The New Forest’s role in World War II

With the help of funding from ExxonMobil at Fawley and the Heritage Lottery Fund, The New Forest National Park Authority has spent two years unearthing and recording some incredible untold stories of World War II. These changed history – and the Forest.

Archaeologists and volunteers collected the memories of over 130 military personnel, residents and prisoners of war; found photos, secret documents and maps; and surveyed World War II archaeological sites from the air, using laser technology. Some 100 volunteers recorded over 80 hours of oral histories and took part in archaeological field surveys and archive research.

The New Forest provides a unique snapshot of what World War II was like in Britain – including 12 war-time airbases, US military encampments, spy schools, prisoner of war camps, bomb testing areas, an influx of evacuees, the ‘Dig for Victory’ effort, the ‘Dad’s Army’ Home Guard and massive preparations for the D-Day invasion.

Some of ‘The New Forest Remembers’ stories which have now been told include a secret wartime visit to the New Forest by King George VI; details of life in a New Forest prisoner of war camp near Brockenhurst; top secret orders, letters and hand-drawn maps that reveal rare insights into the real ‘Dad’s Army’; and the discovery of scars from an earthquake bomb known as ‘Grand Slam’.

A digital online archive, the Interactive Portal, has now been created to make all of this information available to the public, including personal recollections and animated 3D reconstructions. To explore the portal, visit (www.newforestww2.org).
Skates for heavy weights

During a recent maintenance event at the refinery, a heat exchanger had to be pulled and sent offsite for retubing and new baffle plates. The cylindrical bundle was some six metres long with a diameter of 1.4 metres, and weighed 13.5 tonnes. However, its location posed a logistical problem. One solution was for a specialist load moving company to take it to a more accessible place.

ExxonMobil Field Engineer, Colin Marshall, says: “This would have involved designing and building a scaffold over process pipework. A 100-tonne crane would have been needed to lift the bundle from the scaffold, then a Ross Carrier would take it to the wash bay and onwards for planned mechanical works.”

Air power

Instead, Colin researched, tested and safely introduced another approach – four air skates, controlled by a manual console. Individual air lines were attached to each skate to allow all four to be operated in unison. They could also be individually controlled to keep the load level. The skates provide a maximum lift height of 35mm, which includes a thin, nearly frictionless film of air, 0.08 to 0.13mm thick. This allows the load to move in any direction. The bundle was moved for 15 metres to allow the Ross Carrier to pick it up. Whilst on the air skates rig, it was turned through 90 degrees and guided between some steel columns. It was then manoeuvred diagonally to the landing area set up for the Ross Carrier.

For the air skates to work, the surface had to be flat, level and non-porous. However, the ground was very uneven. A bed of sand was therefore laid down and covered with sheets of ¾” marine ply and a layer of heavy duty plastic to provide a smooth surface. The area by the Ross Carrier was also steel-plated to reduce the loading on drain covers.

Once the load had been moved and secured, it was floated by air to a position where it could be lifted with the Ross Carrier. Colin concludes: “This method removed the safety hazard of moving the load over live pipes and delivered crane cost savings.”

Waterside Heritage Centre

Are you interested in local history? If so, your help would be valued by Waterside Heritage! The charity was formed in September 1995, with the aim of establishing an exhibition and study centre and furthering peoples’ interest in the history of the parishes of Fawley, Hythe and Dibden, and Marchwood.

The Waterside Heritage Centre was subsequently opened in June 2002, in the former Railway Station in Hythe. It’s open to the public on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings and at other times for research by groups and individuals. The Centre is funded by members’ subscriptions, donations, grant aid from the three parish councils and sponsorship from local businesses, including ExxonMobil.

Waterside Heritage also provides exhibitions throughout the Waterside, visits local schools and helps to publish books and papers about the Waterside, most recently through Waterside Heritage Publications. A series of four books is being produced, covering the history of the Waterside parishes. ‘Fawley and the Southern Waterside’ has already been published and ‘Hythe, A Waterside Village’, is due to be published later this year. Volumes on Dibden and Dibden Purlieu and on Marchwood and Eling are currently in progress.

Waterside Heritage is helping various local groups to commemorate the anniversary of the commencement of the First World War, with exhibitions at the United Reformed Church in Hythe during June; Fawley Church in September; and a slide projection display in Dibden Church. It’s also working on a new display at Calshot Castle and is helping the Boldre Local History Group with an exhibition on the First World War RNAS Station at Calshot.

Help needed!

If you’d like to become a member of Waterside Heritage, the annual subscription includes a local history newsletter four times a year. Help is always needed with manning the Centre and with tasks ranging from sorting, archiving and indexing through to research and exhibitions. To volunteer, please visit the Centre or contact the Chairman, Graham Parkes, at Hythe Community Centre on 023 8084 4074 or hythecommunity@supanet.com.
Karen Godsall, the newly appointed Principal at New Forest Academy is delighted to be working with Exxonmobil to ensure that students and teachers gain access to important Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths related projects. She met with Alison Jones, the Community Affairs Manager from the Exxonmobil, Fawley Complex to talk about the interesting and diverse opportunities on offer.

‘The academy is now being led by a whole new team of senior leaders and we are focussed on ensuring that good quality teaching and learning is at the heart of everything that we do. We want to work with Exxonmobil so that our students enjoy the many exciting opportunities available to them. We are keen for them to take an active part in local collaborative projects with Exxonmobil.’

The academy has also recently received significant funding from its sponsor Academies and Enterprise Trust for modernising the building and its facilities. ‘We are looking forward to the changes ahead as they will make a real difference to the learning environment that we can provide for our students.’

New Forest Academy is just one of the ExxonMobil Fawley site’s link schools; Noadswood, Applemore, Hamble Community College, Houndsdown, Wildground Juniors, Fawley Infants, Blackfield Primary, Cadiand Primary and Manor Infants are also in the ExxonMobil Link School Programme.

Fawley employees can train as STEM Ambassadors to assist the schools with STEM-related activities. STEM Ambassadors are trained through the government-backed STEMNET programme (www.stemnet.org.uk).

The Fawley site wishes New Forest Academy, and their students, every success!