

Volunteer Observer Corps. (VOC). Later the Royal Observer Corps. (ROC).

The Volunteer Observer Corps was founded in October 1925 following a trial which took place in the area around Maidstone and Horsham with the cooperation of Chief Constables. This trial involved Special Constables who operated as observers and this continued up the commencement of the war. The success of the tests led to the establishment of a chain of observation posts which were controlled by regional group centres. By 1936 there was full coverage from Flamborough Head in Yorkshire to Poole Harbour in Dorset. In 1939 the observer Corps administration was transferred to the Air Ministry and the observers relinquished their special constable status.

Wikipedia and Royal Observer Corps. roc-heritage.co.uk

In 1938 the VOC was mobilised as a result of the Munich Crisis and this highlighted some deficiencies in coverage. Partly as a result of the mobilisation 14 Group was established at Bury St. Edmunds. Along with other groups it was involved in a number of exercises to test the accuracy and communication of sightings to the various Group HQ's which then went to RAF Duxford. The so-called Phoney War gave the opportunity for real time practice with the RAF fighter squadrons. Each post was permanently connected by GPO (General Post Office) land telephone line to the Group centre so that aircraft spotted and plotted could be reported speedily to the various air defence commanders. Aircraft could be observed, identified and tracked, and height and course passed from one post to another, each Post reporting to the Group Centre so giving a confirmation of their course and enabling interception by fighters or air-raid warnings to be given.

David Addy: The St. Edmundsbury Chronicle 2000.

Royal Observer Corps Association. roc-heritage.co.uk

'In 1938 it was decided that there were insufficient posts in Norfolk and Suffolk. The solution was to provide a new Group Headquarters in Bury St. Edmunds, 14 Group. This was completed and opened on 24. 6. 1939 in the Guildhall, Bury St. Edmunds where it has remained to this day. Posts serving this Head Quarters were already in existence, certainly for the exercises in September 1939. It's thought that the first Lakenheath Post was provided by early 1939, having been being built in the plantation at the top of Broom Road with its platform above the trees. Later the site was moved to the present site in August 1944 and consisted of a wooden hut and canvas screen for weather protection of the instruments. The old post remained in place until after the war'.

Colin Brown.

The National Registration of September 1939 gives the following three men as members of the Lakenheath VOC. Entries were hand written.

Mr. Charles Stanford. 5/6/1900. 13 Avenue Road. General labourer. Observer Corps. RAF.

Mr. William Crane. 22/6/1898. 8 Council Houses, Eriswell Road. General labourer. Observer Corps.

Mr. James Brown. 10/9/1898. 6 Council Houses, Eriswell Road. General labourer. Observer Corps RAF.

Ancestry UK 1939 Register. Research by Ken Turner.

Lakenheath observers early in the war also were:

Mr. Henry Williams, Brandon House, Wings Road. Director of the Chicory Factory. (Head Observer).
Mr. Easy Raven, High St. (Bus Proprietor). Mr. John Brown, High St. Mr. Sergeant Coleman.
*Mr. James Brown. Joseph Rutterford. Samuel Rutterford. Mr. Burt Mackender, Station Road.
Mr. William (Bill) Crane, later a Sargent, Home Guard. Mr. James Cooper. Mr. Horace (Horry) Fincham. Mr. Walter Smith. Mr. Charles Stamford. Mr. Frank Mortlock. Mr. Thomas Green.

The Corps was granted its 'Royal' status in April 1941 in recognition of its important role in the defence of the country before and during the Battle of Britain by King George VI.

***The Air Defence of Great Britain INSTRUCTIONS for OBSERVER POSTS 1941.**

States of readiness for the Posts.

Stage 1 - "Readiness."

This stage will represent the full manning of all Centres and Posts being actually on the look-out.

Stage 2 - "Available."

In this stage the crew of two men should be at each Post, but one may be resting in the shelter or elsewhere, provided he remains within earshot of the telephone bell. *The Post Instrument should be erected and covered, and one man must be on the look-out.

All communications remain switched through.

The conditions under the AVAILABLE must be such that the Group can be at READINESS within the number of minutes ordered.

**The Air Ministry, Revised April 1941 in Royal Observer Corps. ROCA Heritage. www.roc-heritage.co.uk*

The Post was required to provide the following information:

1. Post number. 2. Number of aircraft. 3. Seen or heard? 4. Grid reference. (This taken from a specially prepared map). 5. Direction of flight. 6. Height. 7. Type of aircraft.

A typical first report would be:

"B2 calling, three aircraft seen 6153 flying North, height 8,000 ft".

Followed up by a more exact report with further information.

"8000 ft estimated (or corrected) height. Friendly bomber or Fighter, Hostile, or Unrecognised, and if recognised :- Wellington or Dornier (for example)".

