

1939–1945

The Second World War once again found the PLA at the heart of the nation's war effort. The Port not only remained an important distribution centre for crucial supplies of food and other goods, it was a focal point for two of the key events of the war. The PLA's workforce made an enormous, and in some cases heroic, contribution but the Port itself paid a high price. By the end of the war, many of the docks had been devastated by bombing.

Douglas Ritchie, who would be knighted for his wartime services to the Port, proved an outstanding leader. In particular he displayed a sensitivity that was much appreciated at a time when the Port was battered and bruised. Under him, the PLA prepared as best it could for the outbreak of war. Alternative premises for female office staff were found safely upstream in Thames Ditton, a wartime administration scheme was drawn up, and the River Emergency Service was formed. On the day war was declared, every port in the country came under the control of Port Emergency Committees (PEC). In London this was effectively the PLA. The river and the docks were dressed for war. Naval guardships were placed at the seaward limit of the river, where the great Maunsell Sea Forts were later erected on stilts. Gun batteries were sited on both banks of the lower river and guns

installed at lock gates and other key points. Pill boxes and shelters appeared around the docks. Barrage balloons, many of them secured to lighters, floated above the docks and industrial areas of the river's middle reaches. The PLA survey vessel, *St Katharine*, with a six-pounder gun installed, was the first vessel on the river to open fire on the enemy after war had been declared, when German planes attempted to mine the river.



These paintings (this page and opposite) by William Haines vividly depict the night-time bombing raids on the docks during the Blitz. (Courtesy of the Museum of London)

On Saturday 7 September 1940 the first bombs fell on the Port of London. Eighteen-year-old PLA employee Cyril Webb was due on duty that evening at Surrey Commercial Docks. As he left home on his bicycle, the glorious summer weather was marred only by what seemed an unusual black cloud on the horizon. The cloud turned out to be a swarm of 375 German bombers. The docks were already ablaze by the time Webb reached them. Fuelled by vast stocks of timber, the fires burned for five days. In the Quebec Dock the blaze was the single most fierce ever recorded in the UK.

In burning warehouses around the docks, rubber,

paint, flour and pepper burst into flames, rum barrels exploded and parts of the river, covered in liquid sugar, caught alight. The heat was so intense that the paint blistered on craft creeping along the river. The fire officer in charge reported that 'The whole bloody world's on fire'. By the time the last of the bombers headed back over the Channel in the early hours of the morning, 430 civilians had died and much of the Port's infrastructure had been shattered.

For 76 nights the tidal river was under continuous attack. The Blitz reduced trade in the Port to a quarter of its pre-war level. The PLA's male staff found themselves



The colossal blaze at Surrey Commercial Docks on 7-8 September 1940, with thousands of tons of timber on fire. Remarkably, there was only one fatality in the docks.

under the command of the Royal Navy's Flag Officer for London and his team. Military Police occupied the docks. PLA tugs formed part of the River Fire Patrol and the Admiralty asked the Authority to extend its wreck salvage operations into the estuary. Staff started the Port of London House Group of the Local Defence Volunteers, later renamed the Home Guard. Work began in the docks on the conversion of merchantmen into armed naval auxiliaries. Routine operations were abandoned as rail, road and inland water transport shipped vast quantities of food and raw materials to safer storage centres outside the Port. The permanent closure of some of the old upper

docks was even considered. The role of the Port changed as it became the principal junction between the west-coast ports, where convoys brought in their supplies, and the metropolis and its vast hinterland. PLA warehousing staff helped to organise depots for evacuated foodstuffs in safer areas, such as Watford. At the same time, as the

Douglas Ritchie, PLA General Manager from 1938 to 1946, on the left, touring the docks in September 1940 with the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, Mrs Churchill and the Flag Officer, London, Rear-Admiral Boyle. Here they are with a group of auxiliary firemen.



Battle of the Atlantic was under way, goods were also despatched by train from Liverpool and Glasgow to the PLA's London warehouses. As part of the policy of dispersing valuable goods, the PLA obtained a number of petroleum barges, moored in the river with their valuable cargo.

The docks became particularly dangerous places in which to work. There were many acts of remarkable

bravery. Policemen moved ammunition from burning warehouses, dockers extinguished incendiary bombs in warehouses full of inflammable goods, dock railway staff isolated blazing wagons containing explosives and ammunition, dockmasters and their staff deployed their tugs to save ships and other craft in danger. Throughout this terrible time the men and women of the PLA kept the Port going in the most difficult conditions. They fought

In peacetime few women were employed by the PLA outside the dock offices but they came into their own during the Second World War. This image shows three volunteers of the River Emergency Service, with bandages, blackout torches and splints, during Civil Defence training.



fires, rescued cargo, administered first aid, saved lives and served as wardens, snatching sleep whenever they could. Many ordinary people did some extraordinary things.

