

A Memory given on Memorial Day 2023 in Arcadia at the Commonwealth War Graves Commission site in Oakridge Cemetery to the 23 RAF cadets killed between 1941 and 1945 and John Paul Riddle MBE founder of Riddle Field, Arcadia and Embry Riddle Aeronautical University.

by **Christopher Nind**, Lt Col Ret, British Army.

“Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”. These words were part of an address that Sir Winston Churchill gave to the house of commons in the autumn of 1940. His speech to the nation and the world was explaining that Britain was winning the Battle of Britain and that it would stand firm and never surrender. His speech inspired the young men who are buried here as well as our allies, especially President Roosevelt, who was hesitant to get fully involved in the war in Europe. It also inspired Gen Hap Arnold to push even more to increase the training of US pilots.

Winning the Battle of Britain ensured that the UK would not be invaded, but it also increased the pressure on the USA to complete the Lend Lease Agreement. Part of the agreement called for 500 training aircraft as well as pilot training facilities in the USA for RAF cadets.

Lend Lease was signed in March 1941 and in May 1941, 99 RAF cadets were given 5 Pounds Sterling to buy a suit so they could travel as civilians to the USA to train as pilots. They sailed to Canada and then boarded a train to Florida.

John Broome, an RAF cadet on Course 18 at Riddle Field wrote, “ We soon learned that train rides took days rather than hours. The train journey from Canada to Clewiston was all it took to convince us that we were in a large country. On our train journey to Clewiston we had a pleasant surprise at Lake Wales, Florida. Instead of our customary breakfast on the train, we were greeted by a fleet of cars at the railway station. All fifty of us left the

train, piled into various cars and were taken to homes of the local townsfolk for a sumptuous breakfast. Hospitality on the scale was strange indeed to us, but what a warm feeling it generated! We got back to our cars and found in each compartment a sack of oranges—something that we had not been able to enjoy for years. But now we made up for it by eating our fill, and all the time feeling guilty that our loved ones at home were not sharing our good fortune. As our train left the Lake Wales station we waved and thanked our wonderful hosts, but not nearly enough, I am sure. They would never know how much that glorious morning meant to a group of young strangers who were uncertain as to what future mornings would bring.”

The initial training was 10 weeks and began in June 1941, sadly, three weeks after the course started, Charles Russel, known as Beano died from Spinal Meningitis. The wash out rate on the first course was high and so after review by both UK and USA trainers, it was decided to conduct training at one location rather than move students after each phase of training, this gave the cadets a greater sense of security and the success rate greatly improved.

In January 1942 Riddle Field was opened and all RAF training for 5 British Flying Training School (5 BFTS) took place there. Carlstrom Field, Arcadia became a US Army flying school as part of the Arnold Plan.

Approximately 4,200 British cadets at 5 BFTS received their wings during the war and that number was higher than any of the other 5 British flying schools operational in the USA during the war. Sadly, 23 cadets did not make it home from 5 BFTS. Nineteen of them died in air accidents, one from a traffic accident, one from drowning and two from illness. These young men wanted to defend their country; but sacrificed their lives in the process.

A quote from Dr. Murray Cash MD, Flight surgeon at Riddle Field. “The crashes, of course, were a great source of sorrow to me. I gave what treatment I could and then had the more seriously injured cadets flown to the Air Corps hospital at Fort Myers for further treatment. I don’t want to remember—but I can’t forget—the fatal crashes when we would walk out

into the swamp areas filled with the tall sawgrass, dreading what we would find. They were so very young, so very young, and seemingly unafraid. A tragic waste”.

The other headstone we honor today is to John Paul Riddle. He is the co-founder of Embry Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, also was a founder of Avco , and indeed of American Airlines. John Paul died in his late 80s and asked to be buried with his cadets. As he had been awarded a Member of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (MBE) by Queen Elizabeth during her reign, he could be buried at a Commonwealth War Graves Commission site. John Paul Riddle was a man of vision, he introduced civilian instructors to train cadets, this was revolutionary, he knew that these men had one thing in common: their passion for flying. It worked. He himself had been a barnstormer and World War 1 pilot. He had also been instrumental in encouraging Congress into agreeing Lend Lease and the training of pilots for World War 2. His energy was apparent in getting Carlstrom field operational in 6 weeks and Riddle field from cutting the grass to opening the field operationally in 2 months in the summer.

RAF cadet Leslie Knibbs wrote, “I consider myself fortunate to have been trained in Florida. The great kindness of the people and the way they accepted us was most exceptional, because we were so accustomed to the well-known British reserve. Here we were surrounded by people so open and fun loving, even in time of war. What a change for us! I can still see in my mind’s eye some of the folks that I stayed with and those who invited RAF cadets to parties”.

Today, we still say thank you to the people of Arcadia and Clewiston. They saw the value of supporting their allies in order to win the war. They made young cadets welcome and their actions were a true example of the “Special Relationship”.

Finally, a poem by John McCrea, written in 1915 after the second battle of Ypres for the burial of a friend. After the funeral John McCrea threw the poem away, but a friend of his picked it up and asked him to keep the poem,

John worked on it and in December 1915 it was published in Punch. The poem speaks of the poppy which is the symbol of remembrance.

“In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
we shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.