

BLANDFORD'S CONTRIBUTION TO WORLD WAR TWO

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BLANDFORD PREPARES FOR WAR



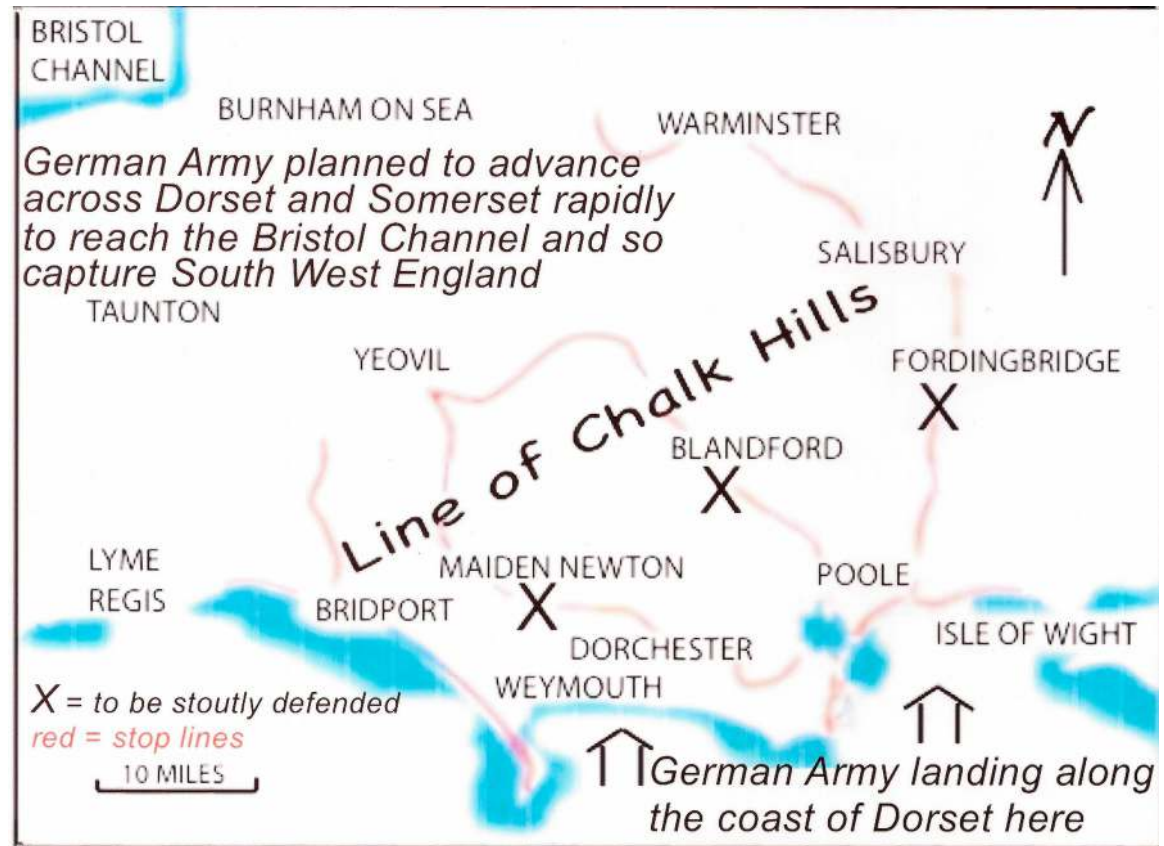
With war looming in 1939, Blandford Camp was reactivated as a training centre for reservists called up, and for new recruits seen here.

Many new huts were built for accommodation, as most of the huts from WW1 had long since been demolished or sold on. Some became the huts for the Blandford Scouts in Eagle House Gardens.

INVASION?

In 1940, Blandford received prominence when Prime Minister Churchill declared Blandford must become 'a strategic tank island to be defended at all costs'. This was in response to the threat of German invasion after the Fall of France in May.

The German plan, one of many, was to land in August 1940 on the Dorset Coast “Operation Sealion”, and strike northward rapidly to the Bristol Channel, thereby capturing at a stroke the ports of Devon and Cornwall and enabling the landing of German forces unopposed.



Blandford featured strongly in the German plans. It lay on one of three routes the German Army would have taken, the others being Maiden Newton and Fordingbridge, with Blandford and the crossing of the River Stour at its bridge, being the most advantageous route.

LOCATION ?

