



The D-Day Museum, Portsmouth

by Andrew Whitmarsh

Portsmouth's D-Day Museum has an extensive archive collection, including material that is arguably of national significance. This short article aims to inform members about the Museum and its collections.

The D-Day Museum is one of six museums run by Portsmouth City Council. It opened in 1984 to mark the 40th anniversary of D-Day, and is the only museum in this country whose sole aim is to tell the story of the Normandy Landings. The Museum's location in Portsmouth reflects that area's importance at the time of D-Day: not only the role played by the city itself, but also that of the surrounding area (the Solent was the assembly area for a large proportion of the Allied fleet prior to D-Day).

The centrepiece of the D-Day Museum is the 272ft (83m) long Overlord Embroidery. This unique work of art is a modern-day Bayeux Tapestry, relating the story of D-Day in 34 panels, from the outbreak of war to the end of the Battle of Normandy. The Overlord Embroidery was created for Lord Dulverton of Batsford in 1968-1973, and has been part of the D-Day Museum since it opened.

The Museum also has extensive displays relating to the preparations for D-Day, and the Landings themselves. These include many items of uniform and equipment, documents and other memorabilia, plus a selection of unusual vehicles, including a Sherman Beach Armoured Recovery Vehicle, an LCVP (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel, or "Higgins Boat"), and a Churchill Crocodile flamethrower tank. New displays were added in 2004 about the Portsmouth area at the time of D-Day, covering local naval preparations, the assembly of troops in the marshalling camps before embarkation, and the civilians who watched it all happen. The D-Day Museum is open daily except 24-26 December, and is situated on the Southsea seafront at: Clarence Esplanade, Southsea PO5 3NT.

The D-Day Museum's archive collections have been drawn upon for a number of recent books on the subject, such as Jonathan Bastable's *Voices From D-Day*, and Martin Bowman's *Remembering D-Day*. However the full extent of the Museums' archives may not be well known to many members. These archives have been built up over the last 21 years. As one would expect, given the Museum's status, they do not include large swathes of official papers such as war diaries of the kind found at The National Archives. Instead, the Museum's collections have a variety of other strengths.

First, the D-Day Museum has material relating to several major aspects of the D-Day story. The Mulberry Harbours are well represented, with papers from the War Office's Tn5 department concerning early designs for the Harbours. Also held are technical papers from the construction firm McAlpine, concerning the design and construction of the Phoenix caissons (concrete breakwaters for the Harbours).

One recent acquisition is the papers Commander Eric Middleton RNVR, who was senior naval experimental officer on the Combined Operations staff, 1942-1944. He played a key role in the development of PLUTO, and his papers comprise his memoirs, wartime



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documents, as well as post-war letters and memoirs from many other people who were involved in PLUTO.

Commander Rupert Curtis RNVR commanded the landing craft flotilla that carried the commandos of Lord Lovat's 1st Special Service Brigade to Sword Beach on D-Day. After the war he built up extensive papers – now part of the Museum's archives – about 1st Special Service Brigade, the experiences of naval personnel in his flotilla on D-Day, and the characteristics of his landing craft (the LCI, or "Landing Craft, Infantry").

Another particular strength of the Museum is material relating to personal experiences on D-Day. One significant resource is the author's research papers from three books on D-Day: Warren Tute's *D-Day* (1973), Russell Miller's *Nothing Less Than Victory. The Oral History of D-Day* (1993), and *We Remember D-Day* by Frank and Joan Shaw (1994). The Tute and Shaw collections comprise hundreds of letters written to these authors following public appeals, giving the memories of service personnel and civilians who took part in or witnessed Operation Overlord.

The Russell Miller collection includes copies of material from a variety of American archives, such as the US National Archives and the Eisenhower Centre. It also includes copies of transcripts of some 50 interviews conducted by Cornelius Ryan with German veterans for his book *The Longest Day* (the originals are now in the Cornelius Ryan Collection at Ohio University). These Ryan interviewees include Rommel's adjutant Helmut Lang, and the German Naval CinC West, Admiral Theodor Krancke.

In addition to these larger collections, the Museum also holds a variety of wartime documents, maps, letters, veterans' memoirs, photographs and other material concerning D-Day. Coverage of the Battle of Normandy is not so comprehensive, but some material is held. Other archive collections concern the local Home Guard, the local RA Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, and life on the home front in Portsmouth during the Second World War. The City Records Office, which is combined with the Museums Service, also holds extensive archive material about the city during the Second World War.

Finally, the D-Day Museum has a significant oral history collection, consisting of around 150 interviews with Normandy veterans, most of which were conducted by Museum staff. There are also around 70 recordings of local people's memories of wartime Portsmouth.

BCMh members, or indeed anyone else, are most welcome to consult the material described above. It can be viewed Monday to Friday at the City Museum and Records Office (address below), by prior appointment with myself.

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