



D·DAY 80



RAF Old Sarum in 1944

June 2024

MORE INFO AT:
boscombedownaviationcollection.co.uk

The Air Observation Post 1944: D-Day, Normandy and the Big One

By Peter Hope



Background

Before the establishment of the modern Army Air Corps, airborne observation of artillery fire was the responsibility of the Air Observation Post (AOP) squadrons. These were RAF units commanded by Royal Artillery majors and were established to fly 12 Auster light aircraft, flown by Royal Artillery captains, who also directed the fire of the guns. The aircraft were supplied and maintained by the RAF. Most of the squadrons were formed at Old Sarum during the war and from there went on to serve in North Africa, Italy, North West Europe, India and Burma. Of these operations the most important was the North West Europe campaign starting with D-Day, 80 years ago

Planning

Such was the success of the Air Observation Post (AOP) during exercises in Britain, the invasions of North Africa, Sicily and Italy that the planners for the invasion of Normandy put a high priority on airborne observation of artillery. The first idea was to launch the Auster aircraft from an aircraft carrier and this was practiced using HMS Argus and HMS Ravager and the 16-inch guns of HMS Rodney. This worked well as the wind over the deck and the speed of the ship meant that landings were almost vertical. However, in the end no aircraft carriers were allocated to the fleet off Normandy.

The next idea was to land a recce party on D-Day, find a suitable Air Landing Ground (ALG) and fly the aircraft over 60 miles of sea to the selected field. 652 Squadron had the honour of being the lead squadron. Three possible ALGs were selected from vertical photographs of the area around Sword Beach

Deployment

Captains Ian Neilson and Alan Keen with four drivers, signalers and RAF technicians together with one three tonner with fuel and spares and a motor cycle were embarked on a Landing Craft (Tank) on 4th June 1944. One RAF technician was LAC David Woodrow, who will be 100 years old on 21st May this year. They set off during the evening of the 5th and they landed on Sword beach at 4 pm on 6th June. Ian Neilson then set off on his motor bike to see the proposed ALGs. The first two were no good but the third at Plumetot was satisfactory being largely clear of obstructions and shielded by the Perier Ridge from enemy observation. A message was sent back to HQRA 3 (BR) Division, under whose command they operated and the squadron in England was alerted. D plus one was spent clearing the ALG and by the end of the day it was fully useable.

Place	Date	Time	Summary of Events	SECRET.
OLD SARUM.	1944.			
	SEPT.	1.	A/Cdr. SUTTON-JONES, S.E.O. of Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Air Force, visited.	
		5.	Station Command (1/2/1944) visited the station and the station was found to be unsuitable for the purpose.	
			G/Capt. DONKIN posted (supernumerary) to R.A.F. School of Army Co-operation.	
		10.	No. 1010 Squadron, Air Training Corps visited the Station and a prearranged programme was carried out which included flying, visits to the Camouflage School and Browning Gun Rifle Range, Armament Instruction and Web Equipment Assembly.	

Operations

At 8.15 in the morning of D plus 2 the first 5 Auster Mk IVs safely arrived having set off from Selsey. They were escorted by a Supermarine Walrus of the Fleet Air Arm to provide navigation and to discourage the fleet from firing at them. That afternoon Ian Neilson made the first sortie, having alerted the local light anti-aircraft regiment (commanded by Lt Col Charles Bazely DSO, formerly CO of 651 Squadron, the first squadron to engage the enemy during operations in North Africa). Flying continued both engaging targets and providing photographic coverage. The AOP build up continued with 662 Squadron arriving on 8th, 659 on 13th, 658 on 18th and 653 on 27th June. 660 and 661 Squadrons arrived early in July, making a total of seven squadrons, one per corps and one at Army level to support the AGRAs, a total of 84 aircraft. They were later joined by three Canadian squadrons and 657 Squadron transferred from Italy. They arrived in Holland early in 1945.

The Big One

On 17th July Major Andrew Lyell, CO 658 Squadron took off at 4.00pm to look at the village of St Martin because it was obvious that a counter attack could be launched from there down to the open country to the west in the neighbourhood of the road that runs from St Martin to Esquay. Visibility was poor and there was no sign of the enemy. Things were different in nearby Maltot, just behind the front line, which was heavily defended by anti-aircraft guns. Then clouds of dust appeared near St Martin and the bushes he had seen earlier seem to have moved. He reported this to HQRA 12 Corps who allocated him 4 rounds gunfire from the artillery of 12th, 30th and 2nd Canadian Corps, some five, or six hundred guns of field, medium and heavy artillery. This is probably the largest concentration of artillery ever controlled by one man. The whole of St Martin and the woods nearby disappeared in an enormous cloud of smoke and dust. He then moved the concentration 400 yards to the West and ordered a repeat. It was subsequently estimated that some 40 tanks were there.



Results

How effective was the AOP? Sir Max Hastings in his fine book “Overlord” and other modern historians of the campaign say little about the AOP but the commander of the German 10th SS Panzer Division in his Lessons from the Normandy Front said “The greatest nuisance of all are the slow flying artillery spotters which work with utter calmness over our positions , just out of reach, and direct artillery fire on our forward positions”. The Air OP continued to provide close support, counter battery fire as well as photographic coverage and liaison flying for the rest of the campaign and the remainder of the war, during which 67 Gunner pilots were killed and 128 were decorated.

Sources:

Unarmed into Battle by HJ Parham and EMG Belfield, Picton Publishing 1986, Memoirs of an Air Observation Officer by A Lyell, Picton Publishing 1985, The Air Observation Post by HC Bazeley, published privately, Air OP Action Remembered by



Operations by the Photograph Reconnaissance Units

To find out more about activity at old Sarum Airfield visit the Boscombe Down Aviation Collection and speak to one of their volunteers, to uncover a wealth of information of the history of aviation and insights into activity around the airfield in the first and second world wars

www.boscombedownaviationcollection.co.uk



D-DAY 80

