



The USAAF 405th Fighter Group at Christchurch Airfield March to July 1944

The origins of Christchurch airport go back to 1926 when joy rides and stunt flying began to take place in a field next to Mudeford Lane. By 1929, the landing ground was officially registered as Christchurch Airfield and some small companies offered flights to destinations along the South coast and the Isle of Wight. However, with the onset of war, the airfield closed in 1939, but not before over 40,000 passengers had flown from it.

In 1940, the ground was purchased by the Ministry of Supply and immediately utilised by the Special Duty Flight who were involved in the design and development of airborne radar work that had started at Purbeck Radar in Worth Matravers.

The Special Duty flight was quickly followed by the Naval Air Installation Unit, who were installing radios, radar, and other electrical installations in naval aircraft. The Airspeed shadow factory was built soon after to produce Horsa gliders and Oxford trainers.

During 1943, as part of the planning for the invasion of Europe, Operation Overlord, Christchurch, together with Bisterne, Lymington, Needs Oar Point and Winkton was selected as sites for the construction of temporary airfields known as Advanced Landing Grounds (ALG).

The existing grass airfield at Christchurch was not large enough for the intended aircraft so farmland to the northeast of Mudeford Wood was utilised for runway. This involved the removal of part of Mudeford Wood and the construction of a culvert to bridge the Mude Stream.



Christchurch Airfield April 1944

Initial construction work was started in October 1943 by the 5005 Construction Company RAF. In March 1944 the 833 Engineering Aviation Battalion of the US Army arrived with their heavy bulldozers and grading equipment.



In March 1944 the 833 Engineering Aviation Battalion US Army arrived with heavy equipment

The runway surface needed to be capable of withstanding the weight of a 4.5 ton aircraft carrying over a ton of ordinance. The surface was initially laid with Sommerfeld tracking but this was found to be inadequate, so the runway had to be upgraded with square mesh tracking.

Whilst construction of the landing ground continues, on the 7th March 1944, 142 Officers and 805 enlisted men of the 405th Fighter Group USAAF arrived in Christchurch after an unescorted crossing of the Atlantic on the Mauretania and a train journey from Liverpool. This followed flight and combat training at Tampa, Florida and Waterborough, South Carolina. Officers were billeted in Bure Homage House, a country house close to the airfield, and in requisitioned bungalows in Denniston Avenue. Enlisted men occupied tents on the lawns of Bure Homage House or at various locations around the airfield.



Lt Charles Mohrle at the controls of 2Z-M, Touch of Texas. A second USAAF P-47 Thunderbolt of 510 Squadron 2Z-P Little Lulu, is visible behind the stack of fuel pods.

During the remaining weeks of March, 73 P-47 Republic Thunderbolt fighter bombers flew into Christchurch to form 509th, 510th and 511th Squadrons of the 405th Fighter Group. Flight training began immediately and continued through to early April. The first operation, a fighter sweep over northern France, took place on the 12th April. The group was active throughout April with escort duties, fighter sweeps and dive bombing.

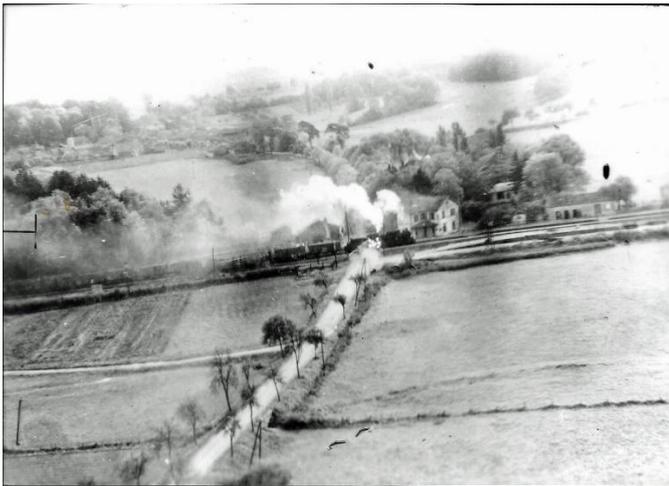


Captain Charles Mohrle 510th FS Touch of Texas



Major Bruce Parnell C.O. 510th FS Little Lulu

During May 1944, with the approaching invasion of Europe, the Group was active escorting heavy bombers of the 8th Air Force, bombing marshalling yards and strafing railway trains, goods wagons and radio stations to deprive the enemy of supplies.



Strafing attack taken from Capt Mohrle's gun camera The result of a dive bomb attack by 510th Group

The first day of June, typical of this period before D-Day, saw 18 aircraft provide escort to B-26 Marauders bombing gun positions at Le Havre with 36 more aircraft escorting B-26s bombing gun positions at Mount Fleury.



