

## MEMORIAL PLAQUE AT MUSEUM

Welcome to our second issue of 2004, we trust that you will find at least some of the contents of interest to you and as usual may we remind you that in order to produce further copies of Dropzone we do need your input so please put pen to paper, or go to work on your PCs and send your memories or points of interest to myself, John Harding, or email it to Roy at [cbaggermuseum@aol.com](mailto:cbaggermuseum@aol.com). We are only too pleased to hear from you.

Since the sad passing of Bernard Tebbutt, which was recorded in the our March issue, we are pleased to advise you, if you have

not already seen it, that a brass plaque in memory of Bernard has been placed on the wall inside the entrance to the museum



*Plaque in the entrance area at the museum*

### SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Memorial Plaque unveiled at Museum*
- *Bob Downs first visit back to Harrington in 1976*
- *Channel 4 proposes new programme*
- *John Harding and the Royal Observer Corps*
- *Colin Burch and Secret Operations during WW2*

## NOT ALL VISITORS COME BY THE SAUNTERBUS

Some of us were interested to see a low flying helicopter around the museum the other month, this is not an unusual sight as there are often helicopters from Sywell aerodrome in the vicinity but it came as quite a surprise when it proceeded to land in the paddock at the rear of the museum. It turned out that although the chopper was of Finish registration the occupants were actually from not too far way at Irthlingborough and were out looking for their car which had been recently stolen and thought that they would pay a visit to the museum as well.



*Rotorway Executive 162F, reg OH XOH, at the "Heliport"*

## MY FIRST VISIT BACK TO HARRINGTON, ENGLAND, AIRBASE

By Bob Downs

*Bob Downs was a Radar mechanic with the 1077th Signal Company and later the 857th BS at Harrington during World War 2. The following letter was recently discovered in Bernard Tebbutt's archives*

*It was in 1976 that I made my first trip back to England after a lapse of thirty years. I had spent those years in raising my family, with hardly a thought about those days of the 1940s when I had served with the signal company, and later in a squadron of the air corps at the airbase, Harrington, England. I was located at the radar shack near the runways, and I do remember the din of aircraft and the activity that was often present. I lived in one of the tent villages. I do recall that cold winter and snow.*

*The decision had been made and I found myself in England once again. From London I worked my way by rail to Tring. From there, the next day, I walked to the Cheddington Airbase where I had served a year prior to going to Harrington. It was a wonderful experience. In a day or so I then traveled to Northampton where I found a comfortable hotel. I made my plans for the next day. Since I was not confident in driving an automobile in England I would be traveling by bus and foot. I wondered if I could find the old base. Was anything there? I remembered so little about the place.*

*The morning found me eager to go. I boarded a bus and was on my way, enjoying the sights on the trip to Kelmarsh, a crossroads that I did remember. In the 40s I had traveled this route many times on passes to North-*

*ampton. One time, a huge truck hauling an armored tank stopped to give me a ride as I waited along the highway. I remember sitting on top of it.*

*After stopping at Kelmarsh I started walking on the Harrington Road which I remembered as having been the way to get to the airbase. I soon noticed that a weatherfront was passing overhead. Before long it started to sprinkle, then to pour. I didn't know what to do. An automobile approached and offered me a ride into Harrington. I thanked him and got out of the car and sought shelter under the eaves of one of the Harrington buildings, a pub, I think. Not a creature stirred. I crossed the street and got into a telephone booth. I stayed there a very long time pondering what to do. Finally, the rain abated and I had decided that I should return to Kelmarsh and back to Northampton. As I walked, a car approached with two young men. They told me that they needed to go to Draughton for a few minutes and then they could*

*take me to Kelmarsh where I could get the bus. Since I was soaked to the skin that sounded like a good idea. The driver called his friend in the back Billy Bob. I got in and to my surprise we turned into the lane going into the old airbase. Once again, it was pouring. It was almost as dark as dusk. We whizzed by some old base ruins and your home (I didn't know that then.) and sped on to Draughton. In a few minutes they were ready to return. Once again, we shot by the old base in a rain storm. At Kelmarsh I thanked the lads, caught a bus back to Northampton and a warm hotel.*

