

The Army's aerial spies



During its time as part of Army Co-operation Command, No 140 Squadron, RAF honed its craft as a leading provider of important intelligence through aerial photography. Its Spitfires and Blenheims ran the gauntlet of flak and fighters over occupied Europe to bring back this vital material

WORDS: ANDREW FLETCHER

In late 1940, as the Battle of Britain died down in intensity and it became clear that the defeat of the Luftwaffe over the skies of Britain would mean that a German invasion would be forestalled until at least the spring of 1941, the Imperial General Staff put forth a requirement for an aerial unit to fulfil the strategic reconnaissance demands of the

General Officer Commanding-in-Chief (GOC-in-C) Home Forces in the event of invasion of the British mainland. They were keen for the Army to have its own dedicated photographic/visual reconnaissance asset capable of using the latest operational techniques, as proven by the Royal Air Force Photographic Reconnaissance Unit (PRU), whereby fighter aircraft fitted with

fixed cameras were able to observe and photograph areas of interest with a minimum of interference from the enemy. This requirement coincided with the recent formation, on 1 December 1940, of Army Co-operation Command within the RAF for the purpose of providing tactical reconnaissance, artillery observation and close air support for the Army.



A number of months passed while the requirement was reviewed by the Air Ministry, a decision being delayed due to the demands being made from all quarters for the limited reconnaissance assets already in existence, namely Coastal Command's No 1 PRU. Strenuous efforts to expand the RAF's photographic reconnaissance forces had already resulted in the recent formation of No 3 PRU within Bomber Command for bomb damage assessment purposes, but the build-up of resources was proving painfully slow.

Ultimately the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) gave the go-ahead for the formation of a unit to meet the General Staff's need, and 10 March 1941 saw the formation of No 1416 (Reconnaissance) Flight. It was based at Hendon, North London, and was part of Army Co-operation Command's No 71 Group.

1416 was equipped with six examples of the Spitfire I PR Type G. These machines were equipped with two vertical F24 cameras and one oblique F24, all capable of being fitted with lenses of various focal lengths, and retained the machine gun armament of the standard Spitfire Ia. An additional 29-gallon fuel tank behind the pilot gave increased range.

Command was entrusted to Sqn Ldr Eric Le Mesurier, one of the RAF's most experienced photographic reconnaissance pilots. Le Mesurier was among the earliest members of Sidney Cotton's Photographic Development Unit (PDU), forerunner of the PRU, and had flown numerous operational sorties deep into enemy territory. In May and June 1940 he was the commander of a detachment of No 212 Squadron, the PDU's overseas component, which operated from Le Luc in southern France and Ajaccio in Corsica to cover targets in Italy. More recently he had been a flight commander with No 1 PRU and in March 1941 was awarded the DSO, the first time a PRU member had been so decorated.

Le Mesurier was tasked with working 1416 up to a state of operational readiness. Over the next few months, personnel were posted in and equipment brought up to establishment. Flying consisted of numerous practice reconnaissances, many of which were in support of Army exercises.

No sorties were flown over enemy territory during this period, with any request for photographic intelligence by the Army being fulfilled by No 1 PRU. However, some of the practice missions were not without risk. On 17 May Fg Off G. F. H. Webb went to photograph targets in the Dover area with Spitfire X4784 but was intercepted near Ramsgate by three or four Messerschmitt Bf 109s at 20,000ft. Webb managed to dive into nearby cloud but not before his port



wing was holed. He made a safe return to base.

Prompted by requests from the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) for better photographic coverage of the enemy hinterland to detect invasion preparations, the Air Ministry considered centralising control of the various photographic reconnaissance units in order to better co-ordinate and prevent duplication of effort by what was still a very limited resource. Such was the lack of co-ordination that aircraft of Nos 1 and 3 PRUs had sometimes been over the same target at the same time, and in two instances had actually observed one another! Thus in the spring of 1941 it was decided to concentrate all UK-based strategic photographic reconnaissance assets under a central authority, the Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Intelligence), or ACAS(I), at the Air Ministry.

