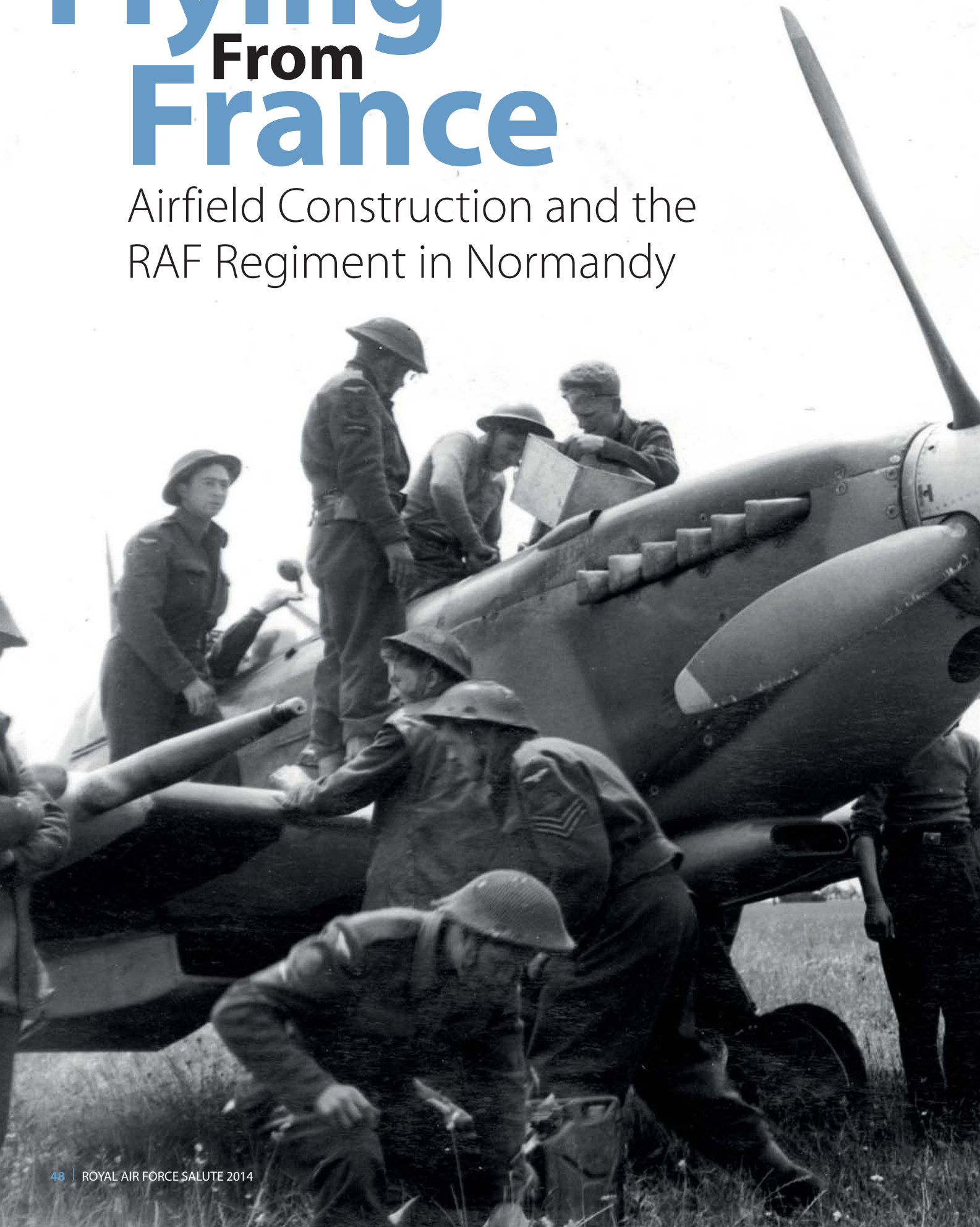


IN SUPPORT

# Flying From France

Airfield Construction and the  
RAF Regiment in Normandy



## Royal Air Force Servicing Commando Units landed in Normandy on June 7, 1944 and the first advanced landing ground opened on the 8th. Stuart Hadaway of the Air Historical Branch (RAF) reveals this little known episode in the RAF's history

