

SUPPORT UNITS

This brief history brings together information gathered over a number of years on the 'less glamorous' aspects of Royal Flying Corps (RFC) operations on the Western Front. Some of the material has previously appeared in the history of St-Omer, published in conjunction with the unveiling of the British Air Services Memorial in 2004. The research presented here is 'work in progress' and further information, photographs and corrections are more than welcome. An addendum provides a listing of the major support units and locations. However, it has gaps and does not claim to be infallible.

Air Parks

Army Air Parks (commonly known as 'Air Parks') were created in December 1915 to supply stores for the individual RFC brigades (each comprising roughly eight squadrons). The air parks were located forward of the main aircraft depots, generally 15-20 miles behind the front line, and adjacent to a rail head. They acted as mobile stores facilities holding up to three week's stock (including a small number of aero engines) together with a plane repair section (mainplanes, tailplanes, elevators etc). Although the latter reduced the park's mobility to some extent, it greatly helped the squadrons as it avoided having to transport bulky items all the way from the depots. Stores were provided on a fortnightly basis from the main depots, most of this material being forwarded by rail. Unserviceable aero engines were returned to the air park by squadrons, for onward movement by rail to the depots.

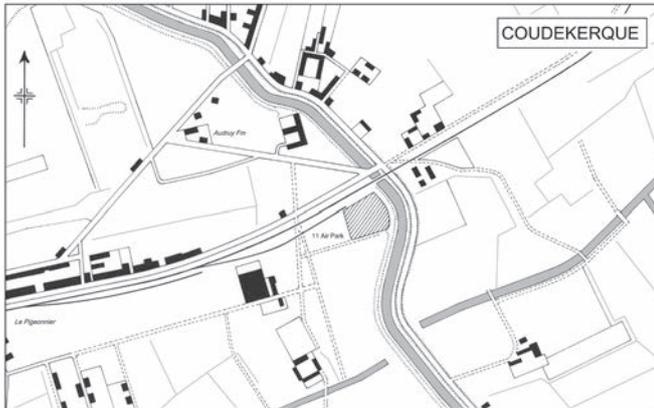
Mobility was an important aspect and all stores were packed in specially constructed cases to allow stores to be issued, if necessary, while on the move. In practice, the air parks tended to operate from a succession of static locations, finding a convenient empty building where the stores could

be laid out in sections and operations carried out in relative comfort. Nevertheless, they could move, and often did, at less than 24 hours' notice. According to Brooke-Popham there were several examples of air parks being packed up and on the move within six hours of the receipts of their orders. During the winter, when there was less operational activity, air parks undertook the repair of MT vehicles, although the majority of their repair activities were focussed on maintaining their own vehicles. The air parks were substantial organisations. By 1918, the formal establishment was six officers and 196 other ranks, together with nineteen vehicles, which included one motor car, four light tenders, eight heavy lorries, one workshop lorry and four motorcycles (with three sidecars and six trailers).

During the Hundred Days campaign, the air parks advanced faster than the rail heads. As a result, stores had to be moved up by road. As this distance grew, it became necessary for the main depots to create advanced issues sections, based at the nearest forward rail head, to supply the air parks. Each issues section held a month's supply of stores, sufficient to cope with a delay of two to three weeks in getting replacement stores from the main depots. A good example of what this involved is provided by 10 Aircraft Park (AP), formed in May 1918 to support the 10th Brigade RAF (attached to the newly reconstituted 5th Army). The 10th Brigade, under the command of Brigadier-General Edward Ludlow-Hewitt, comprised twelve squadrons and two Balloon Companies. The manpower for the air park comprised a cadre of twenty NCOs and men drawn from 1 AD at Guines with the remainder taken directly from new recruits in England. Commanded by Major William Havers, 10 AP was initially accommodated at St-Omer (in the old depot buildings), but soon moved to a derelict and partly burnt-out paper mill at Ouve-Wirquin where they remained until October 1918. The park then moved to the Horlogerie at Bethune, where they stayed a week having made prodigious efforts to clear sufficient space amongst the clock faces and miscellaneous parts laying in indescribable confusion on the floors. Their next, and final, move was to the Fonderie Danel-Butin, 84 Rue de Marquillies, Faubourg-des-Postes (Lille-Sud), where they remained until early 1919. The original owners re-occupied the foundry in May 1919. It is significant that all three locations comprised abandoned industrial buildings, offering a large covered space with good road and rail access, suitable for both stores and lorries. When possible, if space (and safety) permitted, the brigade's air ammunition columns and reserve lorry parks were collocated with the air park.

Reserve Lorry Parks

In the summer of 1917, it was decided to restrict the number of vehicles allocated to individual squadrons to those needed for daily work when stationary. Each brigade was provided with a Reserve Lorry Park (RLP), formed from the 'surplus' lorries. The intention was to improve mobility and ensure that the RFC's vehicle fleet was employed as efficiently as possible. By and large these arrangements worked well, as long as there were only a limited number of squadrons in each brigade moving simultaneously. An individual RLP comprised 82 personnel, commanded by an Equipment Officer, with thirty heavy tenders, one light tender, one workshop lorry, twenty-four trailers and one motorcycle and sidecar. Squadrons utilised a mixture of organic (squadron) and pooled RLP transport to move from one location to another. In column of route, the convoy of cars, heavy and light tenders (each with trailers) and motorcycles stretched for over 600 yards. A typical load for a single heavy tender would comprise: two spare engines; mechanic's toolboxes; six cans of petrol; one 10-gallon drum BB Oil; and three bell tents complete. A typical load for the trailer would comprise: two spare propellers; and all the benches, trestles & small gear used in a flight.



11 Air Park, Coudekerque, occupied an industrial site adjacent to the canal and railway systems. The key to the plan below is:
A - M.A.A. Office; B - Capt Hambley's Cabin; C - C.O's Office; D - Huts;
E - Wash Room & Bath house; F - Main Store; G - Recreation Hut.

