



Reflecting on the Part the New Forest Played in World War 2 on this 80th Anniversary of D-Day

This year is the 80th anniversary of possibly the most important day in the history of World War 2, D-Day, the first day of Operation Neptune, the Normandy landings. The New Forest was heavily involved in the planning, preparation for, and execution of D-Day and the breakout into France, which led to the ending of the war in Europe.

However, the impact of World War 2 on the New Forest was not confined to D-Day, it started in 1939 when, on the 3rd September 1939 Britain declared war on Germany. Nine months later, In June 1940 France surrendered to Germany and the South coast of England became the front line of our defence. Less than a month later from July to October 1940, the Battle of Britain took place followed by The Blitz which lasted until May 1941. Britain was under attack and fighting for survival.

It was clear that we needed to strengthen our defences and large areas of the country, including the New Forest, were turned into military training areas.



Relics of war, an air raid shelter at one of the New Forest forward airfields

A chain of forward airfields was built in the South of England, five of these in the New Forest. RAF Ibsley opened first during February 1941. RAF Hurn followed closely behind in July 1941. RAF Beaulieu and RAF Holmsley South opened in August and September 1942 and RAF Stoney Cross followed in November 1943.

Some of the forward airfields were used by Coastal Command for anti-submarine patrols in the Channel and the Bay of Biscay, others were used for glider training, fighter, and bomber operations.

Parts of the Beaulieu estate was used to train agents from the Special Operations Executive before they left for occupied Europe to link up with resistance movements.

The Ashley Walk Bombing Range, located along Hampton Ridge between Fordingbridge and Fritham was established to test the diverse range of bombs that were developed during the War including Barnes Wallis' Tall Boy and Grand Slam, which at 22,000lbs was the largest bomb ever to fall on British soil. Some of the craters made by these bombs can be seen today.

The Signals Engineering and Development Establishment and the Special Operations Flight at Christchurch were responsible for many breakthroughs in ground and airborne Radar and in signals technology that is believed to have given British and Allied aircraft one of the key advantages over the enemy.

In 1943 planning started for what became known as Operation Overlord, the Allied operation to liberate German-occupied Western Europe. The operation to land the troops in Normandy was planned for early June 1944. 6th June, known as D-Day, was the first day of Operation Neptune, the Normandy landings, involving over 5,000 vessels and 1,290 airplanes. The plan was for some 160,000 troops to cross the Channel on D-Day. This was an immense undertaking that had a profound impact on the New Forest because of its strategic location.

The forest's remoteness and thick tree cover made it ideal for assembling troops, including those of the British 50th Infantry Division who would land on Gold Beach on D-Day. The Balmer Lawn Hotel in Brockenhurst was requisitioned as their Headquarters.



Relics of war at Lepe beach

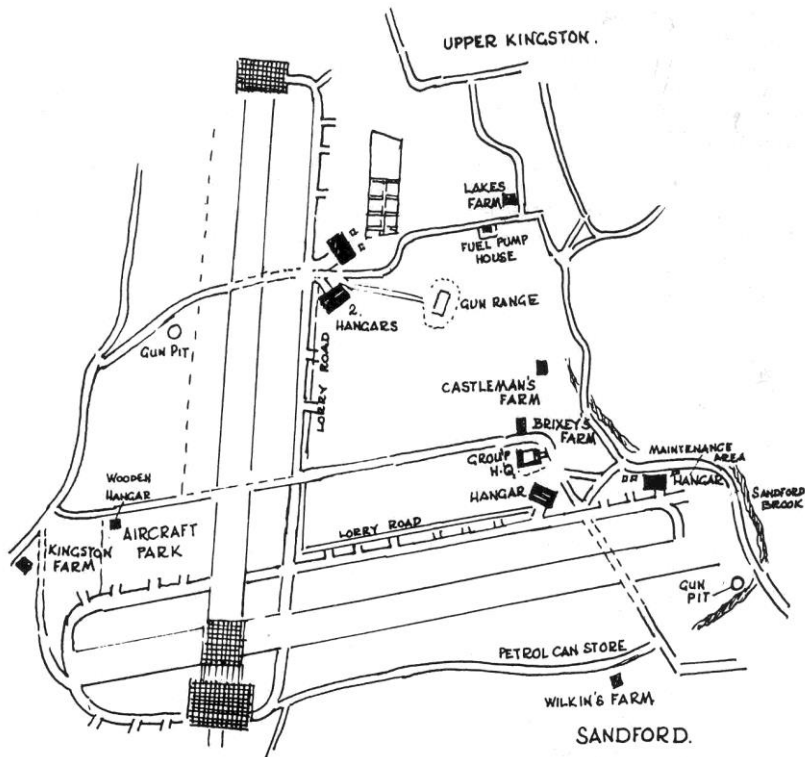
Phoenix caissons for the Mulberry harbour were constructed on the shores of The Solent at Lepe and at Marchwood on Southampton Water.