In order to confuse the invaders, town signs were ordered to be removed, here in particular the word BLANDFORD that was prominently displayed on street and sewer drain covers, and on the charity boards in the Parish Church. Those in the Church were blacked out. One was restored after the War.

Since the street cast-iron covers were a necessity and could not be removed, a scheme was devised to chisel away the letters BL and FO from BLANDFORD leaving 'AND RD'. This was deemed sufficient to confuse the enemy.



THE BRIDGE

Mother gave me a running commentary on what was taking place in West Street. She went on to say we were in line of defence and tank traps were being put in the road ^{and} the plunger was being put inside the shop and if no one comes to activate it, we could get phone orders then you and I would have to do it.

Two baskets of hand grenades and some bundles of explosives and a gun on legs was placed in the bedroom. We had instructions how to use it. The explosives was locked in the poison cupboard. We had been ordered to blow the place up if the enemy

Defences comprising pill boxes, gun positions, road blocks, anti-tank blocks and undoubtedly a minefield, were erected to surround the town and to focus on Blandford Bridge, that being the only reasonable place for the German army to cross the River Stour.

The bridge was wired for demolition and the detonator box (on display in the Museum) was placed in Mrs Harding's house at No. 23 West Street. Her daughter, Mrs Ashcroft, wrote an account, shown here, on how it might have been used.

The model on the first floor of the Museum shows the lay-out of the town defences.

BATTLE OF BRITAIN APPEAL

Blandford's contribution to the Battle of Britain was a Spitfire Mark 2, named "WHO'S A.FEAR'D" taken from the motto of The Society of Dorset Men, coined by Thomas Hardy. The Air Ministry had put out an appeal for more Spitfires in 1941 to replace heavy losses by the RAF.



Mayor Conyers launched the appeal, shown here, behind his shop in West Street. With help from local villages, it raised £5,021. 8s. 10d, enough for one Spitfire.

THE BLANDFORD SPITFIRE



After the final checks the Spitfire received it's squadron markings.

It joined the RAF (Polish) Squadron 303 and shot down four Messerschmidt 109s, before crashing three months later, killing its new pilot, a New Zealander.

PILL-BOXES

Following plans provided by the War Office, ten pill-boxes were built around the town by the local builders, one of whom was George Wilson.

One remains in the garden of No 9 Park Lands (seen here), which was built along an anti-tank ditch, formerly a 19th century Ha-ha (a ditch for confining the deer within Bryanston Park).

Each pill-box was manned on a rota basis by five Blandford Home Guard volunteers, a Sergeant with four men.

Communication between pill-boxes and HQ was by 'runners', many of them schoolboys, Mr Sayres was one, aged 10.



NORCONS



Four circular 'NORCON' concrete firing positions, 7ft diameter and 4.5 ft high were built by the East Street viaduct and on the railway embankment by the River Stour to defend the town from invasion from the East.

They were moved here to the local car park after the war for preservation, but later demolished as they were deemed to be 'in the way'.

If there had been a German invasion, regular army units, held in reserve in the Midlands, would be brought in, and the bridges blown.