The maintenance of the telephone land line was given a high status.



A Post Instrument plotter, with a Mickelthwaite height adjuster attachment, used to plot aircraft.

Photo from Wikipedia. ©allowed in the public domain.

The ROC had become essential to the air defences of the country and this was recognised when King George VI visited the post at Bromley, Kent in 1940 when there was an expectation of imminent invasion.



King George VI with an officer and men of the Observer Corps. (1940)

© IWM H5178. Imperial War Museum.

"During his recent two day visit to the Eastern Command the King saw men of the observer corps who, in all weathers maintain a constant watch for hostile aircraft. They are the eyes and ears of the system of detecting enemy machines coming over this country and his Majesty was very interested in the men and their work."

Taken by Mr. Puttnam. 31.10.40 in IWM H 5178.

The Battle of Britain. 1940.

Although the newly developed radar chain defence was able to spot enemy aircraft approaching our shores the only way that hostile aircraft could be tracked over land was by observation by the ROC. This required the identification of types of aircraft, both 'friendly' and 'unfriendly', which were often flying at very considerable heights. The ROC was required to provide 24/7 observation and to be 'on watch' and reporting for the duration of the battle - July to October, and at the height of 'The Blitz'. These duties generally continued until 1945. The ROC was an essential cornerstone of the air defence of this country and it played a major part in the tracking of the V1 flying bombs towards the end of the war.

ROC personnel were classified 'A' and 'B' with the A group being on watch for 56 hours per week, and the B group 24 hours per week. This allowed for members to continue with their everyday employment.

Wikipedia



Lakenheath Post with the post in the tree. Circa 1944.

Left to right.

Front row: Sammy Tuffs, Ralph Ashman, Harry Rutterford, Charlie Bennett, Tom Tuffs, Jim Brown, Horry Fincham, Walter Flack, George Peckett.

Middle row: Sarge Flack, David Howard, *Fred Bullen, Herb Coleman, Johnny Coleman.

Front row: Ebb Flack and Harold Bennett.

*Chief Observer Fred Bullen, Lakenheath ROC was awarded a Commendation by King George VI for his actions at the site of a crashed aircraft in the village. Later, in the 1950's he was awarded the British Empire Medal.

See also 'Plane Crashes and a Village Hero'.

D Day involvement:

The Seaborne Observers: Unsung Heroes.

'In 1944 as part of the D-Day landings three Observers from the Lakenheath Post, Sammy Tuffs, Barry Hensby and George Peckett were amongst the 796 selected from 1376 Observers and 29 Officers. who volunteered for temporary service in the Royal Navy. They became 'Seaborne' Observers on 'D.E.M.S' (Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships) which were used as supply vessels in the D-Day landings and they acted as spotters for the gunners because the Royal Navy had limited experience in aircraft recognition. They were enlisted for one month (with an option to extend to two months) and were paid a special rate of £1 per day and given the rank of Petty Officer. Their ages ranged from 17 to 70. Two of these observers were killed, 22 survived their ships being sunk. One was injured by shell splinters and one by a flying bomb when the ship was in harbour'.

Colin Brown



Lakenheath Post Observers during their Seaborne training.

*Barry Hensby, standing 1st left. Sammy Tuffs, standing 6th from the left.
George Peckett sitting 2nd from the right.*

The Post stood down from war time duties in May 1945.

The Cold War

In January 1947 the ROC was reformed and a new Post at Maids Cross on the Warren(B1) was established, remaining under 14 Group. In 1953 Post B1 was transferred to 7 Group Bedford, and 14 Group was stood down.

It's at this time that the Orlit Post was built. This can still be seen.

Later, in 1968, Lakenheath (post 46) became part of 6 Group, Norwich, together with Posts at Mundford (47), Thetford (48), and Garboldisham (45). Lakenheath's administration name and call sign was JULIETE 3.



An 'Orlit' Post. A sectional concrete building named after its inventor.

Tensions between the NATO allies and the countries of the Warsaw Pact led to a race to achieve military superiority. Defence against air attacks, both by aircraft and missiles became ever more important. Once again Lakenheath Post played its part.

*The ROC's responsibilities were expanded to include observing and reporting on the effects of a nuclear attack which included the monitoring of radio-active fallout. It was this development of their role which led to the construction around 1962 of the underground Post on Maids Cross whose ventilation and entrance system can still be seen.

**Royal Observer Corps Association: Heritage of the Corps.*



The ROC Post in the 1960's with the posts Identification board.



View of the Post showing ventilation ducts.



An unknown observer, possibly in the late 1970's early 80's. We don't know what he was doing!

Training and Attainment.

