

On The Offensive

War in the Air

Throughout much of the war planes based at Cornwall's airfields were part of the RAF's Coastal Command. During the summer of 1940 when the invasion threat was at its height they carried out daily patrols of the coast looking for any signs of enemy landings. Whilst the German bombing campaign was at its height in 1940 and 1941 they provided stiff resistance to the enemy raiders. Their main role, however, was engaging with Germany's U-boat fleet and protecting convoys of merchant shipping from enemy aircraft.

The main centre of anti-submarine operations in the South West was St Eval airfield. Between March 1941 and the end of 1943 these operations formed part of one of the most critical battles of the war – the Battle of the Atlantic, when Britain's war economy was threatened by severe losses to merchant shipping. A crucial factor in the eventual winning of this battle was the deployment of long-range Liberator bombers which were used to attack the U-boat pens and supply bases in mainland Europe.

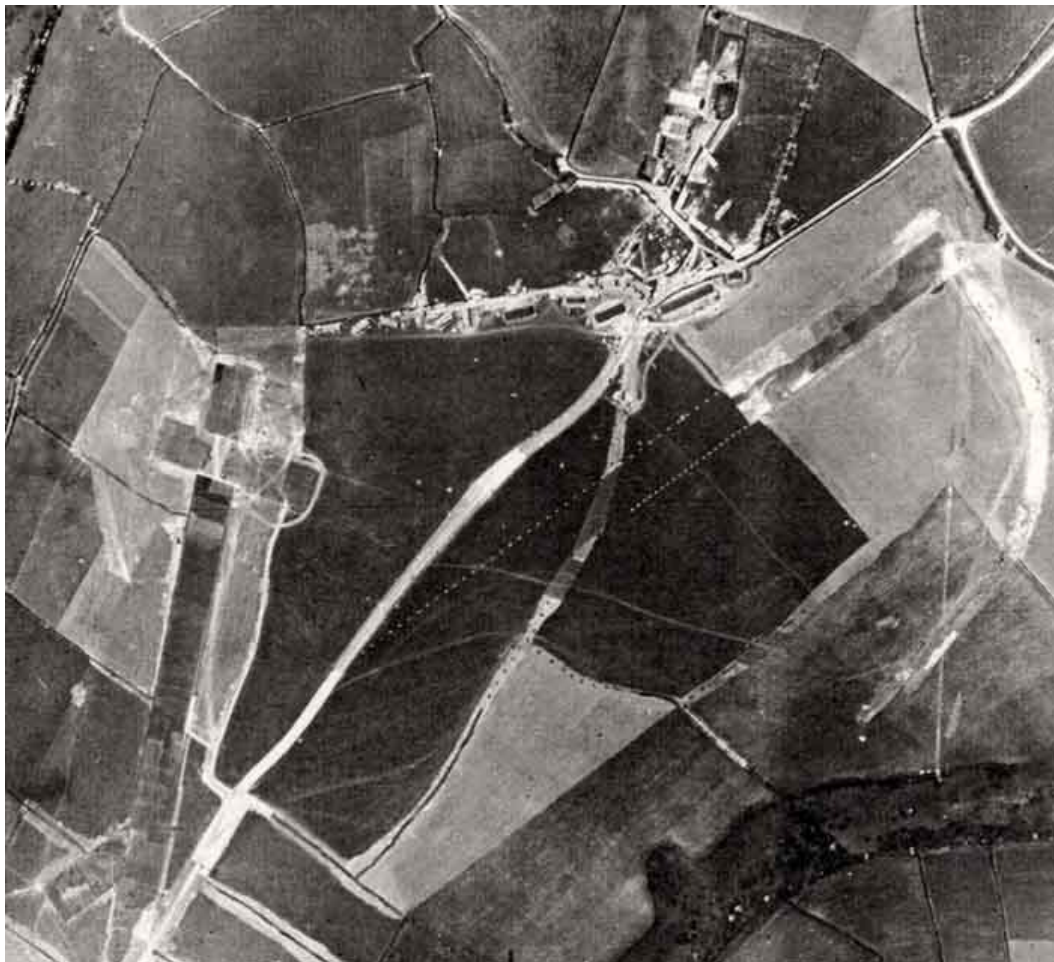


The remains of the accommodation blocks at St Eval airfield today. St Eval was the main centre of anti-submarine operations in the South West. From the spring of 1943, when the Battle of the Atlantic was at its critical point, long-range Liberator bombers of the United States Air Force were stationed here; these aircraft proved decisive in the battle. Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service

