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Fort Henry: Canadian and British Assault Training at Studland for Operation Overlord, 1943-1944

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ABSTRACT

Fort Henry at Studland in Dorset is an observation post constructed to observe Canadian and British amphibious training exercises for Operation Overlord. It is an important and visible remnant of training exercises which is frequently misunderstood. This article draws on a wide range of sources from archives in the UK, Canada and United States to provide a comprehensive account of how and why the building was constructed, the origin of its name and how the building was utilised during its short, but eventful lifetime.

Introduction

During September 1943, construction work started on a large observation post overlooking Studland Bay in Dorset. This building, later given the name Fort Henry, was subsequently used to observe a series of combined operations exercises conducted by 3 Canadian Infantry Division (3 CID) and 50 (Northumbrian) Infantry Division (50 NID) during late 1943 and 1944. Despite efforts from the landowner to have the building removed postwar, Fort Henry has survived, and in 2012 became a Grade II listed building.¹ This unique structure has since become a focal point for interest in amphibious training at Studland Bay yet, despite significant popular attention, it has received limited academic recognition. Only two studies in the historiography focus directly on Studland's Second World War past. In 2020 Thomas

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¹Dorset History Centre (hereinafter DHC) D-BKL/E/Q/90, Letter from Dem-Ex to F.O. Rhodes, 30 October 1946; DHC D-BKL/E/Q/126, Letter from Major General Walsh to Miss Bankes and Mrs Breckwith, 11 August 1950; Historic England, 1411809 Gun Emplacement and Fort Henry, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1411809?section=official-list-entry>. Accessed 8 August 2025.

Cousins et al. published an article investigating the Valentine Duplex Drive tanks lost during Exercise Smash I at Studland in April 1944, while William Foot conducted a study of surviving Second World War archaeology in 2006.² Wider studies of the British and Canadian contribution to Operation Overlord also frequently refer to Fort Henry in passing.³



Figure 1: Fort Henry Exterior – 2025.⁴

²Thomas Cousins, Thomas Harrison, and Dave Parham, ‘The Maritime Archaeology of Duplex Drive Tanks in the United Kingdom’, In Jennifer A. Rodrigues and Arianna Traviglia (ed.), *IKUWA6*, (Fremantle: Western Australian Maritime Museum, 2020), pp. 649–656; William Foot, *Beaches, Fields, Streets, and Hills: The Anti-Invasion Landscape of England, 1940*, (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2006), pp. 65-74.

³C.P. Stacey, *The Victory Campaign: The Operations in North-West Europe, 1944-1945*, (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 1960), p. 12 & p. 36; Andrew Holborn, *The D-Day landing on Gold Beach: 6 June 1944*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 103-104.

⁴Photographed by the author 2025 – scale 50cm.

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Yet none of these publications has attempted to investigate in detail what actually happened at Studland, and this has led to a number of misconceptions about Fort Henry's original purpose and use. This lack of academic interest is surprising as the building represents a significant visible archaeological reminder of training exercises for Operation Overlord, and the often challenging progress made towards developing an effective amphibious force. The purpose of this article is to investigate Fort Henry beyond what has currently been published and in doing so to answer three main questions. It will examine why Studland was chosen as an assault training area for Overlord to gain an understanding of the building's location. It will then consider why and how Fort Henry was built, looking at both the practical and possible political motivations for its construction in 1943. Finally, it will investigate how the building was used by both Canadian, and later British forces as it matured into 1944.

Studland as an Assault Training Area

The large, depopulated area of heathland and close proximity to naval facilities at Portland, Poole and Portsmouth made Studland Bay a practical location for amphibious training exercises. The first known combined exercise was held in 1927, with a much larger landing by 3 Infantry Division in 1936. No live firing was conducted, and as such there was no requirement for a hardened observation post.⁵ Even after the outbreak of war, Studland's importance as a training area remained limited with the area only utilised for local training.⁶

In April 1942 the Commander in Chief (CinC) Home Forces, General Barnard Paget, considered the British Army needed 'realistic formation battle practice' in areas where they could use 'their weapons in the most life-like battle conditions.'⁷ Paget submitted a report to the War Office asking for a list of land in the UK to be requisitioned to create battle training areas. This list included the heathland 'south of Poole Harbour', selected due to the small population and suitable expanse of heath and forest for training.⁸ After limited local objections, War Office approval was given on 2 July 1942 and 450 people were subsequently evacuated. On 10 August 1942, the War Office formally took control of 24 square miles of land under Defence Regulation 51 (DR51)

⁵Special Correspondent of *The Times*, 'General Service Notes', *RUSI Journal*, Vol.72, Iss.488 (1927), pp. 886-887; The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) AIR 2/1924, Report on Combined Operations Exercise 1936, 18 September 1936; Robert Tuke, 'The Amphibious Manoeuvres', *The Fighting Forces*, Vol. XIII, No.4 (1936), pp. 302-308.

⁶TNA WO 166/4283, 5 East Yorkshire Regiment War Diary, 10 July 1940; TNA WO 166/909, 7 Guards Brigade War Diary, 26 February 1941.

⁷TNA HO 207/1186, HF.12065/3/17/G(Trg) Report by CinC Home Forces, 23 April 1942.

⁸Ibid.

creating the Studland Battle Training Area (SBTA).⁹ Over the following year the SBTA became hugely popular as a military training area for British Army formations within Southern Command (SOUTCO).¹⁰

By June 1943, the role of Studland as a training area was about to change again. Lieutenant General Frederick Morgan, recently appointed Chief of Staff to the Supreme Allied Commander (designate) (COSSAC), submitted a report to the Chiefs of Staff Committee (COSC) requesting the formation of new assault training areas to exercise the forces that had been allocated to Operation Overlord. Morgan considered that 'among the most important parts of the training of such forces is to give them practice with live ammunition in supporting the landing.'¹¹ This was a key lesson of the Dieppe Raid and Morgan requested that two training areas were required between The Needles and Portland. In his memorandum he outlined key requirements including a sea frontage of two to three nautical miles; a firing area extending at least 5,000 and preferably 8,000 yards inland; and a sparse population to allow straightforward evacuation.¹²

