

The Second Great War 1939-1945

"I Have Waited Five Long Years To Do That"

A Memoir on the Part played by No 16 Airfield Construction Group RE in support of the Allied Crossing of the River Rhine

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

January 1945

Place

Commanding Officer : Lt Col T Mitchell, RE

Wychmael Belgium

7 January 1945

Group HQ moved to B90 area - opened at WYCHMAEL at 1600 hrs.

(The site for B90, near the village of PETIT BROGEL, had been reconnoitred from my Group HQ in UDEN in Holland. The Staffs wanted another airfield as near as possible to the intended crossing of the Rhine. Our search had covered the whole area occupied by 8 Corps. Heavy fighting along their front had made it impossible to find a site in Holland. That eventually chosen in Belgium was in a sparsely populated area of heath and woods. Billets for my troops were found in villages within two and a half miles of access to the airfield site, at PEER, PETIT BROGEL, GRAND BROGEL and ELLICUM. A Roman Catholic convent school run by an enclosed order of nuns had been chosen for my Group HQ. The children had been evacuated for safety but the nuns had remained. I interviewed the Mother Superior in one of the deserted classrooms. Rules for our occupation were established. All communication with the nuns would be through the Mother Superior and me personally. The nuns had their quarters behind a locked door. The rest of the building provided good sleeping, messing, and office accommodation for us. Once a week, the nuns piled the chairs on the tables and scrubbed the tiled floors of the classrooms. My socks used to disappear behind the locked door without my knowledge. When I returned home in November 1945, my wife wondered who had darned them so beautifully!)

8 January

Work commenced on B90. Four inches snow fell. Maintenance continued on B80 and B88.

(While constructing B88 airfield at HEESCH in Holland we had contended with continual rain and glutinous mud. Here we had something different but even worse. The four inches of snow covering the site of B90 when we started work that first

morning was only a foretaste of what we were to experience until its completion. Next day, ground excavated to formation level had frozen. A large supply of insulation had to be found hurriedly. Thereafter all work excavated to finished levels was covered immediately with a thick layer of straw. Frozen soil had to be removed and replaced with unfrozen material. It was a bad start, made worse by delay in getting the diesel engines of our heavy plant started. Thereafter we left them running continuously until the thaw at the end of January.)

14 January

116 Coy Pnr Corps attached for works on B90.

(The additional Pioneer Company was needed for handling straw and for getting PSP to the site.)

17 January

GCC at ERP complete except for ditches. Rear parties withdrawn from B80 and B88, except for Plant Ops.

(The GCC was a control centre for 83 Group RAF to get their controllers nearer the Rhine. 83 Group aircraft used the airfields my RE Group constructed and repaired.)

19 January

Snow blizzard at B90.

20 January

More snow fell on night 20/21 January. Heavy frost. Pierced steel plank surfacing stores now urgently required. Barges of PSP from ANTWERP have not yet arrived at BREE owing to canals freezing.

(Frost had already penetrated the ground to some depth before the snow fell, increasing the difficulty of producing finished surfaces which would remain stable after the thaw. However the subsoil was sand. This had been a factor in choosing the site and should shorten the time needed for recovery from a thaw.)

21 January

Frost continues, delaying work. 1,000 tons PSP borrowed from B86 airfield.

(We now needed PSP desperately. In the War Diary, "removed" had been crossed out and the word "borrowed" written in ink above it! B86 at HELMOND, ten miles North East of EINDHOVEN, had a brick paved runway. Along its South side was a brick paved taxi track off which were PSP aircraft standings. A second taxi track along the North side of the runway, with similar PSP standings, had been projected but not

constructed. OC 13 Airfield Construction Group RE, whose unit had constructed B86, may have hoped to keep his stock of PSP.)

25 January

Frost still continues - ground frozen to fifteen inches depth - plant work almost impossible.

26 January

Snow fell on night 26/27 January.

28 January

Work continues in spite of frost - track-laying is proceeding.

