History of the 43 Air School

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At the outset of World War II it was soon realised that there would be a substantial need for personnel to serve in the Air Forces of the Allied countries, in a variety of capacities, including pilots, navigators and gunners. In response to this need the Joint Air Training Scheme was initiated. Training schools were established in a number of Commonwealth countries, including the Union of South Africa.

The first of these was set up at Baragwanath with the name 1st Air School. It was followed by over fifty such institutions all around the country. With a noticeable lack of imagination these schools were simply given numbers. And so it was that 43 Air School was established in Port Alfred in 1940. However it did not become fully operational until 1942. It operated under the 25 Group RAF, based in Port Elizabeth.

As was the case with each of the air schools established in South Africa, 43 Air School was tasked with specific aspects of aviation training. The skills taught at 43 included air observation, navigation, wireless operation, bombing, and gunnery. The only course to train pilots was in multi-engine flying, which demands specialised skills above and beyond basic training. Below is a photo of the layout of 43 Air School in 1942.

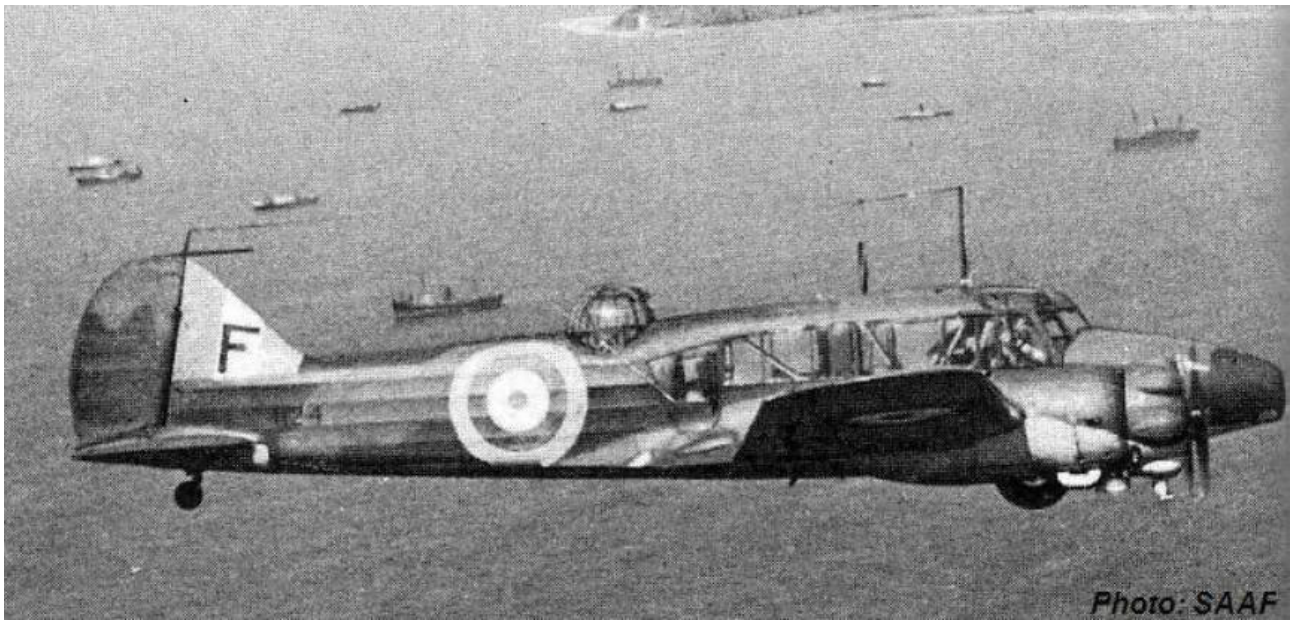


Its distinctive crown shape, typical of all RAF bases at the time, was designed to make it easier for pilots to find in the days before modern navigational aids. In those days there were no marked runways to look out for but simply a large field—and one field looked much like another one. Unfortunately this shape also helped the Luftwaffe to identify British airfields.

43 Air School was fully operational from 1942 until the end of the war. One visitor of note was Noel Coward, who visited the Air School during his 1943 tour of South Africa. During these years the school trained thousands of RAF and SAAF airmen and women. However it was not all training and no fun.