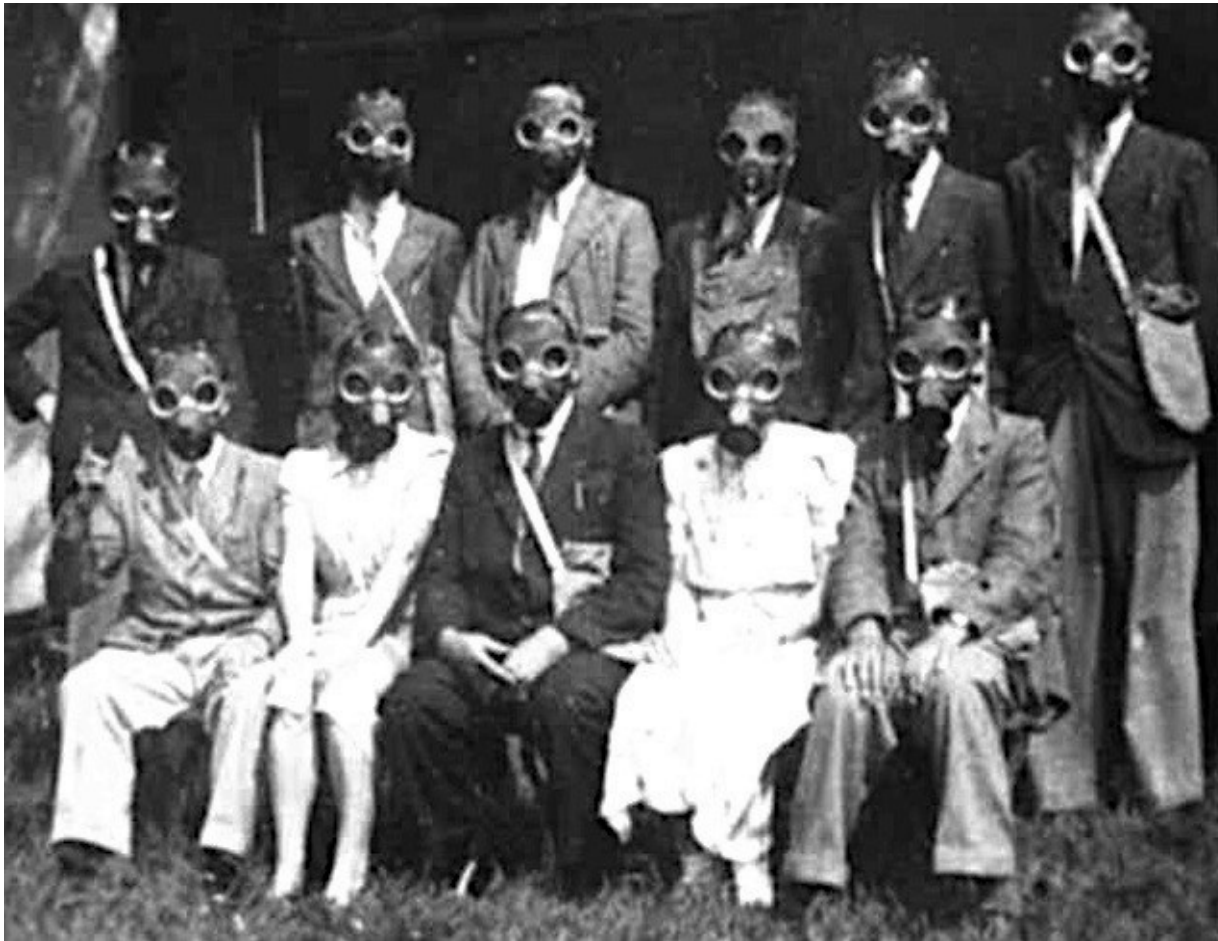
BLANDFORD HOME GUARD

Blandford became one of several focal points in Dorset for the organisation of the Home Guard, initially designated the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV). But it quickly became the 'Look, Duck and Vanish' squad and so was rapidly renamed the Home Guard, and so 'Home Guard' replaced 'LDV' on arm-bands.

Some 200 Blandford men volunteered for the 4th Company Blandford North, CO Major Cherry (below), and 5th Company Blandford South, CO Major Field, forming two of the six companies of the 6th Battalion Wimborne Home Guard. Each Company comprised three or four platoons of 20-30 men each.



CIVIL DEFENCE



The town's people were trained in Civil Defence, in order to act should Blandford be bombed. Some 33 received Air Raid Warden/Precaution (ARP) training. Their depot was in The Old Milk Factory in Damory Street where rescue equipment was stored.

All were trained in the use of gas masks. Here are the town's telephone operators. A Gas Identification Service was set up, led by local trained chemists. A Decontamination Squad was formed to deal with the feared mustard gas.

Five Warden Posts were set up in the town at: The Cedars, in The Plocks, in East Street, at The Old House and in Victoria Road.

It was the duty of the Air Raid Wardens to warn people of impending raids. They were also trained in the use of stirrup pumps to deal with fires.

AIR RAIDS AND FIRE

Cellars under big houses and shops in town became Air Raid Shelters, and trenches were dug in school premises for school children.

Anderson Shelters were built, 7 x 5 feet and 6ft high, 2-3ft down into the ground in people's gardens.

200 volunteers were called for by Mayor Conyers to act as Fire Watchers early in 1941.

AIR RAID PRECAUTIONS.

FIRE WATCHERS

As the Public have already been informed, the most urgent requirement at the present time is Fire Watchers.

It is proposed to ask for 200 Volunteers to act as Fire Watchers on a Rota. It need scarcely be pointed out how absolutely necessary this is at the present moment. Will all those who are prepared to act in this capacity attend at the TOWN HALL, BLANDFORD, on THURSDAY NEXT, the 9th JANUARY, between the hours of 6.30 and 8.30 p.m. for enrolment.

