

Knodishall in the Second World War

Civil Defence

Background

Successive British Governments had been working on Air Raid Precautions (ARP) from the 1920's onwards as a response to the German Zeppelin and Gotha raids of WW1. It was realised that any future wars could and would probably involve mass bombings of civilians. In the mid 1930's local authorities were made responsible for the recruiting and training of volunteers for an ARP service. This was made compulsory in the 1937 ARP Act.

The Munich crises of 1938, when war with Germany seemed likely, spurred things on with the large scale digging of air raid shelters and the mass issue of gas masks. It is likely that the trench being dug in the photo held in the Knodishall Local History Group Archives dates from this period.

With the outbreak of War, local authorities established Emergency Committees to discharge their ARP duties. Rural parishes, such as Knodishall, were considered to be much less at risk of an organised air attack, and the only danger to be anticipated were from stray bombs dropped at random. Although the local authority (in this case Blyth Rural District Council) would have consulted with parishes such as Knodishall in the main would have to rely on their own resources as far as possible.

Since the outbreak of the war, government had largely become regionalised with the setting up of Regional Commissioners. The Eastern Region covered Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire. Sir William Spens was appointed Regional Commissioner for the Eastern Region. They were responsible to Government ministers, but in times of invasion they would assume the full role of Government in their region should reference to central Government become impracticable.

Although in times of invasion, military requirements would be paramount - and under common law the military had the authority to impose power over persons and property of civilians - it was still hoped that civil administration would continue. To deal with the risk of becoming isolated due to invasion, the Borough and Urban districts Emergency Committees formed the nucleus of an Invasion Committee. In towns, villages and rural areas with no Emergency Committees, specially constituted Invasion Committees were established in 1941. These were considered an important part of the defence arrangements of the country. Should invasion occur their key duty would be to ensure civil arrangements would function and all necessary assistance given to the military in their operations against the invader. When an invasion was in progress the civil community could expect to be isolated as normal communications and arrangements broke down. The Invasion Committee would have to ensure emergency arrangements, such as food distribution, were put into place.

Orders from Eastern Command and 11 Corps clearly set out the role of military commanders in relation to Invasion Committees. In rural parishes the local Home Guard Commander was to be the military representative on Invasion Committees. Before 'Stand To' was ordered, if time permitted, the forward divisions could detail additional Military Representatives to act as a Senior Military Representative. Their responsibility would end on 'Stand To'. The role of the Military Representative on Invasion Committees was to cooperate in the planning for coordination between the civil and military personnel in the event of invasion and to ensure that the civil representatives and the population were aware of the conditions which would obtain in the event of invasion. The Military Representative had no legal power to issue orders or instructions to the civilian population. However, he could assume executive control over the civil population on the approach of the enemy; if the civil population reached a state of panic that the civil authorities could not control; if requested by the civil authority; and by orders from superior authority.

For their part, the Invasion Committee was to assist the Army by keeping open essential routes, clearing debris with civilian labour, fire fighting, restoring water where necessary, carrying out decontamination and doing everything possible to avoid panic and resultant congestion on the roads.

Knodishall Invasion Committee

Knodishall Parish Council had established ARP arrangements since the outbreak of the war, with a Food Organiser, Fire Service, First Aid Party, Demolition Squad and a Senior ARP Warden. The Knodishall Invasion Committee was established on 17 July 1941 in accordance with the circular from the Regional Commissioner, dated 30 May 1941. In his circular, the Commissioner recommended that the Chairman of Parish Council be the chairman of the Committee, and accordingly Mr P.J. Spindler, (Parish Council Chairman) was appointed Chairman of the Knodishall Invasion Committee. The Circular also recommended that other members include a member of the First Aid Services, the senior ARP Warden, the local Home Guard Commander and the Parish Food Organiser. The local police officer should be invited to attend in an advisory capacity. These were all duly appointed to the Knodishall Invasion Committee. The Commissioner's circular made clear that such Committees would act in an advisory capacity rather than exercise executive powers.

One of the first tasks the Committee dealt with was the cooperation in fire prevention in crop growing areas. The East Suffolk Council had sent a circular dated 15 July to Invasion and Emergency Committees informing them that the Government had given consideration to protecting crops from attack by incendiary bombs and had urged that the Police, Home Guard, Civil Defence personnel and residents in the district to help farmers in this duty. The Senior ARP Warden, W.M. Rishworth was able to report he had recruited 20 volunteers for this duty and Lieutenant W. Gooding, Knodishall Platoon Home Guard Commander, reported that Major H.A. Robinson, DSO, D Company 8th Suffolk Battalion, Home Guard, would have no objection to Knodishall Platoon members undertaking this duty.

