



'STAR N BAR' Mosquitos

Tired of waiting for photo-recce Mosquitos from the RAF, the USAAF commissioned its own in Canada. Daniel Ford explains why in the end the US opted for a British solution

IT WAS NOT long before the USAAF got to appreciate the attributes of the de Havilland Mosquito and realised that it would make an ideal long-range reconnaissance platform. Its first formal request is believed to have been made in February 1943, when its best recce type was the Lockheed F-5 Lightning.

At this point, the RAF clearly had a pressing and expanding need for Mosquitos and was not at all pleased to release stocks to the US. A compromise seemed possible with the establishment of a production line for the type at de Havilland Canada at Downsview, Ontario. The USAAF was to have access to airframes diverted from RAF orders. Designated F-8s, the aircraft were to be considerably modified from their original build status, partially on the track and, finally, at a US-based finishing facility.

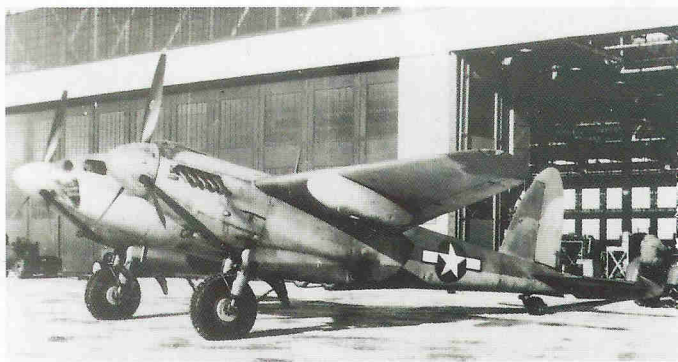
(See *F-for-Foto* on page 57 for more details of USAAC and USAAF photo-recce types and their designations.)

As will be seen, the F-8s were not a success story. Bizarrely, the US Eighth

Air Force went on to operate a large number of UK-built PR.XVIs but mostly *not* in the photo-recce role and they never received a USAAF designation.

The first three of 40 (the original order was for 90 was thinned down) F-8 Mosquitos were handed over to the USAAF at Downsview on June 2, 1943. The F-8 was based on the B.VII or B.XX airframe, powered by Packard-built Rolls-Royce Merlin 31s (V-1650s) equipped to USAAF requirements. The final example left Downsview on March 20, 1944. Special fit and final acceptance was carried out by Bell Aircraft at Buffalo, New York state.

The bomb bay was modified to carry additional fuel tanks towards the rear, while the forward section could take Fairchild-built K17 or K22 cameras. The rear fuselage was modified to take a single, vertical, camera, but it is not known if this was ever used, or even fitted. The oxygen system was of the US on-demand type, in place of the RAF-standard free-flow system.