As might be expected training was intense and high levels of aircraft recognition continued to be essential and members were required to attend an annual week's training at an airbase. During WW2 training and testing had focussed solely on aircraft recognition but demands changed in the Cold War to include nuclear warning and monitoring. The competence of observers was again tested annually.

In June 1941 'The Aeroplane Spotter' magazine featured the development of film to be used to train aircraft spotters including the Observer Corps. This extract shows just how demanding the work of the Observer Corps was. (The extract deals with just two aircraft- the Blenheim IV and the German Junkers (JU 88). To an untrained eye there are close similarities between the two aircraft. A mistaken identification could have fatal consequences. In 1941 there were well in excess of 100 different military aircraft flown by the RAF not to mention the enemy aeroplanes!



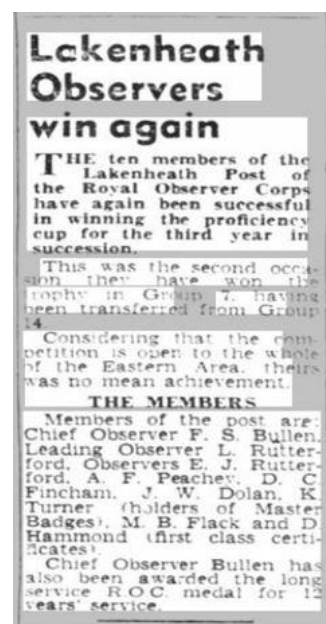
Stills from a Recognition Film. Analysis Films Ltd. Directed by Mr. W M Larkins in 'The Aeroplane Spotter', June 1941. Published by Temple Press Ltd.

**Each year a Master Test took place in which all ROC members were examined. If a master pass was achieved the successful member was entitled to wear an embroidered blue spitfire badge on their tunic. In order to qualify for this badge a score of 90% had to be achieved. This entitled the observer to wear a blue spitfire badge on the tunic. If five successive 'master passes' were achieved then a red spitfire badge was awarded. This system continued up to a maximum of 30 'Master passes' when a gold embroidered spitfire and a gold star was attained!

**The Royal Observer Corps Association: Heritage of the Corps.

The Lakenheath Post had a considerable reputation for its effectiveness.

'Lakenheath Observers Win Again.'
The Bury Free Press. June 3. 1955.



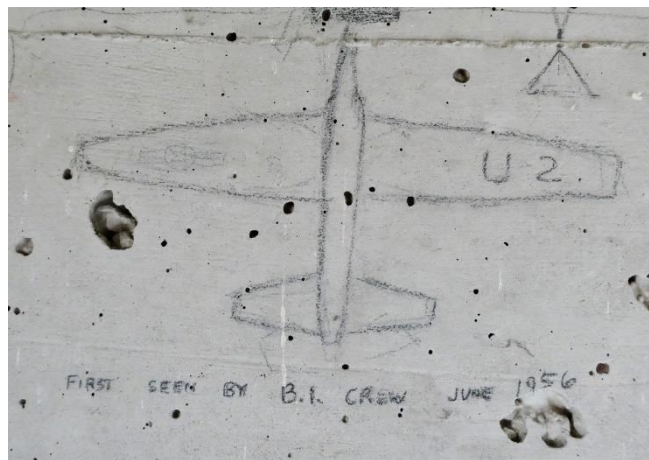
Malcom Rolph writes:

"....., those were heady days, most of us didn't realise at the time, but we were witnessing aviation/ cold war history, under such secret circumstances, under our noses.

Following a winter training period (1955-56) at the British Legion HQ, I had become a member of the ROC at this time and meetings at the post site were started. These were weekly and looked upon as a great spotting opportunity, with all the close airfields and the large number of operational military aircraft: most duty was during the evenings (Exercises were mostly at weekends) and one could expect quite a busy time plotting aircraft activity. This is when the excitement began with the arrival (March/April) of the new aircraft, being shipped in and assembled on site in secret. Eventually, we caught sight of one of the new all silver, jet planes, and we were amazed at the method used for take-off. (This is, of course, all old hat nowadays).

It was thought that we had sighted a couple more aircraft, and after flight testing over a few weeks, (and a couple of political incidents) the aircraft were flown out of the UK, relocating to Wiesbaden in West Germany.

