

Swansea's "Fake" Air Raid of March 1942: Civil Defence Exercise "Gower"

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At 10.00 a.m. on Sunday, 8th March 1942, a high explosive bomb landed at St. Helen's Road, Swansea, between its junctions with Beach Street and Argyle Street, and near Swansea General Hospital. Extensive damage was caused to houses and business premises, while the Civil Defence Wardens' Post caught fire, and the adjacent First Aid Post and the hospital itself were severely damaged. Close by was a motor garage¹, where petrol pumps were damaged, resulting in a serious conflagration in the roadway and petrol flowing into an adjoining basement. Debris from the explosion blocked the roadway, and water mains and telephone cables sustained damage. In the incident, four people were killed and eighteen were slightly injured, while a number of persons were rendered homeless and partial evacuation of patients from the hospital was necessary. Immediately responding to the emergency were police officers, Civil Defence wardens, and members of the National Fire Service (N.F.S.), equipped with two water stream appliances and foam apparatus. First Aid parties were also in attendance, with ambulances and a mobile First Aid Post. To deal with urgent repairs to essential services, road repair and water mains repair parties were on the scene, together with telephone engineers.

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Those seeking further information about this attack will not find it in the official lists of Swansea's air raids, nor in any of the standard secondary studies which deal with them.² So, puzzlingly, at first sight, this episode might appear to be described as "the raid which never was". However, at this point it needs to be made absolutely clear that the whole of the events described in the first paragraph above are fiction and, in reality, this enemy attack never actually took place, hence it does not feature in any lists of Swansea's air raids. The details are taken from part of the scenario for a Civil Defence combined exercise, code-named "Gower", which was arranged by the County Borough of Swansea's Civil Defence organization. The particulars of this are included in a briefing document³ containing the "Narrative and Schedule of Civil Defence 'Incidents'" in the exercise, which took place between 8.00 p.m. on Saturday, 7th March 1942 and 6.00 p.m. on Sunday, 8th March. The object of the exercise was to "*test Civil Defence administration and communications, and liaison with the military under invasion conditions*". The incident described above was number nine of a total of ten mock incidents which tested the capabilities of the Civil Defence personnel, resources and administration.

The briefing document does not elaborate on it, but, as reports in the local Press show, this exercise was a combined one also involving the Home Guard and "*high military authorities*".⁴ The whole exercise was very carefully planned, on an almost theatrical basis, to recreate as faithfully as possible the conditions experienced in a real raid. By this date, of course, Swansea's Civil Defence authorities had already gained plenty of experience coping with the real thing. Since June 1940, the town had experienced enemy air raids on 42 occasions, including heavy blitzes in September 1940 and January 1941, plus the most serious attack of all, the Three Nights' Blitz of 19th, 20th and 21st February 1941. Following Exercise "Gower", Swansea was to be on the receiving end of a further heavy attack, its final one, the blitz of 16th February 1943.

(Image, right) Howell Lang Lang-Coath, Swansea's Civil Defence Controller and Town Clerk. Photograph taken six years earlier, when he was sixty-one. He had a reputation as a very effective administrator. Not flamboyant, there is, however, something in this photograph which matches with the interest in hunting and horse-breeding to which he admitted in 1938. Image: Alderman Edward Harris, "Opening of Main Drainage Works on Thursday 30th July 1936", (County Borough of Swansea).