Morgan's proposals were immediately agreed to in principle and a three service subcommittee called the Assault Training Areas Selection Committee (ATASC) was formed to handle the initial interpretation of reconnaissance reports.¹³ After reconnaissance was conducted in Portsmouth Command, the findings were presented at a meeting of the ATASC on 22 July 1943. Studland had two main advantages; the bay and heathland met the size requirements as laid down by COSSAC, and the area was already requisitioned for the SBTA. There were also notable drawbacks including that some parts of Studland Bay were too shallow to allow the access of large ships, parts of Studland Heath were boggy, and there were few exits from the beach. Brigadier Harrold Pyman, Brigadier General Staff (Training) (BGS(Trg)) 21st Army

⁹DHC D-BKL/E/Q/150, Godlingston Heath Requisition Agreement, 12 November 1942; *Ibid.*, Preston & Redman Solicitors to F.O. Rhodes, 22 October 1942.

¹⁰Range allocation tables for this time are not known to have survived. References to exercises conducted on the SBTA can be found in individual unit War Diaries for formations located in SOUTCO.

¹¹TNA CAB 80/70/44, COS(43)324(O) Operation Overlord Combined Training of Naval Assault Forces, 19 June 1943.

¹²*Ibid.*; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 7.

¹³TNA CAB 80/71/5, COS(43)335(O) Combined Training of Naval Assault Forces, Memo by Ismay, 23 June 1943; TNA CAB 79/62/3, COS(43)335(O) Operation Overlord Combined Training of Naval Assault Forces, 24 June 1943; TNA ADM 179/341, M.053736/43 Secretary of the Admiralty to all commands, 7 July 1943.

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Group complained that Studland would be too small for large scale assault landing, yet the ATASC still recommended that Studland should be selected.¹⁴



Figure 2: The Studland Assault Training Area.¹⁵

The original SBTA is shown by the green boundary and the new requisitions for the SATA are in red.

The extent to which Morgan consulted with 21st Army Group before issuing the specifications for the new training areas is open to further investigation. Yet this would appear to have been limited, as on 27 July, Pyman wrote to Paget stating that ‘the Studland Bay area is by no means ideal for training in assault landing with firing. It is boggy, small and bears no resemblance to the French Coast.’¹⁶ Morgan comments in his postwar book *Overture to Overlord* about the ‘perennial difficulty in finding training areas...in Britian’ implying that he may have kept the specification minimal in the hope

¹⁴TNA WO 205/1089, M.053736/43./A.T.A.S.C – Minutes of ATASC meeting held on 22 July 1943.

¹⁵TNA WO 205/1089.

¹⁶TNA WO 205/1089, HF.00/56/G(Trg) 21 Army Group BGS to CGS, 27 July 1943.

of being able to successfully acquire land.¹⁷ Perhaps the best summary of the situation was by Major General Rod Keller, General Officer Commanding (GOC) 3 CID, who stated in November 1943 that, 'the Studland Bay Area had been requisitioned.... not from choice as a suitable ground but as one of the few available pieces of ground.'¹⁸ Finally on the 7 August 1943 Studland Bay was put before the COSC and they formally agreed to convert the SBTA together with additional requisitions.¹⁹ The SBTA was formally succeeded on 8 September 1943, creating the Studland Assault Training Area (SATA).²⁰

3 CID, Force J, and Exercise Pirate

The SATA had been created primarily for the use of Naval Assault Force J and 3 CID. Force J had originally been formed as Force Jubilee for the Dieppe Raid before being kept as a permanent force and 3 CID was nominated in early July 1943 to train as an assault division, a role it had not previously undertaken.²¹ Control of the 3 CID's training program was vested in 1 Canadian Corps under the command of Lieutenant General H.D.G 'Harry' Crerar, who would subsequently command the First Canadian Army in Normandy.²² Crerar and his planning staff immediately started creating a multi stage training program for the next ten months to prepare 3 CID for a major amphibious operation against a defended coastline, and in August, work started on the first full scale combined exercise. At a conference on 23 August 1943, the first plan for this exercise was laid out. Titled Exercise Magnum the main aim was to exercise the landing of an assault brigade and to exercise Force J.²³ At the end of August, for reasons which remain unclear, Magnum was renamed Exercise Pirate.²⁴ This exercise would include the use of new equipment and methods recently developed to support the assaulting troops. After the failure of the Dieppe Raid, the Canadian forces had

¹⁷Frederick Morgan, *Overture to Overlord*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1950), pp. 239-240.

¹⁸Library and Archives Canada (hereinafter LAC) RG24-C-3, Vol. 14286, File 1044, 27 Armoured Regiment War Diary, 24 November 1943.

¹⁹TNA CAB 79/63/12, COS(43)44(O) Cross Channal Operations Combined Training of Naval Assault Forces, 7 August 1943.

²⁰TNA WO 205/1089, 21 A.Gp/00/56/2/G(Trg) 21 Army Group to First Canadian Army, 30 August 1943.

²¹Richard Hopton, *A Reluctant Hero: The Life of Captain Robert Ryder VC*, (Barnsley: Pen and Sword, 2011), p. 176; Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 9, p. 34.

²²Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 34.

²³LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 13685, File 1/GS, Conference on Magnum held at 1st Cdn Corps HQ on Monday 23 August 1943.

²⁴Directorate of History and Heritage, Ottawa CA (hereinafter DHH), CMHQ Report No.128, 20 November 1944, Appendix 3, Principles to be followed in the organisation of fire support for an assault landing (Exercise Pirate), 30 August 1943.

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concluded that there was a 'need for overwhelming fire support, including close support, during the initial stages of the attack.'²⁵ A substantial amount of work had been done since 1942 to reach this goal, and by both British and Canadian forces, with some of the new methods and equipment being tested at Studland during the summer and early autumn of 1943 such as Landing Craft Tank (Rocket) (LCT(R)). Exercise Pirate was important because it would be the first time that a large-scale live fire exercise had taken place in the UK which included multiple aspects of what would become the assault plan for Overlord. Over the following weeks extensive planning was conducted and the final plan called for a division level landing operation with extensive naval logistics support, RAF tactical air support, and even the planned construction of an airfield in the bridgehead, although this aspect was later dropped.²⁶ For 1 Canadian Corps and 3 CID to embark on such an advanced scheme as their first large exercise, now scheduled for the middle of October 1943, would be highly ambitious.