Air superiority was vital to the success of the Normandy invasion. It allowed Allied aircraft to pound German defences, infrastructure and reinforcements. It protected ground troops and, most importantly, the masses of vulnerable shipping, from German air attack. Operating from bases in southern England, Allied fighters and fighter-bombers cast a protective umbrella over the invasion fleet and beachheads, but flying across the English Channel wasted valuable time and fuel. For air superiority to be maintained, it was crucial that advanced landing grounds (ALGs) be established in Normandy as soon as possible.

This was the job of the RAF's Servicing Commandos and Airfield Construction Service (ACS). They built and maintained landing grounds from scratch in the fields of Normandy, often within sight and even mortar-range of the frontlines, and later they repaired captured German airfields.

The RAF Servicing Commando Units (SCUs) were specially trained for such frontline work. Formed in 1943, the units grew out of the RAF's experience in North Africa, where it had been found that ground crews at advanced landing grounds needed not only technical skills, but also had to be highly mobile and to know how to look after themselves. As well as training in aircraft handling and repair, the Servicing Commandos were given extensive combat and fieldwork training to prepare them for their role.

### Airfield Construction Service

The Airfield Construction Service had also been formed in 1943, to take responsibility for building and repairing RAF stations, a job which had at least partly been done up to then by the army's Royal Engineers. From the beginning, it had kept one eye on the eventual need to support landings in France.

Each ACS wing had three construction squadrons, supported by a plant squadron of heavy machinery, and smaller specialist flights, such as a quarrying flight and a well-boring

flight. Efforts were made to keep these units as light and as mobile as possible, but there was only so much that could be done in these areas while maintaining their abilities.

Therefore, an ACS Field Force Wing was established, with just two construction squadrons, a construction flight, a workshop flight (for making or repairing equipment) and a field plant flight. Smaller and comparatively light, this unit was designed specifically to operate in the narrow confines of the expected beachhead, and be able to keep up with the rapidly moving frontlines.

The first RAF personnel landed in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. They included beach units and advanced parties to help plan the RAF's next moves. On June 7, four SCUs landed on the beaches, then drove inland to begin work at a number of sites. Aerial reconnaissance had identified many potential airfields in advance of the landings, and the Royal Engineers had already begun surveying likely sites, clearing mines, crops, undergrowth and obstructions, and levelling the ground. They also began to lay surfaces for runways, taxiways and dispersal points.

The surfaces could be tarred canvas, or coconut matting with a metal mesh over the top, although these were found too fragile for the heavy use they later came under. Steel mesh tracking was more durable and pierced (or perforated) steel planking (PSP) was even more hardwearing, but it was also much heavier and in the early weeks of the invasion every ounce of weight being shipped across the English Channel mattered.

### Working Airfields

As the shape of each runway began to emerge from the fields, the SCUs turned them into working airfields.

Camouflaged tents were set up for use as living areas and workshops. Protective sites were dug for airfield defence, air raid shelters, and to protect the precious stocks of fuel, ammunition and spare parts carried by the »

Ground crew refuel and re-arm one of the first Supermarine Spitfires to land in France, a Mk IX of 441 Sqn, RCAF. The aircraft put down at the advanced landing ground at B.3/St Croix-sur-Mer, Normandy, on the afternoon of June 10, 1944. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014



RAF airmen watch while a bulldozer towing a scraper levels ground as work commences on the construction of the first Allied airstrip in Normandy, on June 8, 1944. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014



Commandos. After all, many of these sites were within shelling, mortar, or even small arms range of the frontlines.

