



## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF RAF MILDENHALL**

*I am indebted to Mr. H Dring for allowing me to use material from his father's (Mr. C. Dring) book entitled 'A History of RAF Mildenhall' in this account.*

RAF Mildenhall was established in 1934, however people living in the area had long been accustomed to the sight of aircraft in the skies overhead. The Army had, for many years, made use of the extensive Breckland area to the north east of Mildenhall for its military training.

In 1929 it became known locally that Mildenhall had been selected to be the site of the first of the new-style bomber bases. The town was suffering from the effects of the agricultural depression and the local people welcomed the thought of some much needed employment. Work began in earnest in October, 1930 when the first building, a large office for the construction staff, was erected. The Ministry Of Transport laid down concrete access roads and in 1931 a London based building firm took the main contract.

The first phase of construction lasted for some 3 years; most of the buildings from this period are still in existence, although now with different uses. The original hangars, Numbers 1 and 5, were designed to such a high specification that they are in use today with the United States Air Force. The first control tower, a small bungalow type building between hangars 2 and 3, has long since disappeared.

The airfield when finished had 3 grass runways, the longest being the NE-SW runway at 1300 yards. The first aircraft that is known to have landed at Mildenhall touched down at about 11.am on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1931 and stayed only briefly. The station was officially opened on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1934 and Wing Commander Linnell OBE became the first Station Commander.

### **The England to Australia Air Race**

Starting from Mildenhall on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1934, the MacRobertson England to Australia Air Race was part of the Melbourne Centenary Celebrations. The race was sponsored by Sir MacPherson Robertson, with a prize fund of £15,000.

64 Entrants registered for the race but by start day only 20 presented themselves. Three British crews each raced in De Havilland DH88 "Comet" aircraft especially designed for the race. Each "Comet" was powered by two 232-hp Gipsy six R race engines driving variable pitch propellers.

The race was won by pilots Charles W.A. Scott and Tom Campbell Black, flying a de Havilland DH88 "Comet" named "Grosvenor House," serial no. G-ACSS. The "Comet" crossed the finish line at 5:34 AM on 23 October 1934, completing the 11,333 miles to Flemington Race Course, Melbourne in 70 hours, 54 minutes and 18 seconds.

A second all green Comet, G-ACSR, flown by Ken Waller and Owen Cathcart-Jones finished fourth and returned to the UK with film and photographs of the finish. In doing so they set a new there-and-back record of 13 days 6 hours and 43 minutes.

### **Pre War**

Partial mobilisation was ordered on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1939 and on the following day the station received orders to assume a state of readiness for war. Fuel storage tanks were filled to capacity, emergency rations were brought up to war strength and identity discs and field dressings were issued to all personnel. At the beginning of the war 149 and 99 Squadron were stationed at Mildenhall, where the Wellington bombers of 149 squadron were dispersed around the airfield perimeter to minimise the effect of any enemy action. Almost immediately No. 99 squadron was despatched to the satellite airfield on Newmarket Heath. It was to operate from there, under the control of RAF Mildenhall, for the first eighteen months of the war.

### **The War Years**

War was declared at 11:00 hrs on 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1939 and within hours it was reported that the German fleet was moving out of Wilhelmshaven. Three aircraft from 149 squadron were despatched from Mildenhall in an attempt to intercept the fleet, but bad weather made the mission impossible and all returned safely to base. Bombing operations began in earnest on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December, 1939 when W/Cdr. Kellett of 149 squadron led a formation of Wellingtons in an attack on the German fleet off Heligoland. Although the Wellingtons were attacked by enemy fighters they still managed to sink a minesweeper by means of a bomb passing right through the ship without exploding. The 18<sup>th</sup> December '39 saw the biggest air battle since the 1<sup>st</sup> World War when W/Cdr Kellett led a force of 24 Wellingtons from 3 squadrons again against Wilhelmshaven. German fighters had been alerted to the bombers approach by an experimental early-warning radar system and made a classic interception of the raiding force. The forty minute battle which followed resulted in disaster for the Wellingtons. Ten were shot down, two ditched on the way home and three of the ten which managed to return to England were badly damaged when they had to force land away from base. 149 squadron was comparatively lucky in that it lost only two aircraft and made claims to shooting down anywhere from two to seven aircraft. W/Cdr Kellett was awarded the DFC for his leadership on this ill fated mission. It was obviously that losses of this magnitude could not be sustained and the RAF High Command suspended all daylight bombing raids until further notice except for routine sweeps over the North Sea.

