



## Continuing our brief history of RAF Honington

### Part 2 - (1942 > 1946)

#### The Yanks are here!

As we did in Part 1, we first need to wind the clock back a bit to 'set the scene'. At the outbreak of World War II, America was maintaining its stance of isolationism – they were quite happy to supply munitions to the Allies through 'Lend-Lease' but other than sending 'observers', they 'declined' from further involvement. It would take a major change in policy before US forces would be seen in combat. This change in policy was brought about by the events of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. On the other side of the world, the Japanese Empire had been embarking on an expansionist policy and was hampered by the fact that there were little or no raw materials, (oil, rubber, minerals, etc.), on Japanese soil. Japan's invasion and annexation of Manchuria, (Eastern China), and desires for further expansion into Indo-China appeared threatened by Nazi Germany's pact with Russia in 1939. The Japanese regarded the Russians as 'dangerous' and feared that Germany and Russia together would wish to invade East Asia and possibly Japan itself. However, pacts signed with the Axis powers in 1940 and with the Soviets in April 1941 left the way clear for Japan to annexe much of the Eastern Rim of the Pacific Ocean – apart, that is, from the potential threat posed to them by America and especially the US Navy. So it was that, on the morning of Sunday, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941, Japan launched



its deadly surprise attack on the US Naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in an attempt to neutralise the US Pacific Fleet, and so brought America into the war. The main focus of the attack was to sink the US aircraft carriers but they were at sea on exercises – a fact that was to cost Japan dearly.

Whilst it may have been the Japanese who had attacked America, Winston Churchill was able to convince the Americans that their fight would be against ALL Axis powers and that the priority should be the war in Europe.

So began the build-up of American forces – firstly at home with a massive recruitment and training program, before sending them overseas to such places as Honington, well supplied with munitions, bubble gum, Hershey bars and silk stockings! The **United States Army Air Force**, (USAAF), as its title infers, was a division of the US Army and the Air Force component did not become wholly independent, (as the USAF) until 1947 – in fact, prior to 1941, it was known as the United States Army Air Corps! The USAAF was split into a number of supplementary air forces according to location and task. The 'Mighty Eighth' was the moniker given to the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force with the role of strategic warfare in Europe – mostly using heavy bombers with fighters for their defence – and it was they who came to Honington. In September 1942 the airfield was handed over to the 8<sup>th</sup> AF as Station 375 and work began to upgrade the airfield to 'Class A, Bomber Base' standard although it was not to be used as a permanent base for bombers. Instead it was selected by the 8<sup>th</sup> AF Services Command who set up the Advanced Air Depot No. 1 for the repair and modification of aircraft. Initially

AAD1 worked on all aircraft types but by April 1943 it specialised on the Boeing B17 Flying Fortress heavy bomber – principally those of the 3<sup>rd</sup> AD, who's Headquarters was at Elveden Hall and controlled a number of Bomb Groups stationed on airfields located mostly in the western half of Suffolk. A technical advisor from the Boeing factory was also 'drafted in' to assist the maintenance and repair crews. Badly damaged aircraft returning from missions, especially those unable to lower their undercarriage, were instructed to land, (crash-land?), at Honington where the repair crews were better able to deal with such 'invalids'. Some aircraft were easily repairable; some required more extensive repairs – sometimes even making one good aircraft out of two or more wrecks – whilst the worst cases were merely stripped of any useful parts before the carcasses were added to the ever-growing scrap heap.



During the early war years, the RAF had laid down 18 small hard-standings around the airfield as well as a tarmac perimeter track but these were woefully inadequate for the needs of Air Depot. Originally there had been plans to replace all the grass runways on 8<sup>th</sup> AF bases with concrete but these plans were changed and instead a 2,000 yard steel-mat runway was laid. The Americans also replaced the perimeter track and laid 68 new loop and pan hard-standings – many of these were on the western edge of the airfield. Indeed this western expansion abutted, and included, what is now Rymer Court.



In a reorganisation of units by the USAAF in February 1944, the 'Advanced Air Depots' became 'Strategic Air Depots' and the Station numbers and names also changed to differentiate combat bases from support bases – henceforth, Honington AAD 1 became SAD 1 (???) at Station 595, Troston. Whilst the majority of the SAD work was now centred at the Troston site, three of the four existing hangars on the main *Honington* part of the airfield were still used by the SAD unit.



