

The Second Great War 1939 - 1945

"Surrender"

A memoir on the work of No 16 Airfield Construction Group RE in the Heartland of Germany up to VE Day

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

March 1945

Place

Commanding Officer Lt Col T Mitchell RE

BAAL MR A8936

29 March

Work on B104 and bypass to BRUNNEN.

30 March

Work on B104 airfield. Rear half Group moved up. Group all under command 12 AGRE. 2856 Rifle Sqn RAFR attached for protection.

31 March

2819 AA Sqn RAFR attached. 26 prisoners work on B104. Recce party moved to recce RHEINE airfield.

**LUHLERHEIM
MR A320455**

1 April

Work on B104 airfield. Movement order for Advanced Construction Party to move to RHEINE airfield.

(My Group HQ was now bivouacked among small trees near B104 airfield which was being constructed by one half of the Group and 26 prisoners. The other half was still working on roads for 8 Corps' advance. The weather broke. Nevertheless three quarters of the length of the runway had been finished and ready for laying tracking when we struck a soft spot, extending the width of the runway. We started excavating it and searching for dry material to replace it, but failed to find any. The rain continued. The partially excavated end of the runway became a pond. We were in trouble. As the site was overlooked by higher ground, draining it would be a major operation. I reported the situation. Without warning an aircraft made a successful

landing on the partially completed runway. I walked over expecting to find a pilot who wanted to be the first to land on German soil. Instead, out stepped an American who had been sent by General Montgomery to find out whether we could finish the airfield and when. The Americans had given Monty a present of a Flying Fortress bomber complete with pilot. This was the pilot. He took two large Havana cigars out of a case, and in the gloomy damp atmosphere we smoked them as we walked along the runway to the soft spot and back again. He took off as skilfully as he had landed. There was swift reaction from his visit. We were ordered to abandon B104 and prepare to reconnoitre and repair RHEINE, a large airfield with three concrete runways, some way from B104, and still behind the German front line. I ordered an advance construction party from B104 to move forward and bivouac in a safe area, to be followed by Group HQ and the rest of the half Group from B104.)

WESEKE
MR A392679

2 April

0800 hours. Movement of Advanced Construction Party to area MR A4065.
1300 hours. Movement of main body of half Group and Group HQ to area MR A4065.
Recce of RHEINE airfield MR V760100 carried out.

(In pouring rain, men and equipment from B104 were now dispersed in a series of orchards. The Medical Officer and I had authorised a rum ration. Shortly afterwards a despatch rider came with a message from OC 78 Coy asking me to come to his Coy bivouac area. There, at the head of a queue of men in the open under the dripping trees, an officer at a table had opened the wooden box which should have contained the Coy's rum ration. Instead, it held an empty shell case. Its seals had been intact until broken at the table. The rum had probably been stolen at a dockside in the UK. I couldn't do anything immediate because units were only allowed to hold one rum ration at a time. We did, however, get a replacement that evening. The thieves responsible would not have lasted long had 78 Coy sappers got their hands on them that night. While all this was happening my Group HQ recce officer carried out a recce of RHEINE airfield while it was still occupied by Germans.)

3 April

0001 hours. Movement of Advanced Construction Party to BURGSTEINFURT MR A715955.

4 April

0800 hours. Movement of half Group and Group HQ to BURGSTEINFURT - intercepted and redirected to RHEINE airfield.

LANDERSUM
MR V7508

5 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. Recce party attempted to reach PLANTLUNNE airfield MR V7626 - not successful.