It became apparent to the JIC that summer that serious German preparations for the invasion of Britain had been put on permanent

supplement its Spitfires. It was considered that the longer range of the Blenheim would allow for greater operational flexibility by offsetting the limited capabilities in that regard of the Type G Spitfire.

The flight became part of the newly re-formed No 34 (Army Co-operation) Wing on 22 August, but a more significant development was under way. At a meeting between the CAS and GOC-in-C Home Forces it was agreed that 1416 might take over certain Army tasks that fell within the range of the Type G Spitfire, then being undertaken by No 1 PRU. It was considered that this would afford the unit a much-needed opportunity to gain operational experience.

In keeping with the policy of centralising control of all strategic photographic reconnaissance assets, it was proposed that 1416 should move to RAF Benson, the main base of No 1 PRU. While GOC-in-C Home Forces would retain operational control through Army Co-operation Command, all operational sorties

ABOVE: This Spitfire I PR Type G of No 1416 Flight shows the unit's 'DP' codes. W. HOGG

OPPOSITE: A No 140 Squadron Spitfire I PR Type G coded ZW-E. The oblique camera port is clearly visible on the edge of the fuselage roundel, as are the doped fabric patches covering the gun ports along the leading edge of the wings. N. WEBB

'Webb dived his Spitfire into cloud, but his port wing had been holed by the Bf 109s'

hold. This view was confirmed on 22 June when the Germans opened their offensive against the Soviet Union, leaving only limited forces based in western Europe. Under such circumstances it was felt that preparations could begin for the day when the British Army would again fight on the Continent.

Towards the end of July, 1416 began to receive Blenheim IVs to

would be co-ordinated with the officer commanding No 1 PRU in order to avoid any duplication.

Agreement came on 30 August that No 1416 Flight could be accommodated at Benson as a lodger unit, and on 2 September the advance party began its move from Hendon. Three days later the process was complete and the flight could prepare for operations over the Continent.



ABOVE: Charles Harris-St John early in 1942. He went on to become a flight commander with No 140 Squadron before being made CO of No 4 Squadron in 1944.

P. PALMIERI

ABOVE RIGHT: The pale pink camouflage on this Type G Spitfire of No 140 Squadron was used for low-level sorties. In reality the scheme was little more than an off-white, but it allowed the aircraft to blend in with cloud at low altitude. W. HOGG

As previously decided, 1416 would fly tasks from No 1 PRU's flying programme that had originated from the Army. These generally consisted of requests for coverage of the enemy coastline so that maps could be updated and a detailed picture of defences built up.

At 14.05hrs on 14 September, Flt Lt Sandy Webb took off from Benson in Spitfire X4907 to undertake No 1416 Flight's first operational sortie of the war. His objective was the town of Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue on the Cotentin (Cherbourg) peninsula to photograph strong-points along the coast. From between 2,500-3,000ft he took oblique line overlaps of the beaches around the town and the harbour itself. With no interference from the Germans he returned to Benson, landing at 15.50.

Analysis of the photographs proved the mission to have been a



success. Not only was this the flight's operational debut, but it was also the first sortie ever carried out by Army Co-operation Command over enemy territory.

The second did not follow until 17 September. Spitfire X4907, this time in the hands of Flt Lt R. McE. Mottram, set out to photograph the Dutch coast from Ijmuiden to Den Helder. After refuelling at Coltishall, Norfolk, Mottram headed across the North Sea towards the Netherlands, only to find that the forecast cloud cover was insufficient for low-level photography. Undeterred, he took distant obliques at various points along the coast south of Den Helder but was hampered all the way by thick haze. On landing at Benson his photographs proved to be rather

indistinct due to glare from the sun reflecting off the ground haze.

