

D-Day: Stories from the Walls



14th Major Port US Army: Southampton Origin & Context

During the Maritime Archaeology Trust's National Lottery Heritage Funded D-Day Stories from the Walls project, volunteers undertook online research into topics and themes linked to D-Day, Southampton, ships and people during the Second World War.

Their findings were used to support project outreach and dissemination.

This Research Article was undertaken by one of our volunteers and represents many hours of hard and diligent work. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our amazing volunteers.

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14th Major US Army Port Southampton

ORIGIN AND CONTEXT



Figure 1: US Army Transportation Corps Insignia

Source: <http://www.milbadges.com/corps/USA/transportation>

From CivicHeraldry.com

Southampton was the largest passenger port in the country, so it was well suited for handling very large numbers of troops. Due to its location at the head of Southampton Water, into which the rivers Test and, adjacent to the docks, the Itchen flow, it is well sheltered and being approximately mid-way along the English Channel, the port also uniquely experiences a daily double high tide leading to prolonged periods of high water, thus greatly facilitating the movement of large ships at all states of the tide. The tidal range is about 1.5m. The tides around the Isle of Wight and in the Solent are complex [Tidetech] but this area with inlets and river mouths nonetheless offered an excellent, reasonably sheltered area for mooring the many hundreds of craft required for the invasion. Industry was well established at Southampton including shipbuilding and production of the Spitfire thus providing complementary technological facilities, as did the nearby naval dockyard at Portsmouth for ship repairs. Southampton additionally possessed dry dock facilities and, essentially, a rail infrastructure which played a crucial role connecting with the national network.

Southampton's role was not only to be the principal embarkation point for the amphibious assault but, unlike other ports, it would continue to be busy as the bridgehead for continued supply to Europe and receiving wounded personnel back from Europe, thus extending its importance until the end of the war. Consequently, Southampton was designated as the Major Port to move the American forces and their supplies into and back from north-west Europe, and to repatriate or redeploy troops to other theatres.

It is appropriate to highlight the facilities offered by Southampton which led to its designation as a Major Port. Southampton had played a key role in transporting the armed services and their equipment to and

from mainland Europe during the First World War [Ports in WW1], a role it reprised for the Second World War. Between the wars some development of the port was undertaken:

- 1923 – National grouping of railways with amalgamation of existing companies on a regional basis. London and South Western, largest in the south east, renamed Southern Railway [Southern Railway].
- 1924 – 60,000-ton floating dock, 292m long x 41m wide, provided for SS *Majestic* and SS *Leviathan* [Shipping Wonders]. This dock was moved to Portsmouth during the Second World War.
- 1926 – The de-watering plants for the various graving docks, as well as the hydraulic pumping installations, were remodelled, electricity having been substituted for steam as motive power [Grace's Guide].
- 1933 – King George V dry dock, No. 7, completed, able to accommodate ships up to 100,000 tons. Largest in the world, pre-war [Shipping Wonders (A)] [Wonders] [Cunard Ultimatum].
- 1936 – River Test Quay completed, 2,300m long.
- 1943 – Marchwood Military Port. Opposite Southampton, built to ferry men and equipment to the Normandy beaches [Marchwood].

Southampton Port statistics for 1938 include an 8.8km total length of quays, 7 dry docks, 2,500 passenger and 4,200 freight trains [Handbook].