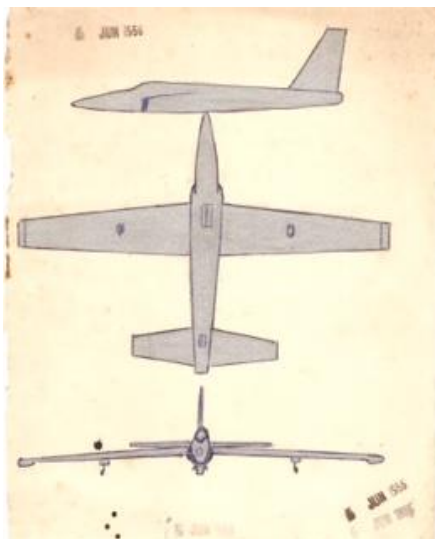
In 1956 an unusual aircraft was spotted at RAF Lakenheath. This was one of the first U2 Spy planes to be seen in this country. Its existence was denied but the Observers on duty made a pencil sketch inside the post as the photograph shows."



The rough sketch of the U2 Spy Plane in the underground Post.

Malcom continues:

"As a sixteen year-old surrounded by older and more experienced members (a few of whom had given war service), I cannot claim to be the first person to witness this event, only that it must have been a combined effort of all the post members serving at that time. With the number of post meetings and sightings, the members tried to describe what they had seen, and from this, a few pencil marks appeared on the wall of the observation area. Fred Bullen, who was our Chief, probably started it with his attempt: not satisfied with his effort, I added my own and it has survived to this day."



*The drawing of the U2 Spy Plane.
Reproduced by permission of Malcolm Rolph.*

Malcom gives the names of the observers in 1955 as:

F.S. Bullen (Chief Observer), L. Rutterford, A. Peachey, M. Flack. E. Rutterford, K. Turner. D. Fincham, and M. Rolph.

In the 1960's the Post members were:

Fred Bullen BEM (Chief Observer). Malcolm Rolph (Leading Observer). Bob Crofts. John Fenn. Don Fincham. Alan Peachey. Ernie Rutterford. Colin Brown. Edwin Curtis. Russell Tuffs. Jim Hannon.



*Lakenheath Post on exercise in the 1960's.
Fred Bullen (with binoculars) and Don Fincham with an unknown officer.*

1970's:

Malcolm Rolph (Chief Observer). Tony Field (Leading Observer). Ernie Rutterford. Colin Brown. Edwin Curtis. Russell Tuffs. Neville Thompson. Peter Hancock. Colin Gyte. Andy Flack. Alan Halls. Robert Palmer. Michael Wallis. Roland Schultheiss. Nigel Tuffs. Stuart Halls. Don Fincham. Alan Peachey.

1980-1991:

Eric Preston (Chief Observer). Malcolm Rolph (Leading Observer). Tony Field. Edwin Curtis. Ernie Rutterford. Steve Drew. Michael Starling. Brian Lucas. Barry Marchant. Steve Hargreaves. Simon Morley. Michael King. The aircraft reporting system remained in use until the early 1960's and training for potential nuclear fallout monitoring duties continued.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the USSR satellite countries the Cold War came to an end and with it came the disbanding of the ROC. The view at the time was that nuclear monitoring should be the responsibility of the armed forces not the civilian volunteers of the ROC. The Lakenheath ROC Post, together with Posts across the UK, was stood down in 1991 ending the longest period of volunteer service in the village.

The Lakenheath underground Post photographed in 2019.

The following photo's were taken by Ady and Jo Harris when they became owners of the site.



Vertical shaft entrance to the Post.



Cooking facility and worktop.



Single bunk and wall maps. Note the vestiges of an aircraft identification chart on the back wall.



1980-90 bunk bed.



The 'Elsan' chemical toilet.

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The Breckland Society have produced a report entitled 'The Cold War in the Brecks', (2021) which gives a detailed account of the role of the ROC and its role in the defence of this country during this period. For anyone wishing to learn more we recommend this report on the link below. The full PDF version is available to download on the page.

<http://www.brecsoc.org.uk/the-cold-war-in-the-brecks/>

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What they said. 1941 and after:

After the Battle of Britain and the Blitz: Air Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding.

"It is important to note that at this time they (the Observer Corps) constituted the whole means of tracking enemy raids once they had crossed the coastline. Their work was quite invaluable. Without it the air-raid warning systems could not have been operated and inland interceptions would rarely have been made".

After D-Day: Air Chief Marshall Sir Trafford Leigh Mallory.

....."All reports agree that the Seabourne volunteers have more than fulfilled their duties and have undoubtedly saved many of our aircraft from being engaged by our ships guns..... convey to all ranks of the Royal Observer Corps, and in particular to the Seabourne observers themselves, how grateful I, and all pilots in the Allied Expeditionary Air Force, are for their assistance, which has contributed in no small measure to the safety of our own aircraft, and also to the efficient protection of our ships at sea. The work of the Royal Observer Corps is often unjustly overlooked and receives little recognition and I therefore wish that the service they rendered on this occasion be as widely advertised as possible."

Quotations taken from Wikipedia.