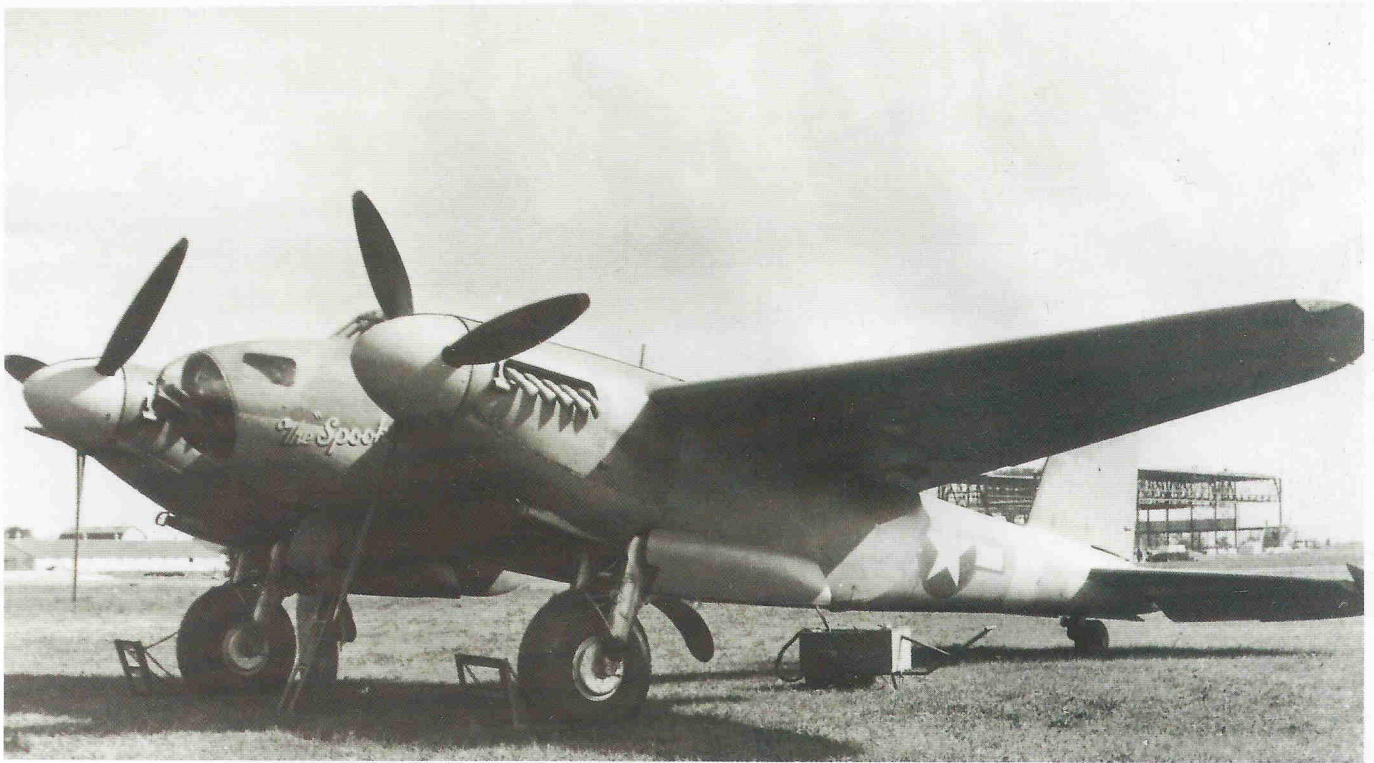


TOP: *The National Museum of the United States Air Forces (previously the USAF Museum) at Dayton, Ohio, proudly displays Mosquito TT.35 RS709 in the colours of PR.XVI NS519. The red tail surfaces were employed from August 1944 to aid identification.*
KEY-STEVE FLETCHER

WEATHER SCOUTS

On March 28, 1944, the 8th Reconnaissance Weather Squadron (Light) was formed at Cheddington, Bucks, to carry out weather reporting flights for the 'Mighty Eighth'. Here some Mosquito PR.XVIs, a couple of T.III trainers and a handful of Airspeed Oxfords, were used to work up the aircrew.

This existence was brief, as the unit was quickly transformed into the 802nd Reconnaissance Group (Provisional) at Watton,



Norfolk, on April 22. On August 9 the unit designation was finally settled as the 25th Bomb Group (Reconnaissance).

Within the 802nd was the 652nd Bomb Squadron operating Boeing B-17F Flying Fortresses to May 1944; later flying B-17Gs and B-24J Liberators. Generally known as the Heavy Weather Squadron, this unit specialised in weather recording flights deep into the Atlantic. It had originally formed up at St Eval in Cornwall and later was based at Bovingdon, Herts, before moving to Watton.

Two other units formed the Light Weather Squadrons (LWS) – the 653rd and 654th BSs were Mosquito units. The 653rd had blue-painted spinners on its Mosquitos, the 654th, red.

From May 1944 the first Mosquito PR.XVIs with various radio and electronic equipment changes were

delivered to the 802nd's two LWS units. Beyond this, further batches arrived heavily modified for other specialist tasks, including H2X radar monitoring, night-photo work with M46 flashlight bombs and multiple chaff (radar counter-measures) dispensers.

Standard work for the 653rd was carried out under the codename BLUE STOCKING and consisted of weather recce flights all over Europe. The results would be used to brief the B-17 and B-24 groups for each bombing mission.

This work was hazardous, but the 653rd flew much more dangerous – and vital – missions known as weather scouting. A Mosquito would arrive over a target just minutes ahead of the bomber stream and would supply meteorological reports in 'real time'. The aircraft would then circle and act as a 'shadow' for

the bombers, keeping them apprised of changes.