It may appear paradoxical that, having had the experience of real attacks, the County Borough of Swansea should involve itself in a training exercise. However, following the raids which the United Kingdom had sustained since 1940, there was a sense both in Swansea and across the country as a whole that the lessons learned from intensive air attacks should be positively built upon.⁵ As a consequence, in 1941 and especially in 1942, the County Borough of Swansea's Civil Defence service was involved in no fewer than six large, combined exercises of this sort. In fact, training exercises had been a key element in Swansea's Civil Defence programme ever since the Air Raid Precautions Act, 1937 had come into force on 1st January 1938. In the years leading up to the war and in its first two years, training the personnel of the new service had been central to the work of the Air Raid Precautions (A.R.P.) organization in Swansea⁶ and this continued after A.R.P. was redesignated as Civil Defence in mid-1941.⁷ In conjunction with this change in designation, there was an intensification in the number of large exercises. which took place in Swansea. The first of these occurred in August 1941. On 25th September, Howell Lang Lang-Coath, Swansea's Civil Defence Controller, reported to the Air Raid Precautions Committee that "*a military exercise was held on 16th and 17th of August in which the Navy, Air Force, Army, Home Guard and Civil Defence participated*". He noted that the Commander-in-Chief of Western Command, General Sir Robert Gordon-Finlayson, and the Regional Commissioner for Civil Defence, Sir Gerald T. Bruce, "*had expressed appreciation of Swansea's ARP services in this exercise*".⁸

1942 saw a vastly increased number of such exercises in Swansea. As well as the one of 7th and 8th March, others took place on 11th July, 9th August, 11th-12th September and 9th-13th October. Unfortunately, unlike for Exercise "Gower", of 7th and 8th March, no planning brief survives for any of these and the only locally-held documentary evidence for them is contained in minutes which briefly record the reports submitted by the Civil Defence Controller to the Air Raid Precautions Committee.⁹ A note on Exercise "Gower" itself appeared in the minutes of the same committee of 23rd March 1942, under the title "*Invasion Exercise*", the committee resolving that "*the Report be noted with satisfaction*".¹⁰

At this point, it should be mentioned that the survival of locally-held records relating to Swansea's A.R.P. and Civil Defence during the Second World War is disappointingly patchy.¹¹ At the end of the war in Europe in 1945, the Civil Defence Service was stood down,¹² but resurrected in 1949 and subsequently moved into new Civil Defence headquarters in Sketty Park House, which the County Borough acquired for that purpose in 1953.¹³ The new headquarters were officially opened by Home Secretary, Gwilym Lloyd George, in 1955. When Civil Defence was finally wound up in 1968, few, if any of the documents held at Sketty Park were officially retained. Consequently, the bulk of material relating to

Swansea's A.R.P. and Civil Defence, now in the West Glamorgan Archives, is to be found either in the records of other departments such as the Town Clerk's, Borough Engineer's or Borough Estate Agent's, or else are privately deposited items which, by chance, somehow came into the hands of individuals, who subsequently transferred them to the Archive Service. Indeed, the document which is the subject of this article is a deposited item.

Returning to Exercise "Gower" itself, clearly a great deal of thought had gone into its planning, influenced, as already noted, by the gruesome experience of earlier, real enemy attacks on the town. The narrative section of the briefing document very precisely laid out the rules of engagement and the patterns of action to be followed. The exercise was to begin at 8.00 p.m. on Saturday, 7th March and continue until 6.00 p.m. the following day. For the avoidance of confusion, all messages, whether delivered by hand or by telephone, were to be preceded with the words "*Exercise Gower*". Staff at the Civil Defence Main Control and the Report Centre at the Guildhall were to be on duty for the duration of the exercise, but zero hour for all other Civil Defence services was 7.30 a.m. on the Sunday. All personnel were to operate as under air raid conditions until the end of the exercise at 6.00 p.m. on that day, or on receipt of a "*Dismiss Parties*" message before that time.

At approximately 8.00 a.m. on 8th March, the town and docks were to be subjected to a series of mock dive-bombing attacks which were to last until 8.45 a.m.. To add verisimilitude to these attacks, stage effects, including thunder flashes to represent exploding bombs and pom-poms to simulate anti-aircraft fire, were to be used. To complete the sense of danger, extensive use was to be made of practice incendiary bombs, while canisters were used to provide smoke and flames. In the same way as if they had been real, the mock dive-bombing attacks resulted in a range of major incidents which were to be staged, at varying times, across the town, at the following locations:

1. Queens Road, Mumbles, between Stanley Street and Langland Road.
2. Armine Road, Fforestfach.
3. Elphin Crescent, Townhill.
4. Slate Street, Morriston, between Woodfield Street and Glantawe Street.
5. Junction of Bohun Street and Millwood Street, Manselton.¹⁴
6. Station Road, Landore, between subway and Neath Road.
7. Junction of Delhi Street and Balaclava Street, Saint Thomas.
8. Orchard Street, between Gower Street and King Street.
9. St Helen's Road. between Beach Street and Argyle Street.
10. Walter Road, between the east and west entrances to St James's Crescent.

