

Construction of B3 ALG Airfield, Normandy, June 1944

Part 2

Off French Coast, 7 June

Personnel and vehicles on L.S.T. 3507 stood by ready to move all night awaiting unloading. As no unloading took place this was unfortunate as it deprived everyone of a proper night's rest, which would have been desirable in view of the task ahead.

(It was a noisy night. The big naval ships kept up a continuous bombardment. The Germans bombed us from the air. Ack-ack fire from ships and shore against the bombers was continuous. The din was terrific. At dawn we saw that the sea storm had worsened.)

1045hrs

A L.C.T. came alongside and it was decided to try to offload the plant. The sea was rough. A great many attempts were made to tie up the L.C.T. When finally achieved, the heaving of the ramp to the L.S.T. due to the sea was too great to allow the heavy plant to cross. Three U.S. Army 15cwt. cars managed to offload; I decided to leave the unit and go with them in order to see the airfield site as early as possible and make a plan for work.

(The LCT seemed very small compared to our LST. It was brought alongside, tied up after many attempts, and kept on station by a display of seamanship I shall never forget. The bow ramp of our LST was lowered. The heaving of the sea seemed to get worse. I stood peering down from the top of the ramp. The sight was awe-inspiring. At one moment the landing craft would be far below the bottom of our lowered ramp. Next moment the two ships' relative vertical positions were reversed, and the LST's ramp thumped down on to the deck of the LCT with such noise and force as to make it seem inevitable that the smaller vessel would be sunk. I watched, fascinated, becoming more and more aware of the great skill of the young naval officer handling the LCT. I got an angledozer poised at the top of the LST ramp, but had to decide that it could not have got down safely. Stowed behind 693 Coy plant was a detachment of US Army self-propelled guns the CO of which was anxious to get ashore. He offered me a lift in one of the three 15cwt cars, which were like large Jeeps. He drove it. He got it poised at the top of the ramp and watched several cycles of the up and down movement before letting in the clutch. Down we went, safely, into the LCT. It was a brief thrill. The young naval officer asked where we wanted to go. We named the beach, sailed past evidence of the assault the previous day, and, because of the high ground clearance of the US vehicle, we got ashore without even getting our feet wet. The beach master checked us in, and directed us to the exit. I thanked the American, and started walking.)

King Beach

1245hrs

O.C. landed on beach.

1410hrs

O.C. reached on foot pre-arranged rendezvous with C.R.E. at German gun emplacements south of Ver-sur-Mer. C.R.E. was not there and no notice could be found saying where he had gone. To get about more quickly I dumped my pack with at R.E. Stores Officer who was establishing his billet and at...

...Ver-sur-Mer, 1530hrs

eventually found the C.R.E. established in a bivouac at Ver-sur-Mer.

1535hrs

Set out to find Capt. Mottram. 693 Coy. Recce Officer and Sq. Ldr. Hamilton, who were carrying out recce of site. Found that $\frac{1}{4}$ of length of proposed strip was still under fire from enemy. Viewed the ground. Capt. M. and Sq. Ldr. H. had been to HQ. of Bn. on ground and had learned that OC Bn. estimated 3 Coys. required to clear enemy. Returned to C.R.E.'s HQ. with Capt. M. and Sq. Ldr. H. to report to C.R.E. and arrange to clear enemy. Local Bn. could not undertake as they were moving forward.

1700hrs

Sent an officer from Gp. H.Q. to look for any mechanical equipment that might be landing and to hurry up to site, 92 Coy. P.C. arrived.

Ver-sur-Mer**1730hrs**

C.R.E. went off to conference at Corps HQ: he gave orders that work would not commence that night.

(In England I had decided, from studying the anonymous aerial photographs taken by the RAF, exactly how to get to our airfield site. Every man in my company had been briefed to take the same route. I was now curious to see the actuality. The main street of Ver-sur-Mer ran uphill in a SSW direction. As I walked past the blackened windowless houses I wondered if there were German snipers still lurking there. There were, because later we learned that the adjutant of No 16 Airfield Construction Group had been shot and wounded and shipped straight back to England while walking up that street.

