

Over our Shoulder

A Gift From the Army to the Air Force



An Air Force Tiger Moth lands at Dunsfold airport, which was built by the Canadian Army.

Behind this photograph are two interrelated stories .. the development of air support for the First Canadian Army in the Second World War, and airfield construction by the Royal Canadian Engineers.

During a visit to Canada early in 1942, the Army Commander, Lieut-General A. G. L. McNaughton, obtained cabinet support for the formation of a long contemplated Canadian Army Co-operation Wing. This wing was to have included four army co-operation (A.C.) squadrons but the British authorities felt that the two existing A.C. units (Nos. 400 and 414 Squadrons RCAF) were sufficient for a force which, as yet, amounted only to one corps plus an armoured division. There was a shortage of aircraft and the Royal Air Force considered that until the Allies were ready for ground operations in Europe, all available planes should be used for strategic bombing. Moreover, as the British Chief of the Air Staff (Air Chief-Marshal Sir Charles F. A. Portal) explained to General McNaughton in April, aerodrome facilities in Britain were inadequate.

McNaughton informed Portal that the First Canadian Army was soon to be increased to two corps, one containing two armoured divisions. He suggested that the additional squadron be organized gradually "over the next three or four months." As for their accommodation, he was "prepared to help by the construction of one or more (aerodromes) ... not only ... for our Army Co-operation Sqns, but also to test the abilities

of our engineer units to do this important type of work." The Chief of the Air Staff promised to inform Army Cooperation Command of these proposals, and suggested that General McNaughton's Chief Engineer (Major-General C. S. L. Hertzberg) should get in touch with the Supply and Organization branch of the Air Ministry regarding the offer of aerodromes.

The British air authorities readily agreed to the construction of an airfield at Dunsfold, Surrey. Locomotives and standard equipment were to be supplied by the Royal Canadian Engineers, special equipment being provided from Air Ministry sources.

On 4 May 1942 an advance party arrived to put up huts and tents and work on the project began three days later. The 2nd Battalion RCN concentrated on the runways, the 2nd Road Construction Company on roads through and around the camp. Trees were limbed and logs converted into lumber by a detachment of the Canadian Forestry Corps. During the peak period nearly 2,000 men were employed, including army service corps drivers and ordnance mechanics. To take full advantage of the daylight hours, the men worked in two shifts each day, six days a week.

On 20 June the first aircraft landed on a completed section of the main runway. This machine (see photo above) was a DeHavilland Tiger Moth used by the commander of No. 414 Squadron for liaison purposes. It was brought to a stop by two sappers the pilot shouting, "Grab a wing, boys, I don't have any brakes on this rattletrap!" The runways and a road encircling the field were completed by mid-August, which meant that the field could now be used in an emergency. Dunsfold Aerodrome was officially declared open on 16 October, two weeks ahead of schedule. To mark the occasion, General McNaughton handed the site over to Air Vice-Marshal Harold Edwards, commanding the RCAF Overseas, as "a gift from the Canadian Army to the RCAF".

By: Capt. F. H. McGuire.

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