

NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF 523 FIELD SURVEY COMPANY R.E.

1. INTRODUCTION.

It is believed that there are no detailed “official” unit histories for the Field Survey Companies raised in the second world war. It is now perhaps doubtful if any will be compiled. For some of the companies, brief anecdotal souvenir histories were produced towards the end of the war using the cartographic and photographic skills and mobile printing resources of the units.

Hopefully, the following notes on various sources of historical material will serve in lieu of a unit history until the compilation of one is addressed, if ever.

There are four obvious sources of historical material : -

- a. Brigadier A.B. Clough’s monograph “Maps and Survey”, H.M.S.O., 1952.
- b. References, mainly war diaries, held in the National Archives at Kew.
- c. Anecdotal souvenir histories produced by the units.
- d. Personal accounts or reminiscences and correspondence regarding the same.

Notes on a-d above are at paragraphs 2-5 below. Anyone wishing to add to these notes or to suggest improvements or corrections is invited to contact the Defence Surveyors’ Association at

www.defencesurveyors.org.uk or : -

Defence Surveyors’ Association, c/o Royal School of Military Survey, Denison Barracks, Hermitage, Berks, RG18 9TP.

2. NOTES FROM “MAPS AND SURVEY” BY BRIGADIER A.B. CLOUGH, H.M.S.O., 1952.

For each theatre of war Brigadier Clough describes the historical background and the strategical and military considerations followed by the survey planning and an account of the phases of the campaign including the survey involvement. These are followed by sections on the maps and map production, triangulation and field surveys, aerial photography and survey and map supply and distribution. For anyone interest in military survey in general or survey unit histories in world war two “Maps and Survey” should be consulted. Notes towards unit histories have been extracted from “Maps and Survey” and these are shown below, sometimes in full, sometimes in brief.

Since these notes were made, “Maps and Survey” has been scanned by DSA and is now available on the DSA website. The notes below may still however provide an “at a glance” summary of the unit’s involvement in world war two.

For 523 Field Survey Company R.E. the index in Brigadier Clough’s “Maps and Survey” gives : -

Theatre	Pages
Home Forces	38, 39, 41, 42, 355, 376, 606.

In January, 1942, an armoured corps was formed under Home Forces. It was thought that a special survey unit might be required to deal with its mapping and survey requirements. 97 (Armoured Corps) Field Survey Squadron was therefore formed, equipped with the new lorry-mounted reproduction plant and it was organized on a very mobile basis. It had a short life of about three to four months only, after which it was agreed that no special unit of this type was justified. **It was therefore converted to 523 (Corps) Field Survey Company of the normal type.**
(Clough 38)

Survey Directorates were assembled for the Allied Planning Headquarters for Operation “Torch” and for the British First Army which was to take part. 518 Field Survey Company R.E. was mobilized for this operation and ceased to be under Home Forces control.

By October, 1942, the Survey organization in Home Forces was as under : -

Director of Survey, with Survey Directorate at G.H.Q. (now Colonel A.B. Clough who replaced Colonel Fryer on his appointment to Middle East in January, 1942).

A small Directorate with each of the Home Commands and certain Corps.

Field Survey Companies Nos. 14, 516, 519, 520, 521, **523** (515 in Northern Ireland), 1 Canadian.

General Survey Sections Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.

Field Survey Depots Nos. 3, 4, 5, 7, 10 (No. 6 in Northern Ireland).

Air (Survey) Liaison Section No. 1.

(Clough page 39)

With the formation of Supreme Headquarters Allief Expeditionary Force (S.H.A.E.F.) in January, 1944, the survey organization in preparation for “Overlord” was as under :-

.....
Remaining with Home Forces :-
Small Survey Directorate at G.H.Q.
One small Survey Directorate at each of the home commands.
Nos. 520 and **523** Field Survey Companies R.E.
Nos. 6 and 8 General Survey Sections R.E.
Nos. 6, 21, 23 and 25 Field Survey Depots R.E.
(Clough 41)

The somewhat unexpectedly heavy demand for 1/25,000 maps during the operations in Normandy and beyond led to an increased requirement in mobile printing equipment for Second Army. It was found necessary, therefore, to despatch overseas the greater part of the reproduction tradesmen of 520 and **523** Field Survey Companies and their printing lorries and by November, 1944, 520 Field Survey Company and 8 General Survey Section had been disbanded.
(Clough 42)

As a result of a somewhat unexpected and abnormal demand for 1/25,000 maps by all arms, especially in the close "bocage" district of Normandy, further mobile printing resources were demanded by Second Army, and agreed to by War Office. This entailed the addition to each field survey company of two printing lorries and one extra graining machine, together with the necessary technical and supervisory personnel. These were obtained mainly from Nos. 520 and **523** Field Survey Companies which were still in the United Kingdom.
(Clough 355)

Other Special Maps.

