



# Maiden Newton

## *At War*



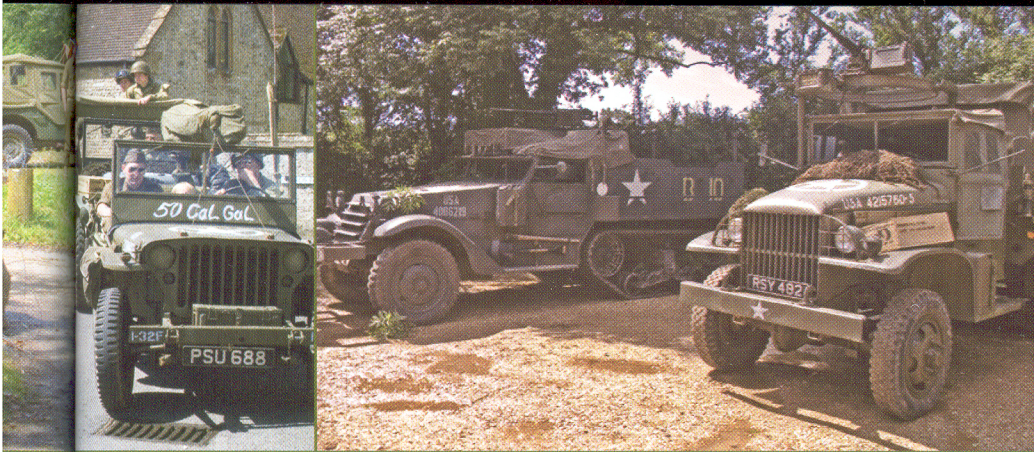
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The county of Dorset, on the South West coast of England, was thrown into the thick of World War Two at an early stage of the conflict. The entire Frome valley was taken over by exhausted troops evacuated from Dunkirk in June 1940. They were billeted in any accommodation that could be found until proper camps could be established, and fed by the local population despite the rationing already in force until army rations were delivered.

Winston Churchill's rousing 'We shall fight them on the beaches' speech was taken to heart as the Dorset coast was fortified against the threat of invasion. In late 1940 and early 1941 thousands of pillboxes, gun emplacements and anti-tank defences were built all around the county and, indeed, all over Britain in the largest military building programme in history.

At major strategic points such as at the convergence of rivers, roads and rail routes these defences were built in even greater depth. One such place, where all three of those elements converged,





was Maiden Newton. The village was established as an 'anti-tank island', fortified extensively with pillboxes, anti-tank blocks, ammunition stores and a spigot mortar emplacement. Dozens of Nissen huts were erected to house troops stationed in the area.

Later, when America came into the war and the forces began to assemble in preparation for D-Day, thousands of US troops were billeted in the area. The 3225th Quartermasters Service Company of the US Army established their base just to the South of Maiden Newton railway station, where supplies from the major ports such as Bristol, Liverpool and Cardiff arrived by rail and were distributed on by both road and rail all around South West England. Munitions, tanks, and other vehicles swamped the narrow country roads and filled every inch of ground not under cultivation.

Naturally this concentration of war materiel made Dorset a prime target for the Luftwaffe. Nearly 56,000 bombs of various types were dropped on the county during the "Dorset Blitz". Fighter Command aircraft from RAF Warmwell fought against these attacks; 54 British aircraft were lost over Dorset for a loss of around 90 of the enemy.

Sixty years later peace has returned to the valley, yet reminders of those desperate times lie all around. In Maiden Newton anti-tank defences and pillboxes, the spigot mortar emplacement and even two of the old Nissen huts still survive.

But over the weekend of 21st, 22nd and 23rd June 2008 the village once again played host to British paratroops and American GIs, the narrow streets were filled with the roar of army trucks and a Sherman tank, and even German jack-boots tramped along the lanes around the village.

Two years in the planning, Maiden Newton at War celebrated the memory of the dark days of World War Two. The village church had run a charitable fundraising festival on alternate years, but the event's appeal had dwindled over time. What was needed was something new, something exciting, something which could involve the whole community (especially the men-folk and the young!). So the idea of a whole weekend of events and activities based around a Second World War theme was born. The response to the idea was resoundingly positive and soon that legendary 'Dunkirk Spirit' seemed to be reborn as the entire village and, indeed, other neighbouring villages became involved in the organisation.

Event organiser Andy Elliott told me that at times it seemed as though the adversities of staging such an event, what with Health 'n' Safety, bureaucracy and red tape, were invoking a similar spirit of solidarity and sheer British Bulldog bloody-mindedness to win whatever the 'enemy' threw back at them. But win they did, and what an event they put on!

