

**FAIRFORD HISTORY**



**SOCIETY**

# Royal Air Force Fairford 1944

## A Most Momentous Year

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**Fairford History Society Monograph 2**

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## **Royal Air Force Fairford - 1944: A Momentous Year**

**Transcript of a lecture given by Brian E Routledge to the Fairford History Society on  
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Royal Air Force Fairford, a typical type 'A' airfield, opened in January 1944. It was one of nearly 500 airfields built between 1934 and 1944 which, apart from the building of the railways in the 19th Century, was the largest civil engineering project ever undertaken in the UK.

These airfields were built for a variety of uses which, to a large extent, was influenced by their geographical location:

- Bomber bases on the eastern side of the country.
- Fighter bases in the south and around large population conurbations.
- Training bases in more rural areas.
- Transport bases in south and central England.

Fairford was one of the last category, being built to support the anticipated invasion of northern France. Also it was one of a number of airfields built in this area some of which will be mentioned later. It was originally earmarked for USAAF use but was taken over by the RAF under the control of 38 Group, RAF Transport Command.

### **Early Days**

Building work commenced in May 1943 and an 'opening up party', commanded by Squadron Leader R G Taylor arrived at RAF Southrop on 17 January 1944. The party also consisted of one Flight Sergeant and 17 Other Ranks (OR). They were billeted overnight at Southrop and proceeded to Fairford the following day to take over buildings 'as and when they were ready'.

The comment above is copied from the Station Log for the period and it must be assumed that the airfield was still a building site. In fact very few buildings were habitable, the exception being the Airman's Mess so at least the opening up party could be fed.

The buildings were a mix of concrete (Maycrete) and brick single story buildings, Nissen and Rhomney huts in the domestic and technical sites with two Type T2 hangars

on the site of the present hangars.



**Fig 1 Typical Maycrete building**



**Fig 2 Nissen Hut (Rhomney Hut similar)**



### **Fig 3 Type T2 Hangar**

There was a problem with the water supply, which did not function properly and this was a recurring problem over the next few months.

Further personnel arrived on 19 January and contact was made with the railway authorities and the local bus company to provide extra transport services to the local area.

In the following weeks more buildings were completed and equipment arrived in the form of barrack stores (beds, blankets, sheets, wardrobes etc) and ground support equipment. It was also discovered that no latrine accommodation had been provided for WAAFs in the Officers', Sergeants' and Airmen's Messes. These then had to be built or existing buildings modified. Similarly, no WAAF Officers' sleeping accommodation had been provided on the WAAF site and again, buildings had to be modified. Bear in mind that the young ladies who served in the WAAF had to have their morals protected and men were not permitted to enter WAAF accommodation on any account.

As we enter February, there was still a problem with the main drinking water supply and a temporary supply was connected. However, this supply also became undrinkable owing to the presence of 'suspended matter' and a 350 gallon water bowser was despatched from Lechlade.

More buildings were now being completed and manpower increased accordingly and by the end of the month there were approximately 200 personnel stationed here. The NAAFI opened on 2 March with a full service and on the 4th the following entry was made in the Log: 'The WAAF personnel, having arrived the previous month, are now settling down well despite the trying conditions i.e. the lack of electric light and rationed drinking water. The local village people are very co-operative in general welfare and billeting.' It is quite interesting that some entries in the log go into great detail whilst others as on 5 March state 'nothing of interest to report'.

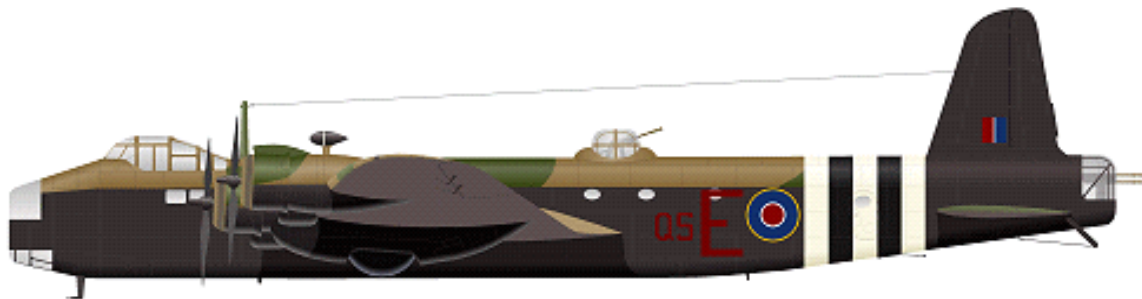
#### **Operational**

On 18 March No. 620 Squadron arrived complete from RAF Leicester East. One party arrived by aircraft and glider, another by rail and a third by motor transport (MT). They started air testing and local flying on the 21st and on the following day carried out glider formation flying. Also on this day (22nd) an advance party from No. 190 Squadron arrived. The aircrews were a mix of Officers and SNCOs not only from the UK but also from Australia, Canada and New Zealand.

