

The Second Great War 1939 - 1945

"Have a Bath at the Palace"

A memoir on the part played by No 16 Airfield Construction Group RE in the advance from the Normandy beachhead to the Liberation of Brussels

The memoir is based on extracts from No 16 Airfield Construction Group HQ War Diaries (by permission of the War Office) supplemented by text in brackets thus ().

WAR DIARY

Army Form C2118

Unit 16 Airfield Construction Group RE

August 1944

Place

Commanding Officer : Lt Col T Mitchell, RE

4 August 1944

Airfield at ST HONORINE DE DUCY (B21)

Orders received to construct RRS (5000' untracked) and with 3 Sqdn Dispersals within 5 days and develop to ALG within 7 days. Group moved to new location LA CARBONNIERE 7165.

La Carbonniere

5 August

0600 hrs - advance parties started work. 1400 hrs - main bodies started work.

7 August

Work held up by lack of water trucks to soften ground sufficiently for rolling.

8 August

OC 39 Recce Wing visited site, with resultant alterations to siting of maintenance area and one Squadron Dispersal.

(When I assumed command of 16 Airfield Construction Group - its previous commander had been killed by driving over a mine - it was making an airfield in the bocage country of Normandy, an area of sunken lanes and small fields enclosed by high hedges. The fields were mainly apple orchards. Grading of the runway, retaining as much turf as possible, was in progress when I arrived. Driving down it revealed on either side enchanting three sided compartments created by the clearance of high hedges, making the airfield, before the aircraft arrived, seem like a breathtakingly beautiful country club. Earnie Moncrieff, the Canadian OC 39 Recce Wing RAF, established his HQ and Mess in one of the compartments overlooking the runway.

The order that the runway was to be untracked was presumably mainly because the build up of supplies was running behind schedule, but also because the imminent American breakout from the beachhead and encircling movement might mean that airfield B21 would only be needed by the RAF for a short period, in which case it would have been wasteful to use on it tracking which was in short supply. The airfield was being constructed very near the front line where heavy fighting was in progress. It was necessary to be very careful when moving about in the vicinity, and all too easy to find oneself in the dangerous silence of no man's land.)

9 August

Lack of water trucks still holding up work. Civilian labour engaged on funnel clearance.

10 August

Orders received to accommodate No 18 Forward Staging Post of Tpt Command on airfield as well as Recce Wing.

12 August

18 FSP arrived.

13 August

Oiling commenced as dust deterrent.

14 August

Recce Wing landed and continued operations. Work on Transport Apron completed 2300 hrs. Airfield handed over.

(The combination of beautiful, dry, summer weather and the fine grained soil in that part of Normandy created a dust problem throughout the bridgehead wherever the surface vegetation was disturbed in making roads, hard standings and airfields. Water was essential for the compaction of graded surfaces at optimum moisture content. Our unit equipment was unable to supply enough, and the Brighton, Eastbourne, etc Corporation water sprinkling vehicles, which had been brought over so promptly for my use when making B3 airfield after the initial landings, were no longer available.)

17 August

Auster Strip at VILLERS-BOCAGE - MR 035599

Orders received and recce carried out.

18 August

Work in hand 0800 hrs by 689 Rd Con Coy RE and completed 1715 hrs. Handed over to Group Captain.

20 August

Order for O Group and 1 rear party from 689 and 78 Rd Con Coys RE to RV with 12 AGRE at 972192 ST OPPORTUNE before 1200 hrs 21 August 1944.

21 August

O Groups and rear parties moved at 0730 hrs.

22 August

Group HQ, 689 and 78 Rd Con Coys RE moved to ST OPPORTUNE at 1630 hrs arriving at 2015 hrs.

(The Allied Armies now seemed near to winning their slogging fight with the German forces and an encircling movement by the Americans to trap them as they tried to retreat through the Falaise Gap had been evolved. The meeting with 12 AGRE at ST OPPORTUNE was to tell me that my Group had been chosen to be the one to move with the Americans to reach an area containing several existing permanent airfields. Our vehicles and equipment were to be incorporated into the van of the American advance. 83 Group RAF wanted their HQ to be nearer this action, and we made an Auster strip at VILLERS-BOCAGE for that purpose. The Americans planned the road movements in great detail. We had to adhere exactly to our timings. In the exciting dash Eastwards which ensued, the way American trucks kept their regular spacing in convoy, irrespective of gradient, was particularly noticeable compared with British trucks, many of which were, by comparison, underpowered, making their convoy spacing ragged on upward gradients. In every village through which we passed, the roads were lined with cheering crowds. We had to warn our troops not to accept any liquid from them for, whenever the vehicles halted for any reason, the villagers would fill with their potent drink, calvados, the pint mugs which every soldier carried; the colour of the calvados resembled tea, but its effect was very different.)