*The next morning I debated. Should I try again? Yes, I decided. That is what I came for. The day was perfect. I walked up your lane and Vera greeted me as she came out of the house. Soon, I met Bernard and we were having cookies and tea, or perhaps it was coffee.*

H. R. Downs 12 -13-2002



Radar personnel at Harrington

## HELP WANTED FOR NEW CHANNEL 4 PROGRAMME ON BOMBER CREWS

The makers of the acclaimed series 'Spitfire Ace' are now making a major series for Channel 4 on the airmen of Bomber Crew in World War II.

They would love to hear from any grandchildren of Bomber Crew airmen who would like to know more about what their grandparents did. They will then be putting these young volunteers through some of the elements of training that airmen undertook in World War II. This will be an opportunity for you to



gain a better understanding of what it meant to be a member of a bomber crew.

**If you know anyone who might be interested and**

**would like to know more information please contact Jess on 020 7013 4476 or email:**

**Jessicav@rdfmedia.com**

## THE ROYAL OBSERVER CORPS By Ex-Chief Observer John Harding

Many of you may be wondering what the relationship might be between the Royal Observer Corps and the Harrington air base. Directly there was none but indirectly there were at least two major points that link one with the other. Firstly, during World War II, the Corps plotted and reported all aircraft flying over the U.K. whether it was friendly or enemy and in some cases it helped to direct aircraft in distress back to their bases. This could have applied to any of the B24s from Harrington. Secondly, after the war, Harrington became a base for three Intermediate Range Thor missiles which were equipped with a nuclear warhead and at this time (1959 — 1963), the Corps was being given the new task of reporting nuclear bursts and the resultant fallout. Fortunately for us all, they were never used and the Soviets did not reply, as they surely would have done. When you next take

a look at the section in the museum, which is devoted to the R.O.C. you might now think that

it is probably a little more relevant to Harrington than it was previously.



*Top—Royal Observer Corps Association lapel badge*

*Middle left—Royal Observer Corps cap badge 1953—1993*

*Middle right—Royal Observer Corps cap badge 1941—1953*

*Bottom—Observer Corps lapel badge pre 1941*

## Royal Observer Corps (continued)

A few words then about the development of the Corps. It was formed in a small way back in 1925 in the south-east of England. Following experiments with aircraft tracking the government gave the go-ahead to form two observation areas with headquarters at Maidstone in Kent and Horsham in Sussex. By 1931 another area was added with its control centre at Watford and with the worsening situation in the late 30s the Corps was gradually increased in size until by the Munich crisis of 1938 the country was covered by a 'spider's web' of Observer Corps posts. All members except for a few permanent staff were volunteers and the observation posts out in the country were completely unprotected against the elements, this was to change after war was declared with, at first, wooden sheds being erected and eventually some purpose-built brick posts were constructed.

The Observer Corps was officially 'called out' on 24th August 1939 and by that time it could field a force of 40,000 trained watchers with posts spread only 5 miles apart over the whole country. Each post with more than 10 volunteers working a shift pattern would report to one of 25 Group Headquarters using a permanent telephone link. The reports were transmitted to R.A.F. Fighter Command etc. One of the exhibits in our museum is the Post Instrument with its Micklethwaite Height Corrector. The Observer at a post would line up the aircraft through the sight bar and a pointer would move to show the position of the 'plane on a map table. A

corrected height could be established if the aircraft was reported as 'overhead' by a neighbouring post.

In 1941 King George VI conferred on the Observer Corps the title ROYAL in recognition of its great work during the Battle of Britain in September 1940. Another milestone occurred in 1941 when women were enrolled for the first time.