Constructing Fort Henry

On 22 August 1943, the General Staff (GS) branch of 1 Canadian Corps informed their Chief Engineer (CE), Brigadier A. B. Connelly that 'they require a German defensive position to be constructed along the coast of Studland Bay near Poole for assault training.'²⁷ 1 Canadian Corps engineers were assigned to conduct the majority of construction, and the following day the Corps Commander Royal Canadian Engineers (CRE), Lieutenant-Colonel Bascom Darwin, was summoned to Connelly's Sussex HQ to discuss the arrangements. After being briefed of the required work, Darwin departed to conduct a reconnaissance of Studland. The exact details of the task he had been given is not recorded at this time, but over the next week it would appear that Darwin formed a plan to construct defences. This appears to have been changed after a meeting with Crerar, as it was noted afterwards that Darwin 'had changed the original plan' and that two officers visited Studland 'to submit a report on positions and location of enemy defences for the forthcoming ex[ercise].'²⁸

A deadline for work to be completed at Studland was set for 15 October 1943, and on 24 August Darwin visited 12 Field Company Royal Canadian Engineers (RCE) where he informed Major George Wade that his company had been assigned the

²⁵Stacey, *The Victory Campaign*, p. 7.

²⁶LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14659, File 1150, CE First Canadian Army War Diary, 2 September 1943.

²⁷LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14680, File 1B, CE 1st Canadian Corps War Diary, 22 August 1943.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 4-5 September 1943.

majority of work.²⁹ Darwin also arrived at the HQ of 9 Field Park Company RCE on 1 September and promptly ordered them to send a detachment to Studland to establish and 'operate a dump of field defence stores.'³⁰ On 6 September 12 Field Company departed their billets in Northanger and moved their HQ and 248 men to the Knoll House Hotel at Studland.³¹ The adjusted construction plan which awaited the Canadian engineers was ambitious to say the least as they were instructed to build mock German positions based on weekly allied intelligence briefings prepared by the Theatre Intelligence Service – which were called *Martian Reports*. This would include constructing four 'German' pillboxes, anti-tank ditches, road exits from the beach, a Todt Organization style anti-tank wall, a mock Tobruk post and even mock tank concentrations.³² The 1941 era Beach Scaffolding was not a feature of German defences, and this would have to be removed along with minefields.³³

Work started on 7 September 1943 with platoons removing scaffolding and clearing minefields. Progress was made by hand until 9 September when two D4 tracked bulldozers arrived together with a dragline and two cement mixers.³⁴ On 10 September 1943, ground work is recorded as commencing for an observation post at Redend Point.³⁵ This is the first documentary reference to what would become Fort Henry and from this date it can be concluded that construction was most likely ordered by Crerar during a meeting with Darwin on 4 September. On 12 September, Darwin, his Field Engineer 1 Captain J.W. Thomas, and Adjutant Captain A.J.E. Smith, prepared a design for the building at their Surrey HQ.³⁶ The following day at a meeting with Darwin, Connelly, and Crerar, the design appears to have been approved.³⁷ Assuming no further changes were made before construction, Darwin, Thomas and Smith's design called for a concrete shelter which could accommodate 40 spectators.

²⁹LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14683, File 85, CRE 1st Canadian Corps Troops War Diary, 24 August 1943.

³⁰LAC, RG24-C-3, Vol. 14787, File 87, 9th Field Park Company RCE War Diary, 1-2 September 1943.

³¹LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14732, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, 6 September 1943.

³²Ibid., Progress Report - Studland, c. October 1943.

³³TNA ADM 179/341, Commander Force J to CinC Southern Command, 1 September 1943.

³⁴LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14732, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, 9-11 September 1943.

³⁵Ibid., 10 September 1943.

³⁶LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14683, File 85, CRE 1st Canadian Corps Troops War Diary, 12 September 1943.

³⁷LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14680, File 1B, CE 1st Canadian Corps War Diary, 13 September 1943.

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At nearly thirty metres long, and over three metres wide, and split into three separate compartments, this building was large and would take all of No.1 Platoon to construct.³⁸

Detailed sources relating to the construction of Fort Henry are limited and the majority of information presented here is taken from three War Diaries, those of 12 Field Company RCE, HQ CRE I Canadian Corps, and HQ CE I Canadian Corps. Although these sources provide some material, information such as exactly what was discussed at meetings between Darwin and Crerar is not recorded and limited additional sources have been traced to rectify this deficiency. This leaves shortfalls in both what can be learned about the construction process and Crerar's motivations for wanting to build such an observation post. At least in the latter case from the information available a reasonable conclusion can be reached.

Exercise Pirate was the first large scale UK demonstration of an assault fire support plan which brought together a wide range of weapons and tactics; these had been developed across the British and Canadian armed forces following the Dieppe Raid of the year before. As will be explored, this attracted an array of senior spectators which Crerar wanted to accommodate. Redend Point is approximately 700 metres south of the firing area and this poses a justifiable danger to spectators where many still experimental weapons systems were being used. During Pirate a rocket from an LCT(R) fell short and hit a Landing Craft Support (Large) killing two crew members and injuring more which demonstrates just how real the danger was.³⁹ It is also worth considering that Crerar may have had political motivations for wanting to encourage spectators to attend Pirate. Since July 1943 he had taken a keen interest in combined operations tactics, holding a corps study week and distributing a paper on fire support tactics.⁴⁰ As his biographer Paul Dickson refers, Crerar took a 'cathartic pride' in Exercise Pirate.⁴¹ The extent to which Crerar wanted to use Exercise Pirate to demonstrate his own ability as a possible commander in Normandy to as many superiors as possible is open to debate and largely beyond the scope of this article.

³⁸LAC RG24-G-3-1-a, Vol. 10741, File 219C1.009 (D303), 21 A Gp/2150/15/G(Trg) Exercise Pirate Spectators, 28 September 1943.

