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On Equipment

By "Flying Officer X"

On the supposition that any army travels on its stomach it might be concluded that an air-force travels on its wings. But an air-force, in fact, does nothing of the kind. By what, then, is the R.A.F. kept in the air? Its pilots, its navigators, its radio operators? The answer is no. Its radio-location girls, its ground engineers, its electricians, its operations staff? The answer is again no. Perhaps by Command Headquarters? Perhaps by Intelligence? The answer is still no. Perhaps by the riggers, the W.A.A.F. or the Observer Corps? The answer is still no, and still no. An air-force depends, of course, on all these things. But all these departments would fail, or fail to function, if it were not for a department with the most humdrum name of all, a department which functions unromantically far behind the headlines of air-battles, epic flights, medals for valour, radio-location, and the problem of whether W.A.A.F.'s should bath with screens. It functions behind all these things, out of sight, and yet is the dynamo that charges every activity. Its official name is Equipment; its everyday name is Stores. Without Equipment, or Stores, the Air Force would be like a dead wire from which the current has gone. Without it there would be no bombing, no fighting, no reconnaissance, no ferry-service, no epics and no victories.

The activities of Equipment are enormously varied and enormously powerful. Equipment can hold up the work of an airman for lack of the buttons on his pants; it can hold up the fighting a £90,000 aircraft for lack of a spare part costing ninety pence. It deals in everything from pins to planes, airscrews to altars, engines to ice-pails, cheese to coffins, petrol to pigeon nest, bombs to brassieres. It feeds, clothes, furnishes, arms, lights, heats and houses the whole air-force, from the Chief of Air Staff down to the lowest A/C Plonk. Its catalogue contains between three quarters of a million and one million items. What it issues in the whole of Great Britain in one year, or even one day, is beyond reckoning. But the figures

for a single R.A.F. station are staggering enough.

You often hear complaints about food. Perhaps the airman does not get enough milk in his tea? Yet in a week on one station, Equipment issue two and a quarter tons. Not enough bread and cheese? Yet Equipment issued eight tons of one and half a ton of the other. It doles out three tons of meat, and three quarters of a ton of margarine.

Is the station clean? It should be, for Equipment issues 650 lbs. of floor polish a quarter, more than 1,000 lbs. of soap, 500 lbs. of cleansing powder, 100 rags for polishing. Are the personnel clean? They should be, for Equipment washes 1,200 blankets a week, and deals with 1,500 bales of washing. Are they well-clothed? They should be, for Equipment issues more than 12,000 new boots a year, 2,000 pairs of stockings and 13,000 neckties. Are they warm? They should be, for Equipment deals with 4,000 tons of coal a year and nearly 2,000 tons of coke.

Equipment deals not only with new things, but with old. From the exchange of tunics it salvages, on one station alone, 18,000 buttons a week, or 900,000 a year. Each button costs 5d.; so that Equipment rescues from buttons alone, nearly £400 a week, or nearly £20,000 a year.

Petrol is, perhaps, Equipment's largest item. Its stocks must naturally be colossal, and some idea of how colossal they are can be gathered from the fact that one station alone uses two million gallons a year. This is enough petrol to keep 100 cars running for 50,000 miles each, or one car for a century at half a million miles a year. If you knew the number of R.A.F. stations in the British Isles you could no doubt calculate from this that the petrol used by them in one year would be enough to take your five-year old Austin Seven to the moon.

But the moon will not light the station. So Equipment issues 100 miles of electric wire a year, 4,000 torch batteries, 10,000 bulbs. It keeps a man who reads electric

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meters. In order to read every meter in the station once, he travels more than 60 miles.

Aircraft depend not only on petrol, but on radio; airmen not only on food but on oxygen. So Equipment—again on one station—issues 2,000 radio valves a year and 3,000 oxygen cylinders weighing 300 tons. It equips 400 oxygen sets and more than 5,000 aircraft instruments. For all these things, and everything else, vouchers and receipts are needed. So Equipment needs 40,000 vouchers a year, 35,000 receipts and another 8,000 forms for exchanges.

This list could go on and on: There is nothing Equipment cannot supply within reason, for the needs of a station. Its items are bewildering in their variety, astonishing in their quantity. Often comic in character. If you want bodkins, beeswax brassieres or boxing gloves, Equipment has

them. It can supply you with ice-pails, milk sterilizers, milk testers, cream-making machines, egg-whisks or nutcrackers. Do you hate flies? Equipment has fly-traps and fly-swatters. It has hand-cuffs and fish-kettles, cork-screws and communion plate. If you die it has your coffin and your shroud. If you are short of forks (agricultural, coke, dessert), or pots (chamber, coffee, cooking, glue, marmalade, mustard or melting) Equipment has all you need. It can fit you up with insecticides, blowpipes, wheelbarrows, anvils, decanters, spectacles, spokeshaves or sponges.

So when you next read of R.A.F. fighter-sweeps, bombing raids, coastal patrols, of the decorations of air-crews or of the beauty and efficiency of aircraft, remember Equipment. It has everything, does everything, keeps everything going. It is the works.

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*But thou, O Lord, be merciful unto me and raise me up,
That I may requite them.
By this I know that thou favourest me,
because mine enemy does not triumph over me.—Psalms 41.*