Lives were often lost. The list of fatal civilian casualties recorded in the PLA's monthly magazine grew longer with each issue. In September 1940 one police sergeant, C E Showell, was fatally injured and his constable, R C Whinney, killed, when an unexploded bomb went off as they tried to unlock a shed to let in the fire service to tackle the blaze. One of the worst incidents occurred in November 1940, when a parachute mine landed in Tilbury Dock and destroyed two PLA tugs, the *Deanbrook* and the *Lea*. Eleven men were killed – from the *Deanbrook*, these were the master, J Gilbert; P Stickland, engineer; W Stoner,

A detachment of the PLA Local Defence Volunteers, later the Home Guard, training at the Royal Docks in 1940.

The warehouses of the Eastern Basin, St Katharine Docks, well ablaze during the Blitz of September 1940. By the end of the war the docks had been devastated by enemy action, leaving the PLA with a huge repair bill.





In the aftermath of the Blitz, precious sugar is salvaged from the remains of No 7 Warehouse, North Quay, West India Docks.

driver; C Whale, stoker; and W W Gallichan, deckhand; those who died on board the *Lea* were A E Jeffery, master; A Hayman, driver; J Hyde, stoker; H Atkinson, stoker; W G Horn, deckhand; and A Rathbone, deckhand.

There was little respite from the bombing until the end of May 1941. By then, the magnificent rotunda gracing the PLA's head office in Trinity Square had also fallen victim to enemy action.

Once again the dockers were seen as indispensable to the war effort. In the West India Dock, where the PLA employed its own gangs to discharge ships, dockers worked from 8 am to 7 pm six days a week and until 5 pm

The bomb-damaged façade of Trinity Square, protected by barbed wire across the entrance steps, with windows and doors blown out, and some windows bricked up. The inner rotunda was destroyed.

on Sundays. Many of them were middle-aged and elderly, sustained only by wartime rations. It was these men who helped to recover 61,000 tons of sugar for human consumption from what was left of the North Quay warehouses in 1940. Elsewhere in the docks, once the worst of the bombing was over in 1941, salvage work began on the burned-out warehouses. Coasters ferried tons of scrap metal to smelting works and rubble was used for the foundations of wartime airfields.

Recognising the value of the dockers, the government, under the Essential Work (General Provisions) Order (EWO), 1941, introduced compulsory registration. As a quid pro quo, supported by Ernest Bevin, now Minister of Labour, every registered dock worker in every port was given regular employment with a guaranteed wage, and the National Dock Labour Corporation was established to administer the scheme.





The EWO also gave the government the power to direct any docker to any port in the country. Some PLA dockers, with other dockers and stevedores, had already left London for the Clyde where Robert Letch, the assistant to the PLA's General Manager, had been asked to organise the Clyde Emergency Anchorages. The first 75 PLA dockers in a group that would eventually total 500 went up with their families in September 1940. At the Emergency Anchorages Port off Gourock, these men helped to discharge cargoes from ships into coasters for transhipment to other ports. The PLA also sent up cranes, trucks and 300 Thames dumb barges. Letch, successively Regional Port Director for the Clyde Ports, Scotland and the North West of England, was knighted for his contribution.

Later in the conflict, a Norwegian war correspondent attached to the British merchant navy summed up the contribution of London's dockers. He wrote how:

A dramatic painting by William Ware of large wharves ablaze along the river in 1940. (By courtesy of the artist's family. On loan to the Museum in Docklands)

'Before the war these dock workers, according to their own custom, would stop work as soon as there was a drop of rain. Now when I was down in the Port of London I saw 'fly-bombs' coming over and did they stop work? Why, the dockers didn't even look at them. They just went on so that the ship could sail the same night. That's the spirit of the dock workers of London today.'

That spirit was reflected in the handfuls of the newly instituted George Medal for civilian gallantry awarded to PLA employees. One of them was Henry Hook, a PLA perm, who won his medal in 1944. He crawled under a burning railway truck full of petrol cans, uncoupled it and helped to move it away to prevent the fire spreading. Not content with this, he climbed onto another truck full of explosives to remove a tarpaulin covered in blazing debris.

Alongside the dockers, other PLA staff played a vital role in keeping the Port open. The salvage depart-

ment cleared wrecks, rescued bombed ships, extinguished on-board fires and saved valuable cargo from damaged vessels. The PLA's *Yantlet* was complemented by the *King Lear*, on loan from a towage company, and by vessels from the Dover Harbour Board and the Admiralty. The Harbour Service turned the River Emergency Service into an efficient organisation, running ambulance vessels and tenders. Harbour Service personnel helped with minesweeping, set up wartime defences, marked wrecks or damaged wharves and piers with green flags, supervised the River Tug Fire Patrol and supplied fresh water for ships and fuel for small craft. When the bombing of the capital was at its height, and many bus and underground routes were impassable, the PEC organised an emergency commuter service for the London Passenger Transport Board, using up-river pleasure steamers, supplemented by diesel and steam tugs.