As early as the autumn of 1940 offensive operations were mounted from St Eval. These targeted the German occupied French ports on the Bay of Biscay coast, in particular the port of Brest. The harbour at Brest was regularly used by capital ships such as the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, and during 1941 and 1942 a series of raids were mounted against this and other ports. Other airfields, notably Portreath and Predannack, were used for raids on occupied France, and for providing fighter support for bombing raids on enemy shipping.

After Hitler's invasion of Russia in June 1941 Britain, which until then had been firmly on the back foot, gradually began to move onto the offensive. As well as mounting attacks on ports and other targets in France the Cornish airfields operated as staging posts for aircraft travelling further afield. Cornwall's geographical position made it an obvious jumping-off point for planes flying out to bases in Malta to attack German shipping operating off North Africa. Other aircraft took off from Portreath for Gibraltar.

The amount of traffic being dispatched overseas increased rapidly in late 1942 during the build up to the Allied invasion of North Africa in November. The other Cornish airfields were increasingly used for ferrying and dispatching as Portreath quickly became overwhelmed with the volume of traffic involved in these operations. Runways were extended in order to cope with the large numbers of heavy aircraft that needed to be dispatched. The small airfield at Trebelzue was expanded and in early 1943 its name was changed to St Mawgan. St Mawgan was used for the dispatch of aircraft to Africa and during late 1943 became one of the busiest airfields in Britain.



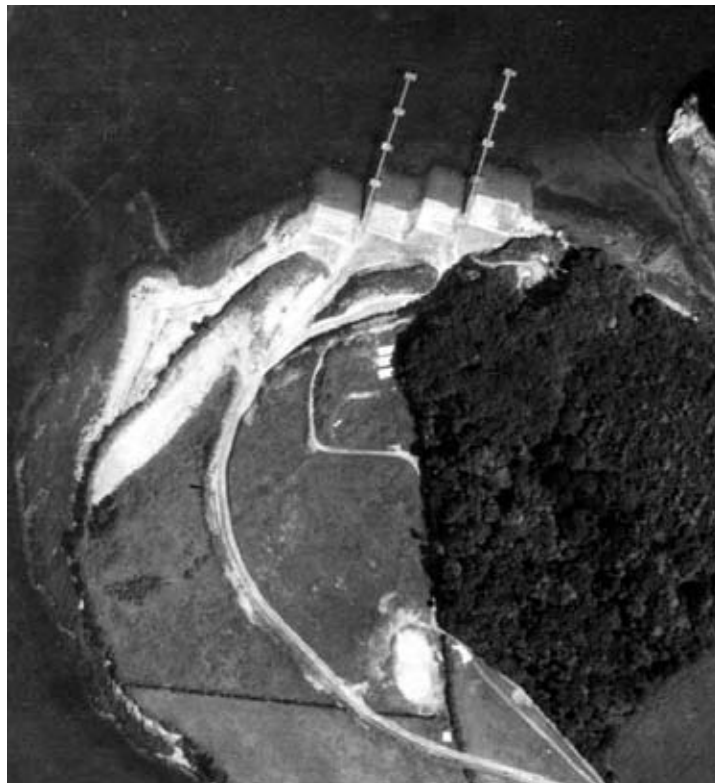
The runways under construction at St Mawgan airfield in 1942. © *English Heritage (NMR)*
RAF Photography: WLA11/1PRU/5107

War in Europe

Since the evacuation of British forces from Dunkirk in 1940, it was obvious that victory demanded one day they return to mainland Europe. This would be no easy matter. During 1942 and 1943 British forces carried out a number of raids on the coast of occupied France. The largest was the Dieppe raid of August 1942, in which a force of 6,000 men was beaten back with heavy losses in the space of a morning.

