

OVERLORD STRIPS

THEN AND NOW

MANY D-DAY AIRFIELDS IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND
HAVE NOW DISAPPEARED, BUT THERE

ARE EXCEPTIONS. **MALCOLM V LOWE** VISITS SEVERAL OF THESE HISTORIC LOCATIONS

Right
A late 1940s aerial view of Middle Wallop, Hampshire.

The blitzed hangar, bombed in August 1940, had not been repaired at that time and was only returned to operations during the 1970s. VICTOR LOWE COLLECTION

Below right
Configured as an F-6C Mustang, this P-51C-5-NT from North American's Dallas production line belonged to the 107th TRS of the 67th TRG based at Middle Wallop during 1944. In the background is Danebury Iron Age hill fort, a prominent local landmark. JB VIA MALCOLM V LOWE

Both the RAF and US Army Air Forces made good use of airfields in southern England leading up to and throughout the D-Day period in 1944. Some of the south's 'strips' were already built and well established, but others were constructed specifically for operations during that time and, being temporary in nature, disappeared soon afterwards.

PERMANENT BASE

The Hampshire/Dorset area features a long-standing airfield that has major connections with June 6, 1944 and is still active. Indeed, Middle Wallop is a true survivor and today an important military base for Britain's Army Air Corps. Located just northeast of Middle Wallop village in Hampshire, alongside the A343 main road and immediately to the west of the Iron Age hill fort of Danebury (sometimes called Danebury Hill), the facility came under the 'Expansion Scheme' RAF building programme of the late 1930s. To that end it featured excellent barracks and administrative buildings, as well as five permanent C-Type hangars. These were supplemented by a growing number of Blister hangars as World War Two progressed. Although not completed until later in 1940, it nevertheless played an important role during the Battle of Britain, initially being a part of 11 Group and later 10 Group, Fighter Command. It had a Sector Operations Room and was deemed significant enough for the Luftwaffe to mount several raids against it during August 1940. During one of these, bombs hit a hangar, successfully putting it out of action and killing three airmen. Unusually for Expansion Scheme RAF bases, hard runways were never laid on the airfield. Originally simply a grass strip, the base's two actual runways (a long north/south and a shorter northeast/southwest) were later created with Sommerfeld Track. A solid perimeter and various hardstandings were added over time. One of the more notable occupants in 1940 was 604 Squadron



and its Bristol Beaufighters, equipped with Airborne Interception (AI) Mk.IV radar for after-dark missions. The celebrated night-fighter ace John 'Cat's Eyes' Cunningham achieved several of his nocturnal victories while operating from Middle Wallop with this unit.

The airfield had a major US presence for the Normandy campaign. During November 1943 it became of great importance to the US Air Army Forces when the newly arrived Ninth AF set up the headquarters of its IX Fighter Command there. This controlled the fighter/fighter-bombers of the Ninth, which would play a significant role in the air operations before, during and after D-Day. In addition, a major US flying unit was also stationed at Middle Wallop from late 1943. This was the 67th Tactical

Reconnaissance Group (TRG), two of whose squadrons relocated to Middle Wallop from Membury, Berkshire. By late March 1944, all four of the group's squadrons were in residence, comprising the 12th, 15th, 107th and 109th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadrons, the last two being federalised National Guard units. The 67th TRG primarily operated F-6 camera-equipped Mustangs, configured for tactical reconnaissance, with their Packard Merlin engines optimised for low- to medium-altitude operations. During this time the airfield was not wholly turned over to the Americans, the US units instead having a 'lodger' status (even though the airfield was assigned a US 'Station' designation, in this case 449).

The 67th TRG duly left Middle Wallop and transferred to France

during July 1944, its component squadrons subsequently assisting the US First Army in its drive across France towards Germany. The 107th TRS initially moved to A-4 Deux Jumeaux, while the 109th headed for A-9 Le Molay with the 67th TRG's headquarters.

Following the Americans' departure, the airfield reverted fully to RAF use and soon spent a short period as a Fleet Air Arm station before coming again under the RAF from 1946.

On September 1, 1957 British Army aviation gained independence from the RAF, and Middle Wallop was duly transferred to the new Army Air Corps. There, the School of Army Aviation was established, which

eventually changed its name to the Army Aviation Centre in the summer of 2009. The airfield remains active and continues to make use of the permanent hangars. However, many other facilities have been considerably upgraded, with the station's camp just to the north of the flying field now resembling a small modern town. The site is also home to the recently refurbished Army Flying Museum.

