

Boeing

# BRITISH-BUILT BRISTOL-ENGINEED SUPERFORTS?

## THE WARTIME RAF'S PLAN TO BUILD B-29s IN BRITAIN

In the opening half of a two-part series prompted by American aviation historian Alan Griffith's research into the prospective wartime building of American heavy bombers in the UK, **CLIVE RICHARDS** — former senior researcher at the Air Historical Branch — digs deep into the archives to reveal a plan to build Centaurus-engined Boeing B-29s in Britain

**T**HE SUPERFORTS ARRIVE", *The Royal Air Force Review* announced with a flourish in May 1950.<sup>1</sup> At first glance the headline's exuberance may have seemed surprising, given that the appearance of Boeing B-29 Superfortress bombers belonging to the USAF at British airfields was by then far from new.<sup>2</sup> However, the four aircraft that landed at RAF Marham on March 22, 1950, would not be operated by the USAF. Rather, they were the vanguard of an initial tranche of 70 B-29s acquired by the RAF under the terms of the Mutual Defence Assistance Program (MDAP). "On the airfields and in the hangars of some of Bomber Command's stations", the article continued, "air- and groundcrews are learning how to handle and service the biggest bomber aircraft ever to go into RAF service — the Boeing 29 [sic] Superfortress".<sup>3</sup>

### A VERY HEAVY BOMBER FOR THE RAF

On closer examination, it is clear that British interest in the B-29 predated the arrival of the first Washingtons (as the aircraft were redesignated by the RAF) by a decade. Despite the veil of secrecy that surrounded the programme, officials in London had nevertheless been aware of the then US Army Air Corps' drive to develop a new

generation of Very Heavy Bomber (VHB) aircraft as early as 1940, and an invitation to inspect the XB-29 mock-up was extended to the British in November that year.<sup>4</sup> In a report following his visit to the USA during 1940-41, the Chief Technical Officer of the Aeroplane & Armament Experimental Establishment (A&AEE), Ernest Jones, described three "pressurised bombers" then under development — the Boeing "XPB1 (B29)", the Consolidated "XB32 (B32)" and the smaller North American XB-28.<sup>5</sup>

It was not until the end of 1942, however, that the Air Ministry began to consider actively the potential acquisition of an American VHB design for the RAF. The catalyst appears to have been the pressing need to phase out production of the Vickers Wellington, which was not only being built in volume at the company's main factory at Weybridge, but also by shadow factories at Blackpool and Chester.

Concern with regard to the continued viability of the Wellington centred upon its contribution to the strategic bombing offensive. While its contemporaries in September 1939 — the Handley Page Hampden and Armstrong Whitworth Whitley — had both been withdrawn from Bomber Command's front line by the winter

*Boeing Washington B.1 WF509 of No 44 Sqn at Marham in February 1951. Formerly serial 44-62003 in USAAF service, this was one of the 92 B-29s loaned to the RAF as an interim measure between its ageing Avro Lincolns and the new generation of jet bombers. The Washington's RAF frontline career was short, the majority having been returned to the USA by early 1954 following the introduction of the English Electric Canberra into RAF Bomber Command squadrons.*

TAH ARCHIVE

