

## **The Second Great War 1939-1945**

### **An Airfield Too Far**

#### **A Memoir on the Work of No 16 Airfield Construction Group RE in Holland**

**September 1944**

Between 9 and 12 September 1944, No 16 Airfield Construction Group RE, which I commanded, was moved from Melsbroek and Evere airfields in Brussels to work on a clutch of existing Belgian airfields lying between Brussels and the Dutch border South of Eindhoven. They were pre 1939 airfields, mainly grass, as were Evere, and Croydon and Hendon in UK, and were situated at Diest, St Trond, Peer, and Bourg Leopold. I established my HQ at Diest. These Belgian airfields had all been cratered by RAF bombing. They were all repaired and the RAF installed on them by 20 September in spite of 78 Coy RE and 269 Coy Pioneer Corps being driven off Bourg Leopold by the enemy on two successive days. Anxious to be based as close as possible to enemy ground troops, the RAF crowded aircraft on to these airfields the moment we had finished repairing them; so much so that on one of them I watched, incredulous, as three Spitfires, taxiing towards one another from three different directions, interlocked their noses and propellers in a collision at exactly the same moment. These airfields were all in a salient created by XXX Corps, flanked by XII Corps and VIII Corps on left and right respectively. Our army was now making little progress against stubborn German resistance. We seemed to be set for another slogging battle as after the Normandy landings. Then, while at Diest, I was summoned to a briefing of senior officers at XXX Corps HQ at Bourg Leopold. There the Corps Commander, General Brian Horrocks, described a bold plan to bypass the enemy resistance in Belgium and open the way into Germany. The plan was code named Market Garden.

Market Garden, its failure, the fierce fighting in Arnhem and all along the route, have been described in great detail elsewhere. Briefly, next day, 17 September, the 1st British Airborne Division was to be dropped by parachute on the North bank of the Rhine to seize the Arnhem bridge and capture the airfield which was just beyond the Western suburbs of Arnhem. The 82nd US Airborne Division similarly was to capture the bridges at Nijmegen and Grave while the 101st US Airborne Division was to secure the road from Grave to Eindhoven. XXX Corps, led by the Guards Armoured Division, would force their way up the road to Eindhoven and thence to Arnhem along the road protected by 101 Division airborne troops. Arnhem is approximately 72 miles from Bourg Leopold by road. My task was to get men and equipment on to Arnhem airfield as soon as it would be captured and do what might be necessary by way of repair and making of temporary runways to enable the second wave of 1st British Airborne Division, supported by the Polish Brigade, to be landed by aircraft and gliders.

In their advance, XXX Corps was to have been protected on either side by XII Corps and VIII Corps. They, however, met fierce opposition and were never able to keep up with XXX Corps. The road remained unsafe for what seemed a very long time, being often cut and shelled.

On 16 September, the day before the Market Garden operation started, 16 Airfield Construction Group companies were located as follows:

Bourg Leopold	:	78 Road Construction Company and 269 Pioneer Company
Peer	:	689 Road Construction Company and 231 Pioneer Company

The Guards Armoured Division of XXX Corps began to advance up the road to Eindhoven in the afternoon of 17 September and with them went my HQ recce party. The road was obstinately defended and the Guards did not meet American airborne troops of 101 Division at Eindhoven till the afternoon of 18 September. On 19 September, the Guards had not reached Nijmegen. My recce party, having got information that strong German forces were on Arnhem airfield and that the British airborne troops dropped on 17 September to capture it were in desperate trouble, enterprisingly went to Volkel airfield which is four miles East of Uden, a village through which the Guards had passed that day. My recce officer took a chance, as it was in territory not yet reached by any British or American troops. Luckily that day he found it free of enemy.

Thereon this memoir can be continued most vividly by extracts from 16 Airfield Construction Group War Diary. The text in brackets thus ( ) is amplification from memories which have remained clear and vivid. Permission to use the diaries has been obtained from the War Office. In the text "the road" means the road Eindhoven-St Oedenrode-Veghel-Uden-Grave-Nijmegen-Arnhem. It had deep and wide ditches on either side along its whole length.

## **WAR DIARY**

Army Form C2118

Unit 16 Airfield Construction Group RE

September 1944

Place

Commanding Officer: Lt Col T Mitchell, RE

**Uden**

**19 September 1944**

Recce of Volkel airfield. Work commenced with civil labour. Recce party the only troops in Uden.

(The well organised Dutch Resistance quickly contacted the recce officer, produced the civilian labour, and fixed him up with private billets in the village as it would have been unsafe to stay on the airfield overnight.)

