
WINKTON ADVANCED LANDING GROUND THEN AND NOW





Views across Winkton ALG, courtesy of Andrew F Wilson. The first shows a P47 probably on the westerley runway, the second a visiting Cessna UC78 Bobcat communications and administration aircraft.



Views showing the area of Clockhouse Copse and the temporary roads and clearings made by the RAF and USAAF in 1943-44 (courtesy of Hal Shook)

The 9th Air Force had four advanced landing grounds in the Avon Valley or south west Hampshire. The Avon Valley has a high water table and building the

temporary landing grounds took some skill. The plan was to lay the runways with Sommerfeld steel matting on compacted earth, and to use the same material for the taxiways and dispersals. However Sommerfeld was not ideal for wet sites like the Avon Valley and extra work was needed during the winter of 1943/44 during which heavier metal coverings were used. This work was not complete when the 404th Fighter Group arrived. Aviation engineering battalion crews had returned to complete laying pierced steel planking overlaying the assembly and holding points and ends of the runways where the need for heavy load bearing surfaces was greatest. Some of the reconstructed airfields had underlays of ballast for the runways and hessian or straw for the taxiways. The unit histories describe the surface at Winkton on which the trucks drove on the airfield as being "*a bumpy driving strip paved with chicken wire and tree branches*" and this was apparently a typical surface for the taxiways and dispersals too. At some sites the mesh was also covered with gravel and rolled down.

The airfield was built to a standard layout or design, two runways at near right angles, aligned as close as possible to north-south and east-west axes. In Winkton's case the North-South Runway was longer (1600 yards, 1456 m) whilst the other was only 1400 yards(1274m) long. To fit the runways onto the site, the sunken road that ran east to west across the airfield (Derrit Lane) had been closed in 1943 and filled with rubble, reputedly from properties blitzed in Southampton. The large area available, plus some trimming of two woods (Barrett's Copse and Clockhouse Copse) within the area of the airfield enabled the construction of full length parallel taxiways down both sides of both runways.

In the fields at the southern end of the airfield and indeed possibly across the lane (Harpway lane) that formed the western boundary the 404th kept a small number of Piper L3 Grasshoppers (ex Civil-standard machines with the rear curved windows) for use as unit hacks and communications. Some at least may have been left behind. At least one is thought to have been damaged by farm animals. The only known photograph indicates they remained in the markings of the previous user. Others were described as dumped up against a hedge.

It has also been reported that one of the fields south of the airfield was used to host three trucks, with aerials, one of them a radar type dish aerial, conjecturally an early US federal or MPN radar set before its transfer to France. The area was close to a number of British radar development sites. Other reports place this equipment on the SW edge of Winkton airfield itself. It may however be a sighting of the three trucks and trailers (including a homer) which made up the radio communications equipment used by the Americans at Winkton and which left the area later than the Fighter Group and for a different destination.

USAAF units at Winton

(My thanks to Peter Oliver for the following details)

HQ and HQ Sqn 404th Fighter Group.

