civilian clothes, all were members of the Royal Air Force destined for training as pilots in the United States before returning to defend king and country in the raging European war. It was a delicate situation. The United States was trying to aid Britain and her allies while maintaining its official neutrality.

By May 1940, the Germans had conquered Norway, Denmark, and the Low Countries. If France fell, which seemed likely at the time, almost all of the United Kingdom would be vulnerable to German air attacks launched from airfields in France and the Low Countries. Large scale enemy air attacks on Britain would make the training of pilots extremely difficult if not impossible. Prolonged air-raids would additionally compel the Royal Air Force to use all its planes for defense, leaving none for training purposes.

The possibility of such a situation had been discussed during the 1930s with the consequent result that men began training throughout the British Empire in what became known as the Empire Training Scheme. The concept of this program was good, but apparently two factors were overlooked: the great distances from the United Kingdom to South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia, and the lack of aircraft. Almost all the planes used in the program had been manufactured in Britain. In the case of Canada, distance was not an obstacle, but the Dominion could not produce enough aircraft. Furthermore, weather conditions precluded pilot-training in Canada during much of the year. By a process of elimination there seemed to be only one place which could provide sufficient aircraft, a safe place to train, and a location not too distant from England. That place was the United States, especially the southern part. The difficulty with that location was that the United States was still a neutral nation. During May 1940 Air Commodore Alfred

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BRITISH STUDENT PILOTS AT ARCADIA AND CLEWISTON 155

Cecil Critchley of the Royal Air Force discussed— on an informal basis— with Colonel M. Scanlon, air attache at the American embassy in London, the possibility of training British pilots in the United States.¹ Scanlon, while personally favoring such a proposal, had no authority to act on it. He did think, however, that American public opinion would support such an action. This belief, coupled with the rapidly deteriorating situation in Europe, prompted the British government to initiate formal discussions with United States authorities about the matter.

On May 22, 1940, Sir Archibald Sinclair, Air Minister in Winston Churchill's war cabinet, asked Lord Halifax to speak about the matter with Joseph Kennedy, the United States ambassador in London. Kennedy was inclined toward a plan whereby the United States would officially overlook the training of Royal Air Force cadets as private students in civilian schools. Instructions were sent to Lord Lothian, British ambassador in Washington, who discussed the subject with Secretary of State Sumner Welles. Royal Air Force Marshal McKean was directed to examine the adequacy of American flying schools, including the Riddle Flying School in Miami, for the training of British pilots.

Secretary Welles replied on June 5 that, because of a shortage of instructors and equipment, the United States could take neither British nor Canadian students except in a few special cases. At the time, the United States was expanding its own training facilities and the government was having to contract with the Miami facility and other civilian schools to train its own military pilots and air crews. Shortly after that exchange, Air Commodore George Pirie, British air attache in Washington, and Lord Lothian asked Secretary Welles if two or three airfields in the southern part of the United States might be made available. This would enable the United Kingdom to undertake training on civilian air fields with civilian instructors and civilian pupils. President Franklin Roosevelt responded that if the necessary planes and instructors could be found, it would be better if the training were done in Canada. But the president did not completely reject the idea of training British pilots in the United States.²

1. This information was obtained from the Royal Air Force archives, Lacon House, London, by special permission while it was in the process of declassification, but had not yet been opened to the public.

2. Ibid.

By August 1940, the Battle of Britain was in full force, and it seemed only a matter of time before Germany would attempt an invasion across the English Channel. The situation caused the matter of pilot training in the United States to be reopened. This time Captain Harold Balfour of the Royal Air Force spoke directly with President Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins. The President thought that, with the publicity then being given to the situation in England, the British request would be favorably received by the American public. As a result of this conversation, Balfour cabled to the London government on August 24, a plan for employing three or four civilian flying schools in the United States where that nation was already training pilots for its own military forces. The greatest obstacle would be the acquisition of advanced trainer aircraft which were then extremely scarce. Air Vice Marshal McKean made a special trip to Washington in an attempt to elicit early delivery of American aircraft for the training of British pilots. He was unsuccessful. The earliest date that aircraft could be delivered to the British was June 1941, by which time the German invasion of Britain might already be an accomplished fact. President Roosevelt was personally willing to divert some of the scarce aircraft to the British, which he certainly had the authority to do. But there were several factors preventing him from doing so. The shortage of aircraft was well known in Congress and any attempt to divert them from American use was likely to lead to a Congressional investigation. There were also some people in the government who were concerned about secret war agreements. Finally, there was a presidential election in 1940.