**Bourg Leopold**

**20 September**

78 Rd Con Coy and Det 269 Coy PC to Volkel 0200 hrs, reached Eindhoven only as route cut by enemy. Worked at Eindhoven airfield.

**Volkel**

**21 September**

78 Rd Con Coy and Det 269 Coy PC arrived Volkel and commenced work. Retired to Uden for night.

**Bourg Leopold**

**21 September**

Gp HQ to move to Volkel 2330 hours - Club route cut.

("Club" was probably the code name for the road to be taken by XXX Corps. Impatient to be with my recce party and to see the state of Volkel airfield, I got a place for my staff car in movement up the road early on the 21st. I found myself travelling next to General Horrocks in a jerky procession like a gigantic modern motorway tailback. The village of Veghel, where 101 US Airborne Division had set up their HQ, was being shelled

constantly. Arrived at Uden, I found my recce officer. He had requisitioned for 16 Group HQ the house, yard and workshops of a wealthy local builder who had been arrested and imprisoned by the local Dutch Resistance because he had collaborated with the Germans. Then down to the Volkel airfield. Its Western boundary was little more than a mile East of the deserted village of Volkel. The airfield had been heavily bombed by the RAF. It had two brick-paved runways, one 5000 ft long, the other 6000 ft. It had a large number of reinforced concrete hangers which had served also as sheltered aircraft standings, situated in three widely dispersed locations near the perimeter of the airfield. All were very heavily damaged, unusable and unrepairable. 78 Coy had started repairing one of the runways. A wide stretch of grass alongside the South taxi track had the biggest crop of field mushrooms I have ever seen. I filled the back of my staff car with them, very conscious of why they had been left unpicked. I then returned to Uden with 78 Coy and their equipment and their detachment of 269 Pioneer Coy. 78 Coy had already inspected a large deserted building between Volkel village and Uden and decided that it would be a suitable billet. However, it would have been too dangerous to leave them and their equipment there. I withdrew them both into Uden and organised a complete perimeter defence to be manned constantly. We concealed the equipment - bulldozers, graders, excavators, etc - in a shrub and tree lined track within the perimeter and left all their diesel engines running, hoping to deceive any enemy scouts into thinking that the village was occupied by a strong detachment of British tanks. Towards evening, Uden was shelled, the shells exploding uncomfortably near my HQ. This continued daily until XII Corps had advanced far enough North to be able to silence the guns responsible. Luckily the builder whose house we had requisitioned for our HQ had made a shelter in the basement for protection from British air raids. Airborne reinforcements for the troops defending the bridges were still passing overhead during my first days in Uden - there were both aircraft carrying paratroops and gliders. Many were brought down by flak - a heartrending sight. Later, when British ground troops had gained territory in some depth, as far North as the Arnhem bridge, on either side of "the road" I was able to see the fields to the East littered with gliders and other remnants of the airborne force. The paratroops' abandoned camouflage coloured silk parachutes had been snapped up quickly by the locals. It was said that every girl in the neighbourhood had a pair of camouflage silk knickers.)

## **Uden**

### **22 September**

78 Rd Con Coy and Det 269 Coy PC at work on Volkel - enemy stopped work.

As still no troops other than 78 Rd Con Coy in Uden, and 2 Bn SS reported 4 miles distant, support requested from US Para Div. One Bn despatched from Veghel. At 1000 hrs, road cut and only 2 Plns of Para Tps reached Uden. Enemy stopped work on airfield by mortar fire and patrols. 15 enemy tanks occupied Volkel. 78 Rd Con Coy with 2 Plns Para Tps retired to Uden. Just before dark, some Guards Armd Div tanks arrived from North and laagered in Uden under protection of 78 Rd Con Coy.

### **23 September**

Guards tanks were reinforced to a Battle Group. They attacked and cleared Volkel village by late afternoon and swung North West of Uden.

### **24 September**

Volkel village occupied by 50 Div. Volkel airfield was now only 3 miles in front of FDLS. 78 Rd Con Coy therefore recommenced work. Household Cavalry patrols were contacted to give warning. Coy returned to man defensive positions in Uden at nightfall.

## **25 September**

Work continued as above.

## **26 September**

50 Div moved and Bde to Mill, East of the airfield, giving it protection. 78 Rd Con Coy were therefore able to sleep at nights now after 3 days of working during daylight hours and manning defensive positions during darkness.

Gp HQ and 269 Coy PC move to Uden 1030 hours. 689 Rd Con Coy arrive Uden 2100 hours.

