

1944-45 - THE ZENITH OF THE AIR OBSERVATION POST

By Major PEA Hope RA (Retd)

The Air Observation Post (Air OP) was the very successful wartime solution to the problem of observing artillery fire from the air. It was carried out by Royal Artillery pilots flying various marks of Auster aircraft, which were supplied and serviced by the RAF.

On 5th March 1945 the Air OP reached its greatest operational strength; 15 squadrons and one South African flight, a total of 186 aircraft, although this was supplemented by the use of reserve aircraft that were pressed into action for the use of Army and formation commanders. Eight of the squadrons were formed at Old Sarum, which served as the training and wartime hub for all Air OP activities in the UK. The Air OP served in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Greece, Yugoslavia, Palestine, Burma, Malaya and Java. This expansion to its zenith was a far cry from the first deployment of four aircraft to France in 1940.

The original aim was to provide air observation for one battery at a time so it may be interesting to see how the Air OP developed artillery observation, other roles and how they carried them out. The key to this development was voice communication by radio.

HF radio had to be used so as to be compatible with ground and naval forces even though VHF is much better for relatively short-range work. Using standard Army sets allowed the Air OP to engage targets with a large number of guns as well as carry out other tasks. The radios were difficult to tune, requiring an operator in the ground role. This added considerably to the workload of the pilots. The main problem with HF radio was that its performance dropped off at dusk as static interference increased.

Directing Gunfire.

Directing and controlling gunfire was, of course, the main task of the Air OP. Guns of all Western Allied forces were directed, including Italian artillery after they changed sides in 1943. The smallest calibre used were the 3-inch guns of Grant tanks firing in the indirect role in Burma and the largest were the 16-inch guns of the battleship HMS Rodney off Normandy. Ranges varied between 4,000 yards for the tanks and 42,000 yards for the Dover guns, firing deep into Normandy with a time of flight of 80 seconds. These guns fired 62 rounds on 19th September 1944 and some 200 rounds altogether with considerable success. Tanks in the indirect fire role were also used on the Ravenna front in Italy when 21 Shermans of the 27th Lancers fired under the direction of 657 Squadron. Assistance to tanks firing in the direct fire role was also provided, particularly in Italy. Captain Leworthy of 657 Squadron several times successfully directed Sgt Miller of 12 RTR onto targets that could, initially, be best seen from the air.

Direction of naval guns was first carried out in Normandy using the guns of battleships Rodney and Warspite, the 15-inch monitor Roberts and the cruisers Belfast and Mauritius. The first direction of naval guns against an enemy warship was carried out at Castania in Sicily and the first engagement using a US warship was in support of US Rangers at Battipaglia with the guns of USS Philadelphia. At Anzio 90% of all naval gunfire support was directed by the Air OP. The first use of the Air OP in the direction of fighter bombers took place near Lake Trasimeno, where Captain Bob Barrass took on 40 tanks with great success.

The number of guns used varied. A single gun was used for destruction shoots, such as the extraordinary engagement by Arrol Macfarlane on dug in Panther turrets on the Foglia River, where he got one round through the commander's hatch of one of them at a range of several miles. A heavy gun was used to block the tunnel protecting a railway gun at Gradia on the Gothic Line at a range of 12 miles. On a larger scale the engagement by Major Andrew Lyell on 17th June 1944 of some 40 tanks in Normandy using the 5-600 guns of 12, 30, and 2 Canadian Corps plus the AGRAs must rank as the greatest concentration controlled by the Air OP, or indeed, any one observer. The greatest ever concentration of guns (over 1,000) was at the crossing of the Rhine. Here the Air OP took on flack batteries, threatening the airborne assault and short-notice support of 51st Highland Division. The main fire plan was controlled from the ground, but the MGRA 21 Army Group, Maj Gen Mead Dennis, observed the action from aloft, flown by Ian Neilson, his GSO2 (Air OP). Throughout the war most targets were engaged by a battery or regiment, but divisional artillery was quite often used, as was the whole of the artillery of a corps. It was not unusual for one pilot to engage up to three targets at the same time but it seems that only Capt Bob Barras successfully, simultaneously engaged four targets.

Photography.

Aerial photography of the battlefield was a specialist RAF responsibility but their severe losses over Normandy gave rise to the development of photographic reconnaissance by the Air OP. From July 1944, each squadron began to be provided with 3 RAF photographic technicians and equipment, so they were able quickly to develop, print and distribute oblique photographs for commanders to use in the preparation of their plans. Major Andrew Lyell carried out fifty two operational photo runs and was awarded the DFC for the photographic work he did along the River Weser in 1944.