LIGHTNING STRIKES

Located in Dorset was an established RAF airfield that was vital during D-Day. This was RAF Warmwell, approximately 3 miles (4.8km) east of Dorset's county town of Dorchester and to the northeast of the seaside

resort and port of Weymouth.

Another of the facilities laid out in the 1930s when the threat of Nazi Germany was becoming apparent, Warmwell was built to support aircraft using the ranges of Chesil Bank along the coastline. It opened in May 1937 and was originally the home of aircraft using the ranges, hosting 6 Armament Training School. At first known as RAF Woodsford after a local village, the name was changed before World War Two to Warmwell (a nearby village to the south, thus avoiding confusion with Avro's Woodford factory airfield in Cheshire).

From 1940 onwards there was a major RAF frontline presence at Warmwell, including throughout the Battle of Britain. Eventually three grass runways were formed, and a variety of hangars built (Bellman and Blister), as well as a perimeter track, various scattered hardstandings and several dispersals.

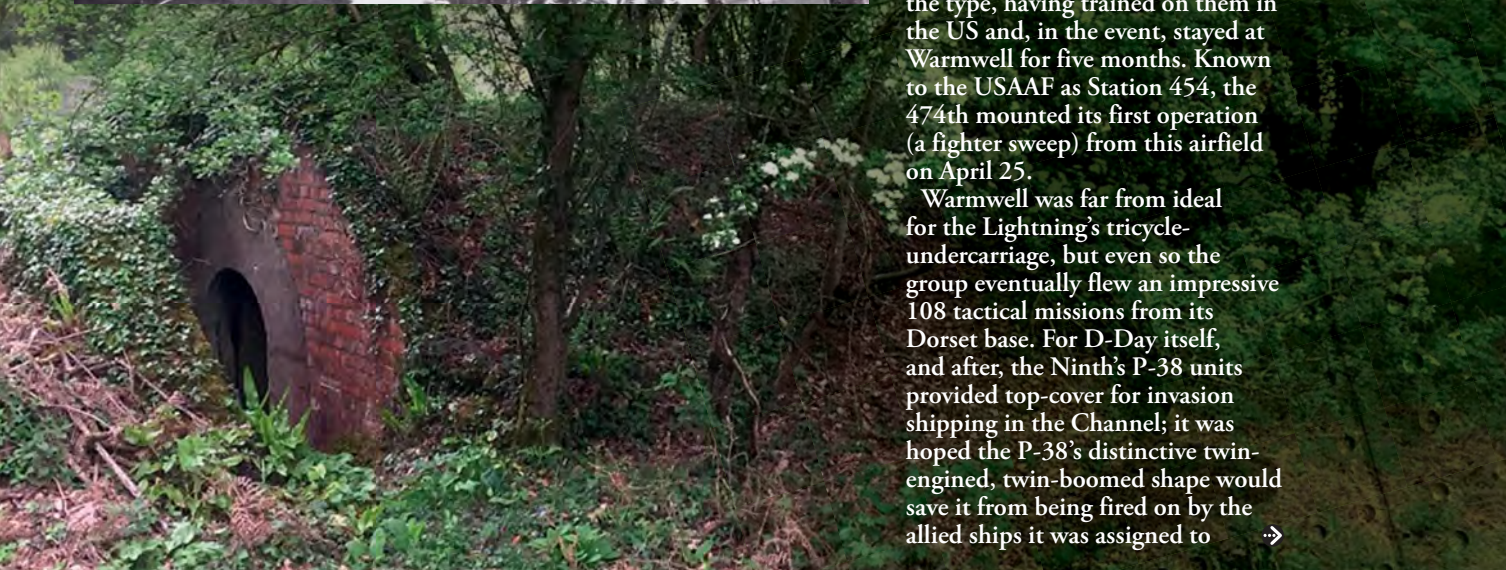
It lacked solid runways. Nevertheless, the airfield was eventually delegated for USAAF use, when the Ninth AF was earmarked for operations in support of the planned invasion. To that end, the P-38 Lightning-operating 474th Fighter Group (FG) moved in during March 1944. This unit was already familiar with the type, having trained on them in the US and, in the event, stayed at Warmwell for five months. Known to the USAAF as Station 454, the 474th mounted its first operation (a fighter sweep) from this airfield on April 25.