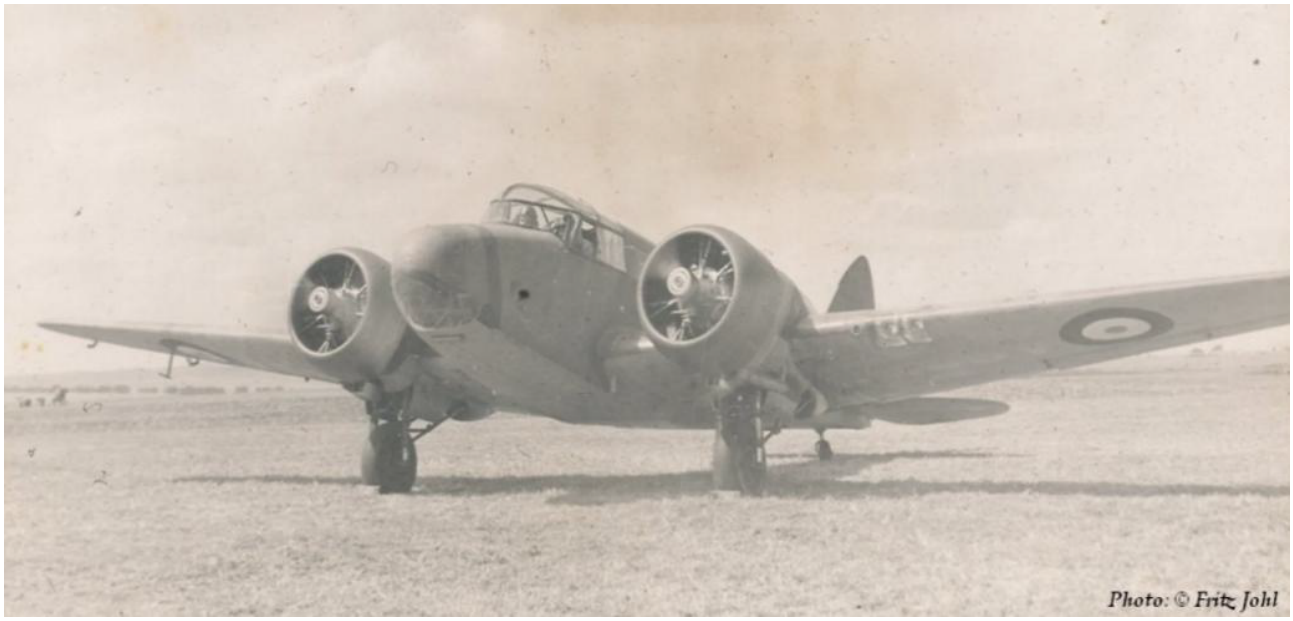


Over the war years a number of planes were used for training purposes at 43 Air School. Some of these are shown below.

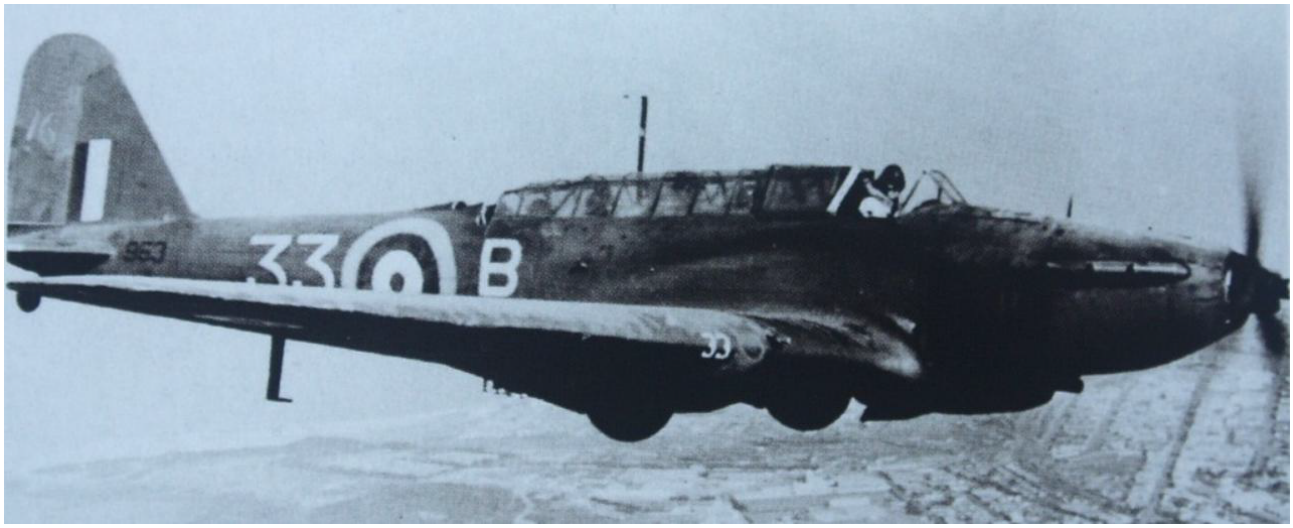


The plane shown above is an Avro Anson, a British twin-engined aircraft of the 1930-1950s best remembered as a WW2 aircraft trainer. It was affectionately know as ‘Faithful Annie’, based on its

reputation as a dependable trainer. At 43 Air School it was used for navigation and multi-engine training.