That was also the date on which No 1416 Flight was re-designated as No 140 Squadron. It had six Spitfire PR Type Gs and six Blenheim IVs. For the remainder of the month the tempo of operations increased, with a further 11 sorties attempted over enemy territory. Six were unsuccessful because of poor weather, but the other five obtained usable photographs. 27 September proved a particularly good day, three successful high-level sorties being completed: two covered targets near Caen and the third around the Somme estuary.

October continued at a similar pace. Sorties generally consisted of either low-level oblique 'dicing' runs along the coast, high-level

cover of specific targets (aerodromes and the like) or high-level 'mosaics' where large sections of country were photographed for survey purposes so that maps could be corrected and updated.

The squadron moved to Weston Zoyland, Somerset, towards the end of the month for a week's armament practice camp. Between 30 October and 3 November an extensive air firing programme was carried out, involving both Spitfires and Blenheims conducting attacks on towed drogues.

Operational flying resumed on 12 November with three Spitfire missions. On one, Le Mesurier attempted a mosaic of the Cherbourg area but was thwarted by thick cloud. As he was looking for breaks in the undercast he sighted an unidentified fighter 6,000ft above him, so he immediately returned to base.

The squadron's first operational Blenheim sortie took place on 15 November. Blenheim IV L9244 — with Le Mesurier at the controls, Fg Off P. J. Sercombe as observer/navigator, Sgt J. L. Crawford as wireless operator/air gunner and Maj Menzies, the unit's Army liaison officer — attempted a low-level run along the coast from Cherbourg to Cap Barfleur. Just under the cloudbase, they flew east from Cherbourg at 500ft but experienced extensive machine gun fire from the ground defences, the aircraft being hit several times. Shortly after taking photographs near Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue they were intercepted by three Bf 109s but were just able to climb into cloud before the enemy aircraft could close the range. On landing at Benson it was discovered that both cameras were unserviceable and no usable images had been taken.

An initial night sortie was performed on 23 November by Flt

Lt Mottram in Blenheim V6033. Tasked with covering Cherbourg, on a mission that lasted a little over three hours he dropped four flash bombs and took two exposures. After the first flash bomb exploded, intense but inaccurate flak was experienced. The pilot reported that searchlight activity was far more accurate and he was coned repeatedly. The results proved rather disappointing, the exposures being unusable.



Sadly, November also saw the first operational loss, when on the 24th Fg Off N. R. Peel failed to return from a sortie to the Normandy coast. He took off from Benson at 14.15hrs in Spitfire R6610, his objective to obtain low-level oblique line overlaps of the coast between Port-en-Bessin and Grandcamp-Maisy. Nothing further was heard of him. It has never been confirmed whether he was brought down by flak or an enemy fighter, though his body was recovered by the

Germans in the Grandcamp area. One possibility is that he was shot down by Oblt Bruno Stolle of 8./JG 2, who claimed a Spitfire at 16.49hrs German time. Although the location of the claim is unknown, 8./JG 2 was operating independently of the rest of III./JG 2 at this time and was based at Théville (Cherbourg/Maupertus) on this date, so would have been well-positioned to have made an interception.

Another loss occurred on 16 December. Fg Off C. A. P. Christie

was killed when his Spitfire, R7142, crashed near Corfe Castle en route to cover Lannion from high altitude. It is believed that he probably suffered oxygen failure and lost consciousness.

In order to extend the operational radius of the Type G Spitfires so that more of the Brittany coast could be photographed, sorties began to be flown from St Eval in Cornwall. Although No 1 PRU operated a detached flight there, the usual procedure for No 140 Squadron was to transit to St Eval to refuel and then fly on to the objective.

Such missions began on Christmas Day when Flt Lt Mottram made a 90-minute transit from Benson to St Eval. After refuelling his Spitfire he took off at 13.15hrs on a low-level tasking to Lannion. Half-way across the Channel the cloud layer broke up. While he continued in an attempt to try and regain cover, none was forthcoming. Mottram abandoned the sortie and returned direct to Benson. More successful was the effort on 1 January 1942 when Fg Off Gordon

Green took oblique photographs of the coast near Lannion at low level. He was engaged by ground defences but managed to make two runs over his objective. Green was a former member of 'A' Flight, No 1 PRU and a veteran of many photographic reconnaissance missions.

