22/09/2017

The Aerodrome

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Antiquity

In today's twenty first century, the summerlands of the New Forest have an irresistible quality that beckon us away from the Brave New World of cyber-conquest and nuclear proliferation. The dawn's early light breathes life into the Forest hillside, turning the shades of black and grey to green, yellow and blue, just as it has every morning, since time unknown, just as it always will do. Upon the high plateau where the gorse boasts its glorious yellow blooms and heavy scents of coconut, you might stand, beguiled by the song of skylarks high around you, and watch a bright green yaffingale – the countryman's name for the woodpecker - in its undulating flight beside the woodland's edge, while a golden palomino pony muzzles her foal on the short-grazed lawn, that grows right up to a rather old and tired-looking square of concrete, where trippers park their cars on weekend picnics. Today, this place is called Stoney Cross.

Amid all this peace and summer leisure, you would never imagine that this open plain of Stoney Cross played such a dramatic part in history. As a child, I didn't either; but it was a famously good place where I could gallop my pony full-pelt, and I did not guess its origins. In the same way, no doubt, today, the happy campers and the trippers queuing at the ice cream van by the road would not guess, but the name given by the Locals in 1943 is still the one by which they know it today, and gives us the clue to the story: The Aerodrome. In fact, it plays a part in English history which dates far before the Second World War. On the 2nd August 1100, King William Rufus was hunting in the New Forest; not a popular figure, to say the least, many would have had a motive for his murder, from the noblemen who had joined his party for the day, to the Commoners who knew every thicket, every tree in their patch of the Forest, where a man could hide and do some mischief. It is possible that the fatal site was not where the present monument was erected in Canterton Glen in 1745, according to tradition, but on Fritham Plain, two miles away, where 15th Century texts place the royal murder; so, I guess, it could have taken place there, or anywhere between. If you draw a straight line from one spot to the other, you go through the Aerodrome, right in the middle. The long beams of the summer evening's sun were low over Long Beech, when a Red Stag broke cover out of the woods. The King shot and slightly wounded the animal, which carried on up the hill towards the west, when another arrow was shot from somewhere close by, hitting the King square in the heart – and the rest is history.

So for countless generations this part of the Forest has held many footprints but, to be fair, the deepest ones were made in the Second World War. It was remarkable how life had swung back into its rhythm for locals in that curious interval between 1918 and 1939, which gave breathing space to Germany to rebuild its military might. But as the armada of little ships raced to evacuate the troops from the beaches of Dunkirk in May 1940, it became clear that Britain's survival was in the balance, and the New Forest found itself in the front line[1], for here we had the largest open lowland forest land in Northwest Europe – the perfect place for airfields. And that was when the People in Authority came up against the New Forest Commoners. As the old saying has it: if you want to find a fool in the country, you have to bring one with you.

[1] http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/nmp-new-forest-remembers/new-forest-remembers-nmp-report.pdf

Captain Mainwaring, the indefatigable leader of the BBC comedy series 'Dad's Army', had actually got it right. Walmington-on-Sea was a fictional seaside town, but the entire length of the south coast of England became the front line, and Britain's last line of defence against Hitler's invasion plans in 1940. Large areas of the countryside were requisitioned for military training areas, camps and for the construction of airfields. The New Forest was perfectly placed; but New Forest airfields were not the easiest places to plan for, partly because of the Commoners. In July 1941, the Air Ministry was deep in consultation with the Verderers[2]: they needed to get started right away, on a new air base, and Hatchet Moor, crossing the Beaulieu-Lymington road, was the chosen place. Then, horror of horrors, somebody realised that construction works would mean destroying some Bronze Age barrows, which had never even been excavated. Construction was duly delayed, while archaeologists carried out their vital work, and the barrows gave up their secrets. Then building could start.

But a glitch crept in. The Air Ministry ordered that the Aerodrome had to be protected by a perimeter fence to secure the base, but the Verderers saw it the other way around and were more concerned about the Commoners' rights to graze their livestock. A compromise was struck in true New Forest tradition, when the Secretary of State granted the Verderers the sum of £57 per year to compensate the Commoners for the loss of rights on the 570 acres occupied by the aerodrome. Later, when a further 443 acres were needed, the sum rose to £101 12 shillings per year. This was, after all, the New Forest, a special place where Commoners' rights had to be protected.

The English Heritage Project 'New Forest Remembers' quotes Ashworth[3] in asserting that the Aerodrome at Stoney Cross was originally planned as a secret advanced landing ground for the allied invasion of Europe. It is not known precisely when plans were first contemplated for the Aerodrome, but it must have been in 1941, for correspondence from the chief archaeologist investigating the barrows, Peggy Piggott, reported to Bryan O'Neill on the 6th November 1941[4]:

I suggest that the stuff is left with Rashley and then sent by him on the date decided on to Stoney Cross – which would be about 8th December. The Stoney Cross job will take about 5 weeks if we have the same number of men. The labour ought to be possible from Fordingbridge I should think.

This wonderful Margaret Rutherford-esque character, so symbolic of British eccentricity, hoped that poor weather would not hold them up, but…

There is not a lot more to do and I think by the end of the month we should be through.

Clearly, the Air Ministry's early discussions with the New Forest verderers predated invasion plans by some two years. Operation Overlord would be the greatest invasion in military history, meaning of course that it would also be the most complex invasion, involving combined operations requiring minute planning and preparation, demanding co-operation between the British, American and Canadian allies, which naturally got hampered by diversity of opinions and political disagreements[5].

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[2] The verderers are an ancient institution; since time immemorial they had administered the old forest laws to protect the vert and the venison, and as those laws fell away and were eroded, so the verderers' role diminished. An Act of 1877 though, reconstituted the Court of Verderers, with duties to supervise the interests of the commoners and their rights in the Forest. In addition to their powers in the Court of Swainmote and Attachment they were given additional powers to employ staff, make bye-laws to regulate commoning, levy fees from the commoners and enquire into and stop any encroachment or trespass on the open forest. The verderers are an august body, whose power has been upheld by Parliament even in recent years. Their Court, held at the Verderers' Hall in Lyndhurst is almost the seat of Forest Government

[3] Ashworth, R, 1990, Action Stations. 5 Military Airfields of the South West. Patrick Stephens Limited, Northants

[4] http://www.newforestww2.org/wartime-excavation-of-bronze-age-barrows-on-beaulieu-heath-and-stoney-cross/ quoting National Archives reference Work 14/1393

[5] http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/battles/dday/

At the time when the United States was forced into the war following the infamous attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, Field Marshall Alan Brooke was appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff; a great strategist and close ally of Churchill, he nevertheless was cautious about the wisdom of opening up a second front by taking the war to the Continent. In any event, there could be no plans for an invasion until the Allies were in the position to put boots on the ground – over 300,000 boots on the first day. As a result, it would be difficult to support Ashworth's assertion given the chronology of events, for it was only at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 that Churchill and Roosevelt agreed to make 1 May 1944 the target date for invasion of Europe. In 1942, at the time construction work started, people were still worried that Hitler would invade , as a result of which, it is probably more likely that the Aerodrome was planned more as an advanced base for stealth operations against Nazi-occupied Europe, and one would want to see some underpinning evidence on just what the original plans were[6]. The persuasive evidence for stealth operations is supported by an entry in the Stoney Cross Operations Record Book for the 14th January 1943, when Captain Coe of the Royal marines arranged with the Station Commander *for a one-day exercise by Royal Marines using the station*[7]. Commando operations clearly were being planned at a very early stage in the Aerodrome's life, even if no existing records make the point explicitly.

So this much we can say, that there is much evidence of air transport work for which Stoney Cross was either designed, or for which it was well-suited, and there may be very good reasons for efforts to camouflage the distinctive base from the air: no doubt its delta-shaped profile was a clear target from above, but there was also a great deal of work going on which they would not have wanted Hitler to discover, which included preparation for stealth attacks by combined operations between the RAF and army paratroopers. William Joyce, the notorious traitor Lord Haw Haw, had lived a couple of miles from nearby Ibsley in the 1930's and, very likely, had set up a spy ring which kept him well-informed, and it is certainly possible that there were sites within the Aerodrome site needing camouflage; moreover, the experimental range at Ashley Walk on the other side of Hampton Ridge saw some of the most important bombing tests of the war, and there were many technical sites within the perimeter, whose work has still not been researched.

The Bombing Range at Ashley Walk

Ashley Walk's bombing range was opened in 1940, long before the Aerodrome was built; in mimicry of the ancient inclosures built to protect the ancient forest timber centuries before, an incredible nine miles of security perimeter fencing enclosed some 500 acres and, most famously, it was the only place where the British tested the Grand Slam, a 22,000-pound bomb that would become the most powerful non-nuclear bomb of the Second World War. It was designed by Sir Barnes Neville Wallis, the inventor of the Bouncing Bomb, made famous by the Dam Busters attack on the Ruhr Valley in 1943. Archive footage in the Imperial War Museum shows Highball, a type of the Bouncing Bomb, being tested at Ashley Walk; it was dropped from a de Havilland Mosquito in an incredible display of precision bombing[8], as it flew over Number 1 Target Wall and Number 2 Target Wall before releasing the prototype bomb against Number 3 Target Wall. The bombs themselves were inert, as they were actually testing the bomb casing. The Grand Slam, though, was altogether more devastating, as it was designed to explode after it had buried itself in the ground on impact, creating an earthquake effect. On the 13th March 1945, a Lancaster bomber dropped the Grand Slam near Ashley Walk from a

[6] http://www.thenewforestguide.co.uk/history/forest-airfields/stoney-cross/stoney-cross-background/
[7] National Archives AIR/28/724/4
[8] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oTuGYbxSdSU

height of 16,000 feet. The impact damage was minimal but, nine seconds later, a seismic wave was felt for miles around, and a subsequent crater appeared, 130 feet in diameter and 70 feet deep. To this day, it remains the largest explosion on British soil.

As recently as 2014, archaeologists pondered over the purpose of a long-forgotten concrete structure, which locals had called the submarine pens, creating the legend that they had been built to resemble the German submarine shelters on the French coast built to protect u-boats from air raids. The purpose of these structures on Ashley Heath, therefore, was believed to be for training RAF crews in high-precision bombing exercises, to destroy the service facilities for the u-boats that had threatened to destroy the Allied merchant fleet in the Battle of the Atlantic. Doubt has been cast on this idea, but it is known that high-precision bombing training tested Lancaster and Mosquito crews with a 4,000-pound bomb, dropped from 12,000 feet at a speed of 200 mph, which is thought to have pre-empted the raids on the u-boat pens in France and later in Germany itself, which presented a similar concrete target[9]. The Mosquito's most famous precision bombing runs were made supporting 617 Squadron's Lancasters, armed with the 12,000-pound Tallboy bomb, when they raided the German submarine installations at Brest, Lorient and Bordeaux in August 1944.

Such high-precision bombing was perfect for the Mosquito. Construction of the prototype aircraft had been hurried along in the summer of 1940 after the Government realised that, following the fall of France, Hitler would concentrate all of his energy on gaining air supremacy as a prelude to the invasion of Britain. Despite the constant air raids on the de Havilland factory at Hatfield, the prototype made its first flight on the 25 November 1940, only ten months and twenty-six days after detailed design work had commenced[10]. The first precision bombing attack took place on the German Gestapo headquarters in Oslo, Norway, in September 1942, when they accurately bombed the building and then returned home at high speed, outpacing their German pursuers[11]. Even when carrying the 4,000-pound bomb that was tested at Ashley Walk, they could out-run the German fighters.

Today, concrete runways and airfield buildings have been removed from the face of the Forest, as its wild beauty has been restored - but echoes of the War still quietly chuckle away. Ground attack aircraft would fly over the 'submarine pens' at Ashley Walk where they would practise dive-bombing along a dead-straight track which led to the edge of Hampton Ridge – it was a perfect line for a railway track, and still exists very clearly. As we shall see, the Lightnings of the American 367th Fighter Group based at Stoney Cross, flew many missions attacking railway lines in occupied France, which brings to life such silent features today as that track across Hampton Ridge. There are many mysterious features in the landscape around Ashley Heath, which appear as unnaturally round ponds; they are, in fact, the water-filled craters left by the bombs tested here. So the evidence for the bombing range at Ashley Walk can still be found, but perhaps most prominent is an observation shelter, which had been built to allow protection when testing fragmentation bombs. It is not the most dramatic sign, though for, a little further beyond the gravel track across Hampton Ridge, a large, concrete arrow, directing bombers to a target on Ley Gutter in the valley, lies flat on the edge of the hillside. Amid the natural beauty of the Forest, it is an evocative sight.