(The airfield had been fitted in between two woods, resulting in a dumb-bell like plan shape. With the German New Year's Day attack on Allied airfields in Holland, Belgium and France very much in mind, we surrounded each of the dispersal areas, each containing several aircraft, by high earth banks on three sides. While the runway and South taxi track were being excavated, I explored the wood on the North side of the runway and devised a route for the North taxi track which would distance its dispersal areas from those on the South without increasing taxiing distance. Col Tuck, OC 12 AGRE, was enthusiastic about it. I calculated that it would take a day longer than the original plan to complete. We devised a modification to our work sequence which saved that day. Being pressed for time because of the bad weather, I was sorely tempted to stick to the original plan.)

30 January

Thaw commenced.

(On the morning of 30 January, I was walking to the airfield across a field of short grass when suddenly my foot went through the surface as though I had stepped into a pool of water, and my boot struck solid ice some six inches or so below the surface. A little before noon the same day, I was being driven slowly along a road paved with granite setts behind a convoy of trucks, their unit identification, painted in black on white on the differential casings clearly visible in bright sunshine. Suddenly, without warning, the wheels of the rear truck plunged through the granite setts, spewing them aside, and the truck came to rest on the bottom of the differential casing. I learned that in time of peace the Highway Authority closed that and other roads during and after a thaw to prevent such damage.)

31 January

PSP train arrived at BOURG LEOPOLD from ANTWERP with 940 tons PSP.

1 February

Work on B90 Airfield - thaw continued.

8 February

Work on B90 Airfield. First aircraft (Auster) landed 1120 hrs.

9 February

Work on B90 Airfield. One Spitfire landed and took off after refuelling.

14 February

Work on B90 Airfield. One Tempest and two Marauders landed damaging the track.

(By 8 February, the RAF had an advance party on the airfield with rearming and refuelling facilities. The Squadrons that were to operate from B90 were not to be brought in until the thaw would be well and truly over. It was difficult, however, to prevent an aircraft in distress from landing. Marauders were twin engine bombers. The thaw was still in progress when they landed and damaged the tracking. B90 was subsequently occupied successfully by similar bombers after the fighter aircraft had left.)

19 February

Work on B90 Airfield. Damage by Marauder now made good.

21 February

Work on B90 Airfield. One Marauder took off. One Spitfire landed for refuelling. One Marauder landed with wounded personnel.

25 February

Work on B90 Airfield. Airfield operational for seven squadrons.

(The next seven days were devoted to repairs and maintenance of vehicles, plant and equipment. After the winter stalemate along the whole of the British East front, it now seemed that the British 2nd Army was about to try to drive the enemy out of all territory West and South of ARNHEM. We knew that 30 Corps was battling its way through the REICHS WALD, South East of NIJMEGEN. We knew that there was to be another attempt to cross the Rhine. Our airfield at PETIT BROGEL was part of the preparation for it. I was curious to know what my Group's part was to be. There was an air of anticipation.)

1 March

127 Wing RAF Adv party moved in.

2 March

127 Wing RAF flew in.

5 March

Brig Panet DCE Airfields 21 Army Group visited site. Warning order for half Group to move.

6 March

39 Recce Wing flew in.

7 March

Movement order for half Group.

(On 5 March, Brigadier Panet had briefed me about the Rhine crossing and my Group's part in it. The crossings were to be at XANTEN and WESEL. For this, the town of CLEVE would have to be captured and the road NIJMEGEN-XANTEN-WESEL secured. The REICHS WALD, an extensive area of dense woodland, was to be used to assemble equipment for the crossing. There were insufficient roads for the build up and assault; there were practically none in the REICHS WALD. My Group was to make new roads and improve existing ones to be used for the advance. The town of WESEL and the Rhine bridge which led into it were to be completely destroyed by a one thousand bomber night air raid. The streets would be so full of rubble as to be impassable. As the bombing of CASINO in Italy had halted the British advance, so it was hoped that the Germans would not suspect that the first British tank thrust would take place at WESEL. But that was exactly what was to happen. By night the British were to cross the Rhine in assault craft on a broad front of about 12 miles stretching from and including REES and WESEL on the East side of the river, in order to secure a bridgehead. Simultaneously American forces were to do the same thing upstream and South of WESEL. The following day, British paratroops were to be dropped to reinforce the bridgehead until ground troops and supplies could be brought across Bailey bridges to be built across the river and flood plain near XANTEN. That would take some days. American engineers were to build a new bridge at WESEL to replace the one destroyed by bombing. My job was to clear a way through WESEL and beyond to enable the whole tank strength of 8 Corps - my memory is that it was three divisions - to pour across the American bridge as soon as it would be finished. To enable me to do this, a British RE bridging unit was to build Bailey rafts (sections of Bailey bridge between pontoons) to cross the river a short distance downstream from WESEL and 16 Group was to have first use of them.)