After about $\frac{3}{4}$ km my chosen route diverged to the east from the main street and suddenly I was alone — no one else to be seen. I came to a feature I had not detected on the aerial photographs. A small stream crossed the road. There was a ford for vehicles and a narrow wooden bridge for pedestrians. I was being constantly on the lookout for mines. I decided to walk through the ford rather than risk the bridge which might have been booby trapped. I remember thinking what a pity it was to have got wet feet after having got ashore with them dry. I continued up towards my rendezvous. It was eerie. Not a soul to be seen. I knew I was on the correct route when I came to the group of farm buildings which was the rendezvous for my company and its equipment.

[See separate map for details]

I came to the German gun emplacement. I listened before going inside. There was no one there - no enemy, no CRE. I did quite a bit of walking that afternoon, finding the CRE and his HQ, then up to the site of our airfield at St Croix. From the gun emplacement the road continued uphill through open fields to our site adjoining the village of St Croix, approximately $1\frac{3}{4}$ km inland but approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ km from the beach on which I had landed. After the position of the south end of the landing strip had been agreed between my recce officer Capt. Mottram, Squadron Leader Hamilton, and me, we waited impatiently for the arrival of men and equipment.)

2000hrs

Some mechanical equipment arrived – two 693 Coy. Cl. II angledozers, which ought to have arrived one tide *later* than main body, and Lts. Miller and Malloy of 75 Coy. with two Cl. II angledozers and two motor graders.

St. Croix-sur-Mer

Decided to start work on end of strip furthest from enemy. C.R.E. still at Corps. Led mechanical equipment to site and commenced clearing dummy German gun emplacements. Found them booby trapped.

2030hrs

2 i/c arrived with one Cl. I. tractor and scraper.

2130hrs

Remainder of 693 mechanical equipment from ship 3506 arrived less one motor grader, viz. 3 carrimore trailers with rollers. Rollers put to work at once beating down crops. Sent 2 i/c to recce bivouac. Work continued till dark.

(The CRE's order not to commence work that night was no doubt prudent. The enemy occupying three quarters of our site between the south end of the runway and the sea, was a pocket of resistance left behind by our advancing infantry, for mopping up by others. These enemy might have tried to break out in my direction rather than surrender, and in doing so might have caused casualties among men and equipment and delayed construction of my airfield. On the other hand the fact that elements of 75 Coy had been sent up to St Croix indicated that their airfield site must still be occupied by the enemy. So I decided to disobey orders. I had already looked at the dummy German gun emplacement; it was made of camouflage netting on a metal framework. I was glad I hadn't gone inside it because there was a flash and an explosion the moment the bulldozer touched it. It had been booby trapped no doubt to deter the locals from interfering with it.

During the evening I had a visit from an officer of *Phantom*, a small mobile recce unit set up by and under direct command of General Montgomery to give him and his HQ information quickly about the progress of events before reports through the usual channels could reach them. During the night my bivouac area received small arms fire from a NE direction and my men returned fire. Next day we discovered that it was Montgomery's advance HQ which had been shooting at us.)

8 June

Work commenced **0500 hrs**. Remainder of plant had still not off loaded from ship. In view of this it was decided to do a minimum of grading, retaining cropped surfaces where possible, merely beating down crops. The length of the crops, however, made it impossible to judge the ground until they had been flattened. Grading of about $\frac{1}{3}$ of strip was accepted. No more could be undertaken as only one scraper out of a total of six had arrived.

1100hrs

Capt. Wilson 693 Coy. arrived with two Cl. II tractors and scrapers and one motor grader. All tpt. available was now being used to beat down crops. In addition 2 i/c had been detailed earlier to go and obtain local farm implement resources for crop cutting. He produced one ancient Fordson tractor with a mower which the Coy. fitters modified for tractor towing, and one horse drawn mower complete with horse and French driver.