Apart from the inability— or unwillingness— of the United States to supply the necessary training aircraft, the British were concerned about the cost of Captain Balfour's plan. They would be obliged to pay all the costs of any of the schools which were turned over to them for training. The problem was resolved in December 1940, however, when President Roosevelt announced his policy of lend-lease to become effective the following March. Between December 1940 and March 1941, the British busily prepared plans for the training of Royal Air Force pilot-cadets in the United States. On March 5, 1941, General Henry H. Arnold notified Air Commodore George Pirie that as soon as the lend-lease legislation was enacted, the United States would make available to the British 260 primary and 285 advanced trainers for use in civilian flying schools in the United States.

BRITISH STUDENT PILOTS AT ARCADIA AND CLEMSTON 157

The British had decided that they would employ six schools. A joint Anglo-American group nominated the specific schools. One of those selected was the Riddle Flying School in Miami, owned and operated by John Henry Riddle. Riddle had already been contacted by his friend, General Arnold, about the possibility of his participating in the British program.³ In order to save time, Arnold called Riddle and the other school operators to Washington to meet with Pirie even before the lend-lease legislation passed.⁴ The program became known as the All-Through, or Six Schools Scheme.⁵ The schools became better known as the British Flying Training Schools, or BFTS. The one conducted by Riddle, first at Arcadia, and then at Clewiston, was BFTS #5.

General Arnold had already notified Riddle in 1940 that the United States Army Air Corps would soon be engaging civilian flying schools to train its own pilots, and asked if he would be interested in seeking a contract for that purpose. Riddle was keenly interested, but his school was not then equipped to handle the training of military pilots. To enlarge his existing facility or to build a new one, Riddle felt that he would need financial assistance from the U.S. government. With \$250 million available for just this purpose, General Arnold tried to persuade Riddle to build a new facility in Kentucky across the Ohio River from Cincinnati. The general's opposition to a flying facility in Florida stemmed from his knowledge that, in the event of war, the United States was planning to leave the peninsula undefended and therefore liable to enemy attack. But Riddle argued successfully that Arnold's plan to build a facility in Kentucky was ill-conceived and unwise.⁶ Arnold advanced funds to Riddle for a school to be located in Florida. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation loaned him an additional \$230,000.⁷

There were several abandoned air strips in southern Florida any one of which, with sufficient funds, could be transformed into

3. Interview with John Henry Riddle, Miami, August 21, 1980. Hereinafter Riddle Interview.

4. Ibid.

5. All-Through meant that primary, intermediate, and advanced training was conducted at the same locations.

6. Ibid.; *New River News*, Summer, 1981.

7. *Fly Paper*, June 2, 1941. The *Fly Paper* was a newsletter published by the Riddle Aeronautical Institute. It is on file in the Embry-Riddle University library, Daytona Beach.



RAF cadet-pilots with their instructors in front of the Riddle Aeronautical Institute hangars at Carlstrom Field. Photograph courtesy of U.S. Air Force.

a properly equipped facility which would meet military standards for the instruction and training of pilots. One of them was Carlstrom Field in Arcadia, where Riddle had himself first learned to fly in the early 1920s. Upon investigation, he learned that the U.S. government still owned the abandoned facility. Unused for nearly fifteen years, many of the buildings had been razed. Most of those remaining were beyond repair. Because the Army Air Corps was enlarging its facilities at nearby McDill Field in Tampa, it was not interested in rebuilding Carlstrom Field. To help them decide what to do with the old field, members of the Congressional military affairs committee, accompanied by Riddle, made an inspection trip to Arcadia. Finding the place flooded by a heavy summer thunderstorm, the Congressmen declared the place unfit for further use as a training facility and recommended its disposition. According to Riddle's recollection, he was able to buy the site for the nominal sum of \$500.⁸ In short order, he built the Riddle Aeronautical Institute, the primary purpose of which was to train pilots for the United States army. On January 19, 1941, the War Department an-

8. Riddle Interview.

nounced that, as a part of the nation's defense program, civilian air schools would begin training military pilots.⁹

The first American cadets arrived for training at Carlstrom Field on March 16, 1941, even before construction had been completed.¹⁰ When the first class was graduated in early June, Group Captain D. V. Carnegie of the Royal Air Force was among the guests invited to the ceremonies. He was in town to make arrangements for the arrival of the first British cadets.¹¹

By early spring 1941, Riddle was already strongly pro-British. He had offered to accept and care for 125 British children who were being evacuated from their country because of the air-raid danger. In anticipation of their arrival, he had taken options on three houses. Like many other Americans, he wanted to assist the British regardless of the neutrality of the United States. Enactment of the lend-lease legislation in March 1941 was the catalyst which enabled him to act on his sentiments.

