R.A.F. BOVINGDON

As we reflected on the 80th anniversary of D-Day back in June this year, and for many Dacorum residents during WWII, Bovingdon Airfield was one of the most visible reminder of the war, with the military airfield's seemingly constant aerial activity throughout the hostilities.

It was a familiar sight to see United States Army Air Forces (U.S.A.A.F.) personnel in both Berkhamsted and Chesham, with the huge influx of the United States airmen and ground crew, many being billeted locally, our transatlantic cousins contributed enormously to the allied war effort.

While exploring our collection at The Museum Store, I recently came across this interesting article by Leslie Hunt about the history of R.A.F. Bovingdon, which I thought was a fitting tribute to all those U.S. and British personnel who, at one time or another, called Bovingdon 'home'.

HISTORY OF A HERTFORDSHIRE AIRFIELD

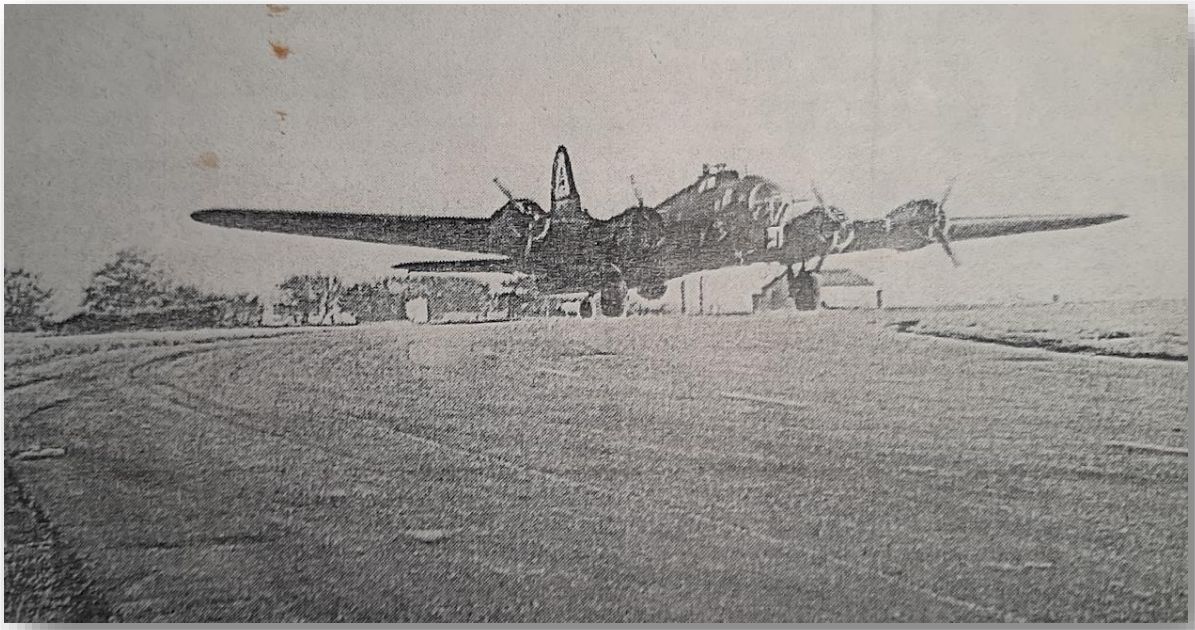
As each year we commemorate the valour of Churchill's illustrious "few" who warded off the Luftwaffe attacks in the summer of 1940 let us never forget that this was really only the beginning of the end and that from 1941 the British and United States air forces combined to bring about the eventual defeat of the Nazis through offensive sorties.

Even though I was privileged to serve in No. 11 (Fighter) Group throughout the Battle of Britain and with day and night fighters from August 1939 to VE-Day I am very conscious of what is owed to the men of the light and heavy bombers, and that is why I feel we ought to recall the part played in World War II (and afterwards) by those who served at Royal Air Force Bovingdon.

Situated on the Hertfordshire/Buckinghamshire border, the airfield construction commenced in 1941 with three runways and with the areas for dispersal of aircraft and the necessary approach ways (perimeter tracks) extending into what were locally known as the "strawberry woods". It was 15th June 1942, when the airfield was ready for handing over to the R.A.F., and it was earmarked for No. 7 (Bomber) Group, though apparently this did not materialize and in August 1942 the United States Army Air Force (U.S.A.A.F.) began to occupy the base – a most popular airfield with its beautiful Hertfordshire surroundings and, not least, easy access to London for off-duty periods. All British airfields (even today) occupied by American airmen are officially known as R.A.F., with a Royal Air Force commander working closely with the American commanders, hence the use of R.A.F. Bovingdon during the U.S.A.A.F. occupation.

The troopship '*West Point'* brought over the ground personnel of the 92nd Bomb Group, and as soon as these men reached Bovingdon from Liverpool the first of the Boeing B17 Flying Fortress bomber flew in across the Atlantic. As part of the U.S. 8th Air Force the personnel quickly settled down with Colonel Sutton as their commanding officer, but after only a few operational sorties flown from Bovingdon the higher authority decided to move the squadrons to Alconbury, Huntingdonshire, leaving Bovingdon available for training crews for the Flying Fortress squadrons, which – it was very soon appreciated – would need replacements because of the high casualty rate over occupied Europe.