³⁹TNA ADM 267/123, J. Gordon Lockhart Flotilla Officer 310th LCS(L) Flotilla Report on LCS(L) 255 Incident, 19 October 1943.

⁴⁰DHH CMHQ Report No.128, 20 November 1944, Appendix 4, Summing Up by Comd I Cdn Corps Combined Operations Study Period, 31 July 1943; TNA WO 106/4283, Principles to be followed in the organisation of fire support for an assault landing (Exercise Pirate), 30 August 1943.

⁴¹Paul Douglas Dickson, *A Thoroughly Canadian General*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 210.

Construction progressed over the following days with No.1 Platoon working on the foundations for the observation post. Visitors came to Studland on a daily basis and included everyone from Darwin and Thomas to Crerar who came to observe progress, or were just 'hanging around' as 12 Field Company's diarist noted.⁴² Access to Studland beach and much of the heathland was restricted due to naval firing. Construction at Redend Point was not affected by this problem as it was outside the range firing area, yet for the majority of tasks, work had to stop to allow firing to take place as Crerar insisted that the training of LCT crews and artillery field regiments using the range should take priority over construction. Major Wade attempted to counter this problem by moving the working hours of the day to early in the morning and late into the night with truck headlights even being used to provide illumination.⁴³ This arrangement did not proceed without problems as on 13 September it was reported that an LCT(R) 'forgot to stop and almost hit some of our men who returned a little prematurely.'⁴⁴

By 14 September it was reported that Wade and Darwin 'spent their time in planning the work which lasted until far into the night. Still very short of supplies. Everyone is keeping busy on the job. Supplies had better hurry up and come.'⁴⁵ Cement arrived on 15 September and was followed the next day by aggregate, more cement and some timber.⁴⁶ However, this was still not enough to finish the concrete works under construction and the following day in a meeting with Major McConnell of the CE's office, Captain Thomas stated that 'everything is under control,' but he was 'anxious about reinforcing steel' which was required for the pillboxes and observation post.⁴⁷ The next day 31 railway wagons of supplies finally arrived at Corfe Castle station allowing construction to proceed. Yet this was not the end of the problem as it appears steel reinforcing bar was still in short supply. Although it remains unclear if Fort Henry was built using improvised reinforcement, surviving rubble at the probable location of the mock German pillbox contains large quantities of re-used Admiralty Beach Scaffolding, demonstrating just how short of supplies the Canadian engineers were.⁴⁸

⁴²LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14732, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, 4 October 1943.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 29 September 1943.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 13 September 1943.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 14 September 1943.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 12-17 September 1943.

⁴⁷LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14680, File 1B, CE 1st Canadian Corps War Diary, 16 September 1943.

⁴⁸Authors site visit, 22 January 2025. Concrete remains can be found at SZ 03244 84617, SZ 03291 84582 and SZ 03270 84572.

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The limited time made available held back construction and on 22 September when Brigadier Connelly visited Studland, Wade reported to him that he was 'very worried about the completion of the job since the range was to be in continual use' as this had left 'him only two days for daylight work in two weeks.'⁴⁹ Ultimately all plans for further concrete pillboxes were scrapped on 24 September, and only one was actually completed.⁵⁰ Over the following days additional work parties from 3 CID engineers arrived to finish clearing the scaffolding and surround the mock defences and foreshore with barbed wire.⁵¹ Detailed progress reports for the day-to-day advancement of Fort Henry do not survive, but all accounts suggest there were further delays. An example is on 26 September when 12 Field Company was forced to move into Studland village as the Knoll House Hotel was too close to where 25-pounders were being fired from LCTs in Studland Bay.⁵² Further distraction was created on 28 September by the holding of 21st Army Group Exercise Crab at Studland which was intended to test vehicles' beach terrain crossing abilities and included Paget and Major General Percy Hobart as spectators.⁵³ As 12 Field Company's unnamed War Diarist stated, 'it proved very interesting, but the vehicles cluttered up the road to such an extent that our own vehicles couldn't get though.'⁵⁴

Finally, after Crab, the obstructions to completing tasks at Studland started to decrease. Combined with a reduced number of defences to be constructed, Major McConnell found on 1 October that 'Major Wade was confident that the whole job would be finished by the 14 Oct[ober]'.⁵⁵ To save timber which was in short supply, shuttering at Redend Point was constructed using metal modular shuttering provided by London based contractor Blaw Knox.⁵⁶ Construction of the concrete structures

⁴⁹LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14680, File 1B, CE 1st Canadian Corps War Diary, 22 September 1943.

⁵⁰Ibid., 20-24 September 1943.

⁵¹LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14721, File 716, 6th Field Company RCE War Diary, 24-26 September 1943; LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14745, File 717, 18th Field Company RCE War Diary, 7-10 October 1943.

⁵²LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14464, File 706, 13th Field Regiment War Diary, 20-30 September 1943.

⁵³TNA WO 199/185, HF.00/414/G(Trg) Spectators Crab, 22 September 1943; TNA WO 205/508, 21 AGp/1462/5/G(SD) Spectator Instructions Crab, 25 September 1943.

⁵⁴LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14732, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, 28 September 1943.

⁵⁵LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14680, File 1B, CE 1st Canadian Corps War Diary, 30 September 1943.

