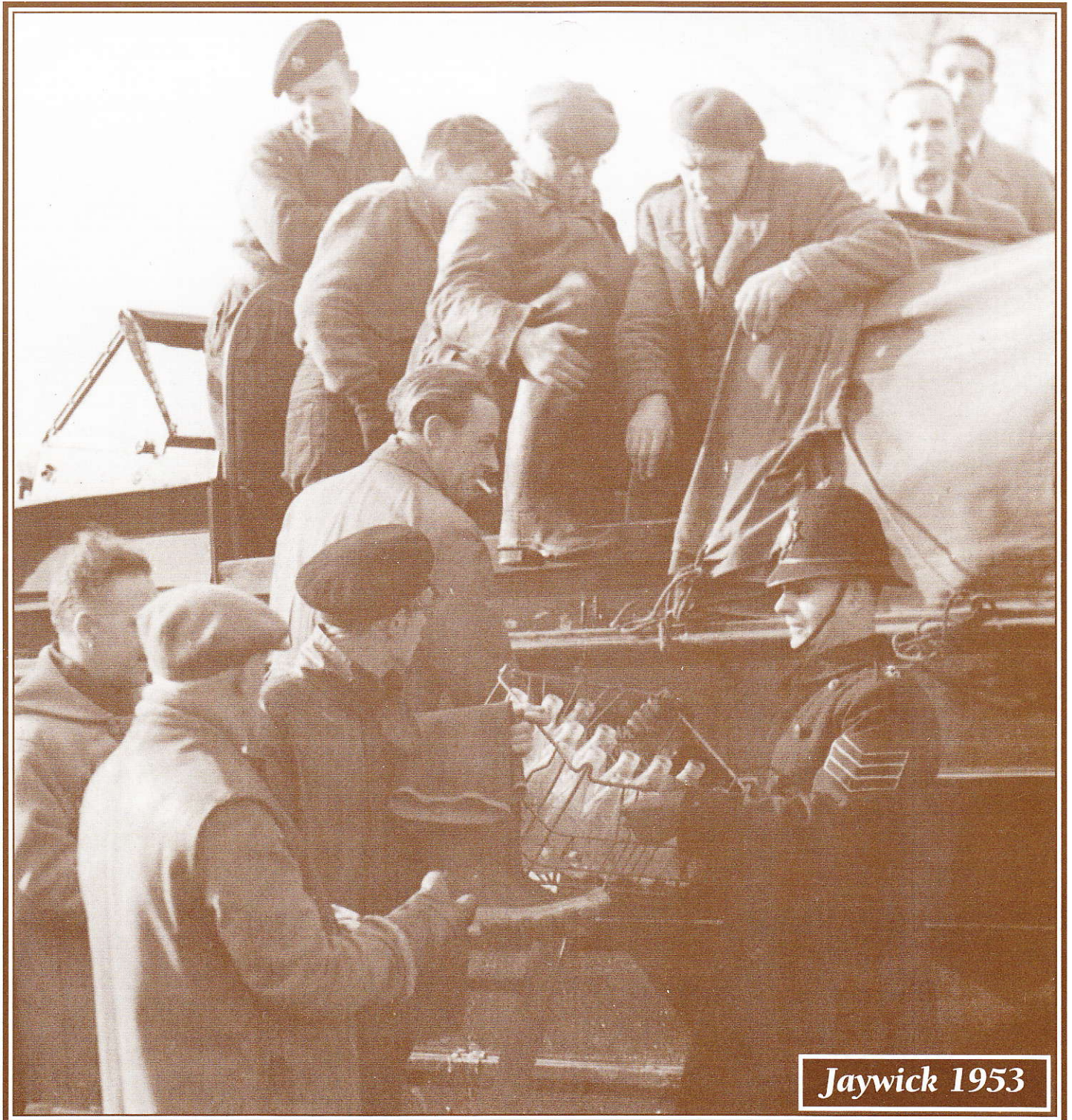




# ESSEX POLICE

History Notebook Number 27

*We are in for a  
high tide tonight*



Jaywick 1953

by Sgt. Dan Elford  
Contingency Planning Officer

**O**n a winter night in 1953 the North Sea invaded the east coast causing a disaster unprecedented in the history of the Essex Constabulary. There were no plans in place to either predict the occurrence or to minimise the affects of the widespread flooding.