The Committee continued to make all the usual arrangements required to deal with invasion and air raids. The Committee considered the parish was well supplied with locally produced food, although some emergency rations had been received from the authorities. It was also considered that the number of wells in the parish was sufficient even if the water mains were destroyed. Public notices were displayed asking the public to say how many picks, shovels and barrows they would lend if invasion took place. Lists were compiled of the number of habitable houses and the population and the number of able-bodied men and women between the ages of 16-65 and a list of those physically unfit. Parishioners were asked by public notice to ensure they were stocked with anti-gas ointment, which could be bought from the chemist. Communal feeding in the event of invasion caused some disagreements with some favouring communal feeding in a hall while others thought distribution to separate homes would be preferable. Work pressed on in organising the Rest Centre (the Legion Hut) by the Women's Voluntary Service. Some of the planning was of a more grim nature. A building for a mortuary was required and the paint shop at the Foundry was chosen. Mr Nichols (Deputy Coordinator) agreed to undertake the task of making a record of all people killed by enemy action and to populate inventories of clothing, valuable items etc.

Being a small parish, Knodishall was not provided with public air raid shelters. It was recommended in such locations that the local population should dig slit trenches in their gardens! To be fair, slit trenches had been proven to give a high degree of protection from artillery fire and dive bombing. It was recommended they be two feet wide and three feet deep. For each person, 2 ft 6in length should be allowed. They could be lined with timber, old doors, corrugated iron sheets or any other similar material that was at hand. They were only to be dug when required due to the risk of flooding and erosion. The Knodishall Invasion Committee clearly followed these guidelines. The minutes of a discussion held by the Committee on 16 December 1941 notes open trenches were to be dug but only 'when the emergency arises.' The minutes also note that 'shallow trenches were preferred.' The Committee meeting of 23 March 1942 notes that trenches were recommended to be four feet in depth and as narrow as possible at the top.

Keeping the public 'invasion minded', one of the key roles for the Military Representative listed by Eastern Command and 11 Corps, was considered important especially as the war went on and no invasion had occurred. The Government was concerned that the morale of the Civil Defence organisation and the Home Guard should not be undermined by any relaxing of precautions. In the local area, measures were taken to keep the civil population 'invasion minded'. On 14 August 1941, the Committee received notice of a lecture on modern war to be held at Saxmundham on 28 August.

The Committee was also reminded of this by the Senior Military Representative, Captain Smith (Royal Berkshire Regiment, 54th Division) who stated 'that every effort should be made to make the people Invasion minded. That Invasion was a definite menace which should be pressed home.' Accordingly, the Committee decided to hold a public meeting at 19:30 on 8 May 1942 in the Legion Hut. A letter was sent to every household requesting that at least one member of the household attend. The address given by Captain Smith at what might be expected to happen during an invasion was well attended with some feeling he 'was too realistic'! It did not, however, spur on volunteers; the minutes of 20 July note that only Mrs S. Foster volunteered to offer to take in someone made homeless by enemy action.

In June 1942, the Government issued a general policy for civilian action in the event of invasion in recognition that the arrangements in different regions varied somewhat. This was codified in the pamphlet 'Consolidated Instructions to Invasion Committees', issued in July 1942. Knodishall Invasion Committee was accordingly asked to prepare a scheme to comply with the requirements of the Consolidated Instructions. The Committee dealt with this in its meeting on 19 October, a day when bombs had fallen on Wickham Market and other places in East Anglia, reminding all of the potential dangers. In the meeting, it was considered that 'practically all the instructions had already been organised on a business basis.' Mr Spindler had invited the Military Representative to the meeting to discuss the Consolidated Instructions but received a reply saying he was 'too busy' and that it had been decided in view of a shortage of Field Force Officers in the area that there shall no longer be a Field Force representative on the Invasion Committee. Instead Captain J.C. Reeve, 2i/c Lesion Home Guard, would give any advice required.

Captain Reeve, who had attended the meeting, raised the issue of the difficulty of getting able-bodied men to volunteer for filling in bomb craters. He felt that men may come forward if personally approached but the 'voluntary system had undoubtedly failed.' It is of interest to note that a representative of the Aldringham Invasion Committee, who had attended an Invasion Committee meeting back in March, noted that he was experiencing great difficulty in obtaining voluntary help with any work that people may be called upon to perform by the Invasion Committee. He stated that it was held by the majority of his people that some form of compensation for accidents or injury should be assured them if they undertook this work. He stated he was going to correspond with the authorities on this matter and asked the Knodishall Invasion Committee to support him. There was much discussion but no agreement arrived at. However, this time, Mr Spindler did write to the Country Controller (Cecil Oakes), raising the issue of the difficulty in recruiting volunteers and also the lack of a Military Representative. In his letter he noted:

'I have been instructed to pass on to you the difficulty of forming squads for filling-in craters on the roads. The Voluntary System has failed. Most are at work many hours, or the Home Guard takes their spare time.