506th Fighter Squadron

507th Fighter Squadron

508th Fighter Squadron

210th Medical Dispensary Aviation

2149th Engineer Aviation Fire Fighting Platoon

Detachment "A" 1293rd MP Co Aviation

9th SERVICE COMMAND UNITS

379th Service Sqn

1591st Ordnance Supply & Maintenance Co Aviation

Detachment "A" 30th Mobile Repair & Reclamation Squad

Detachment "C" 857th Chemical Co

Detachment "A" 1028th Signal Co

Detachment "A" 1242nd Quartermaster Co Aviation

Detachment "A" 2204th Quartermaster Truck Co Aviation

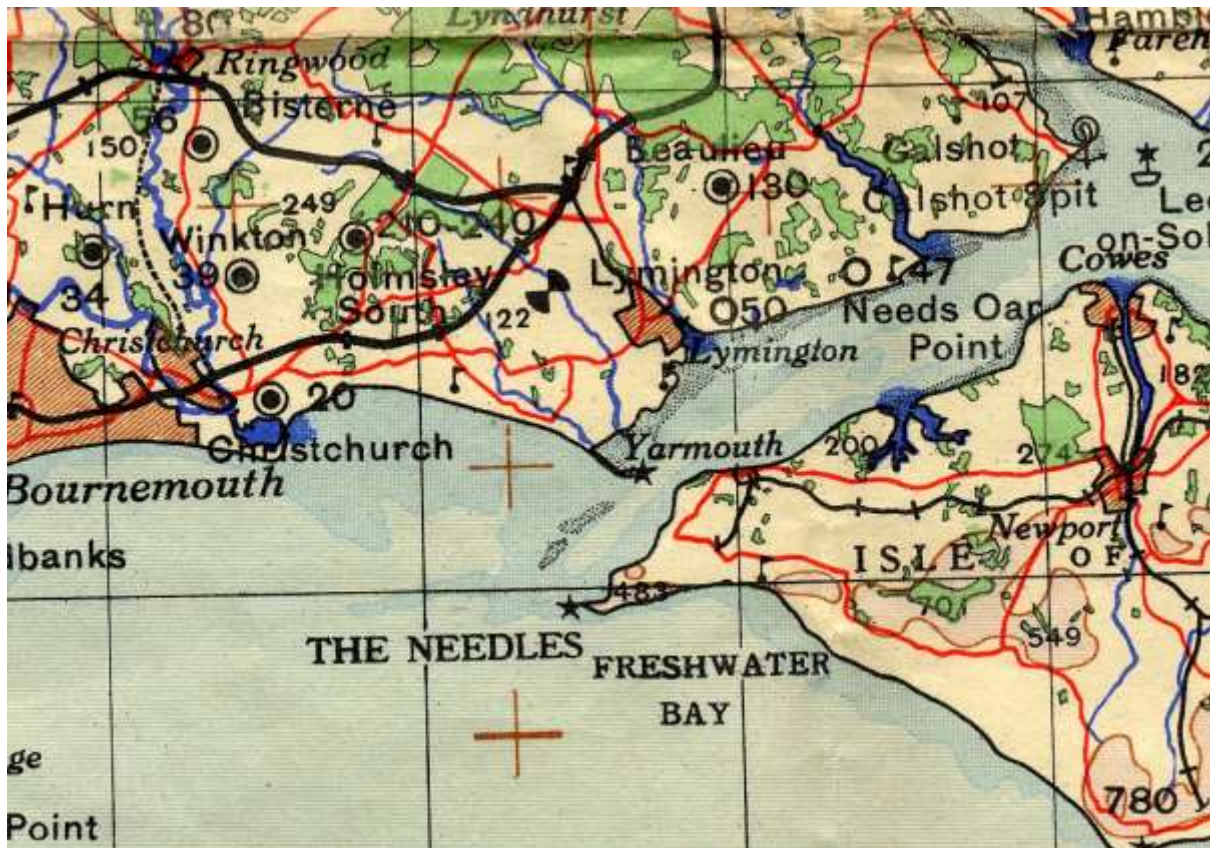
HQ 9th Air Force units

85th Ordnance Bomb Disposal Sqn

Detachment "ZN" 21st Weather Sqn

Detachment "ZN" 40th Mobile Com Sqn

Location (*map shown is RAF topographical for 1944*)



Operations:

The Group HQ had a Brockhouse trailer and a marquee both on lend lease for the intelligence and operations sections, files, maps etc. and group-mission briefings. Each squadron also had Brockhouse trailers as offices for Operations and Intelligence, and used their own creativity with tents and glider crates to make their own briefing and pilots' ready rooms. The Group weather section also had a van of its own. The Brockhouse van, caravan or trailer was a 4 wheel metal sided towed rectangular trailer with doors at each end.

Communications:

Group HQ and each squadron had a communications section. Group had a direct phone line to Command HQ. Written orders were received via teletype. Personnel also handled a code room and radar (ground based homing and aircraft IFF equipment - - Identification Friend of Foe). The Group message center was tied in with a local electrical power source, with auxiliary generators for backup. Each squadron's communications people took it in turns operating the field's CNS or Control Net System, with "three trucks, one transmitter, one receiver and another receiver with a rotating directional antenna... the homing van." The homing van is believed to have been located near the intersection of the two runways. The field controller used the callsign "Drainsink".

Ground Services:

There were five blister hangars/shelters - one for each squadron's engineering section, which serviced and maintained all the aircraft plus the Group. and the quartermaster's heavy stores section. Around the perimeter there had to be a motor pool, a bomb dump, ammunition and supply areas and tents, some kind of firing butts to line up the eight 50 cal. wing guns on each plane. vehicles used included jeeps, 3/4 ton and 2 1/2 ton trucks, bomb lift trucks, crash trucks, ambulances, bomb trailers, 2 wheel carryall and drinking water trailers, gasoline tankers (which refuelled the planes directly), tractors, bulldozers. Local people remember both US Army trucks delivering armaments and RAF vehicles from Holmsley visiting the site, and aerodrome fire service vehicles being present before the 404th arrived. Arrangements for fuelling were sited on the western side of the field, with tanks and a generator house. Some temporary servicing facilities were rough and ready, with some engine changes conducted with a block and tackle hung from a tree on the field.

