

ORFORD NESS PRACTICE BOMBING RANGE

By Peter Kirk

February 2024

The ranges at Orford Ness were originally set up for experimental bombing and ballistics testing in the 1920s. What is not often mentioned is its use as a practice bombing range for RAF and USAAF units from the late thirties to the end of World War II.

It is possible that the area was considered as a contender for an Armament Practice Camp in the mid-1920s, as many known bombing ranges were being considered at that time.

Orford Ness was considered for RAF use in the late thirties. Plans were drawn up in 1936 and 1937 and formalised in 1938. The range was probably opened in late 1938 or early 1939 and would have included a practice bombing target on land and a target moored off the coast for live bombing. The target at this time was a 75 ft. sided wooden triangle, while the sea target would have been a triangular raft. An air-to-ground range was also included, with targets set out on wooden trestles on either side of a concrete markers shelter.

The range for squadron use would have been controlled by Martlesham Heath, but with the agreement of the Ministry of Supply (RAE Farnborough) who would have controlled the experimental operations.

Evidence of use by squadrons in this period (1938 to 1941) is sparse and may include experimental work by squadrons as well as practice bombing and firing. During the early war period, an air-to-air range between 5 and 6 miles deep was set up off the coast between Sizewell and Shingle Street. This was referred to as Armament Training Area 70A and later renamed as AF19. Aircraft would use this area to practice gun firing at towed flag or sleeve targets.

The practice side of Orford Ness range was halted in 1940 and the sea target lifted as a result of new restrictions on training flights off the east coast. After the fall of France, an increase in enemy activity was expected and the fighter defences wanted to keep the radar plots as clear as possible. Most essential training was moved to the west coast.

By 1941, use of the ranges may have restarted, but in limited form. In December 1941, No. 403 Squadron RCAF recorded using its Supermarine Spitfire IIAs on the Orford Ness ranges for air-to-air and air-to-sea firing, although the latter may have been at sea markers. In November 1942, Hawker Typhoons of No. 182 Squadron based at Martlesham Heath dropped 250 lb. bombs on a wreck off the coast at Orford Ness. This may have been the wreck of the SS *Clan Monroe*, which lay in Hollesley Bay.

By November 1943, after restrictions had been relaxed, the USAAF were allocated Orford Ness as a practice bombing range. As the original wooden target was no longer in a fit state to be used, it was proposed by the USAAF that a 100 ft. diameter concrete circle be installed as a target. However, this was changed to the 80 ft. square chequerboard target, which was probably already in use for experimental bombing. The USAAF were allowed to use the range with the consent of RAE Farnborough and only when not being used for experimental work. Bombing runs were only permitted between 0° and 270° true (MAF 41/1429). Records of its use by the USAAF are almost non-existent, but Orford Ness must have been heavily used. The only record found so far is from the 96th Heavy Bombardment Group, based at Snetterton Heath, who used it for practice bombing by Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses in June 1945. The practice bombs used by the Americans was normally the large 100 lb. sand filled version that contained a glass bottle of a smoke generating chemical.

In the last months of the war, a number of RAF Squadrons recorded use of the air-to-air ranges. Between November 1944 and July 1945, Short Stirlings of No. 570 Squadron based at Rivenhall used the range for air-to-air firing. No. 297 Squadron with Handley Page Halifax and Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle aircraft from Earls Colne carried out air-to-air firing between November 1944 and February 1945, as did the Stirlings of No. 299 Squadron from Wethersfield in October 1944.

The use of the range for practice bombing seems to have stopped after July 1945, but may have continued unrecorded for some time after. However, the experimental side carried on as normal.

There is a possibility the Orford Ness bombing range was also designated as a jettison area, where damaged aircraft could drop their bomb load, usually prior to the arming, so they would not explode on contact or after the relevant fuze delay. This was normally referred to as dropping them 'safe'. Although bombs would normally have been cleared soon after being dropped, many may have gone undetected, buried deep in the shingle. When a major bomb disposal effort was carried out in 1969 for over a year, they no doubt had better detecting equipment than their wartime counterparts.

Note: Fuze is spelt with a 'z' rather than the more normal 's' as this was the spelling used by the military to specifically refer to those used in bombs and other weapons that required them.