

Wartime West Sussex 1939 – 1945

D-DAY

Remembering D-Day rehearsals in Wittering

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FABIUS – THE D-DAY PRACTICES

By Shirley Salter

One day at West Wittering school, we were called together by our Head Teacher, Miss Ely, who told us that there was to be no school for the next three days. We were to stay at home, indoors, and if we lived within a quarter mile of the beach and seafront, the curtains were to remain drawn. There would be no buses, only military movement on the roads. Of course, we were all very excited; we did not know what was going to happen.

Already there were huge encampments of soldiers in all the fields surrounding the village, with all their military equipment, tanks, armoured vehicles, jeeps, Dukws and lorries. There were guns, searchlights and barrage balloons besides huge canvas tents in which the men were living. Trenches had been dug also, and from the windows of our home in Admiralty Row we could see the canvas town which had appeared overnight. We could watch the soldiers cooking in their field kitchens, cleaning equipment, checking their guns, even carrying out their ablutions. I clearly remember soldiers in vests and trousers, braces hanging down, shaving in tin mirrors hanging from tent posts, lathering faces and scraping off the soap! Many soldiers came over our garden wall, cadging hot water, cups of tea and any titbits our mothers could supply. I can remember young men bribing my elder sister, a pretty teenager, to run to Jordan's bakehouse to bring them rolls or loaves of bread. This was against orders as the soldiers were supposed to live on field rations.

On the morning of the first of the three days, we were woken by the tremendous noise of the Army on the move. Peeping out, we could see swarms of infantrymen running across our garden. Mum was distressed to see a field wireless station on her best rhubarb bed! After an excited, hurried breakfast, we slipped into the house next door, which had once been the Coastguard lookout tower, and watched from the bedroom window with its panoramic view along the village street and toward Cakeham Tower.

We could see the military machinery on the move – huge tanks fitted with chain flails on the front for detecting mines, tank carriers, busy little amphibious Dukws, jeeps and long files of infantrymen coming up Shore Road from the front, packs on their backs and rifles at the ready, curiously soaked to the skin and dripping seawater. The word went round that this was the practice for the day when the Allies would land in France and liberate the whole of Europe from Nazi Rule. How thrilled we all were, especially the boys – it was a schoolboy's paradise!

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