

‘Gowns Flying’: The first one hundred years of University Air Squadrons

Dr Sophy Antrobus



About the Freeman Air and Space Institute

The Freeman Air and Space Institute (FASI) is an inter-disciplinary initiative of the School of Security Studies, King's College London. It is dedicated to generating original knowledge and understanding of air and space issues. The Institute seeks to inform scholarly, policy and doctrinal debates in a rapidly evolving strategic environment characterised by transformative technological change which is increasing the complexity of the air and space domains.

FASI places a priority on identifying, developing and cultivating air and space thinkers in academic and practical contexts, as well as informing, equipping and stimulating relevant air and space education provision at King's and beyond.

The Freeman Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. He played a central role in the development of successful aircraft including the Spitfire, Lancaster and Mosquito, and in planning the wartime aircraft economy – the largest state-sponsored industrial venture in British history.

‘Gowns Flying’: The first one hundred years of University Air Squadrons

Dr Sophy Antrobus

About the Author

Dr Sophy Antrobus is Co-Director of the Freeman Air and Space Institute, where she researches contemporary air power within the context of the institutional, cultural, and organisational barriers to innovation in modern air forces, particularly the Royal Air Force. She joined the Institute from Portsmouth Business School at the University of Portsmouth, where she was a Teaching Fellow in Strategic Studies. She completed her PhD at the University of Exeter in 2019, examining the early politics of air power and the development of networks in Whitehall during the inter-war years. Prior to her PhD, Sophy served in the Royal Air Force for twenty years including in Iraq and Afghanistan and a tour with the Royal Navy. Sophy is a Visiting Fellow with the Royal Navy Strategic Studies Centre and a member of the RAF Museum Research Advisory Board. She is also a Fellow of the Royal Aeronautical Society.

Abstract

This paper examines the development of the University Air Squadrons (UASs) over the past century, focusing particularly on Cambridge University Air Squadron (CUAS) as the first and longest-standing unit. Drawing on archival sources and recent research, it traces how the UASs evolved from inter-war instruments of recruitment and public engagement for the Royal Air Force into vital training organisations during the Second World War, before adapting to new educational and societal roles in peacetime. The study highlights their continuing contribution to fostering air-minded graduates and sustaining civil–military understanding. In light of current global instability and the United Kingdom’s emphasis on a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to defence, it argues that the UASs remain an important link between universities and the armed forces, offering both historical insight and contemporary relevance for national resilience.

Introduction

The Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron (CUAS) recorded, as it did every year, its annual attachment – or ‘Summer Camp’ – for 18 June to 28 July 1939: ‘80 members attended. 4 Tutors and 2 Hinds were supplied in addition to normal establishment. 2289 hours flying took place, including 867 hours dual.’ Below that entry is one for 1 September 1939: ‘General mobilisation proclaimed. Closing down of Squadron commenced.’¹ As a later commanding officer (CO) recounted in a history of CUAS during the Second World War, ‘The buildings in Fen Causeway were handed over to the Initial Training Wing newly arrived in Cambridge, the equipment was returned to the Royal Air Force (RAF), and the instructors and members went off not merely to fly but to fight.’² Within four days, the Squadron’s inventory had been cleared, its public account closed, civilian employees’ contracts were terminated, and, on 5 September at 0900, the record states that ‘CUAS closes down.’³

Fourteen years after its establishment, the Squadron’s contribution to the war appeared moot. Still, CUAS was reformed the following year to support the war effort, along with the Oxford and London UASs. In addition to taking on students, it was intended that they would expand to accommodate a succession of instructors, who would then establish 20 more University Air Squadrons (UASs) around the country. The Air Ministry had realised, especially on observing the benefit the Army was enjoying in attracting university recruits through its still-open Officers’ Training Corps (OTC) at Cambridge, that a presence at universities was vital for attracting talent into the rapidly expanding RAF.



The Air Ministry saw university presence as key to recruiting talent for the RAF

In the context of the centenary of the establishment of the first air squadrons in Cambridge and Oxford in 1925, this paper will examine the contributions of UASs over the last 100 years and the changes they have undergone. The archival records of CUAS have played a central role in this research, as have the author’s own research for her PhD on the RAF during the Inter-War years. Yet this history has present-day relevance and application in considering the role of UASs in what the last chief of the air staff (CAS) recently described as ‘a time of instability and risk of miscalculation and escalation.’⁴

The history of UASs is closely tied to that of the RAF, reflecting their importance in the Service’s early years as it sought to expand its influence and secure its independence during the inter-war period. Members of UASs at that time formed an important cadre for the RAF when war broke out in 1939. As will be discussed in more detail, UASs went on to support the war effort by training cadets alongside their university studies, many of whom went on to make significant contributions in uniform.