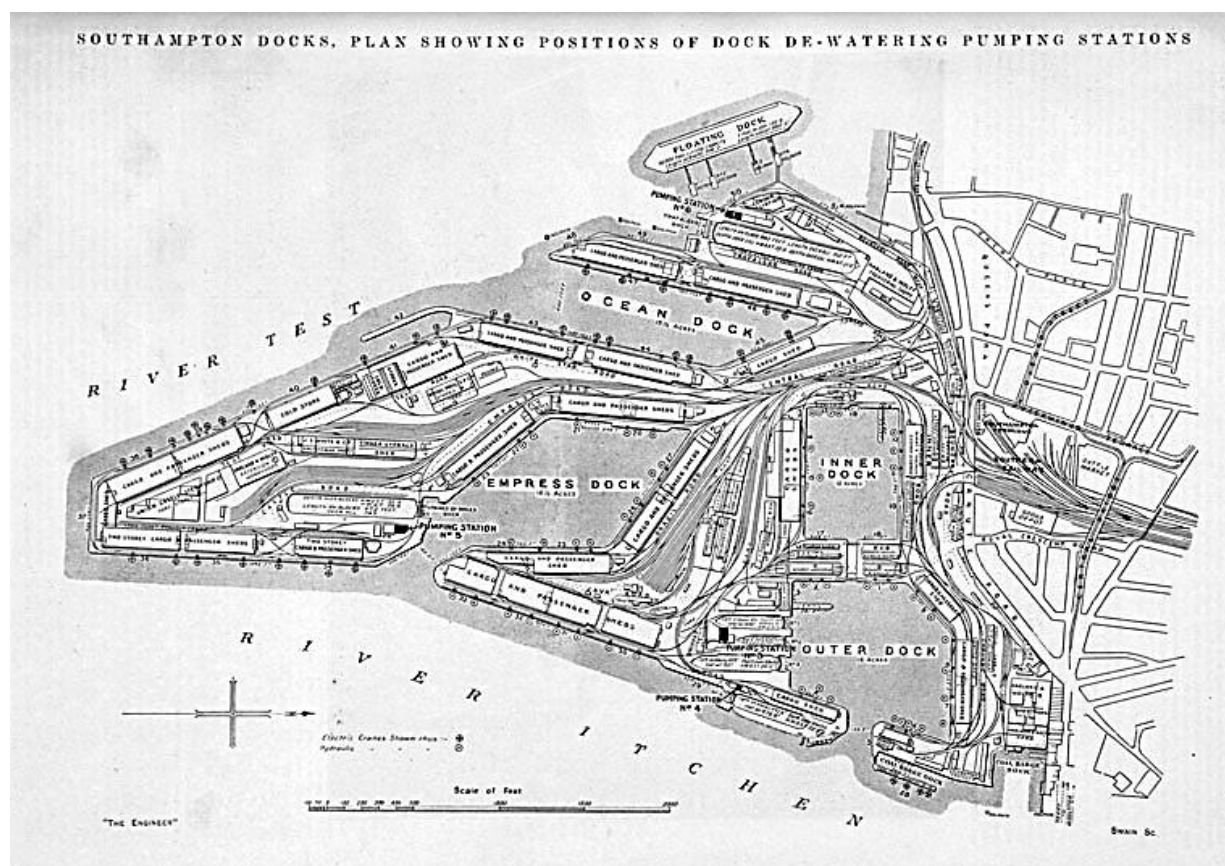


Figure 2: Layout of Southampton Docks in 1926

Source: Grace's Guide - <https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/File:lm1926v142-p189.jpg>

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An aerial appreciation of the 1930s extensions can be seen in the next two Figures.



“The reclamation of the land behind the new Western Docks in Southampton was one of the largest non-rural reclamation schemes ever carried out in Britain. The ground level was made up with mud and silt dredged from the sea bed outside the new dock wall and chalk brought by rail from a pit beside the main Southampton to London railway line at Micheldever, about 16 miles to the north” [Historic England].