The flood was caused by an accumulation of adverse conditions; a low pressure system over the North Sea and North Easterly gales which had the effect of pushing a surge of water down the North Sea into an ever narrowing gap between the coasts of England and Europe. This surge came on top of what were already high tides on that fateful night.

The foregoing is widely known, but what has not been told before is how events unfolded for the Essex Constabulary. The following has been taken from contemporary reports held in the Force museum.

For Essex the story started at 9.45 pm on Saturday 31st January 1953. The Harwich Harbourmaster walked into the police station and informed the PC on office duty that, in his opinion, there would be an exceptionally high tide that night. The night was described as wild with a bitter north easterly wind. The Duty Inspector was not unduly perturbed at hearing the Harbourmaster's report as there was often a degree of flooding at this time of year but, unknown to everyone, a surge of water was being driven down the east coast with irresistible force. The Harwich Inspector did however inform his Divisional Headquarters at Clacton who, in turn, informed Police Headquarters at Chelmsford.

At 10.30 pm the water started to come over the quay at Harwich, a full two and a half hours before the predicted high tide due at 1.00 am. It was then obvious that serious flooding would ensue and an attempt was made to warn persons at highest risk by calling door to door. The local 'radio car' equipped with a public address system was out of contact as the crew were attempting to make repairs to the radio transmitter at Great Bromley, which had itself been put out of commission due to the adverse weather.

At 11.15 pm the Clacton Superintendent, Arthur Simpson, realising that the situation was serious, set out for Harwich with his Chief Inspector. Reports were now coming in of trees blown down and some flooding at Walton and Brightlingsea. On route to Harwich the Superintendent ran into flood water and decided to return to Clacton, allowing the Chief Inspector to carry on to take command at Harwich. Much of the old town of Harwich was eventually flooded to a depth of up to 3.7 metres (12' 0") and the Police Station basement and houses were flooded to a depth of 2.1 metres (7' 0"). The tally of dead at Harwich was eventually found to be eight.

As the situation developed, reports were now coming in of serious flooding at Jaywick. The sea wall here had held but the water had broken through at St. Osyth and a wall of water 2.1 metres (7' 0") high swept into Jaywick from the west.

Thirty five people perished at Jaywick as a result of the flood which inundated the flimsily built 'plot lands' type homes. At St. Osyth there were about 1000 caravans which were swept away by the tidal wave. Miraculously nobody died here as they were virtually all vacant due to the time of year.

As the surge swept relentlessly south along the coast

the sea walls were breached in many places, flooding large areas of sparsely populated grazing and arable land.

As the water swept ever onwards Foulness Island, Great Wakering and Barling were flooded, but although only sparsely populated, six people died at Barling where the flood reached a depth of 3.4 metres (11' 0") in places.

