



Construction of B3 ALG Airfield, Normandy, June 1944

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The author was commissioned into the Corps on 22 January 1940. Posted as a captain to No.3 RE Construction Company Centre, he was responsible, throughout successive bombings while the unit was at Plymouth, for repairs to maintain the city's services and for destroying building shells left standing after the raid which destroyed the whole city centre. Promoted to Major to command 694 Artisan Works Company in April 1941, projects included construction of the anti-tank gunnery ranges at Lydd and a combined operations HQ under Dover Castle. Promoted Lieut-Colonel after completion of [the airfield] B3 in June 1944, he commanded No.16 Airfield Construction Group RE, constructing advanced landing grounds or repairing captured German airfields up to the ceasefire on Luneburg Heath. After this he laid concrete runways on Flensburg and Hamburg airfields, and pierced steel planking runways on German grass airfields selected by the RAF for occupation during the following winter. He was demobilized in November 1945.

The 1944-45 Allied campaign in northwest Europe, the long awaited “Second Front” code-named *Overlord*, with a sub-codename *Neptune*, for the assault and landing on the beaches, relied on the Allies having air superiority over the battlefield. For the initial landing in Normandy, and until the autumn of 1944 when Tempest aircraft joined 83 Group RAF in the Netherlands, the British forces under General Montgomery had to rely on Spitfire and Hurricane aircraft for protection from enemy aircraft; on rocket-firing Typhoon aircraft for offensive action against enemy tanks and transport in the immediate battle area, and on Mosquito and Mustang aircraft for reconnaissance relevant to the operation of the former.

The Spitfire and Hurricane had been designed for the defence of the British Isles against marauding aircraft, a role they fulfilled magnificently, particularly in 1940. They had been designed to fly up from airfields near the coast to destroy intruders, and for their fire power and manoeuvrability in the air rather than for long range flying. In an operational role the RAF reckoned they should be operated not more than a hundred miles from the battlefield they had to protect. The defence from our airfields near the south coast of England to the landing beaches in Normandy stretched them to the limit, for the distance between these beaches and the nearest point on the English coast was approximately a hundred miles. Pilots told me that they could only spend a few minutes over the beachhead battle before having to head back to England for fear of running out of fuel. It was therefore vital that airfields should be constructed in France very rapidly after the initial assault and that means should be provided for the rapid construction of others, at intervals of about a hundred miles along the lines of advance, and for the rapid repair of captured enemy airfields.

The Army created and trained special units for this purpose by converting existing Royal Engineer and Pioneer Corps formations. No.12 Army Group RE (12 AGRE) was formed with, under its command, three airfield construction groups. Nos 13, 16 and 24, and a unit formed from civil engineers in Air Ministry offices which was named 5357 Wing. Each of the RE groups had a group HQ and two road construction companies, each of the latter having attached, and under operational command, one pioneer company. The name "road construction company" was adopted presumably to prevent the enemy guessing their real purpose. As a Major, I was OC 693 Artisan Works Company (693 Coy) when it was converted and placed under the command of CRE 24 Airfield Construction Group. Henceforth, and until the Company moved into its marshalling area prior to embarkation for France, all ranks were trained intensively in the use of the new equipment the company received and in all relevant matters, eg tree felling, aircraft recognition, soil mechanics, etc. I had to find ways of training operators in the use of angledozers, tractors and scrapers, motor graders, excavators, trenching machines, etc under realistic conditions and with tasks similar to what we would have to do in the campaign, but without disturbing agricultural land - not easy when land was being cultivated so intensively during the war in order to feed the nation and foil the enemy's attempt to starve us into submission.

The RAF also had to create a new force, which was designated Second Tactical Air Force (2nd TAF), to be mobile and work closely with the Army. It was composed of the following formations:

- No 2 Group - bombers.
- No 83 Group - fighter aircraft.
- No 84 Group - fighter aircraft.
- No 38 Airborne Wing, a formation of Army Cooperation Command.
- No 140 Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron, a unit of No 35 Wing RAF, which continued to administer it.

The Air Force officers in these formations were initially much less than enthusiastic about operating from airfields moving forward with the advance. 2nd TAF and 12 AGRE met together for the first time at a two-day seminar for senior officers, which I attended. It was held in a room at the south end of Park Lane, London, conveniently near the side entrance of the RAF Club. After that, the newly-formed army and air force units went on to hold various joint exercises outdoors, including choosing and reconnoitring a site in SE England for an airfield of the size and specification of those we hoped to construct on the other side of the English Channel, and going through all the motions of constructing and occupying it, but without disturbing the soil.

