

# **A DAY WE WILL NEVER FORGET**

## **The Importance of Gosport's Involvement in D-Day**

1944, the Second World War has been raging since 1939, what was known as the phony war, eventually became all too real. A bloody ongoing battle between the Western Allies formed mainly of the United Kingdom and France against the German Reich, the Nazis!

“We referred to it as the phony war because it was almost as if you had a mastiff dog, lurching around the compound, waiting to pounce. Waiting to pounce on Poland, the war then really started to get nasty.”

Millions of British men fought overseas to prevent the Nazis led by Adolf Hitler, executing a plan for world domination. But the battlefield wasn't just overseas people in Britain were also vulnerable to attack in their own soil. German aircraft were capable of flying again and again over the United Kingdom to drop bombs on military and civilian targets. This was at its height during the 1940 and 1941, the period known as the Blitz. Gosport was a very likely target because of its military and nautical significance. And so it was decided that children should be evacuated to safer areas.

“My earliest memory is being evacuated, I was given a gas mask and a packed lunch by my mum, and she said you're going on a trip with your sister. We were then packed off to Eastleigh, and I think it four or five weeks later, suddenly our mum turned up, and she decided she would come and get us. I remember her words to this day, she said 'you're going to come back, we want you to be with us, we miss you and if we're going to get killed or bombed then we'll all be bombed together, and we'll stay together for the rest of the war.'”

From 1939 the western Allies struggled to tackle the Nazis on mainland Europe, but by 1940 the Allies needed to make a hasty retreat from France. Three hundred thousand troops were picked up and delivered back across the channel to England in what became known as the Dunkirk evacuation.

The Allies knew that if they had any chance of winning the war, they needed to have their troops in control in mainland Europe. It was

decided the best way to achieve this would be to cross the English Channel rather than invade Europe from any other point. The Germans knew that an invasion across the channel was highly likely, they just didn't know when, or where.

In 1943 allied political and military leaders agreed upon a secret plan, to invade Europe via the English Channel, then to battle on through Normandy, in Northern France. 'Operation Overlord' was the name given to the overall plan, with the Normandy landings becoming known as 'Operation Neptune'. The day on which those landings would happen was referred to as 'D-Day', the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944.

Success was crucial, this could be the chance to defeat the Nazis, and so a year of top secret planning and preparation went on around the country. In Gosport the whole community seemed to be involved, soldiers, seamen, dockyard and factory workers, the home guard and many others civilians too.

"Dad's Army hadn't really hit the screens, it was very, very close to being what Mainwaring and company were. Tanks made of plywood and pram wheels and rope. An ingenious collection of pretend lorries, pretend tanks, and it served its purpose. Principally aimed at causing confusion to the Germans. The Germans were in fact taken in, mainly down towards Dover."

The deployment of these phony vehicles at Dover certainly did fool the German intelligence. They were convinced that the Allied forces would attack across the Strait of Dover, then land in Calais. This would later prove to be a worthwhile tactic even after the D-Day landings in Normandy. Hitler was still, convinced that an attack was most likely across the Straits, and so strengthened his forces in the Calais region. He was unwilling to reinforce his troops in Normandy until it was too late, giving the Allies the advantage of being able to replenish their troops, vehicles and equipment very quickly.

The plan was that the majority of both troops and supplies would be transported across the channel in large vessels, which meant that the Allies needed a harbour along the Normandy coast where the water was deep enough. In the end that search was scuppered by the fact that all the harbours along the French coast were already heavily defended by

the Germans. So the Allies came up with another plan, they constructed a temporary harbour system which could act as a port, to allow thousands of troops, vehicles and supplies to be safely off loaded. Again Gosport played its part, because fourteen of the floating concrete units or caissons from which the makeshift harbour was constructed, were made in Stokes Bay, so they could be taken across the channel to collectively form what became known as the 'Mulberry Harbours'. When everything was ready tugboats from Gosport played their part in transporting the harbours and breakwaters out to sea in preparation for the invasion.

"They built four of these massive breakwaters, now they were as big as my bungalow. When they were completed, being in the tug service, we took them out to Stokes Bay, and turned them over to sea going tugs. They took them away to an area, apparently they sunk them so they wouldn't be seen obviously from the air. But the problem was then, when they came to lifting them, they had to have divers down underneath with powerful hoses because they were all stuck to the mud. These were then towed across as necessary by sea going tugs."

Local people in Gosport were keen to do their bit and help in whatever way they could. For some this meant helping with the loading of the landing craft or LSTs, which would be essential for getting troops and vehicles safely across to the Normandy beaches.

"At the time I was a corporal in the Home Guard, three of us were a special reconnaissance unit, we heard word passed to work, if any of us were available to go along to the slipway at Hardway and help the troops there because they were literally on their knees with loading and that, could we go along and give them a hand.