Fg Off C. E. Knowles had a chance encounter with an enemy bomber on 5 January. Assigned to cover the Dutch coast near IJmuiden, he flew to Coltishall to refuel, and about 15 minutes after crossing out from

FAR LEFT: Spitfire R7142/ZW-G crashed near Corfe Castle while en route to Lannion on 16 December 1941. The pilot, Fg Off C. A. P. Christie, was killed, the cause suspected to be oxygen failure.

N. WEBB

'Tasks generally consisted of requests for coverage of the enemy coastline, to build up a detailed picture of the defences'

BELOW: No 140 Squadron pilots in front of one of the unit's Spitfires at Benson, spring 1942. Fg Off Gordon Green stands at the far right. One of the squadron's Blenheims is visible in the background.

V. PETERSON



the East Anglian coast he sighted a Dornier Do 217 some distance away. The German aircraft immediately reversed course and jettisoned its bomb load. Knowles gave chase but after reducing the range to 1,000 yards the bomber managed to gain refuge in a hail squall and contact was lost. Knowles reached Holland and photographed his objective, as well as an enemy convoy off the Dutch coast while returning home.

The first Blenheim sortie since November 1941 was attempted on 28 January, a night mission to the Channel Islands. Fg Off J. C. Carriere was unable to cover his targets at Guernsey due to severe storm activity and flak, but succeeded in obtaining satisfactory images of Sark.

No 140 Squadron had quickly learned that the Blenheim was unsuitable for daylight reconnaissance, the type simply being too vulnerable to operate over contested enemy

airspace. However, one more daylight sortie was flown by a Blenheim on 19 February when Le Mesurier took V6033 to the west coast of the Cotentin peninsula. Cloud conditions proved suitable and he neared the enemy coast at sea level, rapidly climbing to 1,000ft near his objective, just below the cloudbase. He managed to take an oblique line overlap from Surville to Havre de Saint-Germain-sur-Ay before climbing back into cloud and returning home.



This proved to be the last daylight Blenheim sortie undertaken by 140 until August. The decision to develop night photography was pursued, though the technique was still very much experimental. It was found that photographs could be taken by releasing successive flash bombs carried on the light series bomb rack

of the Blenheim, a method that did not interfere with normal bomb stowage. Such was its potential that it was considered by the Air Staff that the results obtained could be repeated by any bomber or coastal aircraft which had the light series bomb carrier fitted. Such machines would be invaluable for covering some of the important targets, such as shipping in harbours and rolling stock at railheads, which up to that time had been photographed only by day.

The number of night Blenheim sorties gradually increased, peaking with six in June. The number of exposures taken was restricted by the limited quantity of flash bombs carried, but the procedure found to obtain the best results was to drop the flash bombs from about 8,000ft, with a single run over a target producing up to eight exposures. The type's final two operational missions on the unit, attempted on 13 and 15 August, were



in daylight but were abandoned short of the enemy coast due to insufficient cloud cover. The pilot on both occasions, Fg Off Carriere, deemed it unsafe to continue.

By the start of 1942 most of the squadron's old Spitfire I PR Type Gs had been replaced with or converted to the Spitfire V PR Type G, with a Merlin 45 engine instead of the Merlin III. It had also started to receive a few of the Spitfire V PR Type F model, which was unarmed but had a much greater range.

The rate of Spitfire operations began to increase from February and 140 started conducting sorties from its own dedicated flying programme. These tasks still originated from GOC-in-C Home Forces through Army Co-operation Command but came direct to the unit instead of from No 1 PRU.

The first mission of this kind occurred on 24 February, involving

Flt Lt Webb at the controls of Spitfire R7143. His objective was an RDF (radio direction-finding) station situated near Le Touquet, but — like so many of these low-level dicing sorties — insufficient cloud cover near the target caused him to return

to a member of No 140 Squadron, although it was in part a recognition of his earlier service with No 1 PRU.