## **27 September**

231 Coy PC move from Peer to Uden 1500 hrs - 0100 hrs

## **28 September**

231 Coy PC arrive Uden 0100 hrs

(So now the whole Group was at Uden. With Volkel airfield now protected on the East by 50 Div of XXX Corps, and with the hope that XII Corps and VIII Corps forward troops might soon be abreast of Uden, we could get on with the job of making Volkel airfield fit to receive the RAF. There was also an urgent need to create new ALGs (Advanced Landing Grounds) in the territory occupied by Allied troops between Uden and Arnhem, for apart from Eindhoven airfield, which had been bombed by the RAF and was now being repaired, 83 Gp aircraft were still in Belgium, with Brussels-Melsbroek its nearest large airfield with paved runways.

However, something needs to be said about the period 21, 22, 23 and 24 September to supplement the bare operational facts recorded in the War Diaries. Early in the morning of 22 September, as 78 Rd Con Coy and the detachment of 269 Coy PC were on their way to work on Volkel airfield, they were met by a German patrol opposite the large building they had chosen as their future billet. The Germans fired on them, damaging and immobilising one vehicle. In the ensuing skirmish, 78 and 269 Coy troops were able to retreat to Uden without casualty, whereupon I got on to 101 US Airborne Division HQ at Veghel (5 miles South of Uden). Obliging they despatched a Bn of paratroops to help us; but although it was 101's task to keep "the road" open, it was cut between Veghel and Uden while the Bn was on its way, and only two platoons of the paratroops reached Uden, intent on enabling us to continue repair work on Volkel airfield. However, when 78 and 269 Coys reached the airfield with them, they found it occupied by 15 enemy tanks, and came back to Uden. We manned our perimeter defences there, sent out patrols to get warning of approaching enemy, and reported the situation by wireless to 12 AGRE (16 Gp was under its command) and to XXX Corps HQ. Our information that the enemy had 2 battalions of SS troops advancing on Volkel village came from the Dutch Resistance HQ in Uden. In hamlets and farmhouses around Uden, they had a network of members from whom they were being kept informed about German troop movements through people coming into Uden with farm produce etc. An extraordinary rapport had immediately been established between my men and the local population. So, although the Dutch knew that they were liable to be shot by the Germans, information came not only to me officially from the Resistance, but simultaneously it dribbled through to my troops rather as gossip flashes around English villages.

A Household Cavalry Patrol, consisting of a single armoured car, called at my HQ daily to exchange information about the enemy. One day the Patrol Officer told how he had just come past a hamlet to the South East where he had found a German force. While observing it from a distance he had watched, unable to intervene, while the Germans lined up some children and cut off their toes.

The officer i/c the detachment of Guards Armoured Division tanks that arrived in Uden on 22 September in response to my messages knew nothing of the whereabouts of enemy troops around Uden. When told that the immediate threat was from Volkel village, he sent a tank patrol there to investigate. It was repulsed with one man killed. He decided that his detachment was not strong enough and that it would be wise to spend the night in Uden awaiting reinforcements. Next day, having been made up to a Battle Group as recorded in the War Dairy, it cleared Volkel village and forced the enemy to retreat away from the airfield.

Our contact with 101 US Airborne Division HQ at Veghel over this affair had an immediate side effect. They sorely needed to know more about the ever shifting location and movement of enemy troops. Could we make an Auster strip at their HQ? Because, if this were possible, they could borrow a British Auster aircraft and pilot (who normally spotted for British Gunners) and they would then have eyes in the sky. We reconnoitred, sent down some men, and made them an Auster strip. We had been making them en passant all the way from Normandy at the advanced HQ of General Montgomery and other commanders.

Now we got on with repairing one runway at Volkel and sufficient taxi track and hard standings for the aircraft of one RAF Wing, which we achieved by 30 September. We also reconnoitred for a new airfield North of Uden. Since Allied troops at that time only effectively held "the road", and that was constantly being cut by the confused ebb and flow of enemy troops, the site had to be where there was a force to defend it. This made somewhere near the bridge at Grave seem the only choice, as it was permanently guarded by the 82nd US Airborne Division, who had captured it on 17 September. Getting to Grave to have a look at the possibilities remained hazardous for a few days after the tank battle at Volkel village on 23 September. On my first attempt there was an eerie silence and no traffic as soon as I had passed the last houses on the North of Uden. I drove on, thinking that US paratroops must be around somewhere. Then suddenly, on rounding a bend, tanks ahead. My driver braked hard and seemed simultaneously to get the gear lever into reverse. Then a head rose from a tank turret and an arm beckoned. It was British. We joined this little group of three or four tanks huddled together. The first words the officer i/c said to me were "It's eggs and bacon for breakfast today" and then explained that this was a code phrase which meant that his detachment had not had to do a dawn patrol that day. He said it wasn't safe to try to get to Grave that day in my 4 WD Humber.