Officials of the United States Army Technical Training Command had communicated with Riddle with a view toward establishing a flying training facility for British cadets, and a contract was completed. This was the reason for Group Captain Carnegie's presence at Arcadia when the first class of American cadets were graduated. Carnegie and Riddle agreed upon the details of the new program. The British government was to pay for construction and operation of the training facility using funds obtained through the lend-lease program. The instructors would be American. The only British personnel would be one Royal Air Force officer and the cadets themselves.

By late spring 1941, the military situation in England was desperate. It would be months before completion of the American airfields and additional time would be required before the first group of cadets could be graduated and returned to England. The one thing that the British did not have was time. Recognizing the urgency, the War Department agreed to allow the British to begin training immediately in civilian schools which were already training American military personnel. They were to begin even at the expense of delaying the training of American airmen. The British

9. *The Arcadian*, January 23, 1941.

10. *Ibid.*, March 20, 1941.

11. *Ibid.*, June 5, 1941.

were to be transferred to their own fields as soon as they were completed.¹²

As soon as Carnegie arrived in South Florida, Riddle took him on a tour of the area. They first went to Arcadia and inspected the facilities and the quality of training. While looking for suitable sites for the permanent British school, they flew near Clewiston on the south shore of Lake Okeechobee. Carnegie was expressing the urgency of the need for locating a site. Riddle switched off the engine and said that they would use the site at which the plane came down. With Carnegie shouting for him to restart the engine, Riddle maintained a steady glide, landing the plane smoothly about seven miles west of Clewiston. That became the site of the new school, but the drama of the event was overdone. Riddle had already scouted the region for possible sites soon after agreeing to train the British pilots. Having already decided on the desirability of the site, he had chosen an appropriate moment to begin his dramatic descent.¹³

In early May, the *Clewiston News* reported that there might be an air base built in the area because Riddle had been seen in the area.¹⁴ By mid-June, Carnegie and Riddle had agreed upon the site west of Clewiston.¹⁵ Frank Wheeler of the Wheeler Construction Company of Miami, who had built the Riddle Aeronautical Institute at Arcadia, was awarded the contract for BFTS #5 at Clewiston. Work began on July 17, 1941.¹⁶

There were legal problems concerning the Clewiston site, the most important of which was the acquisition of title to the land. The 140 acres owned by the state presented no problem, but the remainder belonged to private parties, some of whom lived out-of-state. In order to condemn the property, the state was required by law to advertise its intentions for at least fifteen days. But, because of the urgency of the project, state authorities simply agreed to reduce the period to five days. Some of the land was also embroiled in foreclosure litigation. Despite all this, it was agreed to proceed with the project and address the legal problems when the state legislature convened at Tallahassee on "rule day" in September 1941. So that work could get underway, Riddle was permitted to take title

12. Riddle Interview.

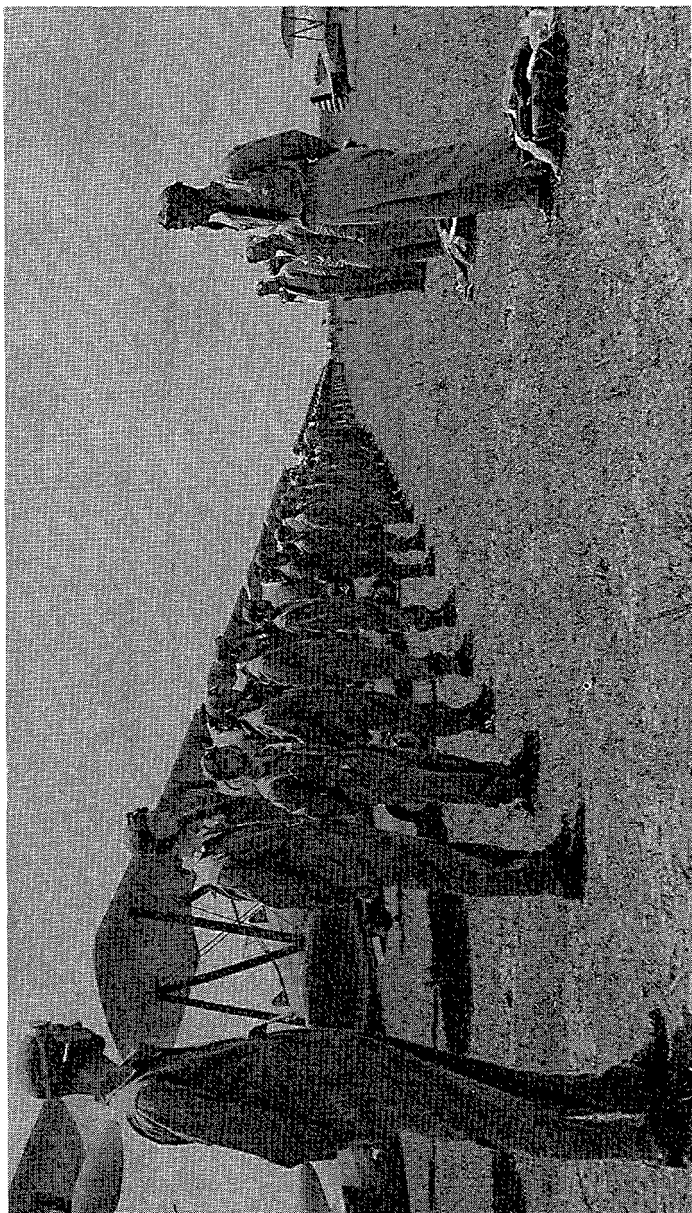
13. Ibid.

