

CHATEAUROUX AIR DEPOT

MISSION

The Chateauroux Air Depot mission was to provide all necessary depot logistical support to USAFE and assistance to all NATO countries; Issue and control shipments of supplies to new USAFE bases and wings in France; Prepare USAFE & MDAP requirements and requisitions to CONUS AMC depots; Provide maintenance beyond the capabilities of the European nations; Provide supply and maintenance training for foreign personnel; Provide and supervise technical representatives requested by the various countries; Assist Military Assistance Advisory Groups to compute detailed logistical requirements; Maintain stocks for emergency issue and routine requirements for all MDAP countries.

Chateauroux Air Depot commanded several sub-depots. These Sub-Depots were located at Bordeaux-Bacalan, (special clothing & medical supplies); Niort-Chize (aircraft ammunition); Metz-Frescaty (vehicles & construction supplies) St. Mihiel (conventional ammunition storage); St. Nazaire (aircraft seaport); and Les Moulins (vehicle storage and maintenance) and the Villefranche (parts storage).

The USAFE Chateauroux-Deols Air Depot consisted of two separate pieces of real estate about five miles apart; the La Martinerie military airdrome and the Chateauroux airport. This complex was also known as "CHAD."

LINEAGE

Chateauroux Air Depot

STATIONS

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

OPERATIONS

During the 1950 initial meetings for U.S. air base site selection, choosing the location of a large air depot was a primary concern. If a site wasn't found in Europe, this depot would have to be located near Newark, New Jersey. Moving the Erding Air Depot and all its war material stocks out of Germany into France as soon as possible dominated all planning. Some consideration was given to locating the air depot in England, but France was the most logical location, since the U.S. Army logistical system was centered in France. The Army had only a minor logistical support system in the UK. Several locations were proposed: Bordeaux-Merignac airfield and port facility, Lorient and Lann-Bihoue airfield and port, Lyon-Bron airfield, Metz-Frescaty airfield, Nantes-Reze airfield and port, and the St. Nazaire-Donges airfield and port facility. The airfields at all these sites were under civilian jurisdiction and would require extensive negotiations to obtain operating approvals. Also, expanding commercial air traffic might cause future problems. The former commercial and military airfield site, Lyon-Bron, located in mideastern France on the Rhone River was the best location proposed in September 1950. The Air Force team was agreeable to a joint use; civil and military airfield operation.

The proposed air depot would be the largest depot in Europe in order to support the USAFE and all NATO air forces, and air forces of other nations receiving Military Defense Assistance Program (MDAP) aid. There was disagreement between DOD and the Department of State over the size and cost of a large depot, and uncertainty if France would agree to the presence of an MDAP depot on its soil. There were also questions about what portion of the MDAP depot would be paid by NATO nations since the depot would be supporting non-NATO aircraft also.

Department of State gave final approval on 3 February 1951 for a depot somewhere in France that would serve Europe and the Near East. A USAF General could select the final location. General Hicks was specifically ordered to "exercise the greatest care so that State Department operations would not be prejudiced by premature exposure of American plans with regards to France." The USAF had decided that it would pay for what it wanted immediately, which did not please the State Department. It still hoped to persuade France to pay for most of the depot's construction costs. About 17 February, the French Air Force offered the Chateauroux location as a depot installation and quick agreement was reached, with the USAF requesting two facilities for immediate use: the Chateauroux-Deols Airport and the La Martinerie Airdrome.

The French government had been very slow in reaching a decision; it always feared the communists would actively oppose the large American presence required by an extensive depot anywhere in France. Radio Moscow already had broadcast the news about the Chateauroux

location, and that General Hicks would command the new depot. In addition, Moscow stated that all current French employees would lose their jobs when the Americans took over the facilities! The final agreement was signed on 27 February 1951 to permit the USAF to construct the Chateauroux Air Depot. General Hicks now became the driving force to get CHAD operational as quickly as possible for USAFE. It would be the only air depot established in France, and eventually replace both Erding Air Depot in West Germany and the Burtonwood Air Depot in the UK.