(The RAF bombing of RHEINE had been devastating. Not only the three runways but also the adjoining grass areas had been made unusable by uniformly closely spaced bomb craters each, I thought, capable of holding a London double decker bus. We had been directed on to RHEINE the moment the Germans had been driven off it. With their nearest airfields being in Holland and Belgium, 83 Group aircraft were as far from the battlefield as they had been on D Day. There was an urgent need to get them again based near the front line. I sent out recce parties to try to reach known German airfields, and made an untracked Auster strip on the only undamaged stretch of grass on RHEINE so that OC 12 AGRE and RAF officers could fly in for a conference. It was decided to repair only one runway, to use the other two as taxi tracks, and to park fighter aircraft between the bomb craters in the grass next the runways. This would accommodate the maximum number of aircraft. I committed myself to completion date and time. The craters on the runway were the critical factor. In France, I had devised a method of crater repair which had proved satisfactory for our Spitfires. It was slow, involving hand packing bricks or pieces of concrete in a dome formation which avoided subsidence. Hard fill merely bulldozed into the craters and rolled always subsided in varying extent. The Germans got away with that because of the design of the Focke Wulf undercarriage, but it was not good enough for Spitfires.)

6 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. Recce party dispatched to QUAKENBRUCKE airfield MR W1352.

7 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. Rear half Group arrived B108.

8 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. Recce party despatched to BREMEN airfield MR W7095.

9 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. Recce of FURSTENAU airfield MR V9239.

10 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. 39 Recce Wing RAF flew in at B108, 1600 hours.

(A RAF advance party from PETIT BROGEL in Belgium was already on RHEINE. Its officer was fearful that we might not finish on time, and wanted to delay the fly in for 24 hours because, the moment the aircraft were all airborne, the ground personnel would have left that airfield for RHEINE and could not be sent back. I refused. That would have been bad for the morale of my men.

After the craters had been sealed there had to be a final meticulous cleaning of the runway to ensure that there was nothing left anywhere that could puncture an aircraft tyre. I briefed my officers that shortly before 1600 hours on 10 April I would fly a green flag above my staff car stationed half way down the runway to warn them to move men and equipment off the runway when I hoisted a red flag. The RAF officer stayed beside me all afternoon, in touch with PETIT BROGEL by wireless. When he announced that the last aircraft was airborne, I hoisted the red flag. He almost became a nervous wreck when the men stayed on the runway until the first aircraft came in sight. Dramatically, in a moment, it was clear and the first Spitfire landed at exactly 1600 hours.)

11 April

Work on RHEINE airfield B108. Air and ground recce of WUNSTORF airfield MR X1630.

(Aircraft poured into RHEINE, including a flight of Dakotas of Transport Command. The airfield was full to capacity. Suddenly dramatic news arrived. Paratroops who had taken part in the assault across the Rhine had reached and captured WUNSTORF. It sounded incredible. WUNSTORF is about 15 miles North West of HANOVER. It has a grass airfield adjoining a boating lake. It was about 130 miles from RHEINE as the crow flies, across territory then well beyond 8 Corps front line. I went to Bob McGregor OC 126 Wing to ask for a pilot. The CO of each 83 Group RAF Wing had an Auster, and I had the use of any of them for recce. Normally the CO would walk with me into his briefing tent and detail a Spitfire pilot to take me wherever I wanted. This time, however Group Captain McGregor decided to pilot me to WUNSTORF himself. We set off immediately. It was a fantastic experience seeing the devastation caused by bombing at places which had so often been in the news. We passed over a vast railway marshalling yard. Could it have been at HAMM? And further on, on our right, a broken dam. After a time we diverted North and refuelled at an airfield in Allied hands. On we went. At times we passed places where German decoy methods had been successful, and bomber fleets had dropped their loads only to pock mark an innocent field. We came to a destroyed viaduct which had carried a canal over a road. The canal had drained onto the road, leaving it full of grounded ships which had been travelling West, bow to stern. We got to the airfield at WUNSTORF without being fired at, as far as we knew. It seemed to be undamaged. We landed safely and inspected it, including its hangers and other buildings.

