

Preparing for D-Day

The U.S. Navy in Salcombe

In August 1943 the western allied leaders met in Quebec and agreed plans for the invasion of France, codenamed Operation Overlord. A month later, on 29th September, the American Navy arrived in Salcombe to establish a USN Advanced Amphibious Base for the preparation of landing craft for the invasion. The first tasks of the 'Seabee' Construction Group were to build hutted camps on the top of the hill for the 6th and 7th Beach Battalions and a landing craft repair slipway on Millbay. The base was officially commissioned in November 1943 when Commander William H Henszey USNR took over as Commanding Officer. He soon developed a close working relationship with the Resident Royal Navy officer Lt Cdr Francis Murch RNVR.



By 1944, nearly 2000 Americans were based in Salcombe, outnumbering its depleted wartime population. The response of the locals to the virtual takeover of their town was generally positive. War weary after four years of wartime shortages and restrictions and with the constant threat from the air, the

locals welcomed the Americans as a means of 'getting the job done'. Although loud and high-spirited, particularly after drinking too much of the local rough cider, the Americans proved to be both polite and generous. Luxuries such as candy and chocolate were handed out to the children who followed the men around and cans of fruit and meat found their way into many local homes.

The Americans took over the Salcombe Hotel and about 60 other properties – hotels, houses, garages and workshops. St. Elmo Hotel became a hospital, Sandhills was used as an officer's club, Cliff House as a mess hall and for recreation and education. A vehicle park and repair depot were constructed on the site of the orchard at Gould Farm and the adjacent Two Hoots car park. The narrow local lanes were often congested by heavy vehicles.

At Whitestrand, two rows of derelict cottages were bulldozed to make a slipway and loading ramp. It became the main focus of activity, with fixed and mobile cranes working around the clock, equipping and repairing the smaller landing craft. Arclights illuminated the quay and the Millbay site at night, to the dismay of the locals who were still subject to blackout regulations.

The harbour soon filled up with all types of landing craft, including large LSTs (Landing Ship Tanks – dubbed 'Large Slow Targets' by their crews) and LCTs (Landing Craft Tanks). The slipway on Millbay was used to haul the LCTs out of the water for repair and maintenance.