

## Memories of the Underground Bunker



Figure 1: The only known surviving photograph from inside the underground operations room during the war. In the centre is General James H Doolittle, commander of the US Eighth Air Force.

In the first term following the reopening of Wycombe Abbey in May 1946, the closure of the underground bunker used by General Doolittle for his wartime campaign took place. The bunker had been constructed on the Wycombe Abbey school site as the headquarters from which the American air raids from the UK were planned and controlled.

On July 1, afternoon lessons were cancelled and Wycombe Abbey pupils who attended the School at this time were invited to tour the site one last time before its closure.

Senior, Maureen Ireland, attended the event in 1946 and was so impressed by the visit that she wrote the following recollections from that day:

“We entered by one of the minor entrances and went down and down until we reached the lowest of the three storeys – 100 feet down. Ceilings were five feet thick reinforced concrete; the telephone exchange has 900 to 950 lines; messages were placed in a container, put in a tube and electronically shot through the tube up to Daws Hill or down the Abbey in one minute.

There was a huge air control room with funnels and fans for bringing in the fresh air and extracting foul air, and with big filtering tanks so that in the event of a gas raid the air could be filtered. All systems were duplicated with immediate switching arrangements. A 'washing machine' purified the air before it was distributed.

As well as pressure and temperature controls there was an index board to all the accommodation, including Intelligence Room, kitchens, cafeteria, lavatories, weather room, Chiefs-of-Staff rooms etc. The Operations Room was vast, one wall taken up with an enormous map of Europe and huge blackboard with sections for objectives, pilots, numbers of places and dates."

Maureen continued, "When operations were on, an officer recorded information as it was received, using a huge pair of steps that fitted grooves in the floor and could be pushed along. After walking through many passages and glimpsing rooms now emptied of contents, we climbed the final lengthy flight of steps and came out the main entrance by its big metal doors. All around the grounds were brick buildings saying 'Danger 6000 Volts'. This was where the electricity entered the underground. If any failed there were plenty of backups. The day after our tour the electricity was to be turned off at 08:00 and the underground closed.

Thereafter, we were told, electricians would go down from time to time to check that the plant was still in working order 'so that it won't be wasted'. Is it still in operation, I wonder?"