The new Aerodrome

[9] http://www.culture24.org.uk/history-and-heritage/military-history/world-war-two/art465260. The Tallboy had first been tested on Ashley Walk.
[10] http://www.aviation-history.com/dehavilland/mosquito.html
[11] One was shot down by anti-aircraft fire

At the outbreak of war in 1939, only nine airfields in Britain had hard runways; by 1940, following a period of frantic preparation for war, there were 280 airfields in the UK, but many of which had simple grass runways that were entirely unsuitable for heavy aircraft. At least 450 new airfields had to be built and, by 1942, construction of new sites reached its peak, with about ten being completed per month. Whatever the original plans for the Aerodrome at Stoney Cross, they had evolved into an airfield following the 1940 design for bombers, which demanded three runway strips with a minimum length of 1,000 yards, as near to 60 degrees to each other as possible. The main strip should be 400 yards wide and the two subsidiary strips 200 yards wide. Along the centre of each strip was a hard-surface runway. By the time that construction started at Stoney Cross, this had been designated as a Class A Standard plan, and the main runway had to be 2,000 yards long and 50 yards wide, with the two other runways 1,400 yards long, with overruns at each end of 100 yards, and 50 yards wide[12].

However reliable or otherwise are assertions that Stoney Cross was intended to be a secret or emergency landing ground (for which we have no evidence), by the time that construction was underway it had been settled as a Class A airfield – and more, with three reinforced concrete runways, the longest being 2,000 yards long, the second 1,520 yards and the shortest 1,400 yards, all 50 yards wide. Today, after three quarters of a century of the most vigorous efforts to eradicate all evidence of the airfield, the outlines of the runways are still unmistakable, only the concrete and bitumen surfaces having been removed, while the casings for the runway lights are overgrown but still visible, some fifty feet apart; while, in several places, sub-surface trenches still reveal clustered pipes, for the electric cabling and the runway lighting, which have been exposed by the passage of time. And not all the evidence of concrete has been deliberately removed, for dispersal areas still provide hard standings for camping and tourist areas, and the right-hand taxi way for the main runway was conveniently adopted by the highways department as the road to Linwood and beyond to Moyles Court, which is the shortest route today from Stoney Cross to Ibsley, one of the main fighter bases in the South.

An inventory made by the RAF[13] showed that there were four large T2 type hangars and six blister hangars, a state-of-the-art control tower to manage safe operation, operations block, headquarters offices and Squadron and flight offices, crew briefing room, fire tender station, flight stores, parachute stores, armouries, two fuel stations each containing 24,000 gallons of aviation fuel, bomb stores, machine gun range, training and repair facilities, sick quarters and ambulance bay, officers mess and barrack buildings for airmen and (separately) WAAF's. There was enormous capacity for dispersal, with 51 pan plus 11 loop hard-standings in three dispersal units, each with their own flight offices and crew rooms, drying rooms and latrines, sleeping shelter, anti-gas clothing and equipment store, small arms ammunition store and aircraft refuelling area; separately there were six 'dispersed sites' with offices and accommodation buildings. And much, much more. This was a major air base.

Such a base was vulnerable to air attack, though (aerodromes had been the Luftwaffe's main target in the early weeks of the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940[14]); and, amidst these dark days when Britain was expecting a Nazi invasion and the Luftwaffe was raiding the country, it is, perhaps, surprising that there was no heavy anti-aircraft battery in the immediate vicinity to protect the Aerodrome; rather, the Station's Operations Record Book reports the provision of airfield defence teams armed with medium-calibre Bofors guns, the principal weapon for the RAF Regiment's Light Anti-Aircraft squadrons. A heavy installation had been built on Yew Tree Heath on the high ground

[12] Francis, P and Others, 2016, Nine Thousand Miles of Concrete - A review of Second World War temporary airfields in England, Historic England
[13] http://www.newforestww2.org/photo.php?image=286.jpg
[14] Bungay, S, 2009, The Most Dangerous Enemy: A History of the Battle of Britain, Aurum Press Ltd

east of Beaulieu Road, to the south, which was activated in 1939[15], though and so it was, perhaps, only prudent that elaborate plans were made for the camouflage of this new aerodrome.

Meanwhile, it was all a bit irritating for the Fritham people, because they had to give up their cricket, when the perimeter fence cut right through their pitch. (Cricket returned as soon as that fence came down after the War.) But Fritham was quietly preparing to sell itself dearly, should the occasion arise, in its own fashion: the Locals would have made good use of an old military motto from India, *Rough and Ready*. As a child, I remember Gerald Forward, a long-term resident of Fritham and friend of my family, who spent many a happy hour in the Royal Oak. He was incredibly kind to me, but this did little to mitigate my awe of him, for he was accorded such respect in the community, that his aura of greatness as a true Forester positively shone. Gerald (notice I employ his Christian name in a familiar way, to demonstrate how I've outgrown my fears) was a Verderer and an Agister, one of the ancient team who supervise the welfare of the free-ranging ponies, cattle, pigs and donkeys on the New Forest. Together with his brother Hubert, he covered the 93,000 acres of the Forest during the war.

In the happy years of my youth, the Royal Oak was a time-capsule of Forest life, run by Bert Taylor and his wife, ably supported by their younger son Andrew, who would later take over the business of the pub, and the farm. Once you were in the Royal Oak for the evening, the outside world disappeared. Frequently a floor of heated debate about Forest issues, it was a place where the old ways still held sway, hunting was cherished as a way of life that had subsisted, legally and illegally, for nigh on a thousand years, and where dogs would scamper around in friendly banter. Indeed, my own beloved dog Jemima would join them when she was a youngster, before Bert's son, Andrew, left the Oak, and the Forest.

I am sure that a great deal was discussed about the war, although it all went above the head of a young boy. No doubt, that talk included reminiscences of the Fritham Auxiliary Unit Patrol[16]. Far from the enthusiastic buffoonery of the Home Guard, Auxiliary Units were a secret resistance network of highly trained volunteers prepared to be Britain's last ditch line of defence during the War. They operated in a network of cells from hidden underground bases around the country.

The Fritham Patrol was one of a number of auxiliary unit patrols in Hampshire. It had been set up by Gerald Forward in the dark days of the summer of 1940, as the Battle of Britain raged in England's skies and everybody prepared for an invasion, after he was approached by a staff officer who went around the subject at some length before asking him to form one of the special 'suicide squads' should the hour of invasion come upon them, armed to the teeth with pistols, rifles, tommy guns, explosive grenades – and cyanide pills. The men in the patrol were the keepers and the foresters who knew the Forest intimately, and lived in the cottages that came with their job. The patrol had one Operational Base which consisted of a caravan buried completely underground, with a disguised entrance in a part of the Forest which was difficult to penetrate. The business of setting up their base was carried out in great secrecy, the caravan being quietly hitched to a tractor and towed away at lunchtime when any on-lookers were elsewhere; it was then buried by the following morning. It contained bunks, a table with stools and oil stove, a supply of drinking water and, most importantly, a two-gallon jar of rum. They also had a radio in the underground base, which led to a tale of its own, for one Thursday the patrol hunkered down in their caravan, following an alert that the Nazi invasion was under way. Auxiliary units were meant to keep under cover until the initial fighting was over, and then, like partisans, create havoc with their resistance behind enemy lines. But they heard no sounds of any

[15] http://www.newforestww2.org/yew-tree-heath-anti-aircraft-battery-s16/

[16] http://www.coleshillhouse.com/fritham-auxiliary-unit-patrol.php; http://www.coleshillhouse.com/fritham-auxiliary-unit-patrol.php#sthash.yiDfpww8.dpuf

invasion, or indeed any sign of an enemy at all, so, three days later, they sent a man out to find out what had happened, who came back to report that it had been a false alarm. The patrol had heard nothing on their radio and had been told not to break cover, but the Army had forgotten that they had been sent to ground and not issued a recall!

The building contractors, Wimpeys, were still working at the Stoney Cross site as the handover date loomed in November 1942; sources refer to RAF Fighter Command opening the Aerodrome for business on the 9th November[17] but, in reality, construction was nowhere near completion. The first Squadron to arrive has been documented as 239 Squadron, with American-built P-51B Mustangs[18], in its rôle with Army Co-operation Wing in ground attack. There is scant mention of the move in 239 Squadron's Operations Record Book at this time[19]: on the 1st November 1942 they were based at Cranfield when Pilot Officer Burton, the Equipment Officer, was posted to Stoney Cross, where he arrived on the 7th November[20]. The Aerodrome's Operations Record Book reports that the first airmen arrived *but owing to the fact that no building was available and not completed, they were billeted out in Lyndhurst*.[21] In fact the facilities were sorely needed for, on the 2nd November, Cranfield had been reported as being unserviceable, possibly due to enemy action, and A Flight was sent to Sawbriedgeworth. Flying Officer Goddard arrived at Stoney Cross on the 23rd November to take up the post of Station Adjutant, and an anti-aircraft detachment arrived, but the Operations Record Book reported that personnel were being posted in at a very slow rate, and it was not until the 23rd Noveber that the following buildings were handed over:

Station HQ Building, Main Guard Room, Airmens' Dining Hall, Cookhouse and Ablutions, the main building of SSQ but not the annexes, No 1 Site was handed over complete, which consists of Officers and Airmen's Sleeping Quarters and Picket Post. Officers and Airmen ceased to be billeted out and were quartered on the station proper. The station was working under difficult communication facilities as there is only one telephone to serve the entire camp. The Station Orderly Rook and Equipment Section is functioning satisfactorily, but the present staff is inadequate.[22]

On the 1st December, the Operations Record Book reported that *the Station is very rapidly taking formation, but no further buildings have yet been handed over.*[23] No doubt Air Commodore Cox managed to hasten things along when he visited the following day and, three days later, Wing Commander Baker arrived to assume command of the Station. On the 7th December more buildings still were handed over from the contractors:

Officers Mess and bath-house, Sergeants Mess and ablutions, ration stores and No 2 Site complete, which includes Officers and Airmens' sleeping quarters and ablutions, picket post.[24]

In fact, the first squadron to arrive was to have been, not 239 Squadron but 170 Squadron, when the Operations Record Book states on the 8th December:

Flight Lieutenant Harley arrived on attachment from No 170 Squadron, in charge of the advance party of the Squadron, to make arrangements (quarters, fitting up of barracks etc) for the moving in of 170 Squadron on the 14th December 1942 to Stoney Cross.[25]

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[17] Hampshire Airfields – see link below
[18] http://www.hampshireairfields.co.uk/airfields/stx.html
[19] National Archives AIR/27/1456/-33,34,36
[20] National Archives AIR/28/724/2
[21] Ibid, Page 1
[22] Ibid
[23] Ibid, Page 2
[24] Ibid

Air Commodore Cox visited the station again that day, which tells us, at the very least, that the RAF was growing very impatient to get the Station completed and, the next day, the Operations Record Book revealed that more buildings were handed over:

Flight offices and crew rooms, one general purpose hut, ablution huts, small arms ammunition stores and Squadron Headquarters Building.[26]

In addition, the Record states that *Airmen personnel were now being posted at a faster rate and the manning position is not so acute.*[27]

Then, the following day, the Station was informed that 170 Squadron would not be arriving until the 31st December. The contractors even worked Christmas Day to complete the work, as *airmen personnel arrived in considerable numbers*. Next day, Group Captain Cooper, commanding 38 Wing, inspected the station and work seemed to proceed smoothly until the end of the year – but then they were notified that 170 Squadron would not be moving in after all and *developments are awaited*.

Well, they were awaited for a long time, and 170 Squadron never did arrive. But, without any further mention in the Operations Record Book, 239 Squadron arrived instead.

Operations

On the 1st January 1943, Group Captain Mason and Colonel Stenman visited the Squadron and, twelve days later, Major Hutton from Army Co-operation Command gave instructions to 239 Squadron to lay down prefabricated 'army track'; whether this was for use as runways or as service roads is unclear. In any event, the next day, 239 Squadron arrived from Hurn, but it was the 25th January 1943 before all the Squadron's Mustangs except one landed at Stoney Cross, while the trailing one followed once it had been repaired[28]. Immediately on their arrival, though Army Co-operation Command descended on them with experiments on the firing pin of their .50 calibre machine guns, so perhaps the Equipment Officer had been working with a team on experiments in the secrecy of a new station.

239 Squadron had been formed in the closing months of the First World War and had converted to Mustangs in May 1942, when they began ground attack and reconnaissance operations over Northern France, which lasted for the whole period of their stay at Stoney Cross[29]. The Mustang was originally flown by the RAF as a tactical-reconnaissance aircraft and fighter-bomber as its performance against German fighters had been disappointing; but the addition of the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine transformed the Mustang's performance at 15,000 feet, giving it a performance that matched or even outclassed the majority of the Luftwaffe's fighters at altitude. It could reach a speed of 440 mph at 30,000 feet, and an ascent to 20,000 feet required only five minutes and 54 seconds[30].

