



New Forest
World War 2
Airfields
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Advanced Landing Grounds

The New Forest's Temporary Airfields

RAF Bisterne

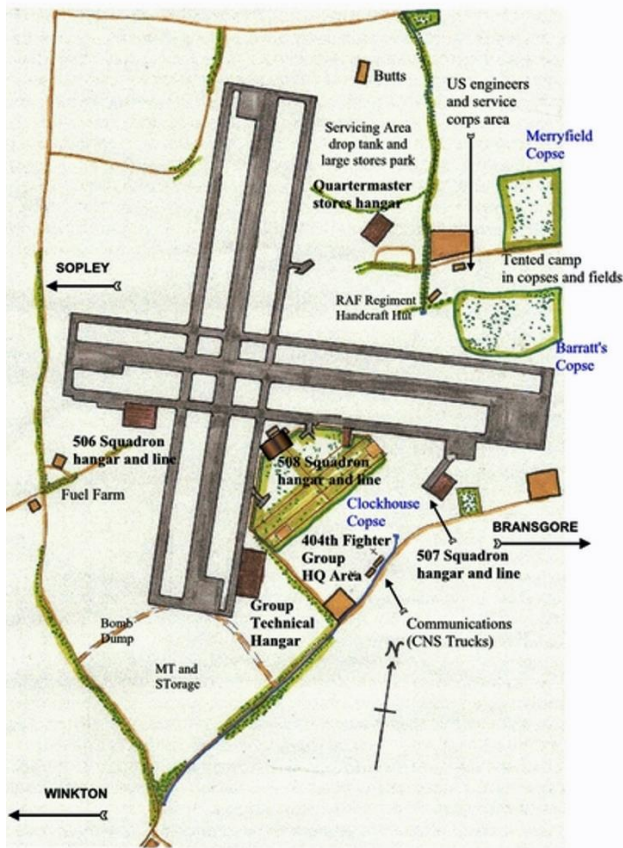
by Steve Williams

During 1942, when planning started for Operation Overlord, the invasion of Europe, it became clear that significant additional airfield capacity would be required in the period running up to the invasion, to destroy defences, rail and road bridges, military formations and factories producing military equipment. This additional capacity was also required during the invasion to provide support to the Landing and the troops on the ground. This required the provision of temporary airfields. These temporary airfields became known as Advanced Landing Grounds (ALG). The ALGs provided vital additional capacity to operate aircraft as near to the front line as possible, initially in England and then through France and the Low Countries towards Germany, as the front line advanced.

Characteristics of an Advanced Landing Ground

ALGs were built on requisitioned farmland with very basic facilities. Most of the accommodation was under canvas or in trailers. Where available, local buildings were requisitioned to provide headquarters and other specialist accommodation. Two or three blister hangers were provided for aircraft maintenance. ALGs had two runways of 1,400 to 1,600 yards long set at right angles to each other. The runways, taxiways and aircraft dispersal were made from Sommerfeld Mat or a similar form of metal mesh that was laid on the prepared ground.

Advanced Landing Grounds typically provided a base for three squadrons who together would require space for around ninety aircraft and 1,000 service personnel. Each squadron would be allocated an area on the airfield and there would be a central headquarters area. Space would be needed for quartermaster stores, fuel storage and ammunition storage.



The layout of a typical Advanced Landing Ground, this is RAF Winkton

Most accommodation was under canvas or improvised out of trailers or glider packing cases. Where possible, the cover provided by trees would be used and there would be several anti-aircraft gun batteries. At some ALGs existing buildings were requisitioned for use as headquarters or officers mess accommodation.

The life cycle of a typical ALG

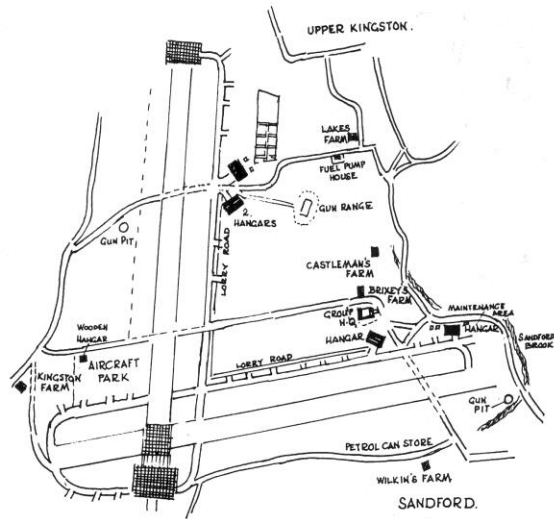
- September 1943 – Site cleared.
- December 1943 – runways laid.
- March 1944 – Camp prepared.
- Early April 1944 – Unit take up residence.
- Early May 1944 – Start of operations.
- Early July 1944 – Unit relocates to France.
- September 1944 – returned to agriculture.

