



The Royal Air Force in American Skies: The Seven British Flight Schools in the United States during World War II by Tom Killebrew.

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During the twentieth century, the vast expansion of the battlefield and rapid advances in military technology made effective combat training more essential to victory than ever before. Yet many historians gloss over this fascinating aspect of military history. Tom Killebrew is not one of them. Following up his microstudy of the British flight training experience in Texas,¹ he now widens his focus to include all the American flying schools where British pilots trained to fight in the skies over Europe.

The Royal Air Force in American Skies is based upon extensive archival research at the British National Archives in London and the US Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell Air Force Base.² Killebrew argues that the British Flying Training Program had a diplomatic ripple effect, as “one of the greatest cooperative ventures ever undertaken between nations” (xiv). He believes the program helped cement the special relationship between the two nations both during the Second World War and in the early days of the Cold War. On a different level, but more important to his examination of wartime pilot training efforts, Killebrew lauds the amazing productivity of this training program: 6,602 RAF pilots and 551 US Army Air Force cadets earned their wings at British Flying Training School (BFTS) airfields.

In spring 1940, Adolf Hitler’s Wehrmacht turned westward and drove the French Army and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) inward from the eastern borders of France with a crushing mechanized onslaught of ground and air assets. By June, the campaign ended with the thorough defeat of French forces and the BEF’s precipitous retreat back across the English Channel. By mid-1940, Great Britain stood alone against the Third Reich.

To prepare for what seemed an inevitable cross-channel German invasion, the British desperately needed substantial American military assistance. This at a time (a presidential election year) when the quasi-neutral status of the United States was being fiercely reassessed by advocates of isolationism and interventionism. Within months, however, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the National Defense Act (June 1940) and the Lend-Lease Act (March 1941), which set American policy prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

In 1941, six civilian flying schools³ across the United States were contracted to provide comprehensive flight training for British cadets. William Long in Texas and John Paul Riddle in Florida were the most notable contractors. They provided civilian instructors, ground school facilities, flight training, and aircraft maintenance. The British flight cadets underwent primary, basic, and advanced phases of

1. *The Royal Air Force in Texas: Training Pilots in Terrell during World War II* (Denton: U North Texas Pr, 2003).

2. In his acknowledgments, Killebrew also expresses a “deep debt of gratitude to Gilbert S. Guinn [Lander Univ.]” for sharing his extensive “research material and student interviews” relevant to “World War II British aircrew training the United States” (xi–xii).

3. At Lancaster, CA; Mesa, AZ; Miami, OK; Ponca City, OK; Clewiston, FL; and Terrell, TX. A seventh school—at Sweetwater, TX—was added after the Pearl Harbor attack.

training, using such aircraft as PT-17s, BT-18s, and AT-6s, provided by the US Army Air Corps (later renamed Army Air Force) through the Lend-Lease program.

The British pilots, who entered the United States via personnel reception centers in Halifax, Toronto, and New York City, soon formed close friendships with American airmen; some of these lasted through the decades into the twenty-first century. Dozens of British cadets killed in training accidents were buried in local cemeteries near the American airfields.

Problems arose between the US and British commands over the nature and duration of flight training. Though, for example, the Royal Air Force balked at the lengthy training programs used by Americans, British pilots ultimately adapted to their new training regimens. Problems with poorly maintained aircraft prompted the British to close BFTS no. 6, near Ponca City, but overall the schools were a great success.

Tom Killebrew has written a carefully researched and engaging study of the evolution of the BFTS training program, with due attention to operational conflicts and problems. Though he might have placed his subject in its wider historiographical context, he has perceptively chronicled a vital cooperative venture in the Allied air war campaign. *The Royal Air Force in American Skies* is now the best work on a forgotten, yet crucial chapter in the history of the Second World War.