When these have been enrolled a Meeting of all Volunteers will be held to discuss how best this scheme can be carried out.

4th January, 1941.

J. E. CONYERS,
Mayor.

TOWN INVOLVEMENT

Medical Services were set up at First Aid posts with Red Cross help, involving over 20 women and 10 men, all Blandford residents. The Women's Institute provided teas and welfare services.

The Blandford Fire Brigade operated with 14 men from their HQ in North Place at the top end of Dorset Street, and the Auxiliary Fire Service with 18 men in the Borough Surveyor's Yard in Victoria Road.

Few Blandford families escaped involvement in the defence of the town.

Further details with names, over 190, are provided in the Museum Booklet 'The WW2 Defences of Blandford' on sale in the Bookshop.

US ARMY ARRIVES

One of the first US Army units to arrive at Blandford Camp in 1943 was 184 Anti-Aircraft Gun Battalion which had the task of protecting the Studland Bay beach landing assault exercise area.

The US Army 22nd General Hospital, formed in the States in 1943, arrived in Dorset in April 1944. It comprised five hospital units: three set up in Blandford Camp (initially in the Benbow Lines and later in the Anson-Craddock Lines, seen here), another at Kingston Lacy and one near Shaftesbury. They dealt with casualties from Normandy flown into Tarrant Rushton Airfield nearby.

The hospital at Kingston Lacy was specifically for severely wounded troops. The huts formed an extensive array in the Park opposite Home Farm.



A special road was built between the Airfield to the Camp to convey casualties rapidly. Some orderlies slept in the Drill Hall in Wimborne. Each Hospital had 1284 beds which could be upped to over 1400. Some 19,500 US casualties were dealt with altogether

The hospital closed down after VE-Day.

INVASION OF EUROPE

Military preparations for D-Day and the Normandy Invasion of Europe began in and around Blandford in 1943.

The RAF established several air-fields, in particular Tarrant Rushton near Blandford, as training stations for glider-borne operations in Normandy.

Newly arrived US troops were garrisoned all over Dorset, while British and Canadian troops concentrated in Hampshire and Devon. Blandford Camp received many US troops for combat mobility training. Most departed for Normandy on 6th June leaving empty tents: one messaged "Sorry Jean, HAD TO GO, Johnny".



US ARMY IN BLANDFORD



The US presence in Blandford was marked with US vehicles jammed on both sides of the streets and on the pavements.

The Corn Exchange was used as a dining hall for US servicemen, and the Red Lion became the US Army Quartermaster's store and the yard outside was used as a vehicle depot.

The Crown Hotel car-park housed motor-bikes and large vehicles.

The Crown Hotel was also used as 'home' for the ladies of the American Red Cross.

US ARMY IN TOWN



The US Military Police had their HQ in 4 West Street, on the site Wyatts hardware store, opposite The Crown Hotel.

The Greyhound Hotel became the HQ of the 3rd US Infantry Division. The out-buildings became their workshops, and the pub's skittle alley used as sleeping quarters.

LANGTON HOUSE



Langton House, a late-Georgian Palladian mansion 2 km east of Blandford, had been unoccupied for several years. In November 1943 it was taken over for use as the Headquarters of the US 1st Infantry Division until 1944, when it left for Normandy soon after the D-Day landings at 'Omaha Beach'.

Much of the planning for the US Forces assault operations on the Normandy beaches, including the capture of the promontory Pointe Du Hoc, was done here.

Having fallen into disrepair, the house was demolished in 1949.

DOWN HOUSE

The Stable Block of Down House, 3 km SW of Blandford, was the HQ of the US Rangers of the 1st Division. The Officer's Mess was in the out-buildings, the main house having burnt down in 1941.

The picture shows Christmas presents being handed out there in 1943 to Blandford children.



The US Rangers arrived in Blandford from Palma, Sicily, on 7th November 1943 where they had been heavily engaged in the Sicilian Campaign and Invasion of Italy.

TARRANT RUSHTON

The RAF air-field at Tarrant Rushton, only 3 km east of Blandford, was vital to the success of the Normandy Invasion.

With months of training, Halifax bombers converted to tow Horsa and Hamilcar gliders, piloted by men of the Army Air Corps, practised take-offs and landings.

