

WARTIME WOODHAM FERRERS

The British Army had abandoned most of its equipment in France after the Dunkirk evacuation. It was therefore decided to build a static system of defensive lines around Britain, designed to compartmentalise the country and delay the Germans long enough for more mobile forces to counter-attack. Over 50 defensive lines were constructed across the country.

The defence of Essex was one of the key priorities against the invasion of London and the industrial heart of Britain. After the coastal defences, the GHQ Line was the longest and most important, designed to protect, and was the last chance of defence. Defensive structures known as 'Pill Box's' were built along with anti-tank ditches and block obstacles. Today, you can still see some of these around the county, including those along the Old Rettendon Road.

Coastal areas such as Southend became areas you could only visit with a permit. One unsuspecting clergyman who went a station too far on the train was found guilty in court and was sent to prison for 3 weeks.

The Home Guard were created in May 1940 when a German invasion looked very likely. Initially they were called the Local Defence Volunteers but shortly after renamed the Home Guard. The men were between 17 to 65 years of age and initially wore civilian clothes with armbands labelled LDV and were armed with local weapons but later they were issued with denim uniforms and finally army uniforms and rifles. Many of the officers and men were retired members of the regular and territorial Essex Regiment who were too old to enlist at the outbreak of war.

By February 1941, when it became clear that the new force was likely to be needed for some time it was recognised as an official military unit and so adopted army military ranks and operated alongside the regular army battalions on home defence duty.

There was very close liaison between the home defence battalions of the Essex Regiment and the Essex Home Guard with the Home Guard often using the same training venues and borrowing instructors from the Essex Regiment. The Home Guard HQ and the administration in Essex was by the Essex Regiment Territorial Army at Market Road, Chelmsford. The home defence battalions of the Essex Regiment tended to guard the more important installations like airfields, ports and coastline with the Home Guard looking after vulnerable but less important targets like road junctions, railway lines and stations, bridges, factories, and even valuable agricultural sites. Had the Germans invaded the Home Guard were instructed to defend Essex although their priority was to assist in the civilian evacuation for which detailed plans were developed. At the start of the war the men were poorly equipped and trained and as a result the butt of wartime jokes but by 1943 they had become efficient at carrying out the tasks required of them.

A home guard unit operated from Woodham Ferrers Station, made up of station staff and other locals. The station was later renamed South Woodham Ferrers. Nearby Radar Hill was used for home guard training including use as a rifle range, with the line up to Maldon rigged with explosives. The service on this line had been withdrawn in 1939, and was used to store trains, and reloading of coal. At one point the royal train was stored there. Patrols would guard such areas to protect from the enemy or 5th columnists.

An influx of troops for the build up to D Day, did not go un-noticed as many village fields and the side of the roads became home for those going to ports such as Tilbury to disembark. Rationing had meant that most everything was in short supply and the American troops stationed nearby often brought with them, cigarettes, chocolate, and stockings. Shops could be seen with brown taped windows to reduce the impact of shock wave damage caused by nearby bomb blasts. A blackout was enforced, with fines and even prison for those showing a light at night. Wardens would patrol, looking for damage, bombs and those who could be seen to 'aid the enemy'.



D Day 80

In 2024, the United Kingdom commemorates the 80th anniversary of the Normandy Landings, also known as D-Day. On June 6, 1944, this historic operation saw the Allied Forces mount a large-scale invasion of occupied France. Their unwavering courage and sacrifice ultimately tipped the course of the Second World War in favour of the Allies.

In the months and weeks before the invasion, the area of Essex became the temporary home of thousands of troops and their vehicles and equipment, waiting to be loaded onto ships to be sent to the coast of France.

We have here some information which may be of interest to our visitors of our commemoration events.

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D DAY 1944

By 1944, the war had turned in favour of the allies, but this did not mean the war in Europe would be won simply by bombing German or its axis powers. To win the war in Europe, it would mean an invasion of the mainland. This had started with the invasion of Sicily and in the East, the Germans were in retreat from the Russian campaign, but pressure was mounting to open a second front in the west led to a plan to invade via the coast of France. Operation "Neptune/Overlord" were the codenames for the 6 June 1944 D-Day Landings on the Normandy beaches of German occupied France. This was the most important Allied operation of the Second World War. On that momentous day, the Allies launched the most ambitious opposed invasion ("amphibious assault") seen up to that time. "Neptune" was the codename given to the naval operation to transport and land the forces ashore, and "Overlord" referred to the subsequent campaign on the ground. By the end of this day, American, British, Canadian and some French forces had established a significant beachhead in France.