The situation at Stoney Cross was growing chaotic, due to the late completion of the construction works, which were endangering the whole operational efficiency of the Station. Members of the Army's Pioneer Corps were brought in to assist the contractors and, on the 27th February, the Officer Commanding the Air Field Headquarters reported that he intended to move the existing Headquarters

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[25] Ibid
[26] Ibid
[27] Ibid
[28] National Archives AIR/27/1456/35
[29] http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/239_wwII.html
[30] http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/TheMustang.cfm

camp site into the woods, as they were not sufficiently camouflaged out in the open and vulnerable to attack by the Luftwaffe[31]. Amid this work, 26 Squadron was due to arrive and, on the same day, Majors Grace and Elliot of the Pioneers met the contractors to get the runways cleared, at least, for on the same day the Mustangs for 26 Squadron were delivered.

In March 1943, the Allied forces had their first great test to prepare them for the experience of D-Day, fifteen months away. Although the strategic plans were well under way, there was a great deal to be learned about just how the Army would be able to advance against the German defenders, and how the RAF would play its rôle in the combined operation. The exercise would be one of the largest undertaken on British soil, and would be codenamed Spartan.

239 Squadron started their part five days early, when, on the 1st March, they prepared for their part some five days before the 'assault' was due to commence by an armoured thrust supported by ground troops. 239 Squadron's Mustangs were to fly reconnaissance sorties throughout the exercise and the first demand for a reconnaissance mission was received on the 3rd March, when

11 sorties took off but all except three returned almost at once due to bad weather. One aircraft bent a tail oleo leg[32] on return and this was unserviceable for the whole exercise for lack of spare part which takes about two hours to fit.[33]

However frustrated the Squadron's Wing Commander felt by this, it was fortuitously realistic – and, to add the element of unhappy co-incidence which often accompanies reality, General Paget visited the airfield that day, of all days. The lesson became harder still next day, when

Three photo demands were received and the orders were very unsatisfactory. The first two were over our own troops whose position we were not sure of and if we had been told this it would have been possible to decide on the method of carrying out this task. The third task was an oblique line overlap of 16 miles of river line at 20 feet. On querying the height, the order was altered to 2000 feet.

For the next two days maximum effort was required of the RAF's reconnaissance Squadrons to locate two enemy armoured divisions. On the 6th March, as the exercise was getting into full swing

8 aircraft took off but the armour was not in the Squadron area. One aircraft was deemed by the umpires to have a bullet in its engine so a very quick and satisfactory engine change was made in 5 ½ hours. Tail wheels began to run out today as there have been a lot of burst or punctured tyres and the unserviceable aircraft have been robbed of their tail wheels to make other aircraft serviceable.

In a short time they were gaining experience of operations in the planned invasion, and learning valuable lessons, such as using six aircraft which would have required ten before, but they discovered limits to being stretched too far:

Two aircraft were at readiness for local defence of airfield today and took off on patrol at 13.30. It is felt that an Army Co-operation Squadron cannot spare sorties like this as their commitments are always very heavy and every defensive patrol means two tactical reconnaissances for the army.

Exercise Spartan finished on the 14th March, when 239 Squadron returned to Stoney Cross and there is no mention in the Squadron's Operational Record Book of immediate problems with construction work in progress, but it was becoming a crowded place, all the same. The business of operating an air base in wartime conditions was hazardous enough, but uncompleted works were making the situation

[31] National Archives AIR/28/724/10
[32] A strut with a pneumatic air–oil hydraulic shock absorber used in the landing gear
[33] National Archives Air 27/1456/37

unworkable. On the 25th March, four tail wheels of Squadron fighters smashed on the airfield due to trenches dug for airfield lighting, but without proper installation completed, while temporary cabling was hastily laid next day.[34] The trouble was, that the temporary cabling then got damaged by agricultural machinery – presumably mowers drawn by tractors.

Moreover, the presence of contractors still working on-site presented more dangers still, particularly when the Mustangs, with very little forward visibility on the ground, had to taxi their way through construction traffic; yet the most serious accident which took place at this time had a very different cause. On the 3rd April a Mustang of 26 Squadron collided with one of the contractor's lorries which resulted in the deaths of three civilians. The Aerodrome's Operations Record Book described it as a *flying accident*[35], so it could not have been taxi-ing at the point of the collision. On the 6th April, Wing Commander Schofield concluded a Court of Inquiry into the accident, although the verdict was not recorded in the Operations Record Book.

What was very clear, however, was that aircraft operations and construction operations were a lethal combination and the Station Commander had already intimated that, *Owing to the unfinished state of the aerodrome, he did not require any further flying to take place between 10th April and 15th May.* [36]

Ironically, this gave a little breathing space to the operating staff on the Station and, on the 6th April, they held a dance in celebration of the RAF's twenty-fifth anniversary, and the RAF Gang Show visited next day. Meanwhile, Army Co-operation Command had vital work to do and, so, the Squadrons rapidly received notice that they would be moving out of Stoney Cross for RAF Gatwick[37]; on the 7th April, 239 and 26 Squadrons left *en masse* for the RAF station that would grow to become London's second largest civilian airport in post-war years. No such luxuries awaited 239 and 26, though for they were accommodated in a tented camp[38] and one doubts whether they enjoyed the Gang Show performance.[39]

In truth, of course, Stoney Cross, with its unusually long, hard-surfaced runways was taking a very long time to finish and its capability outstripped the more limited needs of ground-attack fighters; if the station was not being used for other purposes, one wonders why the RAF had apparently opened its gates for business in November. In any event, as 239 and 26 Squadrons moved out in April 1943, a site meeting took place for the hand-over of the completed airfield for the large aircraft of Transport Command and Coastal Command. But the inspection did not go well and the RAF refused to accept the hand-over from Wimpeys, for much work still needed to be done. Without adequate documentary records, it is difficult to assess whether this was a contractor problem, but Delve[40] offers the mitigation that the site suffered from difficult terrain, which explained its unusual plan demanded by the topography of the landscape.

But then, amidst the hectic construction works that had demanded the withdrawal of 239 and 26 Squadrons, the records show that 175 Squadron, whose motto was *Stop at nothing*, arrived at Stoney

[34] National Archives AIR/28/724/10
[35]National Archives AIR/28/724/12
[36] Ibid
[37] The records of 239 and 26 Squadrons indicate that they did not move to Holmsley South as stated in the New Forest Guide: http://www.thenewforestguide.co.uk/history/forest-airfields/stoney-cross/stoney-cross-background/
[38] National Archives AR 1456/37
[39] National Archives AIR/28/724/12
[40] Delve, K, 2004, Military Airfields of Britain: Southern England: (Kent, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex), The Crowood Press Ltd. Intriguingly, Delve states that the Aerodrome appeared to have been laid out as an emergency airfield by 1942, but improvements were decided and in November 1942 it re-opened as an Army-co-operation airfield for 239 Squadron. No corroborating evidence can be found for operations before November 1942, though.

Cross on the 2nd April 1943[41], operating in a ground attack rôle with the Army Co-operation Wing, flying Hawker Hurricane IIB's, the Hurri-Bomber, armed with twelve .303 Browning machine guns in the wings and two bomb racks, outward from the landing gear[42] under the wing, giving it a formidable capability as a dive-bomber. These Hurricanes were a real war wagon and demonstrated the aircraft's incredible versatility, which, coupled with the Hurricane's formidable ability to take heavy battle damage, made them so popular with their pilots and their ground crews, even though they never won the nation's heart quite like the Spitfire. The Squadron flew in formation from Odiham to Stoney Cross on the 2nd April[43], and some local flying familiarised themselves with the area, without much incident – save for Flying Officer Peacock's tyre burst on landing, damaging the propeller. On the 4th April, Sergeant Murray and four others got up to some aerobatics, while Pilot Officer Diggins was involved in a dogfight for fifty minutes in the afternoon. The next day, after Flight Lieutenant Davies's aerobatics, he went on a reconnaissance flight over an unnamed target, while Diggins and some others went on a formation flight, and everybody seemed to enjoy themselves. But their stay at Stoney cross was all too short and, on the 8th April, the Squadron moved to Colerne, where, lamented or not, they lost their Hurri-bombers and were refitted with Hawker Typhoon IBs[44].

But there were other plans afoot, which were about to open a new chapter in the Aerodrome's history.

Stoney Cross and the story of Paratrooping

295 Squadron had been formed in August 1942 to spearhead the transport of Airborne Forces, of which we will learn much more shortly. On the 5th April, amidst the fallout of the fatal airfield accident, Wing Commander MacNemarra, the Officer Commanding 295 Squadron and Squadron Leader Cadnam of 38 Wing visited the Aerodrome with a view to an advance party of 295 Squadron moving in on the 10th April. An unreferenced source states that completion had been refused for the heavy aircraft of Transport and Coastal Commands - but on the 9th April the Operations Record Book records that Group Captain Cooper of 38 Wing visited the Station in connection with closing down of flying as from the 10th April to the 1st May *except for flying require of 295 Squadron*.[45]

The next day, 175 Squadron moved out and, with remarkable haste, two Whitleys, two gliders and an advance party of 295 Squadron arrived on the 10th. But chaos ensued, as 70 airmen and stores of 239 Squadron were still there, so 295 Squadron could not move in. Nevertheless, on the 14th April, six officers of 295 Squadron arrived to make arrangements for the influx of the main party, while their Commanding Officer arrived with Squadron Leader Ward and made allocation of accommodation for the Operations Room and Squadron Briefing Room[46]. The next day, the Chief Engineer of Army Co-operation Command held a conference with Wimpeys with regard to serviceability of the airfield on the 1st May for the reception of 295 squadron. The contractors warned that they would not have completed clearance of the runway works *and in view of the findings of the Court of Inquiry and danger to workmen of aircraft it was agreed that the move be postponed until 15th May 1943*.[47]

But by this time there were other activities going on which did not trouble the Operations Record Book. Don Robertson brings us back to Ashley Walk, asserting that Stoney Cross was used as the

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[41] National Archives AIR/27/1110/26
[42] http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/weapons_hawker_hurricaneII.html
[43] National Archives AIR/27/1110
[44] http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/175_wwII.html
[45] National Archives AIR/28/724/12
[46] Ibid
[47] Ibid

aircraft base for the trial of the Bouncing Bomb, Upkeep before the Dambusters raid in May 1943[48] and, for which we have photographic evidence[49], Highball, during the same period. Being so close to the bomb testing area, this would make sense, particularly in view of the Aerodrome's well-camouflaged site among the trees obscuring the view from the Luftwaffe's cameras and its new, long runways, so suitable for heavy bombers, which could easily reach Chesil in their flight training, as he said[50]. It would also make sense that the whole operation was shrouded in the utmost secrecy, so that, indeed, to the outside world there were no aircraft operating there at this time.

The associations between Ashley Walk and Stoney Cross are confirmed, but opaquely, in the Operations Record Book; on the 25th February 1943, with building works so far behind completion, Group Captain Dark and Wing Commander Geoghan had decided that, for the purpose of some activity between the 1st and 7th March which was not specified,

the bombing range will be confined to a single aircraft bombing from 2,000 feet and touring the approach run from west to east and across the range.[51]

In fact the footage in Imperial War Museum Archives clearly shows that the bombing runs took place from east to west, which would be consistent with the concrete direction arrow on Hampton Ridge.

Records of Ashley Walk Operations do not reappear until a reference is made to a conference held at the Station on the 23rd April *to discuss the safety of Ashley Walk bombing range*. It was decided that the minutes of the conference should be discussed at Air Ministry and a final decision notified to all concerned later. The preliminary outcome of the conference seemed to run away from the discussion about Ashley Walk, though, for the

Air Ministry decided that the Aerodrome was not suitable for the type of aircraft of which 295 Squadron were equipped.[52]

On the 27th April the advance party of 295 Squadron was posted to Holmsley South; one wonders why the Aerodrome was unsuitable for their Whitley bombers, and all the evidence suggests that, to other people in command it had become apparent that, with its long runways, broad infrastructure space and proximity to the road system that linked it with military concentration points, Stoney Cross offered real advantages, not just for heavy transport aircraft but, also, for those which could tow gliders as well. Indeed, in June 1943, 296 Squadron arrived at Stoney Cross, still well before final completion of the construction work, flying brand-new Armstrong Whitworth Albemarles – presumably much more suitable than Whitleys - and opening a new chapter in the Aerodrome's history, and its association with paratrooping. This was a brand new branch of warfare, which had been pioneered by the Germans in their invasion of Norway in 1940, when their effectiveness took the Allies by surprise.