14. *Clewiston News*, May 9, 1941.

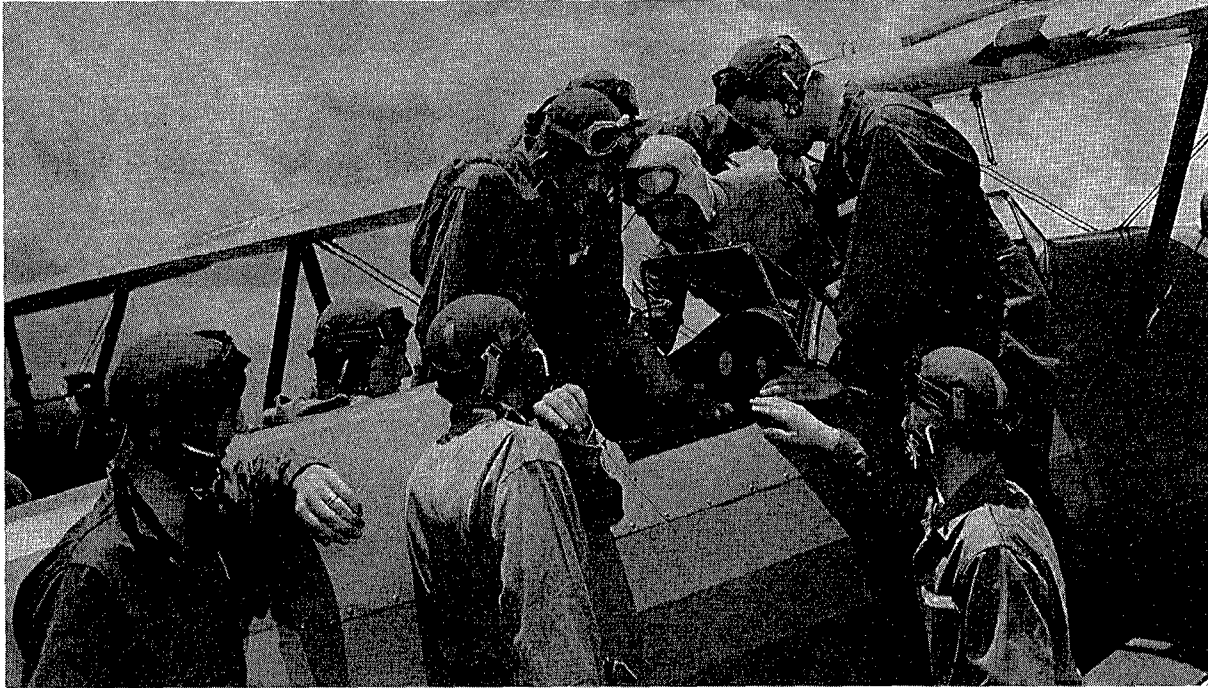
15. Air 20/1388, #88, Public Record Office, Kew, England. Hereinafter PRO.

16. *Clewiston News*, July 18, 1941.

BRITISH STUDENT PILOTS AT ARCADIA AND CLEWISTON 161



British cadets standing by for inspection and receiving instructions for one of their first training flights. Photograph U.S. Air Force.



British cadets and one of their instructors gathered around the cockpit of one of the training planes which they used. Photograph courtesy of U.S. Air Force.