After the war and into the twenty-first century, UASs continued to develop air-minded graduates, some of whom joined the Services, while others took up influential roles in business, politics, academia, and beyond. Indeed, the current Secretary of State for Defence, John Healey MP, and the current Chief of the Defence Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton, are both graduates of CUAS, albeit a decade apart.

This paper will consider the UAS journey in its entirety. Still, it will focus in part on the role of CUAS, the oldest of the Squadrons, one that made a major contribution to the war effort in the 1940s, and which retains significant archival holdings that offer the opportunity to better understand specifically how UASs adapted to wartime. It begs the question, what would be the role of these units – and their graduates – if the United Kingdom faced conflict again? How could they contribute to the current prioritisation of a ‘whole-of-society’ approach to defence, as outlined in the Strategic Defence Review 2025?⁵

The Formation of the First UASs

The RAF's first CAS, Sir Hugh Trenchard, had believed from its inception that the RAF would only succeed if, as well as recruiting officers via the RAF Cadet College at Cranwell, candidates also entered 'from the Universities and from the ranks'.⁶ Though there were some attempts in the early 1920s to engage universities, it was the arrival of Sir Samuel Hoare as Secretary of State for Air in 1924 that offered the opportunity to reinvigorate that ambition.⁷ Hoare summarised the aims of his and Trenchard's explicit plan to improve the standing and extend the influence of the RAF amongst the public: 'our next objective was to spread the roots of the service more deeply and widely in the national life'.⁸

Hoare turned his attention to universities, using his political appointments to the Ministry to obtain maximum influence, and appointed Sir Geoffrey Butler as his Parliamentary Private Secretary in 1924. Butler was one of two MPs for the University of Cambridge, an intellectual with an extensive academic network and a flair for private influence.⁹ Hoare, with Butler, laid the groundwork for the establishment of a UAS in a visit to Cambridge, meeting with the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Seward, and the President of the Board of Military Studies, Professor Inglis. The first two objectives of the formation of a UAS at Cambridge had been laid out as: '(a) To stimulate interest in the air. (b) To promote the flow of candidates for the RAF, the AF Reserve and the AAF'.¹⁰

Trenchard subsequently dined at Cambridge before addressing the Cambridge Union Society on 'The Air Defences of Great Britain' and finished his speech outlining the scheme for a UAS at Cambridge:

The Air Force squadron which, during term time, must be mainly kept alive by means of courses of instruction in engines, rigging, wireless, etc., and by lectures, with possible flying as observers at Duxford or some other Air Force station during the term, if the university authorities will allow this, and with further flying during the long vacation, will, I trust, be the means of stimulating interest in the air as a whole at the university, and that the interest will be continued after members have gone down from the university and gradually throughout the country.

Professor Inglis, proposing a vote of thanks to Trenchard, was then reported as inferring that CAS saw Cambridge as a national incubator for hatching forward-thinking ideas.¹¹ Hoare recalled that Butler was also focusing on the 'new and progressive' ideas, suggesting that the RAF avoid replicating the Army's OTC model: 'Keep entirely clear of the OTC methods. They are out of date and not suitable for a new chapter in a plan for the new world'.¹² Notably, one of the attendees at the dinner was the Officer Commanding (OC) of the OTC and President of the Board of Military Studies, General Costello, who had previously served as Chief Staff Officer to the Air Officer Commanding in Palestine. He was reportedly supportive of an arrangement that would relieve him of direct responsibility for an air unit through the establishment of an independent UAS.¹³

Progress was rapid with Cambridge, and the RAF's first UAS was formed on 1 October 1925, embedded physically within the University's large and esteemed Engineering Department in the now-demolished Scroope House.¹⁴ To alleviate concerns about an overtly military-style unit, which was perceived as unpalatable to both parents worried about aircraft accidents and to the university authorities, the Cambridge unit was essentially civilian in appearance. The Squadron eschewed uniform and rank, and the CO was titled instead the Chief Instructor: 'In fact the whole scheme was an excellent example of our English way of persuading



Their objective was to spread the roots of service more deeply and widely in the national life

our consciences that things are not as they are.’¹⁵ Hoare had followed his visit to Cambridge with one to his alma mater, Oxford, but found the reception there somewhat cooler. He rightly judged that, once Cambridge embraced the concept, Oxford would follow suit—Oxford UAS (OUAS) was formed just ten days later.¹⁶

