



It's Amazing What Can Be Achieved During Wartime

Twelve Days to Build an Airfield!

by Steve Williams

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.

A single runway Advanced Landing Ground was built over the winter of 1943/44 on part of RAF Christchurch and was operational for just three months between April and June 1944. During that time, it was “home” to the 405th Fighter Group of the USAAF, which included the 509th, 510th, and 511th Fighter Squadrons, all flying the mighty P-47 Thunderbolt. These pilots provided ground attack before the invasion to destroy bridges, railways, military convoys etc. to reduce the enemy's capability in preparation for the landings.



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

Whilst based at RAF Christchurch, 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 actually 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 405th Fighter Group were to leave RAF Christchurch for Advanced Landing Ground A-8 at Picauville, to the west of St Mere Eglise.

On the 13th June the 826th Engineer Aviation Battalion, who had completed the construction of A-10, began surveying the land at Picauville and construction started a day later. By the 20th June the area was cleared and a 5,000 foot by 120 foot Prefabricated Hessian (PBS) runway was ready for use. Prefabricated Hessian was lightweight and easy to transport and use, nor did it produce dust clouds

unlike that of Square Mesh Track (SMT) runways. It consisted of an asphalt-impregnated jute which came in 300-foot rolls and was between 36 to 43 inches wide which were laid in overlapping layers.



*Prefabricated Hessian Runway being Laid.
Picture from US National Archives*

The technical and domestic accommodation, which was largely under canvas, was completed by the 26th June, just 12 days after the start of construction. Much of the early work had been carried out whilst under enemy artillery fire. The 405th started to move from Christchurch to Picauville on the 22nd June and by the end of June A-8 became home to 75 aircraft and just under 1,000 men.

During and after the D-Day landings as the front line moved forward, they provided further ground attack as well as close air support to the troops on the ground. The 405th Fighter Group specialised in attacking railways, convoys, and enemy troop formations. The group's most notable action was the destruction of an entire German armoured division near the town of Avranches, France on 29 July 1944. After immobilizing leading and trailing elements of the 3-mile-long column, the rest of the tanks and trucks were systematically destroyed with multiple sorties.

During August 1944 lighting was installed at Picauville to enable RAF Mosquito night fighters to operate. It was then designated A-8 N to signify night operational capability.

The 405th left Picauville for another Advanced Landing Ground, A – 64, St Dizier on the 14th September, to move closer to the advancing front line.

The Advanced Landing Ground finally closed in November 1944 and was returned to agriculture. Today, all that remains is a memorial, beside the D-69 road that runs along the perimeter of the former airfield.



The memorial placed on the side of the road that ran along the perimeter of the airfield.

Building these Advanced Landing Grounds in just 12 days was a remarkable achievement that was to be repeated many times in France and through to Germany. By 15th September 1944, the USAAF 9th Engineer Command had built over eighty Advanced Landing Grounds in their zone of Normandy, while British engineers had constructed a further 76 Advanced Landing Grounds in their zone.

All 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 the Advanced Landing Ground area at RAF Christchurch and the other New Forest Advanced Landing Grounds. RAF Christchurch continued to be an important airfield as well as a centre for research and development and aircraft manufacture until it closed in 1966.

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. More details about Christchurch and all of the New Forest World War 2 Airfields can be found on my website <https://nfw2airfields.info>