We were about to leave - McGregor was anxious to get back to directing his sorties, and I had to organise getting men and equipment from RHEINE to WUNSTORF - when a Spitfire appeared, circled, landed and out came Sir Harry Broadhurst, AOC 83 Group. He asked to be shown round. I could see that McGregor was not very well pleased. Neither was I. Eventually we got off. When we came to the point where on the way out we had diverted to refuel I could see the tank was again only half full. I pointed toward the ground. McGregor tapped the fuel gauge with his finger, gave a thumbs up sign and carried on. When we reached, RHEINE the sky was full of Spitfires queuing to land. We couldn't use the Auster strip I had made on the grass at the SW corner of the airfield because it was now occupied by parked Dakotas. On our first approach to

land on the runway, we were given a red [a red Verrey light shot towards us in the air, a signal forbidding landing]. The Spitfire fuel tanks were probably nearly empty and they would all be allowed to land before the Auster. We circled three times, getting a red each time. The third time, as we passed the North East end of the runway, the engine stopped. We had no more fuel. Then followed a remarkable display of airmanship. I thought we were about to demolish the flying control caravan. Next it, and all the way South East down the runway, on the adjoining grass, Spitfires were parked in threes between the bomb craters. I think we touched the flying control aerial. We seemed doomed to crash into one or more Spitfires. Instead, miraculously, we crash landed in the very short space between two Groups of Spitfires, without falling into a crater and without hitting anything. Instinctively, mindful of how Douglas Bader had lost both legs at a pre-war air display at Hendon, we both tucked our knees up to our chins. With a crunching sound, the bottom of the Auster became a shattered wreck protruding into the cockpit where our feet had been. We both walked out without saying a word. McGregor strode off to his office, I to mine. We both had so much to do that 24 hours elapsed before we found time to see one another again.)

12 April

Advanced Construction Party to WUNSTORF airfield B116.

13 April

Group HQ moved to B116 with half Group and with RAFR. Tracking stores flown into B116 by Dakotas.

WUNSTORF
MR X1630

14 April

Work on B116. Part of rear half Group flew into B116 by Dakotas, remainder by road. Stores continued to arrive by Dakotas. Recce of LANGENHAGEN airfield MR X3330 and HUSTEDT airfield MR X5758.

(When I reconnoitred WUNSTORF on 11 April, British ground troops had not yet advanced far enough to join forces with the paratroops defending the airfield. Next day, 12 April, I had detachments of 689 and 231 Coys flown in Dakota aircraft from RHEINE to WUNSTORF, and I asked 12 AGRE to arrange for a supply of SMT (square mesh track) to be flown in similarly. A runway would have to be surfaced to stand up to the expected intensity of aircraft traffic.

A paratroop officer told me how they had achieved their remarkable coup. They had simply seized civilian cars and had driven straight through the enemy lines to their objective. Surprise had been complete when they arrived, late one afternoon, to find a Group of German officers sitting in the sun at a table laid out for dinner outside a restaurant overlooking the lake. The paratroopers enjoyed that dinner.

We continued to fly troops and tracking between RHEINE and WUNSTORF, but by 14 April we were able to bring 689 and 231 Coy vehicles and equipment by road,

followed by the remaining half of 16 Group and its RAF Regiment detachments. SMT continued to arrive by air, but we had to use what material we could find locally to construct MT roads and some of the taxiways.

There was now a feeling that German resistance was collapsing, and the RAF needed to be up in front to hasten the end. LANGENHAGEN and HUSTEDT were existing all grass airfields.)

15 April

Work on B116. All Group now at B116. 126 Wing RAF flew in. Stores continue to arrive by Dakotas.

16 April

Work on B116. 39 Recce Wing RAF flew in B116, 1030 hours. Construction detachments to LANGENHAGEN airfield B120 and HUSTEDT airfield B150.

17 April

Work on B116. 124 Wing RAF flew in to B120. Work on B120 and B150.

18 April

Work on B116, B120, B150. Stirlings flew in fuel to B116 causing heavy maintenance and slowing down work on tracking.

19 April

Work on B116, B120, B150. Stirlings flew in fuel to B116 causing heavy maintenance and slowing down work on tracking.

