

'THE MAIL GOES THROUGH'

Outmoded as a European theatre fighter the Hurricane may have been by 1944-45, but still it played a key role in the Allied liberation of Europe — of all things, delivering mail

WORDS: BEN DUNNELL

Approval has been given to the formation within No 46 Group, Transport Command, of No 1697 (ADLS) Flight". So reads an April 1944 memo from one Gp Capt Carpenter at the command's headquarters, confirming the establishment of a unit notable in the RAF annals — one that used fighters, no longer required on the front line, to carry mail. In so doing, it made not only urgent deliveries, but also wartime history.

ADLS stood for Air Despatch Letter Service. No 1697 Flight's operations record book sums up its function: "...the delivery of important documents, mail, instructions, etc for the Allied Expeditionary Air Force". It was set up as a lodger unit at RAF Hendon on 20 April 1944 — D-Day was approaching, and logistical arrangements for the hopefully successful aftermath needed to be put in place. One such was an ADLS provision, useful also in the run-up to the planned Allied landings. Its creation was a portent of events to come.

In command was placed Sqd Ldr James 'Jas' Storrar, a man not lacking Hurricane experience. Having joined the RAF in 1939 aged just 18, he served on No 145 Squadron during the Battle of Britain, in the course of which he shot down 10 Luftwaffe aircraft and was awarded the DFC. But while he may have been highly proficient on No 1697 (ADLS) Flight's mounts, the same was not true of all his fellow pilots. To Hendon were delivered on 29 April 1944 three examples of the Hurricane IIc. The following day, just two remained flyable. Upon the start of the unit's flying training programme, MW361 was put straight out of action when Flt Lt R. H. Howard made "a heavy landing on three points",

damaging the port wing and propeller. "This was", the record notes, "the pilot's first solo flight."

Work-ups were, however, barely interrupted. Further Hurricane deliveries brought the flight up to its complete 12-aircraft strength, and, fully equipped, it moved to Northolt on 9 May. Facilities there were decidedly sub-standard, but at least flying could continue. Part of the training effort was to involve mail runs within the UK, and an order from No 46 Group HQ set the process in motion.

How, though, to carry the mail? A series of trial runs on 14 May put ideas into practice. "Owing to the difficulty in fixing an internal container in the aircraft's fuselage", says the ORB, "it [was] decided to use 90-gallon fuel tanks, one on the starboard side to be used for carrying mail, the other to carry 45-gallon petrol fuel to balance". Come 06.30hrs on 16 May, all was ready for Storrar to make No 1697 Flight's first actual mail run, to Thorney Island and Harrowbeer. "Visibility 25 yards, bad weather all journey, successfully accomplished", he noted.



As for the modified 90-gallon tanks, "they cut speed and manoeuvrability", but they worked. With provision of an internal 11-cubic foot fuselage container behind the pilot's seat having also been resolved, this and the largest tanks gave a maximum mail capacity of 31 cubic feet. In that configuration, a Hurricane was restricted to straight and level flight, with all the implications that brought for evading German fighters, not that any were ever encountered. Converted 45-gallon tanks were also available, the instruction in that case being, "No violent manoeuvres". Should extra

range have been required, filling just the fuselage container and toting a pair of 45-gallon fuel tanks would allow a flight of 1,000 miles.

Soon the Hurricanes — which remained cannon-armed — were operating scheduled mail services between Northolt and a variety of RAF stations. Thorney Island (where a three-aircraft detachment was also maintained), Harrowbeer and Hartford Bridge (later re-named Blackbushe) were the first. Even with no enemy activity, this was not without risk, especially in bad weather. Attempting on 26 May to go around the left-hand side of Plymouth while on the Northolt-Thorney Island-Harrowbeer run, WO W. J. H. Roberts flew Hurricane MW335 into a barrage balloon cable. A safe landing at Thorney Island ensued, though a few days later No 46 Group HQ received a request that MW335 be replaced while repairs were effected.

As June 1944 dawned, so preparations for the invasion neared. A visit on the 3rd from Flt Lt Bagnall of No 46 Group Operations gave "details for marking all aircraft to be done for D-Day". The instruction to do just that followed two days later — and then, of course, on 6 June the 'big day' itself. No 1697 Flight stood ready, and on D-Day +2 came an order to "hold two aircraft ready to drop containers over the Continent". This the unit had never practiced before, so on the 9th were carried out experiments "in dropping containers by parachute for urgent supplies needed in France". In spite of being successful, the capability was not immediately used.

Instead, on 10 June, the situation in Normandy was deemed suitable for a Hurricane mail flight to proceed to a forward airfield. At 09.30hrs came the instruction from HQ Tactical Air

RIGHT: Mail being loaded into an unidentified No 1697 (ADLS) Flight Hurricane IIc at B2 Bazenville, Normandy, using the fuselage-mounted container. IWM CL4258





ABOVE: One of 1697's Hurricanes that carried a name was Ilc MW367/DR-B Jessie, pictured taxiing, probably at Thorney Island.