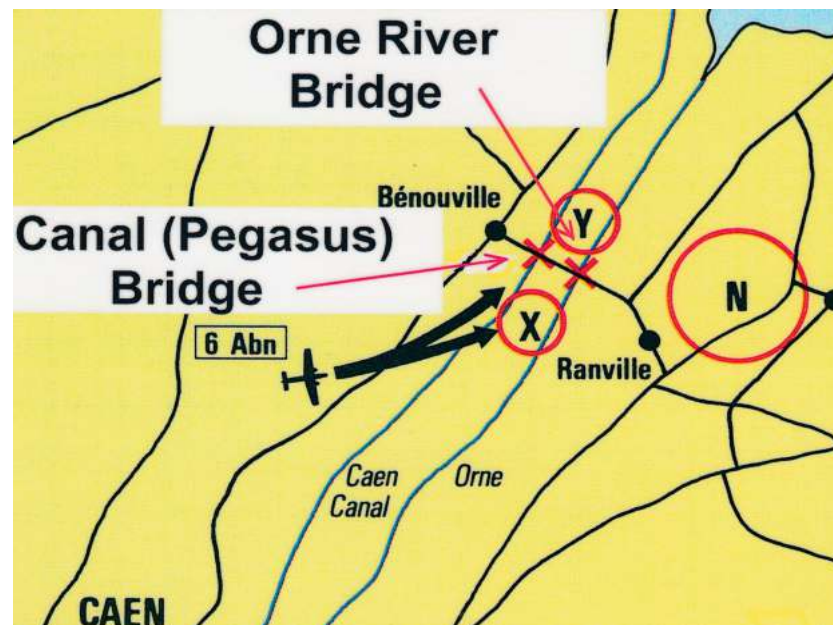


Their task was to capture the bridges over the Caen Canal (Pegasus Bridge) and River Orne, to prevent the German Panzer Divisions that were held in reserve, from pouncing on the Allies wherever they might land in Normandy.

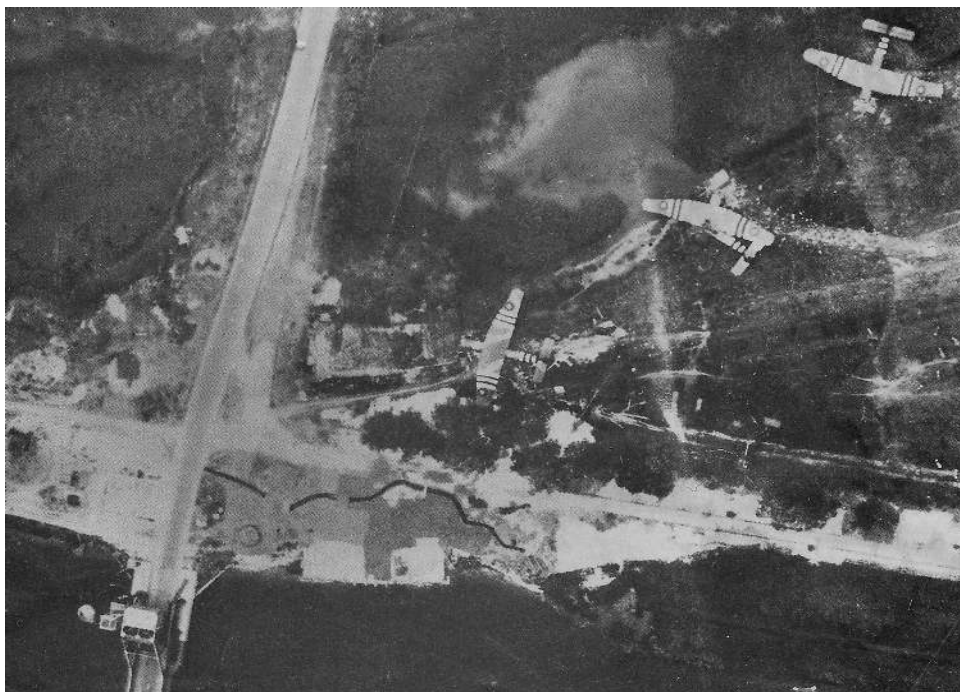
Late on the night of 5/6 June, seven Horsa gliders each with 25 infantrymen of the Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, and five Hamilcar gliders each with a special lightweight Tetrarch tank, took off from Tarrant Rushton towed by Halifax bombers.