On 25 March, the main party from 190 Squadron arrived consisting of an air party towing fully laden gliders and a rail party. Throughout the rest of March both

squadrons carried out glider towing exercises both cross-country and local.

A flying squadron in the RAF is the final link; the top of the pyramid if you like. All the other functioning parts of a flying station support them to keep the aircraft serviceable and the crews fit. A Squadron consists of three major elements; the aircrew, the ground crew with a small administrative staff, and of course their aircraft. Both of Fairford's squadrons flew the Short Stirling Mark IV a modified version of the RAF's first 4-engined bomber. Designed to fulfil a 1936 but outdated specification, it entered service with RAF Bomber Command in July 1940. However they did not carry out their first raid until February 1941. They were not a great success as a bomber and were soon superseded in this role by Lancaster and Halifax aircraft. In March 1943, a decision was taken to continue with Stirling production but only as glider-tug and paratroop transport of which large numbers were needed for the planned invasion of northern France. This version of the aircraft had a crew of 7 who were augmented by air-despatchers when used in the paratroop and air supply roles. From the records each squadron had 25 aircraft on charge.



**Fig 4 Short Stirling Mk IV in 620 Squadron markings**



### Fig 5 Paratroops in a Stirling

As glider tugs the Stirlings were to tow into action the Airspeed Horsa Mk 2 Air Assault Glider. This glider had a crew of 2 and could carry 25 fully equipped troops. It was of wooden construction and of the more than 3,500 production aircraft, Harris Lebus, the furniture manufacturers, made approximately 2,500. The Horsa must have been one of the most wooden aircraft ever built. In fact the only metal parts were sections of the undercarriage and some flying control cables and pulleys. Their method of operation was to be towed to within a few miles of the landing zone (LZ) before being released at about 1,000 feet, making a fairly rapid descent and landing as soon as possible to lessen the chance of damage due to anti-aircraft or ground fire.



Fig 6 Airspeed Horsa Mk 2 air assault glider



### **Fig 6 Stirling towing a Horsa glider**

While the Stirlings were flown by RAF aircrew, the gliders were flown by members of the Glider Pilot Regiment which was an Army unit manned mainly by SNCO pilots who had volunteered for this duty.

As previously mentioned, there were two pilots per glider and **Fig 7** shows a fully kitted out pilot including his rifle. The glider pilots were expected to fight with the units they had landed until they were relieved of this duty or in some cases killed or wounded or captured by enemy forces.



**Fig 7 Fully equipped Glider Pilot standing by a Horsa**

As we enter April, tasking on the squadrons was increased. Not only were they training and working up for D-Day, they were also supporting Special Operations Executive (SOE) operations. The SOE was a British Secret Service intended to promote "subversive warfare in enemy occupied territory", and prior to the Normandy landings, the squadrons supported the French Resistance Movement, supplying the fighters with weapons, explosives and other equipment as well as dropping agents into occupied territory. These support operations were not without danger and on 12 April a Stirling was reported missing. Also on the 12th a Stirling crashed during glider towing training and on the 13th another Stirling crashed near Blackford Farm near Kempford, killing five crew members.

Despite these casualties, training and operations continued and on 18 April a total of 18 aircraft took part in Operation POSH with the aim of dropping troops of the 1st Polish

Parachute Brigade in daylight. The operation was considered successful.

Stirlings were not the only casualties during April, as on both the 18th and the 27th Horsa gliders crashed, one into the control tower, and all four pilots were killed. However major exercises continued when 30 gliders made landings on Brize Norton airfield, not only carrying troops but also jeeps and 6-pounder guns.