Figure 3: Reclamation of the Western Docks between Royal Pier and Millbrook Point, Southampton, from the East, 1932

Source: Historic England. Accessed March 2020. Available at <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/image/epw039727>



Figure 4: The Docks, Southampton, from the South-East, 1946

Source: Historic England. Accessed March 2020. Available at <https://britainfromabove.org.uk/en/image/EAW001355>

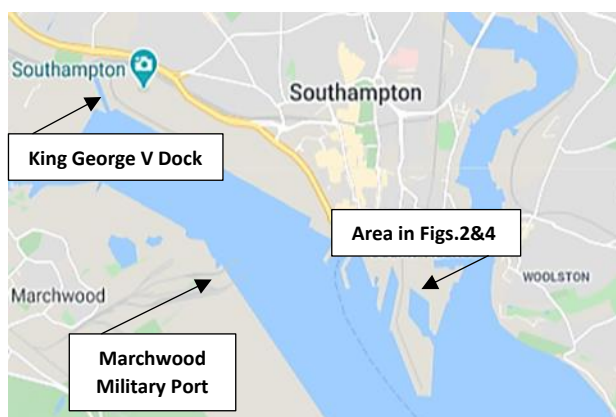


Figure 5: Southampton Port and Docks

Source: Google maps.

<https://www.google.co.uk/maps/@50.9005953,-1.3816417,13z>

Before war broke out, Southampton having become a premier passenger port, featured substantial passenger traffic, imports of produce and exports of manufactured goods. War put a stop to the passenger traffic, and commercial traffic was switched to safer west coast ports as the Luftwaffe made Southampton one of their key targets. Several hundred persons were killed in bombing raids, over 4,000 houses destroyed as well as shops, and over 11,000 houses seriously damaged [Lambert]. 712 of these bombs from 30 November and 1 December 1940 are pinpointed on a blitz map [OS Blog]. Nothing is

shown falling directly on the docks, but several are shown westwards along the quaysides. *“The facilities at the port were regularly bombed by enemy aircraft during the Second World War. Sheds 103 and 104 were completely destroyed on the weekend of 30 November to 2 December 1940. Later that month the Red Funnel paddle steamers Her Majesty and Duchess of Cornwall were sunk moored at Southampton. The tug Canute was hit and sank on 28 December, and while under construction at the Thorneycroft yard the destroyers Norseman and Oppertune were badly damaged. In 69 air raids, 226 bombs fell on the docks, and twenty-three sheds and warehouses were destroyed or seriously damaged”* [The Port of Southampton]. There is a detailed account of the difficult disposal of a German mine which fell into the Coal Barge Wharf during the 1941 blitz [Bomb Disposal]. Another reference includes detailed statistics of the bombing [Simpkin]. Subsequent bombing of the docks is logged on 11 March and 12 April 1941 [Bitterne].

Annotated German Luftwaffe maps showing intended bombing targets in Southampton are available for inspection at the Historic England Archive. <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/photos/results/?searchType=HE+Archive&search=southampton+docks>

In 1942, a fortified telephone exchange and Control Room was built in the shell of a 19th century warehouse in the Docks, which acted as an organisational focal point for the docks during the latter stages of the war including D-Day landings [SCC HER Monument].

The US Transportation Corps responsible for *“all rail and water activities”* [Transportation Corps] was created in July 1942 renamed from the Transportation Service, as a dedicated American Corps in the Second World War considered essential for overseeing the movement of all forms of transportation by motor, rail and water, and divorced from the Quartermaster Corps. US Motor Transport was dealt with by attaching a division or corps as warranted to the Transportation Corps but by early 1944 was placed under a new Motor Transport Division.

Initially, the British, using their Sea Transport Unit controlling inbound ships from berthing to unloading and their Movement Control Unit managing avoidance of congestion in the ports, were responsible for the unloading of men and materials, limiting the Americans to care for the US Army crews aboard the ships.

The 14th Port was activated at Camp Hatheway, Washington on 25 February 1943, commanded by Lt. Colonel Greer Nelson, and then shortly afterwards on 5 March 1943, Colonel Lee V. Hunnicutt assumed

command. 14th Port was mobilised to Camp Stoneman, California, then in June 1943 to Camp Shanks, New York which was the largest US Embarkation camp during the Second World War. The 14th Port sailed on the *Aquitania* on 8 July, arrived at Greenock on 16 July 1943, where command changed again, to Brigadier General Philips and three days later, was split into five groups serving London, Southampton, Hull, Immingham and Plymouth, consolidating with 11th Port.