Later, when XII and VIII Corps had fought their way to positions North of Uden, we might have more choice of site for another new airfield capable of serving the RAF throughout the winter. Meantime, they would have to make do with Grave. The land there was well below the level of the river Waal which flowed below the bridge, and was protected from inundation by the usual high dyke. As the ground was flat and still dry and hard, an untracked grass runway would serve, we hoped, until we had repaired Volkel more fully, and until Allied troops had captured ground for the construction of more airfields capable of remaining usable throughout the winter. At Grave we would have to make a new access road and construct a flying control tower on the dyke as the RAF's mobile flying control caravans would be blinded by it. Grave would only be serviceable for a short period. We had been warned by the locals that, as winter approached, the

water table would rise to the roots of the grass, and then vehicles and aircraft would only be able to move on hard surfaces.)

**Uden**

**28/29 September**

78, 689, 231 and 269 Coys work on Volkel airfield (B80). Party from 689 Coy work on Grave airfield (B82).

**30 September**

689 and 231 Coys work on Volkel airfield.

**1 October**

Work on B80 Volkel airfield, MR E5942 repairing 2nd brick runway and taxi track. Work on flying control at B52, Grave MR E5955 - All Coys.

**2 October**

Work on B80. Enemy ammo train adjacent to site unloaded. Work on B82.

(The ammo train was on a railway line from Germany which ran through Uden station (which was next my Gp HQ) and on to Tilburg and Breda etc. It had been carrying ammunition to enemy troops West of "the road". The RAF had made the engine immobile (by puncturing the boiler with bullets) but the Germans could have sent another engine and pulled the undamaged wagons back behind their lines. I had reported the train to 12 AGRE and XXX Corps but nobody had done anything about it. It seemed a pity to let the enemy have the opportunity of still using the ammunition, so we unloaded it and I seem to remember that in due course a RASC unit took it away.

About this time some men of the Dutch Resistance arrived at my HQ and announced that they had come to take away the Mercedes. They proceeded to take down part of the masonry rear wall of an open front equipment shed which was part of a workshop whose doors were on the other side of the building. They soon revealed a sealed compartment between the back wall of the open shed and the back wall of the workshop. In it was a Mercedes car which the now jailed owner of our HQ had hoped to save from confiscation. We felt foolish for not having spotted the sealed compartment ourselves.)

**Uden**

**3 October**

Work on B80. Flying control B82 complete.

(The work on B80 included constructing a new flying control building to replace that destroyed by RAF bombing.)

**Uden**

**4/6 October**

Work on B80. Recce proceeding in salient for new ALG.

(XII and VIII Corps had now gained some depth of territory on each side of "the road" as far North as Grave. A new ALG for the winter was needed urgently.

As it was now safe for "soft" vehicles to move in the territory gained, I visited XXX Corps HQ which had been established near and East of Nijmegen. Getting to the HQ

needed very careful map reading to avoid straying into enemy held territory. There were reports of units losing, through faulty navigation, vehicles and men sent to collect rations.)

## **Uden**

**7/12 October**

Work on B80 and on access road B82. Recce continued. On 9th, bad weather delayed work.

(We found and decided on a site for the new ALG at the village of Heesch, 7 miles North West of Uden. It had many disadvantages from the construction point of view, but when completed would be superb for the pilots. It was an intensively cultivated piece of land which stretched away from the very edge of the village. The top soil, which we would have to remove to reach a firm foundation, was beautifully rich black stuff, good for growing crops, but of considerable depth. It was cultivated in strips which, because of the Dutch laws governing the inheritance of agricultural land, were multitudinous. Their owners would all have to be traced and compensation for land and crops documented before we could lay a finger on it. I shuddered at the thought of the possible delay. In the village, next the start of the cultivated land, there were two windmills. The sails of one would have to be removed as it was in the aircraft approach funnel. I would have liked to remove the sails from both, but the village authorities said they had to have at least one of the mills for grinding the crops.

The very efficient organisation which the Dutch had created for liaison with the Allied forces made light of the administrative difficulties. They measured and listed the cultivated strips, scheduled the crops on them and said they would trace the owners. All they needed from me was one signature to cover the lot. As for taking the sails off the windmill, that was easy. They would see to it and have the crops harvested, so I planned for a start at the new site and arranged for a RAF Construction Wing to take over finishing the work at Grave B82.)

## **Uden**

**13 October**

Work on B80 and on access road B82. Setting out new site B88 at Heesch E5199.

