

RAF ELMSWELL – FORGOTTEN SENTINEL

by Peter McGee and Graham Mack

STRADDLING THE PARISH BOUNDARIES of Great Ashfield and Elmswell is the remnants of a disused WWII airfield with three huge concrete runways, formerly the home to the four squadrons of the United States Army Air Force 385th Bomb Group, flying Boeing B17s. There is a small chapel dedicated to the American airmen in All Saints church in the village of Great Ashfield. When John Laing & Co completed the construction of the new base in 1941, the remnants of an earlier military aviation presence appeared to have been all but erased. There is no memorial or marker to the men and women who served with the Royal Flying Corps at Elmswell during the final years of World War I. Between 1917 and 1918, approximately 200 men and women served in the front line of the air defence of Britain, encamped on this small Suffolk aerodrome.

The Army had commandeered several fields at Lea Farm in the parish of Elmswell, early in the Great War. It was initially used as a night landing ground, later developed as a major Home Defence aerodrome and eventually became known as RAF Elmswell. The landing ground was first used by 51 Squadron RFC, but the principal occupants were 75 (HD) Squadron RFC which was headquartered at the expanded station from 1917 to 1918. The Operations Record Book for 75 Squadron held at The National Archives (TNA) Kew, has a single page typed summary of WWI activities on the first page of the Log. The record appears to have been created just before WWII and possibly noted some details from an earlier script that is now lost. There are a few books and internet articles about 75 Squadron, but all concentrate on the squadron's activities during the Second World War, as an RAF Bomber

unit. Details of the RFC squadron that participated in the development of Britain's first air defences appear sparse.

In the Centenary year of the start of World War I, the Elmswell History Group took on the task of seeking what evidence could be found in records and publications about the RFC at Elmswell, and what might be found at the aerodrome site itself.

A LANDING GROUND AT ELMSWELL

The earliest known reference to the site indicates that it had been taken up by 30 April 1916 but was not then ready for use.¹ There is no mention of the site in an August 1916 listing of Home Defence units and stations,² in that for 18 October 1916³ or in another for 31 December 1916.⁴ It finally appeared as an operational site in a listing for 5 January 1917,⁵ in which it was classified as a Category 1 Night Landing Ground for 51 (Home Defence) Squadron. The unit, with its HQ at The Old Grammar School, Hingham, had its three flights operating from Harling Road, Mattishall and Marham and was in the process of equipping fully with the FE2b. On 27 January it had two BE2c, one BE2d, one BE12 and 13 FE2bs but all the BEs had gone by 19 February.⁶

It is possible to identify the precise location of the grass airstrip from two further primary sources. A firm of builders in Coney Weston, R. Hogg & Sons, did continuous work at the aerodrome, and in late 1917 tendered to provide fencing around the site.⁷ In a letter dated October 1917 they describe the fencing for each field boundary totalling 1395ft, referring to the Ordnance Survey field numbers in their estimate of costs. Using the 1904 edition of OS Sheet XLVII, the footprint

75 Squadron personnel at Elmswell during late 1918, with the unit CO, Major Claude Ridley, seated centrally and eight WRAF members flanking the men of the unit. The asbestos sheet cladding of the timber-framed aeroplane shed is evident.

:RAF Museum