The experience gained in these raids contributed to the eventual successful invasion of mainland Europe, Operation Overlord, which began on 6 June 1944 – D Day. One factor leading to the success of the D Day landings was the sheer weight of forces involved. The landing troops set off from embarkation points all along Britain's southern coasts, from Harwich to Milford Haven, assembling at a point south of the Isle of Wight before advancing to the beaches of Normandy. The wide dispersal of embarkation points gave no prior clue as to where the landings might take place.

There were embarkation points in the Plymouth area, in and around Falmouth, and in the Helford Estuary. They are generally inconspicuous features, consisting of a concrete apron, known as a 'hard', which sloped down towards the water. Beyond the hard lay a series of steel-framed moorings known as dolphins.



The embarkation point at Turnaware Point in the Fal Estuary. Two dolphin moorings serve a series of four concrete hards. The concrete bases of three huts are visible inland of the hards; these would have provided accommodation for the small nucleus of staff manning the hards. The road in the left hand part of the photo was built to connect the hards to the nearest highway. © English Heritage (NMR) RAF Photography:

Hards were constructed in two parts; in solid concrete above the high water mark, and in flexible concrete matting (concrete slabs hinged with steel hooks) to the lower limit of the tide



*Remains of some of the flexible concrete matting from the D Day hard at Turnaware.
Photo © Cornwall County Council Historic Environment Service*

The initial invasion on D Day was followed by three weeks of intense transportation of troops, equipment and supplies from the embarkation hard to the Normandy coast. In all 11,000 tons of supplies were dispatched daily from the hard to the beachheads.



Temporary camps formed by rows of bell tents at Wheal Busy, Chacewater in the spring of 1944. These camps housed troops from the United States 29th Division during the build up to D Day. They were headed for Omaha and Utah beaches in Normandy. © English Heritage (NMR): US/7PH/GP/LOC213/3054

War in the Pacific

During the Second World War the aircraft carrier replaced the battleship as the navy's modern capital ship. The power and potential of carrier attacks was demonstrated as early as November 1940 when Britain's carrier fleet attacked the heavily defended harbour at Taranto and effectively destroyed the Italian navy.

The greatest triumph of Britain's aircraft carriers was achieved by the Pacific Fleet, which was formed in 1944. The Allied fleets fighting in the Pacific in 1944 and 1945 formed the largest the world had seen; the fleet assembled for the invasion of Okinawa in 1945 consisted of more than 1500 ships in total. The decisive naval battle in the Pacific was at Leyte Gulf when the Allied fleets established their superiority over the Japanese navy in the autumn of 1944.



The Naval Air Station at St Merryn, Padstow in 194-. The four runways are designed for short take-offs into the prevailing wind to replicate take-off from aircraft carriers. © English Heritage (NMR): RAF Photography: CPE/UK/1995/1420

An important site in Cornwall associated with the Pacific carrier battles is the Naval Air Station at St Merryn near Padstow. This was opened in the summer of 1940 and developed into a training base for aircraft carrier fighters. The layout of the airfield differs from that of RAF bases. There are four short runways all facing opposite directions. This is because carriers were always pointed into the wind for aircraft take-off; the airfield is designed to allow take-offs whatever the wind direction.

Activities at St Merryn involved air-to-air, air-to-sea and air-to-ground gunnery practice. This activity intensified in late 1944 when the emphasis was on training for operations in the Pacific, including practice for torpedo bombers as well as fighter aircraft. The nearby bombing and gunnery range at Treligga was used for this purpose.



The air-to-ground and air-to-sea bombing and gunnery range at Treligga near Padstow. Ground targets were placed on the cliff edge; one of these – a set of concentric circles is visible towards the bottom of the photo. On the cliffs above this target is the main part of the range. During 1944 this area was laid out to represent a typical Japanese-held area, with dummy tanks, a bridge, a road convoy and a landing strip. © English Heritage (NMR) RAF Photography: 106G/UK/1498/4258