The New Forest ALGs

Four Advanced Landing Grounds were built in the New Forest at Bisterne, Winkton, Lymington and Needs Oar Point. A fifth ALG type of airfield, with a single runway, was constructed on the East side of Christchurch airfield. Apart from Needs Oar Point, these ALGs were used by the USAAF flying the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. Needs Oar Point was base for four RAF squadrons flying Typhoons.

Bisterne Advanced Landing Ground

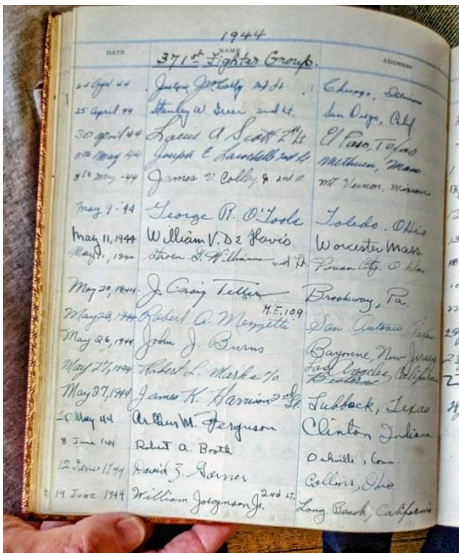
RAF Bisterne ALG was a good example of those in the New Forest. It was located on land belonging to the Bisterne Manor estate, south of Ringwood. Bisterne hosted the 371st Fighter Group of the US 9th Airforce consisting of the 404th, 405th and 406th Fighter Squadrons, flying the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. Most accommodation was under canvas, however a barn at Brixey's Farm was used as the Group Headquarters and briefing room and some officer accommodation was in farm buildings.



Brixey's farm became Station Headquarters



Tented accommodation at Bisterne



The Bisterne Manor Guest Book with the signature of Second Lieutenant Jim Harrison.



Doug and Marian Harrison with Hallam Mills, the current owner of Bisterne Manor estate.

The owners of Bisterne Manor made a few rooms available to provide an officer's club and they maintained a Guest Book that each visiting officer signed. The book still exists and provides a fascinating insight into the history of the Manor during the War. A recent visit by Doug and Marian Harrison provided them with an opportunity to see the Guest Book and Doug's father's signature.

On the 27th of May 1944 Second Lieutenant (later Colonel) Jim Harrison wrote a letter home in which he said *“I went to an old English mansion today; the owner is a retired Colonel who has turned part of his home into an officer’s club for our Group. There is a clubroom, library, a room to write and a bath (with hot water!?). The place is quite old, but very nice inside and out. The mansion is set back from the highway and the grounds are covered by nice lawns and stately trees and all around are colourful flower beds. You cannot imagine how beautiful and peaceful the scene is to my eyes. We all think it is very kind of them to let us into their home.”*

(Letter by courtesy of Doug Harrison)

The ground conditions in the Avon valley at Bisterne were difficult. Twice during its short life, the airfield had to close for runway repairs with flying operations moved to RAF Ibsley.

The 371st Fighter Group completed their move to ALG A-6 at Beuzeville au Plain in Normandy on the 29th June 1944 having used Beuzeville as a refuelling and rearming base since the 12th June.

There is very little to see at Bisterne today, except for an information board located on the side of one of the buildings at Brixey’s farm.



It is impossible to calculate the impact that these temporary airfields had on the outcome of Operation Overlord, the D-Day invasion, and the advance through Normandy, but I think everyone would agree that it was considerable, given the presence of over four hundred aircraft and 5,000 servicemen and women. Today there is little but information boards to mark these sites.

Directions to the airfield are contained in my Guide to the New Forest World War 2 Airfields, which can be downloaded from my website nfw2airfields.info My website also contains links to other articles and web sites with information about the airfields.