⁵⁶LAC RG24-G-3-1-a, Vol. 10741, File 219C1.009 (D301), 0/10/0/1/CE Major W.W.K. McConnell to G Branch 1st Canadian Corps, 2 September 1943.

neared completion by 6 October when 9 Field Park Company asked for 70 tons of cement to be moved by road transport from Swanscombe to Studland by the next day. Despite the short notice, 24 three ton lorries were arranged and arrived at Studland by 2100 hours the following day.⁵⁷ On 9 October, both No.1 and No.2 Platoons finished pouring their concrete, completing the structural elements of both the pillbox and observation post.⁵⁸

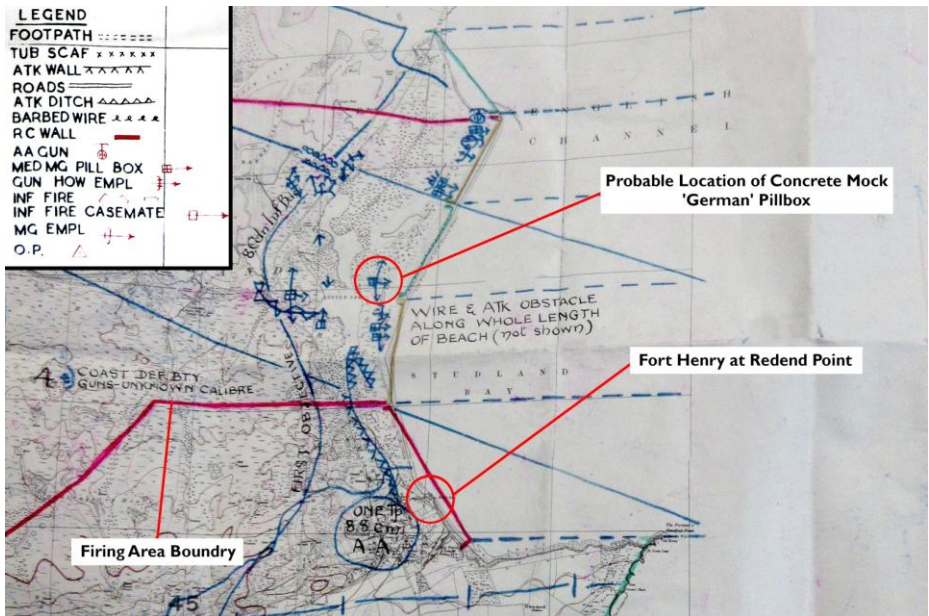


Figure 3: The defences constructed for Exercise Pirate.⁵⁹ Apart from the single new concrete pillbox the remaining pillboxes marked were either re-used 1940 era buildings or scaffolding and cloth dummies.

It is important to note that throughout the construction of the building at Redend Point, it is always referred to as the 'observation post' or 'O.P.' However, from mid-November onwards the name Fort Henry appears for the first time in reference to this structure. A notable example is Brigadier Clarence Mann's commentary and

⁵⁷LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14683, File 85, CRE 1st Canadian Corps Troops War Diary, 7 October 1943.

⁵⁸LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14732, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, 10 October 1943.

⁵⁹Source TNA WO 199/2303.

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spectator instructions on Exercise Vidi, an exercise similar to Pirate, from 25 November 1943 which twice refers to Fort Henry by name and does not introduce the structure, indicating that the invited spectators were already familiar with the name and that it had been introduced before this date.⁶⁰

It remains debatable who first established this name for the observation post as no source specifically comments on this aspect. William Foot stated in *Beaches, Fields, Streets, and Hills* that the name derives from 'the home base of the Canadian Royal Engineers who built it [sic].'⁶¹ The Canadian Fort Henry is a large nineteenth century defensive fort in Kingston, Ontario. However, 12 Field Company was formed at Winnipeg in Manitoba which appears to dismiss this idea.⁶² It is likely that the name Fort Henry still derives from the Kingston fort as this complex is located opposite Canada's Royal Military College (RMC), an officer training facility then having a similar remit to Sandhurst. Students regularly visited Fort Henry, including Darwin who when attending the RMC in 1931, took several photographs of Fort Henry.⁶³ It is thus reasonable to assume that most Canadian officers at Studland were familiar with the Kingston Fort Henry, yet without further evidence, it is impossible to conclude who exactly first thought of using this name for the observation post at Studland. Interestingly, several maps from September and October 1943 mark Fort Henry, yet all appear to be in pencil or pen ink indicating that this name was added at a later date, possibly for a training exercise such as Vidi.⁶⁴ As all engineer records only refer to an observation post, and as it is implied spectators were already familiar with the name by Vidi, it is most likely that the name came into use during Exercise Pirate, perhaps when spectators were gathered in the building and a fitting name was considered desirable.

On 11 October 1943, No.1 Platoon removed the Blaw Knox shuttering from Fort Henry, and this was subsequently taken back to London on 20 3-ton lorries. Crerar visited Studland on the same day and commented on the observation post that he was 'very pleased with the result.'⁶⁵ As 12 Field Company's War Diarist noted on 12

⁶⁰LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14126, File 730, Exercise Vidi, Commentary on 8 Canadian Infantry Brigade Plans, 25 November 1943.

⁶¹Foot, *Beaches, Fields, Streets, and Hills* p. 67.

⁶²LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14729, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, September 1939.

⁶³University of Toronto Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MS Coll 00645 Bascom H. Darwin Collection of Photographs, 1930-1945.

⁶⁴For example, the map attached to US Air Force Historical Research Agency A5140/505.89-12, 21 AGp/1520/5/G(SD) Etna, 21 September 1943.

⁶⁵LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14732, File 86, 12th Field Company RCE War Diary, 11 October 1943.

October, 'the work is pretty well wound up.'⁶⁶ The final task completed was the camouflage scheme being directed by the corps camouflage officer, Captain Pilot. All work was finished by 14 October, and news was received the same day that 12 Field Company would have to depart Studland the following day for Godalming. It had proved to be a hard six week's work, yet the construction jobs for Exercise Pirate were finally complete.⁶⁷

Fort Henry 1943-1944, Spectators and Controversy

From October 1943 to April 1944, eight major amphibious exercises were held at Studland and one notable demonstration which made significant use of Fort Henry. All these schemes deserve considerable attention in their own right as they demonstrate in detail how the 3 CID and 50 NID with supporting naval forces prepared for Overlord. The information below focuses on how and who used Fort Henry during this time. Concentrating on spectators could be considered perhaps trivial in contrast to the achievements and failures of the combined exercises, but as will be considered further, the use of Fort Henry has been misunderstood in several instances, and it is important to explore this in order to properly understand this building.

