



New Forest
World War 2
Airfields
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Advanced Landing Grounds

The New Forest's Temporary Airfields

RAF Christchurch

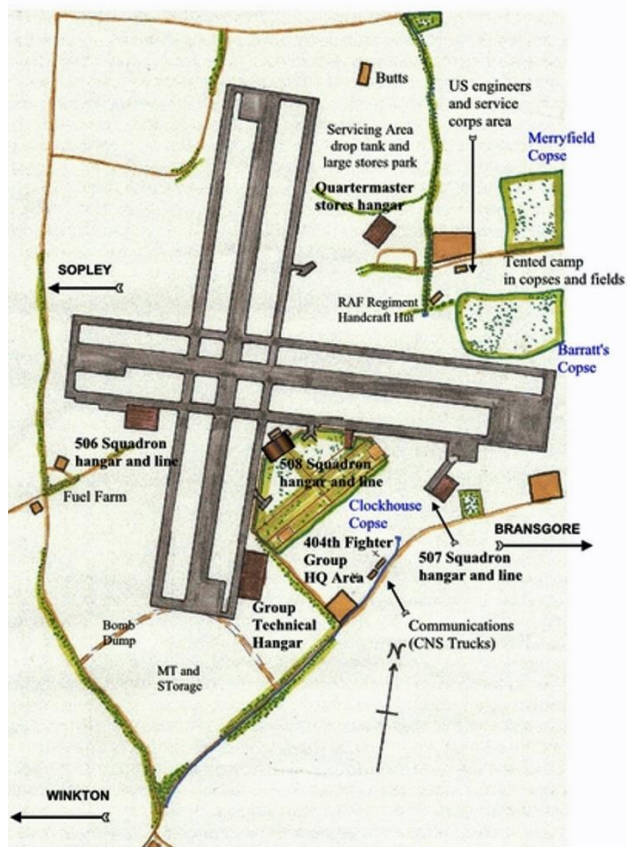
by Steve Williams

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. During the invasion support was needed for 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 were to provide vital additional capacity for key stages during the landings and advance through France and the Low Countries.

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. Most ALGs in England 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 required 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 as well as central services such as medical, communications etc.



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 to protect the airfield. 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 single runway ALG was constructed on the East side of Christchurch airfield. Four of these ALGs were used by the USAAF flying the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. Needs Oar Point was base for four RAF squadrons flying Typhoons.

RAF Christchurch Advanced Landing Ground

RAF Christchurch started life as a civilian airfield in the mid-1930s and at the start of the War it was requisitioned for military use. Several research and development teams were at Christchurch, and the Special Service flight used the airfield. Airspeed established a shadow factory to construct Airspeed Oxford training aircraft and seven hundred Horsa gliders.

In 1943 construction started on a single runway temporary airfield (ALG) near Bure Homage House. This part of Christchurch airfield hosted the USAAF 405th Fighter Group consisting of the 509th, 510th and 511th Fighter Squadrons, flying the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. Much of the accommodation was in tents in the woods and the grounds of Bure Homage House, the House itself was used as the Headquarters and Officers Mess. Houses near the airfield were requisitioned for additional officer's accommodation.



Plan of Christchurch airfield in 1944



Christchurch airfield from the south-west



A plaque at the corner of Somerford Road and Wilverley Road commemorates the Airfield.

On June 29, 1944, Second Lieutenant Vincent James from the 509th squadron, took off in a Thunderbolt but failed to gain height. He crashed onto the roof of 15 Foxwood Avenue. Although the aircraft was destroyed, fortunately there was no fire and the pilot and residents managed to escape uninjured.

Later the same day, Lt James took off in a replacement aircraft, with a full load of two 500lb bombs plus ammunition. Again, his aircraft failed to rise at the end of the take-off run, crashing into 19 Foxwood Avenue. One bomb exploded, killing the pilot, and bringing down his wingman Captain William Chapman in another Thunderbolt, killing survivors of the earlier crash as well as neighbours and rescue workers. With fire raging in the house, the ammunition left in the remains of the plane began to explode and the second bomb

exploded without warning, wiping out a Royal Navy rescue crew, civilians, firefighters and helpers.

On the 22nd June 1944 the Group started to move ALG-8 at Picauville, west of St Mere Eglise in Normandy.

The airfield returned to civilian use after the war and continued to be an important aircraft manufacturing centre for De Haviland. The airport finally closed in 1966 and is now covered with housing estates, retail parks, and industrial units.

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 airfields are contained in my Guide to the New Forest World War 2 Airfields which can be downloaded from my website nfw2airfields.info Links to other articles and web sites with information about the airfields are also available there.