MICHAEL J. F. BOWYER
COLLECTION VIA
ANDREW THOMAS

Force; at the controls of MW340, Sqn Ldr Storrar was airborne at 11.30 and en route to advanced landing ground B3 at Sainte-Croix-sur-Mer, not far from Gold Beach. Escorting him in MW339 was Wg Cdr Mike Beytagh, a No 73 Squadron Hurricane pilot during the Battle of Britain who was now serving at the Air Ministry in the Directorate of Air Transport Policy. There then ensued confusion. Not 10 minutes after their departure was

received a new instruction to cancel the flight, but it was "impossible to pass over as flight has commenced". There duly came confirmation to proceed.

The Hurricanes of Storrar and then Beytagh touched down uneventfully at B3. Storrar's machine carried a bag of despatches. Their trip back to Northolt also proceeded without incident, taking half a bag of mail and despatches. As No 46 Group's subsequent intelligence report said, they had become the first

aircraft "to land and take off from the beach-head". Two further pairs of Hurricanes repeated the duty later in the day. No wonder the evening saw a celebratory party.

Storrar, meanwhile, recorded a broadcast for the BBC. He said: "My fighter aircraft was the first to use an airstrip built by our airfield construction units [...] The trip over was uneventful except for several interceptions by friendly fighters.

BELOW: Hurricane Ilc MW339/DR-H prior to the application of invasion stripes, but toting the modified fuel tanks used for the ADLS role. The titles under the canopy were written in yellow. C. WAIN VIA ANDREW THOMAS



I didn't see one enemy aircraft the whole way. The Channel was full of shipping, but today everything seemed peaceful on the sea. I picked up the strip without difficulty, and came in on a runway almost as good as those at home. The one thing that struck me while I was there was the speed and efficiency with which everything was done. Almost as soon as I taxied in, the mail was out and was rushed off in a Jeep.

"The first thing the troops wanted to know was news from home. "What goes on in England?" asked one of the groundcrew. "Is there any more beer?" asked another...

"I was only an hour-and-a-half at the airstrip, and during that time the aircraft was refuelled and loaded up with return mail, which included recordings made at the battlefield. I took off for the trip home, and as I circled the airstrip I could see quite clearly the forward areas on one side and the landing beaches on the other. My return journey was again without incident thanks to our complete air superiority over the beach-head. Tomorrow I shall be going back again, and so on every day of the week."

In fact, Storrar didn't go back on the 11th, an order being received stating that No 46 Group should "cancel all trips to the Continent until further notice". He did, however, employ the container-dropping technique on the 12th, thereby delivering urgent supplies (the details are not given) near the front line. The scheduled round of mail runs to France commenced on 13 June, their Normandy objective soon switching to airfield B2 at Bazenville. A motto was also adopted for No 1697 Flight: 'The Mail Goes Through'.

France became the sole ADLS focus by the end of June, mail runs just within the UK being discontinued. Alongside the regular schedules were undertaken numerous urgent flights, carrying such high-priority items as "mail, maps and films". With no enemy air opposition being found, it was only against some unseasonal

but still the schedule was maintained. Some 197 Hurricane sorties were completed that month, and 23 by Anson; between them, the aircraft carried 41,954lb of mail.

Now the Allies, having broken out of the Normandy bocages, were making for Paris. On 19 August Wg Cdr Franklin from No 46 Group

'During their Continental operations, the ADLS aircraft did much to facilitate rapid coverage back home of the Allied advance'

weather that the Hurricanes had to battle. No 1697 Flight's efforts were appreciated — the chief of public relations for SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe) said, "The services provided by the ADLS organisation are proving of the greatest value in the clearing of essential traffic between the UK and the continental sphere of operations, and all concerned are to be congratulated on the satisfactory running of this organisation."



No 1697 Flight used not only Hurricanes, but also a pair of Dakotas, allocated in early July, and several Ansons. As the Allies advanced through northern France, so the airfields to which the ADLS aircraft operated moved too. July saw a focus first on B8 Sommervieu and then B14 Amblie, a detachment being set up at the latter. The weather during the latter part of that month was again routinely dire,

HQ instructed No 1697 Flight to send three Hurricanes to airfield A12, an American advanced landing ground at Balleroy, "ready to proceed to Le Bourget on the expected fall of Paris". By this point Allied forces were yet to enter the city, but the Germans were starting their retreat, and the French resistance in turn to rise up. It took a few days, until after the German surrender and Charles de Gaulle's triumphant return, but on 27 August a Hurricane in the hands of Flt Lt Barclay landed at Issy-les-Moulineaux — today the Paris heliport — and brought back press reports of the liberation. Throughout their Continental operations, the ADLS aircraft indeed did much to facilitate rapid coverage back home of the Allied advance.