1700hrs

Lt. Ollerton 693 Coy. arrived with B vehicle convoy from L.S.T. 3507 and reported one 20 ton Albion tank tptr. drowned. Decided during afternoon that ground much rougher than had been anticipated before beating down crops, and that approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of strip must be graded.

(8 June was an eventful day. The picture of my 2 i/c Capt Lasdun, arriving over the brow of the ground just south of our work leading his farm equipment, has remained in my memory ever since. In spite of having beaten down some crops on the runway (Sqn Ldr Hamilton had agreed that the RAF aircraft would be able to land and take off on the areas we had so treated, provided the ground beneath was not too rough), there was a much greater area of standing crops which were harvested. Towards the north end of the runway there was an area of potatoes which caused much anxiety because of the quantity of top soil to be removed to reach firm subsoil, and until 11.00 we had only one scraper to handle it. It was a beautiful hot sunny day. Sometime very early, while the coy was working at the south part of the site which had been cleared of enemy the previous day, I started to walk the rest of the runway area. I suppose it must have been when I got word that the whole site was now clear of enemy - probably when an officer from Montgomery's advance HQ came over to tell me so, and we discovered that we had been shooting at one another during the night. Some half way along I came on an air raid shelter entrance sticking above ground. It had no doubt been made to shelter farm workers caught in the fields during RAF raids. As I approached it a German soldier emerged. He surrendered meekly.

Water was another anxiety. To form a firm runway surface able to carry loads, the subsoil had to be compacted at what is known as "optimum moisture content" using sheep's foot and wobble wheel rollers. If too wet it would have had to be drained. On 8 June it was very very dry and needed to have water added. We had special watering trucks for this purpose, but none arrived before 17.00hrs. Before then, just in case they had been lost on the beach or at sea, I sent a plea to the CRE. He acted quickly. Next day several of the watering trucks, which most municipalities used to have for keeping down dust on roads, arrived up on the site bearing names like "Brighton" and "Eastbourne". The airfield was to operate initially as an RRS (refuelling and re-arming strip), aircraft flying in at dawn and operating from St Croix all day, returning to their airfields in England at dusk (their operations being controlled from England) as they would be until the Tactical Air Force HQ could be established on French soil. For that limited role only one taxi track on one side of the runway, one dispersal area and a MT track parallel to the taxi track were all that were required. We recce, surveyed and marked these out; but to ensure continuity of work we also surveyed the complete taxi track system and two other dispersal areas and recce a route for a permanent motor road to encircle the whole airfield outside the taxi tracks and, at the ends, clear of the runway, over-run areas and the take off and landing angles. Sometime about 1300hrs, while my 2 i/c Capt Lasdun and I were reconnoitring a route for the motor road round the south end of the runway we suddenly saw a German fighter aircraft coming towards us and very low, and firing all its guns. We threw ourselves into a ditch and miraculously were not hit although we were right in the path of the hail of bullets that momentarily turned the soil into a heaving sea, as though liquid. The German was being chased by a Spitfire which shot him down within our sight. Although we had the impression that the German was deliberately shooting at us, it is equally likely that he was getting rid of his load of ammunition to be able to fly faster.)

9 June

R.R.S. could not be completed by 1st light. This was unavoidable. There have been 36 hours delay in the arrival of any plant at all on site and thereafter there had on the average been only about $\frac{1}{3}$ of total shipped.

1200hrs

R.R.S. was completed, including one taxi track and one dispersal area. The A.O.C. was expected to land at 1500 hrs., and work was restricted for this purpose. The A.O.C. did not arrive.

1400hrs

Two Cl. II angledozers sent to assist in clearing coast defences at Port-en-Bassin for four days. (We worked on till last light).

10th June**0630hrs**

First aircraft landed on St. Croix-B3-RRS. A.O.C. landed later during the morning. The first aircraft to land was a Typhoon. Its engine had been hit by flak and was giving trouble. That was followed by a formation of Hurricanes from No. 46 Group R.A.F.