Exercise Pirate drew onlookers from across Britain, and even Canada with 320 spaces allocated for spectators across three categories: A, B, and C. The A list included the 40 officers and officials who would watch the exercise from Fort Henry, while the B list included 200 less senior officers who would be watching from Ballard Down to the south. The 80 'C' spectators would be aboard naval craft and consisted mostly of junior officers. Accommodation was provided at the Grosvenor Hotel in Swanage for 'A' spectators and at the Royal Bath Hotel in Bournemouth for 'B' spectators before everyone was taken by bus to Studland on the morning of the exercise.⁶⁸ A complete list of all those who attended Pirate as spectators has not been located, and a similar predicament is evident for most other exercises held at Studland. However, by examination of the War Diaries of formations who likely sent spectators and private diaries, it is possible to put together a list of most individuals at Fort Henry on 17 October. The most senior officer present was Paget as CinC 21st Army Group, along with Crerar. Civilian visitors included C.D. Howe, the Canadian Minister for Munitions and Supply. Other officers were present from across the British Armed Forces including Lieutenant-General John Crocker, GOC I Corps, with four of his 'G' Branch staff officers and his Corps Commander Royal Artillery (CCRA), Brigadier L.C.

⁶⁶Ibid., 12 October 1943.

⁶⁷Ibid., 11-15 October 1943.

⁶⁸LAC RG24-G-3-1-a, Vol. 10741, File 219C1.009(D303), 21 AGp/2150/15/G(Trg), 21 Army Group Exercise Pirate Spectators, 28 September 1943.

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Manners-Smith.⁶⁹ SOUTCO's GOC Lieutenant-General Charles Loyd was due to attend with Brigadier-General Omar Bradley of the United States Army. However, Pirate was delayed 24 hours from 16 to 17 October due to poor weather and Bradley's diary indicates he was unable to reschedule.⁷⁰

The exercises which followed Pirate shared many similarities in terms of spectator arrangements and also some notable differences. The 'C' list was abandoned shortly after Pirate due to a lack of space aboard naval craft and at the end of October 1943, HQ I Canadian Corps were dispatched to Italy. This meant that Crerar, Fort Henry's principal advocate, did not influence any further schemes at Studland. 3 CID was attached to British I Corps, with Crocker, his BGS Phillip Balfour, and CCRA Manners-Smith all becoming regular visitors to Studland and Fort Henry. The next major exercise, titled Vidi, was held on 28 November and consisted of an assault landing with fire support. Brigadier Clarence Mann of 7 Canadian Infantry Brigade delivered a commentary over a recently installed speaker system at Fort Henry with the aid of a model located in a tent behind the observation post.⁷¹ Paget was the most senior spectator at Fort Henry that day, and it is interesting to note that the GHQ Liaison Regiment (Phantom) are recorded as duplicating Mann's commentary for him.⁷² Keller, Crocker, and Balfour all boarded a Landing Ship Infantry to watch the landings from the water indicating that Fort Henry was not always considered the best place to watch the assault landing unfold for senior officers now that Crerar had departed.⁷³ January 1944 brought the arrival of new CinCs and staff across 21st Army Group which restarted the debate over which assault tactics were to be used. To demonstrate progress that had been made in the United Kingdom a fire support demonstration with skeleton infantry involvement was put on at Studland called Exercise Savvy on 12 February 1944. Fort Henry was at the centre of this exercise to

⁶⁹LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 13762, File: 700/GS, 3CID War Diary, 14 and 17 October 1943; LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 13685, File 1/GS, 1st Canadian Corps War Diary, 16 October 1943; LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 13614, File 1150/GS, First Canadian Army War Diary, 16 September 1943; TNA WO 166/10371, 1st Corps GS War Diary, 16 October 1943; TNA WO 166/10373, CCRA 1st Corps War Diary, 16 October 1943; LAC RG24-G-3-1-a, Vol. 10741, File 219C1.009(D303), 1st British Corps to 1st Canadian Corps, 9 October 1943.

⁷⁰TNA WO 199/2302, Itinerary for Bradley and party to observe Pirate, 12 October 1943; U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center (hereinafter USAHEC) Omar Bradley Collection, Series XVIII, Sub-Series I, Folder 1, Bradley diary, 16 October 1943.

⁷¹LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14126, File 730, Exercise Vidi Commentary on 8th Canadian Infantry Brigade's Plans, 25 November 1943.

⁷²LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14941, File 726, 3CID Signals War Diary, 24-28 November 1943.

⁷³LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 13762, File 700/GS, 3CID War Diary, 27 November 1943.

accommodate both military and political visitors. The main spectators in Fort Henry included King George VI, General Bernard Montgomery, who had replaced Paget, Francis 'Freddy' De Guingand (Chief of Staff 21st Army Group), Air Marshall Sir Trafford Leigh-Mallory (CinC Allied Expeditionary Air Force), Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey (Supreme Naval Commander Allied Expeditionary Force) and Lieutenant-General Miles Dempsey (CinC British Second Army).⁷⁴ In addition a large number of army group, corps, and division staff officers and commanders were present including American officers such as Major General L.H. Brereton, commander of the US Ninth Air Force.⁷⁵ Montgomery and most other senior spectators travelled to Studland on 11 February aboard the train *Rapier*, spending the night in Swanage. The king travelled via royal train accompanied by his Private Secretary, Sir Alan Lascelles and Admiral Philip Vian (CinC Eastern Naval Task Force) who explained Exercise Savvy on route. The party arrived at Swanage where they were met by Montgomery, Ramsey, Leigh Mallory, and a thirty man security party provided by the Cameron Highlanders of Ottawa.⁷⁶ The party then proceeded to Fort Henry where breakfast was provided in a tent complete with silver cutlery. A special latrine was even constructed for the king's use.⁷⁷

In March 1944, the SATA was transferred from 3 CID and Force J, to 50 NID and Force G. 50 NID had only been assigned as an assault division for Overlord in January 1944 and Force G was only just forming in March which required the two formations to compress their training program for large scale exercises into a period of less than

⁷⁴Robert Love and John Major (ed.), *The Year of D-Day: The 1944 Diary of Admiral Sir Bertram Ramsey*, (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1994), p. 25. Note: both the QORC and Freddy De Guingand comment that Eisenhower was also present at Studland that day. However, consultation of Eisenhower's desk diary confirms that he was in Grosvenor Square in London. See Francis W. De Guingand, *Operation Victory*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1947), p. 354; LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 15168, File 753, Queen's Own Rifles of Canada War Diary, 12 February 1944; Alfred D. Chandler et al.(ed.), *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years Volume V*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1970), p. 144.