INVADING NORMANDY

On crossing the French coastline, the gliders were strategically released and the Halifaxes continued southward as if on a normal bombing raid, leaving the Germans unaware of the impending airborne attack. The lead Horsa glider, followed by two others, turned to glide northwards and land at 3am in the field south of the bridge over the Caen Canal, shown on the map as Landing Zone 'X'.



The lead pilot was instructed to slide his glider into and break the barbed wire defences around the bridge (seen in this picture left), so helping the infantrymen to capture the bridge without delay. Other Horsas landed near the Orne River Bridge, capturing it. This military surprise attack was a success, but one glider was lost whilst crossing the Channel.



CAPTAIN TAYLORSON, DFC

Piloting the lead Hamilcar (they were "brutes to handle" it was said) was local man Capt Thomas Taylorson of the Army Air Corps, who was in command of the operation. Together with Second Pilot Sgt Smith, he successfully landed at Landing Zone 'N' near the Ranville Bridge, a mile from Pegasus Bridge. Both bridges were captured.

He won the DFC (Distinguished Flying Cross) for that action, and received it, accompanied by his wife and sister (pictured), at Buckingham Palace from the King in 1945. He is the only army officer to have received an RAF award.

He lived at 17 The Close, Blandford.



DORSET REGIMENT IN 1939-40

Blandford men fought with the Dorset Regiment in most battles from 1940 to 1945 in Europe and the Far East. In 1939 the Dorset Regiment was comprised of five Battalions. The 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Battalions were fighting units, the 3rd was a Special Reserve unit of non-combatant men (guards, etc.)

The 2nd Battalion of the Dorset Regiment went to France in late September 1939 as part of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF). They were kept in France because neutral Belgium would not allow them on their soil. When German tanks erupted across the Belgian border, the 2nd Dorsets moved up through Belgium to the line of the River Dyle, on the right of the British line, alongside a French division of Algerian troops.

On 15th May 1940, when the Germans attacked, the collapse of the French left the Dorsets vulnerable on both flanks. They conducted a fighting retreat south of Brussels and back towards Bethune in France, along roads blocked by so many French refugees.

245 survivors of the 2nd Dorsets reached Dunkirk, where Colonel 'Steve' led them aboard a Thames dredger which took them to Ramsgate, landing 31st May 1940.

DORSETS IN EUROPE

On 10th July, 1943 the 1st Dorsets led the Allies' return to Europe when they landed on the southern tip of Sicily, followed by a series of bitter battles against the retreating Germans, with the loss of 63 men.

On 8th September, 1943 saw them as one of the first to return to mainland Europe. They landed at Pizzo, on the 'toe' of Italy, with few casualties. They were then withdrawn to the UK to prepare for the 1944 liberation of Europe.

Experienced in spearheading landings, the 1st Dorsets led the assault on Gold Beach in Normandy on D-Day 6th June 1944, capturing all their objectives, again with few casualties. By September, they were in The Netherlands with the Guards Armoured Division attempting, but failing, to capture the bridges at Arnhem.

The 4th and 5th Battalion Dorsets landed in Normandy D+17 (23 June 1944). Their first major battle was on 10th July near Maltot, 10 km SW of Caen, when the Division attacked the German positions on and around Hill 112. The hill dominated the surrounding country and was seen to be the key to holding Normandy. It was eventually captured, at some cost.

DORSETS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Advancing northwards, the 4th and 5th Battalions liberated the Dutch towns of Hengelo and Borne, where they established a lasting friendship with the inhabitants. Hengelo presented the Regiment with a Liberation Scroll while Borne renamed their town square 'Dorset Plein'.

In September General Montgomery planned the capture of the two bridges over the Waal River at **Nijmegen** and Rhine River at **Arnhem** in Holland, to relieve the British 1st Airborne Division and Polish 1st Independent Parachute Brigade.

They had been delivered by Horsa and Hamilcar gliders from Tarrant Rushton and were already trying to hold the bridges. Success would have allowed Allied Forces to sweep north east behind the German Army in Holland with the intention of forcing an early German surrender. But strong German counter attacks prevented Allied capture of the Arnhem and Nijmegen Bridges.

DORSETS IN FINAL PHASE OF WW2

The 4th and 5th Dorsets forced their way up to the south bank of the Neder Rhine river west of Arnhem near Driel, where plans were made to reinforce the Airborne troops across the river around Oosterbeek.