(Col Tuck, Commander 12 AGRE, visited me to see how far the work on Volkel had progressed, to see the new site at Heesch, and to visit XXX Corps HQ. As I had already been there, he thought it would be prudent to let me take him in my staff car. I took very great care to direct my driver at each road junction. We arrived without incident. On the return journey, we were discussing what we had learned at XXX Corps HQ and not paying any attention to the scenery when suddenly, on rounding a corner, I became aware of silence. My thoughts flew back to what silence had often meant during the fighting in the Normandy beachhead. No Mans Land. A long straight stretch of road lay ahead. At its end, there was a tank. It was unmistakably German. My driver managed to reverse back round the corner and turn the car before a shot was fired. We had narrowly escaped becoming prisoners.)

## **Uden**

**14 October**

Work on B80. 2nd runway complete. Work on access road B82. Levelling new site (ie taking levels).

**16 October**

B80 work on existing standing and drainage. Weather held up work. Levelling new site.

## **17/18 October**

B80 work as for 16 October. Work on access roads B88. Levelling new site.

## **21 October**

Work on existing standing and drainage B80. Work on access road B82 handed over to RAF Construction Wing.

(Work on B80 as on 16 October continued to the end of the month, much hampered by bad weather. We were now entering a period of continuous very heavy rain which lasted for six weeks. The RAF had an unfortunate time on Grave airfield. The Germans had got ME262 jet aircraft operational. They kept making quick sorties over the ALG. One day they dropped a canister of anti personnel bombs and killed a number of airmen on the ground. RAF aircraft couldn't catch them. They were too fast. We started work on the Heesch airfield on 23 October. On 29 October we did some repair work on the Auster strip we had made at 101 US Airborne Division HQ. One day I was told that the windmill sails I had instructed should be removed would be taken down next morning. I went up to Heesch early, anxious to see the operation. By the time I got there, the sails were down and removed from the village, **but** they had taken them from the wrong mill. "Don't worry", said the Dutch liaison man, and by that evening the correct sails had been taken down and the others reinstated.)

## **ENEMY ACTION**

<b>Uden</b>	<b>5 October</b>	<b>0400 hours</b>
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2 500 lb British bombs in bivouac area Uden MR E5341

<b>12 October</b>	<b>1400 hours</b>
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A/P bombs in Plant Park Volkel airfield

<b>14 October</b>	<b>2200 hours</b>
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1 flying bomb on B80

(The British bombs on 5 October had been intended to hit the railway and its sidings and station which were immediately adjoining the builders yard and house and workshops which were our HQ bivouac area. Whoever sent the bombers obviously didn't know that use of the railway was already denied to the Germans by the disabled engine of the ammo train which we had unloaded on 2 October. We suffered no casualties from the bombs, but windows were shattered.

The anti personnel bombs on 12 October caused no casualties and did no damage to plant. They were dangerous things to remove, but luckily 108 Bomb Disposal Unit was still part of my HQ as it had been since the landings in Normandy. The flying bomb on 14 October was a V2 which had probably gone wrong at launch (the launch site was quite near Heesch). It fell into a wooded area on the East side of Volkel airfield. It caused no damage to our plant and no casualties, but it did make a mighty noise.)



**Uden**

**1-19 November**

Working on reconstruction of Volkel airfield MR E5942 and construction of Heesch airfield MR E5199.

**19-25 November**

Working on reconstruction of Volkel airfield MR E5942 and construction of Heesch airfield MR E5199 including nightwork under floodlights up to 2359 hours.

**25-30 November**

Working on reconstruction of Volkel airfield MR E5942 and construction of Heesch airfield MR 5199

## **ENEMY ACTION**

**4 November**

1 canister anti personnel bombs on Volkel airfield

## **VISITS**

**10 November**

CE Second Army, Brigadier Campbell visited this HQ.

(It was now a race against time to complete Heesch airfield as quickly as possible, and to create on Volkel airfield enough aircraft and vehicle hardstandings and associated taxi tracks, MT roads etc for the number of aircraft the RAF needed to base there. The imminent abandonment of 83 Group's two grass airfields, Grave and one other which the RAF Construction Wing had marked out in fields East of "the road", was going to mean overcrowding on Volkel. The existing German aircraft hardstandings were in reinforced concrete hangers. They had been made useless by RAF bombing, and had been so heavily reinforced that we found it impossible to demolish them without using explosives, a method impractical in the circumstances. The existing runways and taxi tracks were paved with bricks laid loose on sand. This was the obvious method to use for our new aircraft standings etc. But the only brickworks in the area were in enemy held territory, on the North side of the Waal river, East of the bridge at Nijmegen. Nijmegen suburbs South West of the bridge were now held by British forces, but deserted by their inhabitants. Their streets were paved with bricks laid loose on sand. I had the bricks lifted and re-used for standings at Volkel; but although I stripped every one of those streets, they didn't provide as much as we needed. We learned of a factory which had made precast concrete paving and which was now in the territory gained by British forces. We helped it back into production to make square blocks thick enough and strong enough to take aircraft. When we had finished the aircraft standings, additional taxi track, MT roads and paths to RAF personnel quarters, I estimated that we had laid the equivalent of a three feet wide path stretching from Uden to Berlin - a very gross exaggeration no doubt, but it felt true at the time. Every surface had to be properly drained, not least the paths to the pilot quarters. Group Captain Tim Morice, OC 121 Wing, went for me one morning because there was a puddle on the path leading to his Wing Commander Flying's caravan. "Do you realise," he said, "that flying boots are not watertight, and that if one of my pilots gets a cold in the head, I have to ground him and lose an operational aircraft." It was a

