

3 Aircraft Depot & 3 Aeroplane Supply Depot

The RAF depot at Courban was specifically created to supply the Independent Force [IF] since the existing depots, located close to the Channel coast, were too distant to meet the organisation's daily needs – notably the provision of replacement aircraft and aero-engines. Located 200km to the south-east of Paris, Courban was close to the airfields at Autrecourt, Azelot, Bettoncourt, Ochey, Roville and Xaffevillers. The operations of VIII Brigade, the IF's precursor organisation, had been maintained by a single aircraft park (6 AP) based at Vezelise – around 20 km behind the forward airfields. The site was immediately to the south of Courban station – on the Paris-Troyes-Dijon standard gauge railway line-- where there was sufficient space for hangars, salvage sheds, workshops and domestic accommodation, as well as a large landing field. The remoteness of the area (from the Channel ports) meant that the depot was designed on a larger scale than normal – in order to hold a sufficient range and quantity of stores (pending re-supply) and to operate largely independently from the other RAF depots. Courban was also different in that it combined the aeroplane supply (3 ASD) and aircraft depot (3 AD) activities previously separated in the autumn of 1917 (with the aim of improving day-to-day management and enhancing resilience). One presumes that, on this occasion, efficiency outweighed risk. A further consideration, in deciding on a collocated depot, was that the Handley Page O/400 (equipping five of the IF's ten squadrons and larger than any other type operated by the RAF during the First World War) required special transportation and handling arrangements; including dedicated hangars and the bulk supply of aviation spirit. A single location undoubtedly made resupply easier, but with an increased potential vulnerability to German bombing.

HQ RFC drew up the plans for the new depot during the first months of 1918, after a site visit by Brooke-Popham; the final changes in the layout were approved in March 1918. When Trenchard first visited Courban on 12 June 1918 (having taken command of the IF on 6 June), the depot was still under construction. Maurice Baring records a series of follow-up visits to resolve a large number of support and engineering issues including motor transport; light railways; the supply of spares; and power generation. It was anticipated that the IF would need 165 (rail) trucks each week (dispatched from Rouen) to sustain daily needs. Some of the stores were sent direct to the operational units via the nearest railroad, but the bulk – including all ordnance stores (food, clothing, petrol, oil, etc) – went to Courban for onward distribution to the IF. The network included: 6 and 12 Aircraft Parks; 5, 10 and 16 Reserve Lorry Parks; 8 and 11 Air Ammunition Columns; and 11, 14, 21 and 27 Tent Detachments. Although the depot was still under construction at the Armistice it was described as a vast camp, around five miles around, situated about twenty miles from Nancy and within easy flying distance of the Rhine. Courban was integral to proposed Anglo-American night bombing campaign employing the Handley Page O/400. 30 United States Air Service [USAS] squadrons were planned – to be equipped and trained by the British. 3 ASD Courban was tasked with assembling and issuing the aircraft, while 3 AD was to provide equipment and spares. Courban was also required to support the first three USAS squadrons, attached to the IF, pending completion of a dedicated American depot at Latrency. Construction of 2 Air Depot, Latrency (some 20kms to the north-east of Courban), commenced in August 1918 but was not completed before the Armistice and Courban continued to support American Air Service operations until the war ended. As a result, three USAS repair squadrons were attached to 3 AD. The 1099th Aero Squadron arrived on 24 May 1918, followed by the 835th (24 August 1918) and 840th Aero Squadron (20 August 1918). When the 1099th arrived, the

depot was still under construction with 109 RAF personnel on site, together with Royal Engineer detachments (1505 and 1506 Artizan Works Companies) and 1,200 German POWs. Two companies of the Canadian Forestry Corps (43 and 47) were also allocated to the construction of airfields and facilities for the IF.

Courban comprised over thirty hangars and major buildings, although not all had been completed by the Armistice. A spur line was constructed from the main railway into the camp. Additional buildings, not on the original site plan, were constructed between the railway station and the camp. A series of bomb dumps was also established to hold three weeks' supply for the day and night bomber squadrons (bombs, flares, ammunition etc). Telephone lines were laid to link Courban with the forward airfields and Trenchard's headquarters. A road building programme was instigated to facilitate the onward movement of stores. The depot's strength (excluding the USAS) grew from just over 700 personnel in August 1918 to 1,470 officers and men by November 1918. The American and British technicians at Courban worked on DH4s and DH9s, as well as the Handley Page O/400 aircraft. The one exception to the standardized types was Vickers Vimy F9569, the fourth prototype fitted with Rolls Royce Eagle engines, that arrived at Courban on 28 October 1918 for trials with the IF. Total output (up to the Armistice) comprised 250 aero-engines and over 200 aircraft. The 840th Aero Squadron erected their first Handley Page on 20 August 1918. The squadron's post-war history provides an informative and evocative picture of their work. It is worth quoting at some length as it provides a rare contemporary account of the RAF's salvage and processes:

Upon being brought into the shed, the plane is energetically attacked by a party of salvage hands who proceed to detach all component parts. The remains of the wings, or "sails" are taken off, the twin engines are extracted and sent to the Engine Shop for rejuvenation, the propeller, undercarriage and tailplanes are detached and we have nothing remaining but the gigantic "fuselage" or body of the machine. This is separated into four main divisions, nose center section and two tail sections which we now see placed on carriages and pushed over to the Fuselage Shop, where if we follow, we see the painted linen covering ripped from the sections. Then a party of expert wood-workers proceed to tear away all the broken or strained parts of the nose section

3 Aeroplane Supply Depot

A- MT Garage; B- Petrol, Oil & Paint Store; C- Power House; D- Joiner's Shop; E- Sawmill; F- Machine Tools; G- Riggers, Fittings & Tinsmiths; H- Foudry etc; I- Propeller Repairs; J- Armoury; K- Instrument Repairs; L- Wireless; M- Photographic; N- DH Fuselages; O- Engine Store; P- Aero; Q- General; R- Riggers Finished Parts; S- Salvage; T- Plane Assembly & Repairs; U- HP Plane Covering; V- DH Plane Covering; W- Doping Shop; X- DH Erection; Y- Fuselage Doping; Z- Engine Fitters; AA- Officers; BB- HP Fuselages.