The numbers of Allied forces committed, the preparatory work undertaken by all staff, and the bravery of thousands of ordinary service personnel transformed the monumental challenge of D-Day into one of the most successful military operations of all time. The initial success in establishing the "Second Front" locked Germany into a three-front war of attrition – in France, Italy and Russia (the Eastern Front) – that would eventually overwhelm Hitler's Nazi Reich. The Initial Joint Plan produced by the Allies in February 1944, stated that they would assault the Normandy coast to secure "as a base for future operations a Lodgement Area", which within three months would extend to the Rivers Loire and Seine. To achieve this, on D-Day a vast naval armada laden with troops would cross the Channel under the cover of darkness and then, before dawn, drop anchor opposite the five designated invasion beaches: from east to west, "Sword", "Juno", "Gold", "Omaha" and "Utah". By then, three Allied airborne divisions would have landed to secure the flanks of the invasion.

Finally, after heavy aerial and naval bombardments, British and Canadian assault forces would land on "Sword", "Juno" and "Gold", while American forces assaulted "Omaha" and "Utah". After these initial assaults had established five small beachheads, follow-up forces would land and advance inland. By the end of D-Day, the Allies hoped, their forces would have captured the towns of Caen and Bayeux and have consolidated the four eastern beachheads and the British airborne zone into a single salient. To execute this plan successfully, the Allies had to undertake extensive preparations. They had to train and then assemble many dozens of divisions in southern England while deceiving the enemy into believing that their main attack would come in the Pas de Calais, not Normandy. Although Normandy remained heavily defended, the plans succeeded and Hitler was convinced that any invasion would target the Northern coast of France, so insisted that more defensive resources were placed there.

In order to increase the chances of success of the Overlord operation, the French networks received a succession of orders to get into action, essentially through the "personal messages" of the B.B.C. Each coded sentence is sent to a particular network, which knows its meaning and date of execution, to begin the sabotage actions and to disrupt the German forces. Thus, from June 1st to 3rd, 1944, the first part of Verlaine's verse is broadcast on the airwaves: "The sob's long violins of autumn ...", along with 160 other "personal messages". These codes mean that the French resistance must be ready to carry out their sabotage actions. On June 5, 1944, at 9:15 pm, the following messages were broadcast: "... wound my heart with a monotonous languor": the resistance have 48 hours to carry out the destruction, the invasion was on its way.

During the 5th of June, 6,939 vessels from eight different navies and many merchant fleets assembled off the coast of southern England. As the armada headed south towards Normandy, the first Allied bombers passed overhead en route to strike the German defences. Next, from 23:30 hours, 1,100 Allied transport planes travelled south across the Channel, transporting 17,000 airborne troops to Normandy.

From 00:16 hours, the British 6th Airborne Division landed north-east of Caen to seize key bridges over the River Orne and Caen Canal. First, in "one of the finest flying feats of the war", three Horsa gliders accurately crash-landed in the marshy terrain immediately adjacent to the Caen Canal bridge at Bénouville (known ever since as "Pegasus" Bridge after the winged horse emblem worn by these liberators). Within five minutes, and for the loss of just two killed, the Paras had secured the bridge and liberated the first French building – the Café Gondrée. The US gliders were next, from 01:00 hours, two American airborne divisions landed in the marshy terrain behind "Utah" to seize key bridges and road junctions and thus delay German counterattacks and facilitate an Allied advance from the beach.

At 02:15 hours, the German LXXXIV Corps concluded that these airborne assaults were the start of the long-anticipated Allied invasion, and consequently went onto full alert. For many hours to come, however, the higher German authorities, including Hitler remained convinced that the landings were just a diversion prior to the main Allied attack in the Pas de Calais.

By initiating D-Day on the 6th of June amid poor weather, the Allies surprised the German forces, whose slow reactions then let slip their best chance to drive the invaders back into the sea. There would be many battles to come, but a bridgehead had been secured. It took until late July for Caen to be liberated.

The war in Europe continued until May 1945, and the war against the Japanese ended in August 1945, with a hope of peace in the world, we are still yet to achieve. Our events during early June are to capture that wartime spirit of community and coming together, as well as to remember and celebrate all those who took part.

'A nation that forgets its past has no future'

Winston Churchill

The landing beaches of Normandy 1944