Lorries would bring replacement stores up from the beachhead on a daily basis, with an occasional special airlift also taking place; when stockpiles ran low in the middle of June, 30 Douglas Dakotas flew 75 tons of 500lb bombs into Normandy. This kept operations going until a further 1,750 tons of bombs was landed by sea.

Mobile control vehicles, equipped with radio transmitters and transportable flare paths, were used to provide air traffic control. The first to land, on D-Day, ran over a mine and the vehicle and equipment were destroyed. The crew escaped unharmed, however, and managed to set up a temporary system using equipment salvaged from crashed aircraft. A replacement eventually arrived and, within weeks, every airfield in Normandy had its own control system. The Flying Control Sections also included ambulances and fire tenders to deal with crashed aircraft.

On June 8 the first new airstrip, designated B.1, opened at Asnelles-sur-Mer as an emergency landing ground for damaged aircraft that might not be able to make it back across the English Channel. The next day, four more airstrips had been set up for RAF use, by which time the Service had more than 3,500 men and in excess of 800 vehicles operating in the beachheads.

By June 20, this had risen to 13,000 men and 3,200 vehicles, operating six advanced landing grounds with combined stockpiles of 3,000 tons of petrol, 2,500mpgal (11,365 litres) of oil, 500,000 rounds of ammunition and 1,000 cylinders of oxygen and hydrogen. As well as the SCUs and ACS units, there was also a Repair and Salvage Unit to patch up badly damaged aircraft, and two Air Stores Parks to receive, hold and then issue stores as needed by the airfields.

To begin with, the advanced landing grounds provided a temporary base for aircraft operating from southern England. Squadrons would arrive in the morning and fly from the ALGs during the day, being rearmed and refuelled as necessary, while any minor damage could also be patched up. Three squadrons usually operated from one field, supported by half an SCU and often flying more than 100 sorties each day.



Left: Airmen of 3206 SCU gather wheat for transportation from a dispersal area needed for aircraft at B.5/Camilly on July 29, 1944. Behind them, armoured to Supermarine Spitfire Mk IX MK940/ZF-B, of 308 (Polish) Squadron, which had flown in from Ford, Hampshire. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014



Left: Dust was a primary issue on the ALGs, reducing visibility and damaging engines. Several suppression methods were employed, one of which was to spray a mix of used engine oil and water. This cart was among many requisitioned from Bermondsey Borough Council for work with the Royal Engineers. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014

Three bulldozers and scrapers, working in echelon, level the area to be used in the construction of a new, all-weather hard runway at B.10/Plumetot airfield, in July 1944. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014





A pair of RAF Mustangs takes off from an ALG with a Spitfire Mk IX parked off to the right. The ALGs allowed aircraft to be turned around close to the battlefield, increasing sortie rates and helping ensure close air support was available. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014

At night, the squadrons returned to England, until June 15. By then, some of the airfields were deemed safe enough for aircraft to spend the night without the risk of being destroyed by German aircraft, artillery, or counter-attack. On that day, No. 144 Wing (Nos 441, 442 and 443 Squadrons) landed their Supermarine Spitfires at airfield B.3, near St Croix-sur-Mer, and stayed. By June 29, a total of nine wings, with supporting units, were based at ten airfields in Normandy.

#### Improvisation And Expansion

Many problems had to be overcome by the SCUs and ACS. Some, such as shelling, snipers and rough living conditions, had been predicted and prepared for. Others needed improvisation on the spot. One major problem was the dust kicked up by airfield activity. This proved highly abrasive and began damaging aircraft engines. The army tried spraying water on the runways, but this evaporated in minutes. The ACS instead sprayed oil from the boiler of a beached Royal Navy destroyer, and this proved much more effective at keeping the dust down until filters could be fitted to aircraft engines.

