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On the Ground: Canadian Airfields in Normandy

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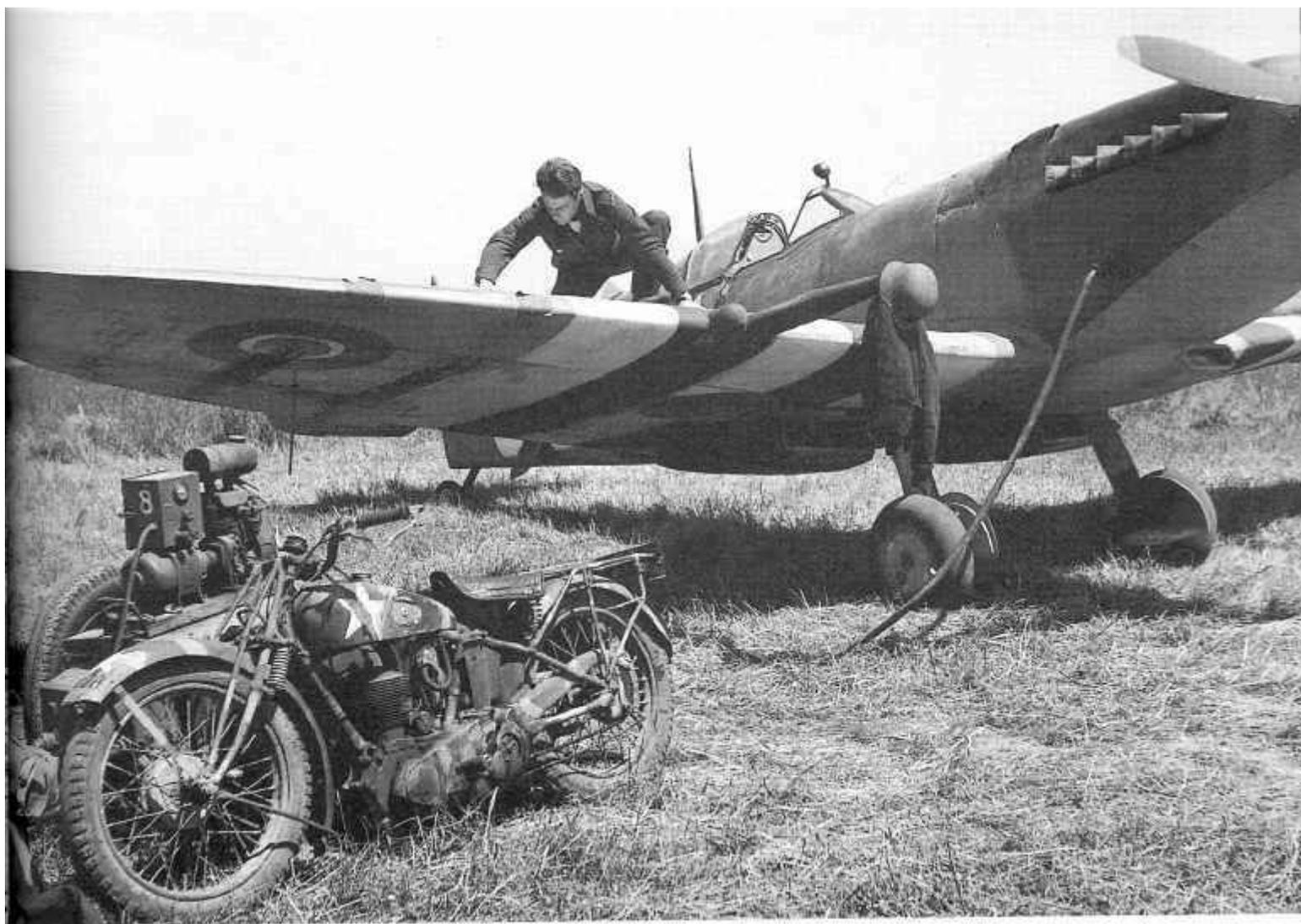