This year we are commemorating the 60th Anniversary of D day and it is worth noting that 796 members of the R.O.C. played a direct part in Operation Overlord. Early in 1944 when the Allied top brass were planning this operation, they knew that, among the guncrews of the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS) that would carry the allied armies to

France, the standard of aircraft recognition was poor and that the risk of friendly fire against allied aircraft was extremely high. After an intensive course the R.O.C. volunteers were accepted as Petty Officer Aircraft Identifiers and were allocated to merchant ships taking part in the invasion. An interesting article written by Derek James appears in the June 2004 issue of the 'Aeroplane' monthly magazine. Derek took part as a Seaborne Observer and later became a Group Commandant with No. 3 Group R.O.C. at Oxford.

At the end of the war a stand down was ordered but most of the observation posts remained.

In 1947, with the 'Cold War' looming, the Corps was re-



*The Post Instrument that was used by the Observer Corps to establish the bearing, estimated height and position of aircraft during World War 2*

## Royal Observer Corps (continued)

formed with approximately 25,000 members, many of them being experienced wartime volunteers. Regular meetings were held for training purposes as well as exercises using aircraft flown by the R.A.F. especially for the purpose.

In the early 60s it became apparent that with the increasing speed of military aircraft, the Corps would not be able to be of practical assistance to the R.A.F. and a new role was found. Instead of the above-ground posts, underground posts were built and new underground Headquarters were also constructed which could accommodate up to 40 observers at a

time. This was the 'nuclear age' of the Cold War and the reporting of nuclear bursts and the resultant fall-out became the 'order of the day'. This was all happening at the same time as the Thor missile sites were being set up in the eastern side of the country - including Harrington.

In 1968 there was a large-scale cost saving exercise (these have been going on ever since of course). Fighter and Bomber Commands of the R.A.F. were amalgamated to become Strike Command and the R.O.C. was also affected by the cuts. Half of the recently constructed posts were closed down, leav-

ing 872 still operational and the establishment was reduced to 10,000 personnel.

In the following years, changes took place all the time with such things as electronic transmission of nuclear burst details but with the end of the Cold War with the Soviet Bloc it was considered that there would be no future need for such an organisation so, in 1991, it was stood down. All that remains today is a comparatively small R.O.C. Association.

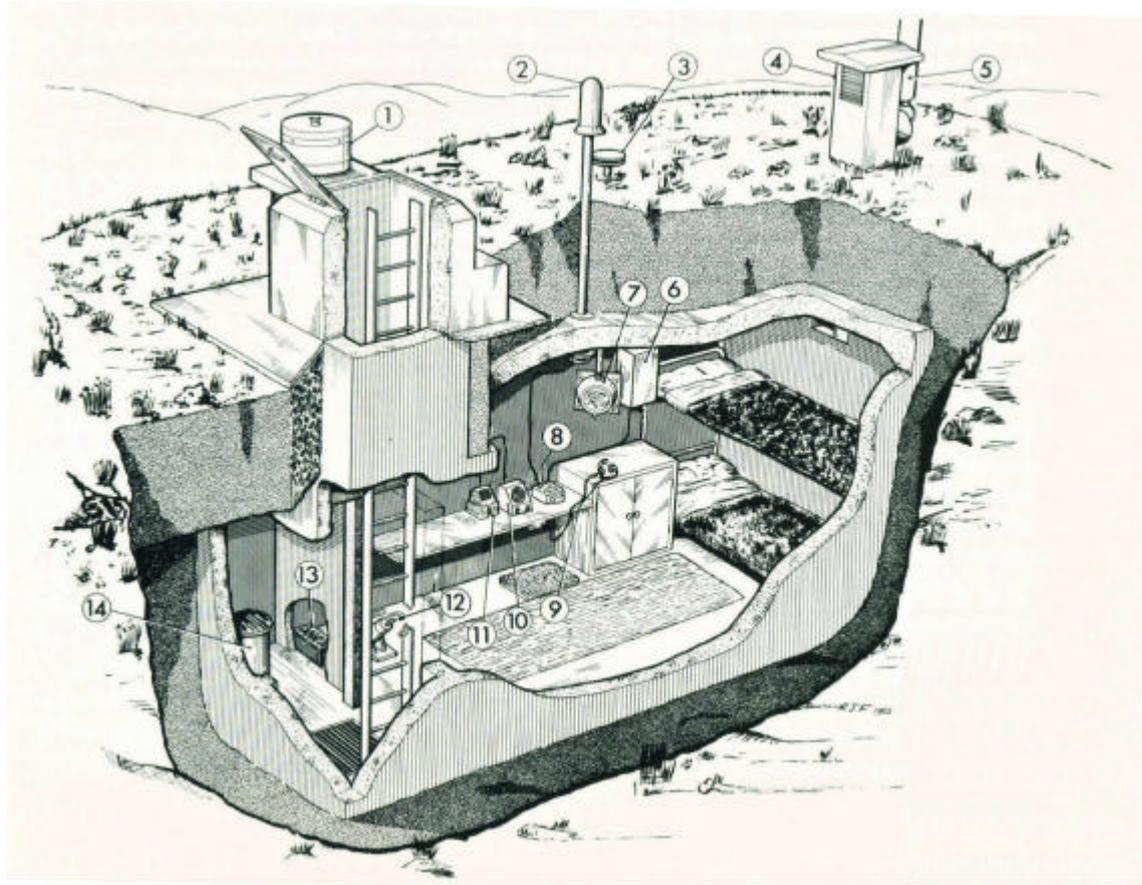
At least three members of the museum were members of the post-war R.O.C. (myself included) - if, by some chance, you feel the need to know more, you can do so by taking a look at the R.O.C. book entitled "Attack Warning Red" which can be found in the museum library - or, on the other hand, take another look at the R.O.C. display cases in the museum.

