

Traces of Deception: The Decoy Site at Cilcain

At the beginning of the Second World War it was accepted that Douhet was correct in stating that “the bomber would always get through” and that a wide range of targets would be bombed by the Germans.

There was a large disparity in numbers between the relative strengths of the Luftwaffe and the RAF. It was doubted that our fighter strength would be sufficient to either defend or resist an invasion of our southern shores. Air superiority was an essential pre-requisite to invasion.

To establish superiority, it was known that the Germans would confront us in the air and wage a war of attrition where numbers should

prevail. They would also attack our aircraft on the ground and bomb our methods of production of aircraft.

Preceding the outbreak of war consideration was given to the possibility of defending airfields and factories by means of decoys.

There was a lot of activity from 1935 onwards but nothing practical was done until the second week of the war with the employment of Colonel John Fisher Turner.

Colonel Turner was a career soldier who had served most of his time overseas. His last appointment before his retirement at the age of 50 was as Chief Engineer to the RAF in India.

On retirement in 1931 he took up the Civil Service post of Director of Works and Buildings

at the Air Ministry in London where he was in charge of the RAF Expansion Program.

He retired for a second time just before the outbreak of war but he returned to command the RAF Decoy Airfield Project on 22nd September 1939.

Soon after his return he visited Shepperton Studios where he met Norman Loudon who ran Sound City which had an established and professional background in modelling and scenery for the Cinema Industry.

Day-time K sites were the first type of decoy site to be built. They consisted of dummy aircraft, the mowing of fields to represent runways and perimeter tracks and ploughing to represent bunkers and buildings. Thirty six were built.

Q or night decoy sites were commissioned in April/May 1940. They consisted of dummy runway lights and various configurations and colours of lamps, which mimicked the lights of an operational airfield.

These were followed by QF night decoy sites which used various forms of fires to deceive enemy bombers.



By 1941 there were literally hundreds of decoy sites with various designations scattered around the UK.

Cities, factories, oil terminals, ports and airfields were all decoyed.

In the immediate area there were decoy sites for Brymbo Steelworks, Monsanto Chemicals, ROF Marchwiell, RAF Hawarden airfield, RAF Hawarden factory, RAF Sealand, and John Summers Steelworks.

From 1940 onwards there were meetings concerning the building of a decoy site to protect the Valley factory. In 1941 plans were made to lay a QF site near Cilcain on Ffrith Mountain.

The site was an Army A series QF decoy number 34, parented by Mold and located at Cilcain, it is also listed as Civil C series QF decoy number 62 again listed as Mold and located at Cilcain. We do not know why it was listed as both a civilian and army site with the same grid reference of SJ 172635 perhaps it had more than one function.

The control bunker for the site was an Anderson shelter measuring 13ft by 15ft with 7 ft headroom in the centre with blast walls screening its entrance. There was a steel ladder on the far wall which led to an observation hole in the ceiling which was probably enclosed as a wooden sentry box. The configuration of this bunker may have been unique.

This bunker was the control centre to ignite fires on Ffrith Mountain running up to Moel Famau.

The ceiling of the bunker has now collapsed into its base and it is surrounded by Alder trees which screen the view up to Ffrith Mountain.

The form of the constituent fires on QF sites changed shape and configuration as the art of building them developed. There was no standard pattern, so the configuration of the Cilcain decoy is not known.

The control shelter shown in the attached photograph is sited below the site of the fires and decoys; it is now screened by the growth of alder trees. The actual fires were located in combinations of troughs and baskets filled with flammable material, some capped by tar or roofing felt and fed by fuel from distant elevated storage tanks. They were ignited from the Control Centre.

When the site opened in 1941 there is evidence that it was manned by RAF personnel billeted in the vicinity of Cilcain. Other documentation from TNA dated 8/9/1941 shows an indication that ICI employees at Valley also manned the site.

It is reported that the initial installation did not include a dedicated telephone line and it was necessary for someone to cycle to the Bryn Bannion telephone box (about 1½ miles away). There would have been a discussion with RAF Radlett concerning the current state of readiness of the decoy site. Instructions would have been issued concerning the probability of an air-raid taking place and which fires should be lit if that happened.

The messenger would have returned to the control bunker to relay the orders received. If the order to fire any part of the site at any time had have been received the operators would have fired the relevant detonators, located under the decoys, which would have been powered by battery from the Control Centre. There are still traces of the detonator cabling leaving the bunker and running to the area of the fires. There is also a telephone post indicating that a dedicated line, minus insulator and located near the door, was installed during its working life.

It is reported that the location of any of the decoy sites was top secret, and the site operators would have deceived any locals by lying about their true jobs perhaps by describing themselves as ack ack gunners or balloon crews. The cover story would have continued into their lodgings and into The Red Lion which served as their headquarters.

As the war progressed and a number of the decoy sites were given less importance, they tended to be taken over by other services. It is known in other areas that the Home Guard and other volunteer groups took over the running of the sites. It is also rumoured that the Flintshire Constabulary took over some sites.

It is recorded that the last bombs fell on North Wales on 11th February 1941.

The site was taken over by RAF Sealand on 1st May 1943 and abandoned on 18th May 1943.

SEPARATE THREADS

It is worth-while to record that most of the potential targets in the UK had been located and photographed by the Luftwaffe before WWII; individual squadrons were assigned targets from this information. The use of Knickebein precise bombing beams enabled the Luftwaffe to bomb with a degree of accuracy but the further away from the transmitters the more inaccurate they became.

Valley was not on their target list.

The bombers which would home in on this area were based in Northern France or Scandinavia, it was a long journey and many apparently more fruitful targets would have passed under their wings. The journey from Denmark would have passed over Leeds/Bradford, Manchester, Liverpool and the attractive local targets of John Summers Steel Works, RAF Sealand, Brymbo Steel Works, Monsanto Chemicals, ROF Marchweil, and both the airfield and factory at Hawarden.

There are reported to be two craters of unknown origin in the site area.

It is also reported that a shot-down German Airman alleged that he was born in Rhydymwyn.

Sources

Wings Across the Border-Derrick Pratt & Mike Jones

Fields of Deception-Colin Dobinson

AVIA 22/1711-TNA

Mike Grant-Oral

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