

Sally Dearman – Women CAN fly

Sibling rivalry was a catalyst that led Sally Dearman our March speaker, to a career in the RAF. From a relatively early age she and her slightly older brother competed in climbing trees and she quickly learned that she obtained a personal buzz from being off the ground.

At the age of 16 she enrolled on a flying course and at 17 she joined the Parachute Regiment. Once her brother had obtained a pilot's licence she quickly followed his example, thereafter losing interest in parachuting in favour of flying, initially Robins and later Cessnas. Sally later joined the RAF as a member of the Quick Reaction Alert Force (QRA), the role of which was to alert British defences if Russia invaded UK air space. Subsequently she completed officer training and fighter control training at Cranwell and, following a change in RAF regulations in 1989 which permitted female pilots, she commenced flying jets with the RAF.

An essential lesson she learned was to fly using instruments and never to rely on one's instinct. Another rule of thumb learned in low level flying (i.e. flying at 7 miles per second 250 feet above the ground) was that if you could not see a cow's legs you were flying too high and if you could see a sheep's legs you were flying too low!

In later training she practised air attacks employing cannons in low level bombing runs. However, having flown aircraft at 350 knots per hour she concluded that she did not wish to operate at 420 knots, which would have involved operating jets in combat zones. Accordingly, Sally left the RAF to retire to civilian life. Initially, and somewhat ironically, she felt ill equipped for her new role and claimed that her children "grew" her. Eventually, she trained as a counsellor for individuals who have experienced trauma, a vocation for which her military service has proved immensely valuable.

Sally was a very lively and interesting speaker and many amusing anecdotes were included in her talk.