By the end of June the ACS increasingly took over from the Royal Engineers in clearing ground and laying runways. However, it was also frequently diverted off to support the army. As well as being used on airfields, ACS heavy equipment was used to clear rubble and build or repair roads and bridges for the advancing British forces, particularly at Conde and in Caen.

As the breakout from Normandy gathered pace, the ACS kept up with the advancing forces, building airfields from scratch as it went. Only in early September did former German airfields begin to be occupied and extensive repair work was often needed to make them operational. By early November, after the Allies had advanced more than 400 miles (644km) across France, Belgium and Holland, the ACS and SCUs had helped in building and operating some 75 airfields, and had proved crucial in maintaining the air superiority that was vital to victory. »

**Right: A load of recently delivered prefabricated bituminous surfacing (PBS) is stored for future use at B.10/ Plumetot in July. The strips were laid under a tarmac surface to provide weatherproofing.** RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014



**Middle right: Members of an ACS lay square mesh track to create the runway for the first British-built strip at B.19/Lingevres on August 7. The airstrip was occupied just six days later, when Spitfires of the four squadrons of 125 Wing – Nos 132; 441 and 453 RCAF; and 602 – landed on its 5,000ft (1,524m) runway. The scene looks serene, but construction of these temporary strips was often close to enemy lines and shelling was frequent.** RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014



**Right: A corner of the 'plant park' at Lingevres, Normandy, showing some of the heavy machinery used to build a new airfield (B.19) in less than a week.** RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014



## The RAF Regiment in Normandy: June–August 1944



RAF Regiment gunners make use of a captured German MG34 machine-gun soon after D-Day.  
© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014

The role of the Allied air forces during Overlord was to support the British 2nd and US 1st Armies of General Sir Bernard Montgomery's 21st Army Group, with 2TAF primarily supporting British and Canadian ground forces and comprising Nos 83 and 84 (Composite) Groups, No. 2 (Bomber) Group and No. 85 (Base) Group.

From the earliest stages of preparation in summer 1943, it was intended that the Royal Air Force Regiment should be included in the landings and the Regiment's Wing Commander CW Mayhew was included on the planning staff for Overlord at Norfolk House in St James's Square, London. The Regiment's roles were to provide light anti-aircraft (LAA) protection and local ground defence, in coordination with the army, to the airfields captured or being constructed in the beachhead.

Colonel RL Preston, Coldstream Guards, Commander, RAF Regiment, and his staff of No. 83 Group, RAF, sailed with the first assault troops, but he was unable to land until 09:00 on D-Day + 1 at 'Juno' Beach. They were soon joined by 1304 and 1305 Mobile Wing HQs, which arrived the same day, suffering casualties from a mine in the run-in to the beaches. The Mobile Wing HQs were to control whatever mix of squadrons was deemed necessary for particular operations, the most common being a rifle squadron and an LAA squadron.

Numbers 2834, 2809 and 2819 LAA Squadrons also disembarked, 2834 Sqn having been bombed twice during a night raid by enemy aircraft. One gunner was killed and another seriously wounded. With the need to land 25,000 troops alone on 'Juno' beach, there were long delays due to the lack of ferries to transport the airmen ashore.

### Squadrons Ashore

By late on June 7, however, all three LAA squadrons had moved to their airfields. At Brazenville, No. 2834 Sqn had six guns in action by 23:30 that night. By the end of June 8, the three squadrons were deployed across Brazenville, St Croix-sur-Mer and Beny-sur-Mer.

A further two LAA squadrons, Nos 2817 and 2876, landed after their convoy had been attacked by 'E' Boats off the coast near Le Havre. The LCT carrying their vehicles and guns was sunk, three airmen were killed and

three seriously wounded. Number 2817 went to Camilly and No. 2876 to Coulombs. The build-up continued apace, and by June 18 there were two Mobile Wing HQs, and ten LAA squadrons deployed across ten airfields in the beachhead.

