

Appendix 2: Stanton Harcourt Aerodrome in World War II

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Since the airfield was not a 'front line' establishment, surprisingly little remains in the historical record. Two principal sources of information are an official monthly publication issued during the Second World War entitled *Location of Units in the RAF*, and *Operations Records* (RAF Museum Library).

Stanton Harcourt aerodrome was in the process of being built by the Wimpey Construction Company, when, at 17.45 on August 16 1940, three Junkers Ju88s dropped thirty bombs and machine gunned civilian workmen, nine of whom died (Bowyer 1983, 239). Both the *Oxford Times* (Friday, 23 August 1940, 7) and the front page of the *Oxford Mail* (Saturday, 17 August 1940), carried the story of the bombing, but the rigours of wartime censorship did not allow the airfield to be identified by name. The response of the RAF was to protect the fledgling airfield with anti-aircraft batteries.

The attack on Stanton Harcourt caused only minor damage, and within three weeks of the raid, the airfield was operational. On September 3, 1940 it came into use for night flying. Six days later flare paths were installed to facilitate emergency landings, and by September 10, C Flight of No. 10 Operational Training Unit (OTU), Stanton Harcourt's first permanent unit, arrived with their antiquated twin-engined Whitley bombers. The eventual shortage of Whitleys caused C Flight to be disbanded. It was replaced in February 1941 by A Flight, which was transferred from RAF Abingdon.

Officially, the aerodrome was designated as a 'satellite' and under the control of RAF Abingdon. It was never a 'front line' establishment, and was used primarily for training, concentrating particularly on night flying. The importance of the 'blind' approach, brought about the formation of Beam Approach Training flights (BAT). 1501 BAT Flight, using the small two-engined Airspeed Oxfords, was formed in December 1941 and moved to Stanton Harcourt on April 18, 1943, where they remained until Dec. 31, 1943.

In July of 1941, Halifaxes of 35 and 76 Squadrons attacked the *Scharnhorst* from Stanton Harcourt. On January 12, 1943, Captain van der Kloot of 411 Squadron was assigned to Operation 'Static', and flew the famous Liberator, *Commando*, designed to accommodate VIPs, from Lyneham to Stanton Harcourt. The next day, in the utmost secrecy, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, was rushed aboard and conveyed to the Casablanca Conference.

Life at the airfield was, however, generally more

mundane, and Whitley V operational trainers provided most of the air activity throughout 1942. A reorganization of No. 10 OTU came in February 1943, with B Flight and gunnery trainers joining A Flight at Stanton Harcourt, and on March 20, 1944 the entire unit was transferred, while two runways were laid at Abingdon. The summer of 1943 also saw the arrival at Stanton Harcourt of 1682 Bomber Defence Training Unit with its new American single-engined P 40 Tomahawk fighters. By July 1944 Hurricane fighters and Wellington X bombers arrived, and in October the last of the old Whitleys left Stanton Harcourt. On May 8, 1945, the Allies celebrated VE Day, shortly after the aerodrome at Stanton Harcourt was retired from active use. It remained under the control of RAF Abingdon until January 15, 1946, when it was officially closed.

Though the history of Stanton Harcourt is not as illustrious as front line airfields like Biggin Hill or Kenley, its important role as a training base should not be underestimated, particularly during the Battle of Britain. By August 1940, eighty per cent of Air Marshal Dowding's squadron commanders had been lost. Half the available pilots had never seen combat experience, and at times had no more than two weeks flying experience (Deighton 1977, 226).

The three runways of Stanton Harcourt were placed unusually far apart (Bowyer 1983, 239-40). Weapons were stored in the SE sector of the airfield, and main dispersals were from runways 1 and 3. Personnel were accommodated N of the village. All the buildings at Stanton Harcourt were of 1940/41 vintage.

A Ministry of Defence *Aerial Photography Album of 1944*, describes Stanton Harcourt aerodrome in the following words:

Bomber Command: one bomber squadron. Height 230 feet above sea level. Entails diversion of one minor road and demolition of two houses. Runways: No. 1 1600 x 50 yards, Nos. 2 and 3 1100 x 50 yards. Transport to local village; nil. Accommodation for visitors: very limited. All temporary buildings. One T2 hanger, one B1. Twenty-seven heavy bomber hardstandings. RAF personnel 713, WAAF 101. 1,000 gallons motor fuel; 12,000 gallons aviation; 850 gallons of oil. 72 tons of bombs and ten million small arms ammunition rounds. Two tractors, two pedestal jacks, one 2-ton crane, one roller and three snowploughs. Night landing; paraffin flares.