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**Devon Coast's Eerie Secret: 749 Yanks Died Here**

By JON NORDHEIMER  
Special to The New York Times

DARTMOUTH, England — For weeks the rumors would not go away. Was it possible, neighbor asked neighbor in the Devon countryside as winter turned into spring, that several hundred bodies of American soldiers lay buried in an unmarked grave beneath the rich green turf in a pasture of a farm owned by Nolan Tope?

When told of the "secret mass grave," Mr. Tope, who was 10 years old in 1944, was the loudest of the scoffers. He said he wouldn't welcome anyone poking in his fields during lambing season, looking for dead G.I.'s. He closed his farm to outsiders and threatened legal action against trespassers.

Dorothy Seekings was one of those convinced the field held a dark secret. She said she had seen the dead piled on the ground 40 years ago while the mass grave was prepared.

"The bodies were in American uniforms," she told a local reporter looking into the mystery, which has only recently been cleared up by research into old United States Army records. "There were great mounds of earth in the field and I was told they were going to be buried there. I certainly never heard that they were moved."

**Grim Past Is Awakened**

The truth proved less eerie than the rumors.

In this section of Devon called the South Hams, Mrs. Seekings's account reawakened a lost period of time, the war years when American troops preparing for the assault on the French seacoast occupied the tidy villages and set up camps in the green fields. The inhabitants were ordered out of the area and evacuated to other parts of the country. The 40th anniversary of D-day on June 6 and the preparations for the invasion will be marked in local observances this spring.

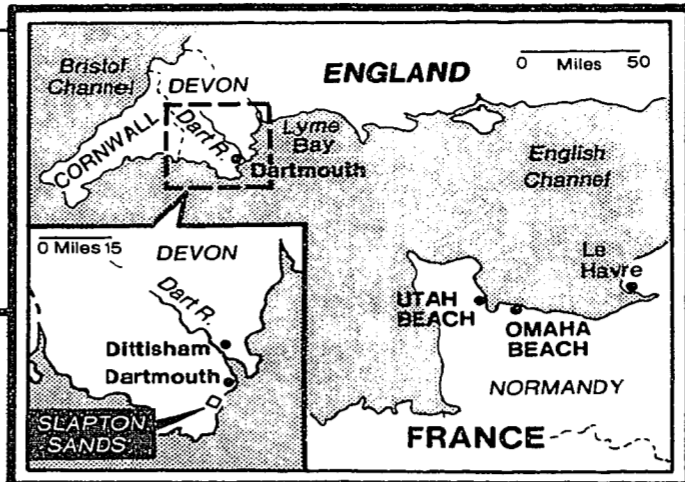
The selection of South Hams was not an arbitrary one. The coast on one side of the evacuated zone has five miles of pristine beach called Slapton Sands. American combat troops from the VII Army Corps used the wide beach and the broad waters of Lyme Bay to train for the invasion of France, code-named Operation Overlord. With low grassy dunes and fast-climbing hills, the coast there closely resembled VII Corps' destination in the coming invasion, Utah Beach in Normandy.

The 3,000 evacuees held little animosity for the Americans. "It was a question then of doing your bit for the war effort," recalled John Hannaford, a butcher at Torcross at one end of the beach, who was 17 in 1944. "We were told to get out and it was a year before people were allowed to return."

**Little Is Changed by Time**

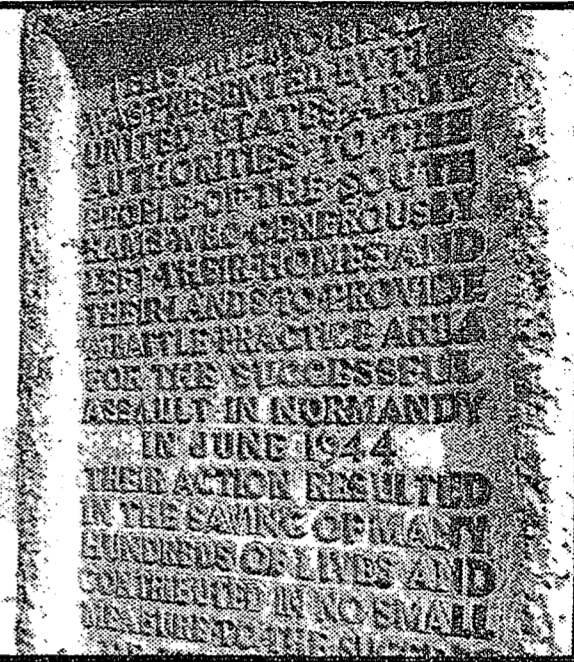
The terrain of southwest England, where Devon and Cornwall thrust into the sea like an elephant's head, has changed little in four decades if one ignores the patches of trailer parks in the coastal towns. From the air the hedgerowed fields and high-banked country roads bordered with flourishes of primroses, buttercups and wild violets look like a bright mosaic of lime and jade green tiles angling toward the blue sea.