The fortress of Eben-Emael was a key of Belgium's defensive link, playing a key part in the massive defences built in the 1930's which stretched from Holland to France, and designed to bring a potential German invasion to a dead stop. Everybody thought it impregnable, until 493 German airborne troops attacked in 42 gliders on the 10th May 1940 and, within 25 minutes, the defenders had all surrendered. It was a shocking defeat which allowed the German panzers to advance through Belgium. Churchill was as worried as anybody else, but was also impressed and lost no time in adopting this new concept of shock warfare, involving paratroopers and gliders who ushered in a new generation of what the

[48] Robertson, D, 2001, The Urge to Fly. Quiller Press. Quoted in http://www.ukairfieldguide.net/airfields/StoneyCross
[49] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zBp1NCbAr0
[50] Other sources have quoted (or re-quoted) that the fighter station at Warmwell was the base for the Chesil training; with a grass runway built only for fighters, unreinforced for heavy bombers, this is unlikely.
[51] National Archives AIR/28/724/07
[52] National Archives AIR/28/724/14

cavalry had provided in Victorian warfare. When the British created their own Airborne Forces later in the year, they based the training on a captured German manual, and the Airborne Forces Establishment was established at RAF Ringway in the Midlands. Training and development took a step forward when the Airborne Forces Development Centre was created at Amesbury in 1943, developing loading and transport for aircraft and gliders[53]. There was an airfield at Boscombe Down near Amesbury, but it was used for flight training and was unsuitable for enlargement to accommodate paratroop training, but Stoney Cross was just 18 miles away[54], so it made sense to develop the Aerodrome as a co-operation base for parachute training. Churchill placed a high value on Airborne Forces, which demanded close co-operation between the Army and the Royal Air Force.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there was some ill-feeling between the Army and the RAF as to who should be commanding the gilder pilot forces; be that as it may, what is beyond doubt, is that that the Glider Pilot Regiment was formed in 1942, although it was to become one of the shortest-lived regiments in the British Army[55]. Nevertheless, it served Churchill's purpose perfectly, to provide the aircrews that would co-operate so closely with the paratroopers who relied on the gliders to fly into the combat area silently, the stealth giving them element of surprise, enabling them to bring them to the ground with instant readiness and concentrating the firepower that was so important to accomplishing their mission. As a result, the Royal Air Force provided the airfield facilities, the tugs and their aircrews, in co-operation with the Glider Pilot Regiment who manned the tows. It was not always an easy relationship, though, for it would be discovered that the glider pilots went into action with insufficient training and, all too often, jettisoned the tow lines early, with catastrophic results; at the same time, RAF aircrews fell behind on tow training themselves, due to bad weather preventing them from flying.

At this time the British had no purpose-built military aircraft for airborne transport but, fortuitously, a short-haul civil airliner proved ideal for personnel transport, parachute training – and for stealth attacks. De Havilland had designed the DH-89 Dragon Rapide in 1933; the prototype first flew in the following year and, from the very start, proved so reliable that it was promptly sold to a commercial buyer and had a flying life of 27 years. The Royal Air Force needed good air transport and, in 1935, a Rapide was acquired and added to the strength of 24 Squadron. They were much impressed and, with the outbreak of war, they decided that Transport Command needed a large number of Rapides, for military and VIP transport and, thus, the Dominie military variant was born[56]. They were certainly much in demand, as the evidence in the Stoney Cross Operations Record Book shows an incredible number of VIP visitors, as early as the 2nd December 1942 when Air Commodore Cox arrived with an entourage, even before Wing Commander Baker took up his position as Station Commander three days later.[57]

Airborne transport would become a key function of Stoney Cross, which would become a major operational centre for long distance haulage and paratroop-gliding duties.

Norman Gillman's research led him to draw the conclusion that, in the period of 1943, Stoney Cross *gained its reputation for secrecy, and mystery*[58]. Gillman particularly highlights the association of 297 and 299 squadrons with Stoney Cross:

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[53] https://paradata.org.uk/units/army-airborne-transport-development-centre-aatdc
[54] a little longer by the roads of the day
[55] Acknowledgement to the Museum of Army Flying
[56] Jackson, A, 1987, De Havilland Aircraft since 1909, Putnam, London
[57] National Archives AIR/724/003
[58] A copy of Mr Gillman's work can be found at Solent Sky Aviation Museum (Archives), Southampton. Unfortunately without source references further primary research cannot be conducted.

… their paratrooping, glider towing work, automatically surrounded themselves with these two essential ingredients, as the British entry into this new form of warfare was a matter of deep security. Then there was the matter of contact with the Resistance, and the dropping of arms explosives, and sometimes people.[59]

As a mark of its suitability for stealth operations, in July 1936, two British Secret Intelligence Service agents, Cecil Bebb and Major Hugh Pollard, had flown Francisco Franco in a Dragon Rapide from the Canary Islands to Spanish Morocco, at the start of the military rebellion which began the Spanish Civil War, and the aircraft gained instant romance that would come to enhance its legend. Although capable of carrying a maximum of only eight passengers, its operational flexibility and dependability made it a huge success and the Dominie military variant had the civilian accommodation stripped out, and replaced with longitudinal benches for paratroopers, while the passenger door was converted to a sliding door where the troops would exit. On the right side, a larger sliding door was added, allowing bundles on parachutes to be thrown out of the door or larger cargoes, such as supplies to Resistance forces, to be loaded and unloaded on the ground. The procedure for parachuting from a Dominie was for the parachutist to climb out of the doorway and get into a seated position on the lower wing, then let the slipstream slide him off into space. The tailplane was low enough so that the parachutist did not hit it. Then the parachutist deployed his parachute manually free-fall[60]. [61]

For massed operations that went beyond a stealth attack, 38 Wing of Army Co-operation Command needed something much larger, which could transport more paratroopers and tow a glider to the drop-zone. 38 Wing's 296 Squadron got it, with the Armstrong Whitworth Albemarle. The twin-engine Albemarle had been designed as a medium bomber but was discovered to have a poor weightlifting capability with a pay-load of bombs; and this was followed hard by the decision of the Royal Air Force that it would only buy four-engined bombers from now on[62], all of which rendered the Albemarle obsolete as a bomber. The trouble was, that substantial numbers were already in production, so another use had to be found, and the Albemarle proved itself as a special transport and glider tug. It had not started well, when, in 1940, well before Stoney Cross was built, an Albemarle underwent taxi-ing exercises with a glider at Hamble aerodrome on the edge of Southampton Water, which was the only place with a runway long enough for the test. The Albemarle had real difficulty taking off towing a glider, and only just made it, which established the need for unusually long runway facilities if this operation was going to work[63].

296 and 297 were the first Squadrons to be equipped with Albemarles, towing a Horsa glider at its maximum weight off a long runway. The Albemarle could carry ten fully armed paratroopers who made their exit from the plane by a dropping hatch in the rear fuselage and a large loading door in the fuselage side, with formidable machine gun defences to ward off enemy attack. In this rôle the Albemarles of 296 and 297 Squadrons would find their homes at Stoney Cross.

It was while they were engaged with parachute training that the Army Co-operation crews were introduced to the Horsa gliders, which could be towed with ease from Stoney Cross's long runways,

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[59] Ibid, p401

[60] http://www.pmulcahy.com/aircraft/british_cargo_aircraft.html

[61] The Dominie remained the aircraft of choice in parachute training for decades. G-AGTM was first delivered to the RAF in May 1944. In 1964 it was acquired by the Army Parachute Association with whom it flew until 1978. See https://www.planelogger.com/Aircraft/Registration/G-AGTM/825863?seo=DH-89-A%20Dragon%20Rapide%206_Army%20Parachute%20Association

[62] http://www.pegasusarchive.org/arnhem/batt_297.htm

[63] Tapper, O, 1973, Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft since 1913, Putnam, London

and the base was home to many Horsas (of the British) and Hadrians (built by the Waco Aircraft Company in the United States)[64].

The Horsa glider was designed by Airspeed, a company conveniently based at Christchurch, just twenty miles from Stoney Cross, and first flew in the autumn of 1941, at about the time when the archaeologists were excavating the Aerodrome site. The simple, all-wooden construction meant that large quantities of the aircraft could be made by a wide number of sub-contractors, and the gliders were much in evidence at Stoney Cross, where there would be a repair facility[65]. Eerily silent in flight, the glider could carry 28 soldiers or a jeep and trailer, or a Jeep and 6 pounder gun; when fully loaded it weighed almost 7 tons. But their birth and development had not been easy and problems were discovered with the prototype when it was being tested in 1942; staff at the experimental establishment at the Ringway had real problems loading a single jeep, let alone a jeep and trailer as they had been assured, and the manufacturers went back and feverishly made changes to the design to meet the deadline – full scale combat operations – but they managed it, and the Horsa went on to become the glider of choice for the British Airborne Forces.

Over 3,600 Horsa gliders were built, and would play a vital part in airborne assaults from Stoney Cross, where they were towed by Albemarles and, later, Short Stirlings and Douglas Dakotas across the English Channel and released over the landing zones, hundreds landing within a few square miles of each other. In the Normandy invasion, the 6th Airborne Division, which included the 8th Parachute Battalion which would get to know Stoney Cross so well in training, used more than three hundred Horsa gliders for the Airborne support. So what of the Squadrons that would do this work?

In June 1943, 296 Squadron was sweltering in the heat of a North African summer. It was based in Froha, in Allied-occupied Algeria, where the crews exercised daily, and at all times, preparing for the next major offensive of the war, the invasion of Sicily, to get a foothold into Italy and open up the first major front in the European mainland. Wing Commander Barton, commanding the Squadron, wrote forcefully about the lessons to be learned from Exercise Cactus IV on the 18th June, bringing to life the business of airborne operations in a way that a simple history book could never manage[66]. It was to be a night exercise, with the aircraft marshalled at 21.00, and the troops boarded by 22.30; Barton wrote particularly forcefully about what had to be learned in joint airborne operations with the business of dropping the troops accurately:

As I have been pointing out to Airborne Division for the past 18 months, lights, if they are going to be used at all, should be distinctive flares which can be seen for 20 miles, not lights which can be mistaken for the back window of a farmhouse which has not been properly blacked out.

Use of bright flares to mark the drop-zone critical – objections of advertising to the enemy countered by dropping false flares, wrong colour or wrong flashing frequency… It seems preferable to lose 10% of the force through lack of surprise rather than 60% through inaccurate dropping[67].

Another exercise followed on the 20th June, when the Squadron then flew on to Hurn, from where it would deploy straight to Stoney Cross. Barton wrote the Operation Order for the move on the 21st

[64] 1,095 American-built Hadrian gliders would be used by the British Airborne Forces, and were vaunted by their producers for the flexibility of their pay-load, carrying 13 troops, or a jeep, or its trailer armed with an anti-tank gun or a howitzer; but they were found inferior to the Horsas owing, partly, to their size: less than half the number of troops could be carried in a Hadrian, which, for all its apparent flexibility for accommodating a jeep or its trailer, proved not to be because the size of the Hadrian forced them to load a load jeep and its trailer into separate machines and so they had to land in pairs, which meant that, if one crashed, the survivor would be useless - Acknowledgement to the Museum of Army Flying.
[65] http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/TheHorsa.cfm
[66] Ibid, p143
[67] Ibid, p143

June[68], in which he required that the advance party under a warrant officer would report to the Station Adjutant at Stoney Cross on the 22nd June, while the main party were to move from Hurn to Stoney Cross three days later. 296 Squadron's Glider Flight would not be accompanying them, but would be going to Netheravon. Two weeks later, on the 7th July, Barton outlined the plan for Operation Ladbroke, when the Squadron would spearhead the invasion of Sicily[69]. He opened the report with an assessment of the situation that lay before them:

The enemy is in full control of Sicily. He has (end of June) approximately 470 serviceable plans based on the island, 70% to 80% of which are fighters. Ground forces in the target area consist of Italian static defence troop, Italian and possibly German reinforcements could arrive within a few hours. The strength of artillery varies considerably in the three target areas, being weakest around Syracuse. The enemy has two RDF stations and a limited number of searchlights operating in these areas…

On the 9th July, their aircraft would arrive over the drop-zone, then release gliders with their paratroopers whose objective was to seize and hold a strategic bridge, in the vanguard of the seaborne invasion of the Allied forces. But why fly all the way from Britain, when a flight plan from North Africa would have been so much shorter and less hazardous? The answer, as it turns out, was simple: there were no British Horsa gliders available in North Africa. Lieutenant Colonel George Chatterton was in command of the Glider Pilot Regiment when he was briefed by Major General Hopkinson, commanding the 1st Airborne Division, on the plans for Operation Ladbroke. Chatterton was suddenly confronted with the news that the 1st Airlanding Brigade was to be flown 250 miles across the Mediterranean at night by his men who had nothing like the flying experience to cope with the difficult conditions that such an operation would impose, particularly at night. Hopkinson answered his objection with a promise of American Hadrian gliders – with which none of his men had any experience and, in any event, the shortcomings of the Hadrian were well known by now[70]. Worse still, the American aircrews towing them lacked the navigation skills to land them in Sicily. Chatterton possessed a forceful character and argued defiantly for a change in plan, for a force of British Horsa gliders to be flown in from Britain, 1,400 miles away. The War Office were terribly worried about this, for a glider tow over such a distance had never been attempted before but, eventually, Chatterton won the day and Ladbroke would be opened by the RAF towing the gliders from their bases in the UK, over sea and within comfortable range of German fighters, to spearhead the Allied invasion of Sicily[71].[72]

Back at Stoney Cross, Barton was ready.