By June 12, British and American forces had linked up and the port of Cherbourg had been captured. The Allies now set about enlarging their foothold and defeating counter-attacks around Caen and the Brittany peninsula. Enemy aircraft appeared in numbers over the airfields throughout June and July.

In one instance, 50 aircraft attacked Matragny airfield and by the end of the month the Regiment LAA squadrons had claimed 14 enemy aircraft destroyed and 13 damaged. This was only limited by an order to halt all AA fire, since Allied gunners had shot down several friendly aircraft. An enquiry exonerated the RAF Regiment.

### Airfield Defence

With the lack of field/rifle squadrons, the LAA squadrons also had responsibility for local ground defence and anti-sabotage measures for airfields and, as the beachhead expanded, the airfield construction groups moved out to construct new landing grounds. This was done under the protection of the Regiment's 40mm Bofors guns.

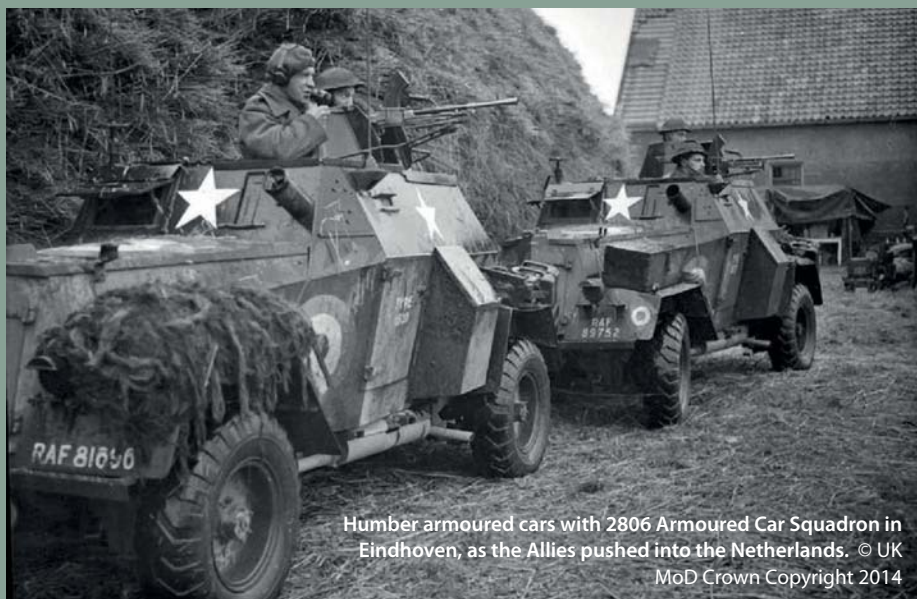
Some of the forward airfields were being shelled and No. 2834 LAA Sqn at Christot found itself only 3 miles (4.8km) from the enemy gun line. Snipers were also a frequent problem. In one instance, fighting patrols of No. 2876 Sqn were formed to drive out enemy troops harassing airfield operations. Although fighting off air attacks, and patrolling the airfield perimeter, the Regiment airmen were also called on to assist with refuelling and rearming aircraft.

While the LAA squadrons had been busy dealing with enemy air attacks, the rifle and armoured car squadrons had been held back in Britain until late July and early August. Seventeen squadrons and nine Mobile Wing HQs were then despatched to France. Two rifle squadrons (a rifle squadron consisted of a squadron HQ, three rifles flights and a 3in mortar flight with four weapons) and an armoured car squadron arrived in late July as reinforcements for No. 83 Group. The remainder went to 84 Gp, which was allocated eight LAA, two rifle and two armoured car squadrons.

Three rifle squadrons were allocated for special duties with Nos 2 and 85 Groups, bringing the total RAF Regiment deployment in France to 19 Wing HQs, 18 LAA, eight rifle and four armoured car squadrons. The rifle and armoured car squadrons were employed in a number of tasks, much of it of an engineering nature, including assembling RPs, breaking down and re-belted ammunition for fights, laying surfacing materials on new strips, constructing aircraft dispersals, mine clearance and escorting the three airfield construction groups. A rifle flight of No. 2726 Sqn lifted out and neutralised 115 'Teller' and 20 'S' type mines without a single casualty from the recently captured Villers-Bocage.