Inter-War Years

Oxford had the disadvantage of being limited to ground training for its first two years before it was able to begin flying training for members at RAF Upper Heyford in 1927. Even so, it would go on to produce nearly 500 flying officers for the RAF within 24 hours of the outbreak of the Second World War.¹⁷ Though in the inter-war years, Cambridge was very much viewed as having a ‘more technical and scientific tone’, the Chief Instructor at Oxford UAS in an address to the Royal United Services Institute in 1929 commented that, ‘It would be the greatest mistake to suppose that aviation in general and the Air Force in particular have no use for men trained in the Oxford schools [Philosophy, History, Literature, and Law]’.¹⁸

In 1935, a third Squadron was established: the University of London Air Squadron. Like its forebears, ‘members’ activities ranged from ground training in aviation-related matters to flying training, all in an environment that was deliberately still civilian in appearance and operation. The Under-Secretary of State for Air, Sir Philip Sassoon, a great supporter of the RAF, had recently challenged that latter trait as he felt that the UASs resembled little more than civilian flying clubs. He argued that despite the students having access to high-quality instruction and aircraft, funded by the Air Ministry, the RAF received little credit for the scheme. He was unsuccessful in this petition, in the face of strong objections from the OUAS and CUAS chief instructors.¹⁹

It was the impending threat of war that brought about the changes that Sassoon had wanted. In the year or so before the outbreak of war, members were required to join the Reserves and a more uniform standard of dress was required: ‘flannel trousers, squadron blazer, and squadron tie’. When war came, the Chief Instructor and Instructor became the CO and the Adjutant, and the air force uniform was introduced ‘with special badges and buttons ... worn on all parades’.²⁰

The contributions that the UAS members trained in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War made to the RAF’s wartime effort are demonstrated by their service in the Battle of Britain. In the summer of 1940, 97 members fought in the battle, 23 were killed, while three ‘were credited with five or more aerial victories’.²¹ Throughout the war and across the RAF, UAS-trained men of the inter-war years proved their worth; two were awarded the Victoria Cross, one from OUAS (Leonard Cheshire) and one from CUAS. The latter was Kenneth Campbell, who, as pilot of a Beaufort aircraft of No. 22 Squadron, launched a torpedo attack against an enemy battle cruiser in Brest Harbour on 6 April 1941. The aircraft did not return, and Campbell would have engaged knowing the almost certain chance of being shot down; the official citation commended the attack as having been ‘carried out with the utmost daring’.²²

The CUAS report on ‘The War Years’ recorded Campbell’s time at Cambridge: he was an undergraduate at Clare College from 1936 to 1939, joined the Air Squadron in his second year, was passed fit for solo flying after 11 hours and 25 minutes of dual instruction, and obtained his Air Squadron proficiency certificate in 1938.²³ Campbell’s father presented a photograph of Campbell and his crew to the UAS, which was placed in the Air Squadron Clubroom.²⁴



Oxford produced nearly 500 RAF flying officers within 24 hours of WWII’s outbreak

As earlier detailed, with the outbreak of war, the UASs were very swiftly disbanded. When they were starting to reform in October 1940, the new CO of CUAS, Wing Commander Kirkpatrick, wrote to Group Captain Lockyer at the Air Ministry, updating him on progress in the selection of the new term's entry into the UAS. He finished with a light-hearted, but rather poignant, assessment: 'They are quite a good crowd of chaps, though perhaps not quite up to the pre-war vintage!'²⁵

The Second World War

Wing Commander C. H. Lewis's comprehensive report on CUAS's 'War Years' provides a detailed account of the challenges and adaptations made to best tailor the provision of instruction and other resources from the UAS for the war effort.²⁶ Additionally, the Operations Record Book for CUAS offers further insight. Therefore, the UAS experience during the Second World War is here viewed mostly through the prism of the Cambridge experience, which broadly matched that of Oxford. Some of the other UASs were much smaller, training a smaller volume of cadets, and some did not have access to a Squadron aircraft.