21 April

Work on B116, B120, B150. Stirlings flew in fuel to B116, causing heavy maintenance and slowing down work on tracking. Part half Group moved to HUSTEDT airfield. Recce of LUNEBURG airfield MR S8220.

(LANGENHAGEN and HUSTEDT were undamaged and immediately usable. Being so far forward, they were used intensively, but it was impossible to get tracking to them. In its rapid advance, the Army had outrun its supply system. AT WUNSTORF even fuel was having to be brought in by air. The weather was sunny and the ground dry. At HUSTEDT, the furthest forward airfield, aircraft were taking off and landing continuously from dawn to dusk. Three parallel runways were marked out to enable maintenance to be carried out on two while the third was being used. Each runway lasted only a few days before having to be repaired.

The British Army advance accelerated. LUNEBURG airfield was captured. I flew there immediately and ordered an advance construction party from 689 and 231 Coys to move from LANGENHAGEN to LUNEBURG next day.)

22 April

Work on B116, B120, B150. Group HQ moved to CELLE MR X577510. Advanced Construction Party to LUNEBURG B156.

(Being near BREMEN, where the Germans were still resisting, WUNSTORF B116 remained important to the RAF. I still had a detachment there, improving it and repairing damage caused by the Stirlings. It was, however, now too far back for my HQ which moved to the town of CELLE where we requisitioned the house of a well to do printer. He moved into another house which he owned on the other side of his garden. He professed to be glad we had arrived [we were the first British troops to enter CELLE] and that he had never belonged to the Nazi Party. A day later, however, our HQ cook brought me a photograph he had found in a kitchen cupboard. It showed a Nazi rally in the main square in CELLE, and the uniformed man on a rostrum, arm outstretched in the Nazi salute, was the printer.

BELSEN concentration camp was only a few miles outside CELLE. My Medical Officer visited it to see what should be done to prevent it being a threat to health in CELLE. He advised me not to visit it. I had no wish to do so.)

**CELLE
MR X577510**

23 April

Work on B116, B120, B150, B156. Part half Group moved to B156.

24 April

Work on B116, B120, B150, B156.

28 April

Work on B116, B120, B150, B156. Auster strip reced at DEUTCH EVERN MR S8115. FW 190 flew in to B120 and surrendered.

29 April

Work on B116, B120, B150, B156 and Auster strip.

(We made a grass runway on LUNEBURG as a temporary measure while also making a parallel runway to receive SMT tracking which would be available in a few days. Meantime, as the Army was still unable to take BREMEN, we had to maintain WUNSTORF, and also LANGENHAGEN and HUSTEDT.

The Auster strip at DEUTCH EVERN was just off the South West corner of LUNEBURG airfield. It was to serve a new tactical HQ for 21 Army Group. The ceasefire was to be signed there - hence the provision for Dakotas.

I saw the Focke Wulf fly in and come to rest near me while I was inspecting the state of the runway at LANGENHAGEN. It made a very low approach - too low for the AA gunners.)

1 May

Work on 21 Army Group Tac Strip DEUTSCH EVERN MR S8115.

Work on WUNSTORF airfield B116 MR X1630 (maintenance of SMT strip)

Work on LANGENHAGEN airfield B120 MR X3330 (grass strip)

Work on HUSTEDT airfield B150 MR X5758 (grass strip)

2 May

Work on LUNEBURG airfield B156 MR S8220 (SMT strip)

RAF Wing abandoned B120. Maintenance on B116, B120, B150.

(Now having a grass runway on LUNEBURG, the RAF could afford to abandon LANGENHAGEN. It had worn out. An emergency of a different kind now arose. Displaced persons who had freed themselves during the German Army retreat were camping on LUNEBURG HEATH. One of their fires got out of control and was threatening bunkers containing what was said to be the whole of the German Army stock of chemical warfare gasses. I was ordered to stop it reaching them. Luckily I had a Pioneer Coy and a Road Construction Coy in transit to LUNEBURG airfield. They made a fire break and put out the fire. It had crept frighteningly near before it was got under control.)

