

## Memories of Holmsley South, 1944

by Roger Philip Clegg, Flight Lieutenant. R.A.F.V.R.



About the Spring of 1944, I was summoned to Group Headquarters to present myself before the top Intelligence man, a smallish but shrewd person who talked in a clipped fast manner, and so I found myself listening with acute concentration.

The news wasn't bad. It was very good. It was thrilling. A new airfield had been opened up in Hampshire, just near Bournemouth. Much equipment, officers and men were already there, licking the place into shape. There remained to install an Intelligence Section on the airfield. I was to be sent there to run that Section. I was to be given a staff, officers, men and women of other ranks, and every needed equipment.

First spending a few days with my Sector Intelligence Officer (Dicky something, I forget his name now) at R.A.F. Middle Wallop, I got myself thoroughly briefed and then proceeded to my new posting. Looking out from the car that was taking me there, I rejoiced to renew acquaintance with a countryside I had so loved in the past, on holiday in peacetime; I mean the spreading moorlands, the open heaths, the clumps of pines, and over all the warm southern sunshine. I was filled with the most satisfying expectations.

Holmsley South, as my new R.A.F. Station was called, was indeed a hive of purposeful energy. Already there was a runway, a perimeter and a clutch of hastily constructed buildings at various points. The Officers' Mess proved to be a charming old country mansion. Nearby, and buried amongst towering pines, stood the bar, a wooden hut, given a touch of artistry by some pine-wood cladding.

I soon settled in, finding myself in friendly and also helpful company. It was an atmosphere, I soon discovered, wherein everyone was strongly aware that something was afoot. It didn't take much to have us suspect that the Big Day, the Great Event, was no less than the Allied Invasion of Europe. Therefore all the more reason for urgency, to get all things done and ready against the day the flag would drop. And in this urgency we found a mutual need for helping one another.

This same urgency had me and my staff setting up our Intelligence Section, getting ready as fast as we could to meet the special demands made upon such a section. All this went on within a clutch of Nissen huts outside of which the Station Maintenance Section had painted and erected a sign which proudly proclaimed INTELLIGENCE. It was a display which called forth ribald comment from the crews - all Canadian - of a squadron of night-flying Mosquitos just recently arrived. Very soon they were glad to be given all that which an Intelligence element on an airfield could offer them, mostly of enemy airfield activity, coastal flak positions and so on. Yet I must admit that their presence in my spacious briefing room, walls covered with maps and aircraft recognition posters, was not always prompted by a thirst for news. We had a very pretty WAAF on the staff, but possessed of a firm mind and not too easily approached, which did no more, of course, but add to her attractiveness.

I mention that the briefing room was spacious. I was not to realise why I had been given such generous space until later, and the reason arrived with two squadrons of Typhoon aircraft, completely self-contained with ground crew and workshops and various shapes and sizes of tents which presently sprouted into a veritable village of them. The squadrons, as with many other like them, had been formed into a Tactical Air Force, capable, when the time came, of moving about swiftly, with their camp-following little world in close attendance and little encumbered.

These aircraft, equipped with their fearsome rockets, were now using Holmsley's runway, trundling noisily around the perimeter and roaring off into the early summer sky. What 1vith this activity by day and the Mosquitos taking off by night, it could be said, and we very much felt it, that our airfield had burst into life, and life with mind-stretching exhilaration.

And this feeling redoubled when we learned that we were now in an area shut off from the outside world. There was no leave. Letters home were vetted. We were a clam-tight secret, and no unauthorised person was going to know it. So it wasn't surprising when my Station C.O., with me beside him, drove up to R.A.F. Uxbridge where, in the huge hall there, and in company with hundreds of other personnel, we were addressed from the stage by a high-ranking officer who, with charts, briefed us on the basics of the forthcoming Allied Invasion. And the great question which had so long occupied our minds was here given its answer. It would be Normandy. The date - still to be revealed.

We returned to our airfield with the feeling that a great massive lid was presently to blow off and all hell would bubble over. D-Day arrived, and at once the airfield was the scene of even more furious activity. Each morning thereafter the pilots of the Typhoon squadrons came to my Section for the day's briefing. After which they would sprint off to their planes and start up a veritable shuttle take-off, fly to Normandy, blast trains, tanks, anything that moved with their awesome rocket-fire; then rush back to us, to be de-briefed even while they stood beside their aircraft, waiting impatiently to be re-armed and re-fuelled. It was my job to gather in all these reports from my staff who madly had to sprint from aircraft to my office, to knock these reports into some sort of chronological state and to phone them through to Sector at Middle Wallop. And since this frenzied activity would begin at daybreak and might go on till nightfall - and remember that this was summertime - it meant no more sleeping in the Mess for my Section, but on the job.

To cope with this, I got Stores to supply and set up iron bedsteads, pillows and blankets, and we all dossed down as and when we could. I can't remember what happened about meals. This sort of orderly pandemonium went on day after day, these Typhoons wreaking fearful havoc, judging by the reports. The pilots began to look drawn and tired, but there was no easing up; not until the news arrived that the combined forces of the Allied Command had gained a firm foothold and were pressing inland. This meant that the captured territory could now receive the Tactical Air Force fighter planes, not only from Holmsley, but from the various other airfields.

The first personnel to move off, and by transport planes, from our airfield, were the ground crews, their transport, mobile workshops and, of course, their tents, bound for some unknown destination somewhere in France. There they would make ready to receive our Typhoons. In a few days, this was accomplished and the exodus of the men and aircraft, whom we had come to know and to share the great effort, took off one by one, watched by us all, to circle and to beat-up the airfield in a last salute and to answer our farewell waving.

All the activity that remained at Holmsley was the night-flying by the Mosquitos, attacking enemy airfields and vital installations. But by day there was now nothing to disturb the quiet that had fallen upon us. I think there is nothing that looks so empty and deserted as an empty airfield. As one of chaps said, "The breath of death is on this place. And that, precisely, was what it felt like. But Holmsley was to be an experience I was to remember vividly for the rest of my life, and with affection.