The station log at this time is not completely devoted to the work-up to D-Day, as on 19 April Pilot Officer Williams was appointed Gardening Officer to oversee the project for station gardens to be put into motion when initially five acres of land were ploughed and 17 tons of seed potatoes planted. The intention was to have a supply of fresh vegetables for the station, with any surplus going to the Home Front.

All through April and into May, glider and parachuting exercises continued to increase and it was apparent to all station personnel that the invasion of France was imminent. Glider training involved landing by day and night and was mostly successful. However, during Operation EXETER on the 19th May, two Stirlings collided over the tow rope dropping zone and crashed near Kempsford. Tragically, both aircrews were killed.

It is not surprising that these two aircraft collided and crashed, as aircraft activity in the area must have been intense. Beside Fairford, there were airfields at Blakehill Farm (south of Cricklade), Down Ampney and Broadwell, all operating Dakotas and gliders, and Brize Norton operating a variety of aircraft and glider types. Also there were smaller stations at South Cerney, Southrop, Bibury and Windrush, all operating training aircraft. Therefore air space would have been at a premium.

The whole station was now working up to D-Day, and on 22 May a station exercise was held to train crews and ground staff in the speedy and efficient co-ordination of maintaining two squadrons of aircraft in the air, firstly for paratroop dropping and secondly for gliders, to ensure a quick turn around. The exercise involved 44 Stirlings and then 44 Stirling/Horsa combinations, and although they were not aware, this is what happened on D-Day.

It might be worth talking about the strain on all station personnel. Not only were the aircraft taking part in an intense exercise programme, they were also still supporting the SOE tasking. Most of the exercise flying was carried out both day and night, with night time take offs at dusk and then landings in the early hours of the morning for SOE operations. The ground crews would then have to prepare the aircraft for operations during the day, for example repairing any damage caused by anti-aircraft fire. Cooks would have to feed duty personnel, the operations staff, probably mostly WAAFs, would stay awake until all the aircraft had landed and then they would have to prepared details for the following day's flying programme. The police would be



mounting a constant vigil to prevent prying eyes seeing too much.

On 28 May Exercise KINGO was held to train crews in evasion tactics and to give detachments of the Home Guard and the local constabulary realistic training in searching for and apprehending paratroops. Of the 72 members of 620 Squadron who were dropped, 34 evaded capture.

### **Operations TONGA and MALLARD**

It was obvious that the invasion was fast approaching, as at 1400 hours on 2 June the station was sealed and all personnel confined to camp, including civilians who were working on that particular day. Or could it be that a Gang Show was being held that evening and they wanted a captive audience! Also, the evening before the station was sealed, the first battle of Normandy took place in the Market Square in Fairford, when a number of British airborne troops had a fight with some American forces.

On 4 June Air Chief Marshal Sir Trafford Leigh Mallory visited Fairford to address all aircrew. He was the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Expeditionary Air Force involved in the Normandy landings. This was a morale boosting visit the day before the planned operation but, as we now know, the landings were delayed for 24 hours due to bad weather.

The station log entry for 6 June 1944 states "Operation TONGA was carried out with the intention of dropping paratroops of 6th Airborne Division, who were to secure and hold bridges over the River Orne and to secure a firm base east of the river. 45 Stirlings from 190 and 620 Squadrons were detailed to carry 887 troops to the DZ. All aircraft took off between 23:33 and 23:52 and 42 aircraft dropped their loads, totalling 830 men, as ordered."

Three aircraft from 620 Squadron failed to return. Of these, two were lost in the tragic circumstances now described. The aircraft, EJ116 and EF295, were shot down close to Grangues Chateau. They had taken off at about 2340 hours on the 5th. The first aircraft carried 14 men of the 7th Parachute Battalion and 5 men from the 6th Airborne Reconnaissance Regiment. The Paras were to secure the area around the River Orne and Caen Canal bridges and the Recce Regiment to find and secure a tank harbouring area. The second aircraft was flown by a Canadian pilot Squadron Leader W R Pettit and it carried Sappers from the Royal Engineers who were detailed to clear the glider landing strips on the LZ of obstruction poles. The Sappers were carrying bicycle inner tubes filled with plastic explosives for this task. The two Stirlings made the wrong landfall and EJ 116 was hit by flak and crashed in a field about 400 metres from the Chateau. All six aircrew and the 19 paratroopers were killed. EF 295 was approaching the coast and her parachutists had received the instruction 'Running in' when one of the explosive inner tubes was hit by tracer and there was a blinding flash inside the cabin. Her engines were also hit. Four men were able to jump, one of whom landed in a field

next to the light anti-aircraft battery that had hit his aircraft and he spent the next 20 hours in hiding.

