



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 Lymington, 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 50th Fighter Group of the USAAF, 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. 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.

Whilst based at RAF Lymington, 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.

SPECIFICATIONS

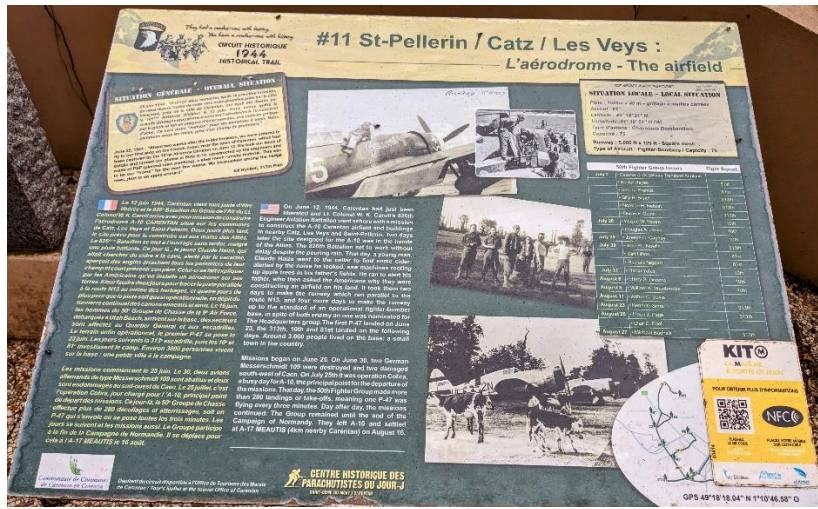
- Engine: Pratt & Whitney R-2800, 2,000 hp
- Maximum speed: 433 mph
- Cruise speed: 260 mph
- Range: 800 miles
- Service ceiling: 42,000 feet
- Length: 36 ft. 1 in.
- Wing span: 40 ft. 9 in.
- Armament: Four .50 cal. machine guns w/ 3,400 rounds
- Bomb capacity: 1,500 lbs. or ten 5-inch rockets
- Military serial #: 45-49385



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

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 50th Fighter Group were to leave RAF Lymington for Advanced Landing Ground A-10 at Carantan, but the site earmarked for this airfield was only liberated on the 12th June 1944.



Information board at the site of A-10 Carentan

On the 14th June the 826th Engineer Aviation Battalion began construction, by the 16th June the area was cleared and by the 18th June a 5,000 foot by 120 foot Square Mesh Tracking (SMT) runway was ready for use. A-10 became an Emergency Landing Strip available to aircraft in distress. Three days later the refuelling and rearming facilities were operational so the aircraft of the 50th could refuel and rearm in France, only returning to Lymington at the end of the day. Much of this work had been carried out whilst under enemy artillery fire.



Square Mesh Tracking Runway being Laid.
Picture from US National Archives

By the 24th June, the rest of the mainly tented infrastructure was completed at A-10 and the 50th moved from RAF Lymington to Carentan just 12 days after the start of construction of the Advanced Landing Ground. A-10 became home for around ninety aircraft and nearly three thousand personnel.

Ed Hubbel, a 313rd Pilot wrote - On June 25, 1944, about two weeks after the initial invasion, we were ordered to fly to our first strip on the French coast, near the town of Carentan, which had been captured by the 101st Airborne Division on June 12. We took our leave of Britain and landed our planes at strip A-10, constructed by engineers using a steel mesh runway. This was to be our home for the next few weeks. We bivouacked among the hedge rows, next to the apple orchard”.

The 50th left Carentan for another Advanced Landing Ground, A-17 at Meautis on the 16th August, to move closer to the advancing front line. The group continued to follow the front line and ended their operations in Europe at Giebelstadt, Germany in May 1945.

Two other USAAF Fighter Groups used Carentan until it closed on the 4th November 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.



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.