Today the area around the historic port of Dartmouth draws upper-middle-class retirees, artists and yachtsmen who live in cottages on hills that look down on the River Dart as it snakes lazily from the sea into the countryside. At Dittisham, where Aga-



Muriel Hamlyn of Cheshire, England, reading inscription on monument at Slapton Sands beach in the South Hams section of Devon. The plaque was erected by the U.S. Army in gratitude to local residents for giving up their homes during exercises for the D-day invasion.

The New York Times/Jon Nordheimer



tha Christie and Daphne Du Maurier kept houses, the river in the spring of 1944 was choked with invasion landing craft, and in the fields, beneath camouflage nets, munitions and supplies were stacked ready for D-day.

Five weeks before the Normandy landings, American forces here staged Exercise Tiger, a nighttime operation to put troops and supplies ashore at Slapton Sands under simulated combat conditions.

In the darkness, out on the cold waters of Lyme Bay, disaster struck.

**Unease Turns to Panic**

Somehow, several German E-boats — fast coastal raiders — slipped into Lyme Bay in the early morning hours of April 28 and put torpedoes into three of the unprotected landing ships carrying about 3,000 G.I.'s whose job was to unload supplies on the invasion beach.

Two of the stricken ships, called LST's, sank after two hours. At first a few of the men aboard the vessels joked about their situation, how the "dry run" had gotten out of hand and the simulation had taken a bad turn. But as the burning ships settled, unease turned to panic.

A secret inquiry held later heard statements about the lack of discipline on the decks. "Officers cannot expect their men to remain cool when they themselves seem to go completely crazy," Col. Eugene M. Caffey, commander of the First Engineers Special Brigade, told Army investigators.

**Secret Kept for 40 Years**

Some men died when they went below deck to get duffel bags and other personal possessions. Many drowned because they did not know how to inflate life vests or wear them properly. Dozens tied them around the waist like lifebelts.

By daylight, vessels crisscrossed the waters off Slapton Sands to retrieve the bodies of Americans who died that night.

These were surely the bodies Dorothy Seekings, then 23 years old, remembers seeing on the Tope farm, a few miles over the ridge from Dartmouth. Unlike most residents of South Hams, she was not evacuated because her father was a baker and needed her to help deliver doughnuts to the Americans.

Mrs. Seekings was instructed not to reveal what she had glimpsed. She kept the secret for 40 years.

Alarmed that the German raid could expose plans for D-day, the Allied high command made sure all information on the episode was buried with the bodies.

**Bodies of Half Unrecovered**

On the morning of June 6, VII Corps landed on Utah Beach and met only light resistance. There were fewer than 100 American casualties.

But on that dark night in late April, the Army revealed much later, 749 American soldiers and sailors were lost on Lyme Bay.

According to official Army records on file at the Military History Institute in Pennsylvania, about half of the num-

ber lost that night were never recovered from the sea. Those that were recovered were buried the next day.

The names of some of the known dead obtained from the institute were checked recently against names on file with the Army Battlefield Monuments Commission in Washington. These records showed that the victims of Exercise Tiger who were recovered and buried in the field had been quietly exhumed and moved to other cemeteries after the war, while the Exercise Tiger episode remained an official secret. Army publications in 1951 contained information on the exercise and the loss of 749 lives but attracted little public attention.

There is a marker, placed after the war, on the beach at Slapton Sands, expressing the gratitude of the United States Army to the people of South Hams for giving up their homes and property in 1944 so preparations for D-day could be conducted.

Several weeks ago vandals damaged the poles flying the American flag and daubed the memorial with red paint and peace symbols.

There is no marker to the 749 dead of Exercise Tiger, shrouded by secrecy and time. There is only the sea breaking on the coast of Devon to suggest their fate.

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