The crucial role of the dockers to the war effort brought some improvement in their working conditions, including the introduction of mobile canteens. Here the staff of the PLA's Mobile Canteen No 32 dispense tea to dockers queuing up during one of their breaks.



THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION AND THE D-DAY LANDINGS

The Port was at the heart of two major wartime operations, the evacuation of Dunkirk and the D-Day landings.

For the rescue of British servicemen trapped at Dunkirk in 1940, Harbour Service staff brought together craft from all parts of the river. These ranged from spritsail barges, big ship tugs and private launches, to a sludge hopper, a Thames fire-float (the *Massey Shaw*) and countless lifeboats. *The PLA Monthly* described how 'deep-sea ships, colliers and general coasters, craft of all shapes and sizes, craft which had never before been out of the river, craft in which the carrying of passengers had never before been contemplated, all got under way'.

The LCC Thames fire float, *Massey Shaw*, which made three journeys across the Channel and rescued 600 men from Dunkirk, returned home on 5 June 1940 to a rapturous reception from well-wishers. (Courtesy of AP Images)

Station Officer Brian Court gets a welcome home kiss from his young daughter Joy as he arrives back from Dunkirk on 5 June 1940 with the *Massey Shaw*, one of the many valiant small ships to take part in the evacuation. (Courtesy of AP Images)



On the Thames preparations for the D-Day invasion began at Tilbury Dock in 1942, where welding work started on what became PLUTO (Pipeline Under The Ocean). Tilbury also sent out the huge floating bobbins (known as 'conundrums', reflecting the secrecy of the project) that helped to lay the pipeline. In the docks and along the river countless patrol vessels, minesweepers, barges and landing craft were built and repaired, including at the purpose-built Denton slipways, near Gravesend, still in operation in 2009. The East India Import Dock and the South Dock of the

Surrey Docks were pumped dry and used to build some of the 'Phoenix' concrete caissons for the Mulberry harbours. The East India Import Dock never reopened.

Forty-six of the 147 units ordered were assembled on the Thames. The closer the big day came, the more intense the activity along the river. The Americans took over a large part of the Royal Albert Dock. Field Marshal Montgomery addressed 16,000 London dockers in the spring of 1944, stressing their

Tanks in the London Docks preparing for embarkation for the D-Day landings in 1944.





crucial role in the next stage of the war. Dockers agreed to load military supplies around the clock and marshalling began in late May 1944. *The PLA Monthly* recorded how 'from the docks and wharves upstream a steady flow of deep-sea ships, coasters, tugs, barges, oilers and landing craft was joined in the estuary anchorages by flotillas of escort vessels'. On 6 June 1944, 209 ships, 194 of them loaded in London's docks, sailed down the Thames, accompanied by a thousand barges. Once the invasion got under way, London dockers in uniform worked on the completed harbours at Arromanches, off the Normandy coast.

(Opposite) British troops embarking for the D-Day invasion in June 1944 'somewhere in the docks'.

(Below) The last complete Phoenix Unit or Mulberry Harbour to leave the Port through the King George V Dock Entrance under tow in 1944 and heading for the D-Day beaches.



During the war more than 1,400 PLA staff served in the forces. Alfred Waker, 42 years a docker in London Docks, suffered the deaths on active service of three of his five sons, two of whom had been employed by the PLA. Many younger dockers, with the formation of the dozen PLA Dock Groups, became members of the Royal Engineers. They served at every point of action where shipping and port activity was involved, from North Africa to Sicily, from France to Burma. During the invasion of Sicily, one gang was still helping to discharge a vessel when she had to set sail while they were still aboard; it was a year before they returned. The contribution of all these men and women, including the 64 killed in action with the forces and the 61 who perished at work or in their homes, was commemorated in the memorial window unveiled by Lord Alanbrooke in the main entrance of Trinity Square in 1952.

At the end of the war the Port had been devastated. Thousands of incendiary bombs and over 900 high-explosive bombs and missiles had caused damage valued at £13.5 million based on pre-war prices (nearly £600 million at today's prices). Half of all storage and one-third of all warehousing in the docks had been lost. In Surrey Commercial Docks, 176 sheds had been completely destroyed and 57 others had to be demolished. Tarpaulins and prefabricated huts were used as makeshift cover for goods. Tilbury escaped without much damage, having been identified by the Germans for use after invasion, although incendiary bombs destroyed the famous Tilbury Hotel in 1944. The concrete structures erected in the Royal Docks during their rebuilding in the late 1930s also proved resilient, and most of them survived the bombs. Despite the best efforts of the PEC, dredging had been neglected and wrecks littered the estuary. With much of the Port's newer equipment despatched to other ports and destinations around the UK, at the end of the war the Port was handicapped by old and overworked machinery in a poor state of repair. Simply bringing the Port back into full operation would be a time-consuming and expensive task.