23 August

Auster Strips (2) at GACE.

Work commenced after recce. Work completed and handed over. CRE, FE1, FE2 to recce existing airfields in area DANVILLE.

(An enormous amount of interesting and varied work and excitement was to be packed into the next eleven days. We were to be the first to see whether RAF bombing had made the German airfields unusable. To maintain the impetus of the advance we would have to get our aircraft operating on them as quickly as possible. To assess the resources

required to do that, the reconnaissances had to be carried out as quickly as possible, leaving the removal of German mines and booby traps to be carried out by my Bomb Disposal Unit as repair of the airfields proceeded. The other task of that Unit would be to remove or render safe any unexploded bombs. As all the existing German airfields for which we were aiming had been heavily bombed, we might expect to find some.

As Army Advanced HQs moved forward, they needed Auster strips for rapid communication with their rear HQs, but at the beginning of a day the position of these strips would depend on the amount of ground gained by the troops by the end of the day. The Chief Staff Officer of General Montgomery's Advanced HQ sought me out in the convoy while on the move, generally in late afternoon, and gave me a map reference for where he had decided to set up his HQ.)

24 August

2 sections 689 Rd Con Coy and body men of 231 Coy PC to ST ANDRE at 1500 hrs.
S/Ldr and 2 Coys recce parties to area GACE at 0800 hrs.

25/26 August

Maintenance party handed over B21 to RAF maintenance and returned to 231 Coy 1115 hrs.

Warning order to move to ST ANDRE 0500 hrs. 26 August movement 0800 hrs completed 2000 hrs.

(At GACE and ST ANDRE we had reached the area which was our objective, an area containing enough existing permanent German airfields to enable the RAF Spitfires and rocket firing Typhoon aircraft supporting General Montgomery's forces to be moved on to them from their airfields in the bridgehead behind the Normandy beaches. It was thrilling work assessing the damage to the various airfields and deciding how to deploy my Group's men and equipment to the best advantage. The recce parties had to take chances and hope that they would not step on or run over a mine. I always started by running down the runways while standing erect in a half track vehicle. The German inclination to obey their own regulations helped us. They seemed to have had a book on how to conceal mines on airfields as they abandoned them. They stuck to it, and we soon learned where to look. For example, they always put mines in the drainage channels on each side of the runways. They were easily removed. Only once did we have a real difficulty. At a critical point on an internal road they had festooned a tree with butterfly type anti personnel bombs. There were so many of them, and many were so dangerously near detonation, that we had to cordon off an area round the tree and make a new road round it. They must have dropped these bombs from an aircraft flown at varying heights. In the main square of ST ANDRE women who had slept with Germans were having their heads shaven publicly.)

30 August

Warning order to move to BEAUVAIS 1800 hrs.

Auster Strip at MR 6091 (to be completed 1200 hrs 1 September 1944) Recce.

31 August

Work commenced on Auster Strip. Site altered 1700 hrs. Work continued and completed 1100 hrs 1 September.

Order to move half Group and Group HQ. Move at 0900 hrs to VESTEY MR 575895

(The Staff Officer i/c General Montgomery's Advance HQ, on the move himself, found me on my way to BEAUVAIS, with a small detachment of one of my Companies, one beautiful summer evening. He established his new HQ just off the road in an attractive wood with, on the opposite side of the road, an open pasture on which he wanted his Auster strip. The scene is as vividly clear in my mind as if I had seen it yesterday. We started work in the evening sunshine and worked throughout the night. I bivouaced on the spot, moving on after handing over the completed job at 1100 hrs next morning.)

1 September

Move from VESTEY to BEAUVAIS 0700 - 1300 hrs MR 913104 - Group HQ, 689 Rd Con Coy RE and 231 Coy PC

TILLE-BEAUVAIS concrete strip commenced repair 1200 hrs. Policy changed - only grass strip required - to be ready by noon 2 September - work done by 689 Rd Con Coy.

2 September

Strip ready by 1000 hrs.

Group HQ moved from TILLE-BEAUVAIS at 1600 hrs - 1800 hrs. Bivvy for night with 12 AGRE at BOVES.

