Cold War Sentinel

Today Laarbruch is a civilian airport, yet its museum houses a treasure trove of RAF memorabilia. Sqn Ldr Rod Hawkins MBE reflects on its history.

English Electric Canberra PR.7 WH773 on display at the RAF Laarbruch Museum.
ALL VIA AUTHOR
When it was announced that the RAF base at Laarbruch, Germany, was to close by the end of the 1990s, a locally based working group from the nearby town of Weeze decided to document the region’s aviation heritage. The result was a 540-page book, which was presented to the departing station commander.

RAF Laarbruch was one of four airfields built along the German border with the Netherlands between 1952 and 1954. The others were Geilenkirchen, Wildenrath and Bruggen, known collectively as ‘Clutch’ stations.

Lessons learned during the Korean War indicated that forward forces, particularly aircraft, were vulnerable to surprise attacks. It was consequently decided to move RAF aircraft further west, away from the established ex-German Air Force airfields to reduce the chances of a surprise attack. Work on the base at Laarbruch began in 1953 and it was the last of the four airfields to be built. Eight RAF officers supervised around 2,500 German workers and the station was completed within 13 months. It was funded by the German government under the reparation payment scheme instigated after World War Two.

Glider schools had been based at the site from the 1930s, the last of which was used by the Nazis during the war. The first RAF airfield constructed in Germany during hostilities was also built in the same location. It was known as B-100 Goch and was active for six weeks in 1945, equipped with Supermarine Spitfire and Hawker Typhoon units.

Ambitious plans
After the book was completed, numerous documents and other artefacts were left in the town hall. The group behind the project suggested that these were put on display.

Another group was formed, this time with the intention of creating a museum. Meanwhile the airfield had been bought by a Dutch company and turned into a civilian airport, now known as Flughafen Weeze (Weeze Airport). Local authorities were keen on the group’s proposal and offered use of an old church as a base for the museum. After heating was installed, the building was decorated and a small number of items put on display.

“The Canberra was purchased by a retired technician from the unit and given to the museum on long-term loan”
The entrance to the museum, showing the old ‘Astra’ cinema building on the right and converted church on the left.

"An old cinema has now also been converted, specifically to cover RAF Germany and the other British bases.”

The attraction opened in July 2007, eight years after the RAF left. The museum now has 110 members who pay a small yearly fee. Together with entrance fees and donations, it is entirely self-financing, with no money coming from public or service funds. It is the only RAF museum in Germany and covers the Cold War and post-Cold War period, including the first Gulf War of 1990-91.

An immense amount of work has been carried out at the site over the past decade. This began with the installation of two cockpits in the old church. These come from an English Electric Canberra T.4, sourced from Dustin, and a Blackburn Buccaneer. The latter has been out of service for more than 34 years, but still manages to drip oil onto the floor.

Further additions were made when a Bloodhound missile and a ZPU-4 anti-aircraft gun arrived from the Belgian air force base at Florennes, and a Rapier missile system was donated on long-term loan. To avoid exposing such items to the elements, the old Sparkasse bank alongside the church was utilised as an additional display hall. It now houses an RAF Regiment section and an air force police and fire service collection.

Over the years visitors have donated exhibits or helped the museum to procure new items. Several of these have been acquired from local people who used to work on the base - at one time, over 400 Germans were employed at the airfield. Laarbruch sees around 3,000 visitors every year, and about half are current or ex-RAF service personnel. Many items - including the museum’s display of ejector seats - have been sourced from ex-forces visitors.

With exhibits continuing to arrive at a rapid rate, including many from other ‘Clutch’ stations, it was decided to further expand facilities. An old cinema has now been converted, specifically to cover RAF Germany and its British bases. This turned out to be a major project, as it had been unused for 15 years and heavily vandalised. The old cinema foyer now hosts...
Visiting Laarbruch

The museum is open Wednesday to Sunday 14:00-17:00hrs in the summer and Friday to Sunday in winter (October to April). It is closed mid-December until the end of February. Entrance is £3 per person with free entry for children aged up to 14. Group visits can be arranged at any time. www.laarbruch-museum.net

Star attraction

Canberra PR.7 WH773 has pride of place outside, between the former bank and cinema buildings. This aircraft - the PR.7 prototype - participated in the 1953 London to New Zealand air race, served at Laarbruch with 31 Squadron and was at Bruggen with 80 Squadron. An impressive centrepiece to the museum, it was acquired from Gatwick Aviation Museum in 2016 and transported to its new home in four pieces. Following reassembly and corrosion treatment it received a new coat of paint and has been returned to its 31 Squadron colours. The Canberra was purchased by a retired technician from the unit and given to the museum on long-term loan. The transport cost was met by local donations and help from a local bank. Its Rolls-Royce Avon engines are currently on display in the cinema and it is hoped that one can be sectioned enabling visitors to learn how a jet powerplant functions. The museum is also home to three shipping containers covering 100 years of 31 Squadron history. This collection has been put together by the unit’s official association. Among the contents is a reproduction of a 1915 Farman aircraft and replica of a sectioned Tornado nose. One side of the latter is painted green while the other is in ‘desert pink’, as used in the Gulf War. There are many stories to be told about the history of this airfield - not least the fact that the current terminal building was originally a Junkers Ju 87 factory at Bremen; it was dismantled and rebuilt at Laarbruch in 1953. All of this can be witnessed by visiting the time capsule that is RAF Laarbruch Museum.

displayed on each of the RAF’s German stations, and highlights the aircraft types flown over the last 50 years. Inside the main auditorium the seats to the rear have been removed (as many were damaged) and parts from the good ones have been used to repair the front seats. A Slingsby Swallow glider from the Two Rivers Gliding Club at Laarbruch hangs overhead. There are also two displays from the Army – 10 Field Squadron Royal Engineers has a section illustrating its work, including runway repairs, and hide constructions for Hawker Siddeley Harrier jump jets. The other army group displayed is 21 Signal Unit which was responsible for installing and maintaining communications on site.

A currently vacant space in the room will eventually be occupied by a suitable aircraft. A side wall has been cut out and large doors installed in readiness for its arrival. Personnel are investigating various SEPECAT Jaguar and Harrier jets and once funds have been secured, further expansion is planned. With the recent withdrawal of the air force’s Panavia Tornado squadrons, the museum is keen to source a suitable airframe for display.