The Chateauroux location in central France was well south of the planned NATO air defense fighter barrier. It had a limited but trained civilian work force for hire, open land for expansion, and good year-round flying weather. This location had quick access to six national highways; the nearby deep water seaports of Bordeaux, La Rochelle, Rochefort, Royan and St Nazaire; and very good railroad service in four directions—all prime criteria for a large air depot. The location also had many deficiencies that would have been encountered anywhere else in France, or on the continent, at that time. The urgency to establish this air depot was so great that these limited facilities would be expanded as an interim air base and then later developed into a permanent air depot. Chateauroux AD, therefore, would be a two-step base, first a bare base with a tent camp and leased buildings, followed in about four years with permanent buildings, warehouses and shops, and an improved airfield. The aircraft repair depot could be enlarged around the aircraft manufacturing plant that was available for lease. An 8,400-foot concrete runway was built in 1952, and extended to 12,000 feet in 1957.

Quick studies determined that La Martinerie was worth \$10 million. The French government would lease it to the USAF for \$1 per year; but the cost of relocating its occupants would be \$4,285,714. La Martinerie consisted of fourteen small aircraft hangars, ten warehouses, a hospital structure, eight three story barracks, and many other small structures. Unfortunately La Martinerie was divided in half by a highway. This road provided access to the Deols aircraft maintenance factory located five miles away and into Chateauroux's city center.

Since the Deols aircraft factory was privately owned, it would rent for \$100,000 per year after an initial cost of \$600,000 to displace its occupants. When operating and repair costs were estimated, the depot facility would spend \$6,997,334 for fiscal year 1951. When the USAF team visited the proposed depot buildings at Deols and La Martinerie they were shocked at the amount of construction and repairs that would be required to set up the air depot. Much WWII bomb damage still remained, and the structures' interiors had deteriorated badly, needing extensive repairs. Many additional real estate parcels were leased around the region for indoor and outdoor storage, offices, and maintenance shops. This was accomplished as rapidly as possible to avoid new construction.

Almost every airman and officer who served in France during the 1950s heard stories about Chateauroux and the horrible living conditions encountered by its troops—and were pleased that they were based elsewhere in France. Not only were living conditions bad, but the working conditions and depot facilities were near impossible. The first problem was that there was no high ground for camping out at La Martinerie, the entire site was flat, without drainage, and the

soil did not readily absorb water. Two-hundred-eighty GP medium tents—without floors—were arranged in a lower portion of the airfield, which became a vast sea of mud in fall, winter, and spring 1951-52. Later in 1952, wood floors and frames were constructed along with a hot water and sewer system. Officers were initially housed in the Sainte Catherine Hotel and later moved to the Renovex Warehouse in the city. There were insufficient buildings and covered storage for personnel, vehicles, supplies, and depot workshops. Chateauroux requested construction help from USAFE. HQ USAFE replied that, "Only German nationals from Air Installations are available, and we consider it inadvisable to use these people in Chateauroux." Aircraft maintenance was far, far down the depot's work priority at this time. There was always a shortage of vehicles to lift, transport, and off-load all types of supplies that had to be moved from the railroad siding in Chateauroux's main train yard to La Martinerie, five miles away. Once the shipments reached La Martinerie, many off-road Army M-series trucks were needed to plow through the mire in the outdoor storage area, but they were not available.

USAFE ordered the newly arrived 73rd Air Depot Wing to send small detachments to each new air base in France to guard, inventory, and store U.S. property when it was delivered from the depots.

The 1951 summer brought little relief. It set records for low temperatures and rainfall, which was the final straw in the effort to stop the chaos unfolding at La Martinerie. Then the real winter rainy season hit in December through March, turning the outdoor storage fields into impassible quagmires. Tents and tarps were used to protect items such as aircraft engines, electrical equipment, and office equipment. Many man-hours were expended attempting to hand dig trenches on the airfield to drain the ponds of standing water. Trucks and forklifts could not work in the mud between supply stacks. This situation persisted for three years. Most material had to be left outdoors until 1.2 million square feet of new warehousing was completed during late 1954.