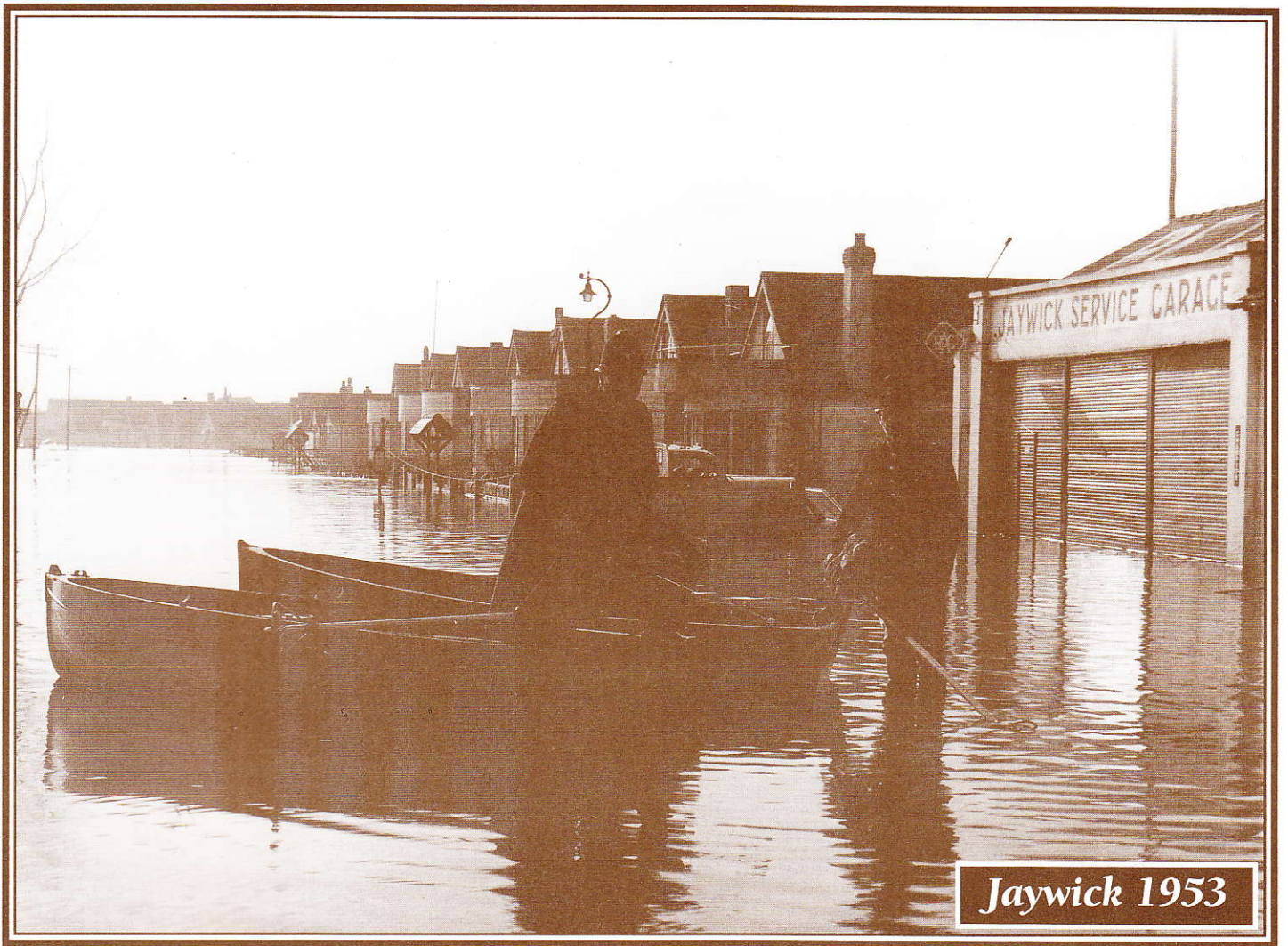
The surge tide now entered the Thames Estuary and areas of higher coastal population. At Southend-on-Sea the flooding was not too great as the surge moved up the Thames but the worst effects were to be felt at Canvey Island. The majority of Canvey is below sea level but at the time was thought to be well protected in comparison with the rest of the coastline. The 12,000 population lived in timber framed bungalows and other insubstantial dwellings. At 11.20 pm Canvey Police Station was warned of the exceptionally high tide and the Sergeant posted his men on the sea walls. High water was expected around 3.00 am and by 1.00 am the water was only 0.3 metres (1' 0") below the top of the seawall. Even as efforts were made to warn the residents, the sea started to breach the walls in various places. By 3.00 am on Sunday two-thirds of the island was flooded, a total of sixty people lost their lives and 11,500 were evacuated, some for up to three weeks.

