

OPERATION 'OVERLORD' AND THE WORCESTERSHIRE CONSTABULARY

by

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We all know of, and gratefully acknowledge, the huge contributions made by British men and women who served in the armed forces during the Second World War. The roles they played, together with members of other allied armies, are widely recorded by historians and family members. Many police officers joined these ranks as reservists, conscripts or volunteers. The effect of the removal of these men from their respective forces put extra pressure on those who remained. There were many new police duties which came about because of the war and it was fortunate that the police authorities were able to turn to the First Police Reserve, of recently retired former policemen; the Police War Reserve of men over thirty who agreed to serve for the duration only; the Women's Auxiliary Police Corps, and the Special Constabulary, some of whom were able to work full time. The adventures and experiences of these officers and those left behind have rarely been recorded. In fact, sources for such research are sadly lacking.

Worcestershire had an establishment of just over 360 officers at the beginning of the war and lost sixty of them in the first call of Reservists to the Colours. As time went on, a further forty-five were removed by the war effort. This was somewhat counterbalanced by the return of some twenty-seven officers to the force over a period of several months. However, the overall loss of men was around seventy-five. Some of the men who remained, specialised in anti-gas training, whilst others gathered information about the 8,864 bombs that dropped throughout the county. Then Dunkirk occurred!

In a 'highly secret' letter, the Home Office instructed the Chief Constable of Worcestershire, James Lloyd-Williams*, to create a department to investigate security matters. This led to a further drain upon experienced manpower.

In October and November 1940, Coventry was targeted by the Luftwaffe and the attacks left death and destruction in their wake. However, on the night of the largest raid, twenty-eight Worcestershire police officers were called from their beds at 2.00am on the morning of Friday 15 November, and sent to Coventry where they remained for three weeks, although relief contingents were sent to replace them throughout the remainder of the year. Thus, the Worcestershire Constabulary was now operating with about thirty per cent fewer regular officers than it had at the start of the war.

By 1944, all thoughts were upon where and when the forthcoming invasion of Europe was going to take place. The operation was called 'Overlord' for the Army, and 'Neptune' for the Royal Navy, but to everyone else it was 'D Day'. Early planning focused on building up allied forces. Camps were set up around the country with a view to streaming the various armies to the coast in rotation as their place in the attack was ordered. As the date of the offensive approached, police forces across the country were required to provide officers from their already depleted numbers to assist the local police at dockland bottlenecks.

On Saturday 11 March, 1944, the Chief Constable circulated a memorandum to each of his Divisional Superintendents. He said :

'It is probable that in the fairly near future this County will be required to provide reinforcements to Forces nearer the scene of operations. The Quota to be supplied by this County is forty seven. The men will probably be sent in batches at intervals. The first batch will consist of one Sergeant and nine men. The second batch will consist of two Sergeants and fifteen men. Subsequent batches, (possibly one Inspector), two Sergeants and eight men. The men for the first batch must be earmarked immediately and should consist of the men who can be made most easily available. Where possible, preference should be given to volunteers and a proportion of the men may be auxiliaries. No man is to be selected who is not likely to be a credit to the County when serving elsewhere. A proportion of the men should be trained Incident Officers and Bomb Reconnaissance Officers.'

Each Division was ordered to provide a quota of officers, and on Monday 13 March, the Assistant Chief Constable advised each Division that their nominated members should take with them the following items :

One patrol jacket; one pair of uniform trousers; one cape; one pair of waterproof leggings; their personal respirator; their steel helmet; two blankets; a one pint cup and a mess tin, and one pair of spare boots. The officers were also told that they should take : a plain jacket, trousers and hat; a change of underclothing; towels, soap and toilet requisites, and a knife, fork, spoon and tin opener. They were provided with emergency rations sufficient for forty-eight hours, which consisted of two tinned meals; one tin of 'Prem' (a tinned ham, imported from America and made by the Swift Meat Company); one tin of sweetened milk, and chocolate, tea and biscuits. Each man was issued with a 'Blue Pack' in which to carry his equipment.



And so, on Friday 28 April, 1944, the Chief Constable received a letter from the Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence, (William Ward, who was actually the third Earl of Dudley), based at 156 Great Charles Street, Birmingham. It was marked 'Top Secret', and directed him to supply one Sergeant and nine Constables.

The men were to assemble on the Stour Valley Platform, New Street Railway Station, Birmingham, on Monday 1 May 1944, at 9.45am.

The Stour Valley Platform, Birmingham New Street Railway Station

In a further letter on the subject of the deployment of police officers, the Chief Constable was instructed that messages were not to be passed by telephone or letter, but only by hand.

It is not clear whether the senior officers at Worcester knew where their men were going. However, the location was not known to the policemen on the ground. It must have been a difficult time for the men and their families. They were given a just a couple of days to organize their affairs. They did not know what might befall them at their unknown destination, and they had no idea how long it would be before they would see

each other again. One thing that had already been put in place, however, was an arrangement to pay the wives of the men directly, whilst their husbands were away. It is interesting to observe the different amounts chosen by the men, irrespective of the number of dependants. Some gave all their wages, whilst others gave varied proportions of their fortnightly income to their wives. Only one, a single man, took the whole of his income.

When the travel day arrived, police transport picked up the men from their various locations and took them to New Street Station. The men were overwhelmed with luggage and equipment and struggled to carry everything with them.

The location where the Worcestershire men had been sent to, can be found in the Worcestershire police records. In a letter to Chief Constable Lloyd-Williams, the Chief Constable of Southampton County Borough Police, Frederick Tarry**, wrote and told him that his men had arrived the previous day and had settled in very well. He invited his Worcestershire colleague to visit his men at any time he wished. The tone of the letter was very friendly and suggested that both men already knew each other. An interesting feature of this and the subsequent exchange of letters between Worcester and Southampton was that nearly every letter was delivered to its destination the day after posting.

