

## **Ferrying Aircraft from Britain in WW2 and the role of RAF Melton Mowbray**

### **Dr Ray Flude**

This presentation had local roots, and much of local interest, but it was also on a topic that had global reach and outlined the profound work conducted at RAF Melton Mowbray.

The aerodrome, initially planned as a training establishment and constrained by terrain falling away for its small plateau location, proved too small for RAF Bomber Command's requirements. It was offered to Transport Command, and although they responded unfavourable at first, it was accepted for the preparation of aircraft being delivered overseas by air and especially because the base facilities were extensive. It was operational from 1943 until the end of WW2, and decommissioned such that the remnants are all but lost from view by now in the local fields.

The speaker, a local resident, attracted to the history of long-range aircraft operations, and especially their influence in logistical and political theatres, used the base as a focal point to demonstrate the enormous capacity, and impact, that Melton Mowbray and the ferrying service generally had on the military strategy in the war years. Such aerodromes did not have based squadrons, but were where specialists worked daily on tasks that involved shifting populations of aircraft. The staff knew little other than what was essential about the movements of aircraft in and out of the aerodrome. Moreover, local residents saw or heard little in terms of movements, or about the activities, on such bases. Dr Flude's research provided a deeper appreciation of the significance of the role of such wartime aerodromes.

The presenter introduced a wide perspective of the way that the Allied powers used aircraft in the war, and how the influx of aircraft manufactured in North America were crucial to the effectiveness of the Armed Forces. US/UK and German war loss statistics emphasised how vital it was to deliver aircraft to squadrons within days/weeks, not many weeks/months, from the time they rolled off production lines. Ferrying aircraft transformed deliveries from North America as hitherto they were dismantled and crated on ships. The ferry process was an endeavour that resulted in a massive aerodrome construction programme, and required 146 different staging posts worldwide.

Overall, the aerodrome prepared 25 different aircraft types to fly overseas. These included Bostons, Beaufighters, Mosquitos, Stirlings, Mustangs and Spitfires. Generally ferrying in/out from operational aerodromes in Britain was conducted by ATA pilots.

An unusual early assignment for the ferrying units was the delivery of a consignment of Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle to the Russian Air Force. The Mediterranean was still out of bounds to Allied aircraft, so the flights took an usually circuitous route departing northerly, heading from Scotland across the north of Scandinavia, and then down into Russian territory. The type had been deemed surplus to RAF requirements, and as it proved equally as unwelcome in new ownership the proposed consignment was curtailed before the full contingency could be ferried.

An example of the considerable size of some tasks was the handling of a 117 Grumman Hellcats, destined for Fleet Air Arm operations in the Far East. They came in batches, the majority despatched by ship from the US on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1944, arriving at Greenock 11 days later, then re-assembled by the Lockheed team at Renfrew. ATA pilots flew them to Melton Mowbray where the team serviced each aircraft thoroughly. The full quota of aircraft then set out on a 6,300 mile journey to Coimbatore in Southern India. Such a journey was not without hazards – the first casualties were two aircraft lost without trace on the way to Cornwall. There were other incidents over western France, on the North African coast, through Egypt and into the Middle East, with 14 aircraft lost, damaged or crashed, but this was an acceptable rate of attrition given it was delivering aircraft to the fleet within 30 days of their arrival in Britain: much sooner

than could be achieved by ships. Aircraft were available by March 1945. Some of these aircraft reached as far afield as Australia and Okinawa before Pacific operations ceased. The onset of peace led to many being ignominiously pushed overboard when they became surplus to requirements, as the cost of their retention could not be justified.



Grumman Hellcats (photo: IWM A 024533)

RAF Melton Mowbray suffered a similar fate. Neither having been distinguished nor being worthy of further purpose, the aerodrome was soon without aircraft: parts of the taxiways and runways were used as new roads and the land returned to farming use.

The question and answers session was enlivened with many people seeking explanations that grew from them regarding this rare tale as a welcome explanation of what is rooted in familiar surroundings. Frank Maccabee presented a vote of thanks, and was joined in expressing warm appreciation by the 140 or so who were present.

*Lecture notes by Mike Hirst*

An additional page is devoted to an aerial photograph of the base (1944).



This photograph is orientated approximately North-South.  
The outskirts of Melton Mowbray are in the top right-hand corner.

Key to the annotated out-lying associated facilities is:

- A. No 1 Site accommodation
- B. No 2 site accommodation
- C. Mess site No 1
- D. No 1 WAAF site – accommodation
- E. No 2 WAAF site – accommodation
- F. Admin site
- G. Communal site
- H. Technical site
- I. No 3 and 4 sites – accommodation and No 2 Mess site
- J. Sick quarters

Photo: English Heritage