On 26 September 1940, the Air Ministry wrote to authorise the reformation of Cambridge and Oxford UASs, but with a very different remit from the 'flying club' culture of their earlier incarnations. Instead, they were to provide ground training for students that replicated the requirements of the Initial Training Wing (ITW) function for direct aircrew entrants into the RAF, allowing students to be sent immediately to Elementary Flying School on leaving university. This reduced 'by two or three months the interval between joining the RAF and getting into operations'.²⁷ As stated in the CUAS Record Book, 'it was the Air Ministry's primary aim to provide air crews from the members of the Squadron', recruiting and training candidates. However, UASs would also take undergraduates aiming to become Technical Officers, as well as those deemed 'medically unfit for combatant duties with a view to entry into the Administrative and Special Duties Branch'.²⁸

In September 1940, the call-up age was twenty, allowing students to spend one or two years at university before entering the military. The university agreed that students selected to join CUAS would spend a proportion of their week studying mathematics, navigation, law, hygiene, armament, signalling, drill, engines, and principles of flight, in preparation for a final exam that mirrored the one used by ITW. Application forms were swiftly distributed to College Porters' Lodges, and an article was submitted to *The Cambridge Review* which appealed to air-minded undergraduates:

...members will know that they are fitting themselves to play an immediate, active and intelligent part in the great battles that must lie ahead for all our fighting services before final victory can be reached...

It is hoped that the Squadron will meet the needs of those who, being drawn to the air and being anxious to get air training while still at the University, may so far have felt at a loss as to the best way to obtain it.²⁹

CUAS records show that the CO and Adjutant arrived on 4 October, interviews with prospective students began on 19 October, and the first drill parade (at Jesus College) and lecture (in the Chaucer Road building that the Squadron was to move to for the duration of the rest of the war) took place on 18 November.³⁰



'Members will know they are fitting themselves to play an immediate, active and intelligent part in the great battles ahead'

Shortly after the decision to reform the Squadrons at Cambridge and Oxford, the Air Ministry reopened London UAS and founded 20 further UASs around the country. CUAS played a crucial supporting role in the establishment of the latter, with aircrew officers bound for the new units sent first to Cambridge to familiarise themselves with the model. Between 28 December 1940 and 28 April 1941, instructors who would go on to form new UASs at Belfast, Leeds, St Andrews, Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Durham, Manchester, Nottingham and others were attached to CUAS.³¹ The calibre of the selected new COs demonstrates the Air Ministry's investment in the project, which included Battle of Britain pilots, former COs of frontline squadrons, and Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) recipients, including a former commander of No. 1 Squadron who had fought in France in 1939, and the first pilot to sink a German U-Boat.³² Oxford UAS's first wartime CO, Wing Commander H. R. A. Edwards, was a double gold Olympic rowing medallist as well as having been awarded a DFC. CUAS's role was acknowledged in reflections on the first CUAS CO, '[he] had ... with infinite patience explained the working of his unit to a number of officers who were on their way to start Air Squadrons at other Universities'.³³

By April 1941, the first Conference of UAS COs was hosted by OUAS. Amongst several decisions made at that event, it was decided that non-British applicants could be considered subject to Air Ministry approval, Tiger Moth aircraft were allotted to selected squadrons, 'members' would instead be referred to as 'cadets', and uniforms would be 'shortly available' for cadets.³⁴ Around this time, it was also decided that UASs would accept potential entrants into the Fleet Air Arm, in the spirit of 'Navy-Air Force cooperation'.³⁵



Entrants were posted far from home to 'give them a chance to grow up'

After the initial challenge of devising courses of instruction and selecting the first intake, the next hurdle was the paucity of students now attending university as deferment of conscription became increasingly difficult. To address the reduced pool of candidates for UAS selection, early in 1941, the Air Ministry announced that a new scheme of aircrew training was to start at several universities in April: the 'University Assisted Scheme' (which was soon renamed the 'University Short Course' since the former title implied an association with 'charity'). This was designed to send some young men to a university for six months at the expense of the Air Ministry. Those with the necessary educational qualifications could be recommended by their Headmasters and by special Air Ministry Selection Boards as potential aircrew officers. They were attested in the RAFVR but would 'come up as civilians while on deferred service'.³⁶

One memoir recalls the route to selection:

Soon after leaving school, I saw in the Daily Telegraph an advertisement from the Royal Air Force for applicants for entry to their first University Short Course. Because the RAF was expanding so rapidly, there was a shortage of suitable entrants for commissioned rank. The scheme was that a suitable entrant would be sent to a university for two terms and then enter the RAF as aircrew for the duration of the war. A place at university and a grant after the war was promised. School Certificate at Matriculation level and a recommendation from one's headmaster were required.