⁷⁵LAC RG24-G-3-1-a, Vol. 10439, File 212C1. (D65), 1st Corps to First Canadian Army, 9 March 1944.

⁷⁶Duff Hart-Davis, *King's Counsellor: Abdication and War: The Diaries of Sir Alan 'Tommy' Lascelles*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2020), p. 201; Anon., *Historical Records of the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders 1932-1948*, (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1952), p. 212.

⁷⁷LAC RG24-C-3, Vol. 14328, File 704, Commander Royal Canadian Artillery 3CID War Diary, 11-14 February 1944.

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six weeks.⁷⁸ To fit this time scale two brigade and two division level exercises were planned under the names of Exercise Smash I-IV to be held in April 1944. The Smash exercises are now what Studland is best known for, yet perhaps surprisingly they are also the most misrepresented. It is important to recognise that in both popular and academic culture alike, a considerable amount of misinformation has been spread relating to who was in Fort Henry in April 1944. Before this account goes further it is necessary to understand the nature of these false claims and why they are wrong, before the actual events of April 1944 are described.

The 1990 book *Dorset at War: Diary of WW2* by Rodney Legg claims that on an unspecified date in April 1944, Sir Winston Churchill, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Montgomery, Bradley and Dempsey watched Exercise Smash from Fort Henry. In his revised 2004 edition, Legg alters his account to state that this happened on 18 April and adds that General Sir Alan Brooke, Lord Louis Mountbatten and the king were also present.⁷⁹ The National Trust, the current owner of Fort Henry has also strongly supported this suggestion with notice boards at Redend Point and online articles.⁸⁰ Multiple other books have also repeated the idea that Churchill, Eisenhower and the king watched Smash such as the 2020 popular history *Sand & Steel* by Peter Caddick-Adams which prefers the date of 4 April for their visit during Exercise Smash I.⁸¹ Andrew Holborn in his 2015 book *The D-Day Landing on Gold Beach* also supports the theory. He prefers the date of 18 April, but no source is listed.⁸² Articles have also supported this theory, including Cousins, Harrison, and Parham's 2016 paper 'The Maritime Archaeology of Duplex Drive Tanks in the United Kingdom', which prefers 4 April for Churchill and Eisenhower's visit.⁸³ The most important, and wrong part of this story is that Eisenhower, Churchill, the King, Mountbatten, Bradley, and Brooke were at Studland in April 1944. No evidence has been located to support this

⁷⁸TNA DEFE 2/416, No.0301/6613, Report by Naval Commander Force G, Appendix A Narrative, 15 July 1944.

⁷⁹Rodney Legg, *Dorset at War: Diary of WW2*, (Wincanton: Dorset Publishing Company, 1990), p. 237; Rodney Legg, *Dorset's War Diary: Battle of Britain to D-Day*, (Tiverton: Dorset Publishing Company, 2004), p. 226.

⁸⁰The National Trust, 'History of Studland Bay', <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/dorset/studland-bay/history-of-studland-bay> . Accessed 28 August 2025.

⁸¹Peter Caddick-Adams, *Sand & Steel: A New History of D-Day*, (London: Arrow Books, 2020), p. 216, p. 923. Note: strangely the source for Caddick-Adams believing this story is Ramsey's diary entry for 12 February, when he was at Studland for Savvy. Why Caddick-Adams is so confident that this is in fact referring to 4 April is unclear.

⁸²Andrew Holborn, *The D-Day Landing on Gold Beach*, pp. 103-104.

⁸³Cousins, Harrison, and Parham, 'The Maritime Archaeology of Duplex Drive Tanks in the United Kingdom', p. 652.

suggestion, and considerable evidence to suggest that in the case of Eisenhower, Churchill, Mountbatten, Bradley, and Brooke, they never visited Fort Henry at all.



Figure 4: One of three interior compartments inside Fort Henry - 2025.⁸⁴

By starting with Alan Brooke and Mountbatten, it is simple to confirm for certain that neither of these individuals visited Studland during April 1944 as both kept detailed diaries confirming that Mountbatten was in India and Brooke largely in London.⁸⁵ Eisenhower's movements are also well recorded during April, and diaries maintained by his staff confirm that there is no evidence of him ever having visited Studland.⁸⁶ However, Eisenhower was in Dorset and Hampshire on several occasions in April 1944. On 2 April he visited American 26 Infantry Regiment at Swanage and Wareham,

⁸⁴Photographed by the author in 2025. 50cm scale.

⁸⁵Alex Danchev and Daniel Todman, *War Diaries 1939-1945: Field Marshall Lord Alanbrooke*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002), pp. 537-542; Philip Ziegler, *Personal Diary of Admiral the Lord Louis Mountbatten: Supreme Allied Commander, South-East Asia, 1943-1946*, (London: Collins, 1988), pp. 82-102.

⁸⁶Chandler et al.(ed.), *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, pp. 149-151.

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while on 18 April he visited RAF squadrons at Hartford Bridge, and again on 21 April at Homsley South and Thorney Island. Aircraft from these airfields did take part in the Smash exercises, yet this appears to be the closest he came to actually watching the exercise.⁸⁷ Like many, Bradley kept a diary recording some of his movements, yet consultation with library staff at USAHEC, where this diary is now held, did not lead to entries for the dates of the Smash exercises being traced.⁸⁸ Nor have any documents been located to suggest that Bradley attended any of the Smash exercises. Like Eisenhower, he was also in the east Dorset area during this time as on 10 and 11 April he conducted a tour of US I Infantry Division, including visiting Swanage.⁸⁹ Churchill's engagement diary for April 1944 also makes no mention of visiting Studland and confirms that he was in London on all days which Smash exercises took place.⁹⁰ The exact movements of the king have not been traced during April 1944, yet no diary entries for individuals at Fort Henry or military records make reference to his presence, in drastic contrast to Exercise Savvy.