The Airspeed Oxford shown above entered RAF service in 1938. Its primary purpose was to prepare aircrew for aircraft such as bombers and twin-engined reconnaissance aircraft. At 43 Air School it was used for advanced training and air gunnery exercises.



The Fairey Battle was a single-engine light bomber which entered RAF service in 1937. It was a sleek aircraft for its time with retractable landing gear and an enclosed cockpit. It was used by 43 Air School for bombing and gunnery training.



The Northrop Nomad was a radial engine, two seater light attack aircraft built in the United States of America in the 1930s. It was obsolete as a combat aircraft by WW2, but was used extensively as a trainer, especially in Commonwealth countries. It was used by 43 Air School mostly to tow targets for gunnery practice.

After the war the school was closed down and the airfield and facilities were handed over to the South African Air Force. However the SAAF did not really have any need for the facility, or indeed the other Air Schools which it inherited. In 1957 the airfield was handed over to the Public Works Department, but it remained largely deserted. Indeed the contents of many of its buildings found their way into neighbouring farms and townships. However it still functioned as a general aviation facility with the upkeep in the hands of local pilots belonging to the Port Alfred Flying Club. A number of aircraft would have been kept in hangars on the field during this era.

In 1987, Jim and Penny Davis, who ran an air school in George, were driving home from East London. On a whim they decided to take a look at the airfield as Jim had done some training there in the late 1960's for the Port Alfred Flying Club. She described the scene that confronted them,

> *" ... the total destruction of what once had been a thriving community. The buildings were all in a state of devastation, weeds and big trees growing in the ruins, no hats on, totally vandalised, cows roaming at will and a couple of hangars. The sound of the wind keening through the ruins. The runways were just a mass of mole hills not a person in sight."*
> Davis, Penny (2004).

Nevertheless they recognised the potential of the airfield and the next year bought the property from the Cape Provincial Administration. With the help of colleagues such as Rick Williams, Roddy Maclean, John Hunter-Hardy and many others, some of the buildings were gradually restored. In 1988 the airfield was registered as the 43 Air School and by the next year a small flying school opened its doors. Initially the School operated with three planes, a Piper Colt, a Piper Cruiser and a 180 Cherokee. As business expanded, so did the need for qualified instructors. One of these, Ted Baines who ran Albany Air Services in Grahamstown, would help out from time to time, and even fill in for

them while they had to be elsewhere. Later Ted joined the School full time in 1999 and stayed on as an instructor after the NAC take over (see below). Ted is now a resident of Settlers Park.

The 43 Air School gradually prospered and grew. When the school won a contract to train pilots for South Africa's flagship airline, SAA, the owners realised the need for the involvement of a partner able to fund the school's expansion. National Airways Corporation, "NAC", who were part of the Imperial group of companies at the time, acquired a majority shareholding in 43 Air School in 2002. The school continued to expand its facilities, grow its client base and in 2019 the school's management team, under the leadership of Willem "Attie" Niemann, bought 43 Air School from NAC.

Since 2002 43 Air School has steadily grown and increased its offering to the aviation industry. Today it is the largest aviation training facility in Africa. It currently has over 400 students from 30 different countries. It has contracts with a number of air lines, governmental clients and corporates; locally, in Africa, India and the Asia Pacific region for training of career aviators. On days when the weather allows for uninterrupted training, Port Alfred airport is in the top five busiest in South Africa from an aircraft movement perspective.

When required by its clients, 43 Air School prepares newly qualified commercial pilots for airline entry through PTC Aviation which is part of the 43 Air School group of companies. PTC provides specialist airline preparation training and airline type ratings for pilots planning to fly Boeing 737NG and Airbus A320 aircraft. Besides pilots, 43 also trains aviation maintenance mechanics and air traffic controllers. It owns a fleet of 60 aircraft, which is being expanded with additional planes to meet the training volumes.

Critical must haves for any credible aviation training organisation include the professionalism of its training and support staff, its attitude towards compliance, quality and safety, and the promotion of a culture of constant evaluation and improvement. The team at 43 Air School engender this while paying attention to the student's developmental needs. Word of mouth referrals from alumni as well as the aviation industry remain our best source of new students and validates what 43 Air School does for the aviation industry.

Reference

Davis, Penny (2004). History of the 43 Air School (part II). The Drogue 2(1).