The United States – with little World War II operational experience against a powerful enemy air force – had counted on the many defensive gun positions of the B17 to ward off fighters, but the Luftwaffe soon found the "blind spots" and Bovingdon became the key airfield for bringing new crews up to squadron standard – a most vital task as the daylight offensives were enlarged. The night bombing had to be left to the R.A.F., whose navigational aids were designed for such missions, consequently the bulk of daylight bombing - with the Luftwaffe waiting in strength – fell to our American allies.



Above Image: *Boeing B17s – Flying Fortresses' were a familiar sight at R.A.F. Bovingdon. Photograph by R. W. Cranham. Date unknown.*

When General Eisenhower came to England for the setting up of the forces for eventual invasion his headquarters at Bushey Park were convenient to Bovingdon, and here his personal B17 was kept, his pilot being Major Larry Hensen. Here also served many famous airmen, including film stars Clark Gable, James Strewart and William Holden. Glenn Miller and his band were often here, as was Jimmy Roosevelt, son of the then president.

The Combat Crew Replacement Unit eventually moved out in September 1944 with allied victory in sight in Europe, and into Bovingdon came the U.S. Air Transport Service (Europe) with Douglas C47 and C53 machines. After VE-Day Bovingdon became a major base for the return of Americans to the U.S.A. – busier even than London's airports at some periods.

Then came the R.A.F. for a brief stay until, in 1946, the Ministry of Civil Aviation took over, with independent airlines flying their services and with B.E.A. using Bovingdon as a diversion when Northolt and Heathrow were closed – a tribute to the better weather over Hertfordshire, thanks to Bovingdon's height above sea level. The communications aircraft of both Fighter and Coastal Commands of the R.A.F. were now located at Bovingdon and many V.I.P.s were flown from and to the airfield in the post-war years.

The writer – no V.I.P. of course – had good reason to be grateful for the airfield, which often enabled him to visit places as far away as R.A.F. Leuchars, near Dundee, in a day starting after breakfast from Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, and giving six or seven hours in Scotland, with return home for supper.

Following the Berlin airlift of 1948/9 and the uneasy peace with saw the "Iron Curtain" clamping down, the 3rd Air Force came into Bovingdon in 1951 with C47 "Gooney Bird" transports, the 753 1st Air Base Squadron remaining here for fifteen years on various missions, including rescue searches and the carrying of medical categories in stretcher-equipped and nurse-staffed machines.

Above Image: *A view of R.A.F. Bovingdon, used by units of the United States Army Air Force (U.S.A.A.F.) during the second world war. Photograph by Arthur Pearcy. Date unknown.*

Alongside were the jet aircraft now being used for communication duties of individual passengers needing speedy links with other R.A.F. airfields – the de Havilland Hertfordshire-built Vampire and Gloster Meteors. There were also various machines for larger loads, including a Douglas Dakota IV of Coastal Command which, happily, is now preserved outside a unique museum at Aldershot as a memorial to the airborne forces. Avro Ansons, a de Havilland Devon for the commanders-in-chief and their V.I.P. visitors and a Vickers Valletta were also used in the busy 1950s.

As the first jet Provost trainers were produced by Hunting Percival at nearby Luton, trials took place at Bovingdon and, later on, batches were ferried through Bovingdon – the nearest airfield with customs facilities – for overseas orders. The Percival Pembroke's were also ferried to overseas air forces from Bovingdon – a useful boost to the export drive. The B26 Invader, B29 Superfortress and B50 (bomber and tanker versions) were just three regular visiting types of aircraft in the mid-1950s, and an unusual event in 1954 was a speed record attempt in a Hawker jet Seahawk (WM983) from Bovingdon to Amsterdam (in 23 minutes 39.6 seconds, at 568 m.p.h.)!

Then came a series of film-making epics flown at or from Bovingdon, which brought glamour – and a following of enthusiasts with cameras always at the ready. "The War Lover" – aptly about the wartime Flying Fortress squadrons – with Steve McQueen as the star was followed by the Mosquito film "633 Squadron", a fictitious squadron number but with many wartime associations, using the last airworthy de Havilland Mosquitoes in the country. This has since been followed by "Mosquito Squadron", based on the legendary Amiens jail attack of February 1944, flown, as many know, from Hunsdon, Hertfordshire.

***Above Image**: The last fly-past just prior to the airfield's closure. Image is part of the Dacorum Heritage collection, cared for at The Museum Store in Berkhamsted.*

In 1968 a defense White Paper included R.A.F. Bovingdon as one of several airfields to be given up by the Ministry, and slowly the last of the flying units, the Southern Command Communications Squadron, moved its aircraft and personnel into Northolt – to leave the hangars and buildings for other uses. What memories they held of wartime and post-war military and civil aviation. Certainly wherever airmen gather for years to come – in every state of the U.S.A. and in every English county – Royal Air Force Bovingdon will sooner or later be mentioned with pride, and with regard for all the kind friends of Hertfordshire who offered hospitality to the men in khaki and blue.

I am very grateful to Arthur Pearcy junior, A.R.Ae.S., once at Bovingdon, for help with this article.

By Leslie Hunt