The bewildering complexity of the Aerodrome's dispersal, clearly shown on any map and, indeed, still discernible from the air today, explains the detailed parking plans and take-off orders which Barton set out in fine detail, and aircraft were marshalled on each side of the runway, while gliders were parked in pairs. Barton gave the first briefing himself, at 17.30 and the first aircraft took off at 21.25. His report, again, brings the operation to life:

When the target was reached, aircraft made runs along the release line parallel to the coast about 3000 yards out or close in on account of the strength of the wind, in most cases at a height of 200 feet

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[68] Ibid, p148
[69] Ibid, p162
[70] See Fn above
[71] http://www.pegasusarchive.org/sicily/george_chatterton.htm
[72] George Chatterton would become quite a hero at Ladbroke. His glider was hit by flak on the approach, and crashed into the sea 100 yards from the shore, so he and the survivors had to swim ashore. Once they made it, they met an SAS patrol whose job was to destroy enemy strong points; and by all accounts enjoyed themselves hugely. Chatterton was awarded the Distinguished Service Order – Acknowledgement to the Museum of Army Flying.

or 300 feet higher than that stated in the briefing for the same reason. Gliders released mostly on the first run, others on the second or third run on receiving the order by intercommunication or by signal light from the tug, or was jettisoned by the tug pilot.

After release aircraft climbed to 600 feet. A little light flak was encountered in the area but no aircraft was damaged. Both gliders and tug aircraft were caught in searchlights which were easily evaded by the powered machines, but not so easily by the gliders, which were held in some cases to within 200 feet of the ground. One aircraft claims a searchlight put out by fire from the rear turret.

Of the gliders towed by the Squadron one came off some 15 miles from the landing zone without receiving any signal from the tug, four landed in the sea, possibly as a result of losing too much height in an attempt to evade searchlights, and the remaining seventeen crash landed in the target area. With the exception of one aircraft which landed at Adder Base, all tug aircraft returned to base, landing between 00.40 and 02.40 hours.

Barton commented that, of their experience in towing gliders up to that time, the Albemarle proved a successful tug for the Horsa in a temperate zone, but it did not prove such suitable combination in a Meditrranean summer climate. As regards any concerns about fuel consumption, they had not used long-range fuel tanks but all returned safely; these were all issues which would be vital features when planning for D-Day.

296 Squadron was soon to be joined by another paratroop Squadron at Stoney Cross[73]. 296 Squadron had been working closely with the Glider Exercise Squadron ever since its formation in January 1942 when it came of age from a sub-unit of the Airborne Forces Establishment and moved to Netheravon[74]; subsequently, it would be renamed 297 Squadron.

It was the 13th August 1943 when command of 297 Squadron was transferred temporarily before the arrival of Wing Commander Kitley, who would lead them through their move to Stoney Cross. The Squadron was based at Thruxton, where life had been mostly a matter of exercising, and entertaining cadets who were eager to fly in gliders, while five of their Albemarles had been engaged in unglamorous missions dropping propaganda pamphlets over occupied France. On the 25th August, three of their Albemarles left for their new base; six Alebamarles flew on the next day with seven other transport aircraft; eight Albemarles on the 27th, 10 transports on the 29th and, on the 30th, five Whitleys. On the 31st August at 18.00, Kitley recorded that the move to Stoney Cross had been completed[75].

It would be a period of intense training for the Squadron, which exercised virtually every day, subject only to bad weather. The skills of the aircrews and the paratroopers were being brought up to the level that they would need in combat, and their kit was tested to prove that it was equally up to the task – but often it was not, and Kitley repeatedly had to report that the containers accompanying the parachute drops failed. Without their arms and equipment, they might as well be naked when they landed[76]. Nevertheless, some real action soon came their way. On the 2nd September, the Squadron's Whitley – *V LA 940* - took off with eight men of the 12th Commandos, under Captain Rooney. They dropped at St Valerie en Caux, where they reconnoitred the area but saw no Germans. They disabled a searchlight before meeting their rendezvous with the Navy who picked them up and returned them to base. In the meantime, the aircraft made itself useful by dropping leaflets on Blosseville, while two other Whitleys from the Squadron created a diversion from the commando raid, dropping leaflets on

[73] 296 Squadron left Stoney Cross in October for Hurn.
[74] National Archives AIR/27/1646/5
[75] National Archives AIR 27/1648
[76] Ibid. See in particular Kitley's entry for 9th September.

Rouen. They also drew the attention of some searchlights, and some light flak came up behind them, but none of them were hit, and no enemy fighters were encountered. All in all, as Kitley remarked,

The whole show was successful.

It was on the 12th September, that 297 Squadron was introduced to the 8th Parachute Battalion. The Battalion had been formed in early 1943 from the 13th Battalion The Warwickshire Regiment, based in the Midlands where the Airborne Forces had been created at RAF Ringway in 1940. Six aircraft from the Squadron were to have flown the Battalion to a night drop over Stonehenge; nothing less than thrilling but, sadly, the weather was so bad that it had to be cancelled. But the plan for Operation Overlord was now well underway and the Squadron exercised daily, practising parachute drops with the 8th Battalion and 22 Independent Parachute Company in preparation for the D-Day invasion. It was the work for which the Squadron had been formed in January of the previous year, and they would make history with it in Operation Overlord and, later, Market Garden.

In fact, they had already been identified as being such important assets to the RAF that 297 Squadron's skills had to be divided out into new units. As a result, on the 4th November A Flight was reconstituted as the new 297 Squadron, of which Squadron Leader Davis took over command; while B Flight went to Dorset, and Wing Commander Kitley took command of a new Squadron, 299 Squadron, that was formed at Stoney Cross from 297's C Flight.

297 Squadron was flying on the 21st December 1943, with the 8th Parachute Battalion on a night-training exercise that somebody had code-named *Try Again*. The intention was to drop 130 troops of the 8th Parachute Battalion and 10 troops of 22 Independent Parachute Company (Pathfinders)[77] in one lift. The first aircraft was to make its parachute drop at 03.00, and the rest were to follow at two minute intervals. It was a dark night, though, with heavy, low rain clouds obscuring the moon and it became difficult for the navigator, Flying Officer Jones, to fix their position. As a result, the pilot, 22 year old Flight Sergeant George Jubb, was led into a fatal error, and the aircraft crashed into a hillside, killing five of the six aircrew and eight of the ten paratroopers on board. The disaster was compounded that night when the fourth aircraft crashed on landing[78]. As a result the surviving aircraft were delayed and, because the runway had to be cleared, the last aircraft did not land until nearly 05.00.

The tragedy had a serious psychological effect on the 8th Parachute Battalion, and Lieutenant-Colonel Alastair Pearson, who had already won the DSO and the Military Cross, one of the most respected, experienced and highly decorated officers in the history of the Parachute Regiment, had to bring them back into shape and hand-picked replacement officers and NCO's to prepare for their part in the Normandy Invasion.

On the 2nd January 1944, two months after formation, 299 Squadron replaced their aircraft, Lockheed Venturas, which were outclassed in combat operations and disliked by their crews, with the Short Stirling, much preferred for its state of the art design and technology in which the navigator's, radio operator's and engineer's stations were grouped above the bomb cells forward of the wing, and the two pilots side by side with dual controls. The officers promptly had a party to celebrate at the

[77] Pathfinders were élite paratroopers whose task was to parachute in ahead of the main force in an attack, mark the drop zone, set up radio directional beacons which would allow the aircraft carrying the main force of paratroopers to home in on the exact point, and also to protect the area from enemy attack as the paratroopers came into land.
[78] http://www.paradata.org.uk/people/william-g-firkins

Dolphin Hotel in Romsey[79] and, by the end of the month, the Squadron had 19 Stirlings, which were being modified for towing gliders.

Always remembered as the first of the four-engined bomber to join the RAF, the Short Stirling could not have been delivered fast enough. RAF re-equipment policy had been based on an assumption, made after the First World War, that there would be no major war for ten years, so they would not need to commit to that sort of expense. Incredibly, by the 1930's, the ten year rule was still just sliding forward, so that, when Churchill was warning of German rearmament in 1934, the UK Air Staff told the Government that there would be no war at least until 1944 under the ten year rule and, so, there was still no need to incur the expense. Then, in March 1935, Anthony Eden and Sir John Simon visited Germany when Hitler told them to their face that the new German Luftwaffe already equalled the RAF in striking power. Within a year the Air Staff issued contract specifications for a four-engined bomber; even so, with nothing on the table, it took four years to develop and, on the 7th Mat 1940, the first production Stirling made its maiden flight[80].

Pilots liked the Stirling for its ability to out-turn enemy night fighters – which must have been a remarkable sight for such a large machine – but it had a poor altitude ceiling which put it in harm's way with a heavy pay-load. Moreover the short wing-span which made it agile also affected its performance and its service with Bomber Command was marred by heavy losses when used on operations, particularly in comparison with the Halifax and Lancaster, even though they were significantly smaller than the giant Stirling[81]. During 1942 Stirlings were used on long range attacks on Italy, flying with the maximum take-off weight of 70,000 pounds, and they just cleared the Alps. That being said, it was a powerful, robust aircraft that could take a lot of punishment, justifying a new rôle for itself and, by mid-1944, the Stirling had found a new lease of life, like the Albemarle, carrying paratroops and towing gliders for airborne operations and, as long-range transport, they served from Stoney Cross beyond the war.

Paratroop training with the Airborne Forces in preparation for D-Day took up most of 299 Squadron's time but, on the 5th April 1944, it flew its first supply-dropping missions to France with supplies for resistance forces. On D-Day, twenty-four Stirlings of the Squadron took paratroops to Normandy before dawn and followed these by sixteen aircraft towing gliders into dropping zones, losing two aircraft in the process. Supply drops continued until the next major airborne operation, the capture of the bridges at Grave, Nijmegen and Arnhem. Between the 17th and 23rd September, the Squadron dispatched fifty-four glider tugs (on the first three days) and seventy-two re-supply aircraft to Arnhem, losing five aircraft to concentrated enemy anti-aircraft fire in the process. The final airborne landing of the war at Wesel during the Rhine crossing met with little resistance and twenty-nine sorties were flown without loss. In May 1945, airborne troops were taken to Oslo to disarm the German occupation forces and after a period of general transport duties the Squadron disbanded on the 15th February 1946[82].

The United States at Stoney Cross

[79] National Archives AIR/27/1654
[80] Barnes, C, 1989, Shorts Aircraft since 1900, Putnam, London
[81] http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/shortstirling.cfm
[82] http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/RAF/299_wwII.html

297 and 299 Squadrons left Stoney Cross in March 1944[83], to make way for a change of management entirely, when it was transferred to the 9th United States Army Air Force, which was preparing to make its own history in the Normandy invasion. The Ninth had participated in the North African campaign, before moving with the American forces in the invasions of Sicily and Italy. After the Casablanca Conference plans were gradually formulated for D-Day and, in October 1943, the Ninth had a whole new purpose in life, to support the Normandy invasion. Together with the 8th Air Force, the Ninth had to destroy the Luftwaffe in the air and on the ground, without which the Invasion could not even start; then they had to destroy other targets that would weaken German capability, such as bridges, railways, industrial plants and ground fortifications – but while still keeping the Germans guessing as to where the Great Invasion would take place.

The 367th Fighter Group was part of the 9th Air Force, and revelled in its nickname the Dynamite Gang. It was activated at Hamilton Field, California on the 15th July 1943; the pilots and the ground crews had all trained on single engine aircraft and, naturally, expected to fly P-51 Mustangs, but were surprised to find 75 P-38 Lightning's sitting on the dispersal pads when they arrived at Stoney Cross, their first base in the European theatre. The change from single engine to twin engine aircraft required considerable retraining but, in the words of their former commander,

With spirit and enthusiasm the 1,000 men of the Group pitched in and by early May the 367th was ready for combat[84].