For the raid on a German radar station at Bruneval, and for other raids of a similar nature, large scale maps of specified coastal areas were produced. The printing of these special maps, which were compiled and drawn at G.H.Q. Home Forces, was undertaken under conditions of high security by **523** Field Survey Company R.E. located near Byfleet, Surrey. Its work was of the highest class and, both from the security aspect, speed of output, and reliability, this unit gave splendid service.
(Clough 376)

During the period when H.Q. F.A.A.A. was located in England, the Director of Military Survey, War Office, placed a small map depot at Newbury, and the printing resources of **523** Field Survey Company R.E. under the operational control of D.A.D. Survey F.A.A.A. Control of **523** Coy. was relinquished when H.Q. F.A.A.A. moved over to France in February, 1945, but the depot at Newbury continued to supply maps to British airborne troops.
(Clough 606)

3. NOTES FROM REFERENCES, MAINLY WAR DIARIES, IN THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES, KEW.

As far as possible, the brief notes from unit war diaries listed below are in chronological order. War diaries from world war two are generally foolscap in format. In addition to the war diary proforma which may be in manuscript in pencil or ink, or typescript, the files usually contain the periodic returns of soldier and officer strengths. Some also contain technical diary annexes but many are confined to mundane notes on arrivals and departures and movements and their content as a source for a historical and technical account can be disappointing. The following "shorthand" notes are generally based on initial hasty examinations of the diaries simply to assess their scope and possible worth as sources for a unit history.

523 Corps Field Survey Company R.E. War Diary Dec 1941 to Dec 1942.

Manuscript, ink, war diaries, no strength returns etc included. From May 1942 war diaries are typed. Initial unit location was Meesden, under Capt Halliday O.C.
From June 1942 the war diary is entitled "523 Corps Field Survey Coy R.E. (Formerly 97 (Armoured Corps Field Survey) Squadron R.E)".
May. From May 1942, the war diary includes brief notes on Jobs No. 34 onwards.
16 Jun Capt Halliday and 2Lt Pickles posted to 523 (Corps Fd Svy) Coy R.E.
16 Jun Other ranks ditto.
16 Jun Capt Halliday promoted Acting Major.

July Brief notes on Jobs 78-87. also postings in and out. Unit now shown at Pyrford.
Aug Brief notes on Jobs 111-129. also postings in and out.
Sep Brief notes on Jobs 159-190. also postings in and out.
Oct Brief notes on Jobs 203-275. also postings in and out.
Nov Brief notes on Jobs 276-328. also postings in and out.
Dec Brief notes on Jobs 330-383. also postings in and out. Manuscript. Still located at Pyrford .
War diary signed by Maj A.J.D. Halliday R.E.
PRO WO 166/8216 Seen 4-4-09

523 Corps Field Survey Company R.E. War Diary 1943.

Generally only very brief daily notes.

Jan Coy shown at Telfont. Mostly "Normal duties".
1 Feb At Pyrford. OC visited detachment at Telfont.
Feb. "Benson" sheets being worked on.
17 Feb Main body moved to Telfont.
Mar Mostly Benson work.
Apr. Ditto. Sheet numbers frequently quoted.
May Dane Court, Pyrford, Woking Surrey.
Jun Both Telfont and Pyrford war diaries.
Jul Benson Job Numbers and sheet numbers shown.
Aug. Drawing Sections working 24 hour shifts on Benson.
Sep Benson Job Numbers and sheet numbers shown.
Oct Ditto.
Nov Ditto.

War diaries also contain brief notes on military training.

A graphic index of the Benson work received and completed by this Company could possibly be derived from study of this diary.

PRO WO 166/12156

Seen 4-4-09

523 Corps Field Survey Company R.E. War Diary 1944.

Jan Faint pencil ms war diary. Coy at Telfont. O.C. is W. J. Phillips.
Feb Pencil. Job numbers and Benson sheets included. Day and night shifts necessary to allow work to be completed on time.
Mar Visits to US Engrs to see Multiplex. Secret Maps K, L, M, N, O. Most Secret maps A, B, C, D. 305 copies each Overlord????
Apr Routine.
May Benson work, etc. Depots E and F established ? Reprints of A, B, C, D.
June American airfield sheets. Mentions of Depots C and T.
Visit to Newbury (Is this the FAA map depot?)
July Air photos for Block 26 ? Reprint Sark & Alderney. Several Canadian-revised Benson sheets. Depot R disbanded and returned. Maj Phillips relinquished command on being released from military service for the Nigerian Survey Dept.
Aug T/Capt D.C. Crouch assumed command, promoted A/Maj. Numerous Canadian-revised Benson sheets. GSGS 4041 x 3 sheets ?
15 Sep FAA officers visited ref repro work for Newbury det.
Oct GSGS 4414 in work .
Nov Maj Lathbury returned from leave.
Dec War diary signed by F Barr, posted in from STC. Lathbury posted overseas 16 Dec.

523 Coy Det

Nov. Loc GSGS 3907 Sheet 114, GR Q379895. 1 Off 22OR with 1 10 ton Foiden printer and 1 x 10 ton Foden PM etc att to DAD Survey First Allied Airborne Army HQ, under Lt E. Cave RE.

523 Coy Det Dec.

On 21 Dec 46 single-colour sheets, 7000 copies each.

PRO WO 166/15313

Seen 9-4-09

4. NOTES FROM SOUVENIR BROCHURES.

None are known for 523 Field Survey Company R.E.

5. NOTES FROM PERSONAL ACCOUNTS.

Svyhist 523 Company

None known.