The author, Stuart Cox, was sent to Queen's University Air Squadron and later recounted that when Lord Londonderry (former Secretary of State for Air and Honorary Air Commodore of Queen's UAS) visited the Squadron, he said that Air Ministry policy was to post entrants to the Short Course far away from their home towns to 'give them a chance to grow up'. He subsequently returned to Queen's to train as a doctor after the war.³⁷



‘It is to enable these young men to develop in mind and character through university life’

The course of study at Cambridge for these short course cadets was to be Engineering, including Mathematics, Mechanics, Physics, Aeronautics and Internal Combustion Engines: ‘Mr J. W. Landon of Clare College was appointed Director of Studies. In addition to their University work, the cadets were to attend the Air Squadron for one and a half days each week, and were to complete... the ITW syllabus.’³⁸ Later, the scheme was extended to arts subjects to attract a greater number of students. Throughout the war, the UAS fought to retain a flying element to the course – two instructional flights for familiarisation and navigation training – and did so despite some pressure from the Air Ministry.³⁹

The CUAS archives attest to the importance and impact that the Short Course cadets made on university life. Distributed reasonably evenly between colleges to ‘prevent them from becoming a para-military clique’, the University treated the students as full undergraduates.⁴⁰ In return, due to the lack of second-year students at Cambridge (only those studying medicine, physics, or engineering were afforded that additional time), the cadets were expected to take on extracurricular activities, including participating in sports and running societies. As later recalled, UAS cadets were awarded University blues in almost all sports except rowing, which ‘demands more time than a cadet can spare.’⁴¹ Those six months must have been almost surreal in the midst of war, given that the course had a broader aim, certainly from CUAS’s perspective:

It is to enable these young men from schools or offices to develop in mind and character through the wider experiences of University life. Societies, games, interminable discussions of life’s problems as young men see them, all the variety that makes up life in a residential university forms part of their training.⁴²

A memoir of a Bomber Command pilot who undertook the first Short Course at Queen’s University Air Squadron, Belfast, in 1941 recalled that on reporting for service at the Aircrew Reception Centre in London that September, he joined ‘an intake that was almost exclusively from the country’s various universities’.⁴³ He was sent directly to the United States for flying training.

By 1944, 1244 cadets had graduated from the scheme, which provided both challenge and reward:

Coming up as schoolboys, they have found stimulus and inspiration in the work, in their friendships, in their relations with the dons and in University and College life generally. They do not have an easy time, for the Air Squadron work is exacting, and they have many other claims of work and games and society. They have to adjust themselves to a routine in which they are sometimes undergraduates, with the minimum of restrictions, and sometimes ‘Aircraftmen, second class’, subject to strict discipline.⁴⁴

By the end of the war, although the numbers understandably dwindled in 1944–5, Cambridge University and CUAS accepted almost a third of the total number of cadets trained via the University Short Course scheme. Oxford and Cambridge alone trained over 3,500 men who were then able to proceed directly to flying training in the RAF. Elsewhere, because of the decision to suspend all arts (as opposed to science and technical) degrees, five UASs were disbanded by 1943.

Post-War Twentieth Century

For CUAS, there was the prospect of returning to the pre-war model of concentrating on flying experience rather than on into-service training. However, wartime terminology and experience meant that there was no return to 'civilian' ways. Nevertheless, the CO could say in September 1945: 'the Air Squadron is out of battle-dress, at least metaphorically, and is preparing for the start of flying training next month.'⁴⁵

The history of UASs during this period was marked by several changes that reflected broader societal and political shifts. The relationships between universities and their air squadrons recovered their pre-war shape, as neither was any longer responsible for generating large numbers of men for the military. Some UASs were disbanded, reducing the number across the country to 14 in 1947, although three were re-established in 1950.⁴⁶ Once again, membership did not entail a commitment to join the regular or reserve forces. The aims of UASs were revised:

To provide flying and ground training for UAS students who wished to prepare for commissioned service in the RAF or RN, to stimulate serious interest in flying or aeronautical problems amongst undergraduates, and to maintain liaison with the University authorities.⁴⁷

In many ways, the end of National Service in the early 1960s added to the importance of the UASs' role in sending air-minded graduates out into the workforce beyond the military. As the public's contact with military life and personnel reduced in the latter half of the last century and as memories of the Second World War receded, the squadrons provided a mechanism to familiarise both students and, to an extent, their peer group with the existence and traditions of the RAF.

