



It's Amazing What Can Be Achieved During Wartime

Twelve Days to Build an Airfield!

by Steve Williams

nfww2airfields.info

Advanced Landing Grounds were temporary airfields built to provide additional capacity for aircraft required to prepare for and support the D-Day landings and the invasion of France in 1944. The ones built in the New Forest provided great learning for what was going to be needed across France as the front line started by the D-Day invasion moved eastwards.

RAF Bisterne, one of the New Forest Advanced Landing Grounds was built over the winter of 1943/44 and was operational for just three months between April and June 1944. During that time, it was “home” to the 371st Fighter Group of the USAAF, flying the mighty P-47 Thunderbolt. These pilots provided bomber escort and ground attack before the invasion to destroy bridges, railways, military convoys etc. to reduce the enemy's capability in preparation for the landings. During the D-Day landings and as the front line moved forward, they provided further ground attack as well as close air support to the troops on the ground.



*The P-47 Thunderbolt
US Museum of World War 2 Aviation*

Whilst based at RAF Bisterne, each mission involved a round trip of about 200 miles to reach their targets and therefore reduced the time they could spend on target. It also placed an additional burden on the pilots, so there were many good reasons to want to provide airfields closer to the area of operation as soon as possible.

The solution was to build Advanced Landing Grounds in France. Before this could happen, suitable land had been liberated, the necessary materials transported to site, and the construction carried out. How long did it take to reach this objective? Looking back in history, it is amazing to learn that a staggering 50 Advanced Landing Grounds were built in France in just 80 days.

The 371st Fighter Group were to leave RAF Bisterne for Advanced Landing Ground A-6 at Beuzeville-au-Plain, near La Londe. Construction of this airfield started on the 7th June 1944, just one day after the D-Day landings, whilst the area was still under enemy artillery fire.

By the 10th June, the 819th Engineer Aviation Battalion had constructed a 5,000 foot by 120-foot Square Mesh Tracking (SMT) runway and A-6 became an Emergency Landing Strip available to aircraft in

distress. Three Spitfires flown by Polish pilots were the first aircraft to land there. Three days later the refuelling and rearming facilities were operational so the aircraft of the 371st could refuel and rearm in France, only returning to Bisterne at the end of the day.



*Square Mesh Tracking Runway being laid
at A-6 Beuzeville au Plain, June 1944
Picture from US National Archives*

The first part of the mainly tented infrastructure was completed at A-6 by the 17th June and the 371st started to move from RAF Bisterne to Beuzeville just 10 days after the start of construction of the Advanced Landing Ground. The move was completed by the 23rd June and A-6 became one of the first Advanced Landing Grounds to operate in Normandy, with around ninety aircraft and nearly three thousand personnel.

Pilot Profile

Second Lieutenant (later Colonel) James K. Harrison (Jim) flew the P-47 Thunderbolt with the 404th Fighter Squadron of the 371st Fighter Group. He came to RAF Bisterne in April 1944 and flew 111 combat missions with the 371st before returning to the United States three weeks before VE Day. During his time in Europe, he was awarded the Air Medal (with 17 Oak Leaf clusters), the Distinguished Flying Cross, and, as part of his unit, the Presidential Unit Citation.



Picture courtesy of Doug Harrison



The location of the runway at Beuzeville is still clearly visible in the fields.

The 371st left Beuzeville on the 18th September 1944 for Advanced Landing Ground A-65, Perthes which is located near the commune of Perthes in the Champagne-Ardenne department of northern France. to move closer to the advancing front line. The 371st continued moving east to follow the front line and ended their operations in Germany, leaving Stuttgart for the United States in August 1945.

A USAAF P-38 Lightning Fighter Group also used A-6 Beuzeville, but it finally closed on the 18th September 1944 and was returned to agriculture. Today, all that remains is a memorial, beside the road that runs along the perimeter of the former airfield and a memorial next to the church in the village of Beuzeville au Plain.



The memorial placed on the perimeter of the former airfield.



The memorial in the centre of the village of Beuzeville au Plain

Building these Advanced Landing Grounds in under 12 days or less was a remarkable achievement. One that was to be repeated many times in France, Belgium and The Netherlands to Germany.

All the USAAF Fighter Groups that were based in the New Forest moved to one of the Normandy Advanced Landing Grounds by the middle of July 1944, bringing an end to the life of RAF Bisterne and the other New Forest Advanced Landing Grounds.

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.