Each of these streets was to be rendered impassable to vehicular traffic for the duration of the incidents concerned.

In addition to the major incidents, throughout the whole of the County Borough a series of minor incidents were also going to take place, again particularly involving the use of dummy incendiary bombs and smoke canisters. It is very clear that the authorities had learned from the experience of previous real raids, particularly from the point of view of the type of casualties and damage resulting from them and, not least, because of the widespread scatter of bomb strikes which had typically occurred during some of the earlier blitzes on Swansea. Indeed, this exercise uncannily foresaw the pattern of Swansea's final blitz of 16th February 1943, where damage was sustained across a wide area extending from Morriston, through Hafod, the town centre and St Thomas, to Sketty and Mumbles.¹⁵

Incident no. 9, described at the start of this article, was clearly the major and pivotal incident of the whole exercise. From it stemmed a whole range of other issues to tax the ingenuity of the Civil Defence workers. The narrative section explained that *“at 10.00 hours it will be assumed that Incident No. 9, which has been timed correspondingly, will involve damage to Telephone cables leading to the Control and Report Centre, situate at the Guildhall, and as a result of this damage, a partial breakdown of the Telephone Service will ensue, which will isolate the main Control and Report Centre”*. To counter this, at approximately 10.10 a.m., the officer in charge of the Emergency Control and Report Centre at Sketty Hall was to be advised by messenger from the Main Control Centre to take over the responsibilities of the Main Control and Report Centre, pending the evacuation and arrival of the Main Control officials.

As things further developed, the demands of the exercise were to become fiendishly more difficult. At 11.00 a.m., it was to be assumed that the main Swansea telephone exchange had been destroyed by a high explosive bomb and that telephone communication throughout the whole of the County Borough had become inoperative. Consequently, from that time the Civil Defence Messenger Service was to be brought into operation.

In addition to this, the ten individual incidents, each carefully orchestrated by a “producer”, were designed to test numerous different elements required of Civil Defence and to put the workforce through their paces. The document details the incidents as follows.

Incident no. 1, which was to commence at 8.25 a.m., took place at Queens Road, Mumbles, between Stanley Street and Langland Road, its producer being a Mr. Pickwick. In its scenario, a high explosive bomb caused damage to houses on both sides of Queens Road, as well as to electricity and water mains, as a result of which poor water pressure had the potential to hamper firefighting efforts. There was fire among the debris which was blocking the road and three seriously injured people were lying in the roadway. Other persons had been rendered homeless. The services involved included the police, wardens, a First Aid party, the N.F.S. with two water stream appliances, and parties to repair the road, electricity mains and water mains.

A Mr. Vanor was the producer of Incident no. 2. This was scheduled to begin at 8.36 a.m. at Armine Road, Fforestfach and involved dealing with a gas bomb which had contaminated the roadway and a house with liquid gas. Twelve persons were uninjured, but contaminated, two slightly injured and contaminated, four seriously injured and contaminated, and two killed and contaminated. Services in attendance were to be the police, A.R.P. wardens, First Aid party, ambulance, mobile cleansing unit, decontamination squad, gas identification officer and a mortuary van.

