

# **The Significant Contribution of the New Forest Airfields**

By John Levesley

In 1940-41 the airfields at Christchurch, Sway and Hurn were central to the development of both airborne and ground radar. To support the work of the Telecommunications Research Establishment in Dorset and the Air Defence Experimental Establishment located on the edge of Christchurch Airfield a RAF Special Duty flight operated a fleet of over thirty aircraft. Much of the work on radar for night fighters and coastal command occupied the flight's activities, but it also supported the development of coastal watch radar, and chain home low radar - an addition to the better known early-warning chain home system that was so critical to Britain's defences in the Battle of Britain.

Within ADEE was the Army Radar Unit whose mobile army gunnery radars were modified in partnership with the TRE to produce the world's first Ground Control Interception radar (in modern parlance Fighter Control radars). The first GCI to be deployed operationally was also in the New Forest on Christmas Day 1940, at Sopley.

When all this work relocated to Malvern the radar work tradition continued with the arrival at Christchurch of the Naval Air Radio Installation Unit of HMS Raven which developed prototype airborne radar installation for the Royal Navy's carrier-based aircraft.

The ADEE site was taken over by the Signals Research and Development Establishment who pioneered breakthroughs in telemetry, compressed voice and data communications and microwave communications.

For much of the period 1941 – 1944 elements of RAF Army Co-operation Command were based at Hurn, Holmsley South or Stoney Cross and both the Parachute and Glider exercise squadrons of the RAF operated from these airfields on occasion.

Airspeed at Christchurch manufactured Horsa Gliders, RAF Units at Hurn and Stoney Cross serviced heavy gliders. Long haul glider towing techniques were developed at Holmsley South in advance of the invasion

of Sicily in 1943. The USAAF at Stoney Cross assembled WACO gliders in 1944 whilst in 1945 RAF pilots were taught how to snatch gliders on hooks at Ibsley.

The arrival of the Airborne Forces Experimental Establishment at Beaulieu in 1945 was the culmination of years of development work between the RAF's Army Co-operation Command and the Army's Air Corps, Airborne forces, and SOE across the New Forest. The AFEE carried out the first formal tri-service evaluation of the operational use of the helicopter by the British.

Military operations from the New Forest in World War Two have a strong invasion theme. In 1942 through to early 1944 Coastal Command at Holmsley South and Beaulieu were instrumental in combating the growing U-Boat threat in the run up to the invasion of North Africa.

The air-towed delivery of gliders to North Africa for the invasions of Sicily and Italy was made possible by work done at Holmsley South and Hurn. Many of the techniques used by the RAF, the Glider Pilot Regiment and the Parachute Regiment in North Africa, the Mediterranean, in Operation Overlord and Operation Dragoon, at Arnhem and the crossing of the Rhine originated in work done in the New Forest earlier in the war.

In the build up to D-Day in June 1944, through to the end of August 1944, every airfield and landing ground was involved in both Operation Neptune and Operation Overlord. In addition to the Royal Air Force and other Commonwealth and free European forces there was a concentration of RCAF squadrons and of course a major American presence through Ninth Airforce units.

Military (and civil) aircraft manufacturing started at Christchurch with Airspeed in 1940 and then continued with de Havilland beyond 1945. Hurn was a major wartime engineering base for both the RAF and BOAC.