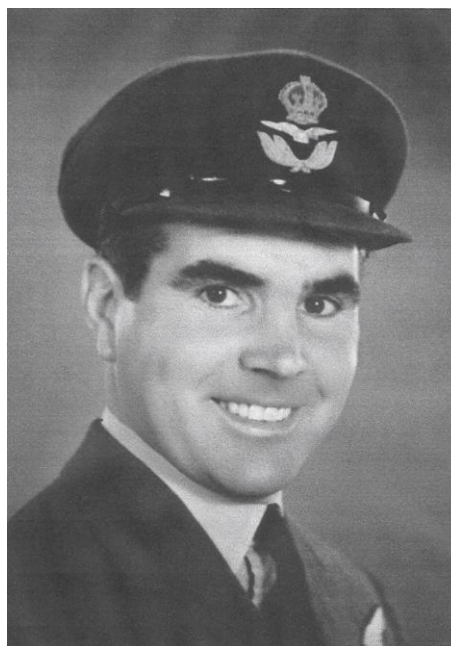




A Navigator's Experience of Using Sopley Radar Sqn. Ldr. Stanley Booker MBE Legion D'Honneur RAF (Rtd)

By Steve Williams

Stanley was a navigator in RAF Bomber Command, 10 squadron. His Halifax was shot down over France on 3rd June 1944. Having been picked up by the resistance, Stanley was betrayed to the Gestapo interrogated in Paris and survived imprisonment in the notorious Buchenwald concentration Camp and Stalag Luft III. He was then held hostage by Russian troops until the end of May 1945. He finally returned home just under twelve months from the day he bailed out of the burning Halifax.



I have been fortunate and privileged to have met Stanley on a number of occasions. During one of our chats, he mentioned using Sopley Radar. I had not spoken to any air crew who have experience of using this other than for night fighter interception, so I had to explore this further.

It was a bright sunny morning towards the end of May when I was strolling along to meet Stanley. I found him relaxing in the sunlight listening to some of his favourite music; he appeared to be lost with his thoughts. Being 101 Stanley must have plenty of thoughts to be lost with, many fond memories and some less so, but that is another story.

Last time I met Stanley we were talking about flying, as we usually do, and he mentioned Sopley Radar. I think we got there via a rather strange route; in fact, it came about because Stanley had donated his uniform to Friends of the New Forest Airfields for display in our Heritage Centre which is housed in the last remaining building of the former RAF Sopley Camp. When I mentioned Sopley Stanley immediately said Ahh Sopley Radar,” I used to use Sopley Radar, but don’t tell any other navigators.”

RAF Sopley was a World War II radar station, codenamed *Starlight*, which was located near the village of Sopley in Hampshire. The Radar Station was opened in December 1940 as an experimental Ground Controlled Interception (GCI) radar station, using mobile systems developed in nearby Christchurch. This was to provide interception guidance to 604 Squadron RAF, a specialist night fighter unit based at RAF Middle Wallop, flying the Bristol Beaufighter.

Now I am no specialist in radar technology, but from what I understand, the Sopley Radar was a big step forward in capability as it could “see” all around itself, the full 360 degrees. Earlier radar like the Chain Home system could only see in the direction they were pointing. This 360-degree capability enabled a single radar station to direct the interception.

I have read a bit about the night fighters using GCI to great effect, but Stanley was a navigator flying in Halifax bombers with No 10 Squadron RAF. These were not night fighters so where did Sopley fit in?

Stanley said, “You are quite right, Sopley was known as a GCI station for night fighter interception, but, one day a fellow navigator told me that he had been using Sopley Radar for daylight transits over Southern England. He said that they were very helpful as the skies over Southern England were getting quite busy in 1943”.

Stanley explained that his aircraft had been operating with Coastal Command in an anti-submarine role, based on the North coast of Cornwall. The navigator’s role was important but not as hectic as when flying over the very busy skies of Southern England. Stanley said, “It was like going from the quiet country to a busy city at rush hour. It was nothing that a good navigator could not handle, but one day when we were scheduled to fly over Southern England, I thought to myself, I just might see what this Sopley Radar is about”.

Stanley had been told that all he needed to do was contact Sopley Radar before his flight and request radar guidance. He was told he would need to give them the aircraft type, call sign, departure point, estimated time of departure and the destination.

He then said “I contacted Sopley before this particular flight and got a very helpful and welcome reception. I gave them the information requested and was told to make contact when we reached our initial cruising altitude”. “It worked very well, but I do not mind telling you that I plotted the route myself as well. I was not initially confident in the capability of Sopley Radar or the communications. However, I need not have worried, the radar guidance was magnificent, and it helped me many times especially when weather conditions were not good. Sopley Radar clearly did a lot more than night fighter GCI”.

What Stanley had described was of course the very early days of air traffic control, in 1946 RAF Sopley was reclassified as a master GCI station and reserve Sector Operations Centre. As part of the UK's programme to update its air defences, Sopley underwent much modernisation during the 1950s including a new guardhouse providing access to a two-storey underground operations centre. During the early 1950s a domestic camp was built and in 1958 the School of Fighter Control moved in. In 1959 an Air Traffic Control Research Unit was established.

The Fighter Control School disbanded in 1960 and the station was taken over by Air Traffic Control, and it became Southern Radar. It finally closed in September 1974 when Air Traffic Control moved to West Drayton.

Stanley had helped me learn something new about the history of RAF Sopley. As always, time flew by and it was time for me to leave, so I left him to his lunch and his thoughts, having agreed that he would tell me more about his memories of the Halifax next time we met.

Steve Williams is a former pilot and life-time aviation enthusiast with a particular interest in the World War 2 airfields of the New Forest and the D Day landings in Normandy.