UASs were not, of course, immune from pressures to reduce defence spending, especially given their voluntary nature, and amalgamations have taken place, but they never suffered radical cuts. Sewell has argued that the trend away from direct entry into the RAF from school and towards an increasing number of young people wishing to attend university led to a critically important change in RAF policy.⁴⁸ The RAF realised that it needed to attract more graduates, both to address this trend and increase the educational levels of officers, given the increasing complexity of defence technology. Thus, the Graduate Entry Scheme (GES) was created for sponsored students wishing to join the RAF through university. UASs provided the perfect vehicle for managing and training those individuals during their degrees. As a result, each UAS was required to admit 'University Cadets' from not only their own university but also from others that did not have a UAS. Hence, CUAS took students from the University of East Anglia as part of their cohort. The future of UASs was once again assured.

The other major change to follow the GES was the admission of women into UASs as cadet pilots. At that time, women could not apply to the RAF as aircrew, but they were given the same flying opportunities as men while at university. In 1989, the RAF changed its policy and began recruiting women as pilots. Some of the first women cadets joined the airlines and the RAF in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first female Squadron Commander, Nicky Smith, was a graduate of CUAS, as was the first and only female ejectee, Kate Saunders, from an RAF Harrier whilst on air experience flying as a university cadet in 1991.



The RAF sought more graduates to raise officer education and meet growing technological demands

Twenty-First Century Context

As the RAF celebrates 100 years of UASs, the modern versions of the original Cambridge and Oxford templates share some similarities, but there have understandably been many changes over time. Echoing the original aims laid out for Cambridge UAS of stimulating interest in the air environment and promoting the flow of candidates into the RAF, the current role of the UAS system is 'to serve as a recruitment and talent pipeline ... and to create a Defence-literate civilian cohort'.⁴⁹

From the outset, Military Education Committees (MECs) have provided a link between universities and the military; they were created when the War Office established University OTCs as part of the 1908 Haldane Reforms. The chief role and function of MECs has not changed since then and is defined as: 'the civil and academic direction and supervision of those students engaged in military activities for which they are responsible'. Recent research has recognised that the relationship between MECs and their universities varies, and some 'manifestly fail' to make the best of their MECs.⁵⁰



The UAS functions as a recruitment pipeline and promotes a defence-literate civilian cohort

Another area of continuity is in representation, but perhaps not in a positive way. The UASs that survived after the Second World War were predominantly hosted in universities affiliated with the Russell Group. As already mentioned, in 1970, under the Graduate Entry Scheme, UASs took on responsibility for cadets at other universities in their vicinity, so theoretically membership became available to the majority of students at UK universities.⁵¹ However, in practice, 'reach is very uneven in that some units have a far higher number of students from some universities than others in the same catchment area ... [with a] dominance in representation amongst students from Russell Group universities'.⁵²

In terms of changes, diversity has certainly improved from the predominantly all-white male recruits of the twentieth century. Yet Newcastle University research found that membership of University Armed Service Units (USUs) was still relatively limited, particularly in social terms, just ten years ago. Women represented 35% of the UAS sample, while 26% of the male and female sample attended an independent school (compared to 7% of the UK average for pupils attending fee-paying schools whilst studying for A-Levels or equivalent).⁵³

The study made an interesting observation that where USUs were not allowed to participate in Freshers' Fairs or equivalent events, due to legitimate Student Union policies, they denied students a gateway to resources that might not be accessible elsewhere, such as leadership or adventurous training. Freshers' Fairs were found to be a significant source of information for USU participants, and this was particularly important for women.⁵⁴ Such denial of access is reflective of contemporary antipathy to military and defence-related businesses or activities, which was not the case in the early decades of the UAS journey. That said, the author remembers CUAS being banned from the University of East Anglia Freshers' Fair in 1990, potentially for the same reason as the Christian Union, with whom CUAS shared a pitch beyond the perimeters of the building, due to their then position on homosexuality.

Over the decades, the role of UASs in contributing to the civil-military relationship has changed as public familiarity with military life and personnel has diminished. From the apex of the Second World War, many factors, including the end of National Service, defence cuts, particularly as part of the supposed 'post-Cold War' dividend, resulting in cuts in personnel numbers, and the related reduction in the number of bases that the RAF has, heightened the responsibility of these units to create that 'defence-literate cohort'. As OC 6 Flying Training School stated: 'By maintaining

strong links between the military and our affiliated universities ... the UAS system establishes advocates for defence – even among those alumni who do not pursue military careers.⁵⁵

This then raises the question of what the role of UASs would be in the dangerous and volatile world, as stated by the Secretary of State for Defence in the 2025 Strategic Defence Review, where defence is moving towards ‘warfighting readiness to deter threats and strengthen security in the Euro-Atlantic’.⁵⁶ Currently, they have no ‘war role’; the precedent of the Second World War was a swift closure of the three existing squadrons followed by a Herculean effort to open more than twenty just a year later. Back in 1928, the Oxford UAS CO talked about the importance of members gaining their Squadron Proficiency Certificate, ‘equivalent of the first term at a Flying Training School’, and ‘members gaining this Certificate have their names recorded at the Air Ministry and thus form a potential Reserve for war’.⁵⁷ There is certainly potential for alumni of UASs who do not join the RAF to potentially support the strategic reserve, adding to defence resilience. They should also be actively pursued as a potential recruitment pool for the Royal Auxiliary Air Force, adding to the value of UASs to the RAF and to the nation’s defence.