Objectives continued to be spread along the coastline from Brittany to the Netherlands, with most concentrated in the area from the

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home without attempting to take any photographs.

The emphasis changed during March from low-level to high-level. April was the first month in which the squadron flew more than 100 Spitfire sorties, a pace that would be maintained throughout the summer. Fg Off Gordon Green was awarded the DFC, the first such decoration

Cotentin peninsula to the Pas-de-Calais. Covering the Dutch Frisian Islands on 11 April, Plt Off F. J. Blackwood was intercepted by enemy aircraft at 28,000ft shortly after completing his first run. Blackwood took evasive action and set course for home but was chased across the North Sea to within 50 miles of the English coast. No damage was caused to his aircraft.

Given taskings in the Cherbourg area, the same pilot had another lucky escape on 22 April. He was crossing the Channel at 23,500ft when his Spitfire started to produce contrails, so he attempted to climb above the layer, which he succeeded in doing at 37,000ft. At this altitude he approached the target area and was about to start his run when white smoke began to be emitted from his starboard exhaust and the engine temperature rose. He immediately turned back, suspecting a glycol leak. After a few minutes the engine seized and he started a long glide back across the Channel. Fortunately the height he had gained to get above the condensation layer enabled him to just about make it to the English coast. As it was, Blackwood had to put down in a field near Sandown on the Isle of Wight, in the process heavily damaging his machine (X4492), though he was unhurt.

A new establishment was received on 1 May 1942, increasing the number of personnel and adding two standard Spitfire Ia models as trainers and a Tiger Moth for communications. This brought the aircraft inventory up to six Spitfire PR Type Gs, two Spitfire PR Type Fs, two Spitfire Ias, six Blenheim IVs and one Tiger Moth. It led to a number of promotions with the CO, Eric Le Mesurier, being made an acting wing commander.

Soon the squadron began to move to Mount Farm, the satellite airfield to Benson, because of ongoing work on the construction of paved runways at the main base. ‘A’ and ‘B’ Flights completed their transfer on 4 May with no disruption to operations, six sorties to France being flown that day. The squadron headquarters flight followed on 20 May, though the maintenance flight and photographic section



LEFT: A Blenheim IV provides the backdrop to this group of No 140 Squadron aircrew at Benson circa April 1942. Senior officers seated in the front row (left to right, from fourth from left) are Flt Lt Ralph Mottram (OC 'A' Flight), Sqd Ldr Eric Le Mesurier (CO) and Flt Lt Sandy Webb (OC 'B' Flight). N. WEBB

stayed at Benson due to the limited facilities that were available at the satellite field. As the ranking officer, Le Mesurier became the station commander at Mount Farm in addition to continuing to command No 140 Squadron.

'Deeper penetration into enemy territory started to become more common with the Spitfire PRIV'

June got off to a bad start with two operational losses on the 2nd. Plt Off Blackwood's luck finally ran out when he failed to return from a sortie to the Cherbourg peninsula. He took off at 11.20hrs in Spitfire X4502, the last anyone saw of him. An intercepted German radio transmission claimed that a British fighter had been shot down a few miles west of Alderney at a time corresponding to when Blackwood would have been in the area. It seems he may have been the victim of Lt Ambrosius Passer of 9./JG 2 who claimed a Spitfire at 12.10hrs. The location is not known but 9./JG 2 was based at Théville, about 30 miles east of Alderney.

Later in the day, Plt Off C. K. Parkes got airborne in Spitfire AR234 to photograph targets at Le Havre, Limay and Saint-Valery-en-Caux. He failed to make it home. The last RDF plot of what was believed to be his aircraft was at 18.20hrs, 10 miles off Beachy Head. It is possible Parkes became mixed up in the Luftwaffe's efforts to interfere with Circus 182, which was targeting Dieppe at the

time. I./JG 2 claimed three Spitfires between 17.45 and 17.59hrs, the first being made by unit commander Oblt Erich Leie 20km (12.4 miles) south-south-east of Eastbourne at 6,000m (19,685ft).