Later, when the bomb bays were modified, the PR.XVIs could combine weather scouting with chaff-dropping to 'spoo' enemy radar – these operations were codenamed GRAYPEA.

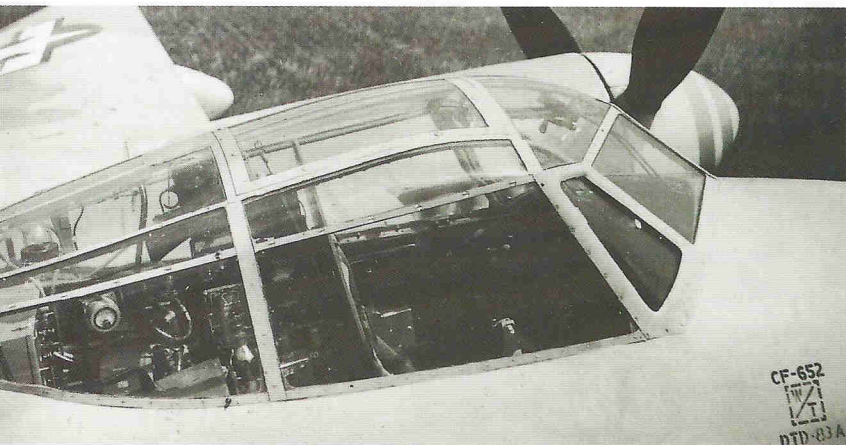
The 654th carried the suffix 'Special' to its LWS title and undertook some missions for the Office of Strategic Services including RED STOCKING flights to pick up UHF radio 'bursts' from agents deep in Europe. The 654th also flew extensive H2X-radar 'mapping' sorties 'capturing' the look of the H2X screen to aid bombers flying to the same area.

(From July 1944 to March 1945, the 654th also operated a trio of Martin B-26G Marauders for night photoflash work and in January and February 1945 a single H2X radar-equipped P-38L.)

F-8 43-34925
'The Spook', in the UK. This machine was ordered as a B.XX for the RAF as B.VII KB313 and was one of the first three handed over at Downsview on June 2, 1943. As it crashed in Nova Scotia in February 1945 it must have been one of the six that made the ferry flight back west.

FAR LEFT:
F-8 43-34943
(ordered as RAF B.XX KB149) at Downsview, Ontario, prior to delivery to the USAAF.

BOTH MAP



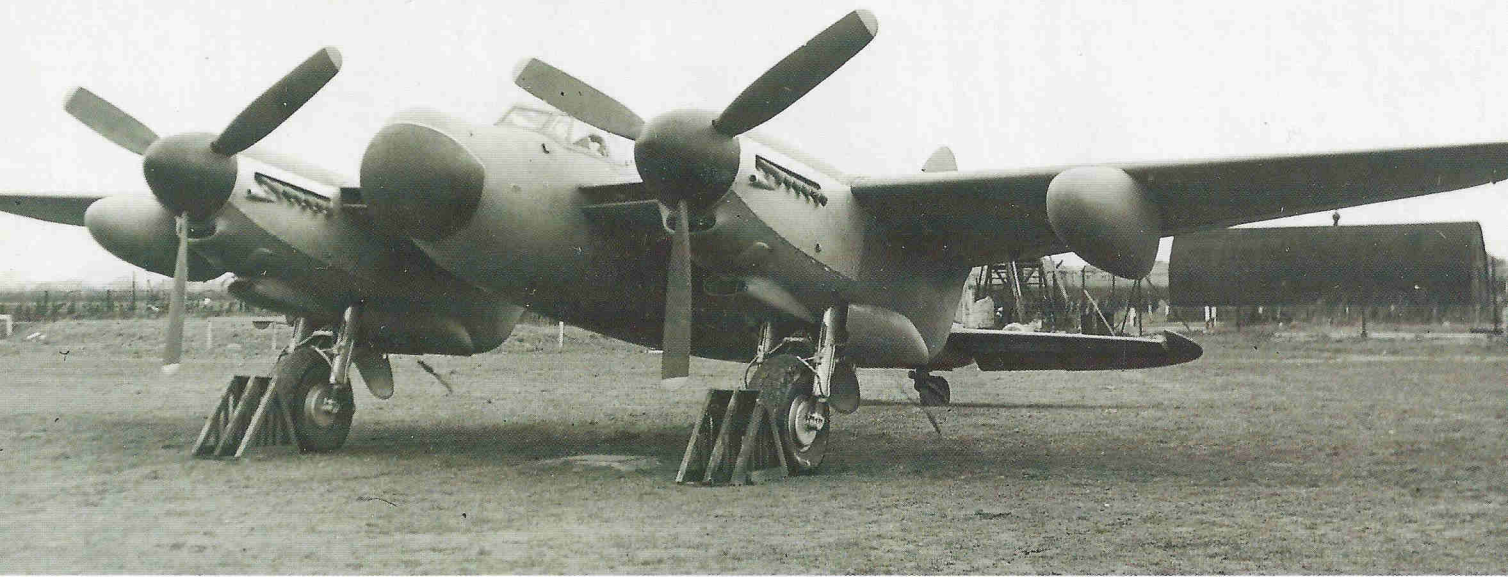
US-SPEC 'MOSSIES'