The 866th Engineer Aviation Battalion arrived at Chateauroux on 21 July 1952 with 27 officers and 760 soldiers to provide much needed construction skills to improve conditions at La Martinerie.

By summer 1955, after a huge effort, all the supplies that had been outdoors, had been retrieved, opened, cleaned, inspected, repacked, and stored in very organized fashion in new warehouses. Some items had been destroyed or had corroded to scrap during this outdoor storage fiasco.

In 1955 another two-story steel hangar was built adjacent to the high bay aircraft assembly building, providing another 150,000 square feet of floor space for aircraft repair.

During the runway extension program in 1956 a new air terminal area was developed about a half mile north off route N20, south of Cere. This area included twelve buildings and a 1,280,000 square-foot aircraft parking apron. This apron area could accommodate up to twenty-four C-133A-size cargo transports. Included was a new seven story control tower, base

operations building, air passenger terminal, fire station, transient billeting, mess hall, warehouses, and large lots for long term auto parking. All flight operations were moved from the factory administration area into this new complex. At the same time, the southeast side of the airfield was expanded with a 3,000-foot long curved taxiway having ten large rectangular aircraft parking hardstands, plus two large metal hangars for hazardous cargo storage and handling. This area was used as a specialized repair activity for the depot. Electrical service at Deols and La Martinerie was increased to 2,500 KW during 1956.

Additional construction at La Martinerie was required in 1957 to provide facilities for receiving the parts, supplies, and vehicles from the Moulins, Villefranche, and Bacalan sub-depots that were closed in 1958. Vehicle repair shops were expanded to accommodate the increased workload resulting from phase-out of Moulins vehicle shops.

From the very first days, French nationals were employed to assist the depot operations. An employment office was leased in downtown Chateauroux in the Bourse de Commerce building. Citizens of the Indre Department welcomed the opportunity for employment. By December 1954 there were 3,450 French employees at the depot as approved by "Operation Native Son." Depot employment reached a maximum of 3,950 French civilians in July 1961. During the sixteen years of depot operation, military personnel decreased from about 3,200 down to 1,800, but military dependents increased dramatically from 250 in 1952 to about 3,900 in 1965.

Civilian salaries averaged about 35 to 45 percent higher than local wages, which was resented by the local business owners. Common starting wages in 1955 were \$1.00 to \$1.70 per hour depending upon skills. CHAD provided its employees with transportation to and from work from all around the Indre.

This large air depot also had the greatest concentration of U.S. personnel in France, and this caused some friction between the French citizens and Americans. The American presence in the small city was overwhelming, especially the large U.S. family automobiles. Inflation of rents was a serious problem for both groups of people. Education in French language and customs was made available on base, and later became mandatory. Military personnel were expected to acquire a basic ability to be polite and survive in France.

The Chateauroux Air Depot was established as USAFE's primary depot and was commanded by HQ USAFE until 31 December 1955. On 1 January 1956 all overseas depots were transferred to the Air Material Command, and Chateauroux AD then became the primary AMC depot for Europe and the Middle East region. Its new command title became Central Air Material Area, Europe, (CAMAEE). CAMAEE used its new major command insignia in its patch on 18 March 1956. This transfer between major air commands had very little effect on mission or manning. Command changed again on 1 July 1962 when Chateauroux was transferred back to USAFE from Air Logistics Command. The overseas theater commander again had direct command of his logistics depot. On 1 April 1956 all 70 and 7000 series designators were changed to 3000 series designators for all assigned units at Chateauroux, but tenant unit designators were not changed.

In addition to the depot supply function for Europe, Chateauroux Air Depot assumed the job of equipment maintenance and disposal for Europe. Aircraft depot level maintenance became a huge task. USAFE estimated that it would have a maximum of 2,500 assigned USAF aircraft.

The Chateauroux depot functioned from March 1951 until March 1967 when FRELOC closed all U.S. military bases in France.

USAF Unit Histories
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Sources
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.