A few of the R.O.C. posts remain to-day, some were sold to private individuals. The larger underground H.Q.s were mostly demolished but some remain - the building at Lawford Heath near Rugby was the H.Q. for No 8 Group (COVENTRY) R.O.C. and is now privately owned by, I believe, a satellite communications company.

One country in Europe still has an official Observer Corps, identifying and reporting aircraft from above ground posts and liaising with the army and air force - that country is Denmark.



*John Harding inside the ROC underground post at Daventry during the 1970s. Instruments evident on the wall are the Bomb Power Indicator, for measuring the intensity of the pressure wave from a nuclear explosion. On the desk are the training version of the Fixed Survey Meter, for measuring fallout radiation, and the BT Teletalk for communication with Control and other posts in the Cluster. The carrier receiver, over which an Attack Warning Red message would be received, is partially shown on the left hand edge of the photo. Food ration packs are on the double bunk bed in the background for use by the operational crew of 3 persons. Lighting was by a 12 volt battery powered 6 watt striplight, the battery being periodically charged by a petrol generating set. Ventilation of the post was achieved by opening and closing blastproof sliding vents that connected to a vent shaft terminating in the characteristic concrete pillars on the surface approximately 2 metres above the underground chamber*



ROC "Master" Monitoring Post circa 1962  
Key

- |  |                               |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. Ground Zero Indicator               | 8. ROC Fixed Survey Meter     |
| 2. Fixed Survey Meter probe unit cover | 9. Radio head set             |
| 3. Bomb Power Indicator baffle plates  | 10. Loud speaker telephone    |
| 4. Air ventilator                      | 11. Carrier Receiver          |
| 5. Pneumatic aerial for radio set      | 12. Pump for pneumatic aerial |
| 6. Radio set                           | 13. 12 volt battery           |
| 7. Bomb Power Indicator                | 14. Chemical toilet           |



Roy Tebbutt c1990 operating the Teletalk inside the Royal Observer Corp's No 8 Group, 67 Post at Chipping Warden. This post like many others, had all the superstructure demolished and the underground rooms were filled in after the disbandment of the Corps in 1992. The keys to open the post entrance hatch are in the foreground and the radiation measuring PDRM 82 Fixed Survey Meter is let into the surface of the table

## AIRFIELD

The following evocative short poem has been received via Barbara and Tom Reeves. It was written by Alan Burbidge c. 1985.

