**Dissertation Proposal**

*What is the Key Question You Want to Answer?*

The key question proposed for this dissertation is “How did modifications to the de Havilland Mosquito between 1942 and 1945 shape the development and effectiveness of British aerial intelligence during the Second World War?”. The paper would aim to unpack the relationship between technological innovation and the evolution of wartime intelligence, focusing on one of the most versatile and important aircraft of the period.

The Mosquito was unique in its adaptability, initially conceived as a fast, unarmed bomber. It was then rapidly modified into several specified roles, including photographic reconnaissance (PR). Its speed, coupled with its high-altitude capability, due to its pressurized cabin, made it an ideal candidate for penetrating deep into enemy territory undetected. This dissertation will examine how the technical modifications enabled improvements to the methods of intelligence and the extent to which the Mosquito altered British understanding of enemy movements, defences and infrastructure.

This question is important as it positions the Mosquito not merely as a technological success, but as a tool that shaped wider wartime strategy. The focus on the 1942-45 period allows for thorough analysis whilst providing a strong base to analyse key developments that followed as a result of improved aerial intelligence capabilities. Ultimately, this question invites reflection of how technology drove changes in war, not just in combat but in how wars are understood and fought through intelligence. It will contribute to ongoing historiographical debates about the role intelligence played in Allied victory, and how aerial improvements, like the Mosquito, played a central role in shaping success.

*To Answer This Question What Historiography Will You Need to Engage With?*

It is important to engage with relevant historiography (studies of how history is interpreted) as it enables us to undertsand how other historians have approached the relationship between military technology and intelligence systems during the Second World War.

The most substantial body of literature concerns British wartime intelligence as a whole. Christopher Andrew’s “The defence of the Realm”[[1]](#footnote-2) and Michael Goodman’s “The official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee”[[2]](#footnote-3) are some big names in this area. This historiography emphasises an increase in professionalisation and strategic influence of intelligence serviced during the war. It focuses on signals intelligence (SIGINT) and codebreaking rather than imagery intelligence (IMINT) or aerial reconnaissance arguing that intelligence rarely determined victory. These approaches are often top down and politically centered, useful for offering more of a contextual input to build understanding of intelligence as a whole.

In contrast historians of aerial reconnaissance and air power have begun to restore the significance of photographic intelligence. Downing’s “Spies in the Sky”[[3]](#footnote-4) is central to offering a detailed history of photo-reconnaissance (PR) units and the work at RAF Medmenham. This area often focuses on bombing campaigns and the role that aerial intelligence played arguing that successful campaigns depended on accurate reconnaissance. The work of this area often places reconnaissance as a top priority and a turning point but their work remains broad in scope and theme and rarely bridging the gap between aircraft development and reconnaissance.

Specialist works that focus soley on the Mosquito itself provide invaluable technical context with Bowman’s “Mosquito Missions”[[4]](#footnote-5) detailing the aircrafts versatility, charting evolution from bomber to reconnaissance to special operations. These texts provide the necessary structural changes that made reconnaissance possible linking the two themes.

This dissertation aims to place itself directly in the centre of this discourse arguing historians have yet to fully explore how aircraft design allowed for intelligence systems to improve and the impact that had on the wars outcome. This paper will extend recent efforts to reassess the scope of British intelligence beyond SIGINT and highlight the role of the aircraft and its impact in intelligence systems.

*Where Are the Gaps and/or What Are the Weaknesses in This Historiography*

The existing historiography focus either on the intelligence institution or the technical developments of aircraft, but the two are rarely linked. Historians such as Andrew and Goodman explore the evolution of British intelligence but chose to prioritise SIGINT over IMINT, giving little attention to how intelligence collection was shaped by aircraft capabilities.

Downing does centre on aerial reconnaissance, however he places little importance on the aircraft treating them as tools instead of the root of evolution and improvements. However, aircraft focused works by Birtles and Bowman offer detailed accounts of the Mosquito including PR, but they stop short of fully analysing how these changes influenced intelligence-gathering strategy.

Similarly, air power historians such as Cox and Ehler focus on the importance of intelligence in planning, focusing mainly on bombing raids, rather than the systems that enabled the effective and accurate targeting. Writers like Hennessy outline the political structures but neglect the technologies that made intelligence work possible.

This shows there is a gap in the connection between aircraft innovation and wider evolution of British intelligence practices which this dissertation aims to bridge.

*Primary Sources and Their Strengths and Limitations.*

One important primary source that would be useful for exploring this topic would be RAF Reconnaissance Reports and Operational Records. These records will provide me with mission reports, flight paths, target objectives and outcomes which I will then be able to use alongside other sources to form an understanding of how the aircraft was implemented. This is a strong choice as its first hand, institutional data on reconnaissance operations, frequency of missions and aircraft performance. However, these sources do present some issues mainly in the sense that it is rigid data and allows little interpretation and may require context from secondary or other sources.

Photographic Intelligence Material is also massively important as it can show images taken by Mosquito PR variants allowing the analysis of situations the Mosquito found itself to be in. These photos will allow me to see direct evidence of the mission targets as well as the image clarity the aircraft was able to achieve as well as the range of missions they were involved in. These photos may prove difficult to find as the aircraft the image was taken from can be hard to find and may require more in detail context to properly interpret.

Technical manuals and modification reports provide great detail into how the aircraft was adapted for its different roles. This is incredibly important for evaluating how good the Mosquito was at its job and what allowed it to be so successful as well as showing the technical advancements over the years. It can however, be hard to interpret as it requires context linking it to operations and may require some technical knowledge to understand.

Finally, press reports and propaganda can be used to give an insight into how the image of the Mosquito was being portrayed. This may also show the strategic framing and how important the RAF and war leaders perceived the Mosquito to be. However, with newspapers and propaganda it is heavily censored going through critical filtering and so may not always be historically and factually accurate.

1. Christopher M, Andrews, *The Defence of the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5,* (Penguin, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Michael S, Goodman. *The Official History of the Joint Intelligence Committee. Volume I, From the Approach of the Second World War to the Suez Crisis* (Routledge, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Taylor Downing, *Spies in the Sky: the Secret Battle of Aerial Intelligence during World War II,* (Abacus, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Martin W Bowman, *Mosquito Missions: RAF and Commonwealth de Havilland Mosquitoes*, (Pen & Sword Aviation, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)