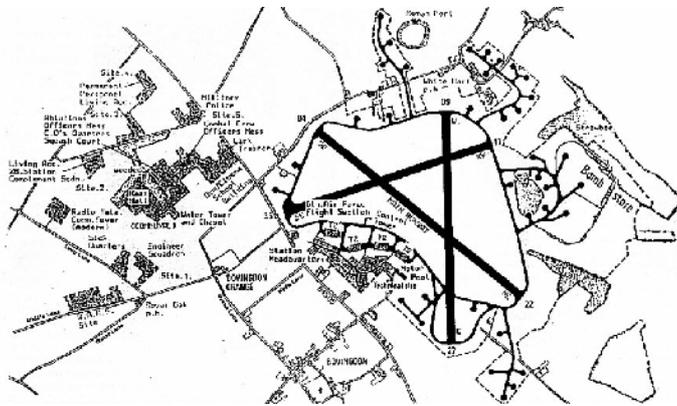


Bovingdon - the wartime years

By John Puczynski



Technical Site showing part of Runway 35 and all four T2 hangars



Wartime map

Routing east out of Halton will take you through the gap between Heathrow's Class A airspace and Luton's Class D CTR. You will have to remain below 2,500 feet and will probably route via Bovingdon. Now disused, Bovingdon was relinquished by the MOD in 1976. It had been in use since 1942, when it was taken over by No 7 Group, Bomber Command. Built by John Laing, it had the standard 3-runway layout and could house up to 2,400 personnel in dispersed accommodation. Permanent buildings were only added in the 1950s in the form of married quarters in Bovingdon village and Hunter's Close, both some distance from the airfield.

The station was soon earmarked for United States Army Air Force use, the 92nd Bomb Group arriving between the 18th and 26th August 1942, Bovingdon becoming USAAF Station 112. Almost immediately upon their arrival the B-17s the group had flown over from States were transferred to the bomb groups that had arrived in the UK earlier in the year. The 92nd

had to make do with the already war-weary B-17Es they received in return. They flew their first mission to The Avions Potez factory at Mealte, France, on the 6th September. The 92nd lost one aircraft, one of the first two Fortresses to be lost over Europe. After only a few missions it was becoming clear that there was a need for in-theatre training of combat crews and after only 4 missions, part of the 92nd Bomb Group remained at Bovingdon to form the 11th Combat Crew Replacement Centre (the American equivalent of an OTU), whilst the remainder moved to Alconbury to re-form as a combat group. The CCRC remained at Bovingdon for the next two years until September 1944, most combat crews spending 3 months of theatre indoctrination at Bovingdon prior to joining an active combat unit.



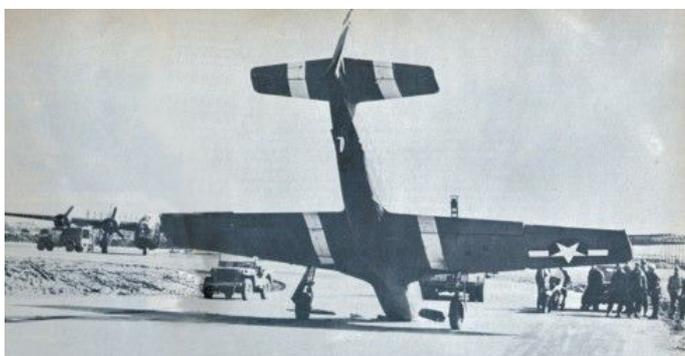
Bovingdon B-17E

Ground Schools were set up at Bovingdon to give instruction on equipment and procedures specific to the UK. The crews learnt the RAF's flying control system and Standard Beam Approach. Most pilots arriving in the UK lacked instrument-flying practice and the, crude by today's standards, Link Trainer was used to simulate blind flying conditions. Later Bovingdon was to have one of the early US-developed ILS systems, the SCS-51.

More advanced training requirements were met by some of the early flight simulators produced by Rediffusion. In late 1942, Rediffusion was instructed to install equipment at Bovingdon. The American authorities quickly appreciated the benefits of this trainer and requested that it be made to operate with American equipment as installed in the B-17 Flying Fortress. The equipment had provision for the superimposition of interference such as enemy jamming. Some installations were equipped with sound effects and epidiascopes so that pictures of target areas and other landmarks of importance could be projected in front of the trainer. These installations were known as Crew Procedures Trainers.