### AIRFIELD.

*There's concrete laid between the fields  
Where the wheat and the barley grow  
And Nissen huts rusting in the copse  
Where the blossom's hanging low  
And the NAAFI wagon used to wait  
Where they've built that haystack now  
Three roads that lead nowhere  
Ghosts of forty years ago.*

*You can see the grass grows greener just by  
Where the cookhouse used to stand  
And the great scar where 'D-DOG' went in  
Coming, damaged, in to land  
And the crater where ABBA'S HAND went up  
Taking off for the Dresden show  
Three roads that lead nowhere  
Ghosts of forty years ago.*

*The control tower there is standing still  
It would take a lot of knocking down  
And the guardhouse where we used to sign out  
For a night out in the town  
But the trouble when we came back in  
Do you remember boozy Joe?  
Three roads that lead nowhere  
Ghosts of forty years ago.*

Well, this poem could almost have referred to the Harrington airfield, albeit now sixty years ago. Those three concrete runways have long ago disappeared, together with the control tower and the guardhouse. But I do have the pleasure of occasionally flying over the old airfield in a light aircraft and I can tell you that it is still possible to see just where those runways used to be. They stand out like crop marks and the concrete launch pads where the three Thor missiles were housed can still be seen. Thank goodness the Operations Block has survived to enable us to tell the tale to our many visitors during the summer months!

John



*The Control Tower at Harrington 1945*



*Harrington airfield taken from the North 1945*



*Harrington airfield taken from the South 1999*

## HARRINGTON AVIATION MUSEUMS

Off Lamport Road  
Harrington  
Northamptonshire  
NN6 9PF  
UK

Phone: 01604 686608

Email: [cbaggermuseum@aol.com](mailto:cbaggermuseum@aol.com)

*Contributions to the  
newsletter are greatly  
appreciated, please send  
them to John Harding at  
the Carpetbagger  
Aviation Museum,  
Harrington  
NN6 9PF*

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.org.uk

Is there any special subject or topic that you would like to see in the newsletter? If so then let us know and we will try to incorporate it in future editions

## From Special Duties to Thors



*RAF Stirling dropping supply containers*

Many of you will be aware that Colin Burch from Macclesfield was the first Officer Commanding No 218 Squadron (SM) at Harrington in the late 1950s, and was later the Training Officer for the whole of the North Luffenham complex with its four other missile squadrons until closure in 1963. However what you may not have known was that during World War 2 Colin was also involved in Carpetbagger type operations with the RAF.

Colin was involved with supply dropping to the French resistance movement during his operational tour with Bomber Command's No 75 New Zealand Squadron flying Stirling aircraft from RAF Mepal, near Ely in Cambridgeshire, during 1943/44. These aircraft had been withdrawn from the main task force having suffered undue heavy losses and were redeployed to carry out night-time operations supplying the French Maquis with quite a variety of supplies with which to harass the Germans. According to Colin the operations were carried out at night, which with limited navigational aids made them very much reliant on map reading (very difficult at night) and dead-reckoning navigation. Having to fly at low level to make a successful drop made the task somewhat hazardous especially in mountainous terrain. It is believed that some of their losses, which fortunately were not too great, was due to colliding with hills and the like.

On returning to base, all references to the location of the drop zones were destroyed and the official recordings were simply "secret operation". Many years later, when, through curiosity, he tried to find the places which he visited he was dissuaded by the MOD and so contacted the French Embassy. They too were unresponsive and it was quite by chance that he came across a French historian who was collecting information about these operations. He supplied Colin with quite a dossier which made interesting reading and revealed the location of many of the drop zones. Some of these were in the Central Massif which highlighted the hazardousness of such sorties and made him wonder at the accuracy of their navigation and the relatively low casualties that they suffered.

He considers that these operations were just as harrowing as the bombing of targets in Germany, contrary to a general belief that they were otherwise.