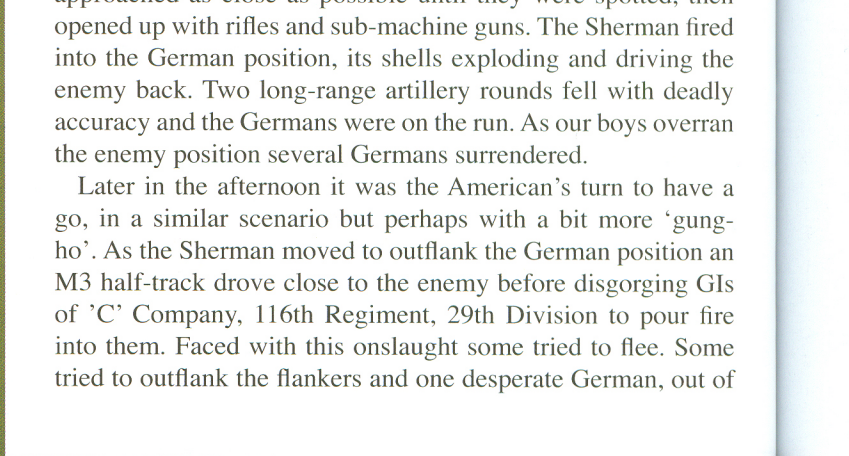
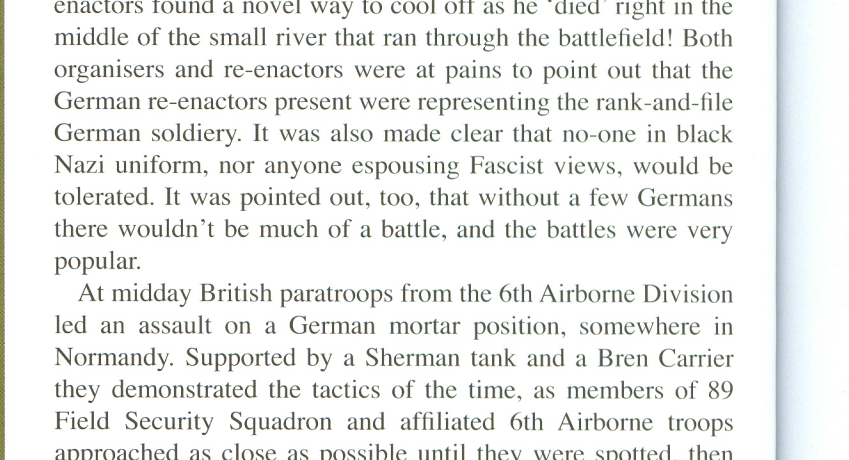
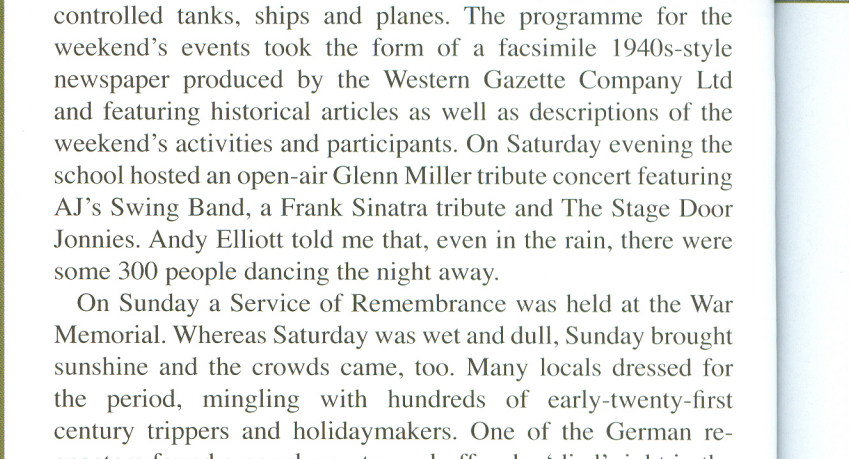
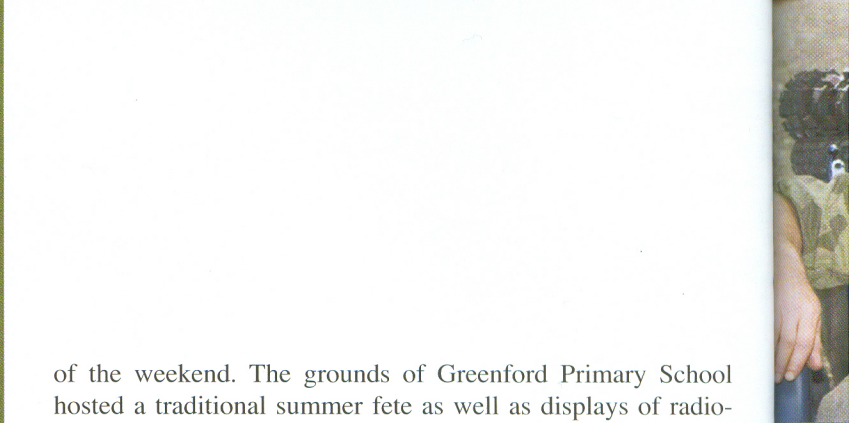
The weekend kicked off with a Fabulous 40s dance in the village hall, featuring