January 1940 saw the resumption of night time 'Nickel' operations; both the Mildenhall squadrons participating in the dropping of 'Nickel' (propaganda leaflets) over Germany. The wisdom of risking lives on such missions over enemy territory has been widely debated over the years and aircraft and crews continued to be lost on what many considered pointless exercises.

In March 1940 the headquarters of No. 3 Bomber Group moved from RAF Mildenhall to Harraton House at Exning, near Newmarket, not to return to Mildenhall again until January 1947.

On 17<sup>th</sup> June 1940, 149 squadron was joined at Mildenhall by 218 (Gold Coast) squadron. The squadron had been evacuated from France, where it had been operating since the outbreak of the war. The union was short lived. 218 squadron was posted to RAF Oakington in July, where it exchanged its Fairy Battles for Blenheim IV's.

Throughout the remainder of 1940 and 1941 the two base squadrons continued to play an active part in the bombing campaign and acts of endeavour and heroism were common place. A slight relief to the bombing came around this time, in the form of Mildenhall being chosen to take part in the making of a propaganda film. The film was the famous 'Target for Tonight' featuring the Wellington 'F' for Freddie captained by Gp. Capt P.C. Pickard. DSO, DFC. The Group Captain was later to lose his life leading the legendary attack on Amiens prison in 1944 whilst piloting a Mosquito fighter bomber.

Four engined Short Stirling bombers were assigned to 149 squadron at the end of 1941, and it was quickly established that the large bombers were unsuitable for the grass runways. To remedy this problem the Stirlings were operated from the newly prepared concrete runways at Lakenheath, a short distance down the road. The squadron's first operation with the new aircraft was against the battleship 'Tirpitz, although the poor weather restricted any real attempt at an attack. 149 squadron, whilst still under the command of RAF Mildenhall, operated exclusively from Lakenheath. Its place at Mildenhall was taken by 419 squadron RCAF, who operated Wellington bombers. The new squadron was formed at Mildenhall on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1941 and its first operational sortie took place on 11th January 1942, being an attack on Brest. No. 419 squadron operated from Mildenhall up until November 1942, when it was posted to RAF Middleton St. George as a part of No. 6 RCAF Group. The Canadians had become popular figures in and around Mildenhall and their high spirits and free spending was missed when they departed. With the Canadians departure came the arrival of two more Wellington squadrons in the form of No's 115 and 75 squadrons. 75 squadron had a high percentage of New Zealand aircrew and formed the first Commonwealth squadron in Bomber Command.

RAF Mildenhall closed temporarily for operational flying at the end of 1942 whilst its first concrete runways were laid. The base continued to control its three squadrons even though none were now at the parent airfield. No.149 squadron, by now one of three squadrons in Bomber Command to have trained for Gas bombing, continued to fly from the Lakenheath satellite, whilst 75 Squadron converted to Short Stirlings and remained at Newmarket. No. 115 squadron was

dispersed to East Wretham and in March 1943 converted from Wellingtons to Lancasters. On the 12<sup>th</sup> March 1943, all three squadrons took part in the outstandingly successful raid on the Krupp armament works at Essen; this heralded the start of Bomber Command's "Battle of the Ruhr". At the end of March 1943, RAF Mildenhall handed over control of its three squadrons to their various airfields. Now with concrete runways, a new control tower and Drom approach lighting, it was ready to receive the heavy bombers. In April 1943, No.15 squadron was posted from Bourn in Cambridgeshire to Mildenhall and two Airspeed Horsa gliders towed by Whitley Vs facilitated the movement of equipment and personnel. On its second day at Mildenhall, XV squadron sent eighteen Stirlings to bomb Essen with the loss of one Stirling which crash landed on return.

## **622 Squadron**

On 10<sup>th</sup> August 1943, No. 15 squadron detached its 'C' flight to form 622 squadron, this being the only RAF squadron ever stationed at Mildenhall that had not had an earlier existence in the previous war. Seven Stirlings were assigned the new squadron code letters of GI and they were in operation on their first day of formation when they attacked Nuremburg; all returned safely. The Stirling was the oldest and least effective of the four-engined bombers and due to their high loss rate they were increasingly utilised on mine laying operations.