8 March

Half Group moved to new location in BAAL MR A8936 GERMANY for road works on concentration areas for Rhine crossing. Under command 10 AGRE.

9 March

Recces between MAAS and Rhine for Dakota strip and Auster strip for 21 Army Group TAC.

5017 Sqn RAF arrived PETIT BROGEL to take over maintenance of B90 airfield.

10 March

Work commenced on Auster strip at MR 969127 Sht.4503 1/25000. Preparation for demonstration at PETIT BROGEL of new airfield surfacing-channel track.

11 March

Work on Auster strip - track laying (SMT)

12 March

Channel track demonstration, CE Second Army, CE 8 Corps, DCE Airfields 21 A.Group attended.

13 March

Warning order for rear half Group to move 16 March.

15 March

Handover of B90 complete. Movement order.

16 March

Movement at 0230 hrs to BAAL MR A8936.

BAAL
MR A8936

17 March

Group under command 10 AGRE. Work on concentration areas and roads for OP PLUNDER.

19 March

Group under command 12 Corps.

20 March

Work on roads and concentration areas under command 18 US Airborne Corps for OP PLUNDER.

21 March

Work on roads and concentration areas complete.

22 March

Handover of maintenance to 1132 Combat Group US Engrs.

(The previous two weeks had been strenuous for me personally. Until 16 March, my HQ was still at WYCHMAEL along with half the Group which was tidying up at B90 airfield, demonstrating a new airfield track material, and finding sites for and constructing communication airstrips for a new Tactical HQ for 21 Army Group. Until 16 March, the other half of the Group was more than 60 miles away, working on roads needed for the build up and movement overnight to the Rhine for the assault crossing by water.

That work was varied. It included making new roads for access into storage areas in the REICHS WALD forest, repairing existing roads and converting part of the railway from NIJMEGEN to CLEVES into a one way road complete with, at one road junction, a flyover and slip roads. The roads had to be able to stand up to heavy rainfall as well as carrying very heavy wheeled traffic safely in darkness. The Operation Order I issued on 17 March stipulated that hardcore was not to be used as surfacing for road repairs, that all filled craters, potholes, strengthened and widened verges, and patching was to be sealed with tar or similar material. White painted five inch diameter posts spaced at 50 foot centres longitudinally were provided on both sides of all roads except where closely tree lined, driven two feet into the ground, and approximately one foot from the edge of the hard surface on the near side of one way routes. Separate tank tracks were created, distinctively marked. Improving surface drainage on all routes was a top priority. Existing worn roads were to be tar sprayed if time permitted. My splendid Road Construction Companies had had much experience of this type of work in repairing existing bombed airfields along the line of advance through France and Belgium, and I could rely on them. Nevertheless I walked very many miles daily inspecting every yard of the work throughout the area between NIJMEGEN and WESEL after my Group HQ moved to BAAL where we bivouaced in the open on the Siegfried Line, a few yards from a single strand of wire on posts erected by British troops and bearing a sign warning that mines lay beyond it. We had good weather there.)

23 March

Group prepare for OP PLUNDER. RAFR Armd Car Flt attached 49 BD Pln attached.

24 March

Recce party moved at 1100 hrs. D day for OP PLUNDER.