3 May

Tracking laying commenced on B156.

78 Coy replaced at B150 by 689 Coy.

5 May

Recce party at BREMEN. Cease fire ordered. Recce party to COPENHAGEN.

6 May

Warning order Group HQ to move to B156. Recce parties in SCHLESWIG HOLSTEIN.

(The defeat of the German forces now seemed inevitable. The Staffs had decided to use LUNEBURG airfield to fly out great numbers of displaced persons. For that a tracked runway was essential. We were given priority for the supply of SMT, and laying it proceeded with the utmost speed. My Group HQ was still at CELLE, but I had moved into a billet at the North East corner LUNEBURG for better control of current and future work.

News that a ceasefire had been declared came to me about lunch time. My first action was to hand my revolver to my driver for safe keeping and have a ten minute walk down a nearby road, unarmed for the first time since D Day. The sky was cloudless. Germans were already sunning themselves on the roof terrace of a nearby house. I had no time for that yet. I had to find out how soon I could reconnoitre the German airfields in SCHLESWIG HOLSTEIN to assess damage and how long it might take to make them serviceable to enable the RAF to decide where to base its aircraft. These were concrete runway airfields from which bombers had been launched against Britain. General Montgomery had stipulated that he would not deal individually with the German Army, Navy, and Airforce, but would issue all his orders to the German High Command, the OKW, situated then at FLENSBURG. I asked 12 AGRE to arrange that all these airfields be instructed that RE recce parties from my Road Construction Coys would be arriving by road and that I personally would arrive at some by air, and to find out from the OKW how soon we could start. At dawn next morning came the answer. I already had a recce party at BREMEN, which had fallen before the ceasefire. I issued orders for the road recce parties, and I detailed my HQ recce officers, Captain Stanley Muus to go to COPENHAGEN, where the airfield was expected to be undamaged. Stanley was a Danish mining engineer who had been in South Africa when war was declared and had immediately joined the British Army. Copenhagen was his home town. His wife had been shot for helping RAF crews to escape. I had promised that as soon as the war finished I would send him on compassionate leave to COPENHAGEN, where his family and relatives lived. I did so, as soon as we had finished our immediate recce tasks.

I next walked over to the office of a Canadian Spitfire Wing to ask its CO, Group Captain George Sellars, for his Auster and a pilot. George thought that this was a trip not to be missed. He would be the pilot. We flew off North early next morning. As we approached KIEL canal, he shouted that he hoped that the AA gunners had been told not to fire. I too hoped that the OKW had sent the right signal. The flak over the canal had been notorious. We got across safely. As we approached the first airfield, we saw an array of aircraft on a runway, their crews drawn up in front of them, and a Group of men in front. We landed and got out. A German Air Force officer stepped forward and asked, in perfect English, if I was Lt Col Mitchell. Then, when I said yes - ignoring my pilot - who was my superior in rank - he asked me to accept the surrender of his aircraft. He went on to say that as the war was now over we could all be friends again and would I step into his mess and have a drink with him. I said I wasn't interested in his aircraft, but required immediately a cross country vehicle and driver so that I could inspect the airfield as quickly as possible. Either the OKW had failed to convey the reason for my visit, or the airfield commander had made an incorrect assumption. The same performance took place at the other airfields I visited. The road recce parties had their moments also - one went to the island of SYLT, a fashionable nude bathing resort with a big airfield. At the edge of the beach there was a large notice announcing, in German "It is forbidden to photograph the Reichsmarschal when he is bathing" - a reference to the corpulent head of the German Air Force, Hermann Goering. SYLT we were told by the locals was his favourite resort.

Shortly after the end of the war, at a dinner in the RAF Club, Sir Harry Broadhurst recounted how the German Air Force had surrendered to a Royal Engineer officer!

LUNEBURG
MR S8820

7 May

Group HQ moved to LUNEBURG MR S8820

8 May

VE Day

Thomas Mitchell
December 1994