The Invasion Committee finds it difficult to keep in touch with Military Representative. This Committee has now been told to depend on the local Capt. of the Home Guard for advice. Perhaps you will please inform me if you consider further directions to the inhabitants are necessary.'

Unfortunately there is no record of Mr Oakes reply.

The Committee was asked to arrange a Church Parade for National Remembrance Day on 15 November 1942, in which all Civil Defence organisations could cooperate in 'Thanksgiving for the defeat of the German air Attacks on this country in 1941/2, and the work of the Civil Defence Services in combating the havoc caused.'

By the summer of 1943, it was clear that invasion preparations were winding down. A circular dated 28 June 1943 from the Regional Commissioner, issued by direction of the Minister of Home Security, stated that Invasion Committee schemes should be brought to a stage of completion but not further elaborated on unless and until the need became more pressing. Expenditure should be kept to essential expenses only and no further work undertaken by Invasion Committees with a view to enlisting the interest and support of the general public in invasion preparations.

The Knodishall Invasion Committee met on 29 July and this circular was discussed and arrangements reviewed. The matter was adjourned until 23 September allowing outstanding questions to be settled and the final scheme for sending to the Regional Controller prepared.

The Knodishall Invasion Committee's scheme is detailed below:

Food Depot	British Legion Hut
First Aid Post	Mission Room
Rest Centres	British Legion Hut
	The Chapel
	School
HQ and Wardens Post	Bracendale
Home Guard	Attached to Leiston
Military Representative	Capt. Reeve, Leiston Home Guard
Fire Service	Attached to Aldeburgh
Mortuary	Foundry

The scheme was somewhat upset by the attachment of the Fire Service to Aldeburgh. The scheme notes that it was not at all clear if the local men could even attend a small fire. The firemen had also agreed to act as the Demolition Squad, potentially leaving Knodishall without anyone to clear debris etc.

Invasion Committees were stood down in October 1944 and in February 1945 it was declared Invasion Committees were no longer necessary. The Chairmen wrote to each member of the Committee informing them of this decision and ended with the following sentence:

'In passing on this message I warmly thank you for all the help you have given to enable the Parish to put up a carefully prepared scheme, which fortunately had not to be put in operation.'

The Military

Suffolk was within the military Command district of Eastern Command, with 11 Corps responsible for Essex and the majority of Suffolk. Divisions from the Field Force were rotated through 11 Corps throughout the war.

Home Guard

On 14 May 1940, Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden gave a radio broadcast calling for volunteers to join the Local Volunteer Defence Force (renamed the Home Guard on 22 July by Churchill). The Knodishall volunteers officially became No. 15 Platoon, 8th Battalion Suffolk Home Guard with its HQ at the Butchers Arms. The Home Guard were not expected to defend their villages from a proper attack, but they could make the road communications in a village impassable for lightly armed German forces. The Knodishall Home Guard also undertook some civil defence roles, the Invasion Committee noting they would act as stretcher bearers. 11 Corps Defence Scheme for 1942 also notes the Knodishall garrison as being strong enough to form check points to control traffic to ensure that roads were kept clear for military use. At some point in 1942, the Platoon was attached to the Leiston Garrison. It had been recognised that it was pointless to try and defend every village, so those villages that had a platoon too small to defend the village were given specific roles such as observation patrols or forming the mobile reserve of a neighbouring defended locality. Knodishall Platoon formed the mobile reserve of the Leiston Home Guard, with its HQ at the TA Drill Hall. By 1942, along with rifles, the Knodishall Platoon was armed with three Browning automatics, four EY rifles (a specially adapted Lee Enfield rifle to fire the No. 68 Anti-tank grenade) and one Northover Projector (a makeshift anti-tank weapon).