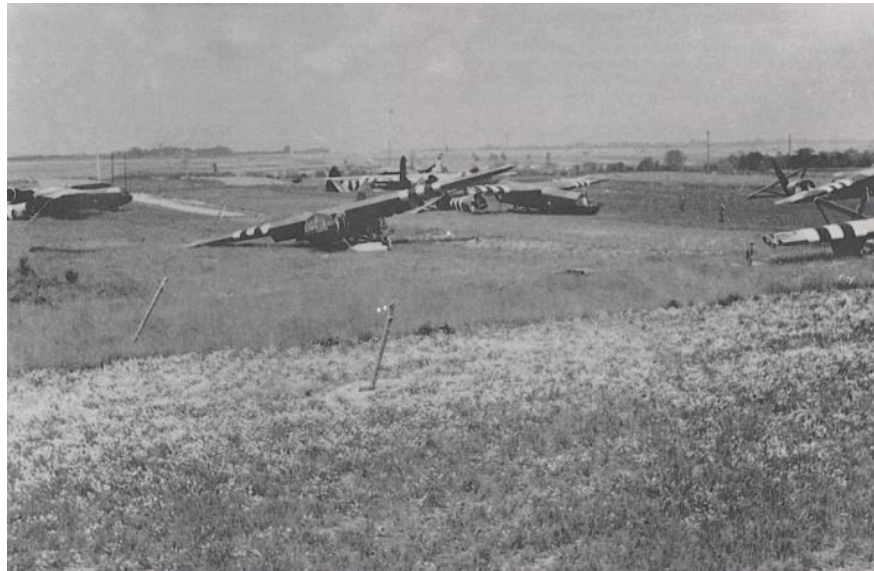
As the aircraft crash-landed and ploughed on for more than 100 metres, the four aircrew in the nose and four Paras were killed, most of the other occupants were badly injured. The aircraft ground to a halt about 500 metres from the Chateau, which was occupied by German troops, who were soon on the scene. The Germans rounded up the survivors and took them to a stable block where some basic first aid was permitted for the injured. In the early hours of the 6th, a Horsa Glider crashed into the grounds of the Chateau which carried a party from 6th Airborne Division HQ. The co-pilot and a Captain Max were both killed and the remainder including the pilot, Staff Sergeant D Wright were taken prisoner. Evidence from a Red Cross worker in the Chateau suggests that Staff Sergeant Wright and seven of the Sapper survivors from EF 295 were shot. She was told that there had been an attempted break-out and was shown the spot where the men were killed. The men were buried in a trench and finally identified by a British medical team in 1945.

Of the aircraft that returned, 27 were unserviceable, either through mechanical faults or damage caused by enemy action. Of these 25 were ready for operations by 1800 hours on 6th June. This brings great credit to and shows the dedication of the ground crews.

The aircraft were needed for Operation MALLARD, the intention of which was to land units of 6 Air Landing Brigade near Ranville to support and reinforce the troops landed in Operation TONGA. 36 Stirling/Horsa combinations were airborne between 1910 and 2001, carrying 33 jeeps, 29 trailers, 8 x 75mm guns and 254 troops. Thirty-five gliders were safely landed. One glider ditched in the Channel due to the tow rope breaking but the personnel on board were rescued. One Stirling crashed near Lion-sur-Mer but all the crew returned after three days during which they "experienced a succession of adventures".



**Fig 8 Glider Pilots waving off their colleagues during Operation MALLARD**



**Fig 9 Horsa gliders on the LZ at Ranville, Normandy**

### **Back to Normal**

On 7 June the confinement to camp was lifted and on the 9th the glider pilots returned, having sustained light casualties with only one fatality. Also on the 9th two glider pilots were killed when a Stirling crashed into a stationary glider. So probably, having survived D-Day, they died in a tragic accident.