Lepe, Stone Point and Lymington were major embarkation point for troops who had been camped in the forest. During the build up to D-Day Lyndhurst was home to an Engineer Depot, with ammunition and ordnance stores.

Lepe was also the point from which PLUTO, the pipeline under the ocean left mainland England.

The Exbury Estate played a significant role in the strategic planning of D-Day. Exbury House was designated as HMS Mastodon, it was responsible for the administration of victualing, arming, and training of crews for the landing craft used in the amphibious assault.

Bucklers Hard and the Beaulieu River saw intense activity in the build-up to D-Day as a repair facility for motor torpedo boats and minesweeping craft. RAF Calshot was an important repair and maintenance facility for sea planes and the base for fast boat operations around the Solent.



RAF Bisterne ALG

Sketch by the late Alan Brown

Five temporary airfields known as Advanced Landing Grounds were built in the New Forest during the winter of 1943/44. They were at Bisterne, Christchurch (on part of the existing airfield), Lymington, Needs Oar Point and Winkton. Most of the New Forest airfields were occupied by formations of the USAAF from April 1944 until the end of June when many could move to newly constructed ALGs built on land liberated in Normandy. These USAAF units flew the P-47 Thunderbolt or P-38 Lightning, primarily in the ground attack and close air support roles. The New Forest ALGs closed after only three months of operation.

To gain the air superiority needed to ensure a successful invasion, the Allies launched a strategic bombing campaign (codenamed Point-blank) to target German aircraft-production, fuel supplies and airfields and communications infrastructure to cut off the north of France to make it more difficult to bring supplies and reinforcements. These attacks were widespread and elaborate deceptions were planned to prevent the Germans from determining the timing and location of the planned invasion.

Many of the troops camped in the New Forest embarked landing craft around the coast and set off for the Normandy beaches on the night of the 5/6th June 1944. The aircraft based in the New Forest provided air cover for the massive convoy and close air support to the troops on the ground during the landings and the breakout from the beaches.

The New Forest's role in World War 2 did not end on D-Day. The airfields continued to provide essential bases for airborne operations including sending vast quantities of freight to the front line and the return of casualties to military hospitals that were located on the edge of the forest. Medium bombers took the place of the fighter bombers on the forward.

Many more troops and a great deal of supplies were transported by sea, by the end of August 1944 more than two million Allied troops were in France and history shows us the impact that Operation Overlord had on bringing the war in Europe to an end.

The research and development conducted in and around the New Forest delivered many innovative technologies which made an enormous contribution to the War effort.

Whilst most of the facilities and infrastructure developed for the war have long gone, there are still opportunities to walk some of the former military sites where you can see the remnants of this incredible period in the history of the New Forest for yourself.

Directions to many of these places are contained in my Guide to the New Forest World War 2 Airfields which, together with links to much more information about the New Forest during World War 2 and some suggested walks is available on my website <http://nfww2airfields.com>

Steve Williams is a former pilot and life-time aviation enthusiast with a particular interest in the World War 2 airfields of the New Forest and the D Day landings in Normandy.