Finally, after all ranks had been given embarkation leave, my company had orders to move to a stretch of road near Hampton Court Palace, from where our long convoy of trucks, and mechanical equipment on tank transporters, was escorted through London by police at a fast non-stop pace, to a preliminary marshalling camp in Southend. From there we commenced a process which continued in our final marshalling camp at Ipswich, viz, exchanging our vehicles for new ones which had to be collected from ordnance depots in various parts of England; as well as collecting some equipment which we had not needed while in England; and where we were able to have repairs done at static workshops etc. From Southend we moved into Marshalling Standing Camp R6 at Ipswich where we spent a busy period collecting our full compliment of equipment, documents and manuals for operations in Europe. All vehicles had to be "waterproofed" so as to be able to operate for ten minutes while immersed in deep sea water. Our new vehicles mostly arrived already so modified, but we had to modify some ourselves.

While there we received through RE channels aerial photographs of the site which the Overlord planners had chosen for the first airfield my company had to construct after landing. These had been taken by the RAF, and were provided with interpretations; they also showed the beach on which we were to land. The airfield site seemed to be on farmland behind a bluff rising from a coastal road. In approaching our beach from the sea the bluff would be seen on our left. There was no indication of the location. The beach and bluff might have been anywhere, and facing in any direction.

My officers and I pored over those photographs, trying to visualize the terrain, scenery and buildings. I decided on the route to be taken by everyone in 693 Coy walking or driving from the beach to the airfield site. All ranks were briefed, and it was decided that the company would rendezvous in what appeared to be a farmyard on the route. It would be my duty on coming off the beach to report to my CRE, and he gave me a rendezvous — an enemy gun emplacement near the farmyard.

The RAF seemed now to be making daily recce sorties when weather conditions allowed, photographing our site from different angles and at different times of the day to help interpretation by studying shadows cast by the sun, and also to keep watch on enemy activity, either in the construction of new defences or in troop movements. One day, shortly before we moved to the embarkation hards at Felixstowe, we had a fright. The latest photographs showed that a new German covered gun emplacement had been constructed near the end of our proposed runway. The RAF said "Don't worry. We'll fix it for you. We'll mount a bomber attack and demolish it." I was horrified. That would have put paid to any idea of constructing an airfield rapidly on that site, a view confirmed when I saw later what RAF bombing raids had done to German airfields. It seemed to me that the Germans could not possibly have constructed, in a day, a gun emplacement of the kind shown. The RAF was asked to take more photographs and to interpret them very carefully. To our relief we got word that they had done so and that they now said that this new gun emplacement was a dummy.

Part of 693 Coy's initial task after landing was to reconnoitre and mark a crash landing runway on land next to the beach to allow pilots of disabled aircraft to avoid being taken prisoner by landing behind enemy lines - or to avoid having to ditch in the sea. To do this, 693 Coy recce officer Captain J Mottram, together with a RAF liaison officer, Squadron Leader Hamilton, left Ipswich for a marshalling area near Southampton. They crossed with the first assault on 6 June, landed safely, and accomplished their mission. Happily this emergency runway was never used.

Thereon this memoir can be continued most vividly from 693 Coy's War Diary. The original is in the Public Record Office at Kew, London, on sheets of Army Form C2118. It is in my handwriting, each entry signed by me. Excepting the events of 7 and 8 June 1944, when the diary for those days was obviously written just before dusk on the 8th, it was written daily, and sometimes oftener. I now possess photographic copies of the diary, made by the Record Office and released to me by the War Office. It is quoted verbatim in the following narrative but changes in layout are made. The text in brackets thus () is amplification from memories which have remained clear and vivid.

WAR DIARY

Army Form C2118

Unit 693 Rd. Constr. Coy. R.E.

24 Airfield Constr. Gp.

June 1944

Commanding Officer: Major T. Mitchell, R.E.

Ipswich, 1 June

0410hrs

Commenced move from marshalling standing, Camp R6 to embark hards at E4. Remained in box or embarkation point till

1830hrs

Loading of L.S.T. II 3507 commenced. Considerable difficulty appeared to be experienced in stowing 'B' vehicles on top deck as stowage plan too tight for number of vehicles. Loading ceased on account of tide at 2330hrs, when all top deck and half bottom deck stowed.

1600hrs

Electric welding trailer which had arrived at Camp R6 at 1600hrs 31st May was loaded on to tank tptr. already loaded with blade grader by the kind cooperation of O.C. of ...Bn. U.S. Army. Weather fine but showery.

Felixstowe, 2 June**0900hrs**

Loading of L.S.T. 3507 recommenced (ship had stood offshore overnight).

1130hrs

Loading completed. Two 3 ton lorries belonging to another unit and 693 Coy machinery lorry could not be loaded on account of space. As this vehicle was to have been the last to go on the whole ship no exchange could be made to enable a less valuable truck to be left.

(The machinery lorry was my Company's mobile workshop for the maintenance and repair of our plant and equipment in the field. Failure to load it was serious.)