An advance party of the 367th Fighter Group had been busy at the Aerodrome preparing for the arrival of 392, 393 and 394 Squadrons equipped with the magnificent Lockheed P-38 Lightning. General Jimmy Doolittle, famed for his raid on Japan and who would command the 8th Air Force in England during Operation Overlord, called it *the sweetest-flying plane in the sky* and it was the fighter in which the greatest American aces, Richard Bong and Thomas McGuire won their laurels[85] (Bong won 40 victories and McGuire 38) in the South-west Pacific war, and which the Luftwaffe pilots would learn to respect as the Forked-tailed Devils.

Major Jack Reed wrote in his diary[86] that they arrived at Stoney Cross at 18.00 on the 4th April:

I must say it's quite a place. Much better than we expected. We have a large well-equipped field and good barracks….. Maj Crossen (Group Exec) and Griff who were on the advanced party jumped the gun on us and have done two sweeps each. Maj Crossen got two confirmed on his first trip. An 88 and a 109F…. Seems like old times to get back to making a cup of tea in your room before going to bed.

Two days later they had settled in and had some more to say about the Aerodrome:

We are gradually getting organised. Have an excellent field to operate from. It was originally a glider field and had plenty of runway. Over 7000' for the long one. The dispersal areas are strung out for miles with 38s in every nook and corner. We have 83 assigned to the Group with 25 to each of the

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[83] 297 Squadron would distinguish itself in the Normandy Invasion. At 23.00 on the evening before, four pathfinder Albemarles dropped ten men of the 22nd Independent Parachute Company in one aircraft and thirty paratroopers comprising the Advance Party of the 5th Parachute Brigade in the other three, over their drop-zone near Ranville. At 23.43, nine Albemarles of 297 Squadron dropped the main force of the 5th Parachute Brigade near the east bank of the River Orne; while in the early hours of D-Day itself fully loaded Albemarles towing eight Horsa gliders carried elements of 9th Parachute Battalion and engineers of the 591st Parachute Squadron to attack and silence the Merville Battery. Later that day 19 more Horsas were towed across; but the frantic operation to deliver, and then supply, the troops was only just beginning. See http://www.raf38group.org/297Squadron

[84] Chickering, E, 1988, A Tribute to the 367th Fighter Group. Edwin S. Chickering was Group Commander from November 1944 - September 1945, and delivered his tribute at Memorial Service, Air Force Museum, Dayton, Ohio, July 30, 1988 (Edited for use on the WWW - 8 December 1998)http://www.367thfightergroup.com/367hist.htm

[85] Yenne, B, 2009, Aces High: The Heroic Saga of the Two Top-Scoring American Aces of World War II, Berkley

[86] http://www.thenewforestguide.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Extracts-from-Captain-Jack-Reed.pdf

Squadrons…. We are in the 9th Air Force and will do ground support and dive bombing and strafing. It's going to be a rough war when this invasion starts.

Jack's best friend was James Elvidge Peck. Jimmy had been flying since he was 15 years old and had run up 212 flying hours when he joined the Royal Air Force in 1941, before the United States had even joined in the war, and was welcomed into an 'Eagle' Squadron that was manned by American volunteers. Equipped with Hurricanes, it began defensive patrols in October but in November 1941 it converted to Spitfires. Jimmy was awarded the RAF's Distinguished Flying Cross before the Squadron was transferred to the United States Army Air Force on the 29th September 1942. He then moved to the American 52nd Fighter Group, where he was awarded the American Distinguished Flying Cross and the Airman's Medal with Clusters. Tragedy struck on the 11th April, though, as Jack wrote of Jimmy's last flight in his diary:

He was up testing a new P-38 which had been assigned to him. He had about two hours doing about everything in the book and overshot the runway coming in to land. When he opened his throttles to go around the left engine failed and he spun in on the perimeter track. Needless to say it's pretty hard to take because Jim was my closest friend…. Jimmy had the British DFC and Bar, and the American DFC…. Jim was thrown clear when the ship hit and exploded. He was not burned but had a bad fracture of the skull…. Jimmy died about twenty minutes later on the way to the hospital.

Reed's Squadron became operational on the 9th May, and he plotted their first mission which took off at 08.00 with a sweep across Cherbourg, looking for a fight with the Luftwaffe:

Coming home we fired our guns in the Channel and my wing man (Lt O'Donnell) of the 392 caught a ricochet in his left engine and it quit. We stood by and I got a vector and brought him home on one engine. In making his approach he forgot his wheels and the tower gave him a red flare. He tried to go around but a 38 will not fly on one engine with flaps down if your speed is below 120 mph. When he opened his throttle to go around it pulled in to the left and into the trees. The ship hit the trees and exploded. I of course was very close watching him and I couldn't see how he ever had a chance. The good Lord was really riding with him because he stepped out of the wreckage with not a scratch except for a cut on one hand. I still can't believe it. It is almost exactly the way Jimmy Peck went in. I asked him later how he ever got out and he said he just sat there and then got out and ran like hell. After that he will probably live to be a ripe old age.

The invasion plans were all but in place, now, and the 367th were ready to play their part in the greatest invasion in history. In his diary for those most momentous days of the 5th and 6th June, Jack wrote:

Have been waiting for some time to write this. Yesterday afternoon at 4.00 the invasion started. I had been briefed previously but didn't know when it would actually start. The boats set out across the Channel at 4.00 yesterday afternoon and landed this morning at 06.30 for the American landing and 07.15 for the British landing. This was called 'H-Hour'. The landing was made between Cherbourg Peninsula and Le Havre on about a 50 mile beach front. Our job is to protect the shipping in the Channel from the English coast to the French coast…. The aircraft passing overhead today has been terrific. A group of P-51s just went over loaded up with bombs and a group of B-24s are just returning and this has been going on endlessly since early last nite. The P-38s are doing shipping cover with six groups. The P-51s, Spits and Typhoons are doing low cover and dive bombing in the assault area…. They are dropping airborne infantry and equipment by the thousands in behind the beaches who in turn are working out toward the beaches…. There was a terrific amount of hun activity in the Cherbourg area this morning and it was thought for a while that they would counter

attack, but guess they changed their minds when they had a look. There is a solid stream of landing craft going and coming between England and the assault area and supporting them on either side is over 800 warships. That sort of gives some idea of the size of the force.

By the latter half of June 1944 the Lightnings had truly earned their distinctive D-Day stripes when the 367th switched to ground attack missions supporting First Army ground forces fighting for their lives in France following the bitterly-contested D-Day landings. On the 16th June each aircraft carried two 2,000 pound bombs on an experimental mission; the first time such a heavy bomb load had been used by P-38s in combat. Up until this time, 367th casualties had been light; however, two days later four aircraft failed to return. Worse was to follow when seven P-38s were lost during the intensive softening-up of German positions prior to a ground offensive to secure Cherbourg. Jack wrote in his diary on the 21st June:

We had a big show today. Last nite we were ordered to Warmingford to remain overnite so we knew something was in the wind. We took off from there this morning about 07.30 and went to Berlin. We were escorting 7 CW[87] *of B-17s and 24s… We took off and climbed through the overcast and set course for Denmark, our first check point. We had no way of knowing our exact position on top of the overcast and we caught a hell of a lot of very accurate flak over the Fresian* [sic] *Islands. Just south of Sweden we turned south and went down to point of rendezvous which was just outside Berlin and from then on we really started to catch flak. I have been in this war quite a while but never have I seen so much and such accurate flak. They just simply put it up in clouds. If you turned left it followed you, if you turned right it followed you. If you dived they lowered it. I have never seen anything like it. I know what these bomber boys mean now when they say 'flak happy'. That stuff will drive you nuts.*

At the Memorial Service at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio, in July 1988, Edwin S. Chickering, former Group Commander of the 367th had this to say about the raid which took place the following day, the 22nd June 1944[88]:

A three division attack ordered for June 22nd was to be preceded by a low level bombing and strafing attack by 12 Ninth Air Force fighter groups. The 367th was to be the last fighter group over this highly defended area and would be followed by a massive Ninth Bomber Command attack from medium altitude. The fighters were ordered to fly at low altitude from west to east through this five by 26 mile highly defended area. The 367th P-38s were sitting ducks. Major Rodgers, leading the 392nd Squadron returned with only seven undamaged aircraft. Major Smith, the experienced Flying Tiger pilot leading the 393rd Squadron was killed. Within two to three minutes after entering the area the 394th had lost five pilots.

Jack Reed was there….

Today we really got it. I thought yesterday that we had really seen something but today they just shot us all to pieces. We went over to bomb the tip of the Cherbourg Peninsula where they have the hun cornered. It's only a strip about 5 miles wide and 25 miles long but the amount of flak concentrated there is almost beyond comprehension. Every town, farmhouse, trees, etc, is loaded with light and heavy flak. The mission was to send in 12 groups or 36 Squadrons 5 minutes apart and bomb them completely out but I don't feel it was very successful. We lost nine pilots and of the 48 ships we sent out only 13 are still fit to fly. Engines shot out, rudders and fuselages shot away and the rest filled full of holes. My wing man and myself got away OK but one boy in my section was on fire and had to bail in the Channel about 10 miles off Cherbourg…. We lost him. Boy by name of Wedul. Really a fine lad.

[87] Composite Wing

[88] http://www.367thfightergroup.com/367hist.htm

Two other boys who were in front of me exploded and went straight in, some of the others crash landed in allied territory and about five or six came home on single engine and one of those had to crash land when he got home. Maj Smith who was Group Ops Officer is missing, the 394th lost 6 and the 392nd one and 393rd one. I dropped my bombs on a flak battery and strafed another one but it was pretty futile. We were on the deck in the bottom of a ravine and they caught my section in a cross fire. Out of the 12 groups who went in all of them sustained heavy losses. So I don't think it was worth it.

Chickering was more blunt at the Memorial Service:

The mission was an unqualified disaster - seven pilots killed in action. All but 11 of the returning aircraft had extensive battle damage. The 367th was out of action for several days. During the 17 day period, including the operations in the Cherbourg area, the 367th had 14 pilots killed and one taken prisoner.

In all, twenty-one P-38s were missing in action from Stoney Cross during the 367th's stay during which time 55 missions had been flown from the airfield, attacking railways, bridges, hangars, and other targets in western France, and escorting bombers that struck airfields, marshalling yards and other facilities in the same area, before switching to ground attack missions supporting First Army ground forces in France. Then, consolidating the position of Stoney Cross as a heavy base, new tenants were planned when, in July 1944, 367th's fighters left Stoney Cross for the air base at Ibsley, six miles away, whose facilities met the demands much better of fighter aircraft. Indeed, no less than fourteen RAF Squadrons flying Spitfires between 1941 and 1944. Ibsley had been allocated to the United States Army Air Forces' 8th Air Force since 1942, when it became home to 27, 71 and 94 Fighter Squadrons of the 1st Fighter Group, which arrived on the 24th August 1942 with their P-38 Lightnings. Just five days later, on the 29th August, two planes were scrambled to intercept a German bomber. It has been said anecdotally that this was the first sortie to be flown by American forces from England in the Second World War[89]. What is not in doubt, is the record of the 367th, when, on the 25th August, it earned the first of its two Distinguished Unit Citations, for both its ground attack work and for its success in a huge fight with Luftwaffe fighters[90].

With the support of heavy bombardment critical to the success of the Allied advance in Normandy, strike bomber bases were needed closer to the Continent, for which Stoney Cross was ideal, so the 367th had cleared the Aerodrome to make way for 556, 557, 558 and 559 Squadrons of the 387th Bombardment Group[91], flying Martin B-26 Marauders, a very fast and very accurate medium bomber, designed to strike hard at ground forces, but which, unfortunately, was unforgiving to novice pilots, resulting in its nickname of Widowmaker. Nevertheless, once the pilots became proficient with the aircraft, the aircrews learned to appreciate its qualities, for it could take a lot of heavy punishment and still get them home[92]. And, while similar in design to the twin-engined Albemarles of 297 Squadron, the Marauders had the performance edge which saw them used very effectively as medium-level, very accurate bombing.

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[89] This is disputed by records which indicate their first engagement was on 1st September: http://www.8thafhs.org/combat1942.htm

[90] Blake, S and D DeBry, 2011, P-38 Lightning: Unforgettable Missions of Skill and Luck, P-38 National Association, March Air Reserve Base, CA

[91] http://www.387bg.com/Stations/Stoney%20Cross/Station%20452,%20Stoney%20Cross,%20England.htm

[92] The Marauder serial number 41-31612 nicknamed 'Five By Fives' (after 'Mr Five-By-Five', a popular song that came out in 1942), has been said in the Real New Forest Guide (http://www.thenewforestguide.co.uk/history/forest-airfields/stoney-cross/stoney-cross-background/)
to have flown over 100 missions from Stoney Cross, but this appears to be an error, because this aircraft served with the 386th Bombardment Group, which was never based at Stoney Cross. See http://www.historyofwar.org/air/units/USAAF/386th_Bombardment_Group.html

The 387th had a distinguished history in the War, nicknamed the *Tiger-striped Marauders* or *Tiger Tails* because of the distinctive diagonal yellow and black stripes painted on the tails of its aircraft. They had been activated at MacDill Field in Tampa Bay, Florida, on the 1st December 1942, where they trained with the new B-26 bombers, before joining the 8th Air Force in England, from where the Eighth would fly bombing missions deep inside German territory, targeting German's arms industry; but the twin-engined Marauders of the 387th simply did not have that sort of range and, so, they were sent on raids attacking Luftwaffe airfields in occupied France and Belgium, while the heavy four-engined bombers concentrated on the German heartland. Then, in September 1943, the 9th Air Force headquarters arrived in England to assume the task of providing tactical air support for the invasion of Normandy, and the 387th was transferred to the Ninth in October, to support the D-Day Invasion[93].

