

Birth Of The Institute

Squadron Leader D. O. Fraser

Squadron Leader Douglas Fraser, a Fellow and Life Member of the Institute holding RIN membership number 6, was one of the founder members joining when the Institute was formed on 25th June 1947. Sixty years later, on Friday 29th June 2007, at our first Annual General Meeting since being granted our Royal Charter, he was invited by our President to make a short presentation on the birth of our Institute. Squadron Leader Fraser was unable to travel from his home to attend the AGM in person, but with great foresight had planned for such an eventuality and prepared a short video of his speech. This paper is a verbatim account of his message.



As this is the Annual General Meeting celebrating our 60th anniversary I thought it appropriate to say a few words about the birth of the Institute.

As a flying boat captain who had specialised on navigation, I had the privilege of representing the Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) from 1944 to 1946 as its navigation representative at the British Air Commission in Washington DC. This included monitoring the navigation activities of the US Army Air Force and Navy research establishments and reporting on these to the MAP.

Before the success of the atomic bomb could be assumed, a momentous decision was made by the United States Government. This was to the effect that the Americans had the designs of conventional weapons necessary to win the war provided they were produced in sufficient quantities. Expenditure on research and development was scaled right down and transferred to quantity production. This brought the research and development leaders in the services and industry together to defend their interests – hitherto the army and navy research and development establishments had rarely spoken to each other. A side effect of this new cooperation was a decision to form an American Institute of Navigation for the continued exchange of information. I had collaborated in this decision and was elected vice-president for the United Kingdom.

I reported fully on this development to my principals at the Ministry of Aircraft Production. The idea fell on fertile ground in United Kingdom as the various UK establishments had been collaborating for some time in the formation of a series of post-graduate specialist navigation courses for about a dozen aircrew from the Commonwealth (on the second of which I had qualified) to bridge the gap between operators and research and development experts otherwise known as the ‘boffins’.

On returning to UK after the war in 1946, I joined the steering committee establishing the Institute as technical secretary of the provisional Council. We had the good fortune to engage Michael Richey as executive secretary, who was ably assisted by Don Sandler, secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society, and others. We also had the support of LP Kirwan, Director of the Royal Geographical Society, who gave us office space and use of their facilities including the lecture hall, which have remained to this day. The Institute was duly launched by its founder members in 1947, it became ‘Royal’ by decree in its 25th year in 1972 – only receiving its ‘Royal Charter’ this year.

In retrospect it seems certain that the Institute, or a comparable body, would have been founded by those collaborating on navigation within the UK without the US precedent. Since this account is based mainly on memory I apologise for any errors or omissions.

Postscript. As this issue was being prepared for press, we were informed that Douglas Fraser died on 24th September, 2007. We are grateful to his widow, Mrs Fraser, for her permission to print his last talk.