After all the excitement and tension of D-Day, both squadrons were soon back supporting SOE operations and also carrying out re-supply to the Normandy landing zones. These operations continued for the rest of June and the station log concentrates on these missions with very little details of any other station activities. The SOE operations were flown during the hours of darkness, but during the day a number of glider towing and cross-country flying exercises were held. Because of the time of year, the night time operations in support of the SOE meant late evening take offs and by precise navigation the location of a radio beacon or DZ and then delivery of the load. The French resistance was still very active, blowing up bridges, destroying the railway lines being used to bring German reinforcements to Normandy, and attacking military convoys.

On 10 June the Secretary of State for air visited Fairford and took tea in the Officers' Mess whilst the rest of the station was watching Hygiene Films which were shown at eight separate sittings. As an ex-member of the RAF I vaguely remember these films being shown when you were posted abroad. They highlighted the dangers of 'liaising' with the local female, and in some cases male, population. I have no further comment

to make on this!

As we come to the end of the momentous month of June, there are a number of general comments in the Station Log as follows:

<b>Total Aircraft Take-offs</b>	794 by day, 217 by night Total 1011
<b>Total Aircraft Landings</b>	824 by day, 188 by night Total 1112
<b>Glider Take-offs</b>	217 by day, 97 by night Total 314
<b>Glider Landings</b>	236 by day, 105 by night Total 341

Seven aircraft made emergency landings, all at night whilst returning from missions.

Station activities: Gardening was continued and a large number of tomato plants were planted out in various plots. As yet no crops have been gathered, but a further 6 acres of ground was prepared for July sowings and plantings.

The Station Library was well patronised and discussion groups were held every Tuesday. Also progress continued to be made on building the stage in the camp theatre.

**The strength of the unit at 23.59 on 30 June 44 was:**

	RAF	WAAF	Glider Pilot Regt
Officers	177	8	15
OR	1963	241	199

July started with appalling weather with rain and bad visibility reducing flying activity. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> station personnel were warned not to disclose or write to any unauthorised person the results of any damage caused by flying bombs together with any information concerning measures proposed or taken to counter these attacks. Also on the 2<sup>nd</sup> the station Post Office opened.

On 3 July 190 Squadron sent two Stirlings on SAS operations and dropped 42 containers successfully on the DZ. This is the first reference to the SAS in the Station Log as the

Brigade had established bases well behind the Germans in France from which they attacked lines of communications and relayed intelligence. Also on the 3rd the station high frequency direction finder homed a Stirling from 190 Squadron from out over the English Channel when in distress and lost.

SAS and SOE operations continued throughout July and the number of aircraft despatched reflected growing activity behind the German lines. It was unusual to send less than 10 aircraft on operations each night and sometimes as many as 15. On the night of the 22nd a Stirling was lost from 190 Squadron and one from 620.

On the 22nd RAF Fairford Dramatic Society held its first reading of the 'Housemaster' and on the 28th the Officers' Mess Dance was held. One comment has often been made about the attitude and relative safety of the RAF personnel based on operational stations, whilst the aircrews had one of the most dangerous and stressful jobs of the war, those working on the ground had one of the safest. No doubt the local hostelrys in Fairford, Kempsford and Whelford were well frequented by both air and ground personnel as there were buses to Cirencester and Swindon and trains to Oxford and then to the rest of the UK.

Despite all the operational activity, three further acres of land were cultivated during the month and 15,000 assorted plants including sprouts, broccoli, cabbages, etc were planted.

On the last day of July the log relates that an Oxford aircraft from RAF South Cerney crashed near Lechlade; a sad note to end the month on.

As we enter August operational missions in support of Special Forces continued throughout the month. On the 3rd 10 aircraft set out on SAS supply drops and a German Junkers 88 night fighter attacked one aircraft from 190 Squadron. The Stirling fired back and scored several hits on the enemy aircraft before it broke off its attack. On the 4th a Stirling flown by a New Zealander, Pilot Officer Robertson was hit by flak near Lisle and was seen to crash; there were no survivors.

On a number of nights when Special Forces drops were to be made, the Log states that there was no reception from either beacon or ground signal and the affected aircraft returned with their loads. Sometimes this was due to bad weather but in other cases it can only be assumed that the ground receiving parties either couldn't make the rendezvous or had been intercepted by enemy forces. During the month the Fairford squadrons flew 394 missions.

Other incidents included one Stirling ditching in the Channel with the crew being rescued by RAF Air/Sea rescue launch after taking to their dinghies. Another aircraft was lost on the 23rd and it can be seen that there was a steady attrition on both aircraft

and crews which must have had a sobering effect on the entire station.