(The five days from 31 August to 4 September were pretty hectic for the Road Construction and Pioneer Corps Companies in my Group. The pace of the Allied Forces advance was increasing, and on the British front additional existing German airfields were being captured daily. The RAF constantly wanted to get aircraft operating from them as soon as they became available. They had concrete runways but these and all the surrounding grass surfaces had been so heavily cratered in most cases by our bombers that it was difficult quickly to make even a grass runway and taxi tracks. The short and rough strips which the Germans had contrived to make between the craters and from which they had been able to operate their Focke Wulf fighters were not good enough for Spitfires. To repair the concrete runways and taxi tracks we used every suitable material quickly available locally. One sunny Sunday morning I got the manager of the local gas works out of bed to give me tar.)

3 September

689 Rd Con Coy moved to CAMBRAI. 78 Rd Con Coy moved to VITRY. Group HQ moved BOVES-VITRY at 1400 hrs.

78 Rd Con Coy commenced work on VITRY airfield - ready by 2300 hrs.

689 Rd Con Coy commenced work on CAMBRAI airfield. This job not completed as advance too rapid.

(XXX Corps was now leading the British advance and had the Germans on their front in headlong retreat. The 11th British Armoured Division had been chosen to make a dash to capture BRUSSELS. There were two airfields there. It would be important to get 83 Group RAF operating from them to continue destruction of the German forces and to prevent them from re-grouping and mounting a counter attack. To do that I would want to know the condition of these airfields as soon as possible in order to decide how to use most efficiently my Group's resources, presently scattered in Northern France at BEAUVAIS, BOVES, VITRY and CAMBRAI. I decided to leave my HQ, which was bivouaced at BOVES, and, taking with me my attached RAF adviser, Jack Rowlandson, travel with the Guards Armoured Division.

We raced towards BRUSSELS, he in his RAF Regiment armoured car, I in my Humber 4WD staff car, conscious that the Guards were leaving the mopping up of pockets of resistance to following troops. As we galloped along, it seemed unfair that we should be traversing the whole of the Western Front battlefields of the 1914-19 Great War as incidental to an afternoon's work. It was thrilling stuff.

Amid a cheering crowd we pulled up in a small square near the centre of BRUSSELS to look at our street maps to decide the quickest way to the airfields which were our objective, EVERE and MELSBROEK. Attractive young women immediately climbed on to our vehicles, offering hugs and kisses. There was no time then for that sort of thing. We went on to EVERE airfield through cheering crowds and a general air of festivity. EVERE was a small grass airfield next the North East suburb of that name. Some RAF officers were already there. It seemed undamaged, but was being raked by fire from an 88mm German gun which seemed to be sited somewhere on the road to MELSBROEK airfield. I went back into the city to find a British Army HQ to get some action to silence the 88mm gun and to continue the advance and capture MELSBROEK airfield. I had no success. The Guards seemed to have thought that by liberating the central area of the city they had achieved their objective for the day. EVERE and MELSBROEK, it was thought, could wait till tomorrow. The streets were ablaze with lights and thronged with mingled crowds of civilians and soldiers. I was told that the Belgian Queen Mother had invited all officers to have a bath in the Royal Palace that evening. I should have loved to have accepted, but I was anxious to get a message to British Second Army HQ and to Brigadier Panet, DCE Airfields, 21 Army Group, to report the situation about the two airfields. I found the Guards Armoured Division HQ. They were equally concerned to report their success. They had a woman officer and an aircraft about to fly back to the 2nd Army HQ and road

transport ready to take messages back to their rear parties. I gave the woman my messages for Army HQ and Brigadier Panet and sent back by road a message to Colonel Tuck at 12 AGRE HQ. Then, as the Guards had not planned to advance next day, I arranged to borrow from them next morning a platoon of their armoured cars to enable me to reconnoitre MELS BROEK airfield and maybe drive the Germans off it. They agreed to silence next morning the 88mm German gun dominating EVERE airfield, but took no responsibility for what I might do on MELS BROEK. I was told that my driver and I could sleep in the customs warehouse, so we found our way there, quite ready for sleep after what had been a memorable day. As we entered we were both handed a bottle of champagne and a large Havana cigar. My attached RAF adviser and his armoured car driver had got themselves fixed up for the night in the permanent buildings at EVERE airfield.

I learned later that the messages sent by air never arrived at Army HQ. The woman officer had persuaded the pilot to fly via PARIS, where she disappeared. It was presumed that she was a German Agent.

I kept my bottle of champagne and cigar until I got home in November.)

4 September

78 Rd Con Coy continue work on VITRY airfield.

689 Rd Con Coy advance party move to EVERE airfield.

Group HQ left VITRY at 2230 hrs for MELS BROEK - bivvy for night at DOUAI (with 231 PC) - 2 vehicles lost in bomb craters en route.