very small puddle and I have often thought of it since as I negotiated the much larger puddles in the pavements near Victoria Station in London on rainy evenings.

At Volkel we had existing hard surfaces from which to work in making these new hard standings. At Heesch there was nothing but beautiful black top soil. It was deep and glutinous. Rain was continuous, and there was frost at night. The runway and taxi tracks and MT roads were planned to be surfaced with PSP (Pierced Steel Planking). Because the Germans had denied us use of the Channel ports, and they still held Antwerp, there was no near store of this material. I had to send our low loaders (tank transporters normally used to carry our bulldozers, excavators and other heavy equipment) back to Normandy to fetch it - 5,000 tons of PSP. We had at first no hard material for making access roads. These were kept serviceable by continuous use of a blade grader, even coping in this state with the low loaders heavily laden with PSP. The reason that we had at first no hard material for road making was that the locals normally used gravel dredged from the river beds, and that source and the brickyards were now inaccessible because of the hostilities. We had to find some substitute, because clearly it was not going to be satisfactory to lay the PSP directly on to the graded subsoil. Brigadier Campbell's personal visit on 10 November underlined the importance the staffs placed on getting Heesch operational. There was, however, no short cut if the airfield was to serve the RAF throughout the winter. Brigadier Campbell told me that the Americans had just made an airfield for their Air Force, and had completed it in a week. He thought I ought to have a look at it. I did. Their Aviation Engineers had found an area of level heather-covered heath on which they had simply laid PSP direct. It was true that they had got aircraft flying a week later. They hadn't had to cope with rain - it was sunny there on the day of my visit - but, because of the varying height of the heather plants and the springy nature of their stems, the PSP was being damaged continuously by the weight of the aircraft using it - Mustang fighters. The apparently level upper surface concealed ground which was anything but even, as anyone would know who has walked over heather moors, where it is not unknown for a leg to be broken, let alone a pierced steel plank. To construct their airfield, the Americans had used a whole Aviation Engineer Battalion, approximately the same size as my Airfield Construction Group of two Road Construction Companies and two Pioneer Companies. Their whole Battalion was pinned down doing constant maintenance, whereas my Group was working on two airfields simultaneously and would be free to tackle another when our work at Volkel and Heesch finished.

Meanwhile we kept talking to the Dutch Liaison Organisation about the problem of material for a foundation to spread the load under the PSP. They said that beds of gravel were sometimes found beneath the top soil of heather, and that we ought to talk to an organisation call Koninklijke Nederlandsch Heidemaatschapij. They would put us in touch. We found that their job was to turn barren, sandy, acid heathland into rich soil such as we had at Heesch. Where they found gravel, they excavated it and sold it to the building trade. Did they know of any deposit in British-held territory? Yes, they did, but it was still lying under untouched heath, and their equipment for getting it out had been taken away by the Germans. No problem, we said. If they would show us where it was, we would send equipment, strip the top soil, excavate the gravel, and load and transport it to our airfield at Heesch, which we did. I was determined that I would not have to leave a maintenance party behind after the airfield became operational. We graded and compacted the subsoil under the runway very exactly to levels to give good drainage and a smooth surface that would not cause Spitfires to "hop" on touchdown when landing. We covered the graded surface with a layer of straw as it was done to prevent frost damage at night, then on the straw a layer of gravel carefully checked for uniform thickness, and PSP on top of that. Subsequently Bob McGregor, the Canadian Group Captain whose Wing occupied Heesch, declared it was the finest runway on which he had ever landed his Spitfire. Dispersal aircraft standings and MT roads were similarly surfaced with PSP, but

the refuelling, re-arming and engineer servicing areas were paved with bricks on sand and the taxi track and MT road leading to these were surfaced with concrete. Just as we were nearing completion, Brigadier Campbell paid another visit to the site to say that the RAF now wanted to put an extra squadron on the airfield, but they still wanted our work to be finished by the already forecasted date. This was going to be very difficult. The only possible site for the additional dispersal aircraft standings, taxi track, etc had at this stage of the work great access difficulties for their construction.