PHOTO ESSAY

On the Ground

Canadian Airfields in Normandy

Mike Bechthold



Above: A "liberated" German helmet and motorcycle are the prizes obtained by this Canadian Spitfire pilot during a visit to the front lines. (CFPU PL 30259)

Opposite: A Typhoon from 440 Squadron taxis past a stockpile of 100 octane gasoline. (CFPU PL 40735)



Above: An aerial view of an Allied landing field near Caen, 31 July 1944. Though it is broad daylight, the Allied convoy in the picture has complete freedom of movement and does not have to worry about air attack. The Germans in Normandy did not enjoy such freedom. (NAC PA 129123)

"Landing on the Norman beachhead was an experience which none of them would forget for reasons quite apart from any historical significance. The landing strips were inches deep in dust and whenever aircraft landed or took off tremendous clouds of dust swirled up. The Spitfires were soon coated with dust while the pilots assumed an ashen pallor and, in their greyish-blue uniforms, looked like grey ghosts. When the rain fell, as it so often did during the summer months, the runways became stretches of sticky mud which suggested the name 'Flounders Field.'" [RCAF Overseas: *The Fifth Year*, p.233]

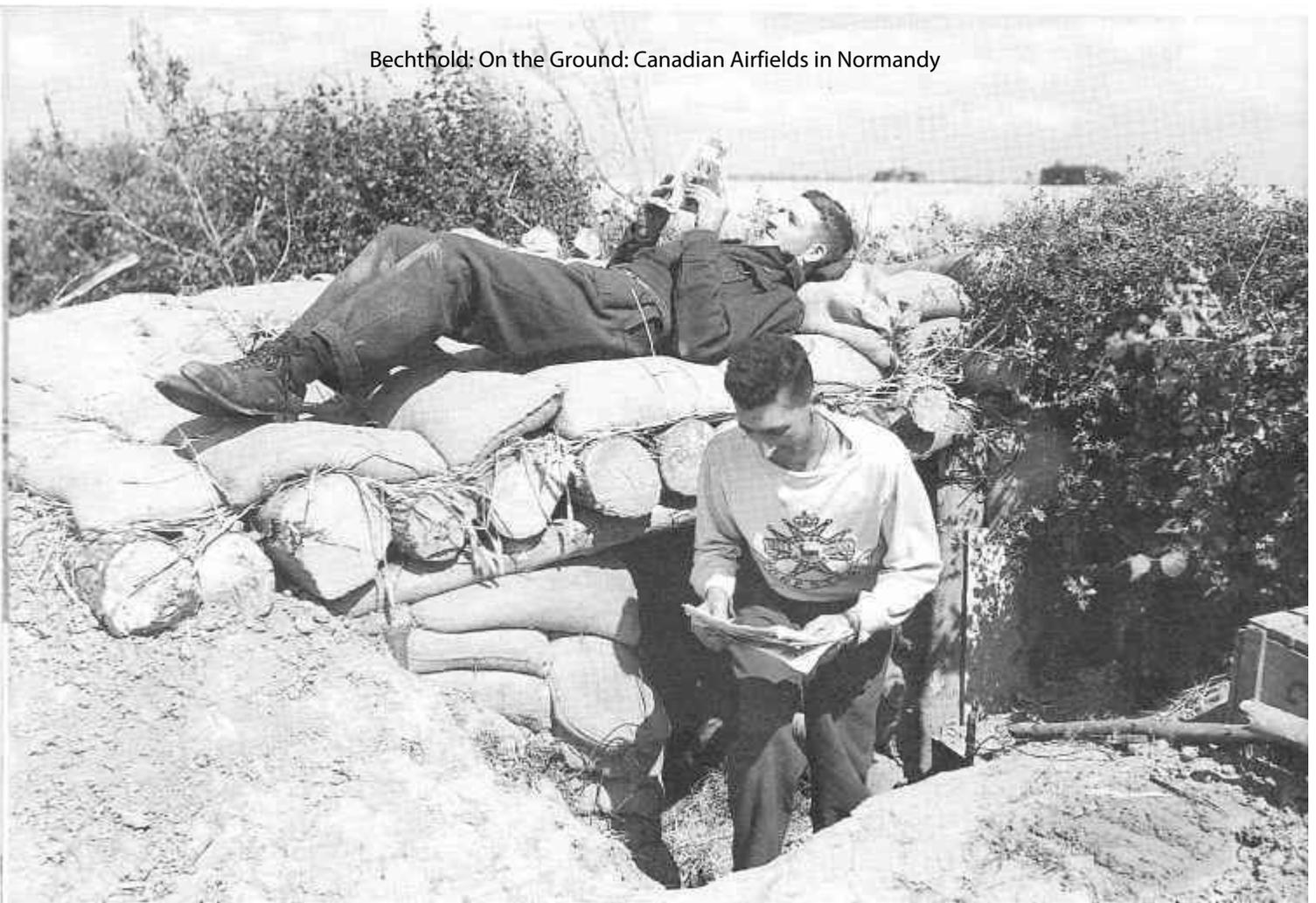
"Life on the airfields was not pleasant. The heat, flies, wasps and menu of tinned food combined to produce an epidemic of dysentery. By day the fields were either a sea of mud or a swirling dust bowl and at night the din of flak barrages, bombs and artillery fire made rest difficult. Yet the ground crews maintained a surprisingly high state of aircraft serviceability. On one occasion a crew of three fitters under Sgt. De Long and Cpl. Stiles changed an engine in a Spitfire in 11 hours flat, an example of perfect team work and probably a record for an engine change under field conditions." [RCAF Overseas: *The Fifth Year*, p.254]