Having had Mosquito PR.XVIs since May 1944 and found them to be exceptional aircraft, capable of being adapted for a variety of missions, the 802nd was looking forward to receipt of the 'purpose-built' (and US-funded) F-8s. The first of 16 touched down at Watton in mid-July.

Immediately the 653rd and 654th began flying the new type, only to very quickly find they were a great disappointment. The F-8 had

Detail view of the cockpit of F-8 43-34949 at Bolling Field, District of Columbia, in June 1944, prior to the ferry flight of the Watton examples to the UK. Note the stripes on the prop hubs.

US NATIONAL ARCHIVES



H2X-equipped PR.XVI MM308 prior to delivery in February 1944 to the 482nd BG at Alconbury, Hunts. The 482nd was a specialist unit using B-17s and B-24s equipped with H2S and H2X for pathfinding and, later, radar training.

DE HAVILLAND

unacceptable performance above 25,000ft (7,620m) while the PR.XVI had a service ceiling of 37,000ft. Pilots and groundcrew considered that the standard of construction was decidedly lacking in comparison with the Mk.XVIs.

The equipment fit – carried out in late 1943 onwards in New York – was much further down the line than the ‘black boxes’ installed in the Mk.XVIs at Alconbury, Hunts; Burtonwood, Lancs; and Langford Lodge, Northern Ireland. There ‘gizmos’ could be installed relatively quickly in response to operational experience and rapidly changing role requirements.

Usage of the F-8 was brief and the 16 examples were shortly to be found on Watton’s perimeter forlornly in store. Eventually, ten were transferred to the RAF for service as B.XXs, the other six are believed to have returned to the USA to join the other F-8s. Their Stateside use, if any, is unrecorded.

A SPLASH OF RED

F-8s were produced and delivered to the UK in standard green-grey ‘bomber’ camouflage with their USAAF serial number in white across the fin and rudder. The Mosquito PR.XVIs of the 802nd RG/25th BG (R) flew in RAF standard Photo Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) blue, although a handful destined for night-photography missions were painted black.

All this changed on August 12, 1944 – just three days after the 802nd changed its designation to the 25th BG (R) – when a Mk.XVI flying weather scout for a bomber stream was shot down by a P-51 Mustang. The fighter pilot said that he identified the high-flying aircraft as a Junkers Ju 188. Beyond this, other escort pilots named Mosquitos as Junkers or Messerschmitt Me 410s.

The work of the weather scout was already difficult enough with

Luftwaffe fighters determined to nail the circling aircraft without having to worry about ‘friendly fire’. The vertical tails of the PR.XVIs were painted bright red as an instant identifier for Eighth Air Force fighter pilots.

By September, the entire tail – including the horizontal surfaces – from just behind the ‘star n bar’ and before the RAF serial number, was painted red.

The spring of 1945, saw the Mosquitos of the 25th BG undertaking Loran (long-range navigation) beacon and signal calibration flights as well as their many other specialist tasks. The unit was wound down at Watton during July and August 1945 and their Mosquitos returned to the RAF.

During its time, the 802nd/25th had operated over 100 former RAF Mosquitos in addition to the 16 unfortunate transatlantic F-8s.

Weather scout PR.XVI NS676 wearing ‘invasion stripes’, June 1944. Although the code cannot be determined on the tail, the circle denotes a 653rd BS example.

KEY-GORDON SWANBOROUGH COLLECTION