"The Orderley Room, Supply, enlisted mens' mess hall, and kitchen were set up in the (507th) squadron area while operations began to function in a RAF trailer near the line. A pilots assembly tent was set up adjacent to the trailer and Intelligence operated next to it. A large glider crate was secured, and from this a parachute department was constructed.

The line was centered about the squadron hangar, communications, armament and ordnance pitched their tents conveniently close to it. Tech Supply and the Engineering office operate from within the hangar itself." - extract from the 506 squadron history for April 1944.

Doug Nelmes of the 508th Squadron was a member of the refuelling crew at Winkton. He remembers that they used Cleveland Cletrac M2 7 ton high speed tractors. Each squadron had two Cletracs fitted with a generator, and both high pressure air for the undercarriage struts and low air pressure for the tyres. The Cletracs also had a winch on the front and carried locally made tow bars on the side. The Cletracs were also used to pull the water tankers, in the case of the 508th, a four wheel tanker trailer. The ground crew also used Jeeps to tow planes however most of the time the planes were taxied to the revetment on their own power, unless they were unserviceable.

To start the engines some times they used a battery, but the ground crews had energizing power plants to wind the actuator up before engaging. These were used only if there was a starting problem or in cold weather. When they were started, there was always the Crew Chief or assistant on stand by with a fire extinguisher, as they could catch fire from excess gas. Refuelling was done by Army 6 x 6 G.M.C trucks that in the States we used as oil trucks. They held 750 gal fuel American measure and pulled trailers that held 600 gal each. Each Truck pulled one, and some two. The trailers were possibly British. In Winkton, all the gas came from the Fuel Farm at the edge of field.

Later Doug went into maintenance and took care of the power equipment that was used to service the planes, he had 110 items of powered equipment.

Armourers used a belt repositioning machine supplied by the RAF for aligning and positioning 50-cal. machine gun cartridges. Jettisonable gasoline tanks of a compressed paper composition were manufactured in the UK and stored on the airfield.

Winkton (probably in conjunction with the RAF radar station at Sopley) was defended on the ground by an RAF Regiment light anti aircraft contingent armed with eight Bofors guns and at least 17 machine guns. At least one US mobile AA unit was on the airfield, often located near the hangar on the southern boundary. The RAF regiment were located in a 'Handcraft' Hut across the road from New Barn.

Even allowing for the double British Summer time worked during the war, on a less than perfect day it must have been difficult to pick out the airfield in the gloom and gathering darkness without assistance (Hal Shook, C.O. of the 506th remembers that it was completely dark returning from the last D Day and D+1 patrol, he could check that his aircraft were all present by counting the exhaust flames). An emergency electric lighting system was provided, a line of electric lamps operating at low power and screened so that they were only visible 15 degrees either side of the runway alignment.

The Quonset or Blister Hangers were pretty basic, little more than a large curved steel roof which providing limited protection from the unusually cold and wet weather of early June 1944. However they were the only large permanent buildings apart from the Group headquarters and seem to have been used for several functions including the enlisted men's cinema. The pilots organised themselves a pilots' coffee bar out of spare materials *"A pilot's snack bar was made with a glider crate and an ammunition blister. Interrogations (mission debriefs) were held there. Lounging chairs and sofas were procured while the kitchen was composed of a refrigerator and a small stove. Hot coffee, warm spam sandwiches, eggs and oranges greeted pilots as they came in from cold missions"*.

Andy Wilson of the 507th. writes in 1998..... *I know the "officers club" - so called - was in a brick barn, and I remember listening to the D Day briefing by our "bigoted" officers (Group S-2/Intelligence and Group S-3 Operations) in a brick building. I thought it was the Lower Clockhouse Farm location.*

("bigoted" officers refers to the security clearance required for prior knowledge of the invasion plans - the code name for the required security clearance was bigot).

At least one squadron, the 506th, had a very basic bar set up in New Barn at Merryfield Farm. It was opposite the tented camp area and may have been used by everyone.

Personnel were scattered around the perimeter, in tents, by squadrons, officers and enlisted men separate. Officers ate in a combined "Officers' Mess" - - a long tent (British ?) someone described as a "circus" tent (a marquee ?). Enlisted men were served from cook tents in each squadron.

Andy Wilson remembers he was housed in a pyramidal tent with three other officers from his squadron. They slept in fold out canvas cots on a "mattress" of hay "borrowed" from a farmer's field just north of Barrett's Copse. For heat they had a small cylindrical stove about two feet high, coal fired, with a stove-pipe running up through the roof of the tent which could and sometimes did char when the pipe got too hot.

Latrines were waist high black "buckets" with wooden seats, behind roofless canvas screening. Exposed pipelines brought cold water into the tent area for washing. At least one squadron built an open air shower with an oil burning water heater and an auxiliary wing tank.