The vehicles had come from all over the country, when we were talking to them. When they arrived in Priory Road and they came along to the top of the slipway there was always the smallest vehicles first, so the small vehicles came down inside up the ramp or on the lift, onto the upper deck and as soon as the last small one came in the first large one came down the slipway and as the tank space was full there were no more vehicles waiting.

Now somebody or a lot of people in a lot of offices all round the country had sat down and worked out exactly where every one of those vehicles would be at that particular time that day.”

Troops had been trained and prepared all over the United Kingdom for the landings and beach battle scenarios, some were even trained as far away as the USA, so that all were as prepared as possible for what was to follow.

“A convoy was formed of about twelve or fifteen of these craft, and we came across the Atlantic after a very rough journey and very long, lengthy journey, but eventually we came to Portsmouth and loaded up for D-Day and this was real thing, we were all looking forward to it. We were not allowed to take any photographs, we were not allowed to keep diaries.”

“Troops made their way to the Hardway where they were loaded onto LSTs, LCTs whatever landing craft was in operation and they would go to a rendezvous point.”

As the troops prepared for what lay ahead, they knew that this war had already cost millions of lives and left many more as wounded casualties. Would they be next? Would they make it home alive from D-Day?

“I’d been taken down by my mother, down to the front and it was building up to D-Day there and the place was chock-a-block. We weren’t allowed to go on the sea front itself. There was a lot of stationary vehicles, army vehicles, big lorries and tanks. There was a soldier who was sat on a low wall looking a little bit despondent and as we got near him, he looked at me and he said “here you are snowball you have this” and he fished in his pocket and he brought out a sixpence and he held it out to me and he said “I won’t need this where I’m going”. Of course he was off to France, my mother cried and it’s something which was initially kept by my mother as a memory of that very, very important occasion. Yes, it’s something which I will never know, did he survive? Did he not survive? What happened to the bloke? Well obviously there must have been a lot of fear and dread in their minds, because they knew what they were confronting or near enough.”

Nothing was left to chance, reconnaissance aircraft had already flown low over the Normandy beaches to take aerial photographs which could be used to draw up accurate maps. Artists added landscape drawings, so that the landing parties had a clear idea of the layout of the land that they were about to invade,

“We moved to Stokes Bay where we were starting to get ready for the invasion. The officers turned up with maps, so that showed us exactly where we were going to land and with the maps there were aerial photographs. Now these aerial photographs were brilliant, it showed you exactly what was on the beach, so we had little meetings to decide what each tank was going to carry and what our job was going to be on this particular beach. There would be a hundred odd tanks, so these tanks were going to be landed in different little positions all along the invasion coast.”

June 6<sup>th</sup> 1944, D-Day, in Gosport the build of military presence was plain to see, even by civilians who watched what was happening in their own back yards.

“The day itself was slightly unreal, we weren’t absolutely certain, we didn’t know who to believe in a way. We knew they had gone to fight the Germans, we weren’t certain where, we didn’t have any real detail and then later in the day that came out.”

“The actual D-Day, we went to bed that evening and the roads were full of troops and lorries and tanks and Bren Gun carriers and things like that. The next morning we woke up and all the roads were free, they were all clear and it wasn’t until just before we went to school that we were told that the invasion of Normandy had started.

The preparations were complete. Now it was down to all the brave men waiting in strategic points across the country, to cross the English Channel and do their duty. Most of the troops came from the United Kingdom, Canada or the USA, but many other countries also took part in D-Day and the battle of Normandy including Australia, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and Poland. Everyone had their part to play, for some that meant transporting troops and equipment on landing craft across to the Normandy beaches.

“This little ship was now filled to capacity with vehicles and troops and then we started to set sail for Normandy, our beach was ‘Gold’, then having got rid of our cargo of troops we were glad to get heading back home.”

A hundred and fifty six thousand troops were carried across to the Normandy beaches for the initial assault. Their job was to establish a beach head from which the main invasion could be launched. They left in the early hours of the morning, but the elements were against them,

“Now the trip across the English Channel was dreadful, it was really bad. The sea was rough and it was frightening, really frightening, the waves were coming over the top of the tank deck and it was no way really to prepare for what we were about to do.”

Crossing the channel was just the first challenge, waiting for them on the French coast were many more perils. Bombardment from the enemy, rough terrain, land mines and beach defences!

“But eventually we got near and then guns started to fire and it was the monitors that were shelling the French coast, but we went right underneath. The noise was dreadful!

We were dropped a hundred yards to the left of our target, and also we were half an hour late, the infantry had already been ashore. Now as we came into shore, the tank in front of us, which was a Sherman Plougher tank had knocked out one of the gun positions and so as we approached and we went through, the driver said to me, there’s bodies on the beach.