Warmwell was far from ideal for the Lightning's tricycle-undercarriage, but even so the group eventually flew an impressive 108 tactical missions from its Dorset base. For D-Day itself, and after, the Ninth's P-38 units provided top-cover for invasion shipping in the Channel; it was hoped the P-38's distinctive twin-engined, twin-boomed shape would save it from being fired on by the allied ships it was assigned to →

Above
Photographed in November 2017, Middle Wallop is still a fully functioning military base. This view presents a 'then and now' comparison with the 1944 image of the photo-Mustang, with Danebury Iron Age hill fort in the far distance to the right. The airfield's principal buildings have all been upgraded over the years.
MALCOLM V LOWE

Left
Photographed during August 1943 by the then 67th Reconnaissance Group, RAF Warmwell was fully active although without hard runways. The site of this historic flying field has been destroyed by post-war quarrying. USAAF

Below left
The countryside around Warmwell airfield was home to domestic sites. It was built as a permanent station in the late 1930s and structures can still be found among the undergrowth, including underground air raid shelters. JAMES GOULD



Right

The brief home for the 404th FG during 1944, Winkton still stood out against the landscape in the immediate post-war period, exemplified by this 1947 photograph. The airfield cut through the copse of trees in the lower centre of the image.

JB VIA MALCOLM V LOWE



Below right

Still in existence, just west of the flying portion of Winkton airfield is the entrance to the underground facility connected to the major GCI radar installation associated with nearby RAF Sopley.

MALCOLM V LOWE

Below

To the untrained eye there is nothing at the site of Winkton airfield to suggest that P-47D Thunderbolts once flew from there. The large gap in the background between the trees of Clockhouse Copse (right), and those of Barrett's Copse (left), is the only clue that Winkton's east-west runway cut through it.

MALCOLM V LOWE

protect. Some of the P-38s were nonetheless targets for 'friendly fire'.

The 474th FG was the last of the Ninth AF's fighter/fighter-bomber groups to leave England and transfer to northern France following Overlord. This was accomplished during early- to mid-August, the unit moving to A-11 Saint-Lambert. Thereafter Warmwell gradually reverted to its initial role as an RAF air-firing practice camp, but this only continued until September 1945. Within weeks it was placed on Care and Maintenance status before it was eventually closed and sold.

The control tower was converted into a private dwelling named Egdon House and is one of the most impressive renovations of this nature. It sits on private land just north of a minor road, which utilises a part of the former perimeter track. The two Bellman hangars also survived the airfield's closure and were to serve various roles in the post-war period. But there is a very sad reality about much of the rest of the Warmwell airfield site, which has been destroyed by post-war quarrying and the flying field itself completely obliterated. Part of the old main domestic site to the east of the flying field has been built on for housing, the new development being known as Crossways.



The camp cinema/gymnasium is now the Crossways village hall. Scattered around the local area are several remaining buildings from the more distant domestic sites, which are far enough from the main quarrying areas and on private land to afford survival. These include the sergeants' shower block in one of the domestic sites, as well as several air raid shelters for 25 and 50 occupants. Plans apparently exist to use part of the quarried site for luxury apartments in the future.

FLEETING EMPLOYMENT

Completely additional and separate to the established D-Day airfields, a totally different type of flying facility was utilised for frontline operations in southern England – just for the invasion period. This short-lived base was the Advanced Landing Ground (ALG), made by engineer/construction units specifically for

temporary operations until the invasion itself took place, after which each would be rapidly returned to agriculture or other previous use.