Opposite: A pair of Spitfires being repaired. (CFPU PL 30197 & IWM CL 186)

Below: The aircraft dispersal at the 419 Repair and Salvage Unit in June 1944. The role of this Canadian unit was to provide additional technical support to the squadrons of 143 and 144 Wings RCAF. Aircraft visible in the photo include (from left to right) A Typhoon, Spitfire, Thunderbolt, Mustang, Typhoon and two Thunderbolts. (CFPU PL 30295)







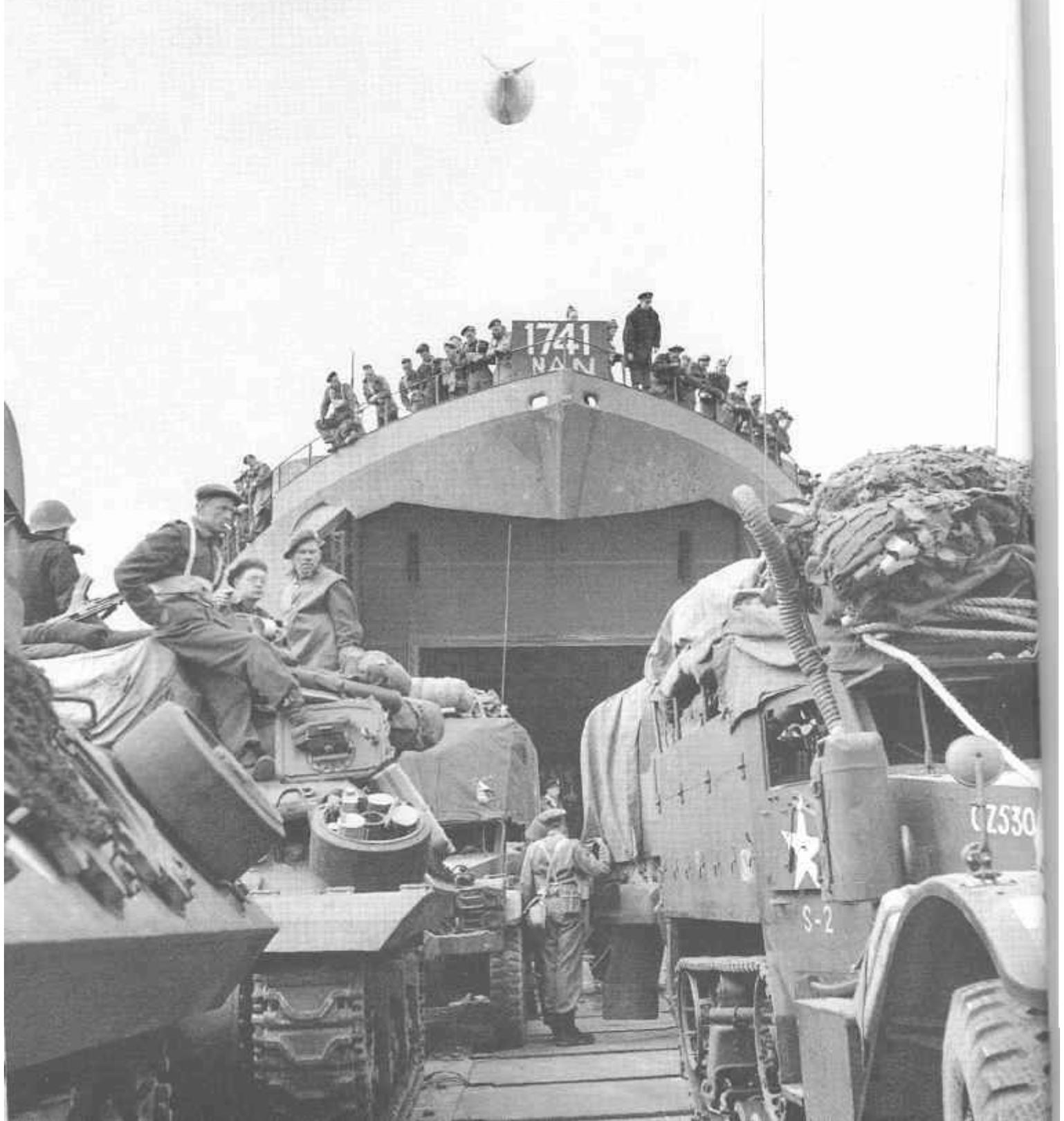
Two airmen from 143 Wing rest by their sturdy bunker as they await the return of the Typhoon which is their special care. (CFPU PL 31052)



"At the moment we have the doubtful honour of being slightly closer to the fighting line than any other air field. This enables the Germans to practically lift the flaps of our tents and look inside. Although we're still living in tents, as we did in England, they all have an important addition to them—namely a slit trench. Some of the more ambitious builders have constructed dug-outs which are well underground and ventilated by means of shell-cases." [W/C Don MacDonald, CO 129 (Fighter-Bomber) Wing, B.10, RCAF quoted in War Report, 4 July, pp.131-132]

