

## Historical Topics Series: 2



### The Belfast Blitz

Belfast had been relatively unaffected by WWII initially but, with the fall of France in 1940, Belfast's situation changed dramatically. The city now lay within range of German bombers flying from western France. Even so, by April 1941 much remained to be done to enable the city to cope with major bombing attacks and when large-scale air raids began on the night of 7-8 April, 1941, they found the city practically unprepared. A raid over the dockside not only caused considerable damage to the Harland and Wolff premises but left 13 people dead. A second air raid on the night of 15-16 April caused considerably more damage. 180 German bombers took part in the attack that lasted from just before midnight until 4 a.m. on Easter Tuesday.

After the April raids measures were taken to improve the defences of the city but resources were not available and neither was time - the Germans were to attack again in less than three weeks. On the night of 4-5 May, another air raid began shortly after 1 a.m. targeting the east of the city where the strategic areas of the shipyards, the aircraft factory and the harbour, were situated. A large number of bombs also fell on residential and business property. A smaller raid the following night continued the destruction.

The effect of these raids was devastating. The Civil Defence movement and voluntary organisations, such as the Air Raid Precaution (A.R.P) units and the Women's Voluntary Service, played important roles in the city's defence but massive damage was done to businesses and industry. Civilian casualties were lamentably high. Over 900 people were killed in the Easter Tuesday raid alone. During World War II probably no other city in the United Kingdom, except London, lost so many of its citizens in a single night's raid.

Records in PRONI relating to the Belfast Blitz include:

- MPS/1/3/8** Public Security War Room War Diary. Record of warning messages, details of the opening and closing of the War Room, staff duty times, and times of receipt or despatch of important messages with a brief summary of their nature, 1941- 44.
- MPS/2/3/516** Ministry of Home Affairs file on publicity surrounding the war effort in the form of press cuttings from various local and national newspapers, 1940-45.
- MPS/2/3/197** Ministry of Public Security file – Women's Voluntary Services, 1941.

- CAB/3A/63** Origins and early development of the Civil Defence organisation in Northern Ireland including the establishment of the A.R.P., details on evacuation procedures, emergency medical provisions and related publicity, 1936-40.
- CAB/3A/68 A-B** Ministry of Public Security report on air raids including photographs, news cuttings and a map with raid areas indicated.
- CAB/3A/3** Detailed report on the damage inflicted on Harland and Wolff Ltd. and to Short and Harland Ltd. during the air raids of 1941.
- HA/32/1/761** 'Ministry of Home Affairs, National Defence file – After Blitz action to be taken.' Details of the co-ordination of the war effort arrangements of various departments and details of an emergency scheme, the 'Hiram plan', designed to meet contingencies in the event of an air attack, 1941-44.
- HA/32/1/764** 'Ministry of Home Affairs, National Defence file – Reports as to damage caused by air raids', 1941.
- FIN/30/AA/99** Ministry of Public Service file – Intelligence summaries of air raids on Belfast in April and May 1941.
- D2742/1** 'St Ninian's Church: Notes of Air Raids, Eastertide 1941', by William Ward, Whitewell Road, Belfast – Notebook describing the air raids of 1941 and their affect on the area.
- D1896** Two aerial photographs of German air raid targets – Harland and Wolff Ltd. and Belfast Corporation Electrical Works.
- D3038/3/12** 'Bombs on Belfast 1941' – booklet of photographs by the *Belfast Telegraph* showing the bomb damage inflicted on Belfast.
- D2109/18/9** Diary of Emma Duffin, including a description of the scenes in St George's Market, Belfast, which was used as a mortuary, in the aftermath of the Easter Tuesday raid, 1941.
- T3756** 'Easter Tuesday at Veryan Gardens, April 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> 1941.' An account of the air raids by Mr Alfred Ambrose, Senior Air Raid Warden, Whitewell Road, Belfast.
- LA/65/3AG/2** Casualty lists for raids on Belfast April-May 1941

The *Ulster Year Book, 1947* (pp.xxxii-xxxviii) includes a summary of the war effort in Northern Ireland, J.W. Blake, *Northern Ireland in the Second World War* (Belfast 1956) and J. Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast 1992), are also available for reference in the PRONI library.