The advance unit of the 387th arrived at Stoney Cross on the 18th July 1944 organising the headquarters for the group's arrival three days later, where they were based until the Allied front in Normandy had pushed back the Germans enabling allied bombers to operate from French soil[94].

The very next day, Burl Thompson reported their first mission in the 556th diary:

A pathfinder smash at a railroad bridge at Lisieux, southeast of Le Havre. Bad weather at take off, worse on the return and 10/10 cloud at target. Led the high flight in 686 on her 107th mission. As yet she has never aborted with us. Bomb load 4-1000 lb. (Bridge smashed)

Despite poor weather, they flew missions nearly every day from Stoney Cross. For Mission number 61, Burl Thompson reported:

Aug 4, 1944 – target railroad bridge at Honfleur. Weather was bad over target, and after four runs on the target, still unable to bomb. We started for home. The lead ship erred slightly in navigation causing us to get the hell shot out of us. Maj Grau in the No. 1 spot, us in the No 4 spot, both had to land in Normandy. We got our left engine shot out, and the hydraulic system was causing our right engine to heat up. Unable to get our landing gear down, we belly-landed at B-8 – a Canadian airstrip. Andy was injured in the landing, MR was hit by flak—not serious. Lt Morson seriously injured by flak and died at 8.00 am, Aug 5. Everyone [else] was bruised but not hurt. The ship was a washout but Manny did a beautiful job of landing with one engine out. The next day we went to B-14 and were brought home by Avro Anson. Andy is still in 20th Gen Hospital at Bayeux (2 days later).

More of the raid was reported by Peter Crouchman[95]:

Flight Commander Captain Mansel R. Campbell was at the controls of Mah Ideel, when clouds obscured the target forcing the formation to abandon its efforts to take out the bridge across the Aure River at St Mimi. The Squadron had twelve ships in the formation. Captain Campbell's B-26C was one of the three that received flak damage; forcing him to make an emergency landing at one of the fighter strips in Normandy, France. 2nd Lt Robert B Morson, hoping to add the OLC[96] to his newly earned Air Medal, died as a result of the crash landing. Lt Morson was the crew's acting navigator. The other crew members escaped serious injuries.

It was an oddity of war, that on this date two of the Squadron's B-26C's were forced to make emergency landings in France due to Flak damage. This fact, in itself, was not unusual during those days, but on this particular mission, both pilots of the downed Marauders were very instrumental in

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93 http://387bg.com/

94 http://www.387bg.com/387th%20Bombardment%20Group%20-%20Chronology.htm

95 Crouchman, P, A Crouchman, R Allen, W Thompson, Jr, 556th Bomb. Squadron, B-26 Marauder Reference and Operations Guide, p. 57, quoted in http://387bg.com/387th%20Bombardment%20Group%20-%20Chronology.htm

96 Oak leaf cluster

forging the history of the 556th Bomb Squadron. Major (Lt Col two months later) Glenn Grau, the Squadron CO, was flying B-26C #612

Two days later, on the 6th August, the group took off on a mission to bomb a series of targets including bridges, fuel and ammunition dumps, and a locomotive depot at Beauvais, Beaumont-sur-Sarthe, Courtalain, Foret de Perseigne, and Blois airfield. But tragedy struck even before they left Stoney Cross. Peter Crouchman recorded:

Shortly after 1st Lt James H Brantley began his taxi roll, his flight engineer attempted to load the plane's Very pistol, located overhead and directly behind the copilot's head. While inserting the recognition coded flare cartridge into the Very pistol, the flare accidentally discharged into the pilot's cockpit. The fireball from the live flare ricocheted wildly about causing much confusion in the smoked filled compartment. The flare's fireball apparently came to rest on Lt Brantley, causing severe burns to the pilot's leg. In his great anxiety to escape his ordeal, Lt Brantley exited the B-26B by opening his overhead plexiglas hatch. The aircraft continued to taxi out of control, causing Brantley to slip from atop the plane, into the rotating propeller, killing him instantly.

Lt Loren Hinton, a veteran combat pilot in the Squadron, was acting as instructor and co-pilot during Lt Brantley's first mission. Lt Hinton cut the engines switches, but could not bring the rolling aircraft to a stop because the brake pedals were located on the pilot's left side position. The rest of the crew escaped the coasting B-26 by exiting via the bomb-bay and the waist gun windows. They escaped with minor injuries. Jisther finally came to a stop after running into the front of a nearby Squadron hangar. The B-26B was salvaged for parts.

On the 12th August, Lieutenant Moriarty of the 556th was at the controls of his B-26B Marauder named *Roughernacob* over Corbeil, when his bomber was struck by flak that pierced the fuel lines. The rapid loss of fuel forced Moriarty and his co-pilot, Lt Jess Wilkes, to feather their left engine and call Emergency Control for a suitable airfield to make an emergency landing. They ended up in a farmer's field short of an advanced landing ground for American fighters in France. Bill Murray recalled it intimately[97]:

The weather was fairly good and the flight to Corbeil was uneventful. The overcast over our target prevented us from dropping our bombs. As we turned to leave we encountered some light Flak, but at the time, we didn't believe we were hit.

We must have received damage to our fuel system. Shortly before we headed out across the English Channel, we noticed that our fuel gauges suddenly showed we were almost empty. We must have been losing fuel rapidly. I broke away from the formation and had Jess call emergency Flying Control for a heading to the nearest field suitable for a B-26 to land; which they supplied.

As we turned and headed for the designated field, our left engine began to cut out...and come back in. We decided to feather it, and trimmed our plane for single engine operation. We were losing altitude because we still had our full pay-load of bombs. We were over friendly territory, so we did not salvo to lighten the ship. About this time, our right engine began to miss for lack of fuel - when we trimmed for single engine, it was necessary for both Jess and I to be at the controls when the engine would cut out.

I spotted a fighter field ahead and to the left, and thought that we could make it. The big mistake I made was in not getting Whitey, our bombardier, out of the nose compartment earlier. Now this was impossible since Jess had to man the controls with me.

[97] Moriarty, B, Tall Tiger Tales, Yea Botz, Vol. XIX, No. 1 (Dec 1987)

As we turned toward the fighter strip, I knew we would not make it. We were about forty-five degrees to the runway, when I saw this farm field and without hesitation, called Jess to put the landing gear down. I've thought about it many times and to this day I don't know what, or who told me to do that.

We landed in that small field. At the far end of this field was a hedge row, and as we went through it, all three of our landing gears were sheared off. We bellied to a stop in the next field. Jess and I went through the top hatches, then ran to the nose to check on Whitey. The plastic nose section was broken off and he was gone! We thought that possibly he had been thrown clear, but when we turned around there was Whitey running like hell across the field! He hurried to the rear of the plane to check on Schell, Gantt and Salas, but they were gone... Like our bombardier, they were running from the wreckage, and needless to add, Jess and I took off too.

We were very fortunate we did not have any injuries. Thinking back, having the gear down probably saved our lives. It definitely saved Whitey's life.

Roughernacob was put down on the edge of Allied Landing Strip number A-13. The P-47 pilots, and personnel of the fighter Squadron, treated the B-26 crew royally during the few days of their stay. When transportation was arranged, Lt Moriarty, and his crew, were taken back across the English Channel to their home base at Stoney Cross, outside South Hampton...carrying their Norden bombsight.

There is no evidence that Stoney Cross ever hosted a Squadron of the American B-17 Flying Fortress, but homage must be paid to a B-17 which landed there for a visit in the invincible, happy-go-lucky spirit of the bomber boys. Anticipating that a war was looming on the horizon, the B-17 Flying Fortress was developed in the 1930's when Boeing competed with the likes of Douglas and Martin for a contract to build 200 bombers. Boeing's prototype out-performed its rivals and exceeded the Air Corps' expectations – but, disastrously, the aircraft crashed and the order was cancelled. But the Air Corps was so impressed with Boeing's design that they ordered 13 more B-17s for further evaluation. And the Flying Fortress was born[98].

322 Squadron joined the 91st Bombardment Group (the *Ragged Irregulars* which included the famed *Memphis Belle* among their number) with their fine fleet of B-17's. *My Baby*, serial number 42-107033, whose distinctive nose art featured Carmen Miranda[99], had been leading the attack on a heavy mission on the 8th August[100], supporting a break-through by the Canadian 1st Army. They made it safely back to their base at Bassingbourn in Cambridgeshire and, two days later, on the 10th, with no mission planned, Lieutenant David McCarty decided to take his bomber on a jolly to see his old friend and fellow resident of Birmingham, Alabama, Y Z Garner, if only Y Z could get to their rendezvous at Stoney Cross. Captain Edward Mautner was an officer with the Medical Corps based in Salisbury at the time, where Y Z innocently asked if he could borrow a jeep to drive to Stoney Cross so he could meet up with a friend he knew from Birmingham, Alabama. Mautner's orders were not to let the jeep out of his sight, so he agreed on condition that he went along aswell. When the jeep arrived at Stoney Cross, the formidable sight of a Flying Fortress parked there could not help but impress Mautner and, of course, it soon became clear that Garner and Mac McCarty were friends, and the rendezvous at Stoney Cross had been well-planned for them to meet up again, with the help of Mautner's jeep. Mautner later recalled that he believed Mac might have been drinking the night before, and he was certain the co-pilot had - but that did not stop Mautner from jumping at the chance to take a flight in the plane, when Mac suggested they take it up, and Mautner, Garner and Mac took off on a joy ride.

[98] https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/B-17_Flying_Fortress.html
[99] painted by Corporal Tony Starcer, mechanic and 91st Bomb Group's artist who also painted *Memphis Belle*.
[100] http://www.91stbombgroup.com/Dailies/322nd1944.html

It had a lasting impact on Edward Mautner, who took photographs of the bomber, which he would later have developed by an X-Ray technician in the Medical Corps and sent back to his family in the United States, writing on the back of one of them:

These 'forts' are the greatest bombers in the world.

About a month later Garner came to see Mautner again; but this time he was in tears. David MacCarty had been killed. The memory stayed with Edward Mautner for the rest of his life, and he passed the story on to his son.

In 2014 the Red Bluff *Daily News* reported a remarkable encounter when Edward Mautner's son met 2nd Lieutenant Ernest R Kelley, the pilot of *My Baby*, which, sadly, had been shot down over Piermont in occupied France on the 5th September 1944, during a bombing run on a German chemical plant[101]. On a long mission, Bob Kelley had the last turn, when he lost two engines and *My Baby* crashed, narrowly missing a French city; thankfully only with one of the crew killed, and Bob Kelley made it back to England to be back in the air within days. McCarty had not been flying on *My Baby* that day, but, three days later, Mac was pilot of number 348 *The Roxy Special*, on a mission to attack the Farbenindustrie chemical plant at Ludwigshaven. The daily report for the Squadron tells the story[102]:

Intense accurate flak with 6-8/10 cloud cover made visual bombing impossible and obscured results. Lt McCarty flying A/C 348 was observed to have received a direct hit in the target area in his right wing. The wing caught fire and then exploded. The plane was last seen going down in a tight spin. One chute seen.

It was not Mac's.