Incident no. 3, produced by Mr. Fair, was to take place at Elphin Crescent, between Gwynedd Avenue and Gwynfor Road, Townhill, and to begin at 8.44 a.m.. This was another incident involving a gas bomb, which caused contamination with liquid gas to a house, the adjoining roadway (*“grossly contaminated”*) and two parked vehicles, and necessitated the evacuation of 130 people. Casualties amounted to three slightly injured and contaminated, three seriously injured and contaminated, and two killed and contaminated. Services in attendance were police, wardens, First Aid party, ambulance, gas identification officer and mortuary van.

Slate Street, Morriston was the location of Incident no. 4, scheduled to begin at 8.52 a.m. and produced by Mr. Llewellyn. In this incident, a block of flats and a house were damaged by a high explosive bomb. The results were fire, the roadway blocked by debris, and gas and water mains damaged. Three persons were trapped in the upper storey of the block of flats and, for the purpose of the exercise, it was suggested that the N.F.S. should effect their rescue. In addition, there were ten persons seriously injured and lying in the roadway, and four fatalities. Dealing with this incident required the presence of the police, wardens, the N.F.S. (four water streaming appliances), First Aid party, ambulance, mortuary van and parties to repair the road and the gas and water mains.

At 9.10 a.m. a high explosive bomb at the junction of Bohun Street and Millwood Street, Manselton damaged a house, caused a fire and blocked the road, also damaging gas and water mains. Lying in the roadway were four dead and four seriously injured people. In this, the fifth incident, produced by Mr. Jones, several people were made homeless and fire-fighting was difficult because no water was available from the hydrants. The presence of police, wardens, the N.F.S. (six water streaming appliances), First Aid party, ambulance, mortuary van and parties to repair the road and the gas and water mains were required.

In incident no. 6, which began at 9.18 a.m. and was orchestrated by Mr. Allen, a high explosive bomb damaged Landore Station and rolling stock there, and demolished the adjoining railway bridge and a nearby house. Electricity and gas mains were knocked out and the roadway between the subway under the station and Neath Road was blocked. Three persons were killed, four seriously injured and the twelve trapped inside a damaged coach necessitated the attendance of a rescue party, in addition to the usual service requirements of the police, wardens, First Aid party, ambulance, mortuary van, and road, gas and electricity repair parties. Because of the specific nature of this target, a railway transport repair gang was also to be called out.

Incident no. 7 was aimed at putting the Civil Defence personnel themselves under especial stress. At 9.36 a.m., at the junction of Delhi Street and Balaclava Street in St. Thomas, there were direct hits from high explosive bombs on the First Aid Post and Wardens' Post, as well as extensive damage to the N.F.S. Fire Station and fire-fighting equipment caused by blast and debris. Fire spread through the area, gas mains were damaged and the roadway between Sebastopol Street and Balaclava Street was blocked. The casualties listed in the scenario were four Civil Defence personnel trapped in the basement of the Wardens' Post, four firefighters seriously injured and four firefighters slightly injured. However, in his remarks concerning the incident, its producer, Mr. Bryant, noted that "*Casualties are at 12, but all Civil Defence and N.F.S. Personnel present at the time of the Occurrence will be treated as such*". Emergency services in attendance were police, wardens, the N.F.S. (four water streaming appliances), First Aid party, ambulance, mobile First Aid post, rescue party, road repair party and gas repair party.

Incident no. 8, commencing at 9.45 a.m., was another which had a nasty sting in its tail. In the section of Orchard Street between Gower Street and King Street, a high explosive bomb caused extensive damage to business premises, resulting in a fire, blockage of the roadway and damaged electricity and water mains, so that there was no water supply available from the hydrants. The producer, Mr. E.V. Bevan, had also arranged that

"This incident will be duplicated, inasmuch as it is to be assumed that an undetected unexploded bomb will explode ten minutes after all the Services required have arrived on the scene. Members

of Rescue Party, Police, Wardens, and all other Civil Defence Personnel present will become casualties and treated as such. In addition all Civil Defence Service Vehicles and N.F.S. apparatus will be immobilised. One Warden will be designated as slightly injured to enable him to report the additional damage.”