The Field Force

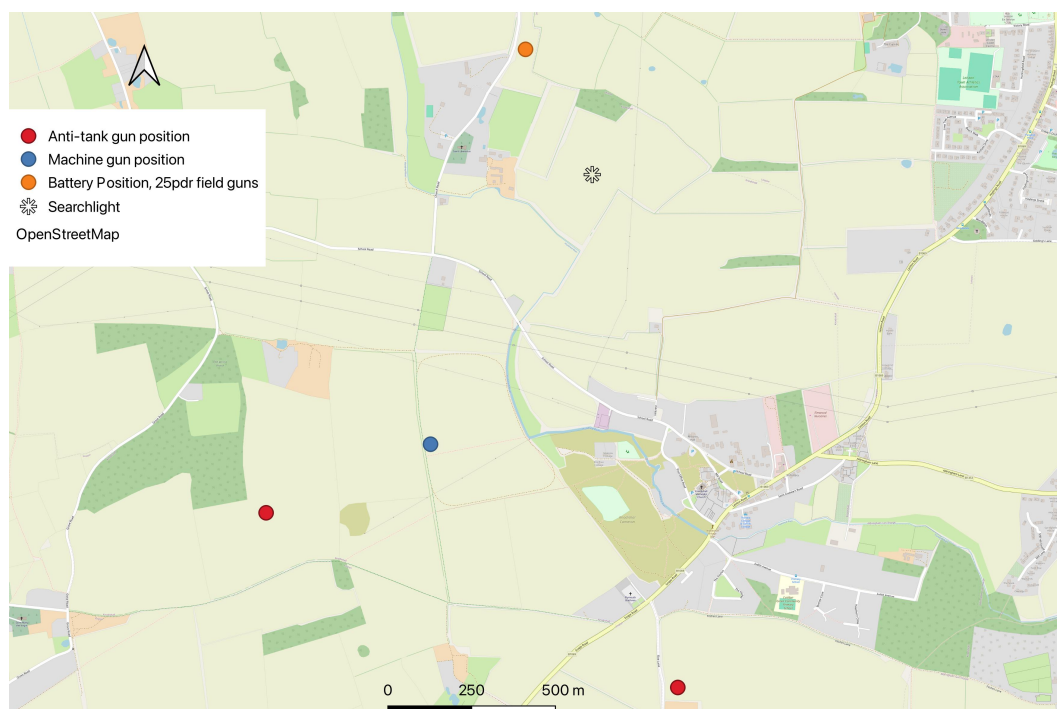
As the winter nights grew longer in the 1939, the fear of a German invasion flotilla avoiding the Royal Navy grew and General Kirke, Commander-in-Chief Home Forces was ordered to prepare a plan to deal with an invasion. The most likely threat was airborne troops landing in the rear of ports and linking up with seaborne forces to capture the port from the rear. Ports were given additional protection and vulnerable beaches watched with patrols armed with rifles and Bren guns. Inland, strongpoints were formed to slow down enemy troops that had succeeded in landing on beaches and linking up with airborne forces. The 2/4 Battalion, Essex Regiment, 54th Division, began digging trenches at Knodishall Whin and Knodishall Green in November 1939. They no doubt made use of the WW1 pillbox at Knodishall Whin.

In May 1940, the 55th Division replaced the 54th Division in Suffolk. In the invasion panic following the fall of France, many defences were constructed along the Suffolk Coast. Six pillboxes were added to the Knodishall Whin defences. The battalion holding the local area was the 9th Battalion, The Kings Regiment. Their War Diary notes that 'C' Company's HQ was Firs Farm, Knodishall. The Company was disposed around Knodishall Whin. The War Diary also notes that the only garages which would in future receive fuel supplies for the sale to the general public in the area were Messrs Moss at Leiston and Messrs Moore at Knodishall. The Battalion was responsible for the destruction of the supply should there be any danger of it being captured by the enemy.

From 1940, a searchlight from 329 Battery was located at Knodishall. This was part of a grid of searchlights laid out so that three searchlights at anyone time could hold an enemy aircraft in their beam and pass it over to the next searchlight in the grid. Each searchlight site had approximately 10 men armed with rifles and Lewis light machine guns.

In the autumn of 1940, the 42nd Division replaced the 55th Division in Suffolk. Anti-tank guns, most likely 2-pdrs, manned by 203 Anti-tank battery were situated in the vicinity of Knodishall. This was part of a wider reorganisation of costal defences in an attempt to provide more depth and cohesion, with the role of the guns protecting inland approaches from the coast. In addition, two machine guns were also located in the vicinity of the village. A battery of 25 pdr field guns was also located nearby, with a role of covering the beaches.

In 1942, the Regimental HQ of the 55th (Suffolk Yeomanry) Anti-tank Regiment was briefly based at Knodishall from 7 February to 21 February before the Regiment moved out of the area to Westbury. Unfortunately no details of billeting / locations are given in the War Diary.



Knodishall - Searchlight and gun positions

Base Map - [openstreetmap.org](https://www.openstreetmap.org/): <https://www.openstreetmap.org/>
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