When that failed, the 4th were ordered to cross the swollen river, under heavy fire, to rescue their Airborne comrades. Of the 315 Dorsets who reached the north bank, many were captured and only 75 returned.

The 4th Battalion's sacrifice was recognised by the award of an Airborne Pennant. They were the only non-airborne unit to win the battle honour 'Arnhem'.

By April 1945 they had advanced to Bremmerhaven in Germany, and the war was almost over.

FURTHER EXPLOITS BY BLANDFORD MEN

A 'Secret Army' dressed as Home Guards, created by Churchill in 1940, was formed as Auxiliary Unit Patrols. The local unit included Blandford men. Some 40 patrol posts were built deeply concealed in local woodlands along the south coast approximately 10km apart. They would allow themselves to be passed over by the enemy and then they could harass them from behind. Suicide pills were provided to prevent loss of secrecy. Their motto was "*Like Dad – keep Mum*".

When the Dorset Auxiliary Unit Blandford, part of the Home Guard, was disbanded in 1943, thirteen joined "B" Squadron 1 SAS (Special Air Service) pictured below outside Chestnut House, East Street. This was a special British SAS force planted behind enemy lines in France as part of Operation Bulbasket, formed to operate after D-Day (6th June).

Led by Lt Weaver, they were parachuted into France near Poitiers with necessary equipment, set up camp nearby at Vienne, and were soon joined by local members of the French Resistance.

BLANDFORD UNIT OF "SAS"



The Dorset Auxillary Unit Blandford - Disbanded in 1943. 7 of the unit joined "B" Squadron 1 S.A.S. All took part in Operation "Bulbasket" in France. Lt. P. Weaver - Cpl. J. Rideout - L Cpl. G. Biffin survived the war - Tpr. A. Ashley - Tpr. G. Gogger - Tpr. S. Ryland - Tpr. H. Pascoe were captured on 03/07/44 - Executed on 07.07.44 with 26 other members of 'A' Troop - There graves are well tended in Rom Cemetery, France.

Tpr. S. Ryland, R.A.S.C Ernie Pt. Lofty - Tpr. A. Ashley. Tpr. H. Pascoe.

Pt. A. Yateman. Pth. Voisie - Sgt. Millbank - Lt. P. Weaver - Cpl. J. Rideout - L.Cpl. G. Biffin - Pt. B. Hunt.

Tpr. G. Goggen.

SABOTAGE !

The unit was to disrupt the movement of German forces returning from North Africa. One particular objective that was successfully achieved was the sabotage of the railway system, so delaying the 'crack' German 2nd Panzer Division from reaching Normandy to confront the beach landings of the Allied Forces.

In one battle in July, the Germans captured four of the SAS men: Alan Ashley, George Cogger, Sidney Ryland and Henry Pascoe; and although in uniform they were executed 'as spies', contrary to the Geneva Convention for the Conduct of Warfare.

Also captured, it is said, was a young teenager of the French Resistance, and one of the four knowing they were going to be shot said "shoot me and let this young Frenchman go". He was freed and survived the war.

REMEMBRANCE

These brave men lie buried in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemetery at Rom, France, except Pascoe whose place of burial is unknown, but is commemorated with two other 'unknown burials' (see right).

It is an emotive plaque.

Also their local intelligence-gathering investigations revealed railway sidings with trains laden with fuel ready to go to Normandy for fuelling German armour. RAF Mosquitoes were called in and destroyed them.



INDIA

The Dorset Regiment also played its part in the Far East, notably in the Battle of Kohima in North-East India.



A NOTABLE HISTORY

The 2nd Battalion was despatched across India to relieve the garrison at *Kohima*, where the Japanese threatened in 1944 to break through from Burma (Myanmar) into India. It became the turning point of World War 2 in the Far East. The Battle of Kohima lasted three weeks during April and May in mountainous terrain and under monsoon conditions. It was against a ruthless enemy at close quarters. A fight, across a tennis court in the incongruous grounds of a bungalow that had been a peacetime hill station, subsequently became famous.

The gallantry of the Dorsets who defeated the crack Japanese 31st Division at Kohima is marked by the honours won: Capt. Chettle the Military Cross, Cpl. Mansfield the Military Medal, and Lt-Col. McNaught the Distinguished Service Order. The name Kohima is recorded in Blandford by Kohima Court off the Market Place.

Blandford men fought in every theatre of World War II. The Dorsets also took part in the post-war campaigns in Malaya, Korea and Kenya.

BLANDFORD FORUM

