

# The Road to D-Day

## Behind the Battle That Won the War

*Rick Atkinson*

A killing frost struck the United Kingdom in the middle of May 1944, stunting the plum trees and the berry crops. Stranger still was a persistent drought. Hotels posted admonitions above their bathtubs: "The Eighth Army crossed the desert on a pint a day. Three inches only, please." British newspapers reported that even King George VI kept "quite clean with one bath a week in a tub filled only to a line which he had painted on it." Gale winds from the north grounded most Allied bombers flying from East Anglia and the Midlands, although occasional fleets of Boeing Flying Fortresses could still be seen sweeping toward the continent, their contrails spreading like ostrich plumes.

Nearly five years of war had left British cities as "bedraggled, unkempt and neglected as rotten teeth," according to one visitor from the United States, who found that "people referred to 'before the war' as if it were a place, not a time." The country was steeped in heavy smells, of old smoke and cheap coal and fatigue. Wildflowers took root in bombed-out lots from Birmingham to Plymouth. Less bucolic were the millions of rats swarming through 3,000 miles of London sewers; exterminators scattered 60 tons of sausage poisoned with zinc phosphate and stale bread dipped in barium carbonate.

Privation lay on the land like another odor. The British government allowed men to buy a new shirt every 20 months. Housewives twisted pipe cleaners into hair clips. Iron railings and grillwork had long been scrapped for the war effort; even cemeteries stood unfenced. Few shoppers could find a fountain pen or a wedding ring, or bed sheets, vegetable peelers, or shoelaces. Posters discouraged profligacy with depictions of the Squander Bug, a cartoon rodent with swastika-shaped pockmarks. Classified advertisements included pleas in *The Times* of London for "unwanted artificial teeth" and for cash donations to help wounded Russian warhorses. An ad for Chez-Vous household services promised "bombed upholstery and carpets cleaned."

Government placards advised, "Food is a munition. Don't waste it." Rationing had begun in June 1940 and would not end completely until 1954. The monthly cheese allowance stood at two ounces per citizen. Many children had never seen a lemon; vitamin C came from "turnip water." The Ministry of Food promoted "austerity bread," with a whisper of sawdust, and "victory coffee," brewed from acorns. "Woolton pie," a concoction of carrots, potatoes, onions, and flour, was said to sit "like cement upon the chest."

For those with strong palates, no ration limits applied to sheep's heads, or to eels caught in local reservoirs, or to roast cormorant, a stringy substitute for poultry.

Tratto da: Foreign Affairs  
July / August 2013