live music from Dickie and Debbie Lines and 'The Rhythm Rascals'. In the 1940s a local band, Bill Elliott and the Rhythm Rascals, regularly played at dances in the area. Five of Bill's great grandchildren re-formed the Rascals especially for this occasion.

On Saturday and Sunday re-enactment and living history groups, as well as members of the Western branch of the Invicta Military Vehicle Preservation Society, brought the village to life with displays and battles. Members of the South Dorset Community Archaeological Society conducted an excavation of the spigot mortar emplacement and the restoration of a pillbox over the course





of the weekend. The grounds of Greenford Primary School hosted a traditional summer fete as well as displays of radio-controlled tanks, ships and planes. The programme for the weekend's events took the form of a facsimile 1940s-style newspaper produced by the Western Gazette Company Ltd and featuring historical articles as well as descriptions of the weekend's activities and participants. On Saturday evening the school hosted an open-air Glenn Miller tribute concert featuring AJ's Swing Band, a Frank Sinatra tribute and The Stage Door Jonnies. Andy Elliott told me that, even in the rain, there were some 300 people dancing the night away.

On Sunday a Service of Remembrance was held at the War Memorial. Whereas Saturday was wet and dull, Sunday brought sunshine and the crowds came, too. Many locals dressed for the period, mingling with hundreds of early-twenty-first century trippers and holidaymakers. One of the German re-enactors found a novel way to cool off as he 'died' right in the middle of the small river that ran through the battlefield! Both organisers and re-enactors were at pains to point out that the German re-enactors present were representing the rank-and-file German soldiery. It was also made clear that no-one in black Nazi uniform, nor anyone espousing Fascist views, would be tolerated. It was pointed out, too, that without a few Germans there wouldn't be much of a battle, and the battles were very popular.

At midday British paratroops from the 6th Airborne Division led an assault on a German mortar position, somewhere in Normandy. Supported by a Sherman tank and a Bren Carrier they demonstrated the tactics of the time, as members of 89 Field Security Squadron and affiliated 6th Airborne troops approached as close as possible until they were spotted, then opened up with rifles and sub-machine guns. The Sherman fired into the German position, its shells exploding and driving the enemy back. Two long-range artillery rounds fell with deadly accuracy and the Germans were on the run. As our boys overran the enemy position several Germans surrendered.

Later in the afternoon it was the American's turn to have a go, in a similar scenario but perhaps with a bit more 'gung-ho'. As the Sherman moved to outflank the German position an M3 half-track drove close to the enemy before disgorging GIs of 'C' Company, 116th Regiment, 29th Division to pour fire into them. Faced with this onslaught some tried to flee. Some tried to outflank the flankers and one desperate German, out of



ammo and out of hope, charged the Americans armed only with a trenching spade! The Americans quickly overran the German position and, pausing only to check that none were 'playing possum', moved on into the woods beyond and forward to their next objective.

At the end of each engagement all the troops presented themselves in smart ranks to the audience, the British being greeted with enthusiastic cheers; the Germans with a mixture of applause and good-natured catcalls. As peace descended once again the audience drifted off to enjoy the rest of the displays and events.

I have to say that this was an absolutely first-class event. The organisers should be heartily congratulated, especially since they had never attempted anything like this before. For a small village community to pull off such a fantastic weekend at their first attempt was truly inspiring. At the time of writing the money was still coming in, but Andy Elliott was hopeful that the final figure raised for local charities would top around £10,000 and, while a final decision had yet to be taken, he thought it likely that the event would be repeated at two or three-yearly intervals. We wish them every success.