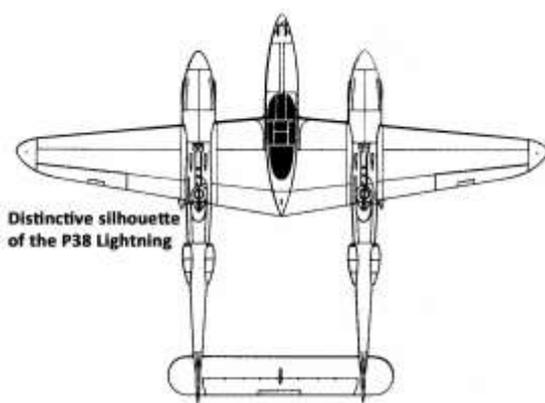
The new runway and hard-standings around the airfield were soon to have an additional use as, on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1944, Honington became home to the 364<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group with their Lockheed P38J Lightnings who arrived from their training bases in California. The P38 was a quite revolutionary design with twin engines, each mounted in a boom which extended back to either end of the tail plane. The pilot and armament, (4 x 0.5" machine guns and 1 x 20mm cannon), were carried in a central nacelle between the engines. P38s were surprisingly quiet for a combat aircraft as their two Allison V12 engines were fitted with turbo-superchargers, (mounted in the tail booms), to force more air into the engines and these had the effect of muffling the exhaust noise. Another unusual feature, when compared to other multi-engine aircraft, was that the engines, and thence the propellers, each operated in opposite directions – this reduced the effect of torque when varying the power settings.



Combat for the Honington Lightnings did not get off to a good start. On 29<sup>th</sup> February, the Commanding Officer, Lt Colonel Frederick Grambo, was killed in action whilst on a

familiarisation mission with the Lightnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group from Kings Cliffe. Thus it was that three days later the group flew its first combat mission with their new CO, Colonel Roy Osborn, to escort B24 Liberator bombers to Frankfurt. The situation did not improve – in the first full month of operations the group lost 16 aircraft whilst destroying only 5 enemy aircraft. It should be noted that many of these losses were due to engine failures, weather conditions and pilot inexperience. In fact things went from bad to worse for on 15<sup>th</sup> April the Group took part in Operation Jackpot when 610 fighters attacked and strafed airfields in central and western Germany. Over 40 German fighters were destroyed on the ground and a further 18 in the air but Eighth Fighter Command lost 33 fighters – a third of them Lightnings and of which 8 were from Honington. Once again bad weather, heavy cloud and mechanical failure accounted for many losses.

Perhaps one highlight of the Lightnings combat history concerns the events of D-Day – June



6<sup>th</sup> 1944. It was decided that the role of close defence of the invasion fleet and beaches would be given to Groups operating the P38 Lightnings. The thinking being that their distinctive silhouette, so different from anything else in the sky, was such that the anti-aircraft gunners on the Navy ships, (whose aircraft identification skills were notoriously poor), would recognise them as 'friendly' and not shoot at them! Some

measure of insurance was also provided by the painting of black and white 'invasion' stripes around the wings and fuselage/tail booms of Allied aircraft.

It was becoming apparent that the P38 Lightning was not suited to combat in the European Theatre of Operations, (ETO). There are many theories as to why the P38s of the 8<sup>th</sup> AF flying from England suffered so many engine problems whilst operating at high altitude over Germany whilst those operating from bases in Italy had no such issues. Whatever the reasons for the aircraft's problems and perceived (?) failure, the writing was on the wall and Eighth Fighter Command embarked on a process of switching to the new North American Aviation P51 Mustang and the first of which began arriving at Honington. So it was that on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1944 the 364<sup>th</sup> FG at Honington flew its last mission with the Lightnings and the occasion passed without losses or victories. In the five months of missions with the P38s, the Group had suffered more losses than it had scored victories – hopefully better times were around the corner.