Conclusion

The UAS journey of the last hundred years has touched the lives of many students, whether they joined the RAF or not. Their role in the inter-war years was in spreading the concept of air-mindedness, developing a distinctive culture, and training increasing numbers of members to fly. As a result, the RAF had a significant pool of trained UAS graduates from which to populate the rapidly expanding force when war was declared in 1939. Though UASs were put into dormancy for a few months, their potential worth in supporting the war effort was soon realised. Soon, more than 20 UASs had been created, and the bespoke University Short Course became a valuable route to entry into the RAF, mainly for aircrew but for other roles as well.

Today, life on UASs involves a greater emphasis on adventurous training and leadership, with a reduced focus on flying training, although all cadets have the opportunity to fly. Arguably, the continuing generation of ‘air-minded’ graduates offers huge potential when the SDR has recognised the importance of the reserves in the future planning for a resilient, whole-of-society approach to defence in the current unstable geopolitical climate.⁵⁸ Beyond that, the UASs offer the RAF a route to enhancing relations with universities across the country, building on the MEC structure that has existed for even longer than the University Air Squadron. Perhaps an audit to identify and improve communications with alumni, alongside further thought about the potential role UASs might play if the worst happens again, are early steps the RAF should perhaps already be considering.

Endnotes

- 1 TNA AIR 27/2368, 'Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron', 1925-1945, 23.
- 2 CUAS Archives, 'Cambridge University Air Squadron Report for Years 1940-1945 (The War Years)', 23 November 1944 (with 1945 addendum), 1.
- 3 TNA AIR 27/2368, 'Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron', 1925-1945, 23.
- 4 Sir Richard Knighton, Chief of the Air Staff, 'CAS Lecture', Freeman Air and Space Institute, King's College London, 26 November 2024, as reported in <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/were-in-a-much-more-volatile-and-dangerous-period-says-chief-of-the-air-staff>.
- 5 *Strategic Defence Review. Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad* (Ministry of Defence, 2025), 4, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/683d89f181deb72cce2680a5/The_Strategic_Defence_Review_2025_-_Making_Britain_Safer_-_secure_at_home_strong_abroad.pdf.
- 6 Cmd 467 Permanent Organization of the Royal Air Force: Note by the Secretary of State for Air on a Scheme Outlined by the Chief of the Air Staff (London: HMSO, 1919), 5.
- 7 This paper provides a more detailed exposition of the period: Clive Richards, 'The University Air Squadrons Early Years 1920-39', *COMEC Occasional Papers* 7 (2016): 1-40.
- 8 Samuel John Gurney Hoare Templewood, *Empire of the Air: The Advent of the Air Age 1922-1929* (Collins, 1957), 181.
- 9 Stephen Parkinson, 'Sir Geoffrey Butler and The Tory Tradition', *Conservative History Journal* 2, no. 2 (2014): 21.
- 10 TNA, AIR 2/312, 'Flying Training in the Cambridge University Air Squadron', 1 September 1928.
- 11 *Flight*, 'The Air Defences of Great Britain: Sir Hugh Trenchard's Address at Cambridge University, 17 (7 May 1925), 273-5.
- 12 Templewood, *Empire of the Air*, p. 196.
- 13 Richards, 'The University Air Squadrons Early Years 1920-39', 17.
- 14 CUAS Archives, 'The Cambridge University Air Squadron', Michaelmas Term 1925.
- 15 Charles G Grey, *A History of the Air Ministry* (George Allen & Unwin, 1940), 197.
- 16 Templewood, *Empire of the Air*, 197-8.
- 17 Templewood, *Empire of the Air*, 199.
- 18 A. G. R. Garrod, 'The Cadre, Auxiliary Air Force, and University Air Squadrons', *Royal United Services Institution. Journal* 74, no. 494 (1929): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071842909422561>.
- 19 Richards, 'The University Air Squadrons Early Years 1920-39', 20-21.
- 20 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 3.
- 21 Richards, 'The University Air Squadrons Early Years 1920-39', 21-22.
- 22 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 14.
- 23 Incidentally, this was the first year that the Squadron achieved 1000 flying hours in a single term, TNA AIR 27/2368, 'Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron', 1925-1945.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 CUAS Archives, letter from Wing Commander Kirkpatrick to Group Captain Lockyer, 28 October 1940.
- 26 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years'.
- 27 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 2.
- 28 TNA AIR 27/2368, 'Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron', 24.
- 29 CUAS Archives, 'Draft article on the C. U. Air Squadron for Cambridge Review', 26 October 1940.
- 30 TNA AIR 27/2368, 'Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron', 24-26.
- 31 TNA AIR 27/2368, 'Operations Record Book of Cambridge University Air Squadron', 27-35.
- 32 Imperial War Museum Archive, 'Royal Air Force: France, 1939-1940, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205207555>'; Dr Stuart Cox Archive, 'Memories of the RAF during WW2', <https://commons.erau.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=bfts-stuart-cox-documents> 5.
- 33 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 12.
- 34 TNA AIR 27/2380, 'Operations Records Book of Oxford University Air Squadron', 1925-1945.
- 35 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 2.

