

Hayling's D-Day Invasion

by Christine Bury



*Practice invasion on south Hayling
Photo from the book An Island at War by Robin Walton*

It is Spring, 1944, and the Allied push into Europe is only weeks away but where will the troops invade, how will they do it and what equipment will they need? Can the men practice the assault? The answer is 'Yes' and one of the places successfully invaded was Hayling Island on 4th May, just five weeks before the Normandy landings.

Early on that Thursday morning, 230 landing craft approached four of south Hayling's beaches. On board were over 10,000 men, mainly drawn from the 50th Infantry Division, with tanks and support vehicles. This was Exercise Fabius 2 and it was one of six simultaneous rehearsals taking place along the south coast to test the Allies' ability to mount a seaborne invasion.

Uppermost in the minds of Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Allied Supreme Commander General Eisenhower was the

need to avoid a repetition of the disaster in early April at Slapton Sands in Devon when hundreds of American troops were killed following an attack by a squadron of German E-boats. To this end, the entire channel area was sealed off for the May practice and the two men watched the practice invasion unfold from the roof of the Royal Hotel.

Hayling was chosen as a practice assault site because the island was already a military fortress. Holiday camps, hotels and houses had been requisitioned for military use and forces personnel outnumbered the normal population by three to one. Landing craft training and repair took place there, as well as the construction of four enormous sections of the floating Mulberry harbour used in the European invasion. There was even a top secret unit, the Combined Operations Pilotage Parties, based at the Hayling Island Sailing Club, part of whose job was to reconnoitre the Normandy beaches before the actual landings of men and material.

The success of the largest seaborne invasion in history on 6th June 1944 was in part thanks to the lessons learned during rehearsals such as those on the beaches of Hayling Island. It obviously served the Hayling invaders well for they later lead the successful assault on Gold Beach at Arromanches.