

Southampton from Blitz to D-Day

11th April 2019 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

As this year is the 75th anniversary of D-Day, the Society arranged for Jake Simpkin to give an illustrated talk on Southampton's role in the build-up and its contribution to D-Day. His talk also included the Hamble River area's involvement in D-Day.

Jake started by describing the town's darkest time during the Blitz when Southampton was raided 57 times and the strong folk memories of certain incidents. An increasing number of attacks culminated in three major raids at the end of November 1940. It was Southampton's darkest hour. King George VI and Winston Churchill visited to keep up morale. The air-raids were shocking and violent but it was queues, blackouts, rationing, shortages and working long hours, that typified Southampton during the war years.

From early 1943 there followed the gradual build up to D-Day and Operation Overlord, with Southampton people playing an important role working in the factories and ship yards, as well as building the Mulberry Harbours. The US Army 14th Major Port Transportation Corps arrived in July 1943 and took over the docks' organisation. Jake described the activities of the days prior to D-Day and the troops leaving for the Normandy beaches.

The main naval bases on the Hamble River were HMS Tormentor at Warsash and HMS Cricket at Bursledon. In the build up to D-Day many camps of troops who were to take part in the Normandy invasion were set up in the river valley. The evening before D-Day the river emptied of troops and boats as they went to the Normandy beaches, many not to return.

Hamble's Air Service Training was the country's largest Spitfire repair base and its ATA women ferry pilots were in the ideal position to see the build up to D-Day but had to keep the details to themselves. On the 5th June, pilots returned with stories of a great assembly of boats and aircraft having black-and-white strips painted on their wings (special D-Day identification markings). At 11am on the morning of D-Day, the first Spitfire, fresh from the battle over France, landed at Hamble, which was to become one of the forward repair units. It was designated a 'prang-patch' for aircraft coming back in trouble from the front in Normandy, just 80 miles or so across the Channel.

Hamble foreshore was taken over by the United States Army Water Division and filled in with rubble from bomb damaged Southampton to build a repair depot. The US Army built workshops and slipways for the maintenance and repair of its small vessels.

Prior to D-Day, Hamble's Oil Terminal was taken over by the Army and the jetty was extended. Hundreds of troop carriers and torpedo boats were re-fuelled for the crossing to Normandy. On 5th June 212 vessels were bunkered at the Hamble jetty.

The jetty was used for both refuelling ships on the spot and loading small tankers that plied between the Solent and the actual invasion beaches. To supply the armed forces in France after the invasion, a pipeline called PLUTO was laid under the English Channel and its fuel supply passed through the Hamble Oil Terminal. By 24th March 1945 Hamble Oil Terminal had shipped half a million tons of petroleum products to France.

One of the final tasks for Southampton, in 1946, was the embarkation of British war brides for the USA and Canada.

Jake's talk was a tribute to the courage of the civilians of Southampton and the surrounding area during WW2. His presentation included examples of the small details of how the war affected the civilians which are not normally told. An excellent and comprehensive talk told in a very professional way.