(OP PLUNDER was the code name for the assault across the Rhine. It was thought that by mid morning bridgeheads would have been secured sufficient to allow my recce party to cross and operate safely. However I knew that the officer commanding the RE unit which was to build the Bailey Rafts wanted to see the bank conditions on the German side of the river as soon as possible, and intended to cross in his own craft soon after dawn. It was agreed that I should go with him so that I might have as much time as possible to assess the situation in WESEL where I had to clear a way for 8 Corps. It was chilly and damp when we met on the West bank shortly after swarms of aircraft had roared overhead to drop paratroops. There was no sign of anyone on the opposite side. We were a short distance downstream from WESEL and couldn't see the territory on the other side because the ground there rose behind the beach and riverside road. The craft, which had an outboard motor and was just big enough for two people, had been concealed under the bank overnight. The motor was reluctant to start. Although there was still nobody in sight on the other side of the river, I felt that the repeated attempts to get it started were making us conspicuous. Eventually we got going, but half way across the motor coughed and stopped. I felt very much like a sitting duck as the craft swung round in the current. However, the motor was quickly restarted and we reached the other side without incident. I walked upstream along the riverside road to what had been the start of the built up area of WESEL. There was nothing foolhardy in doing this preliminary recce alone because I knew that a Commando Brigade had captured and cleared WESEL and was now battling against the Germans East of the town. Nevertheless, it was eerie. I didn't see a soul that morning until I got back to where I had landed. It recalled my walk up from King beach in Normandy to the site of B3 airfield. Then, however, I knew exactly where I was going and what I had to do when I got there. Now I did not. It took only a short time to decide that we would not be able to clear a way through the piled up remains of the town's buildings before the Americans had built a new bridge. I decided we would bypass the North side of WESEL, making a road for wheeled vehicles and clearing and marking tracks for tanks. I started to reconnoitre a route, keeping a wary eye on possible hiding places for snipers. I found that there would be no difficulty in skirting the town. It didn't seem prudent to walk beyond it without further information about the battle line. I walked back to the raft building site. My solitary walk seemed unreal. I got ferried back to the West bank.)

25 March

Adv HQ and half Group moved at 1000 hrs to WESEL MR A221425.

26 March

Main HQ and half Group moved at 0600 hrs to WESEL MR A221425.

WESEL

27 March

Group at work in WESEL clearing routes.

28 March

Work in WESEL. Work on roads and tank tracks for 8 Corps advance GHQ. Half Group moved to DAMM B104 under command 12 AGRE.

(24 March and the following four days were as intriguing and as enjoyable as any during the campaign from Normandy to Denmark. Luckily the weather remained fine. On a given line of advance, we had to find and make routes that would allow rapid passage for all of 8 Corps wheeled vehicles and tanks. For the former, we would make use of any existing roads, improving and strengthening them as we had done in and around the REICHS WALD. For my D-Day task in Normandy, the RAF had flown many special photographic flights and had interpreted the photographic maps they gave us. We had no such thing for this job. The maps we had showed no detail of the wooded areas. After leaving what had been the built up part of WESEL, we had to pass through an attractive thinly wooded area containing orchards and small farms. We had to walk through it to find out what it contained. Rapid reconnaissance and preliminary route marking enabled me to deploy the whole Group simultaneously on long stretches.

Meantime, the RAF wanted more new airfields. The battle front was already more than 75 miles from their existing bases. We had been searching for sites as soon as it seemed safe to explore the surrounding countryside. My recce party reported what they considered the only possibility in the British bridgehead. I had a look at it. It was in a wood. The line of runway was acceptable for levels and free of trees, but would be hemmed in on both sides. A good deal of tree clearance would be necessary for aircraft take off and approach funnels and for taxi tracks and MT roads. (An airfield had similarly been constructed in a wood in the Normandy bridgehead when the Army had failed to advance quickly enough to capture pre-selected airfield sites.) I had no option and moved a Road Construction Company and a Pioneer Company to the village of DAMM to construct what was to be named B104 airfield.

The roads and tank tracks we were making had to be ready as soon as American engineers had completed the bridge they were building at WESEL to replace that destroyed by bombing. I had gone back across the Rhine one day to see how they were getting on. I was standing on the West abutment of the bridge when along came Mr Churchill with a few officers. They walked down to the water's edge on the North side of the abutment. I could see Mr Churchill's back. He seemed to be looking North towards the adjoining shattered railway bridge. When they returned to road level, I asked one of the officers what Mr Churchill had said about the military situation. The officer replied that Mr Churchill had undone his fly buttons, urinated in the Rhine and said "I have waited five long years to do that".)

Thomas Mitchell
October 1994