As the surge swept along the industrialised areas of the Thames millions of pounds worth of damage was caused. Reports tell of oil refineries under 1.2 metres (4' 0") of water, 66,000 Tons of sugar destroyed and 5000 tons of margarine rendered useless. Ninety percent of Tilbury was flooded to a depth of 1.5 metres (5' 0") but only one elderly lady died there. Had the flood struck during the working week it is likely that men employed on construction work below ground on the new power station at Tilbury would have been at serious risk. There was very little flooding in Grays but the flooding was again extensive in Purfleet. The police here had more time to act and warn persons at risk as a flood warning device fitted on Southend Pier had activated at 11.45 pm and Southend Borough Police were able to pass the warning on to Grays.

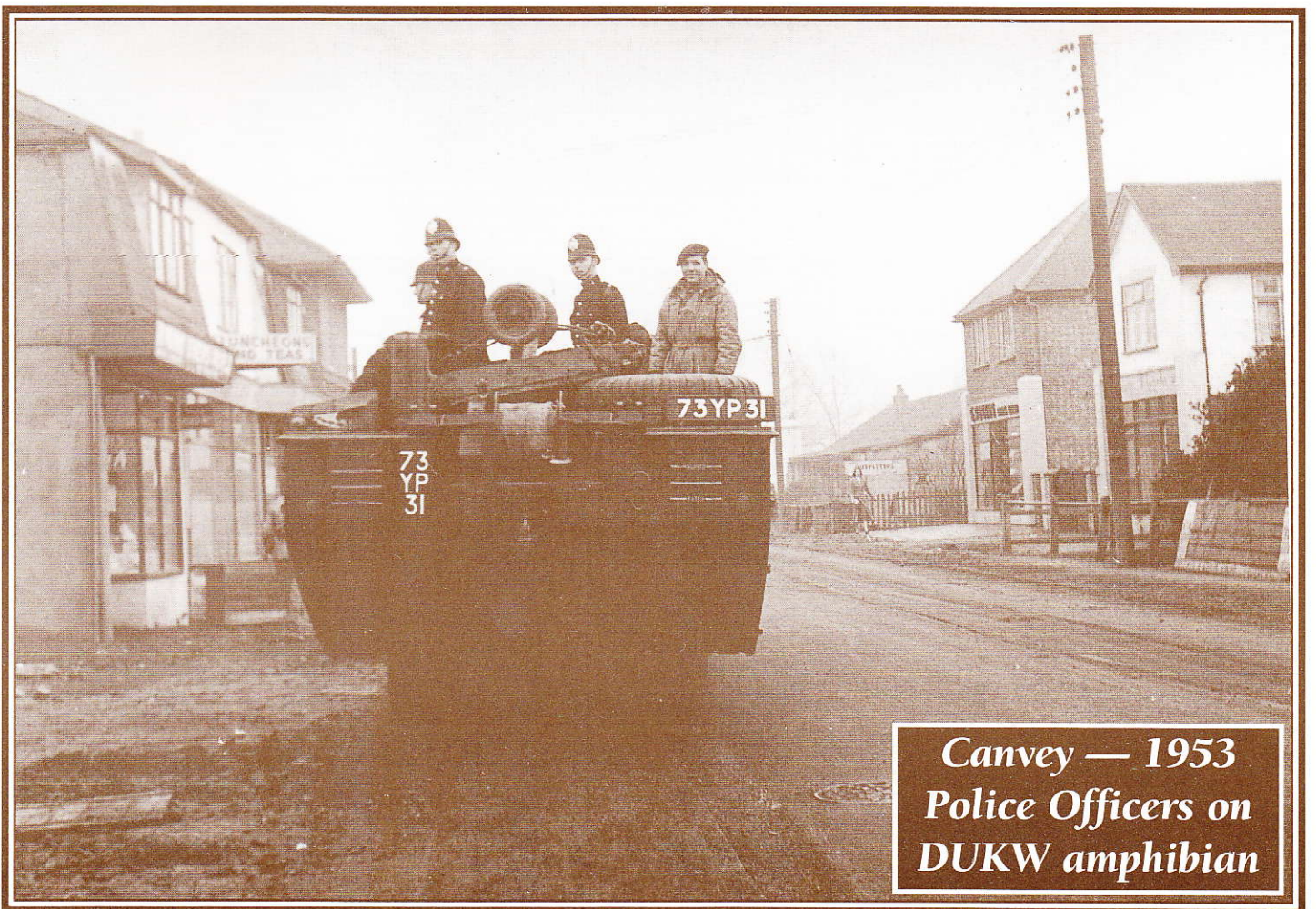
When reading this it has to be realised that police radio communications were in their infancy and communications relied on telephones, a large number of which were disabled due to the bad weather. The difficulties of obtaining an overall picture of the situation throughout the county can well be imagined. In the seriously flooded areas light and power had failed, as well as telephones, and communication was by way of messengers whose progress was impeded by water, darkness and unseen obstructions.