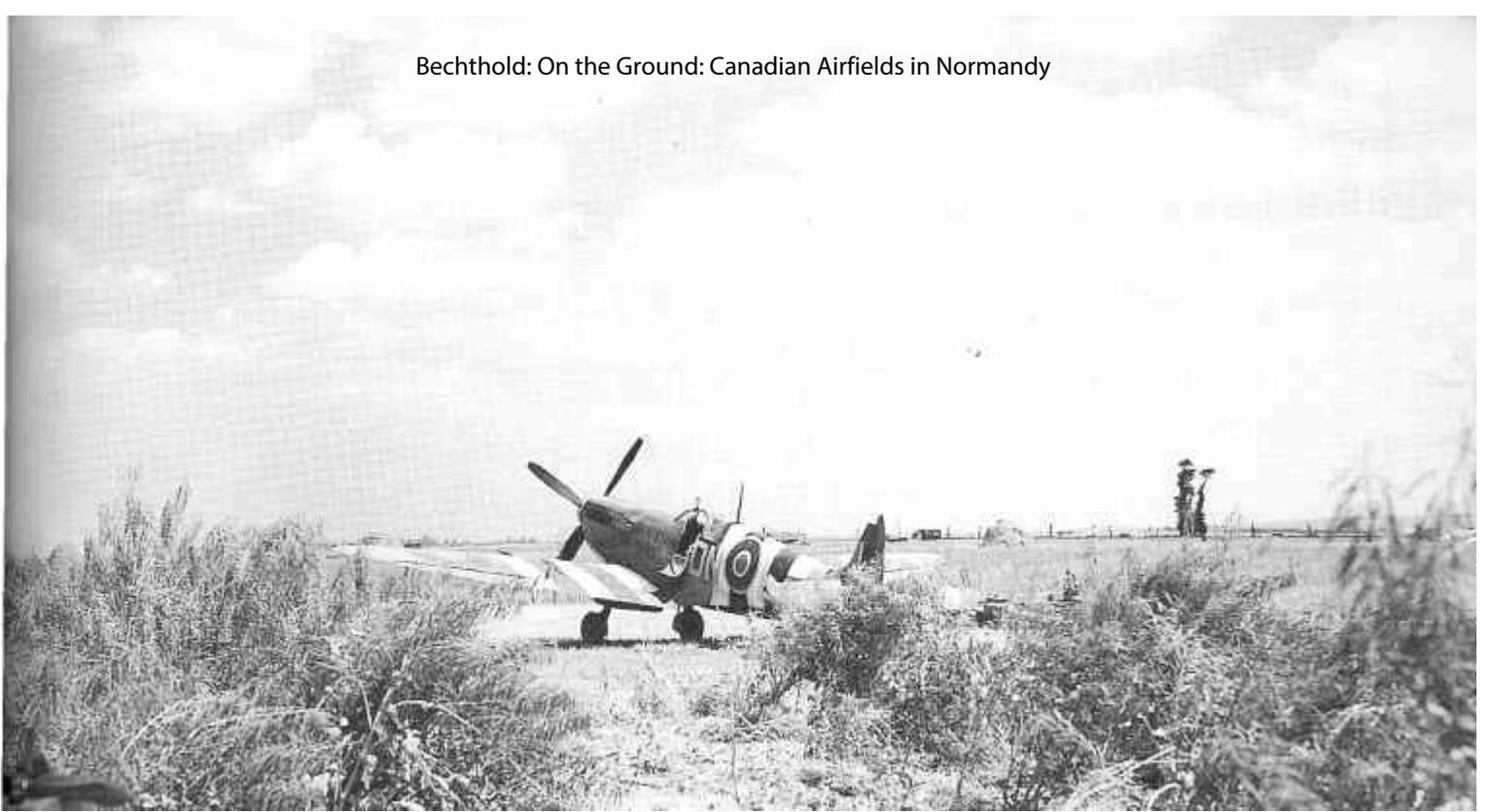
Two RAF pilots receive their first meal in Normandy from a field kitchen at an RCAF airfield. (CFPU PL 30079)

"The meals in Normandy were even less varied than the English war-time menu. For weeks the squadrons had to live on 'compo' rations out of tins. Occasionally a pilot returning from England was able to bring a few delicacies for the mess, some fresh bread, or tomatoes, or a jet tank full of beer." [RCAF Overseas: The Fifth Year, p.234]



Elements of 3rd Canadian Anti-Tank Regiment landing on the "Nan" sector of Juno Beach, 6 June 1944. On the M10 can be seen (l. to r.) Bombardier Long (back to camera), Bombardier Farrell, Lieutenant Bill Lee, and Gunner Dowhanluk from "I" Troop, 94th Battery.

(Photo by Ken Bell. NAC PA 141676)



Nestled in a French wheatfield is a Spitfire from 416 Squadron. The pastoral surroundings of this aircraft at B.2 are a far cry from the combat it faced over enemy lines. (CFPU PL 30299)

"The airstrip the Royal Engineers had cut out for us at B.8 lay to the northeast of Bayeux at Mangy, about 3 miles from the outskirts of the legendary Norman city. B.8 was a single strip running east to west to accommodate the prevailing winds. The

surface was a brown, light loam that had been easily levelled by bulldozer blades across about 3,000 feet of flat, cleared agricultural land, planted at the time in grain crop."

[Richard Rohmer, *Patton's Gap*, p. 102]

Stripped of their bombs, two RCAF Typhoons take-off into the twilight to continue their attacks against the German lines of communication. (CFPU PL 31848)

