

CORNWALL AT WAR REPRINT 1939–1945

Peter Hancock

A traditional view of Cornwall is of a land apart. For many it conjures up images of idyllic summer holidays with wide sandy beaches lying under blue skies. All such images of Cornwall were shattered during the years of the Second World War when Cornwall's position as the guardian of the Western Approaches thrust it into the front line of that global conflict. Across the county men and women were put on a war footing; farmers were exhorted to produce more food, existing servicemen went off to fight, others joined up in their thousands, and women flocked to join the auxiliary services or took over the working roles of the menfolk who had gone to war.

As the war years passed so the county became a fortress: beaches were sealed off with barbed wire and mines, waters off the coast itself were mined, and much of the fishing fleet was commandeered for active service. In order to take the fight back to the enemy, new airfields were built and harbour facilities constructed for clandestine operations and, later, to shelter vessels of the invasion fleet destined for the liberation of Europe. Meanwhile, against a background of air raids and rationing, life for civilians in Cornwall went on under the dark and uncertain clouds of war.

This book draws into focus the picture of Cornwall during the war from 1939–45. Using historical photographs, along with many recently taken images showing the remains of military structures and the surviving paraphernalia of war; the author provides a vivid picture of the vital role played by Cornwall in those turbulent years.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Hancock was born and brought up in Cornwall. He was educated at Poltair School, St Austell, the local sixth-form college and at the University of Exeter. He has taught at a prep school in Truro for over fifteen years, his subjects including History and Art. This book was inspired by his interest in local history and the curiosity aroused by the neglected coastal defences dotted along the Cornish Coastal Footpath, about which there was clearly a dearth of information.

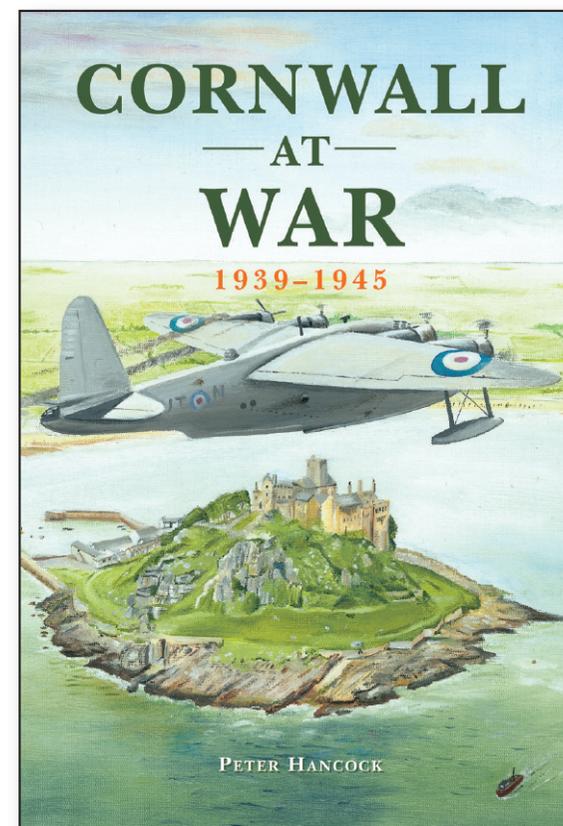
A life-long car fanatic, he has been a member of the Triumph TR Register for over twenty years, and writes a regular column for *Triumph World* magazine. He has also had published a number of short stories.

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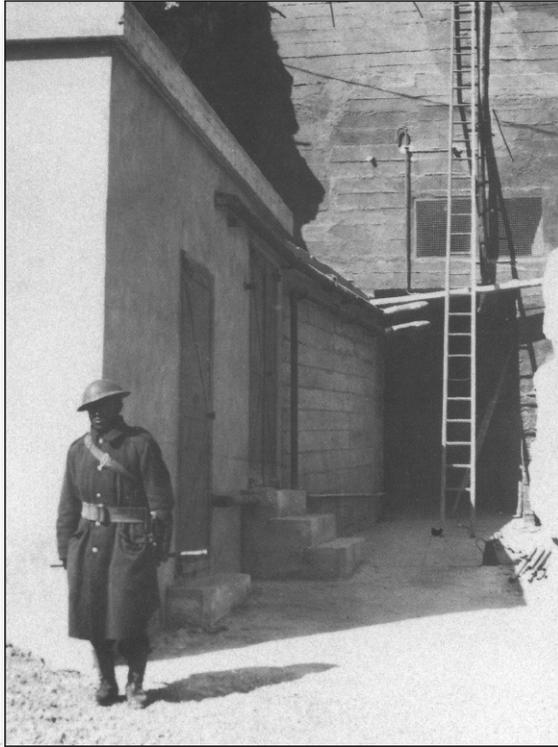


