

Chapter 7

Conclusion

IT MAY BE thought that there must be little more to add on the subject of the Second World War. By concentrating on the theme of maritime Somerset and its part in the war, it has been a constant surprise and pleasure at the ways in which the evidence has delivered a different perspective from that presented in other forms of study. The national imperatives – keeping the sea lanes open for vital imports of food, fuel and military supplies and cash earning exports, keeping the nation safe from invasion and retaining the ability to project and supply military expeditions to other theatres of war – apply throughout the war and apply to the role of Somerset.

In arriving at the conclusions presented here, evidence from a far wider range of sources has been used than will be evident from the references given. Surviving archaeological and documentary evidence is far from complete but further work will undoubtedly uncover more. Time has also moved beyond the range of much reliable anecdote and personal memory, so much so, as is noted in the introduction, that memories, for example at Watchet of HMS *Iliad*, have been overlaid by later activity associated with the Doniford and Lilstock ranges and at Minehead have become unconsciously distorted in the retelling. In particular, it is no longer possible to engage with those of middling rank in all three services who were involved in decision-making at a regional level. Even the detailed topography of stretches of the Somerset coastline has changed in the last 60 years, sometimes quite dramatically. For example, the breach in the shingle bar between

Porlock and Bossington has flooded the area behind, and substantial coastal erosion between Dunster Beach and Blue Anchor Bay has destroyed some defences and threatens to overwhelm surviving structures. However, where possible all sources of evidence have been compared, including evaluation of air photos, and overall findings have been tempered with military experience and judgement.

Much of the fascinating and much more complex detail that has emerged from such an approach will have to await further publication. This applies for example to the perceived threat of invasion in West Somerset where archaeological evidence not only confirms the documentary sources but clearly indicates that the ways in which the threat was met were much less simple than might otherwise be thought. It was said that: 'If there are three courses of action open to an enemy, he will choose the fourth!' The impossibility of deciding what the threat was, where and when it might materialise and what its objectives might be made the task of planning defences exceptionally challenging.

Most people seeing pillboxes along the beach assume that they were built to meet a seaborne invasion yet the documentary evidence clearly shows that the main perceived threat was troop-carrying aircraft landing on the beaches, or on the high ground behind them, and even off-loading light air-portable tanks. No matter how improbable the airborne threat appears today and how deep ideas of a seaborne invasion have become embedded in communal consciousness, the evidence for the perception of the airborne threat in 1940 is firm.

Somerset and the Defence of the Bristol Channel

Post-war access to German plans for invasion shows us how wrong the British planners were but contemporary documentary evidence shows that these threats were not dreamt up locally but formed part of the national strategy and were, ordered, resourced and controlled through the Field Army chain of command. In retrospect it should be understood that no one could know (nor if they had would they have been believed) that the Germans had no plan of invasion prepared in June 1940 and later when the German command had started implementing plans for the seaborne invasion of south-east England (Operation Sea Lion) that this was effectively their only plan. The enemy had shown great flair and success in delivering the *coups de main* that felled Czechoslovakia, Poland, Denmark, Norway, the low countries and France, and later Greece and Crete. Steps had to be taken to apply that experience. Rearming the Severn defences to counter an invasion force spearheaded by heavy warships based on Brest, taking measures to contain airborne landings on Exmoor and elsewhere in the South West and even having half an eye on the three hundred year old threat from an enemy based in France – the invasion of Ireland as a step to defeating Great Britain – all were sensible considerations that demanded planning and resources.

Standing back from the detail it can be seen that Somerset made a surprisingly important contribution to the maritime activities that led to victory in the Second World War. The county lent to the war effort modest but important port facilities especially the Port of Bristol Authority's dock at Portishead. Somerset boats and crews served in the Bristol Channel and wherever in the world they were sent or taken. On land, the southern flank of the Bristol Channel along the Somerset

coast was defended against both airborne and seaborne invasion, which could have halted all maritime activities and threatened the major port facilities at Bristol and Avonmouth. Within the county of Somerset and the neighbouring counties, the air defence system minimised the threats of enemy air reconnaissance and destruction of ships, ports and installations. It was a system that underwent rapid technological change and became more sophisticated and dependent on what are now called electronic warfare measures. Enemy aircraft on reconnaissance, bombing, anti-shipping or mine-laying missions were harassed and attacked, while the warning systems ensured that essential work suffered the minimum interruption. Along the Somerset coastline the military were able to train effectively and carry out firing exercises with anti-aircraft guns, artillery, tanks and anti-tank weapons and small arms while air gunnery and bombing ranges were used extensively by the RAF and Fleet Air Arm.

Important experimental work could also be carried out in a relatively safe and secure environment, in particular the design and testing work of the Royal Naval Department of Miscellaneous Weapons Development at HMS *Birnbeck* in producing effective solutions in anti-submarine warfare and in support of the Allied invasion of mainland Europe. There were also important communications facilities particularly the GPO maritime radio stations at Portishead and Burnham-on-Sea, while along the Somerset coast local men and women served in the Home Guard, Observer Corps, Coastguards, Royal Naval Auxiliary Patrol, and Civil Defence. Larger numbers of other uniformed men and women from across the UK and wider afield also served in Somerset and carried out their duty to King and Country.