(Next morning the 88mm gun was silenced and I was able to reconnoitre EVERE airfield, decide the alignment of a runway and the resources in men and equipment needed to make it serviceable. I then collected the troop of Guards Armoured Division armoured cars I had been promised and, entering MELS BROEK airfield at its South East corner, proceeded to run up the East taxi track which was bordered by a series of air raid shelters and other buildings. The Germans appeared to be evacuating the airfield ahead of us as we fired into each structure to flush out anyone left behind. We encircled the whole airfield in similar manner and, being satisfied that the Germans had withdrawn, I dismissed the loaned troop of armoured cars and spent the rest of the day reconnoitring MELS BROEK airfield after which my driver and I returned to the safety of a second night in the customs warehouse, but not before a despatch rider from my 689 Road Construction Company, then at CAMBRAI airfield, found me and took back messages for my HQ and 12 AGRE.)

5 September

Group HQ and 231 Coy PC continued to BRUSSELS-MELS BROEK

0630 hrs arrived at 1900 hrs. 689 Coy's advance party arrived 0930 hrs at EVERE. 689

Rd Con Coy commence work EVERE airfield - completed by 1200 hrs. 689 Rd Con Coy commence work at MELS BROEK airfield.

6 September

689 Rd Con Coy main body arrived EVERE at 1400 hrs. 78 Rd Con Coy moved at 2000 hrs from VITRY to MELS BROEK. Both EVERE (B56) and MELS BROEK (B58) airfields completed - grass.

7 September

78 Rd Con Coy Advance party arrived MELS BROEK 0730 hrs.
689 Rd Con Coy work on B58 (MELS BROEK) airfield on concrete strip.

8 September

78 Rd Con Coy main body arrived MELS BROEK 1010 hrs.
269 Coy PC arrived MELS BROEK 0110 hrs.
78 Rd Con Coy and 269 Coy PC left MELS BROEK for DIEST-SCHEFFON 1900 hrs.
689 Rd Con Coy work on B58 (MELS BROEK) airfield on concrete strip - Public Works contractor Tadesco Freres to take over.

(The advance party of 689 Road Construction Company having arrived at EVERE airfield at 0920 hours on 5 September were immediately put to work there and, after completing that task, were transferred to MELS BROEK airfield to start making a temporary grass runway pending repair of the concrete runways. When my Group HQ arrived, with 231 Company Pioneer Corps at 1900 hrs, I immediately gave my Bomb Disposal Unit the job of getting rid of any mines and booby traps in the permanent brick buildings I had selected to be Group HQ office and sleeping quarters. It had probably been an Officers Mess. Some fairly amateurish booby traps were found and removed. Unfortunately they failed to detect a device in the central heating boiler, and I heard later that a man had been killed by it at the start of the heating season. The Bomb Disposal Unit then went on to search for mines etc on the airfield. Meantime a very loud explosion occurred on the other side of the airfield, and a large aircraft hanger burst into flames which grew into a spectacular fire. The men hardly bothered to look at it.

Next day, 6 September, we pushed ahead with making the grass runway on MELS BROEK. 12 AGRE HQ had now been established in BRUSSELS. Shortly after lunch time I was on my way to a meeting there when, at the East end of the Boulevard du Jardin Botanique, I met the main body of 689 Road Construction Company. It was an astonishing sight. It was stationary and occupying the whole length of the Boulevard and surrounded by cheering crowds. Its vehicles and equipment - motor graders, tank transporters loaded with tractors and scrapers, rollers, excavators, etc - were festooned with girls hugging and kissing the men. The Company was put straight on to repairing the much cratered concrete runways at MELS BROEK.

Two days later that work was handed over to a civilian contractor when my whole Group was ordered forward to establish the RAF on airfields between BRUSSELS and the Dutch border near EINDHOVEN and participate in the MARKET GARDEN operation, as described in my memoir entitled "An Airfield Too Far".

The failure of the Army to press on through BRUSSELS had enabled the Germans to regroup. If the Guards had captured MELSBROEK airfield on 3 September, which should not have been difficult as it was being abandoned next morning and the decision to do so must already have been taken on the evening of 3 September, the Germans could have been given no respite from attack by our rocket firing Typhoon aircraft which could be deployed fast and more flexibly than 25 pounder field guns with Auster aircraft spotting for them. To give time for the Army's supply line to catch up with the forward troops, essential supplies could then have been brought up by air, as was done later at WUNSTORF in Germany.)

9 September

Coys on maintenance work.

Group HQ left MELSBROEK 1400 hrs for DIEST-SCHEFFON.

Thomas Mitchell
February 1995