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CORNWALL AT WAR

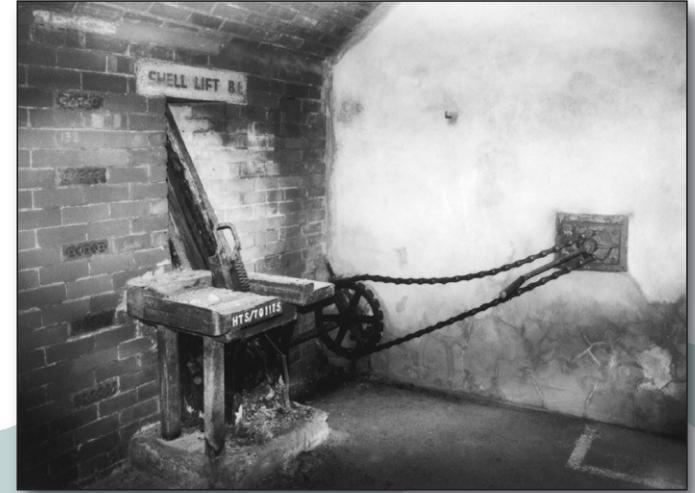


A sentry outside 'The Tunnel' underground telegraph station, Porthcurno, 1941.

A precariously sited pillbox guarding the coast to the west of Loe Bar. For how much longer will it survive coastal erosion?



The daymark on The Gribbin near Fowey. The railings, removed during the war, are finally being replaced in October 2001.



The shell lift remains in remarkably sound condition. Only the ingress of rainwater from above prevents the chains which operate it from functioning.

Example of a double page spread.

An anti-aircraft gun at Penderennis, facing out over the Carris Roads.



For a time the task of manning the guns was given to 201 Battery RA under the command of Major Stephens of Ponsanooch. About 100 men were divided equally between Penderennis and St Anthony Battery, after they had completed their training in Plymouth. Mr Victor Simms was a sergeant in the RA who served at both Penderennis and St Anthony. He feels they were adequately prepared to repel an invasion, and recalls helping to train on 'young infantry boys' at the batteries below 201 Battery was posted overseas.'

Running down the north coast were a series of radar stations. The most westerly of these included a military observation post built into the cairn at Chapel Carn Breva, overlooking Land's End Airport. These then continued up the south coast to Rame Head, and beyond. As an example, at Dowworthy four radio masts were located between the beach and the narrow coast road. The primary school and residential housing now cover the site.



Access to the subterranean Battery Plotting Room, Penderennis, with large ventilators protruding from the walls.



All that remains of the radar station that once stood on the cliffs above Blackberry Rock near Portun.

If the enemy was detected by one of these radar stations the sighting and position would be radioed to the Fire Command Post at Penderennis. They would then alert the Battery Commanders at St Anthony Battery and St Mawes by telephone. The gun detachments, perhaps resting in the Victorian war shelter, would be alerted by an alarm bell.

The Battery Observation Post (BOP) was conveniently located in the salient of the south-facing bastion. Inside the steel door the walls of the rectangular room were painted dark blue to maximise the view through the long, narrow observation window. Here ten personnel, men and women, worked together in cramped surroundings. Using a range of equipment they determined the current range and position of the enemy. In the centre of the room was a Watkins Depression Position Finder, a semi-circular table on which was mounted a telescope to track the target, linked in turn to equipment that would provide accurate gun settings. These were based on the target distance as well as taking into account tidal and weather conditions. A smaller Depression Range Finder was available for tracking close range, fast moving targets like MFls. A Deployment Co-ordinate Converter was used to predict the future position of the targets. These were then relayed to the gun crew in Half Moon Battery using Maglip transmission equipment, a basic form of remote control. The Fire Commander co-ordinated the response with the guns at St Anthony Battery, as well as keeping in touch with the Battery Plotting Room next to the Bay Hotel in Falmouth by telephone.



The Battery Observation Post at Penderennis, seen from the gun, and behind the table key used for starting sector coils and aims. The letters on the wall label page used by the gun crew to hang their capes and gas masks.



Meanwhile, in the underground magazine between the gun emplacements of Half Moon Battery, the ammunition was being prepared. Before the magazine crew descended the slope they had to use a boot scraper in a recess in the wall in order to remove any stones which might create a spark. Inside the steel door the corridor had been covered by their Victorian predecessors with smooth, white ceramic tiles, again to avoid sparks being struck. Another precaution that continued into the twentieth century was for the men to first enter a changing room to change into magazine clothing made of cotton tied with braided cords, together with canvas slippers, thus discarding any metal belt buckles or buttons that could create a spark.

The Battery. The original guns were decommissioned in 1945. This is a 1946 replacement, recently installed.