Bovingdon's proximity to London and the various headquarters sited around London meant that it became a hub for communications and liaison aircraft. General Eisenhower had his personal B-17 based at Bovingdon, being housed in No1 Hangar, nearest the main gate. In the photograph of the technical site, Hangar 1 has been marked, but the only B-17 that can be seen is one standing outside No2 Hangar. The picture does show, however, a wide range of aircraft parked on the grass around the edge of the taxiway. These include a P-38, P-47s, P-51s, and a range of aircraft used by the 8th Air Force Headquarters Squadron which operated Noorduyt UC-64 Norsemen (one of which was carrying Glenn Miller when he disappeared), Cessna Bobcats, Beech AT-7s and a range of British types such as Oxfords, Ansons and Defiants.

Another unit housed at Bovingdon over this period was the Air Technical Section. The B-17s used at Bovingdon for training were more readily available for experimental modifications and trials than those of combat units and during the winter of 1942-43, Major Robert J. Reed was instrumental in attempting to improve the defensive armament of both B-17s and B-24s. For political reasons the changes he made were not incorporated but did result in the B-17G having much improved defensive capability over earlier models. The VIII Fighter Command also set up an in-theatre troubleshooting group called the Office of Flight Research and Engineering, based at Bushey Hall, Watford. Heading up the team was Major Cass Hough who, as the only pilot, conducted all test flying at Bovingdon. No restricted airspace in those days! The early Mustangs proved a delight to fly but lacked 'poke' according to British pilots. Two Mustangs were converted to Merlins by Rolls-Royce and evaluated at Bovingdon, the engine giving out an extra 600hp over the original Allison.



Merlin-engined Mustang AM121 evaluated at Bovingdon after suffering an engine surge!

Information on the Rolls-Royce experiments was sent to North American who had already received USAAF contracts to install Packard-built Merlins in two P-51s. The design team was able to use the existing mounts and by moving the air intake for the carburettor beneath the nose they were able to provide a much more streamlined solution than on the British conversion.

High-speed dives were a regular occurrence in the local area as recovery techniques were developed. The introduction of types such as the P-47 and P-38 to European weather conditions also led to many teething problems. These were systematically cured and by the end of 1943 Air Technical Section was recognised as having some of the most innovative aeronautical engineers in the UK. Most of the projects undertaken had come straight from fighter squadrons who gave the Air Technical Section their unofficial motto 'Nil Excretum Taurus'. The development of pressurised drop tanks by ATS for the P-47 and P-51 allowed US fighters to range over most of Europe and thus achieve air superiority in the later stages of the war.

On the 21st February 1944, Lt General Doolittle, who had taken over 8th Air Force, expanded the ATS into a single organisation, called Operational Engineering Section (OES), to deal with bomber and all types of operational problems. Two Bovingdon hangars were made available and strength was increased to nearly 200 personnel. The role included development of new tactics, techniques and material to adjust to the tide of battle.

During the winter of 1943-44 the P-38 was adapted for high-level bombing. All armament was removed from the nose and the compartment was fitted with a bombsight and accommodation for a bombardier. This was the Droop Snoot, being designed to lead a formation of bomb-carrying Lightnings. The Bovingdon P-38s were often used for excursions over Europe to help identify solutions to particular problems. Repeated bombing of heavy guns protecting harbours around St. Malo had failed to neutralise them and OES was asked to suggest suitable ordnance and techniques for removing them. Whilst making observations of the area one of the Lightnings fired some rounds into one of the casements out of frustration. To the amazement of the crews the Germans started waving white flags. This is thought to be the only occasion that enemy ground forces surrendered to 8th Air Force aircraft!



Major Cass Hough and his personal P-47D

A late Royal Naval development designed to penetrate and destroy U-boat and E-boat shelters was the Disney rocket bomb. As the bomb was 14 feet long there was no suitable British aircraft that could carry it so in the autumn of 1944 trials were conducted from Bovingdon using a B-17G carrying Disney bombs on wing racks. The weapon was then used operationally by the 92nd Group on 14th March 1945.

The first chapter of Bovingdon's history came to an end in September 1944 when the CCRC was disbanded and the US Air Transport Service (Europe) moved in.



OES's Droop Snout Lightning shows it has undertaken 7 combat missions and one VIP mission (two stars over a wheelbarrow!)

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