

Middle Wallop – home to the Army Flying Association

The Army Flying Association is privileged to have, as its main operating base, the largest grass airfield in Europe – the Army Aviation Centre at Middle Wallop in Hampshire, close to Salisbury Plain.

Middle Wallop has been an operational airfield since the Battle of Britain and seen several incarnations since the Royal Air Force designated it a Bomber Command station in the Munich Crisis building programme of 1938. In the far south-east corner of the airfield, the bomb dump, with its historic beehive fuzing shelters, bears witness to these aspirations for Blenheim and Battle day bombers to operate from the field.

In 1940, the Blenheim did arrive at ‘Wallop’ but in the guise of night fighters from no 604 Auxiliary Air Force squadron, moved forward to protect the Midlands from the Squadron’s home base at RAF Hendon. RAF Middle Wallop was to be a key sector station in Fighter Command.

Incidentally, there is no village of Middle Wallop from which the airfield take its name, as the parishes of Nether Wallop and Over Wallop could not agree on which name should be carried by the new Royal Air Force station. As an aside, an old brewery in a Nether Wallop village gives its name to the English vernacular expression for beer – a pint of *wallop*.

During the Battle of Britain, RAF Middle Wallop was a sector station flying Hurricane and Spitfire in the day fighter role and Blenheim, later Beaufighter on night fighter operations. On 13 September 1940, 13 Spitfires from No 609 (West Riding) Squadron of the Auxiliary Air Force engaged Luftwaffe formations over Portland Bill and Weymouth, downing 13 enemy aircraft for the loss of two. The next day, just as No 234 Squadron’s Hurricanes were arriving from St Eval in Cornwall, the *Luftwaffe* returned the favour and destroyed numerous Spitfires and Blenheims on the ground.

As the Second World War progressed, the Royal Air Force rotated various squadrons through RAF Middle Wallop, including Mosquito long-range fighters of the Royal Australian Air Force; Spitfires from the Royal Canadian Air Force and some of the first Mustang fighter-reconnaissance aircraft.

Middle Wallop also saw the trials and operational use of aerial mines sown by what must have been the Royal Air Force’s largest ‘fighter’ of the Second World War, the Handley Page Harrow. Flown by a single pilot, these converted transport aircraft operated at night over Hampshire and Dorset launching aerial mines to float in the sky until a German bomber flew into them and blew up. The aerial mines was a stop gap until the radar-equipped night fighter could be brought into service but it must rank of one of the weirdest ‘temporary’ night fighter measures to have been deployed, destroying at least six enemy Heinkel He III.

Group Captain John ‘Cats’ Eyes’ Cunningham, probably the most famous British night fighter ace operated from RAF Middle Wallop for two years from 1940 and achieved fame as the carrot-eating ‘Cats’ Eyes’ because of the propaganda value of not publicly disclosing the development of airborne interception radar in his Beaufighter.

With its satellite airfield of Chilbolton and various decoy fields in the surrounding countryside, RAF Middle Wallop went on to be a staging post for the great cross-Channel operations to liberate Occupied Europe, hosting Typhoon and Spitfire, Mosquito and tank-busting Hurricanes. The US Army Air Corps flew reconnaissance versions of the twin-boom P-38 from Wallop’s grass.

Famous names were based at Wallop and no doubt drank in the '*Mucky Duck*' in Monxton, the *Five Bells* in Nether Wallop and the *Pheasant* on the Salisbury road, also the mess for No 604 Squadron. Amongst the aces were Bob Doe, Ginger Lacey and Don Blakesee, an American Eagle Squadron pilot.

After the Liberation of France, the airfield temporarily transferred to the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy as HMS *Flycatcher* and later controlled the victory flypast of London.

Perhaps more in keeping with the Army Flying Association were trials by members of the Royal Artillery's air observation post units with their Austers and other experimental aircraft, many of which can be seen in the Museum of Army Flying. Before the Army Air Corps was formed in 1957 from the Glider Pilot Regiment of Arnhem fame, army flying was in the hands of the Royal Artillery, hence the AFA's parentage in the Royal Artillery Aero Club, founded in the 1930s.

Actually, in 1942, elements of the Parachute infantry battalions and the Special Air Service Regiment were brigade together at Winston Churchill express command to be called the Army Air Corps but broken up in 1949.

Since 1957, Middle Wallop has been the home of army flying travelling through various names, including the School of Army Aviation and the Army Air Corps Centre. Today, it is the centre of excellence for all battlefield helicopter training under the command of the Joint Helicopter Command.

The AFA is proud of Middle Wallop's heritage and grateful for the privilege of maintaining army aviation skills at such an historic site.

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