

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROYAL AIR FORCE STATION, BRIZE NORTON.

This year is the 80th Anniversary of the RAF Station at Brize Norton. To mark the occasion they have produced a Souvenir Magazine with a well illustrated history. This note is based mainly on the information in that Magazine, with a bit of background history added. To put Brize Norton in context it is today the largest RAF Station in the UK with an establishment of about 5,800 military personnel and 300 civil servants.

The Station was built in 1936 just before World War II on 500 acres requisitioned from the Ellis family by the War Office (later to become the MOD). It was initially an RAF Training School with two long grass runways. The School at that time trained 90 Officers and 360 Other Ranks in courses on all aspects of flying and aviation. This came at a time when the UK Government was at last beginning to re-equip the armed services against the threat of German rearmament. The training was initially on Hawker Hart and Hawker Fury aircraft when fighter biplanes were being phased out by the RAF and replaced by Hawker Hurricanes. Air Speed Oxfords and US Harvard Trainers were also introduced just before the war, replacing their biplane predecessors.

In August 1940, soon after the beginning of the war, there was a disastrous raid on Brize Norton by two German Junker 88 bombers which destroyed the main hangar and 46 aircraft on the ground. There were three more raids in 1940 by which time the airfield was better defended. Later in the war, in addition to training aircrew, the station became a base for training pilots on Horsa Gliders towed by converted Whitley bombers, and was one of the bases from which glider landings in Normandy were flown after D Day in 1944. Brize Norton also became from the start in 1940 the base of the Parachute Training School for the British Army. Para Commandos were first deployed in Italy in 1941 and then extensively in the Normandy landings 1944. Brize Norton has ever since remained the training base for all British Army and Airborne personnel "with Wings".

At the end of the war in Europe in 1945 Brize Norton was also used temporarily as the test station for 130 captured German aircraft flown to Britain, including the newly developed Messerschmitt 262 fighter jet. In 1950 the station was handed over to the US Air Force as a base for B47 Stratojet Bombers. This continued for twelve years until US bombers began to be replaced by ICBM's and the US Air Force moved to Upper Heyford, a wartime bomber base.

When the station was handed back to the RAF in 1965 it began to assume its current role as a base for RAF Transport. The runway at the existing RAF Transport Base at Lyneham was too short to handle the new VC 10 and Belfast aircraft. In 1967 the enormous hangar, covering five acres and able to accommodate six aircraft was built at Brize Norton. It then became the main RAF base for troop carriers while Lyneham remained the base for air cargo.

In the 1970's the station was also used for the development of Concorde Flights for British Airways by the Bristol Company; and in the 1980's it was used once again during the Cold War by the US Air Force as a base for B52 and Galaxy bombers.

During the Falklands War in 1982 RAF Brize Norton played a key role in Operation Corporate, supplying the British invasion force with air cargo. This required refuelling via Ascension Island to Port Stanley. In the First Gulf War in 1990 it played the same role in joint Operation Granby with the

US Air Force in Iraq. In 1994 they supported the UN Army with Operation Grapple in Bosnia; in 1995 with Operation Gabriel in Rwanda; and in 2003, following the passing of a UN Resolution, in the Second Gulf War with Operation Telic, using a base for VC 10's in Saudi Arabia and for Tristars in Bahrain.

During the lengthy war in Afghanistan Brize Norton and Lyneham were the main bases for troop transport and supplies for the British Battle Groups stationed there in a six monthly succession of Operation Herricks. And most recently in 2017 a major relief operation was carried out by the RAF following the disastrous Hurricane Irma in the British Virgin Islands, in which virtually all types of aircraft at Brize Norton were involved.

In 2001 the RAF leased four US Boeing C17 Globemasters and based them at Brize Norton. In 2012 Lyneham was finally closed after a steady transfer of C130 Hercules aircraft and crew to Brize Norton. Brize Norton also resumed from Lyneham the role of the airport for repatriating fallen and wounded UK personnel. A purpose built Repatriation Centre was constructed there in 2011.

By 2013 the VC 10's (an aircraft first in airline service in the early 1960's) and the Tristars had all been retired and replaced by the Airbus 330 Voyager as tankers. The various versions of the C130 Hercules (the workhorse of the RAF) are now being steadily replaced with the A400M for both cargo and troop transport. The A400M Atlas turbo-prop is a remarkably versatile large aircraft with its short take off and landing capability and ability to operate overseas on unprepared runways.

It is a pity that the recent and excellent BBC 1 Centenary Documentary "The RAF at 100" Brize Norton did not mention the role that Brize Norton played over eighty years in that hundred year history of the RAF. The Souvenir Magazine on which this article is based explains in 90 pages of print and superb photography the many roles of the station, its crews and its aircraft over the past eighty years. It is also a fine record of the achievements of RAF Transport and gives a vivid impression of the *Esprit de Corps* of the RAF with its legendary motto "*Per Ardua ad Astra*".

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