So the first landing craft that came in we loaded them on with the wounded and the landing craft took them back, and then by nine o’clock we’d hoisted our blue flag to say that the opening was safe for other tanks to come in, so the second wave came in, and by mid-day we cleared the beach of all the beach obstacles. So basically our job was done.”

The code names for the five Normandy beaches were ‘Gold’, ‘Juno’, ‘Sword’, ‘Utah’ and ‘Omaha’. The Allies eventually conquered them all. By the 11<sup>th</sup> June 1944 approximately three and twenty seven thousand troops, fifty four thousand vehicles and a hundred and four thousand tons of supplies had landed on these beaches, all be it at the cost of ten

thousand Allied casualties. But the ultimate result was that the Allies had the foothold they so badly needed on the European mainland.

In spite of the success of D-Day, the Allies still had a long way to go before they could think of victory; they had to battle across Normandy, through towns that were still heavily defended, on their way to Paris where they crossed the river Seine to liberate the capital city where they pushed the Nazis further and further back. Constant reinforcements were needed in the form of troops, vehicles and supplies, all of which had to be transported from the UK to the Normandy coast. The landing craft made countless trips across and often they didn't come back empty handed.

"We made trips backwards and forwards until the September of that year."

"When the boats came back, they were bringing the wounded back or the German prisoners of war."

"I remember on one occasion we were coming back, and I had the misfortune of taking in a huge kettle of soup, in the tank space full of prisoners, so I was there with this kettle of soup, one arrogant devil just threw it back at me, and I just ignored it. No good jumping up and down about it, it just happened."

People in Gosport still remember watching prisoners of war being marched off the landing craft on their way to temporary prison camps.

"I suppose the most lasting memory of all, was in the evening where there was still some unloading of broken gliders and that from landing craft, when suddenly this enormous LCT, American landing craft appeared in the distance and then somebody said, it's covered with men and then as it got closer somebody said, I think they're Germans, and at that moment everybody was silent.

The most shocking experience of my life ever because these were killers to me, these were people who dropped bombs on us, had killed local people. As the craft came in and moored up, one British soldier got off with a gun just over his shoulder, called them off and he lined up hundreds of these Germans, they looked absolutely bedraggled and beaten, but the real problem was when people from the houses came

out with cups of tea and coffee for them, other people were rushing up and taking the coffee and tea away, and that was a massive emotional dilemma for me, I didn't know who was right and I think gradually we realised that these men didn't ask to be there they just had no choice."

Meanwhile over in Normandy the battle was still raging. After the D-Day landings the Allies faced the challenge of moving off the beaches and further into Normandy. The British, Canadians and Polish forces moved inland in a bid to capture Caen a major city in Normandy.

"After that we spent our time supporting infantry trying to take CAEN. Caen was a pivotal point and until Caen had been taken we couldn't break out no further on. It went on through June, July, August until early September. So that basically was the end of the Normandy campaign."

The attempts to capture Caen to push on inland towards Verlaise were not easy. The fighting in Normandy was fierce and bloody but ultimately successful. The battle of Normandy was vital to the Allied success in France. Throughout the winter of 1944 and the spring of 1945 the Allies gradually made their way towards Nazi Germany. For some this was via Paris, Belgium then onto Germany itself.

"I was told we were going to go into Bremen, then I was surprised we weren't chasing them because they were definitely giving in and then while I was doing it a hausfrau came out and started brushing up the pavement, I said to her no one's done anything yet there must have been shooting at something, why hadn't anyone shot me down? And then when said stay where you are, don't move on, and don't start trying to chase the Germans, why not? Because tomorrow they're going to admit that they're beaten. This was on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945, and that was the end of the matter."

The Germans realised that the battle was over in Europe, they signed a document of total and unconditional surrender, which formed the first stepping stone towards peace in Europe.

As we commemorate D-Day we must never forget the huge debt of gratitude we owe to all who made the Allied triumph possible. Those courageous troops who landed in Normandy were supported and encouraged by so many, armed forces and civilians, at sea and in the



air, in the front line and in the background. Millions of men and women who each played their part working together for their country and for peace.

“Being young it was just sort of exciting and we were useful, we were on the move we were doing something useful, we weren’t just sitting round doing nothing.”

The German army found themselves facing a formidable enemy, who fought them in Europe with plentiful resources of troops, vehicles, fuel and equipment.

Gosport was at the heart of the supply and dispatch of so much that was needed to make D-Day a success, thanks to the expertise and hard work of the wide community of the town both military and civilian. Their courage and commitment played a significant part in winning the war, and in that, the town of Gosport should take great pride.

“The initial assault couldn’t have been mounted without the complete commitment of whatever it is, thirty to forty sites, in Gosport who did nothing else for several years but make sure that the initial assault worked. If the initial assault didn’t work then D-Day would have failed. We kick started the while operation properly, it couldn’t have worked without Gosport.”