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Dying Species ?

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AKING the long-term view, there is reason to feel concern over the training of commercial pilots. The opportunities offered by air transportation are daily becoming more widely recognized and as a nation we have made a remarkably good start with the new generation of airliners. On the operational side there is some lack of balance and the effects of discrimination linger on, but we have cause to be very proud of our Overseas and European airline Corporations. Now, when almost unlimited expansion can be foreseen—with room for all responsible operators—it would be nothing short of disastrous if lack of training facilities for the skippers to fly the aircraft, and to lead the crews of five or ten years from now, were to prevent the country from playing its full part in international air commerce.
The Royal example will undoubtedly inspire many more to seek ways and means of answering the call of the air. Where should commercial pilots come from? Obviously there will be no flow from among private individuals who learn to fly at their own expense. Unfortunately, this also means that there is no way in which a young man can realize a desire to make the air his career unless he is prepared to enlist in the Services or has very considerable means at his disposal. We may add that there is no school at all for private-pilot training on rotorplanes.
There remain two principal alternatives. To continue to look to the R.A.F. for pilots,
or to train commercial pilots at the public expense. The first course offers great possi-bilities but not perhaps along the present rather casual lines. Moreover, recent changes in plans for training pilots for the R.A.F. will have the result of reducing the numbers likely to be available for commercial flying later on. (Unfortunately, also, it will almost certainly have the immediate result of the peremptory "demobilization" of
a considerable number of experienced flying instructors.)
But this remedy may not in any case be a lasting one, because of the already foreseeable changes in the R.A.F.'s aircrew structure and requirements; even today the Service will naturally seek to retain the cream and release only pilots of average or mediocre ability. This is not an encouraging thought for civil operators.
On the other hand, a national college of flying training, supported by the State and by the operators, and with entry the subject of a competitive examination or scholarship, would seem to be an essential some time in the near future—and the sooner the better, we feel. Temporarily the aircrew position is fairly static. Provision is being made for the steadily increasing numbers of passengers and more frequent services with the introduction of larger and faster aircraft—with the result that few, if any, more pilots are needed. There is a limit to this sort of expansion, however, and overall the situation grows slowly more serious, for qualified pilots cannot be created overnight however much money is made available at the eleventh hour. The great pool of experienced wartime pilots has seeped away, and many of the present airline captains are by no means young men.
Why have we heard so little of the scheme announced some twelve months ago whereby National Service pilots were to appear before a selection board with a view to acceptance for employment as commercial pilots upon their release? Once chosen, they were to have received special help and training to fit them for their civil employment while completing their R.A.F. service. As we commented in a leading article on September 28th, 1951, such a scheme for an all-through flying career would have been "advantageous to the military authorities, airline operators and candidates alike." We wonder, as well, if the present Ministers have re-read the Wilcock Report of February, 1950. It con-tained much that was arguable, but it also provided some background material worthy of consideration today.
It is unfortunate that shortages bring with them cumulative bad effects. During the summer before last the scarcity of aircrews resulted in a slight lowering of qualifications for acceptance and a raising of age limits. Such stopgap measures can result only in a lowering of status for the profession as a whole. Experiences confirm that the more difficult it is to enter, the more highly regarded a profession becomes; and, unexpectedly perhaps, the result is that better men in greater numbers seek to make it theirs.