15 and 622 squadron converted to Lancasters in December 1943, 622 squadron flying its last Stirling mission, mine laying in the Frisians, on the 20<sup>th</sup> December and No. 15 squadron flying its last similar mission on 22<sup>nd</sup> December. By this time 15 squadron had flown the Stirling operationally for longer than any other squadron. One of its aircraft, Stirling N3669 LS-H, had flown 67 missions, believed to be a record for the Stirling Bomber. This aircraft was exhibited outside St. Paul's Cathedral during the Wings for Victory week. Both squadrons flew their first mission in Lancasters on a raid to Brunswick on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1944.

Throughout the Battle of Berlin the two squadrons continued to put on a maximum effort in support of Bomber Command's directives. In March 1944 the Battle of Berlin was halted and the impetus switched to attacks on German communications and defences in preparation for the Normandy invasion. On D-Day, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944, 35 Lancasters from RAF Mildenhall attacked the gun emplacements on the French coast near Caen at 0500hrs, just before the Allied landings. The V1 flying bombs were now menacing Britain and the launching sites were frequently attacked. 14 aircraft from each of the Mildenhall squadrons took part in such attacks on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June and in addition operations were flown in support of the Allied armies. On one such mission to Heinsberg on 16<sup>th</sup> November 1944, the Commanding Officer of XV squadron, W/C W. Watkins was shot down by flak and taken POW. On 28<sup>th</sup> November 1944, Lancasters from both squadrons took part in an attack on Neuss, an important German supplies centre. This was the first time that Lancasters from Mildenhall dropped the 12,000lb 'tallboy' bomb.

In the autumn of 1944 the important navigation aid 'G-H' was fitted to several of the Lancasters. The G-H system was based on a blind bombing technique

governed by radar and the Lancasters had their tail rudders painted with yellow strips to distinguish them as G-H leaders. These specially adapted aircraft were used extensively as formation leaders on massed daylight raids, with the G-H equipped Lancaster flying in three 'vic' formations. When the leader released his bombs at the designated point this was the trigger for the others to follow suit.

February 1945 was an extremely busy month, 222 sorties being flown by 15 squadron and 229 by 622 squadron. Attacks were now being made on tactical targets in preparation for the Allied crossing of the Rhine. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> March, a Lancaster from 622 squadron led 16 aircraft from Mildenhall in an attack on Wesel, the aiming point being 1500 yards in front of allied troops.

The last bombing mission from Mildenhall came on 22<sup>nd</sup> April, when 14 aircraft from each squadron took part in a raid on Bremen. One Lancaster from 622 squadron was lost due to flak. Operation 'Manna' began on 29<sup>th</sup> April. It was a series of flights made to the Netherlands to drop food supplies to the starving civilian population. Finally on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1945, two Lancasters from each squadron took off to lay mines in the Kattegat to try to trap a convoy that had been seen leaving Kiel. Bad weather resulted in the aircraft returning to base and this proved to be the last offensive operation of the war, flown from RAF Mildenhall.

VE-Day, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1945, passed quietly at Mildenhall with both squadrons busy dropping food to the Dutch, preventing a general stand-down. RAF Mildenhall had figured prominently in the bombing offensive throughout the war and over 200 assorted Wellingtons, Stirlings and Lancasters had been lost. The Station 'Roll of Honour' records the names of over nineteen hundred officers and men killed on active service, seventy six of whom are buried in the beautifully kept Military Cemetery at the back of St. John's Church in Beck Row.

622 squadron had dropped 10,469 tons of bombs since its formation in 1943 and 15 squadron had dropped 13,124 tons, since changing to Lancasters in December 1943. Both squadrons were also heavily involved in mine laying operations.

Each of the squadrons could boast a Lancaster that had completed over 100 missions, a very rare feat when considering that the average missions completed by a Lancaster was 21. LL885 GI-J of 622 squadron completed 113 operational sorties and LL806, also 'J' of 15 squadron completed 134. The latter's record was surpassed by only two other aircraft and in both cases they had been flown by more than one squadron whereas LL806 J-Jig completed all her missions with 15 squadron.

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**H. Sandall**

**622 Squadron Historian**