(At dawn on the 10th I was eating my breakfast of tinned sausage and bacon in my slit trench in our bivouac area when I heard the noise of a Spitfire changing pitch and landing. I was out of my trench like a shot, thinking I must have got a wrong message about the AOC's arrival time. By the time I got to it the aircraft was in the dispersal area, the engine cowling was off, and the RAF mechanics were clambering all over it. I asked the RAF engineer officer what had happened to it. He said the pilot had said he had engine trouble but his mechanics couldn't find anything wrong. I realized quickly that this pilot was wanting to be the first to land on French soil from the air after D-Day. I said to the young man - he had a strong Glaswegian accent, "Do you realize that the AOC is due to land here soon and that he won't be amused by your landing before him?" That aircraft was in the air in no time. There is a sequel. After the ceasefire in 1945, 83 Group established its HQ at Schleswig and one day whilst visiting there from my HQ at Flensburg a pilot came up to me and asked if I would sign a piece of paper he was holding. On it he had printed. "This is to certify that was the first airman to land by air on French soil after D-Day, 1944" - or words to that effect. I can remember neither the young man's name or rank. I signed it and that piece of paper is no doubt framed and standing on some mantelpiece, possibly in Glasgow.)

Second taxi track completed during the day. O.C. 75 Rd. Constr. Coy. — the second Rd. Constr. Coy. in 24 Gp. - arrived during the morning.

2130hrs

O.C. Plant Sec. 75 Rd. Constr. Coy. arrived at B3 with the remainder of 24 Gp. mechanical equipment.

(We had carried all the fuel, for making the airfield, in our scrapers and had had enough spare capacity in these to house a portable hot shower installation; by the evening of 9 June we had assembled it and hot showers were now available. This was a luxury only made possible because the allocation of shipping space for us was by volume, and we were able to house the complete installation of enclosure, boiler, head tank etc in our six scrapers. We had made the installation in Marshalling Camp R6 at Ipswich and as 693 had originally been an Artisan Works Coy we had all the necessary trade skills to make a thoroughly efficient piece of equipment.)

11 June

Only sufficient mechanical equipment employed to complete third and last dispersal area of B3 A.L.G. Remainder of men and machines rested.

(Every man had a hot shower that gloriously sunny day. It was thrilling to see the RAF operating from our runway. Now, instead of being able to spend only a few minutes over the battlefield before having to return to England for fear of running out of fuel, the aircraft were over the battlefield in minutes. They took off three abreast, the lines of three following each other so closely that there were always nine aircraft roaring down the runway together, their wheels folding up the moment they were airborne. The aircraft were still under operational control from England and returned to their airfield there each evening. The first sorties on 10 June revealed an unforeseen problem. Dust. Because of the fine dry weather and the nature of the soil the aircraft enveloped themselves in dense clouds of pinky brown dust. It affected the aircraft engines. Special filters were designed and manufactured in England

in a day. I was told, as a temporary measure. The only real solution was to operate from surfaced runways. Two such rapidly laid surfacings had been developed in Britain and RE road construction coys had been trained in laying them with special equipment. One, PBS (prepared bitumen sheeting), was a very thick and strong roofing felt type of material laid in long continuous rolls stuck to each other as they were being rolled out, with a fluid contained in machines nicknamed "stamp lickers". Several bridgehead airfields surfaced with this material had been planned and should have been nearing completion by 11 June but could not even be started as their pre-selected sites were still under enemy fire. The RAF therefore decided to have B3 made into a complete ALG airfield instead of an RRS.)

12 June

B3 A.L.G. completed and new motor road completely encircling the airfield commenced.

0900hrs

O.C. 75 Coy. with one Cl. I angledozer and one excavator moved to commence new airfield (B8) at Magny near Sommerview.