In Uden during November we had a respite from enemy action, and I could sometimes relax in the evenings to play bridge with my officers. The Air Force Officer attached to my HQ, Captain Corbisier, a Belgian Air Force fighter pilot, was French speaking, so we played in French. Twice Colonel Tuck had me down to dinner in 12 AGRE mess and to play bridge in his billet before being driven back up "the road" - very welcome breaks.)

**Uden** **1 December**

Working on construction of Heesch airfield B88, and repair of Volkel.

**6 December** **1330 hours**

Aircraft flew in to B88.

(The last minute instruction to make provision for a further RAF squadron had threatened to prevent occupation of the airfield which was now completed in its originally planned form. We had, however, solved the problem of access etc. The additional squadron area was now under construction.)

**Uden** **20 December**

Recce for new site commenced.

(Future attempts to cross the Rhine were to be aimed directly at the heartland of Germany. For that the Staffs wanted another new airfield as near as possible to the area of their intended crossings. The recce extended over the whole area occupied by VIII Corps from Uden to and over the Dutch border into Belgium. It was now very cold, with heavy frost.)

**Uden** **22 December** **2300 hours**

Information of enemy paratroops landing between Eindhoven and Boxtel. Stand to.

**23 December**

Coys withdrawn to within perimeter of town to form garrison defence.

(The position of the paratroop landings, North of Eindhoven and near the West side of "the road", seemed to indicate that the Germans were out to recapture "the road" and trap the Allies in their narrow salient stretching from Eindhoven to Arnhem. Our grapevine warned us of the gravity of the situation. Having organised our defence, I was in the village square in Uden, roughly in the centre of our garrison, my driver manning a Bren gun beside me, when from the South in walked the Chief Staff Officer of Second Army. He had been flying to XXX Corps HQ in an Auster. It had been disabled by small arms fire but had managed to make a forced landing on "the road" up which he had seen a German tank force advancing. I gave him my staff car and driver and sent him on his way. From my HQ I contacted 12 AGRE and 83 GP RAF HQ at Eindhoven by wireless

and asked for Typhoons to be set up to deal with the tanks. My men were ordered to lay on the ground the coloured silk squares which in UK had been issued to each man for identification to enable Allied close support aircraft to distinguish between friend and foe. This was the first time we had felt it necessary to use them. I put mine down on some grass at my HQ and lay beside it. It was comforting to think that the threat from tanks would soon be over, for the time being at least. All along the way from Normandy we had seen German tanks destroyed and tossed aside by rockets from our Typhoons. What I never imagined was what it would be like to be near the receiving end in a rocket attack. We could now hear the noise of the approaching tanks. Then came the noise of the Typhoons. They circled overhead. Now the tanks could only be a few hundred yards away. Then the most terrifying noises as the rockets screamed down, seemingly aimed at me. This went on for what felt like a long time as the pilots tackled the tanks one by one. I had heard at close quarters during the campaign many big bangs, but none equalled the extraordinary noise of these rockets, none as frightening. I walked out South next morning to see the damage. The German tanks, shattered and burnt, were all lying on their sides in the ditches alongside the road. However, the threat from the German offensive wasn't over yet. We had reports of fierce fighting in XII Corps area. We and all other troops in our neighbourhood soon found out that the Germans had completely cut our supply line. We couldn't get to the store from which all units drew their rations. The German ration store for their troops in our area was at Oss, a town only two miles North of Heesch, where we were constructing B88. The Guards Armoured Division reckoned rightly that they might capture the store at Oss sooner than they could free the way to the British ration store. So they captured Oss, and the British didn't miss a meal. The Germans also didn't want to be hungry. So the Guards having had all morning to get supplies out, the Germans recaptured the store at lunch time and held it until next morning when the Guards again captured it. This performance was repeated for several days during which we all existed on German rations. The British signed the storekeeper's book for all they took. That book was in a Guards Mess in London before the recent Army reorganisation.)

**Uden**

**28 December**

Heavy black frost. Sanding.

(We were now having to sand a runway at Volkell every morning for a dawn patrol by the RAF. To try to intercept and destroy V1 enemy missiles, Tempest aircraft had been introduced into one of the Wings on the airfield. They were difficult to control on the runway during "take off". Pilots said they tried to slew sideways. One said the aircraft tried to wrap itself round its huge propeller. Sanding was specially important for the Tempests. Some V1s were aimed at London, others at Antwerp. The latter passed low over our heads at Heesch. While inspecting work at the latter I frequently saw the sudden appearance of a vertical white column of air, seemingly not far from where I stood. Each white column marked the launch of another V2 rocket intended to fall on London.

