

# DORSET AT WAR

Rodney Legg



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rodney Legg was born in Bournemouth and has emerged as one of the area's most prolific historians. He recently published *Bournemouth: the Good Old Days* also for Halsgrove. He has produced dozens of other books, particularly on local history and walking themes, and has edited both *Dorset – The Country Magazine* and *Purbeck and Poole Magazine*. Nationally he is still active in the environmental movement having been chairman of the Open Spaces Society since 1989 and a member of the ruling council of the National Trust from 1990 to 2009.

This is the story of Dorset in World War Two – from 1939 to 1945. It is no exaggeration to say that there is no other single county in the British Isles that contributed to victory in so many decisive ways and on such a variety of levels and fronts.

Dorset not only withstood the defensive phase but proved to be pivotal in waging the offensive war that followed – by developing the ideas of secret science into operational apparatus, by deploying assault battalions of the county regiment, and by providing the major American springboard for the D-Day landings.

Taking the conflict year-by-year, renowned Dorset author and World War Two expert Rodney Legg shows how the county lived and functioned in those troubled times.

## HALSGROVE CATALOGUE

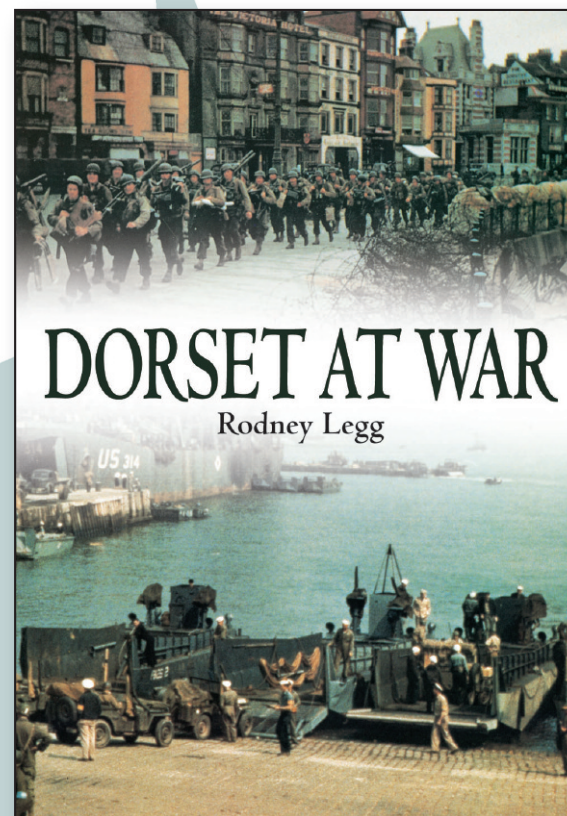
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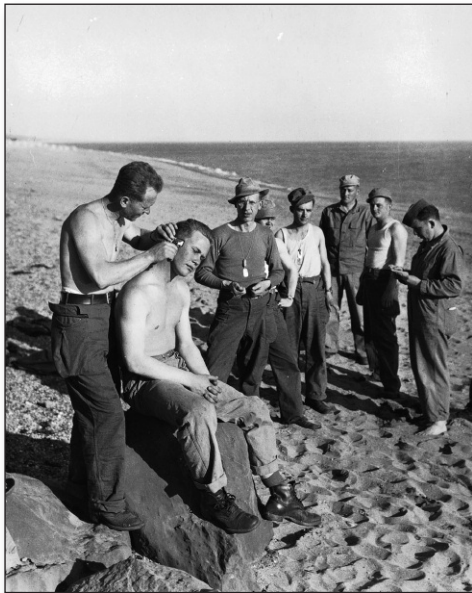
## HALSGROVE TITLE INFORMATION



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Above: Churchill and Churchills with the Prime Minister inspecting the British tank bearing his name at Sea Vale Farm, Lulworth, on 6 April 1942.

Left: GI haircuts on the shingle at Freshwater, Burton Bradstock, in April 1944.

Below: Example of a double-page spread.



Squadron Leader Ronnie Fokes (left) and his Typhoon pilots of 257 Squadron at RAF Warmwell on 13 May 1943.

1940  
**The Battle of Britain**

DORSET'S KEY role in the secret scientific war began on Friday 5 January with the arrival of a 45-year-old boffin. John Darwin – a cousin of the Victorian naturalist – from Section VIII of MI6, the Secret Intelligence Service, at Whaddon Hall, Buckinghamshire brought a Mark III high-frequency transmitter and HMD receiver with aerials to install in the classroom of the 750-ton Royal Navy trawler *HMT Hartlepool*, in Portland Harbour for experimental wireless tests. Captain William Powlett and his crew were briefed to assess its anti-submarine potential.

