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DESPATCH FROM BEACHHEAD

by

FRANK GILLARD

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(Misc. Circuit)

This is Frank Gillard speaking from Normandy at 1717 GMT on July 7th. Here's despatch No. 83, title "Forward Airfields". Duration 4 minutes.

Censored by No. 7

Hello BBC. This is Frank Gillard in Normandy. I spent this morning with some of the troops who are helping our Air Forces to help the Army. They were the sappers and pioneers of Airfield Construction Companies, who've been constructing A.L.G.'s - Advanced Landing Grounds and R. & R.S.'s - refuelling and Re-arming Strips - ever since D Day. I stood with them on a great open plateau that had been covered in crops only a short time ago. Even now potato plants were showing here and there, but French labour and French implements had cut those crops, and they'd been paid for their work. Farmers had been compensated. The surface of the ground had been levelled out. Hedges had been removed, ditches filled in. And now there was a flat open space, thirty-five acres or more, with three or four miles of access and perimeter roads. An army - literally an army - of men, sappers, and pioneers was laying a runway running slap across the hilltop. That meant eight hundred tons of tracking to be stretched out and fastened to the ground by three hundred thousand clips and twenty thousand pickets. On

Some of these airfield sights take a long time to clear. /One field, now in operational use out here, over three thousand trees had to be felled. So as to be ready in time sappers and pioneers are moving forward with the leading infantry, making up roads and paths as they go, being useful on the way. Dust is a big problem on these emergency airfields, it comes up in clouds and does great damage to aircraft engines. The sappers are tackling the problem energetically. They're laying hessian under the wire mesh. They're planting grass seeds quickly.

They're trying to oil the surface and they're laying on supplies of water to each strip, so that the ground can be kept sprayed.

It's going to take three and a half million gallons of water a day but they're finding it and pumping it somehow. These airfield

construction companies I find, are amazingly keen on their job. Let me end by telling a story about one pioneer, who was helping to lay

wire mesh track on a landing strip when a shot-up airplane came in to make an emergency landing on the unfinished airfield. The pioneer

saw that his strip of steel matting, not yet fully tacked down, was curled up at the end, and he realised that it would wreck the

airplane if it caught against the undercarriage or the fusilage. Without hesitation, he threw himself bodily on the turned up strip

so that his weight flattened it out. The machine might easily have hit him, and bumped a big, and possibly killed him. As it was,

the landing wheels just skimmed against his shoulder, and one wheel passed right over him. And the airplane made a safe landing.