Meantime the German Offensive in the Ardennes against the Americans, which came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge, had started. The Germans quickly achieved a penetration of 50 miles. It became impossible for General Bradley in his HQ in the City of Luxembourg to communicate with his armies. Our men were able to listen to the BBC news of the battle on the portable wireless sets which Philips of Eindhoven had donated to companies in Holland. A palpable gloom spread among all troops around Uden when it was realised that the British in their Dutch salient might be cut off from all supplies and eliminated. At this point General Eisenhower decided to place the American Armies on the North side of the Bulge, as well as British troops, temporarily under the single command of General Montgomery. XXX Corps, now out of the line, was to be moved to

a reserve position in Belgium. A ripple of confidence immediately washed through all ranks following this news. Guards Armoured Division tanks began moving down "the road". I got caught up in this traffic one day on my way to visit our new site at Petit Brogel in Belgium. General Montgomery, in a jeep trying to edge ahead, came alongside my car, but also had to wait. He immediately gathered round his vehicle all who were near, propped up his plastic covered map showing the latest reported formation positions drawn on with coloured chinograph pencils, and proceeded to give his view of the battle and what he meant to do about it. "They're after my petrol" he said. Then he distributed cigarettes all round. His jeep was full of them, although he didn't smoke himself. I had exactly the same experience somewhere on the way through France, when he had behaved in the same way - an impromptu briefing to anyone near, irrespective of rank. Very good for morale.)

**Uden**

**1 January 1945**

**0915 hours**

50+ enemy aircraft attacked B88 - damaged one plank of PSP. 16 shot down by aircraft of 126 Wing RAF of B88.

**0930 hours**

6 enemy aircraft attacked B80, no damage - 1 shot down

(This was the famous New Year's Day attack on 16 Allied airfields in Belgium and Holland and one in France with simultaneous low level attacks on Antwerp docks. The outstanding performance of 126 Wing RAF on Heesch was due to their Commanding Officer Group Captain McGregor getting all his aircraft airborne before the attackers arrived over his airfield. None of ours were damaged. Rapid scrambling was helped by our design of the airfield. How he got enough warning of the approach of the attackers flying in low level formations in complete radio silence can be gleaned from the official German Air Force publication which accurately describes how the raid was carried out. It is fascinating reading. On Eindhoven airfield, where two RAF squadrons were lined up on the runway preparatory to take-off when the enemy struck, 71 RAF aircraft were destroyed or damaged according to the official 83 Gp RAF history.)

**Uden**

**1 January**

Group employed on maintenance and final completion of B80 airfield (Volkel Holland), B88 airfield (Heesch Holland) and Group Control Centre of 83 Gp RAF (Erp Holland). Recce of Petit Brogel, Belgium, B90 site, continued.

**4 January**

Small advance party moved to B90 for surveying and setting out.

**5 January**

Advance parties of Road Con Coys and Pioneer Coys moved to B90 area.

**6 January**

Coys moved to B90 area - rear parties left at B80 and B88. Advance party of 5352 Wing RAF arrived to take over B80 and B88.

**Wychmael, Belgium**

**7 January**

Group HQ moved to B90 area - opened at Wychmael at 1600 hours.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

I need not have been so concerned about the enemy ammunition train on 2 October. The Germans probably could not have spared a railway engine to pull it back into Germany. When flying was possible, the RAF was disabling every train that moved by day. They destroyed or damaged 170 locomotives in November alone with aircraft operating from Holland in an area North and North East of the Rhine.

The significance of the shooting down of Second Army's Chief Staff Officer on 23 December has only occurred to me as I have been writing this memoir. His journey was the consequence of General Eisenhower's decision to place American troops under General Montgomery's command to halt the German advance in the Ardenne. He was flying to give General Horrocks orders to move XXX Corps into a reserve position West of the Meuse. Communication by road was impossible then, and a coded message by wireless or telephone would have been considered too liable to be intercepted.

The unique collision of three Spitfires on a Belgian airfield in September 1944 was embarrassing for the airfield controller and for the pilots concerned, one being Air Vice Marshall (then Group Captain) "Johnnie" Johnson, the British top scoring fighter pilot. Aircraft are often most vulnerable when taxiing on airfields. In the 1930s, Bert Hinkler, who had created records flying to Australia and elsewhere, was killed in his aircraft by colliding with another aircraft while taxiing on Croydon airfield. Because of the way Spitfires cock their noses in the air when on the ground, their pilots can only see their surroundings sideways.