Liaison.

It did not take long for senior commanders to see how useful the Auster aircraft would be for liaison work and for getting around the battlefield. This was particularly the case in Burma, where communications were very difficult. This was, again, officially an RAF responsibility but the pilots used, usually fighter pilots on "rest" tours, were not trained in short field operations leading General Sir Miles Dempsey, commanding Second Army in North West Europe to declare "Fly Arty and be safe". The most distinguished passenger to be carried was the King, who was flown from an operational strip at Radda on a twenty-minute flight to Sienna in Italy in July 1944.

Taking and holding of ground.

It is normally the job of the infantry to take and hold ground but at least twice the Air OP did this, once by seizing Brussels Airport and persuading the German garrison to surrender and also in capturing Klagerfurt Airport in Austria while it was still held by the enemy.

Ground Attack.

Major General Parham and Captain Belfield called their excellent book on the Air OP "Unarmed Into Battle" but on at least two occasions Air OP aircraft were very much armed. In November 1944 657 Squadron were visited by Vladimir Peniakoff ("Popski", the leader of Popski's Private Army) who was raiding several farms that had been converted into strong points near Ravenna. One called Casa del Guardiano he could not reach because of local flooding. He, therefore, asked that the Austers be used as bombers. Loaded with 4.5 inch mortar bombs, PIAT projectiles and hand grenades, Popski and his second in command, Captain Yunnie were taken on several runs

at tree top height with great success. The second armed attack was at the crossing of the Rhine. Captain Sharp of 661 Squadron was observing the extreme left flank when he saw approximately 100 men digging in opposite the town of Rees. He called for fire but was told that the target was out of range of any available guns. He immediately returned to his landing ground, had the Perspex panel opposite the rear seat taken out, had the radio removed and with Captain Lindsell set off with a Bren gun and plenty of magazines. They made several passes emptying a magazine each time with excellent results until they were badly hit from the ground and had to break off the action.

Resupply and casualty evacuation

Despite their limited load carrying capability, the Austers of 656 Squadron did very valuable work in resupplying forward elements in Burma and evacuating casualties.

Other Tasks

In the advance from Normandy some Austers were fitted with loudspeakers and used for traffic control. The Air OP was called upon for the reconnaissance of routes on many occasions and provided immediate information to ground commanders after landing near their headquarters and sometimes provided running commentaries on the situation on the ground. In Burma the Austers dropped leaflets on the retreating enemy urging them to surrender and also laid telephone cable over the jungle and rivers to provide land line communications. Six miles of cable could be carried by each aircraft. In Italy a South African sapper trod on a mine in very long grass, He was invisible to his friends who called upon the Air OP for help. The pilot spotted him, indicated where he was, allowing the unit to clear a direct path and rescue him.

End of the War

At the end of the war in Europe on 8th May and in the Far East on 15th August 1945 all Air OP aircraft were used for liaison duties, helping with the administration work of the occupying forces. There then followed a rapid run down of what was once a large organisation but one very economical in its command structure. The highest command rank was major RA.

Conclusions

The Air OP was very highly regarded by senior commanders but the cost was high. 579 Gunner officers qualified as Air OP pilots during the war including those from Poland Canada and South Africa and one each from Belgium, The Netherlands, Argentina and India. 67 pilots were killed, mainly from anti-aircraft fire and accidents but also from enemy aircraft, small arms fire from the ground and strikes from our own shells. 129 pilots and two ground crew were decorated. Millions of shells were directed but it is difficult to estimate how many shoots were carried out. However, it is known that, for instance, 657 Squadron flew over 5,000 operational sorties between first coming into action in April 1944 and the end of the war with a break when it moved from Italy to the Netherlands. That makes 416 sorties a month. Also, it is known that Captain Coles in one day flew 6 hours and 40 minutes during which he engaged 5 divisional targets, 6 regimental targets and one battery target. Every order was promptly carried out except in the case of very bad weather indeed. Many rules were broken but one never was, whatever the risk; supporting the infantry, who they admired so much. Perhaps that was the only rule that really mattered.

Sources:

Unarmed into Battle by HJ Parham and EMG Belfield, Picton Publishing 1986, *Memoirs of an Air Observation Post Officer* by A Lyell, Picton Publishing 1985, *The Air Observation Post* by HC Bazeley, published privately, *Air OP Remembered* by IG Neilson, published privately in 2014, *Warlike Sketches* by A Macfarlane, published privately. *Artillery on the Modern Battlefield*, PEA Hope, Duncan Medal Essay winner 1978.