

BIRD STRIKE COMMITTEE EUROPE

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BIRD CONTROL UNITS IN THE RAF

Talk given by Sqn Ldr T S Austin, UK

BIRD CONTROL UNITS IN THE RAF

Mr Chairman, Gentlemen

I have been asked to give a short talk on Bird Control Units and the way that they are employed in the Royal Air Force. Before I talk about this I would like to first of all mention the history and how they came into being.

In about 1965, the Sappho equipment and bird distress calls were introduced into the Royal Air Force. The equipment was fairly bulky and as such it was found convenient to mount the equipment in the Station Fire and Crash Vehicles. As a consequence, bird scaring on airfields generally became a secondary duty of the fire and crash services, initiated by the local Air Traffic Controller. Unfortunately, because it was a secondary duty and the firemen had received no training and also because of shift work, very little expertise was built up on the subject of bird scaring and even those keen members who had developed sufficient knowledge quite frequently were not available when bird scaring was required. It is not surprising, therefore, that when we look at the on-airfield bird strike records for the period 1964 to 1971, we find that there was no great or indeed there was no improvement at all. In 1971, the Directorate of Flight Safety decided to set up a trial; 12 teams of 3 men each were formed to be Bird Scaring Units. These men were required to work on full time bird scaring operating from dawn to either dusk or the end of night flying and were also required to perform bird scaring operations during week-ends and the over periods when flying was not taking place. The teams were initially trained in the correct use of the bird scaring equipment, they were also told a little bit about bird hazards and what caused birds to come to airfields and how to recognize bird attractions both on and around the airfield and then they were set into operation on 12 Stations for a trial which was to last 2 years. The monitoring of this trial was done by means of daily bird counts. These bird counts were used to assess whether the team were in fact reducing the number of birds on the airfield, and at the same time, counts were taken from the local ornithologists and from the local areas to show that overall there was no decline in the residential bird population. These counts did in fact show that there was quite a large reduction in birds on those airfields where the Bird Control Units had operated or were operating.

However, it is not just in the reduction of birds that we can assess the effects of Bird Control Units. We could also look at the Bird Strikes. In 1972, when the airfield Bird Strikes overall in United Kingdom increased by 20%, the Bird Strikes on the 12 Stations where Bird Control Units were operating decreased by 10% whilst 12 other Stations with similar high risk potential and chosen to compare directly with these Stations, their Strikes rose by 150%. While further check was made of the effectiveness of Bird Control Units, this was in relation to the cost of the Bird Strikes. During the first 6 months of 1973, all Bird Strikes in United Kingdom were assessed for cost and it was found that on the 12 Stations with Bird Control Units there were 15 Strikes at an average cost of £400 each. Whilst on the remaining Stations in the United Kingdom, there were 50 Strikes and the average cost was £3,600, a very big difference. The reason for this difference was that on the Bird Control Unit Stations there was no engine and very little airframe damage caused by the Strikes and the reason for this was that the effect of the Bird Control Units was to get rid of the gulls, lapwings and other large birds which tend to flock on the runways and can cause multiple serious Strikes to aircraft taking off and landing. As a result of this trial, the Director of Flight Safety prepared a paper that also examined the previous 10 years Bird Strikes for airfields and they discovered that 80% of the Bird Strikes in the UK on airfields occurred on just 20 military airfields whilst the remaining 35 or 40 produced only the other 20%, so the figure of 20 Stations was taken to be the most cost effective and the calculation was made based on this figure. Each bird Control Unit was estimated to cost between £8,000 to £10,000 per annum. A team of 3 men of the rank of Corporal and below plus a vehicle. Each Strike that would occur on a Bird Control Unit Station was estimated to save somewhere in the region of £3,000. With an average yearly record of something like 200 Strikes throughout the UK Service Stations and estimating that 80% of these would occur at the 20 airfields at which the Bird Control Units would be established we came out with a figure that the overall cost of the Bird Control Units would be something like £200,000, but the overall saving of the Bird Control Units would be something in the order of £450,000 so that we assess the 20 Bird Control Units in one full year will save us approximately £250,000 on Bird Strikes. This paper was presented, and has been accepted by the Air Force and 20 teams have now been set up with a date for commencing operation of the 1 July this year.