- 36 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 5.
- 37 Dr Stuart Cox Archive, 'Memories of the RAF during WW2', November 2022, <https://commons.erau.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1001&context=bfts-stuart-cox-documents>.
- 38 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 5.
- 39 CUAS Archives, 'Flying in University Air Squadrons', 25 November 1942.
- 40 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 6.
- 41 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 6.
- 42 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 5.
- 43 Bill McCrea, *A Chequer-Board of Nights* (Compaid Graphics, 2003), 1.
- 44 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 7.
- 45 CUAS Archives, 'The War Years', 21.
- 46 J. Sewell, 'Pre-Service Units: II—University Air Squadrons', *The RUSI Journal* 125, no. 2 (1980): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071848009441865>.
- 47 Sewell, 'Pre-Service Units', 44–45.
- 48 Sewell, 'Pre-Service Units', 45.
- 49 Email from Commandant 6 Flying Training School to author, 30 April 2025.
- 50 Patrick Mileham, 'COMEC Rejoinder: The Value of the University Armed Services Units', *COMEC Occasional Papers* 10 (June 2017): 26.
- 51 Eligibility on grounds of nationality is stated as: 'Be a citizen of the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland, holder of dual UK/other nationality or have been a Commonwealth citizen since birth (with 'right to work' immigration status). Whether or not you were born in the United Kingdom, you should have resided there for the 5 years immediately preceding your application. However, candidates with a minimum of 3 years may be considered.' RAF website, <https://recruitment.raf.mod.uk/university-air-squadrons>.
- 52 Newcastle University et al., *The Value of the University Armed Service Units* (Ubiquity Press, 2015), 165, <https://doi.org/10.5334/baq>.
- 53 Newcastle University et al., *The Value of the University Armed Service Units*, 47.
- 54 Newcastle University et al., *The Value of the University Armed Service Units*, 99, 166.
- 55 Email from Commandant 6 Flying Training School to author, 30 April 2025.
- 56 *Strategic Defence Review. Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad*, 4.
- 57 Garrod, 'The Cadre, Auxiliary Air Force, and University Air Squadrons', 327.
- 58 *Strategic Defence Review. Making Britain Safer: Secure at Home, Strong Abroad*, 10, 113.

About the Freeman Air and Space Institute

The Freeman Air and Space Institute (FASI) is an inter-disciplinary initiative of the School of Security Studies, King's College London. It is dedicated to generating original knowledge and understanding of air and space issues. The Institute seeks to inform scholarly, policy and doctrinal debates in a rapidly evolving strategic environment characterised by transformative technological change which is increasing the complexity of the air and space domains.

FASI places a priority on identifying, developing and cultivating air and space thinkers in academic and practical contexts, as well as informing, equipping and stimulating relevant air and space education provision at King's and beyond.

The Freeman Institute is named after Air Chief Marshal Sir Wilfrid Freeman (1888–1953), who was crucially influential in British air capability development in the late 1930s and during the Second World War, making an important contribution to the Allied victory. He played a central role in the development of successful aircraft including the Spitfire, Lancaster and Mosquito, and in planning the wartime aircraft economy – the largest state-sponsored industrial venture in British history.

Find out more

kcl.ac.uk/research/freeman-air-and-space-institute

[@freeman_air](#)