Appended to this was a note of *“Additional Casualties: 4 killed and 5 previously reported trapped, also killed. Others slightly or seriously injured”*. A further note added that if certain services arrived on the scene before the second incident (and therefore their members became casualties themselves) those services would need to be duplicated.

Incident no. 9 has already been discussed above.

Incident no. 10, involved a high explosive bomb at Walter Road, between the east and west entrance to St. James’s Crescent. Scheduled to start at 10.20 a.m., its producer was Mr. Williams. The explosion demolished houses, with extensive fire among the debris, which blocked the western end of the road. On the eastern end, a crater obstructed the roadway. Gas mains were also damaged. Some people were made homeless and the casualties totalled four killed, eight suffering from serious burns and eight seriously injured. It was anticipated that services in attendance would include police, wardens, the N.F.S. (four water streaming appliances), First Aid parties, ambulance, mortuary van, road repair party and gas repair party.

While the proposals for the Civil Defence element of the combined exercise were clearly spelled out in this document, unfortunately very little is known about the contributions made by the Home Guard and other military personnel. However, coverage of the exercise, as reported in the local Press, does give us some indications, not least the slightly facetious suggestion that the Home Guard were so heavily involved that they *“had to make arrangements for cooking their meals at their posts”*¹⁶ But the Press also reported that, at the close of the exercise,

“it was officially stated that its purpose was the testing out of the defensive arrangements, both civil and military, of Swansea and its vicinity, and the co-operation had proved valuable to all concerned. What had been learned, it was added, had been the subject of preliminary discussion and would be further studied in the proper quarters. High military authorities were present, and one of the umpires was the Senior Regional Commissioner, Sir Gerald Bruce.”

The stories in the local Press also give a very good idea of the impact which the exercise had on the people of Swansea who witnessed it:

“‘Attacks’ on and ‘defence’ of various localities started at dawn, and the ordinary citizens soon had plenty of evidence of the considerable extent to which low-flying aircraft, fighters and bombers shared in the various plans. The activities were widespread, and this and the spirit in which they were undertaken made an exhausting day.

The Civil Defence services were ministered fully from leaders down to the youngest messengers, and candidates for treatment at the decontamination centres, and the public, saw more than ever before the businesslike and serviceable new uniforms.¹⁷ ...

... Near the centre of the town there were not only military operations but very considerable demonstrations of imitation gas attack and fires, and the programme included examples of most of the raid “incidents”.

Respirators were more than usually in evidence among the general public who, at certain of the official buildings, had to show identity cards as one of the “fifth column” safeguards.

Measures to be taken at works in the event of invasion were also studied.”

Across the country, and not just in Swansea, combined exercises such as Exercise “Gower” were intended to improve communications between those bodies – both military and civilian – which were involved in the defence of the realm, and to hone them to perfection, the better to confront and deal with the rigours of enemy air attacks and possible invasion. It is clear that the harsh lessons learned from real enemy action were borne in mind in planning such exercises and were put to good use. The exercises themselves also threw up problems and solutions which it was hoped would stand the defensive organizations in good stead in the future, if further attacks by the enemy occurred. From the evidence of committee minutes and Press reports, we must conclude that, as far as Swansea’s Civil Defence authorities were concerned, the exercise had been a success and more than worthwhile. However, it must be remembered that Exercise “Gower” was carried out in wartime, when the threat of a real enemy attack was always present. This likelihood was not lost on the people who planned the exercise and its narrative section concluded with the stern message:

“Should an ‘Alert’ be sounded during the period 07.30 hours to 18.00 hours on Sunday, March 8th, Civil Defence personnel engaged in the Exercise will return to their respective posts, depots or units, and take up their ‘Alert’ Stand-by duties or patrol.”