RAF Transport Command

The American presence left Stoney Cross when the 387th moved out in September 1944, and the Aerodrome was returned to the RAF. The ground crews there had now achieved a great deal of experience servicing and repairing gliders, that were still much needed to support the Allied advance in Europe, and Number 1 Heavy Glider Servicing Unit had a lot of work. But it appears that this large air base had other aircraft repair duties, as well. In his book 'The Silver Spitfire', Tom Neil recalled an occasion, while he was at Ibsley, when he was 'invited' by an engineer officer of a maintenance unit at Stoney Cross to flight test a repaired aircraft. A Westland Lysander had been on a cloak-and-dagger mission out of Tangmere and was caught on the ground in occupied France. The gunner had been shot dead but the pilot only winged and managed to make it back across the English Channel, but had to force land on Chesil Beach. The unit apparently was responsible for repairing aircraft that had made forced landings in a 50 mile range of Stoney Cross and, so, the Lysander had been taken back there for repairs. The repairs had apparently been completed but Neil approached the aircraft with caution and, with many misgivings he climbed up into the cockpit:

Settling myself eventually into the pilot's position, I felt at least a mile from the ground, totally unprotected and surrounded by glass, and nakedly accommodated in a bucket seat with two wings sprouting from my ears. There was nothing much in front either, quite unlike a Spitfire, whose nose reached out ahead the length of a cricket pitch. Moreover, the control column didn't break in the middle like that of a fighter, but grew like a stalk out of the floor. There was also a mass of space,

[101] http://www.redbluffdailynews.com/business/20140301/men-connect-in-red-bluff-over-tale-of-b-17-joy-ride
[102] http://www.91stbombgroup.com/Dailies/322nd1944.html

instruments everywhere, and a rather peculiar non-fighter-type smell – old spies, I concluded with a ghost of a smile[103].

Neil's affection for the Lysander did not grow with close acquaintance on that test flight. It was only after he was back on the ground, the plane at a standstill, that

I was able to relax a little, comforting myself that any landing that did not draw blood or from which you could walk away was more than acceptable to me under the circumstances.

The Aerodrome's new function in life followed in November with the arrival of 232 Squadron RAF, equipped with 25 Wellington bombers in a transport rôle, when they were promptly joined by 242 Squadron which had reformed there after returning from Italy. Then, in February 1945, Stirlings began to arrive for 232, and the Wellingtons were passed to 242 Squadron.

They were joined shortly by 46 Squadron RAF[104], which in May 1940 had taken part in the Norway campaign, flying from the aircraft carrier HMS *Glorious*, but the Squadron was decimated when the carrier was sunk in the Norway evacuation. More recently, 46 Squadron had taken on another critical function, flying Beaufighters in a Night Fighter defence rôle in North Africa, protecting Egypt and the vital maritime link of the Suez Canal. When Germany finally withdrew from Greece, however, the Squadron's business became very thin; in the month of November no operations had been reported at all; their Beaufighters had been unable to take off any way, because the weather had been so bad. The war was being won, and several aircrew who had become time-expired were repatriated home, while others left for duty with other Squadrons that still had a part to play in the war effort. Meanwhile, a great deal of importance was attached to winning an inter-RAF football tournament, and they were liberally entertained with ENSA concerts; but the rumour machine hummed into action with the news that the Squadron was going to be repatriated to the UK and reformed with a whole new rôle. On this occasion, the rumour was right and they were to leave their night fighters to join RAF Transport Command in the UK. On the 18th December, those remaining at Shallufa received three weeks' pay in English currency and, on the 22nd December, they embarked on a troopship for Liverpool, where they arrived on the 7th January and took some disembarkation leave before reporting to Stoney Cross. They were now familiarised with their new aircraft, flying the Stirling in the long-haul transport rôle on services between Stoney Cross and the Indian base of Arakkonam via Poona and between Stoney Cross and Dum Dum, north of Calcutta, via Palam, which were to commence on the 1st April after their training flights had been completed. After stagnating in recent months in North Africa, they now had a real sense of purpose and, as the Operations Record Book had it,

The Squadron is looking forward to being able to carry out its new duties with efficiency and zeal[105].

The 46 Squadron RFC and RAF Association website contains details of Flying Officer Francis William Douglas DFC, an officer of the Royal Australian Air Force who was attached to 46 Squadron. His nephew had written to the Association asking if they had any information about this experienced pilot who was awarded the DFC for his previous service flying Lancaster bombers, and had arrived at Stoney cross in February 1945. He was said to have been flying Stirling *PJ911* on a long-haul transport training flight when it crashed on the 24th March 1945 in the Canigou Mountains of South-western France, when he was reported *Missing presumed dead*.

[103] Neil, T, 2014, The Silver Spitfire: The Legendary WWII RAF Fighter Pilot in his Own Words, Weidenfield & Nicolson
[104] http://www.raf.mod.uk/history/46Squadron.cfm
[105] National Archives AIR/27/461

The French accident report[106] confirmed that the Stirling was on a training flight from Castel Benito in Libya to Stoney Cross in loose formation with three other Stirlings, when it crashed into a mountain, while flying below the safety altitude recommended to the crews at the briefing. It stated:

The aeroplane clipped the mountain with its right wing (the wing was ripped off by the force of the impact and stayed where it was). At the same time, two of the crew members, probably the pilot and co-pilot were ejected with their seats. A few metres away, the salvage team found the remains of two other bodies, as well as a letter, written in English, in the inside pocket of a leather jacket. The rest of the aircraft had slid 200 metres below.

The accident report descended into strange, dramatic narrative in its conclusion, which has been translated:

What happened?

Close to two months after the crash, a Catalan cowherd, drawn by a foul smell, made a strange discovery and informed the mayor of XXX [name redacted]. He had found a rotting human foot, at a place called the Ravin de Nouvaillet around two kilometres from the accident, no doubt dragged there by foxes. The police in XXX opened an enquiry into this macabre discovery but found nothing. Theories were put forward that it was an escapee from France or somebody in hiding killed by a German patrol before August 1944.

But shepherds and cowherds are great philosophers who have all the time in the world to meditate on the heavens and the earth and in particular, on the grandiose landscapes around them on the Massif XXX: with one eye on the flock and the other on philosophising … "This foot had a leg; this leg had a body; this body had a soul which hovers over me, crying 'Help!'. To find the pieces of the puzzle, the snow must melt first."

In his letter to the 46 Squadron Association, the pilot's nephew stated that *all 14 personnel on board were killed and were buried in the Mazargues CWG Cemetery at Marseilles, France*[107]. In fact, the accident report confirmed that there were nine on board:

Pilot Officer McMillan was one of three pilots… plus six crew members, ie nine airmen.

With the end of the war in August 1945, flights from Stoney Cross continued with trooping duties to India. In fact, trooping flights repatriating troops from overseas postings became such an important feature of the Aerodrome's work following the end of the war, that immigration reception facilities were established to speed the process through. In December 1945, 242 Squadron left Stoney Cross in sole tenancy of 46 Squadron but it was still a busy place; over the month more than 400 passengers passed through, mostly inbound, while 33,000 pounds of freight was handled, mostly outbound[108].

46 Squadron's Stirlings were replaced by the legendary Douglas DC-3 Dakota in February 1946. By this time the Dakota had earned itself a legendary reputation that has hardly been equalled in aviation history, yet the prototype had only taken off eleven years previously, in 1935. Rapidly realising its potential for transporting men and materials, the US Army Air Forces ordered a military version of the pre-war civilian DC3, and called it the Skytrain, with the designation C-47. As transport for

[106] http://www.smr46.co.uk/46sqn/index_files/Page30454.htm
[107] http://www.smr46.co.uk/46sqn/index_files/Page2687.htm
[108] Gillman, p407

military supplies, the C-47 could carry up to 6,000 pounds of cargo, and could famously hold a fully assembled jeep or a 37 mm cannon. As a troop transport, it carried 28 soldiers in full combat gear[109].

As an air ambulance the Dakota could accommodate 14 stretcher patients and three nurses, and Stoney Cross would be a very convenient landing point for taking patients to the Royal Victoria Hospital at Netley, the world's largest military hospital, just 21 miles away. On the 15th January 1944 the Hospital had been handed over to the United States Forces, when it became the 28th US General Hospital. Within six months the need for medical evacuation was imperative and every inch of space was needed when the wounded were brought back from the D-Day landings in Normandy. Now, with medical evacuation by air, the most pressing cases could be airlifted to the American-managed base at Stoney Cross from where they could travel the last few miles by ambulance truck to the American-managed base at Netley Hospital, a seamless operation that could be managed by United States military personnel from beginning to end. As the Allied armies bitterly fought their way across Northern France towards Germany, their medical teams in the field were able to take advantage of excellent planning, for American invasion plans had required the 9th Air Force to equip all their C-47s with racks for stretcher cases, and to give medical care and treatment to casualties in-flight, flying to air bases such as Stoney Cross that had convenient access to its military hospitals such as that at Netley. In the first seven weeks following D-Day, 18,415 American wounded - 33 per cent of the total 55,674 American casualties – were evacuated to Britain by air[110]. Whatever their planned homeward orders might have been, C-47 crews often found themselves with new instructions to carry out ad hoc medical evacuation missions. One crew member recalled:

Often, after unloading supplies in some part of France or Belgium, we would be ordered to a different airfield on the Continent, where we might find a nurse, medical crew, and a group of wounded (either walking or litter cases) waiting for us to take them to a hospital base in Britain.[111]

So what of the Dakotas in the Royal Air Force? Under the lend-lease programme large scale deliveries of C-47s were made to the UK, with nearly 2,000 Dakotas, as the aircraft became known in RAF service, being delivered, the first entering service with the RAF in India in 1942. The delivery of large numbers of Dakota IIIs revitalised the RAF's transport capacity, delivering dedicated aircraft that had been designed for the task rather than making use of obsolete bombers such as the Albemarle and Stirling which had flown from Stoney Cross on so many missions for Transport Command. The Dakota III eventually equipped twenty two RAF Squadrons and three Canadian Squadrons under RAF operational control. Dakotas served in every theatre of the war, most notably in Burma and also during the D-Day landings and the airborne assault on Arnhem in 1944.

General Eisenhower did not exaggerate when he called it one of the most vital pieces of military equipment used in winning the war. When production finally ended, a remarkable 10,692 DC-3/C-47 aircraft had been built[112]. As one Dakota pilot put it:

You can wreck a Dak, but you can't wear it out![113]

Dakota serial number *KP241* first flew in 1945, when it was handed over to 46 Squadron and flown on trooping duties between Stoney Cross and India. Then, on the 3rd April 1946, it was flying in on

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109 Yet still the same as the Horsa glider.
110 Nanney, J, 1998, Army Air Forces Medical Services in World War II, Air Force History and Museum Program
111 http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a433168.pdf
112 Incredibly, more than 400 DC3's and C-47s are still flying today; and that excludes the Basler Turbo 67, built on a retrofitted DC3 airframe but so well constructed that the FAA classifies it as a new aircraft (see: http://www.baslerturbo.com/)
113 http://www.raf.mod.uk/bbmf/theaircraft/dakotahistory.cfm

approach to Stoney Cross on one engine, when the pilot in command overshot the runway and lost control, and the aircraft crashed and burst into flames. Mercifully the plane was not carrying passengers, but the crew of two were killed[114].

As the requirement for trooping flights subsided, passengers and freight were carried mostly to Rome, Berlin, Warsaw, and Vienna, and the roar of Stoney Cross now reduced to a whimper. There was a further moment of glory, though, when General Eisenhower, then Army Chief of Staff based in Washington DC who had arrived in Southampton on RMS *Queen Mary* on the 3rd September 1946, went to Stoney Cross by car, where he took a plane to Frankfurt, Germany[115]. His aircraft was a four-engined Douglas C-54 Skymaster rather oddly named *Sunflower II*, which had been assigned to the US Air Attaché in London[116].

It would be the swansong for the Aerodrome at Stoney Cross, though, where activity was gradually reduced – at least on a military scale, for, in May 1946, the RAF Chaplaincy Board was pleased to report a baptism on the base[117]. What a splendidly flying start for a child! Still, by December 1946, the remaining units had transferred to RAF Manston. Stoney Cross was then retained on a care and maintenance basis until January 1948, when the land was released back to its pre-war owners. As soon as the perimeter fence was down, the Fritham cricket team was able to resume those quintessentially British activities that had been so rudely interrupted by Hitler and which, after all, everybody had been fighting for. Somehow, it seems fitting that we end on this scene, in which we all got back to normal.

The abandoned buildings rapidly fell into decay, and were visited only by local children and wandering ponies. In the years since then, though, successive attempts have been made to erase all evidence of the Aerodrome from New Forest soil; they have mostly succeeded, but concrete hard standings for the long-forgotten aircraft still serve as car parking areas and the camp site at Ocknell, in a fitting irony of evolution that has seen the business of war serve the leisurely ways of peace. And so, we are back where we started: the summerlands of the New Forest still have an irresistible quality that beckon us away from the Brave New World of cyber-conquest and nuclear proliferation. But the ghosts of the old runways remain, for their outlines still stride across the plain, maybe to inspire some Forest folklore in the future, about the New Forest at war.

Simon Daniels

[114] http://aviation-safety.net/database/record.php?id=19460403-0
[115] http://www.thenewforestguide.co.uk/history/forest-airfields/stoney-cross/stoney-cross-eisenhowers-visit/
[116] The same website misidentifies the aircraft type in an illustration, but carries a picture of Mrs Eisenhower boarding a C-47 Dakota.
[117] National Archives AIR 82/321