The unit's initial Spitfire PRIV, AB122, was taken on charge on 22 June. More followed early in July, a combination of brand-new machines and older ones handed over by No 1 PRU. The variant's inaugural mission with No 140 Squadron took place on the morning of 13 July when Plt Off W. J. Dooley in AB122 obtained photographs east of Paris from 28,000ft.

A sortie to Paris by Plt Off C. D. Harris-St John in PRIV BP922 on 22 July included the use of a VHF radio. This was the first time the squadron had employed RT on a daylight Spitfire sortie, previous marks having had no radio installation to save weight.

In preparation for Operation 'Jubilee', the planned combined operation to temporarily seize the port of Dieppe, 140 — in conjunction with No 1 PRU — flew sorties over Dieppe during the whole planning period. In June alone it attempted to photograph the port no less than 14 times, succeeding in 11 instances, including two night sorties by Blenheims on the 17th and 20th.

Although more than 100 Spitfire sorties were again flown during July, Dieppe was only visited on five occasions. Just two of those managed to obtain photographs of the port, excessive cloud frustrating the others. August saw renewed efforts. Harris-St John flew right up the harbour entrance on 16 August, and over the docks at 400ft. He was greeted enthusiastically by the local flak

BELOW: Wg Cdr Le Mesurier shows Gen Sir B. C. T. Paget, GOC-in-C Home Forces, around the cockpit of a Spitfire.

V. PETERSON



gunners, who succeeded in putting a shell through his starboard wing. Although it exploded, it did not inflict critical damage. The pilot took violent evasive action and succeeded in crossing out over the cliffs, but not before firing a machine gun burst at an observation post on the heights. On landing back at Mount Farm Harris-St John's photographs revealed a tank in a concrete emplacement which had not been identified on previous images, a fact rapidly added to the latest details of the port's defences.

The last two sorties to Dieppe before Operation 'Jubilee' were flown on 17 August, both from high level. The first, in the hands of Plt Off R. L. Jones, succeeded in making seven runs over the target at 28,000ft. Four-and-a-half hours later, Plt Off L. G. Smith completed six runs from 30,000ft. Despite both pilots spending considerable time above the port, no opposition was encountered, either from flak or fighters.

Notwithstanding all the reconnaissance efforts in the lead-up, the actual operation itself on 19 August was a complete disaster. Practically none of the objectives were met and there was a casualty rate well in excess of 50 per cent among the Allied ground forces involved,



the German defenders simply being too strong and well-prepared. Even though 'Jubilee' was a failure, No 140 Squadron flew seven more sorties over Dieppe in the remainder of the month to assess the damage caused and to monitor any measures taken by the Germans post-attack.

As a whole, August 1942 proved a very busy month with 195 sorties being flown, a total that would not be exceeded until the summer of 1944. As well as all the trips to Dieppe and the other Channel ports in connection with Operation 'Jubilee', deeper penetrations into enemy territory became more common, the greater range of the PRIVs allowing them to be undertaken with less risk.

Plt Off F. N. Smallpage had a nasty surprise during a sortie to cover Argentan and Chartres on 5 September. As he approached Caen he observed a contrail above him to port, at about 36,000ft. The unidentified aircraft immediately dived to intercept, so he reversed course and headed for a layer of cloud below with the enemy machine giving chase. Just as he entered cloud there was a loud crack and a rush of air as the port canopy blister and surrounding Perspex disappeared. The enemy fighter was not seen again,



so Smallpage thought it prudent to return to base where he was able to land safely. Initially he thought his aircraft had been hit by a second, unseen, enemy fighter, but on inspection the separation of the blister from the canopy appeared to have been caused by structural failure.