The men had hardly had time to settle in to their new location, when one of them discovered that his wife and child were unwell and became rather anxious as a result. In reply to Tarry's letter, Lloyd-Williams mentioned, rather impatiently, that if the officer was becoming a problem he would remove and replace him. Chief Constable Tarry smoothed things over by saying he had spoken to the officer and had been able to settle him down. But it soon became clear that the men were not going to return home any time soon and so Tarry allowed them to accumulate their rest days in order to have a few days in Worcestershire periodically. It was during one of these periods that the officer who was



concerned about his family was replaced.

The Worcestershire contingent was in the charge of Sergeant George Young from Evesham. He wrote to Lloyd-Williams on Tuesday 2 May. In a handwritten letter he told the Chief Constable how they had been over-burdened with equipment and uniform and arranged to send some of the items back home. The men also required flat caps in order to blend in with the local officers.

Along with police officers from other forces, the men were housed in quarters in Archer Road, Southampton, which were described as 'very comfortable billets', with excellent food. The block has since been demolished, being replaced with apartments.

Sergeant George Young (wearing Great War medals)

Initially the men were required to work shifts in 'B' Division of Southampton County Borough Police, although later, some of them worked in an adjoining Division. Their duties were comprised of barrier duty, snap checks, military traffic control, and some work following air raid damage. When not engaged on these duties, they carried out ordinary beat patrol. The Worcestershire men integrated well with the local men and social occasions were held where they competed against each other playing snooker, billiards and darts.



*Archer Road,
Southampton
(since
demolished)*

Sergeant Young exchanged a number of letters with his Chief Constable, keeping him up to date with the events that were occurring at Southampton. As time progressed, the letters became reasonably informal and were very much appreciated by Lloyd-Williams. There is little mention in the correspondence of the embarkation on 'D Day'. From that it may be assumed that the process was largely free from problems other than the weather.

By Monday 10 July 1944, one month after 'D Day', there was some talk of sending the contingents home from Southampton. But a week later, Tarry had to reconsider this plan, as the Borough had come under attack from flying bombs. The Germans had got the range of the port and were firing their weapons from the Pas de Calais. At the same time the weather had improved in Normandy and this was going to lead to an increase in the embarkation of troops.

Eventually however, Tarry decided to return half of the fifty men who had been seconded to him from the midland police forces. They consisted of five Constables each from Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shrewsbury Borough, and a Sergeant and four Constables from Staffordshire and Shropshire.

With this reduction in men, it was possible to close a hostel that housed the Shropshire contingent, and they were duly re-housed at Archer Road. Sergeant Young commented, 'We have as little as possible to do with them as they are such a grumbling crowd.' This view had the potential to bode well for the future amalgamation of the forces in 1967.

The final days of the stay at Southampton were very mundane, and it is possible to detect a reduction in enthusiasm in Sergeant Young's letters. He must have been very pleased to hear that he and his colleagues were to return to Worcestershire on Friday 1 September 1944. They had been away from their homes for four months, albeit with leave. Perhaps the sacrifice was not as great as for many others who were thrust further into harm's way, nevertheless, for those involved there was an element of uncertainty for which they could not prepare.

Although second and third contingents were prepared for dispatch to wherever they were needed, they were never called upon, although if they had been, Lloyd-Williams was determined not to be troubled by homesick policemen in the future. As such, he ordered his Superintendents to ensure that future groups should not include officers who were likely to experience 'domestic trouble' whilst away from home. Fortunately the problem did not arise.

* James Evan LLOYD-WILLIAMS



[1] Chief Constable Montgomeryshire Constabulary
1927-1931

[2] Chief Constable Worcestershire Constabulary
1931-1958

Awarded KPFSM LG 1 January 1945 p107
CBE LG 8 June 1950 p2786

Educated St Peter's College, Westminster

Career Indian Police service 1907/1914 (Asst Supt 1907, Bengal Province) - Indian Army Reserve of Officers 1914/1919 (2nd Lt, 35th Scinde Horse; Lt, 33rd QVO Light Cavalry; Capt, 32nd Lancers; NW Frontier and Mesopotamia; MC 1918) - Indian Police service 1919/1927 (Supt 1919, Bengal Province) - [1] - [2] - Retirement (DL Worcestershire)

b. Saturday 7 April 1888 (Oswestry?)

m. 1923 Lilian Brett 2d

d. Saturday 7 May 1960, Pershore

** Frederick Thomas TARRY



[1] Chief Constable Exeter City Police 1930-1940

[2] Chief Constable Southampton County Borough Police
1941-1946

[3] HM Inspector of Constabulary 1946-1962

Awarded OBE LG 1 February 1937 p695

KPFSM LG 12 June 1941 p3301

CBE LG 1 January 1946 p52

CB LG 2 June 1962 p4310

Educated Hartfield School, Sussex

Career Army service 1914/1919 (RWKent Regt; MM and Bar, MiD) - Brighton Borough Police 1919/1930 (PC 1919; PS 1922; Insp 1926) - [1] (First Prize and Gold Medal, Police Essay Competition, 1932) - [2] - [3] - Retirement (numerous industrial appointments)

b. Saturday 19 December 1896, Hartfield, Sussex

m. 1922 Frances Winter 2s

d. Tuesday 5 October 1976, Southampton



Frederick Tarry as HMI inspecting the Worcester City Police, late 1940s, accompanied by the Chief Constable Ernest Tinkler, and members of the Watch Committee.