On 1 February 1944, five operating detachments were placed in one 14th Port Unit at Southampton, now commanded by Colonel Walter D. McCord [Facts Worth Knowing]. By the end of March 1944, the Transportation Corps as a whole totalled 40,385 personnel [Fold3 Personnel]. An early appointment was newly promoted Lt. John B. O'Donnell who had attended an officers' refresher course "Out-loading School" in Southampton which was directed at the work which was to be so important over the next period. He was based in an office at the Civic Centre where he stayed until redeployed on 19 November 1945.

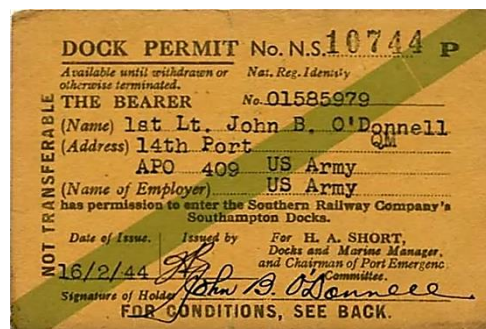


Figure 6: Southampton Dock Permit

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48pH89admYg>

Southampton, because of its harbour facilities and location relative to Normandy, became the principal US port on the south coast. As mentioned, it had been bombed heavily and had suffered severely. Consequently, the port had remained idle and closed to non-essential traffic for some two years and much of its cargo handling equipment had been moved to other ports. Despite the damage, the Americans regarded Southampton as one of the best ports in England, due to its deep water, advantageous tides, extensive quays and piers, plus the seven graving, or dry, docks. British personnel had misgivings due to its vulnerability to bombing, but these fears eventually proved unfounded.

German air power waned and the 14th Port consisting of London, Southampton and Plymouth was established in July 1943. The primary mission of the 14th Port was the unloading of cargo and the secondary mission, destined eventually to become the primary, was the loading of vessels with vital war materials for ports in combat areas. At first, the British managed the entire process of unloading men and materials and the Americans were limited to looking after the US Army crews on board the individual ships. In September 1942, with an increased inflow of American troops and supplies, the British agreed that the US Army Authorities should assume the transportation responsibility for their own forces and freight. In January 1943, the Transportation Corps assumed full control of American ships in the ports of the United Kingdom [Fold3 Control] [Fold3 European Records]. The British continued to use the ports used by the Americans, with American and British port commanders working in close cooperation.

Southampton had its share of labour problems as dockers were not properly regulated but those problems were overcome. Wartime had obviously decimated the availability of skilled dock labour and this precipitated the taking over of the docks with the agreement of all parties by the US Army, albeit assisted by a core of skilled and dock trained local labour. The Southampton docks were owned and operated by the Southern Railway, and boasted over 60 miles of railway track within its environs, linking with the national network which was a fundamental key resource in material movement to and from the port. It should be noted that the Harbour was under the control of Southampton Harbour Board, established under the Southampton Harbour Acts, being separate from the Docks.

Early in 1944, 14th Port headquarters were moved from London to Southampton and an office was established at 181 High Street, Southampton, then Allen's Sweet Shop, and subsequently in 2020, Poppins Café & Restaurant. Colonel Walter D. McCord of the US Army commanded the 14th Port from an office in the north wing of the Civic Centre in the foyer of which there is affixed a plaque [Fold3

