

## **EXERCISE TOPHAM HATT BACKGROUND INFORMATION – Updated & correct as at Feb 06**

The Swanage Railway is situated in the county of Dorset, in an area of outstanding natural beauty known as the Isle of Purbeck (actually a peninsula). There are two main towns, Swanage on the coast and Wareham ten miles away to the north-east. A branch line to Swanage from Wareham was opened in 1884, with one intermediate station serving the village of Corfe Castle.

At the height of the railway operation, the line saw busy periods, especially during World War 2 and during summer holiday periods. Nevertheless British Rail closed the line in 1972. The track between Swanage and Furzebrook was lifted immediately and the remaining 3 miles of it was left to cater for goods traffic conveying clays. During the 1970's British Gas discovered oil in the region and a terminal was built at Furzebrook to move the oil by rail. As further deposits were found, BP took over the operation and subsequently a pipeline was built to Fawley near Southampton and the transport of oil by rail discontinued. Until 2005 a by-product, Liquid Propane Gas, was sent twice a day by rail to Avonmouth.

In recent years the Railway has been re-laid from the Swanage end, opening to Herston Halt in 1984. Trains now run all the year round to Norden "Park & Ride" and include many special events. In December alone, up to 13,000 passengers may be carried on the Santa Specials.

Since the closure, many groups have supported the railway project. Today the backbone of the Railway is the Swanage Railway Trust (SRT), which is a registered charity. Members annually elect the governing body, called the Council of Management, and also provide the volunteer work force, which supports all areas of the project. The Swanage Railway Company Limited has a Board of Directors that runs the Railway. The Directors are also volunteers and, although there are shareholders in the Company, a dividend is never paid and profits are ploughed straight back into the project.

The line has catered for holiday makers and railway enthusiasts in the past, but the recent opening of the extension to Norden has opened up a number of new opportunities associated with a Park + Ride car park scheme. This initiative has seen BP, English China Clay, local councils and the Railway come together with a constructive plan to reduce motor traffic levels in the area. By providing a car park adjacent to Norden Station, at the end of the Wareham by-pass, visitors are encouraged to park their cars and travel by train to Corfe and Swanage. The initial construction catered for 120 cars, which by 2001, was increased to 400. Also included are a Tourist Information Office, toilets and a children's playground.

The Headquarters of the Swanage Railway Project is located in the centre of Swanage with the administration being based in the original station buildings. Most of the engineering facilities are based at the Herston Works 1 mile from the town centre, with track maintenance being based at Norden. The town itself is a popular seaside resort and the population can rise from 9,000 in the winter to over 30,000 in the peak summer months.

The Topham Hatt series of exercises has become an on-going Corps project since its inception back in 1984. The Armed Forces as a whole have supported the Railway project in a number of different areas but the Royal Corps of Signals has made by far the largest contribution. Many different units and hundreds of soldiers have visited the Railway and formed part of the unique relationship.

On average exercises have been held twice a year. Having identified tasks to be completed soldiers work closely with staff from the Railway and are able to use techniques and practices not often used or encountered in the military environment. The work is often labour intensive and it enables team leaders to handle a variety of tasks.

Work undertaken by Royal Signals tradesmen has mainly supported the Railway's Telecom Department. In 1984 fifteen soldiers from 30 Signal Regiment retrieved 30 miles of redundant cable from the Mid-Hants Railway at Alresford and installed much of it at Swanage during a four week exercise called EX CYGNET TRAIN. The Telephone Exchange at Corfe Castle was a major installation by troops from Northern Ireland in 1990. All equipment associated with the exchange was commissioned, together with the underground cable link from Harman's Cross and the local pole route within the station limits.

As time has progressed so has the length of the Railway. In 1993 tradesmen from Germany, Northern Ireland and the mainland helped extend the cable and pole route between Corfe Castle and Norden, a distance of nearly one-mile. To give soldiers an element of variety some have for example, assisted the Signals Department in the installation of point equipment at Corfe Castle and Harman's Cross. More recently the Halt at Herston has been totally refurbished.

In addition to helping the Railway build the extension there have been two further important developments over the past few years. In 1993 11 Signal Regiment, which had recently moved to Blandford, accepted an invitation to become a Corporate Member of the Swanage Railway Trust. This move formally recognised the link between the Railway project and the Corps as a whole.

The Railway has been pleased to host many visitors from the Corps. A major event was held in June 1999 to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the link between the Royal Signals and the Swanage Railway. Amongst the many visitors was the Master of Signals who was visiting for the third time.

The Topham Hatt venture has had such an influence on soldiers who have seen the on-going progress that many decided to pay £350 and join the ranks of the Railway membership. This led to the second major development that was the formation of the Mercury Group in 1992. The Group, which is a part of the Swanage Railway Trust, was formed as a result of 18 Junior Soldiers from 11 Signal Regiment who joined as Premier Life Members during Exercise Topham Hatt V.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the association between the Royal Signals and the Swanage Railway was celebrated on the 19th June 2004 with the opening of a new set of steps and a disabled ramp built by soldiers at Herston Halt.

As at July 2005 1,331 soldiers from the Royal Signals had worked on the Swanage Railway, realising 5,431 man days of assistance. The support received by the Railway and the town was marked on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2005 when 11<sup>th</sup> Signal Regiment from Blandford was granted the Liberty of the Town of Swanage and marched through the town with band playing, swords drawn and bayonets fixed; an immense honour for any British Army unit.

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19 Feb 06