The most distant target yet covered by No 140 Squadron was photographed on 8 September when Fg Off E. H. Brown visited Bordeaux. During a mission lasting just under four hours, he flew a continuous vertical line overlap from Caen to Angers and Bordeaux and back again at 30,000ft, his film running out just south of Caen on the return leg. Surprisingly for such a straight route

he experienced nothing in the form of enemy opposition.

The same could not be said for Plt Off Harris-St John's sortie to Saint-Vaast-la-Hougue and Barfleur on the 16th. After a couple of runs over Saint-Vaast at 31,000ft he turned for Barfleur and observed two Focke-Wulf Fw 190s just below him, climbing to intercept. He immediately turned into their attack but was hit by cannon and machine gun fire. Blinded by fuel streaming over his windscreen, he went into a spin, not regaining control until 15,000ft. His Spitfire, AB305, continued to perform normally and he made for England at full throttle. However, the German fighters soon caught up and Harris-St John was again forced to turn into their attack, though he could easily out-turn them and head for safety. Three more times

ABOVE: Calais from 23,000ft, captured on 24 January 1943. The pilot, Sgt Peter Brearley, experienced intense but inaccurate flak over the port.

P. BREARLEY

ABOVE LEFT: Le Havre from 27,000ft, as taken by Brearley's Spitfire on 11 January 1943. The task was typical of the work carried out by the squadron at this stage of the war.

P. BREARLEY



ABOVE: This Spitfire I PR Type G, coded ZW-J, is another example of an early No 140 Squadron aircraft. N. WEBB

the Germans caught up with him and each time the same manoeuvre was repeated. The last attack occurred about 30 miles off Beachy Head, at which point the Fw 190s broke off and Harris-St John was able to land back at Mount Farm.

Five Spitfires were detached to St Eval from 14 September so as to reduce the flying time to Brittany. The detachment was operational by the next day, three trips being flown, although two were unsuccessful due to cloud obscuring the targets. By the time the last such mission was flown on 24 October, St Eval had been the base for more than 60 sorties.

As the weather gradually deteriorated with the approach of winter, the level of operations decreased markedly. October's poor conditions prevented any operational flying at all from Mount Farm on 15 days. Out of 84 missions attempted, 24 were unsuccessful.

Even less flying was possible in November and December, but 8

10.30 but also noted enemy fighter patrols in the area. It seems highly likely he was brought down by 140's long-time nemesis, Jagdgeschwader 2. At 10.30, Uffz Heinz Schulze of 4./JG 2 claimed a Spitfire near Guernsey at a height of 8,000m (26,247ft), the very time R7116 would have been in the area. Amos managed to bale out of his stricken machine and drifted down on to the island, where he spent a few minutes talking to some of the locals before being captured by German soldiers. He spent the remainder of the war as a prisoner.



By the start of 1943, No 140 Squadron's aircraft were becoming obsolete. The Blenheims were relegated to non-operational training sorties around the British mainland while the Spitfire PRIVs and PRVIIs, as the Type Gs were now known, were becoming old and worn-out and were outclassed by the latest German fighters.

'From humble beginnings, No 140 Squadron had become the prime provider of aerial photographs for the Army'

November saw the squadron's first loss since June. Plt Off N. N. Amos RAAF took off from Mount Farm at 09.25hrs in Spitfire R7116, tasked with covering the Channel Islands from 30,000ft, but failed to return to base. Fighter Command reported his last position as just south of Jersey at

The War Office requested in February that 140 be re-equipped with the Spitfire PRXI, which was just becoming operational with other photographic reconnaissance squadrons. However, the new machines were in such demand both at home and abroad that the request

was deemed by the Air Ministry to be a relatively low priority.

As a stopgap until the Spitfire PRXI was available in greater quantity, the North American Mustang I was considered to supplement the older Spitfires. It was already in widespread use among Army Co-operation Command's tactical reconnaissance squadrons but was not considered suitable for the high-altitude photographic reconnaissance role. 140 received a number of Mustangs that February and trial sorties were flown while the type's performance was evaluated. It quickly became evident that the Allison V-1710-powered machine was unsuitable for the work the squadron was conducting and no operational missions were attempted with it.

