

SOUTHAMPTON IN WWII

The Second World War lasted from 1939 to 1945. Two opposing military alliances, the Allies and the Axis Powers, fought against each other, involving more than 100 million people from more than 30 countries. It was the deadliest conflict in human history and has shaped the world, as we know it.

Just as in the First World War, Southampton played an important role in the movement of troops overseas. The British Expeditionary Force sailed from Southampton to Cherbourg on 9 September 1939; just seven months later, they returned, many rescued by the 'Dunkirk Little Ships'. Troops left from the town for postings all over the world, and the wounded, refugees and German prisoners of war (POWs) came in on the returning ships.

Early on in the Second World War, Southampton was identified as a pivotal port for the launch of the invasion. The South Western Hotel was requisitioned and became the headquarters for Combined Operations Military Movement Control, HMS Shrapnel. Churchill and Eisenhower met here on at least one occasion. Frequent bombing had forced the closure of the docks during the early part of the war, but they reopened after the last major raid in June 1942. The invasion plans required the construction of two artificial harbours to be towed to Normandy immediately after the landings to facilitate the unloading of supply ships. Secret construction of the codenamed 'Mulberry Harbours' began in the dry docks in spring 1943, with component parts built at locations along the south coast. A pipeline under the ocean (PLUTO) running from the Isle of Wight to Cherbourg was even designed to supply fuel for the allied vehicles.

In the summer of 1943, the US Army Transportation Corps took over the docks and it was designated the US Army 14th Major Port. Their first task was to discharge the lend-lease cargoes from America. As part of Operation Bolero, the United States supplied the UK and other allied nations with food, oil, vehicles, locomotives, aircraft and warships. These arrived in Southampton between August 1943 and April 1944. The 14th Port was then responsible for the embarkation of troops and equipment destined for Normandy from D-Day through to the end of the war, as well as receiving war casualties and German prisoners, the repair and salvage of vessels, and finally for the repatriation of troops, equipment and war brides to America. At its peak in November 1944, US Port military personnel numbered 6,641 with around 700 civilian personnel. The whole of Southampton effectively became a military camp. Southampton and the surrounding area as far as Romsey and Winchester were identified as Area C. With both British and US forces using the port and marshalling and transit camps, great coordination was required. One-way systems were established on the roads and many areas sealed off from the public. British and US Police worked together to ensure the roads were kept clear and the military areas secure. Military vehicles lined the streets, stretching from the waterfront up through Southampton to the Common and beyond, and the side streets in-between. Camouflage nets strung between trees hid them from the air.



Operation Overlord Administrative map for Area C, covering Southampton and the surround area, dated 1 May 1944. Reproduced by kind permission of Portsmouth Museum Service, Portsmouth City Council.

Camps for British and American soldiers radiated out into the surrounding countryside, many in the grounds of the big houses, Chilworth, Broadlands, Hursley, Breamore etc. Canadians were camped at Bassett Wood, Bassett Green and Stoneham Golf Course. Half of The Common was left clear for the British Army on foot to marshal and many private houses in Shirley were requisitioned as bases. At this time, Americans practised segregation; black and white troops were not allowed to mix. They had separate duties, billets and even recreational facilities. The black American soldiers were mainly dockworkers, drivers and stretcher-bearers. Their quarters were in London Road, in the old Ordnance Survey buildings and a church. Many of the men, including the 512 Port Battalion, slept in camps outside the town. The 399th Truck Company needed 100 buses and trucks to bring the 2,000 stevedores into the town every day. The people of Southampton did not agree with segregation, and sometimes inadvertently caused trouble by paying no heed to colour.

White officers were billeted in the Polygon Hotel and in private houses in Highfield and Bassett with the troops billeted at many of the schools following their evacuation (Ascupart Road, King Edward's, Swaythling Junior, and Taunton's school) and the Blighmont Barracks at Millbrook. Camps were set up in open spaces on The Common and the parks. The US army control centre was set up in the Civic Centre, while the US Naval Advance Amphibious base operated from The Star Hotel. The US 28th and 46th Field Hospitals set up facilities at the wharfs to receive the most seriously wounded soldiers returning after D-Day. The Royal Victoria Hospital and YMCA at Netley were taken over by the US Navy.

The American Red Cross occupied seven buildings in Southampton. Figures for the 'white club' alone record that they provided 30,000 meals per week and accommodated 450 men every night in the dormitories. These were mainly men on leave and US Navy based in the town. At the Red Cross clubs, men could access laundry and repair services, barbers and enjoy recreational activities, sports, movies and four dances a week. The American Red Cross women in the docks were very popular, with their endless supply of tea and donuts.

The residents of Southampton enjoyed the company of all the Americans. They entertained the children, played in the streets and gave them chocolate, comics, rides in their Jeeps and even Christmas parties. The young women of Southampton enjoyed being invited to dances or the movies and they relished the treat of a pair of tights. The children's cries of "got any gum chum" were often met by the retort "got a sister mister?" Homes were left open for the troops to use their facilities. New sports such as baseball and basketball were seen for the first time. Residents were used to seeing the men move off for military manoeuvres, so when D-Day came, it was not until the news broadcast at 10am, that they realised their military friends had really gone this time.



Troops and local on Rockleigh Road (Image from private collection)