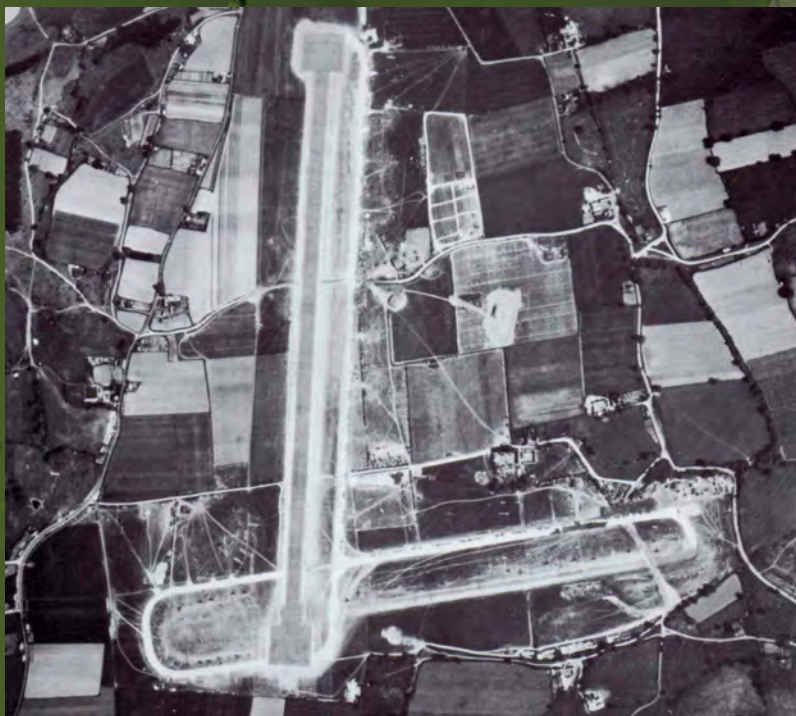
Two areas proved suitable for such facilities: Kent in the southeast, and the New Forest area near the south coast. In the latter location, three ALGs were particularly important to the US Ninth AF. They were at Lymington (50th FG, Station 551), Bisterne (371st FG, Station 415), and Winkton (404th FG, Station 414). Accommodation at these temporary airfields was hardly ideal for personnel or aircraft and keeping these units' Thunderbolts flying for their fighter-bomber missions was challenging.

Winkton was built during 1943 on requisitioned land between the villages of Sopley and Bransgore in Hampshire, the new airfield straddling the minor road (Derritt Lane) between the two villages, which was closed. Land on and around the thoroughfare

needed to be raised to allow the site to be properly levelled. Two runways were constructed using Sommerfeld Track, intersecting on the road itself, and comprising a north/south and an east/west, with taxiways on each side of each runway. The latter required the felling of trees in Clockhouse Copse, which today remains the only really visible marker for the airfield's location.

During early April 1944, 404th Fighter-Bomber Group (later FG) personnel arrived, after the airfield had been improved to provide sufficient parking and hardstandings for its three squadrons of Thunderbolts, as well as austere tented accommodation. The 404th FG began receiving P-47 'Jugs' following its arrival and the first mission was conducted on May 1, 1944, after which the unit flew fighter-bomber missions prior to and during the D-Day campaign, losing





eight P-47s in combat while receiving credit for two enemy aircraft shot down. On D-Day itself the group flew as high fighter cover over the beaches and conducted some 191 sorties on the day – a remarkable achievement considering the comparatively primitive surroundings from which the unit operated. The group's charismatic and well-liked leader was Col Carroll McColpin, an experienced pilot who guided the unit through this challenging but successful residence. In early July the group began to leave Winkton for northern France, the main move being on July 6, but, as with all such relocations, the entire move took a period of time. The group made its new home at A-5 Chippelle.

Subsequently Winkton rapidly disappeared into obscurity. No other operational units were based there, and the site was de-requisitioned. By the end of 1945 it had all but vanished, even the metal track of its runways being removed. The

minor road running through the site was duly re-opened. Today there is nothing to suggest that Thunderbolts operated from the site 75 years ago. A barn (apparently called 'New Barn' by locals) that was used as the camp theatre/cinema by personnel of the 404th FG still survives and was restored several years ago. It is one of the few buildings in the locality with any links to the Ninth AF.

VITAL 'VISION'

Immediately adjacent to Winkton was RAF Sopley camp and radar installation. This site was unrelated to Winkton ALG and did not have an airfield of its own. Dating to 1941, this RAF Ground Controlled Interception radar facility gained particular importance during the Cold War, and the camp was later the temporary home for Vietnamese 'boat people' in the 1980s. During the past two years or so the camp has almost completely ceased to exist, making way for a new

housing estate. In recent years the area has become the home of the Friends of the New Forest Airfields (FONEA) historical trust, dedicated to preserving the memory of the many local strips, past and present. FONEA's recently opened New Forest Airfields Heritage Centre is based in the camp's former back-up generator building, one of the few former RAF structures that continue to exist on the site. In comparison, the unassuming entrance to the underground portion connected to the major radar installation is still present, as is the massive subterranean facility it leads to. It is located off a minor road just to the west of Winkton airfield.

Even more anonymous today is the ALG at Bisterne, Hampshire. Located in low-lying terrain just to the north of Bisterne village, beside what is now the B3347 Christchurch to Ringwood road in the Avon Valley, this ALG was the most troublesome of the Ninth AF's airfields.