This leaves the question as to where the suggestion that the above-mentioned individuals were present at Studland came from. It would appear that the main source is Legg's books, but none provide sources. Legg did get some information correct, and both Montgomery and Dempsey were present at Studland for Smash III on 18 April.⁹¹ The continued mentions of the king at Studland appear to all relate back to his presence in Fort Henry during Savvy in February. A similar explanation can be used for Churchill, as it would appear descriptions of his presence in April 1944 are actually referring to his visit in July 1940, long before Fort Henry was constructed.⁹² A similar explanation can be applied to Eisenhower due to his visit to Swanage. It is interesting to note that even some oral histories by those who took part in the Smash exercises, such as a 2013 interview with General Sir Robert Ford (ex 4th/7th Royal Dragoon

⁸⁷Robert R McCormick Research Center First Division Museum Illinois (hereinafter RRMRC) 3rd Battalion 26th Infantry Regiment Journal, 2 April 1944; RRMRC Journal of Brigadier General Willard Wyman, 2 April 1944; RRMRC 1994.126, Huebner Diary, Colonel Stanhope Mason Chief of Staff, 2 April 1944; TNA AIR 27/717/7, 88 Squadron (Sq) Summary of Events, 18 April 1944; TNA AIR 27/1482/7, 245 Sqn Summary of Events, 21 April 1944; TNA AIR 27/1170/27, 198 Sqn Summary of Events, 21 April 1944.

⁸⁸Email correspondence between the author and USAHEC, 15 September 2025.

⁸⁹RRMRC Journal of Brigadier General Willard Wyman, 10-11 April 1944; RRMRC 1988.31 Box 185, 2nd Battalion, 26th Infantry Journal, 10 April 1944.

⁹⁰George Washington University Gelman Library, Washington DC 2015.048/Flat box: 39, Churchill Engagement Diary April 1944.

⁹¹Love and Major (ed.), *The Year of D-Day*, p. 57.

⁹²TNA WO 166/4283, 5 East Yorkshire Regiment War Diary, 17 July 1940.

Guards), refer to Eisenhower and the king being present.⁹³ Ford visited Fort Henry for the 2004 unveiling of the memorial to those who died during Smash I and it is likely that he heard the king, Eisenhower and Churchill suggestion during this time, before inadvertently repeating it in 2013.

The spectators who actually attended the Smash exercises on the 'A' list largely consisted of staff officers from 50 NID and 30 Corps. Smash I and II were effectively brigade level fire support exercises and offered nothing new to be seen for external spectators. Smash III on 18 April consisting of an assault by 69 Infantry Brigade and a follow on landing by 151 Infantry Brigade attracted more visitors.⁹⁴ Leading figures watching the exercise were Montgomery, Dempsey, Ramsey, Vian, Commodore Sir Cyril Douglas-Pennant (Commander Force G), Lieutenant-General Gerrald Bucknell (GOC 30 Corps), Major General Douglas Graham (GOC 50 NID) and Sir Archibald Sinclair, Secretary of State for Air. Additional figures included a wide array of staff officers from 21st Army Group and notably New Zealand Observer Brigadier James Hargest.⁹⁵ The extent to which Fort Henry was actually used during the Smash exercises is debatable, although the spectator instructions list it as being the 'A' list point of observation, a painting by war artist Alaxander Gross of Smash I shows spectators, including Bucknell and Graham, standing at Redend Point outside the building.⁹⁶

Fort Henry's final major use appears to have been on 26 April 1944 when Exercise Bunsen was held at Studland. This was a demonstration of strategic air power for ground commanders to witness the destructive power against beach defences and also to test a variety of different bombs and fuses. Montgomery and Freddy De Guingand were present among a large number of other officers.⁹⁷ Smaller amphibious exercises continued to be held at Studland even after June 1944, such as Exercise Puddleduck in

⁹³Eric Stockley, 'Gen Sir Robert Ford', <https://www.rdgmmuseum.org.uk/history-and-research/oral-history/>. Accessed 27 April 2025.

⁹⁴TNA WO 171/512, X/523/G Exercise Smash Combined Plan, 11 March 1944.

⁹⁵TNA WO 171/334, 30 Corps GS War Diary, 20 April 1944; TNA WO 199/2320, SOUTCO to 50NID, 30 March 1944; Love and Major (ed.), *The Year of D-Day*, p. 57; Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM) Documents.4835/8, Bucknell Office Diary, 17-18 April 1944; TNA WO 205/989, 30 Corps to 21 Army Group, 15 April 1944; TNA WO 171/512, 50NID Signals Log, 15 April 1944.

⁹⁶TNA WO 199/2321, Exercise Smash Combined Plan, 11 March 1944; IWM ART LD 3954, Landing Exercise 'Smash One' by Alexander Gross, 4 April 1944.

⁹⁷TNA AIR 51 307/4, AEA/TE.22305/TRGIA, Exercise Bunsen 25 April 1944; Anon., *Sunday Punch in Normandy: The Tactical Use of Heavy Bombardment in the Normandy Invasion*, (Washington: Headquarters Army Air Forces, 1945), p. 16.

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January 1945, yet no information has been found to date to suggest that Fort Henry was further used.⁹⁸

Conclusion

Fort Henry was built in September and October 1943 as an observation post for 3 CID and Force J Exercise Pirate. Built by 12 Field Company RCE to a design led by Canadian engineer Bascom Darwin, this building is unique to Studland and serves as a clear reminder of the numerous large scale amphibious exercises held at the SATA in 1943 and 1944. The reasons for its construction can be considered a combination of practical and political motivations by its conceiver H.D.G. Crerar. The exact reasons behind the name Fort Henry remain open to interpretation, yet it appears most likely that it is named after the nineteenth century fort in Kingston, Ontario, which is located adjacent to the RMC. Although popular culture and the historiography to date has primarily associated the building with the 50 NID Smash exercises, this is largely in error. Fort Henry should be considered for what it is, a 1943 Canadian building most notably used during exercises Pirate, Savvy, Smash III, and Bunsen, by those who directly shaped the allied assault.

⁹⁸TNA ADM 179/519, No.23/4/825, Exercise Puddleduck, 2 January 1945.