August broke all records for amounts of mail carried, and September brought little let-up. This was despite the fact that, as Sqn Ldr Storrar recorded at the time, "little preparation [was] made for such a rapid advance, as most of

BELOW: The pilot of this Hurricane, Flt Lt W. V. Melbourne, looks on as Sgt H. Stillwell unloads mail bags from its converted underwing tanks. The shot was taken at B2 Bazenville in June 1944.

MICHAEL J. F. BOWYER
COLLECTION VIA
ANDREW THOMAS



the new strips touched down upon by the pilots are not ready to receive mail". Sometimes improvisation was necessary, as on 5 September when Hurricane PG597 broke its propeller at Amiens-Glisy. "Most of the bomb craters had been filled up", says the ORB, "but one was still open and unmarked". Keen not to disrupt the ADLS schedule, its pilot, Fg Off Gillespie, was "extremely fortunate" there to find a Hurricane propeller, and after just two-and-a-half hours the aircraft was on its way back to base.

To Storrar fell the honour on 8 September of making his unit's first trip to newly-liberated Brussels, specifically Evere airfield which became known as B56. A schedule to the Belgian capital began, while in Paris a detachment was set up at Le Bourget — by mid-October, 13 Hurricanes were stationed there.

Around that time, 'Jas' Storrar's period in command of No 1697 Flight came to an end pending posting. His replacement, Sqn Ldr R. C. Kitchen DFC, came from within the unit's existing ranks. 'Kitch' took over at a time of change, for No 1322 Flight was formed on 30 October from 1697's Anson element, and, by the month's end, "Instructions had been received by HQ No 46 Group [...] that No 1697 Flight was to move to Western Europe forthwith". Specifically, that meant Le Bourget, with a detachment in Brussels. Insufficient personnel accommodation at Le Bourget postponed those plans, and — with the addition of three Auster liaison aircraft — 1697 continued its business as usual.

At least, it tried its best to. The conditions at Le Bourget and the other airfield near Paris used by the Hurricanes, Toussus-le-Noble, became dire. "Constant heavy rain has almost turned the grass strips into ploughed fields", wrote Kitchen, "with the result that the Hurricanes on taking off

The ADLS Hurricanes

Serial	Mark	Notes
AG262	X	'Hack' aircraft only
LF770	IIc	Crashed at Le Bourget, 30 September 1944
LF771	IIc	
LF773	IIc	
LF774	IIc	
MW335	IIc	
MW336	IIc	Crashed at B31, 13 September 1944
MW338	IIc	
MW339	IIc	
MW340	IIc	
MW347	IIc	
MW355	IIc	
MW359	IIc	
MW360	IIc	
MW361	IIc	
MW365	IIc	Crash-landed 30 miles west of Brussels, 13 September 1944
MW367	IIc	
MW368	IIc	
PG472	IIc	Damaged at B14, 15 August 1944
PG512	IIc	
PG514	IIc	Crashed at St Denis, 20 September 1944
PG515	IIc	
PG546	IIc	
PG597	IIc	
PZ752	IIc	Crashed between Dijon and Le Bourget, 6 November 1944
PZ758	IIc	
PZ759	IIc	
PZ762	IIc	
PZ768	IIc	Crashed 15 September 1944; pilot Ft Sgt Elliott killed
PZ769	IIc	
PZ773	IIc	Crashed between Dijon and Le Bourget, 12 November 1944; pilot WO Jones killed
PZ798	IIc	
PZ807	IIc	
PZ832	IIc	

Data taken from No 1697 Flight operations record book.

would get their radiators clogged with mud and have to land immediately through overheating". Not a moment too soon was Le Bourget's new hard runway available.

No 1697 Flight was, however, not long for this world. "The [unit was] ready to move", Kitchen recorded, "when a policy letter was received from HQ 46 Group [...] stating that the Hurricane ADLS Flight would no longer be required as such and the Flight was to be disbanded". This, the letter said, excepted "such part as 2nd TAF should require which will be handed over to that Headquarters". The change manifested itself in the Second Tactical Air Force Communications Squadron at Evere being allocated nine Hurricanes and pilots with which to establish an ADLS element. No 1322 Flight's

Anson Xs, meanwhile, formed the dedicated Air Despatch Letter Service Squadron.

The Hurricanes carried on flying schedules to Caen, Amiens and Brussels until 17 December, but thereafter plans for the transfer predominated. Most of the aircraft left Northolt for Evere on 8 January 1945, and soon started flying for their 'new' operator. With the 2nd TAF the Hurricanes ranged still further into liberated Europe — one of them, MW361, became the third aircraft to touch down at RAF Gatow in Berlin after the airfield came under British control. But with official disbandment on 7 March ended the brief but interesting history of No 1697 Flight, an unsung part of the wartime RAF, but one that battled hard to ensure that, whatever the weather, the mail did indeed get through.

BELOW: Pilot and despatch personnel being conveyed by Jeep to B2's operations facility, leaving the No 1697 Flight Hurricane parked next to some RAF reconnaissance Mustangs.

M. GOODMAN
VIA ANDREW THOMAS