P-47 Thunderbolts of the 510th Group line up for take-off on the 6th June 1944

D-Day itself was a big disappointment for the 405th Group as it was tasked with patrol duties between Christchurch and the Bay of Biscay, escorting anti-submarine aircraft of Coastal Command flying B-24 Liberator Vs and Vis from their base at St Eval in Cornwall. Continuous patrols were flown from 05.30 to 23.00 hours for four consecutive days under RAF control.

Finally, on the 10th June, the Group resumed dive bombing and armed reconnaissance missions looking for targets of opportunity on the Cherbourg peninsula.

On the 29th June tragedy struck Christchurch and the 405th Group.

At 06.45 Lt Vincent James of the 509th Fighter Squadron failed to get airborne and with a full bomb load his P-47 Thunderbolt struck a bungalow in Foxwood Avenue. The bombs did not explode and there was no fire, Lt James was very lucky as he escaped with minor injuries.

At 14.00 Lt James attempted another take-off in a replacement P-47 on an armed reconnaissance mission armed with two 500 pound bombs. Again, his aircraft failed to achieve enough height and he collided with another bungalow, alongside the one he had crashed on earlier. This time he was not so lucky, one of the bombs exploded killing Lt James as well as several civilians attending the first crash site.

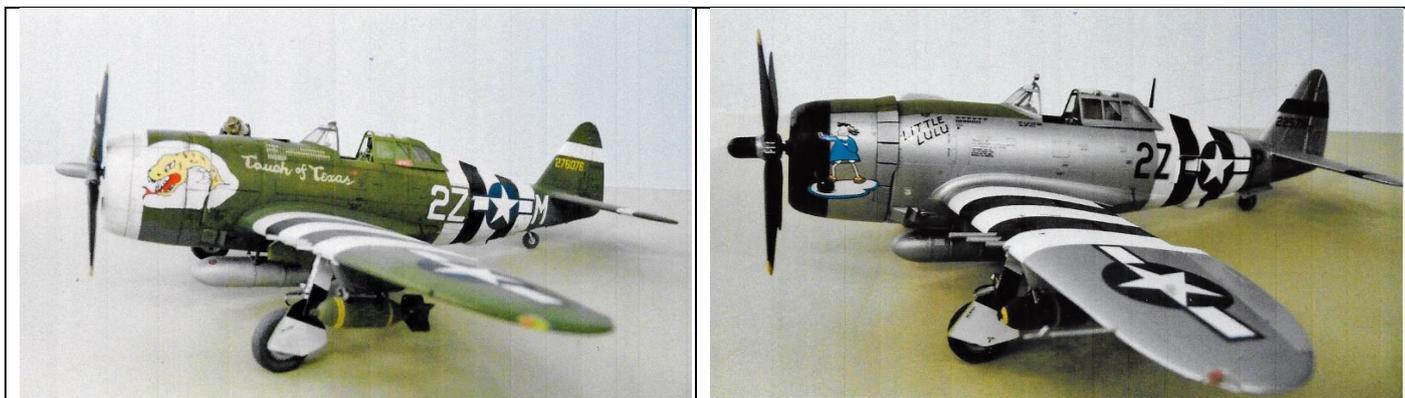
Capt. William Chapman, paired with Lt James for take-off was brought down by the explosion. His aircraft crashed on waste ground and he suffered serious injuries that prevented from flying in Europe again. A local NFS fire engine and an RAF fire tender attended the crash site and they were joined by a Royal Navy fire crew and an RAF Sergeant just as the second bomb exploded, killing them all. USAAF personnel rushing to warn people about the danger together with workers from Airspeed and local civilians were also caught in the blast. 16 perished in this terrible accident and a further 14 were injured.



Devastation in Foxwood Avenue

Changes in tactics in early July resulted in the 405th Group fling close support for the advancing troops in France together with armed reconnaissance missions where they searched for targets of opportunity. The last mission flown from Christchurch was a dive- bombing mission on the 10th July. On the 11th July 405 Group moved to their next home, Advanced Landing Ground A-8 at Picauville in Normandy. Before too long the 405th Group was on the move again as it continued to support the advance through France and into Germany.

After the war, Christchurch airfield returned to civilian use and whilst important ground breaking research and development continued, Airspeed and then de Havilland produced some well-known civilian and military aircraft before the airport finally closed in the 1960s.



1/48 scale models of Touch of Texas and Little Lulu on display at the FONFA Heritage Centre

*Friends of the New Forest Airfields, Registered Charity No. 1063648, is the charity that is **Preserving our Aviation Heritage and Honouring the Service** of the brave servicemen and women who operated from the twelve New Forest Airfields during World War II. To find out more, or to join FONFA, please visit our website <https://fonfa.co.uk>*