13 June

0015hrs

Airfield bombed. Only damage was to 693 Coy. One A.E.C. tractor mid 4 x 4 rendered U/S and one Mack heavy tractor 6 x 6 destroyed completely. One man killed and one injured. One man of the mechanical equipment guard provided by 92 Coy. P.C. also injured. The man killed and the men injured were the *only* men sleeping above ground.

(The Germans had presumably hoped to hit the runway. All my personnel had orders to sleep in individual slit trenches or in a dry ditch bordering our bivouac.)

0900hrs

Two further scrapers and dozers sent to Magny.

2200hrs

Perimeter road at B3 completed.

(A minor crisis occurred on the perimeter road. At about 1800hrs we struck what is known technically as a soft spot on the east leg of the road, just north of the public road to St Croix from Ver-sur-Mer. In its extreme form a soft spot becomes a quicksand. This one was probably caused by an underground water course. It meant getting an excavator into position, excavating down to reach the source of the trouble and firm ground, disposing of the excavated soil, replacing it with dry soil - which meant setting up another excavator elsewhere — and draining the trouble spot to prevent a recurrence. The work had to be done thoroughly for the road had to be able to carry loaded 20-ton vehicles. This happened while the RAF was moving in, in a big way — by evening the airfield was occupied by three wings each with four squadrons at full strength of 18 aircraft per squadron — some 217 aircraft plus supporting services — signals unit — engineers, air control etc and airfield commander's HQ caravan. We had to dig down about six feet. We couldn't bypass the spot quickly as it adjoined a wooded area on one side and the taxi track on the other.)

14 June

0500hrs

A second runway parallel to and adjoining first commenced at St. Croix.

0830hrs

2 i/c and Capt. Mottram sent to recce bivouac area at new airfield at Magny.

(The second runway was to be dustless and able to last throughout the summer. As all the then available PBS was already allotted to other airfields the staffs had devised an alternative and, in the few days since it had been decided to make B3 into an ALG, they had obtained the necessary materials and had them shipped over. We graded the new runway. On top of the graded surface we laid, stretched, and secured hessian which we soaked with heavy fuel oil obtained from the Navy and over which we stretched Sommerfeld track. The latter was like the steel mesh reinforcement used in concrete roads.

The Magny airfield was to need the resources of the two RC coys of 24 Gp. Its runway unavoidably ran through a dense wood of tall mature trees.)

15 June

0830hrs

Brig. Pannet D.C.E. Airfields 1 Army Gp. visited airfield B3.

0935hrs

Gen. Eisenhower landed on B3 in a Fortress.

(That the big Flying Fortress did no damage to our airfield was a testimony to the soundness of its construction. My wife and various friends saw Gen Eisenhower's arrival on a newsreel in a local cinema at home and spotted me in the group meeting him.)

1000hrs

Movement of mechanical equipment to airfield B8 at Magny commenced - owing to lack of tpt. this is a shuttle move.

(We had lost vehicles in the bombing on 13 June and a tank transporter drowned in coming off an LST.)

1430hrs

693 Coy. HQ. moved from Ver-sur-Mer to airfield BB at Magny near Sommerview.

(I don't know why I write Ver-sur-Mer in that entry. My coy HQ had been on the airfield at St Croix throughout. We had not been able to see the seashore from the high ground on which we had constructed B3. Now, as I descended towards the beaches after seeing the last 693 Coy vehicle off, I saw for the first time the extraordinary hustling scene of activity between ships and shore that had been going on ever since I had landed. The Mulberry concrete harbour had been constructed and ships were being unloaded at it and vehicles pouring off it, while all sorts of craft were ferrying men and materials to the beaches from ships for which there was no room alongside Mulberry - LCTs of various sizes and many DUKWs. The latter were amphibious boats rather than amphibious vehicles. The Rhinos on which it had been planned to bring our equipment ashore on 6 June but which could not be used then because of the rough seas, were now also busy bringing equipment ashore. Word had come to me up at B3 that the docks coy of which my youngest brother was 2 i/c was working unloading ships in deep water and onto the shore road that ran under the cliff beyond the north end of B3. The route I was taking joined that road. I stopped beside an officer. He was a lieutenant in the docks coy. He said that his coy had come over with the first assault. Did he know where Capt Mitchell was? Yes, he had seen him just a minute or so ago. Pointing, he said that it was just along there. I went along there. A NCO said that Capt Mitchell had just gone out to one of the ships. I couldn't wait. I drove on to my next job at B8)

Following now is the diary of my CO CRE 24 Airfield Construction Group, which is with mine in the Public Record Office at Kew. It is in admirably concise language which tells the army and air force commanders all they wanted and needed to know.