Notes

¹ The actual site of the petrol pumps is not recorded, but the ones at C.E.M. Day’s Motor Garage at 60-62 St.Helen’s Road may have been intended. The garage was located on the south side of St Helen’s Road, almost opposite Swansea General Hospital, and was immediately adjacent to Brunswick English Wesleyan Methodist Church, which stood next door, to the west of it. (Today, its premises are occupied by an Asian food market.) The rate book for Victoria Ward for March 1942 indicates that the property at numbers 60-62 was classified as a workshop, garage and premises, and was occupied by this company at the time (West Glamorgan Archive Service [hereafter, WGAS], TR3/14/171).

² WGAS, D 32/1; J.R. Alban, “The ‘Three Nights’ Blitz’. Select Contemporary Reports relating to Swansea’s Air Raids of February 1941” (Swansea, 1994); K. Pryer, “Luftwaffe over Swansea. A History of the Air Attacks on Swansea, 1939-45” (various edns, Swansea, undated).

³ WGAS, D 42/11

⁴ *South Wales Evening Post* (9th March 1942), p.2; *Herald of Wales* (14th March 1942), p. 2.

⁵ The National Archives [hereafter, TNA], HO 186/1308 – “Air Raids: Lessons Learned from Intensive Air Attack, 1941-3”; T.H. O’Brien, “Civil Defence” (London, 1953), 619-20.

⁶ J.R. Alban, “Preparations for Air Raid Precautions in Swansea, 1935-9” in *Morgannwg, The Journal of Glamorgan History*, xxviii (1984), 55-73. See also O’Brien, “Civil Defence”, 128, 377-8, 611.

⁷ Despite the change in the organization’s name, the committee responsible for Civil Defence in Swansea continued to be called the Air Raid Precautions Committee right up until the end of the war. The change of name from “Air Raid Precautions” to “Civil Defence” had been effected by 11th September 1941, when, in response to a Commons’ question, the Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, explained the reasons for the change and for the introduction of new uniforms (“Hansard”, vol. 374: debated on Thursday, 11th September 1941, “Service Title and Badge (Alteration)”, online at <[<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1941-09-11/debates/8a10fa40-76b3-4528-93e8-46362db85178/ServiceTitleAndBadge\(Alteration\)>](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1941-09-11/debates/8a10fa40-76b3-4528-93e8-46362db85178/ServiceTitleAndBadge(Alteration))>.

⁸ WGAS, TC 3/61, p. 413, minute 443.

⁹ WGAS, TC 3/62, p. 424, minute 652; p. 428, minute 668; p. 479, minute 683.

¹⁰ WGAS, TC 3/62, p. 195, minute 585.

¹¹ As a consequence, it is often necessary to consult the Civil Defence records of central government, held in The National Archives at Kew.

¹² For a general overview of Civil Defence before, during and after the Second World War, see “A Brief History of Civil Defence”, ed. T. Essex-Lopresti (Civil Defence Association, Matlock, 2005). On 26th April 1945, orders

were issued that Civil Defence across the U.K. should start to be wound down in preparation for the appointed day of closure on 2nd May (ibid., pp. 32-4).

¹³ Not in Sketty Hall, as some commentators have mistakenly claimed, although, during the Second World War, Sketty Hall had been used by the A.R.P. and then the Civil Defence service as a Divisional Headquarters for Division 2, which covered the central and western parts of the County Borough (Alban, "Three Nights' Blitz", pp. 22-6).

¹⁴ In this list, the document wrongly names this street as Millbrook Street, which is situated a mile away, in Plasmarl. However, elsewhere in the document, the correct name is used.

¹⁵ Details of this last raid of 16th February 1943 will be considered in J.R. Alban, "Swansea's Final Blitz" (forthcoming). One may add that, although the Three Nights' Blitz of February 1941 is best remembered for the extensive damage caused to the town centre and to Townhill and Mayhill, bombs also fell within a wider area, extending from Llansamlet to Waunarlwydd.

¹⁶ See note 4 above.

¹⁷ Following the transition from A.R.P. to Civil Defence in 1941, a dark blue battledress uniform gradually began to replace the overalls which had been worn by personnel since the formation of A.R.P. in 1938. A new system of yellow rank insignia was also introduced at the same time. See also note 7.