

INDIVIDUAL HISTORY

BRISTOL BEAUFIGHTER TF Mk.X RD253/BF-13/7931M
MUSEUM ACCESSION NUMBER 74/A/13

- Oct 44 Built as part of contract No.B65570 at the Bristol Aeroplane company's 'Shadow' factory at Old Mixon, Weston-super-Mare, with Bristol Hercules XVII engines. Part of a batch of 500 Beaufighter X aircraft built at Weston Sep. 44 - Aug 45, serial nos. RD130 - RD867, from a total of 2,205 of this variant built.
- 02 Nov 44 To No.19 Maintenance Unit St Athan, Glamorgan.
- 07 Mar 45 To RAF Pershore, Worcs.
- 18 Mar 45 Ferried to Portugal by No.1 Ferry Unit - one of 16 Beaufighters ferried to Portela, Lisbon for use by the Portuguese Naval Air Arm (Forças Aereas da Armada) that month, beginning 13 March, with the first batch of six aircraft, deliveries being completed 22 March.

The aircraft left for Portugal in three batches - two formations of six and one of four. Two RAF Beaufighter crews stayed in Portugal for three weeks to train Portuguese crews on the Beaufighter (Pilots - Sqn Ldr G H Denholme DFC and Flt Lt Gregory, navigators Flt Lt Dodson and Fg Off Sancha). The sixteen aircraft came from RD- serial number batches and were re-numbered BF1-16 in Portuguese service, No.253 becoming BF-13. As delivered to Portugal the aircraft carried Coastal Command colours (dark green/ocean grey upper surfaces and medium sea grey undersurfaces) and Portuguese markings. A further Beaufighter (radar-equipped Thimble-nosed TF.X BF 17, ex RD862) was delivered 26 April 1946 after overhaul by Bristol, to replace one of the original batch, BF-7, that crashed killing the three crew due to engine failure on 22 October 1945. Esquadilha B was disbanded in 1949 due to the poor condition of the aircraft and its aircraft mostly scrapped, BF-17 (RD862) being its last serviceable aircraft, making a final unofficial sortie in 1949 (Aircraft Illustrated December 2009 pp.66-67).

The Portuguese used the Beaufighters for maritime patrol duties, equipping Esquadilha B of the Forças Aereas da Armada (later renamed Aeronautica Naval) based at Portela de Sacavem, replacing worn-out Blenheim IVFs with some of the Beaufighters later being operated from a second naval air base at Averio, the Centro de Aviaco Naval de San Jacinto. By early 1946 the Beaufighters were out of use, with a bad reputation amongst the naval pilots.

Having suffered from serviceability problems, the Beaufighters were withdrawn from service in 1949 with the disbandment of Esquadilha B, caused in part by the shortage of spares and pilots, and replaced by twelve Curtiss SB2C-5 Helldivers to serve in the anti-submarine role.

c1950 After an approach by Professor Varela Cid, parked in open at Lisbon Technical Institute (Instituto Superior Tecnico) in central Lisbon, for use as instructional airframe for aeronautical engineering students, together with a second Beaufighter, BF-10/RD220, now under restoration to static condition at East Fortune's Museum of Flight, after some years in South Africa. The Institute already had a Blenheim IV for instructional use.

Photos of both aircraft - Veteran and Vintage Aircraft of the World (Hunt 1965) (001770); Flight International 3 Dec 1964 p.973.

The engines were initially run to full throttle every week or so during classes, usually on Saturdays. See 'Bullfighters' Flypast February 2018 pp.100-103.

1965 After initial reservation of both aircraft by Peter Thomas's Staverton-based Skyfame Museum, who were unable to arrange dismantling and transport of the aircraft to the UK (Flight International 18 November 1965 p.861) presented to RAF for preservation by the College arriving at 71 MU Bicester, Oxon. that July. Photos of weathered fuselage, August 1965; Control Column April 1968 p.6. and May 1969 p.3.

1966 Using components from RD867, a target-tug Beaufighter TT.10 (one of 35 such conversions from TF.X airframes, the last of which, RD859, retired at RAF Seletar on 16 May 1960) recovered from RAF Takali, Malta in February 1963 and RD253, 71 MU rebuilt one Beaufighter as RD867; this engineless aircraft was later (April 1969) swapped with the National Aeronautical Collection of Canada by the RAF for the Bolingbroke now in the BoB Hall (masquerading as a Blenheim), the RAFM retaining RD253 which was in better condition.

The RAFM has held major components of two other Beaufighters - ex-Halton engine running rig X7688/3858M, a Mk.1 now registered as G-DINT for restoration to flying condition by SkySport, but up for sale 2003, and the ex-Cranfield cut-away nose section loaned to the Fighter Collection to assist with their own Beaufighter restoration 1992/97. This is thought to be a Mk II aircraft and has been displayed at Hendon adjacent to RD253, moving to East Fortune on loan as a pattern for the restoration of BF-10 in 2000, and now back at Hendon.

Late Jan 1967 Remaining Beaufighter components - approximately two-thirds of the airframe - transferred to St Athan for restoration as a second aircraft by No.4 School of Technical Training. Photo of parts laid out at St Athan 1st Feb 67; FlyPast Sep 84 p.8; RAF News W/E 21 October 1967; Control Column November 1967 p.106; Air Pictorial March 1968 p.91.

27 Jan 67 Allocated maintenance serial 7931M at St Athan.

- Feb 67 Restoration commenced. Work began with a kit of parts that formed RD253, including nose, centre and rear fuselage sections, undercarriage, outer wings, tail, centre section and control surfaces, but no engines. All were re-furbished and re-assembled and missing parts searched for. Some serviceable tyres were found and inner tubes supplied free of charge by the Dunlop Tyre Co. The tyre bay at St Athan yielded an almost unused tail wheel assembly; an ATC Squadron in Norfolk supplied an instrument panel.
A Beaufighter crash site in Snowdonia yielded more components. The search for parts was aided by the South Wales Aircraft Preservation Society.
- The restoration was led by F/L Len Woodgate, later curator of the Aerospace Museum Cosford, who recalls 'I was a Flight Commander at RAF St Athan when my Boss sent for me and took me to a hangar in which there was a lot of bits of Beaufighter. There were the remains of two Beaufighters which had been cannibalised to make a good one.
- My Boss said 'make a display aircraft out of this for the St Athan Collection or throw it on the scrap dump' -
Len Woodgate oversaw much of the restoration before being posted. Photo under restoration; Control Column Oct 67 p.92.
- 20 Aug 67 Restoration virtually complete except for engines, wingtips and rear cupola. One engine (Hercules XVI) later temporarily fitted on starboard side as a trial installation, on loan from Birmingham Science Museum. Photos assembled at St Athan - RAFM PC1996/6; Air Pictorial March 1968. Aircraft displayed at St Athan's 'At Home' day that month.
- 1968 Restoration completed. Engines taken from RD867, which went to Canada in September 1969 after storage at Henlow. Photos: Aircraft Illustrated Dec 69 p.483; Control Column May 1969 p.3; Aeroplane August 2003 p.80 (colour).
- Sep 70 Displayed at RAF St Athan Battle of Britain open day.
- 15 Mar 71 Transferred by No.71 MU Bicester, to Hendon, with re-assembly complete by the end of the month. The aircraft has remained on display in the main hall/'Historic Hangars' ever since, being given 'D-Day' invasion stripes in 1994. Photos; Flypast May 2003 p.59; Flypast February 2018 pp.100-101.

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