Normal operations continued at a low rate due to the weather. The end of February saw a number of non-operational taskings in preparation for Exercise 'Spartan', the upcoming Army manoeuvres. 'Spartan' was planned to test the organisation of the forces intended to take part in an invasion of the European mainland and involved a considerable number of ground and air units. As part of Army Co-operation Command, No 140 Squadron was heavily involved. From 1-12 March it flew 101 sorties, 92 in Spitfires and nine in Blenheims, the busiest day being 9 March when 15 took place.

Once Exercise 'Spartan' was out of the way, 140 was immediately informed that it would be relocating to Hartford Bridge (later renamed Blackbushe). The last three operational sorties from Mount Farm were flown on 14 March, but even before the whole squadron had made the move — completed two days later — 140's debut operation over enemy territory from the base took place when Fg Off Smallpage attempted on the 15th to photograph Le Havre and Fécamp. A layer of stratus over the target area prevented him from covering his objectives.

The unit began to receive the Lockheed Ventura I that month. It was planned that the Ventura would replace the Blenheim IV in the night photographic reconnaissance role, though the Blenheims had not been used operationally since the previous summer.

Of more than 130 operational Spitfire sorties flown in April, the majority were successful. This was the first time since September 1942 that the 100 mark had been exceeded. There was a change in command with the departure of the popular and experienced Le Mesurier after 25 months in charge, his last active mission with the unit being flown on the 5th when he photographed Le Touquet from 28,000ft. His place was taken by his long-term deputy Sandy Webb.

It became apparent through April and May that the enemy was intensifying its efforts to intercept reconnaissance aircraft, though thanks to hostile aircraft warnings received from Fighter Command suitable avoiding action could be taken and actual interceptions were kept to a minimum. Returning home after successfully photographing Soissons on 13 May, Sgt P. Brearley observed nine Fw 190s 4,000ft below him over Le Havre. He was not intercepted but this was a rare instance where no warning message came in.

For May as a whole, 123 operational sorties were flown with only 18 failing to obtain any photographs. Most of the unsuccessful ones were caused by enemy activity, pilots aborting their missions after getting a hostile aircraft warning by radio.

Army Co-operation Command was disbanded on 1 June 1943 and many of its constituent units transferred to

a newly formed organisation within Fighter Command, known at this time as the Tactical Air Force (TAF). The idea was that the TAF would meet all the air support requirements for the 21st Army Group, the British Commonwealth component of the force earmarked for the planned invasion of north-west Europe.

With the demise of Army Co-operation Command, No 34 (Army Co-operation) Wing moved over to the new organisation. It was re-designated No 34 (Photographic Reconnaissance) Wing and was directly subordinate to HQ TAF. No 140 Squadron remained a part of it. Operationally it made no difference to the unit's day-to-day activities — it received its tasking from HQ TAF dependent on the demands of HQ 21st Army Group, itself recently formed from GHQ Home Forces, and continued to fly sorties concerned with obtaining information on German defences

and transport infrastructure in the projected battle area. It was obvious that all the photographic requirements of the invasion force could not be met by 140 alone, and it would soon be joined within No 34 Wing by No 16 Squadron.

Thus ended the initial phase of No 140 Squadron's history, its time in Army Co-operation Command. From its humble beginnings in 1941 the unit had developed into the prime provider of aerial photographs for the Army, it being the only photographic reconnaissance asset dedicated to fulfil demands for aerial intelligence direct from the War Office. In a little over two years the squadron had flown more than 1,500 operational sorties and obtained many vitally important photographs. With its move to the Tactical Air Force, 140 carried on its crucial work and would continue to faithfully execute its role as the Army's aerial spies.

BELOW: Pilots from No 140 Squadron with a Spitfire PRIV at Hartford Bridge during 1943.

V. PETERSON