Medical:

Group HQ and each of the squadrons had medical sections, with three officers including a dental surgeon at Group, and one officer, medical technicians and ambulance drivers in each squadron. The Group medical tent was used as a dispensary -- pills, shots etc. The Group Aid station for serious injury was manned at Winkton by an independent Medical Corps unit. At one time there was a large US mobile army surgical hospital site in woods a few miles to the north towards Ringwood and there is a reference later to the 95th General Hospital at Ringwood providing additional facilities.

WINKTON ADVANCED LANDING GROUND

FACTS AND FIGURES

Location	Lat & Long	50 46 40N	01 45 45W
	Grid	U605177(141)	
	O S Reference	SZ165975/195	
	GSGS	3907	
	Nearest town	3 miles (5 kms) NNE of Christchurch	

Elevation		40 feet (12) m above sea level	
Name	British	Winkton	
	USAAF	Station 414	
Runways	North/South	1600 x 50 yds	1456 x 45.5 m
	East/West	1400 x 50 yds	1274 x 45.5 m
	Surface	Sommerfeld matting and pierced steel planks	
Taxyways	Surface	Sommerfeld matting	
Dispersals	Surface	Sommerfeld matting	
Hangers	Blister hangars	There were five hangars, There was one for each squadron, aligned along the southern side of the east/west runway. The other two were allocated to the Group HQ and the quartermasters section and were aligned on the eastern side of the north/south runway. Group had the hangar on the south side of the airfield, the other was north east of the runway intersection.	
Lighting	A line of low power screened electric lamps		
Flying Control	Control Net System	callsign "Drainsink"	
Radio	Homing service via QDMs available		
Pundit Code	XT		
Accommodation	Tented Camp		
Headquarters	Lower Clockhouse Farm	On the south south east boundary of the airfield on the Winkton to Bransgore road.	

Nominal Command	11 Group RAF	
Parent Unit	RAF Ibsley	
Dates	September 1943	Airfield site cleared and prepared by 4768 Flight, 5004 Airfield Construction Squadron RAF
	early March 1944	Team B US 83rd service group prepares camp
	April 4th, 1944	404th Fighter bomber group takes up residence consisting of 506, 507, 508 squadrons, with P47 fighter bombers. Engineers still in residence laying PSP
	July 4th 1944	404th relocates to site #5 at Chippelle, Normandy
	August 1944	Reports of an RAF Auster aircraft or one or more Piper L3 USAAF using the airfield for calibration duties
	Autumn (Fall) 1944	Airfield reinstated as agricultural land
	January 1945	Airfield closed

Winkton today (1998)

The site of the airfield is little changed, it is still flat and open, but the road across the site was reopened and some of the culverts over streams were removed when the runways were lifted. Clockhouse and Barrett's copses are still there, still with their corners snipped off to hint at the alignments of the old runways. New Barn and both Upper and Lower Clockhouse Farms still stand, the last named the site of the former Group headquarters. According to Gordon Farwell, whose father farmed much of the land occupied by the airfield, New Barn was used as an entertainment centre and theatre. His father remembered an ENSA party on stage framed with two large shells (artificial or practice polished wooden shells, one is still owned by the family) but this use is believed to have been associated with

Team B of the USAAF 83rd Service Group during the period of the sites preparation in early 1944. The service unit also had a large officers mess tent across the road from New Barn, beside the stream, and another a facility, possibly a field kitchen in a field to the west of New Barn. Whilst the airfield was in use it is reported that an unofficial and informal beer bar was set up in the barn for use by certainly the 506th squadron and probably many others. As well as tented accommodation in Barrett's copse, there was also further accommodation and cookhouses in Merryfield Copse - later the location for the post war RAF Sopley domestic site.,

The land is still used for farming, much of it in use as a pick your own farm, growing fruit, sweetcorn, beans and other crops that are suitable for the home freezer or fruit bowl. On a fine day in the summer the area is covered with people picking fresh strawberries for lunch or tea and I doubt if one in a thousand knows of the land's former use. That is not to say that the history of the airfield goes unrecorded. In a dozen British Books ranging from big glossy books to small local history pamphlets the story of station 414 can be gleaned but it would be aviation enthusiasts who would glean that material, rarely the general public. However each year Alan Brown, the local aviation historian and secretary of the New Forest Aviation Group, and his wife Margaret tour the local area with a historical exhibition about the airfields of the New Forest, and in 1998 much of the material was re-exhibited at the New Forest Museum in Lyndhurst and at the Red House Museum in Christchurch to supplement an exhibition about Christchurch aerodrome. In every case Winkton ALG and the 404th was remembered and featured and mementoes, drawings and photographs exhibited to the public.



View across Station 414 looking east from runway intersection
June 1998