However there was some light relief as the Station Theatre hosted its first stage show when 'Take-Off' was presented by Flight Sergeant Cooper. I don't think it was Tommy, but who knows! ENSA Concerts 'Out of the Blue' and 'Hello Beautiful' were performed and various films shown. On the 16th the camp was 'sealed' as the public telephones were put out of action and they were not repaired until the 19th when the station was 'unsealed'. Dances were now also being held accompanied by the Station Dance Band.

September came and operations supporting the SAS and SOE were increased with 36 aircraft flying on the 1<sup>st</sup> of the month. Of these only 13 aircraft completed their missions, the rest being unsuccessful due to deteriorating weather (10/10<sup>ths</sup> cloud). Two of the successful aircraft succeeded in dropping 26 SAS Troopers and their equipment. Also on the 1<sup>st</sup>, another ENSA Concert Party put on the review 'Stage Show' in the Station Theatre.

### **Operation MARKET GARDEN**

On 2 September the Station was again sealed with no indication as to why. We know now that this was to prepare for Operation MARKET GARDEN; the airborne assault on Arnhem. However Special Forces support operations were still being flown and with increased frequency. Now it was not unusual for between 25 and 30 aircraft to be operating nightly. It must have been obvious that a major mission was planned for the Station as glider training also increased.

But, normal life must go on as on the 5th the County Rat Officer (Mr Barton) visited the Station in connection with the extermination of vermin. Also rehearsals for the new Station Show 'Slip Stream' were held in the Camp Theatre.

And so to Arnhem. Fairford's aircraft and gliders were to have an important role in the operation from the start as they were detailed to be the first over Arnhem. Six aircraft from each squadron were to carry paratroop pathfinders whose job was to mark the DZs and LZs for the main landing. These aircraft were to be closely followed by 36 Stirling/Horsa combinations from Fairford that were to take off on the evening of the 17th. The pathfinder aircraft found the target and dropped their troops successfully. The pathfinder troops then had 30 minutes to complete their tasks as shortly after all the initial aircraft had departed the LZ the gliders were due to land. Of the 36 gliders planned, 31 were landed successfully (five gliders had to be cast off due to problems with tow-ropes). Once all the aircraft and gliders were launched, there was little the ground crews could do so they attended a dance in the NAAFI until the aircraft returned to base.



**Fig 10 Aircraft being prepared for Operation MARKET GARDEN**



**Fig 11 Paratroops waiting to embark in Stirling aircraft**

The next lift took place on the following day (18 September) when 33 combinations were launched of which 27 Horsas landed on the LZ. A re-supply mission was mounted on the 19th to drop supplies to the troops in the bridgehead. The day did not start well as one Stirling swung on take-off and crashed leaving 33 aircraft to attempt to deliver their loads. Although no enemy aircraft attempted to interfere with the Stirling formations, anti-aircraft fire (flak) from the ground on the run-in to the DZs was intense. Two aircraft from 190 Squadron were shot down before they could get close with fatalities to both aircrew and despatchers. Despite the heavy opposition, the remaining aircraft dropped their containers and panniers directly onto the DZ. It is

worth noting that during paratroop dropping or re-supply operations, the aircraft had to fly at low altitude, straight and level and at a low speed making the aircraft extremely vulnerable during this phase of the flight.



**Fig 12 Horsa Glider landing at the Arnhem LZ**

Fairford aircraft returned to the bridgehead on the 20th and again suffered casualties due to heavy flak. They were hit both on the run-in and to the east of the bridgehead as they turned for home. On this day many aircraft were damaged and three were brought down over the DZ. A further two aircraft were so badly damaged that they crash-landed while attempting to return to Fairford.

The squadrons went once again on the 21st and it was then that they suffered their heaviest losses. They now had a total of only 21 aircraft available for operations and these left Fairford with panniers and containers of supplies of ammunition and food for the besieged paratroops. Although a large number of panniers and containers were delivered on to the DZ this came at a high price in both aircraft and men. Nine aircraft (seven from 190 and two from 620) failed to return. Again, some were hit by flak but most were shot down by German fighters some distance from Arnhem. From 190 Squadron, 24 aircrew and six RASC despatchers were killed including the Squadron Commander, Wing Commander Harrison.