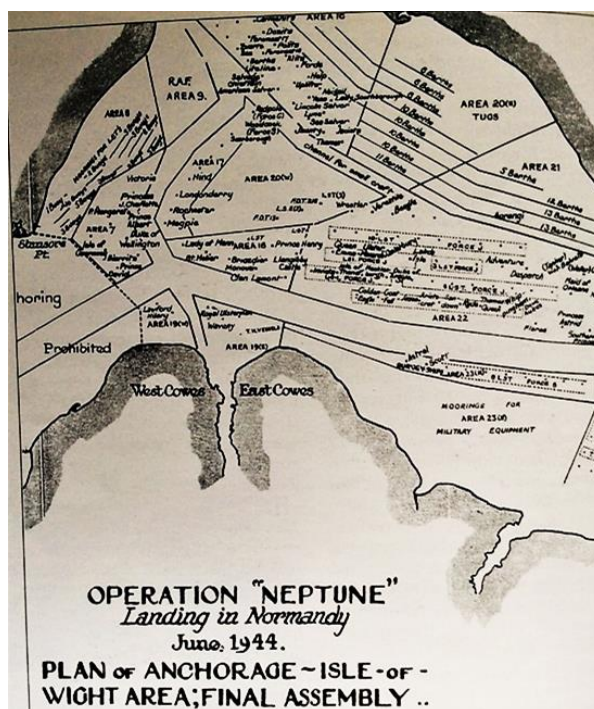
Relocation]. Other locations included Blighmont Barracks, a school, and two hotels, one of which was the Polygon (demolished in 1999 for flats).

In mid-July 1943, the 14th Port commanded by Brigadier General Joseph Phillips, took over operation of the London docks but by January 1944, control at London had been passed to 12th Port which included London, Hull and Immingham. The second half of 1943 saw 162,224 measurement tons offloaded at Southampton. (A measurement ton is equivalent to UK 40ft³ and to US 42ft³. 100 ft³ is ca.2.8m³. [Measurement Ton]). Plymouth was originally a Sub-Port under the Bristol Area but was closed for a period due to vulnerability to German air attack but was reopened as part of 14th Port in July 1943. In early 1944, Plymouth came under the jurisdiction of 13th Port. After the invasion on 22 October 1944, Plymouth with its Sub-Ports, Falmouth, Dartmouth, Truro, Totnes and Hayle once more fell under the jurisdiction of the 14th Port, Plymouth being Sub-Port “B” [Fold3 Plymouth]. On 30 May 1944, Colonel Sherman L. Kiser was appointed Port Commander of 14th Port.

Weymouth/Portland was operated from an early date by 14th Port personnel but it was mid November 1944 before it was formally placed under the jurisdiction of the 14th Port as Sub-Port Weymouth “C” and finished with its last vessel on 27 April 1945. Poole, as Sub-Port “P”, from 29 May 1944 was under the jurisdiction of the 14th Port and from here the majority of cargoes comprised POL, an American acronym for Petroleum, Oils and Lubricants, loading its final vessel on 7 May 1945.

Rail activities, included under the Transportation Corps, were fundamental to the movement of troops and material arriving at other ports, on the English east and west coasts and Scotland, towards the principal invasion embarkation ports of Plymouth and Southampton. When the Americans arrived, Britain’s railways were already heavily used and suffering with shortages of rolling stock and damages from war losses and a critical manpower shortage. The individual freight rolling stock was smaller than the norm in America, leading to America importing to UK more locomotives and larger freight wagons to cater for the larger than normal loads but these additions were not used on the Southern section [Transportation Service]. The national network connected with and was well established within Southampton ports and docks, and without this key component, the invasion build-up would have been severely disadvantaged. Even so, significant extensions to track and station facilities were implemented at Eastleigh, Micheldever, Botley, Romsey, Brockenhurst, Millbrook, Havant, Chandlers Ford and Nursling. By way of illustration, in three weeks of November 1942, there were 721 trains running on Southern Railway for government purposes, and increased to 9,516 in the 7 weeks from 20 May to 8 July 1944 [Hampshire and D-Day].

As further indication that the facilities and location of Southampton relative to Normandy made the choice of Southampton easy, extensive buoyed moorings were available less than 10 miles south from its docks to the north of Isle of Wight, operative prior to D-Day as shown in Figure 7.



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