Off Felixstowe, 2 June**1215hrs**

L.S.T. 3507 anchored to a buoy in a line of other L.S.T.s. Sent back signal from ship to embarkation point asking number of ship in which machinery lorry would be loaded.

Remained at anchor off Felixstowe all day.

Weather fine and sunny.

3 June**0900hrs**

Still at anchorage. Rigged up improvised shower on deck with aid of ship's Engineer Officer.

1800hrs

Met C.E. 30 Corps. who was now on L.S.T. lying alongside 3507.

C.E. sent signal to D.C.S.O. T Armd Div., saying essential 693 Coy. machinery lorry be loaded.

2100hrs

Signal received back saying machinery lorry would be loaded on spare L.S.T.

2130hrs

Signal received to commence briefing and news circulated that ship would sail 0730 following morning. Received maps from O.C. ship. Arranged programme for briefing troops following day. Distributed maps to officers.

(These maps showed the codenamed landing beaches and the hinterland but no real place names.)

4 June**0900hrs**

Ship did not sail as expected. Received instructions from O.C. ship troops not to be briefed till ship at sea.

5 June**0830hrs**

Ship sailed 1445. Briefed troops somewhere in Thames Estuary.

(I didn't know the ship's course. I guessed that we sailed into and out of the Thames Estuary because we passed close to guns on platforms sticking up out of the sea. I had seen them on news films described as "forts at the mouth of the Thames". I had received the sealed orders from which I briefed the troops while in the marshalling camp at Ipswich. As far as I remember the envelope mainly held messages from Churchill, Eisenhower and Montgomery to be read to the troops. There was no clue as to where the landing beaches were on the French coast. It was a beautiful sunny day and we were all enjoying the sail as I read out the messages on the open upper deck of the LST, and announced that our company was due to land on the beach codenamed King. From previous study of anonymous aerial photographs of that area every officer and man of my company knew how to get from the beach to the site of the airfield we were to construct. By late afternoon we sailed westward past Dover, the white mass of chalk which had been tipped down the face of the Castle cliff from the excavation of the tunnels for the Combined Operations HQ looking as though floodlit by the sun. 693 Coy had earlier fitted out that HQ which was now helping to control our movement. I couldn't help remembering how accurately the Germans shelled Dover every evening when I was stationed there. I was glad when we were well past that white cascade. We sailed on into the night. After checking all I had to check and inspecting all I had to inspect I went to sleep to wake up just before dawn to be told by the ship's captain that we were off the Isle of Wight, about to assemble to cross to France. At some time on board we had all been given a sea sickness pill — the first time I knew that such a thing existed — and now I suddenly realized how sea sickness might have affected the assault. The pill worked perfectly for me. Previously I had always been very sick on cross channel ferries.)

On Sea, 6 June**0900hrs.**

Ship approaching Isle of Wight.

(The view on the crossing was stupendous. a sight such as never seen before and which will probably never be seen again anywhere. There were ships as far as the eye could see in all directions. They were equally spaced in equally spaced parallel lines all heading to or from the French coast. The ships sailing back to England told their own story. Their sides were lined from bow to stern with ships' boats on protruding davits. These were ships which had carried the first assault wave of infantry. Many of their boats were hanging from one davit only. They were hurrying back to embark more troops. Attaching a ship's boat to two davits in a heavy sea is difficult and takes time. In the shelter of an English harbour there would be time to do this as troops embarked.)

1800hrs

Anchored off KING beach: continued there all evening, no rhino ferry apparently being available to start unloading.

(It was afternoon when we sighted the French coast which was sitting beneath an immense cloud of black smoke. All houses along the seafront behind the beach were blackened and seemed in ruins. Big naval ships, in deep water, well offshore, were continuously shelling targets inland. We also anchored a long way from the beach, no doubt as near as the draught of the ship would allow. No one seemed to know where we were. I had, however, once spent a few days in 1927 on the beach at Lion-sur-Mer which is just a few miles west of the mouth of the Caen Canal. I recognized the landscape and so knew where we were. Checking on a map afterwards I found that our beach was at Ver-sur-Mer, just 15 miles west of Lion-sur-Mer. The sea was very stormy.

To get my earthmoving etc equipment and men ashore, shallow-draught rectangular floating platforms with a freeboard of about two feet, and with an outboard motor at each corner, had been constructed in Britain and towed across to the beaches. They were codenamed *Rhino*. The plan had been to manoeuvre them under their own power into position at the bow of the LST whose bow ramp was then to be lowered onto the floating platform. Equipment and men would then go down the ramp onto the platform which would take us to the beach, using its outboard motors.

However, a very major hiccup then occurred. The platforms could not cope with the heavy seas. We couldn't get ashore that evening.)

Continued on Part 2