**Fig 13 RASC despatchers in action over Arnhem**

Although detailed for another re-supply mission on the 22nd, this was cancelled due to bad weather. However on the 23rd, they were again airborne but this time with a fighter escort. The squadrons had few serviceable aircraft and only 17 were available. Even so they delivered their loads to the DZ but again many were hit by flak and one aircraft flown by the Commanding Officer of 620 Squadron, Wing Commander Lee was lost. Fortunately he and his crew survived the crash landing, evaded capture and returned to base shortly afterwards. The final MARKET GARDEN operation took place the following day when five aircraft from 620 Squadron took off for the DZ. Of these four found their way to Arnhem but only one delivered its load.

Operation MARKET GARDEN was mounted at great cost to the Allied forces, especially the Parachute Regiment and the RAF. The strength of the Stirling Force in 38 Group at the commencement was 112 aircraft in six squadrons. During the six days of MARKET GARDEN they lost 69 of their aircraft. Of the Fairford units, 190 Squadron flew 98 sorties and suffered the heaviest losses. Twelve aircraft crashed, 39 aircrew and 12 despatchers were killed with a further 15 aircrew captured. 620 Squadron lost five aircraft during 104 sorties, eight aircrew and seven despatchers were killed and seven aircrew captured.

Despite the heavy mauling the Fairford squadrons had received during the Arnhem operations they continued with SOE and SAS re-supply missions with the few serviceable aircraft available. These continued until the end of the month and that is where my copy of the Station Log runs out. It is worth pointing out that during the early autumn Fairford was extremely busy with a total of 1,761 aircraft movements (take-offs and landings) by day and night, mostly due to operational requirements.

The final entry in the Log for 29 September states that there were no operations but the following congratulatory message was received from Air Vice Marshal L N Hollingsworth, Air-Officer-Commanding 38 Group:

“Now that MARKET GARDEN is over I wish to congratulate all aircrew and maintenance personnel on their magnificent work. On all sides I hear nothing but praise for the impeccable manner in which the glider operations were carried out by 38 and 46 Groups and for the cool courage and determination displayed on subsequent days. Although the military aim was not wholly obtained, we can console ourselves with the fact that the verdict of history will be that this operation was worthwhile. The high endeavour shown in your efforts to assist our gallant friends of the 1st Division in their epic struggle make me proud to have the privilege of commanding you. A special word of praise is also due to the maintenance personnel whose 'Stirling' work has enabled us always to keep looking forward. Well done.”

### **The Final Weeks**

Fairford was involved in one more operation when the squadrons were detailed to mount Operation MOLTEN to ferry Horsa gliders to Italy. Sixteen crews from each squadron manned the Stirling/Horsa combinations and took off for the long and arduous journey to Rome's Ciampino Airport, a distance of approximately 1,600 kilometres. All aircraft arrived safely by 10 October. The Stirlings then assembled at Pomigliano near Naples and returned to England in early November but not to Fairford. In the meantime it had been decided to move the squadrons to a new base and on 18 October the remaining aircraft and crews departed for Great Dunmow in Essex. The move included Fairford's headquarters element and all the units which supported the Stirlings as Great Dunmow had just opened and had few personnel of its own.

At this point Fairford became a satellite airfield of RAF Keevil in Wiltshire and became a glider pilot training unit. The task was to rapidly train glider pilots in order to make up the losses suffered at Arnhem. It continued in this role for the rest of the war and was placed in care and maintenance in October 1945.

RAF Fairford had a fairly brief life as an operational World War Two airfield, being active only for about eight months. However, during this time, it played its part in one of the most critical days of the entire war - D-Day, and what has subsequently been called a magnificent failure - Arnhem - but we should not forget the SOE and SAS missions flown at great risk to the aircrews.

In finishing, I would like to quote from a statement made by Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Arthur Harris about his aircrews in Bomber Command that I feel equally applies to all aircrews at Fairford: “Night after night, men - boys really, they were all so young - fought their fears and conquered them. They forced themselves to do what

every instinct in their body shrieked against doing.” But it not only aircrews who deserve our respect but also the clerks, firemen, WAAFs, MT drivers, cooks, suppliers, despatchers, the ground crews and the local civilian staff and so on and so on.

Brian E Routledge  
January 2007



**Fig 14 Aerial view of the original area of RAF Fairford today**

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All illustrations supplied by the author