### ATI Escort

Following the breakout, the RAF Regiment used fast moving detachments of armoured car and rifle flights to escort RAF Air Tactical



Humber armoured cars with 2806 Armoured Car Squadron in Eindhoven, as the Allies pushed into the Netherlands. © UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014

Intelligence (ATI) teams investigating crashed enemy aircraft, captured airfields and radar installations. After the launch of the British Operation Bluecoat on July 30, an ATI team was dispatched with a flight of No. 2806 Armoured Car Squadron and a rifle flight from No. 2726 Rifle Squadron to examine equipment in a radar station located on Mont Pincon.

It was not known if the enemy was in occupation and the airmen came under mortar and shell fire as they approached the crest. Assisted by a guide from the Worcestershire Regiment, they entered the station. A counter-attack then caused their withdrawal and it was not until three days later that they reoccupied the site and set about de-lousing the area of mines and booby traps, with the assistance of four sappers. Spasmodic shelling continued and a sniper gave trouble, but was located and eliminated.

A few days later, following up on a Canadian attack, two flights of No. 2827 Rifle Squadron and a flight of No. 2806 Armoured Car Squadron escorted an ATI team to a captured V-1 installation in a quarry at Haut Mesnil near Caen. The armoured car squadron's Humber vehicles moved in the day after the attack and a complete search was made, punctuated by mortar, shell and small arms fire. The force withdrew without casualty on August 11, only to see the quarry overrun by a counter-attack.

With the successful Allied breakout from Normandy in mid-August, the RAF Regiment deployed detachments of armoured car and rifle flights to move onto captured airfields. A flight of No. 2798 Rifle Squadron entered Paris with the first Allied elements on August 25, 1944 and, assisted by the French Maquis, secured the Longchamps racecourse as a possible landing ground. Meanwhile, another flight was sent with an ATI team to investigate and occupy 78 potential V-1 launch sites located around the city.

By September 1944, with the advance reaching the Netherlands, there were Regiment armoured car and rifle squadrons positioned on the frontline alongside army troops. Other units were involved in protecting RAF signals units during the Ardennes offensive and had an interesting time protecting their charges from encirclement during the German offensive that became known as the Battle of the Bulge.

The LAA squadrons continued their vital work as the Allies advanced into Germany, and No. 2875 Sqn was credited with destroying the first jet fighter, a Messerschmitt Me 262, by ground fire. By December 31, 1944 there were 16 RAF Regiment wing HQs and 45 squadrons on the Continent. As the war in Europe drew to a close, RAF Regiment units played a major role in taking the surrender of the German forces in northern Germany and Scandinavia.

Extracted from *Centurion Journal 2013*, by Dr Nigel Warwick, Official RAF Regiment Historian



**Above: A mechanical excavator operated by 4854 Quarrying Flight at a quarry between Carpiquet and Caen in Normandy, releases stone for the repair and construction of runways and airfields. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014**



**Right: A groundcrew man works on the electrical connections of a stockpile of 60lb RPs. The weapons were almost certainly destined for use on Typhoons. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014**



**Right: Men of the Pioneer Corps, an army unit providing labour for light engineering tasks, caulk PBS during construction of the hard runway at B.10/Plumetot airfield. A 'fairweather strip' was located off to the left. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014**

**Below: A Hawker Typhoon of 198 Squadron at B.10/Plumetot in July 1944.**

The blast in the distance was the result of a bomb disposal squad 'de-lousing' the airfield ahead of construction work. Mines and other enemy ordnance could easily damage or destroy important plant. RAF (AHB)/© UK MoD Crown Copyright 2014