Construction began during 1943, two runways being laid roughly in the same arrangement as Winkton using Sommerfeld Track but with just one taxiway for each runway. At least two Blister hangars were also erected, together with other facilities, further work being carried out in early 1944. During March 1944, personnel of the 371st FG began arriving, and was eventually supplied with P-47Ds. Its first mission, a fighter sweep over northern France for familiarisation purposes, was made on April 12. However, the airfield surface was totally unsuitable for operations with the heavy Thunderbolt, being damp at the best of times, and soon the runways were unusable. On April 21 the unit's Thunderbolts were moved temporarily to nearby RAF Ibsley, while the north/south runway was re-laid with various combinations of PSP, and Bar and Rod Track. The east/west runway was abandoned. Operations eventually resumed from Bisterne after further delays on May 14. The group eventually flew successfully during the invasion, concentrating on fighter-bomber duties, although several dogfights against Luftwaffe fighters took place with Maj Rockford Gray securing three 'kills' on June 8.

No doubt to the relief of many of the unit's personnel, the 371st FG started to relocate to northern France later in June to its new home at A-6 Beuzeville (near the famous Sainte-Mère-Église). Combat losses amounted to ten Thunderbolts during the Bisterne period.

Left
Photographed on May 22, 1944 when the 371st FG had returned to operational flying from the airfield, Bisterne stood out prominently from the surrounding countryside. USAAF

Below left
It is a challenge to find any visible traces of Bisterne ALG on the ground. This photo, taken earlier this year, offers a view along the approximate line of the north/south runway. At one time, portions of the Sommerfeld Track bulldozed in 1945 could be seen, but that has now been removed. MALCOLM V LOWE



Right

This photograph of Lymington ALG was taken on May 22, 1944, as the air offensive against targets in northern France intensified prior to D-Day. These temporary airfields left quite a scar on the landscape. In recent years Lymington has returned to life, with the northern end of the roughly north/south runway being used. USAAF

With the Americans leaving, unsurprisingly no other operational units were based at Bisterne and the site was rapidly de-requisitioned. By the end of 1945 it had completely disappeared, the metal track of its runways bulldozed to clear the site. It is a challenge to find any evidence of the airfield today. Local farm buildings used by the Americans are all on private land and inaccessible, with no trace of the runways whatsoever.

CONTINUING USE

Although many of the ALGs have long since disappeared, as is the case with Bisterne and Winkton, an unlikely survivor into the modern era has been Hampshire's Lymington. This pivotal ALG was situated just to the east of the port town, on the Solent, southwest of Southampton.

Like many ALGs, Lymington was built in 1943, intended for temporary use during the Normandy campaign. Two runways were laid. Similar to those at Winkton and Bisterne, the main runways were northeast/southwest with the second roughly north/south. Sommerfeld Track was used for these runways and adjacent taxiways, with other facilities put in place, including up to five Blister hangars. Further work was carried out in early 1944.

Personnel of the 50th FG began arriving in April 1944, with P-47D Thunderbolts duly being assigned. The first mission, a familiarisation flight over northern France, was made on May 1. The group then flew fighter-bomber sorties during the D-Day period, losing six



Thunderbolts and claiming six enemy aircraft, the first of these on June 7. The 50th FG duly became one of the first Ninth AF units to move to northern France when operational conditions allowed. This occurred during late June, the unit relocating over several days from June 24 to A-10 Carentan.

Subsequently no other operational units were based at Lymington, and the site was rapidly surrendered. By the end of 1946 it had all but disappeared. One Blister hangar remained in place, albeit in an increasingly dilapidated condition. However, defying all the odds, Lymington resurfaced years later as a private flying field.

Sometimes known as Pylewell House or Newtown Park airstrip, some of the original north-south runway has made a very usable grass flying area. In recent years the site was purchased by a British-born American

anglophile named Charles Ryland Burnett III, who invested so well in the airstrip that during June 2014 a major event was held there to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Operation Overlord. Sadly, he died in a UH-1 helicopter crash in the US during January 2018. After this, the continued use of the landing strip remains in doubt. The surviving Blister hangar was beautifully restored during that period, and is one of the best examples of its type in existence.

Author's Note: All airfields mentioned in this article, active or disused, are on private or MOD property and therefore should not be accessed without prior permission.

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