BRITISH STUDENT PILOTS AT ARCADIA AND CLEWISTON 163

immediately by eminent domain. As a result of this unusual procedure, construction began before the legal acquisition of the land.¹⁷

C. W. McSheehan, Wheeler's construction superintendent, said that he had never seen anything built so quickly.¹⁸ There were accommodations for 250 cadets and 60 American civilian instructors, but the natural grass was used for runways. With canals and drainage ditches and a low-lift pump with a capacity of 60,000 gallons a minute, the runways were well-drained.¹⁹

The first Royal Air Force cadets arrived at Carlstrom Field in Arcadia— the temporary home of BFTS #5— about a month before construction was started at the Clewiston site.²⁰ These men came from England through Canada. Before leaving England, each man was given five pounds sterling and told to buy a civilian suit.²¹ Upon arrival in Canada, they were ordered to replace the brass buttons on their overcoats with plain ones. Wearing their civilian suits and altered military overcoats, the men entered the United States ostensibly as Canadian civilians. Not everyone understood the need for the disguise. When they arrived at Arcadia, the local citizens wondered "why on earth they wanted to come in plain clothes."²²

In Canada the men had received instruction booklets on various aspects of American life, geography, and customs. They were ordered not to ask Americans why they had not yet joined in the fight for freedom, or in any manner to be critical of the United States and its neutral status.²³

The first contingent of 99 men left Toronto for Florida by train, arriving at the Arcadia station on that early June morning. They received a hearty welcome from Arcadia's mayor and townspeople, along with John Henry Riddle and other officials of the Riddle Aeronautical Institute. The United States government may have been neutral, but the people of Arcadia, Florida, were not. Ignoring the conditions of neutrality, they had decided weeks before to greet the British men warmly and let them know that Arcadia was enthusiastically pro-British. The arriving cadets were greeted with oranges, orange juice, coffee, tea, doughnuts, and enthusias-

17. Riddle Interview; *Clewiston News*, August 8, 1941.

18. *The Arcadian*, August 28, 1941.

19. Riddle Interview.

20. *Tampa Tribune*, June 10, 1941.

21. Air 20/1837, p. 192/3a, PRO.

22. Air 20/1347, pp. 136-38, PRO.

23. Air 45/11, p. 31, PRO.

tic conversation. Hundreds of people turned out, some waving small Union Jacks. The British and American flags flew side by side on the lawn of the Arcadia House, and pictures of King George VI were displayed.

After the rousing reception, Arcadia citizens in their personal cars drove the cadets out to Carlstrom Field where they were served breakfast. The men then toured the school, stopping at the swimming pool. Having only recently spent many of their nights and some of their days in air-raid shelters, the cadets found Florida a dramatic change. As one of them is supposed to have said, "It's just like a fairyland . . . so beautiful and peaceful." This first group, known officially as Squadron 42-A, began training on June 11.²⁴

By early September the United States was itself in desperate need of the training facilities at Carlstrom Field. The British began their move to the still unfinished Riddle Field in Clewiston. Two barracks and a mess hall had been completed, and other buildings were still under construction. On September 25, 89 cadets from Arcadia arrived at the Clewiston site. The first group of planes took off on training flights the next morning.²⁵ Some RAF cadets continued to train at Carlstrom Field until late April 1942 when the Clewiston facility— designated Riddle Field— was completed.

Riddle Field— BFTS #5— remained in operation throughout the war. The last cadets were graduated on August 25, 1945.²⁶ During its four years of operation, 1879 cadets had begun training at Arcadia and Clewiston, and 1452 had received their wings. BFTS #5 was closed on September 10, 1945.²⁷

Relations between the British cadets and the residents of South Florida remained excellent throughout the period. The young men were entertained by various people and organizations from Sarasota to Ft. Myers to Palm Beach. They made friends easily with the locals in both Clewiston and Arcadia either through personal contact or through local organizations, especially the churches. Although Clewiston hosted the British longer than Arcadia, it is the latter town that continues to be more closely associated with them. Perhaps one reason is that about two dozen of the cadets never returned home, but are buried in a special area of the Arcadia ceme-

24. *Miami Herald*, July 4, 1941.

25. *The Fly Paper*, June 23, 1941.

26. *Clewiston News*, July 12, 1973.

27. Air 29/627, p. 58, PRO.

BRITISH STUDENT PILOTS AT ARCADIA AND CLEWISTON 165

tery. The Union Jack is frequently flown over the graves, and on Memorial Day the townsmen decorate them with flowers and hold special services there. On more than one occasion since the end of the war, some of the "veterans" of BFTS #5 have met in Florida for remembrances of times past and to renew old friendships with their former hosts.²⁸

In all respects John Henry Riddle's flying training school and the British cadet training program were successful. Of the six British Flying Training Schools in the United States, BFTS #5 in Florida received the highest performance rating.²⁹ Floridians had enthusiastically assumed their role in the nation's policy of "defending America by aiding the allies."

28. *Clewiston News*, July 12, 1973.

29. *Ibid.*, June 11, 1943.