Ver-sur-Mer, 7 June

B3 St. Croix-sur-Mer air strip laid out and preliminary work started under command of O.C. 693 Rd. Constr. Coy. R.E.

9 June

R.R.S. at B3 St. Croix-sur-Mer completed by noon. A.L.G. completed by dusk. This was the first A.L.G. to be completed in France.

10 June

Aircraft commenced operating from B3 St. Croix-sur-Mer A.L.G. Work on this site continued to improve the facilities.

Following are extracts from "A short historical account of No. B3 Group R.A.F. during the period 1 April 1943 to the end of the War in Europe" by Squadron Leader D R Morgan BA:

"On the morning of the 9th June the main headquarters was established in an orchard at Creully. Apart from looking after itself, however, it had as yet very little to do. At 1500hrs B3 airfield at St. Croix became ready as an R and R strip. This was a very creditable performance, since it was barely three days from the day of the initial landing of the construction group. No time was wasted and the following day, that is, D plus 4, the airfield was in use. The first aircraft to land on the bridgehead were Hurricanes from No. 46 Group..."

Following is an extract from the Memoirs of General Karl Koller, Chief of German Air Staff:

"There are many reasons why Germany lost the War; political, economic, and military reasons which were our own fault. None of these reasons were decisive in themselves, nor were they together decisive.... Quite apart from them, what was decisive in itself was the loss of air supremacy."

B3 helped to secure air supremacy over the beachhead for our forces and so prevented them being subjected to the dive bombing they experienced at Dunkirk.

POSTSCRIPT

ONLY the minimum amount of my company's equipment deemed necessary for the construction of a fuelling and re-arming strip was shipped to arrive at the Normandy beaches on 6 June 1944. This was divided between two ships, each containing sufficient to enable the RRS to be constructed even if one of these ships was to be sunk, although it would then have taken longer to complete our task.

These ships were LST 3506 and LST 3507. They were similar in principal to modern roll-on, roll-off car ferries, with upper and lower decks and bow ramps. My second in command sailed in LST 3506 and I was in LST 3507. The remainder of the company's men and equipment sailed in ships due to arrive one tide later than 3506 and 3507.

As recorded above, when I left 3507, my company's equipment could not be offloaded on to a Rhino floating platform, as had been planned, because the Rhinos could not be manoeuvred in the stormy sea. The storm continued throughout the 7 and 8 June. I suppose that as men and equipment arrived at the airfield site in dribs and drabs I may have asked the men how they got ashore. If I did, I had forgotten when I started to write this memoir: so I rang Sir Denys Lasdun who, as plain Captain Lasdun, was my 2 i/c. He told me that they had to leave ship into deep water. In England this possibility had been foreseen, and all our vehicles had been waterproofed to withstand ten minutes immersion in water with their engines running.

The captains of LSTs 3506 and 3507 must have waited for a low tide, sailed straight at the beach until their ships grounded, then held their ships in that position while they lowered the bow ramps and the vehicles and men inside disembarked into the deep water. Lightened by the offloading, the LSTs would float off the beach on the next high tide. This explains why some equipment which was in ships intended to arrive one tide later than 3506 and 3507 actually reached the airfield site interspersed with arrivals from 3506 and 3507. It would be interesting to hear the captain of one of the ships concerned give his account of the grounding manoeuvre, to hear him tell how he deliberately did that which every captain normally tries to avoid.