The P51 Mustang is often described as the best American fighter of WWII – but in some ways it could have been known as a *British* fighter for it came about as a result of a British request. In the early war years, the USA supplied Britain with Curtiss P40 fighters but more were required and the British Purchasing Commission approached North American Aviation in 1940 requesting them to build P40s under a licence agreement. NAA were 'new kids on the block' in the aviation industry and, whilst they had achieved success with their AT6 advanced trainer, (also supplied to the RAF as the Harvard), and their Mitchell twin-engine

medium bomber, they had no track record for producing their own fighters. The company declined the offer to build the P40s but instead offered their own fighter design which the US authorities had so far declined to support or finance. After some trepidation the offer was accepted, a contract signed for the supply of 320 aircraft, and the first aircraft flew on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1940 – 149 days after the contract was signed. Initially, the new aircraft used the Allison V12 engine as used in the Curtiss P40 and the P38 Lightning and the Mustang, as it became known, was a good low-to-medium altitude fighter-bomber or fighter-reconnaissance aircraft. It was, however, no good as a pure fighter as it ‘ran out of steam’ at altitudes above 15,000 feet. A Rolls Royce test pilot who flew one of the first aircraft commented that it would be much better with the Rolls Royce Merlin engine installed. Permission was eventually given to convert five Mustangs for test purposes – the results were a revelation. However, all Rolls Royce engines were needed for ‘home-grown’ aircraft so the Packard Car Company in the US were contracted to build Merlins under a licence agreement and the Merlin-engined Mustangs became legendary. Another, smaller, redesign of the Mustang with a lower rear fuselage and ‘bubble’ canopy became the P51D version and it was this definitive model that came to Honington for the 364<sup>th</sup> FG. During the summer of 1944 the group gained experience with their new aircraft and as summer turned to autumn, and autumn to winter, the Honington pilots began to see some of the success that had previously eluded them.



Honington Mustangs prepare for take-off on a long-range escort mission - (note the additional fuel tanks mounted under the wings).

On 7<sup>th</sup> October, while escorting bombers to oil targets in eastern Germany, 25 of the new German Me163 ‘rocket-powered’ fighters appeared and three Honington pilots combined to shoot one down. On 2<sup>nd</sup> November, in the same area, around 400 German fighters were airborne and a massive combat developed – 100 enemy fighters were claimed to be shot down with a further 30 seriously damaged for the loss of 16 US fighters. The Honington Group claimed 13 for 1 loss – their best so results far - but even better was to come! On 27<sup>th</sup> December, whilst ‘sweeping’ ahead of bombers heading for the Rhine they met strong opposition near Bonn



P51 Mustang of the 364th FG undergoing maintenance in the Suffolk sunshine.

and shot down 29 aircraft whilst one 364<sup>th</sup> FG pilot became an 'ace in a day' by single-handedly shooting down 5! For this mission, the Group received its only 'Distinguished Unit Citation' award. Four days later another 25 were shot down for one loss.

By 1945, the systematic annihilation of the Luftwaffe meant that fewer and fewer aircraft were left to defend Germany so the days of racking up 'high scores' were over. Some successes continued to occur, including the shooting down of some more of the new German jets, and their last 5 victories were notched up on 19<sup>th</sup> April with their final mission flown on 6<sup>th</sup> May 1945.

Whilst most of the Fighter Group personnel returned home, the Strategic Air Depot remained active as four Bomb Groups would not return home until near the end of the year. Additionally, the Headquarters of Eighth Fighter Command was also temporarily relocated to Honington. As the USAAF prepared to leave Honington a massive 'clean-up' was required. The piles of scrap metal, and indeed many new and serviceable items that were no longer required needed to be removed from site. Rather than return the useable items to the USA or take the scrap to local merchants, the whole lot was buried in a number of pits dug between Crash Gate 2 and the adjacent woods - and it's still there!

Honington was to be the last USAAF base in Britain to be handed back to the RAF and it was not until 26<sup>th</sup> February 1946 that the Stars and Stripes was finally lowered by which time, as some wag commented, the only major task left for American forces in the UK was the shipment of war brides!



In Part three of our brief history we will look at Honington's role in the Berlin airlift, the Suez crisis and the arrival of the 'V' bombers with their nuclear weapons.

(As an aside, you may like to point your browser to <http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/805> where you can see a montage of film taken largely at and around Honington, (with some footage from Pulham St Mary), by American personnel. Look out for the B17 christened "5 Grand" which was the 5,000<sup>th</sup> B17 Fortress built and was autographed by all the workers at the Boeing factory.)