

The Wartime History of Lupton House

Brixham Heritage Museum is marking the 75th anniversary of D-Day with a major transformation of its Second World War display. Curator Philip L. Armitage tells us more and explains the wartime role of Lupton House.

Led by Christopher Macaulay, the museum's dedicated volunteer exhibition team of Jim Lambourne, Otto Schneider and Roy Wilkins has created a new Second World War display illustrating the Brixham Home Guard, the Emergency Coastal Artillery Battery at Battery Gardens, evacuee children, Belgian refugees, and life on the home front. In recognition of the forthcoming 75th anniversary of D-Day on 6 June this year, the display also covers the part played by Brixham in Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion and liberation of German-occupied Western Europe.

Among the newly displayed WW2 artefacts at the museum are some fascinating pieces recovered during an archaeological investigation of the former site of the 1944 American D-Day encampment in Lupton Park. The park forms part of the estate of Lupton House (then the country home of the Fourth Baron Churston), on the outskirts of Brixham. The museum's volunteer Field Research Team, in collaboration with Mike Ford of the First Wave 44 Living History Group (who first suggested the project) carried out the investigation in 2015/2016.

The location of the site was determined with reference to a contemporary photograph, taken in May 1944 by

Life Magazine photographer Frank J. Schershal (LIFE collection/Getty images), showing US army pyramidal tents lining the roadway in Lupton Park. The choice of the archaeological site proved successful, yielding evidence for the former presence of the American military including, unexpectedly, an Icelandic 2 Aurar coin dated 1942. This was presumably accidentally dropped by an American serviceman who, before being posted to the Lupton camp, had served with the American Army of "Occupation" in Iceland. In July 1941, US Marines took over from the British Royal Marine garrison responsible for the strategic defence of the vital Atlantic convoy route.

Inspired by the results of the archaeological investigation, historical research by Brixham Heritage Museum is beginning to reveal the major role of Lupton House in events leading up to and during D-Day, when the house and estate were requisitioned for military use.

On the night of November 11 1942, a small combined force of British army specialists from No.12 Commando and No.62 Commando, based at Lupton House, left Kingswear in MTB (Motor Torpedo Boat) 344, on an intelligence-gathering raid (code-named Operation Fahrenheit) in advance of the D-Day planning. Their

objective was capturing German servicemen alive at a signal station at Pointe de Plouezec on the north Brittany Coast. The commandos got on shore and climbed the steep cliff. But detected by enemy sentries, they exchanged fire before retiring back to the MTB. By next morning all the commandos were safely back at Lupton House.

In January 1944, Lupton House and estate again became a focus for military activity, this time for the American units based in Britain. Among these was the 1st Special Engineer Brigade that had been selected for Operation Overlord. Designated as Camp E, Lupton House formed one of five staging centres established in the West Country for a series of amphibious assault training exercises on local beaches in readiness for the Normandy invasion. At Lupton, four camp areas were set up, each with 39 pyramidal tents, a mess tent, a kitchen and latrines, with accommodation for 230 enlisted men. There were spaces

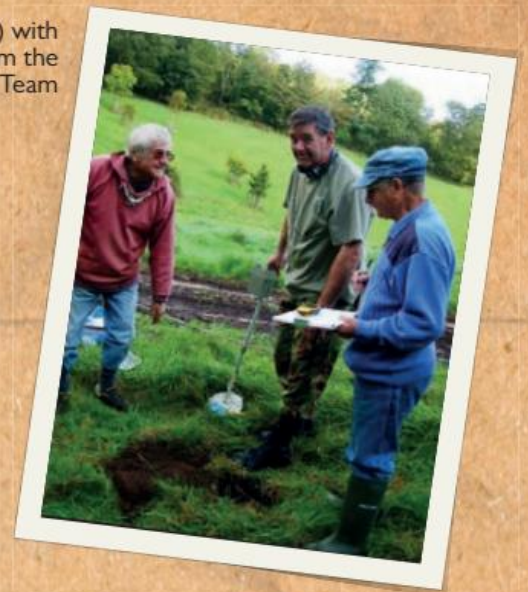
activity, as the D-Day marshalling Area K-6 for Force U, the units attached to the US 4th Infantry Division of VII Corps tasked with landing on Utah beach. Among these were the 746 Tank Battalion (equipped with Sherman tanks) and a unit of the Chemical Warfare Service. The latter was responsible for decontamination measures in the event of an attack with chemical weapons by the Germans – and also for providing covering smoke screens for the landing US troops. The US Quartermaster Corps set up a POL (petroleum, engine oil and lubricants) distribution centre, as well as providing mobile 4-wheeled laundry and bathing trailers. Across from Lupton, at Churston Ferrers, were the 562 Ambulance Company (Motorized), 3859 Quartermaster Gasoline Supply Company, and Company A of the 375 Engineer General Service (African American) Regiment.

Before midnight 3 June, the tank brigade, engineers, medical units and other support sections had left Lupton,



Artefacts found at the site

Mike Ford (right) with volunteers from the Field Research Team



for 200 vehicles. Three preliminary training sessions, code-named DUCK I, II and III, took place early January to early March; followed (April 27 – 30) by Exercise Tiger, the ill-fated, D-Day full-dress rehearsal (duplicating actual battle conditions).

At the times planned for each of the exercises, vehicles and troops from Lupton were loaded at Brixham and Kingswear onto landing ships – LSTs (landing ship tanks), LCTs (landing craft tanks) and LCIs (landing craft infantry) - for transporting to the assault-training grounds at Slapton Sands, five miles south of Dartmouth (chosen as a thinly-populated area with a beach resembling to a degree the Normandy invasion beaches). To facilitate the loading of heavy tanks and trucks onto landing craft, the Brixham and Kingswear slipways had been provided with reinforced concrete “hards” (hard standings).

In early May 1944, Lupton continued to be among the key locations in the south west for American military

moved along the roads to the Brixham and Kingswear/ Dartmouth embarkation points, and were aboard LSTs and LCTs and on the way to their rendezvous points beyond the harbours. Actual D-Day was intended to be on the 5th June but the slow-moving ships of Force U got under way a few days earlier because they had the greatest distance to go compared with the rest of the invasion flotilla. However, a delay caused by a storm on the night of 4 June meant postponement of the date of landing on the Normandy coast to 6 June.

Today, apart from the absence of any surviving visible signs of the American D-Day encampment, the Lupton Park landscape appears very little changed from the days when it was the scene of bustling military activity, populated by so many men whose lives were to change for ever when they participated in what was to be the “largest seaborne invasion in history”. ■

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