Winter then stopped the conflict. For three weeks in January the obvious enemy was the weather. Innes could restore a quiet dignity to the countryside. Hodges and rivet-banks were relieved by the high callous of flocks of birds driven south by severe conditions. Siskins, little yellow-green seed-eaters from Scandinavia, descended on the alder cones of trees beside the River Yeo at Sherborne. There was a water-raft, for the first time anyone could remember, also flowing on fear of human observers. No mention appeared in the newspapers, nor on the wireless, of the record snowfall of 27 January. There could be no public weather reports. Meteorology remain classified for the duration.

The secret war resumed on 26 February when several young radio research scientists were posted to the Isle of Purbeck. Alan Hodgkin and Bernard Lovell arrived at Worth Matravers with the advance party from the Air Ministry's Telecommunications Research Establishment (TRE) at Bletchley to set up a new base between Worth village and Reticombe Farm. They were joined by Dr Robert Cockburn. The group's sole lecturer was Leonard Hayler who endeavoured to explain to RAF personnel how to use the complex equipment that was being devised. All first went on to knightshoods in their eminent post-war careers.

By 5 May 1940 the rest of TRE had been evacuated from Scotland to Dorset. Ironically, though the coast facing Norway had become dangerous, that towards France was regarded as safe. With 200 staff, and previously known as the Air Ministry Research Establishment – when it was at Bawdsey – the unit was headed by A. P. Rowe and Robert Watson-Watt. They worked on RDF, standing for Radio Direction Finding and then Range and Direction Finding, though soon both were replaced by the American description Radio Direction and Ranging thanks to its catchy palindromic mnemonic – radar.

Indications that this might no longer be a secure cover came on 2 March when long-range German aircraft from Kampfgeschwader 26 attacked shipping in the English Channel east of St Alban's Head. The steamship *Domada* was set on fire. In a repeat incident on 20 March they sank the 5,430-ton freighter *SS Barhall* off Purbeck. The crew escaped by lifeboat.

The important and worrying discovery of the month was in a Heinkel He.111 bomber (call-sign *HA-AC*) of Kampfgeschwader 26 – the celebrated *Loewen-*

THE BATTLE OF BRITAIN

Geschwader (Low Wing) – which had been shot down. It contained a navigation mine confirming the existence of a radio directed beam-bombing system. "Radio Beacon Knickerbein from 06.00 hours on 315 degrees, revealed on being translated. This provided a puzzle for TRE. On 12 April a laurel wreath was attached to the door of the Hardy Monument, the memorial tower to Nelson's flag captain on the hills above Pooleham – the village known to Thomas Hardy as 'Tosham' – in memory of the men of the Royal Navy killed in Norway 1940.

"To the undying memory of Captain Warburton-Lee, R.N., H.M.S. Hardy, and the gallant men who died at Narvik, Nelson's Hardy and Hardy's Possum salute you."

HMS Hardy was named for Vice-Admiral Thomas Masterman Hardy. His commemorative tower is owned by the National Trust. Bernard Warburton-Lee caught the enemy by surprise on 10 April when he penetrated Oboloff with the Royal Navy's 2nd Destroyer Flotilla. He then took Hardy, *Hotspur* and *Hunter* into Narvik harbour. *Hotspur* and *Hunter* stood guard outside but then joined the action. Two German destroyers were sunk for the loss of Hardy and *Hunter*. Warburton-Lee, mortally wounded, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross. *Hotspur* and *Hunter* were damaged, but fought on as they escaped into the open sea, setting fire to the German transport *Ramstedt*. The ship was carrying ammunition and the destroyers "were peppered with ironmongery as the went by".

The first bombing targeted on Dorset was to a munitions factory on 24 April. An oil incendiary bomb exploded beside the wash water venting house of the nitro-glycerine complex at the Royal Naval Cordite Factory, Holton Heath. This began burning but Wilt Downey and his fire-fighting team brought the fire under control and averted what could have been a major disaster. Paper was a key material at Holton Heath – 1,910 tons of it being used in RDX – the gunpowder pulp which was mixed with nitro-glycerine for the base of cordite SC, the propellant for the Navy's shells.

The situation became hopeless in northern Norway as the Germans advanced. Two Short Empire flying-boats, *Cable* and *Caribou*, which had been scheduled to operate planned peacetime Atlantic services in 1940, had been seconded by BOAC at Poole to 119 Squadron at Liverpool. They took radar kit for beleaguered British troops at Harstad but were attacked by a Heinkel He.115 fighter on Poole road on 4 May. The equipment was destroyed though the injured crew were rescued and brought home by a British destroyer. A further raid sank the flying-boats.

The Air Ministry's Special Duty Flight arrived at Christchurch Aerodrome from St Athan, Glamorgan, on 8 May. It comprised six Ansons, four Blenheim, two Harrows,



Stone-remains remnant of the Western Front at Bournemouth Hill, Bournemouth



Working for a gas tank in the exercise at Bournemouth Hill carried out by the 12th Battalion, Hampshire Regiment



Practice trench dug in sand dunes beside the Sandbanks Hotel, Poole



Beales of Bournemouth burning, with its clock having collapsed into Old Christchurch Road, after the lunchtime raid of 23 May 1943.