By first light on the Sunday morning the magnitude of the catastrophe could not be appreciated. Alone and unaided by organised assistance, the police of the county, including the Special Constabulary, had begun the task of rescue, evacuation and recovery of the fatalities with complete disregard to fatigue and physical danger. As time went on, police officers from Hertfordshire were drafted into the old Clacton Division and Metropolitan Police were drafted into Tilbury. Military aid was obtained in the form of both manpower and vehicles throughout the county. This came principally from the Harwich Navy Yard and Colchester and Shoebury Garrisons.

At Chelmsford Police Headquarters a central control



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*Canvey — 1953  
Police Officers on  
DUKW amphibian*

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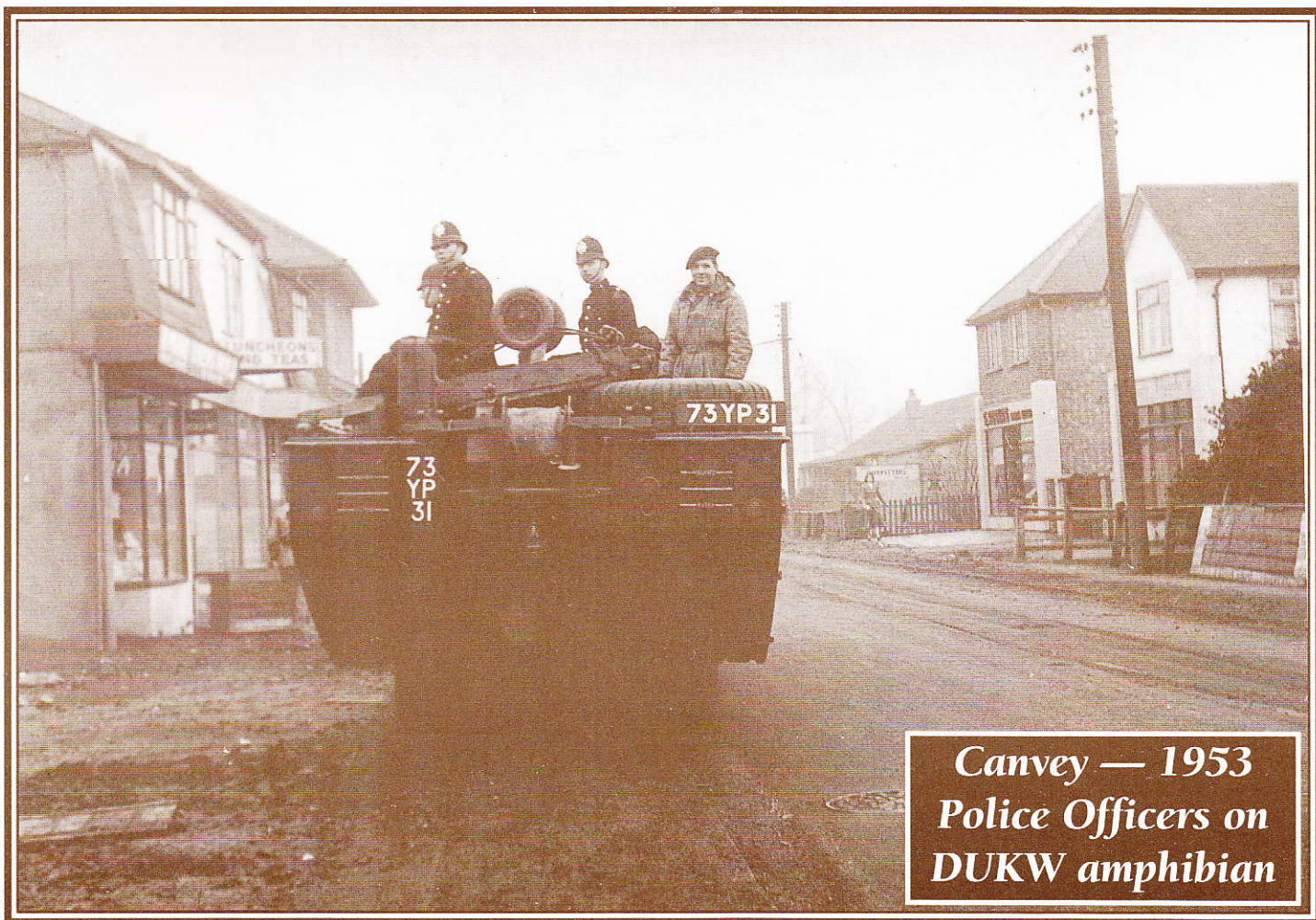
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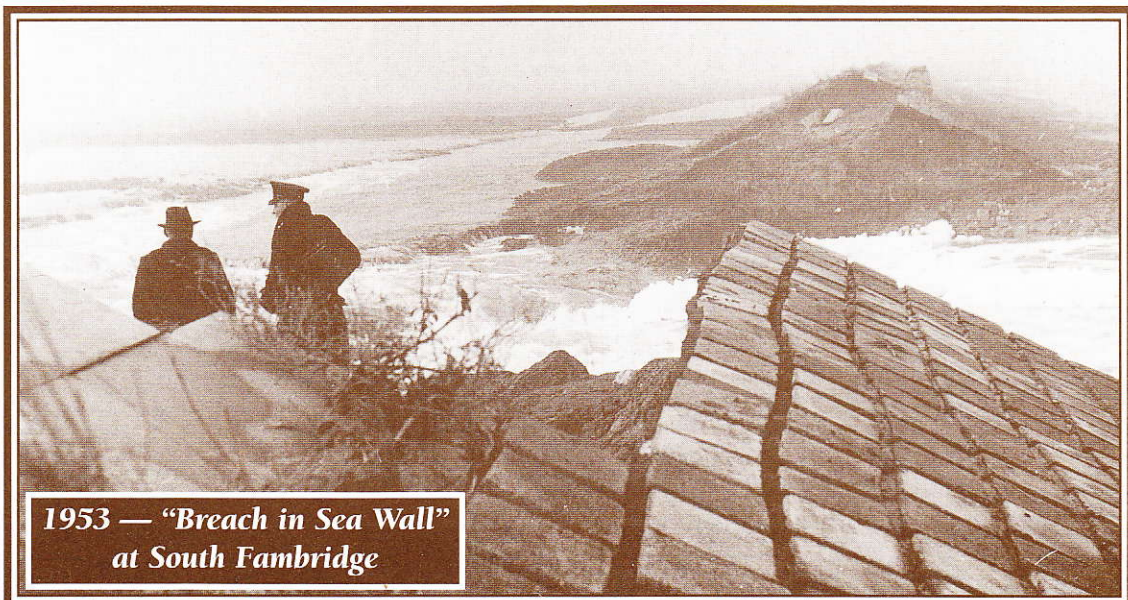
was set up, whose role was largely confined to satisfying the demands for special clothing, feeding and liaising with the various authorities concerned in order to cut 'red tape' and get things done as quickly as possible.

At the time, the Essex River Board was the body responsible for sea and river defences and, by 9th February, steps were already being taken to prevent a similar disaster again befalling the people of Essex in the way that it did, without any sort of warning.

Today, the Environment Agency are responsible for maintaining both the county flood defences together with an effective system of warning the public of impending danger. The experts tell us that at some time a flood of the same magnitude as that in 1953 will again occur, but systems of meteorological and tidal prediction are such

that warnings will be given in plenty of time. This has to be coupled with the fact that the level of the flood defences is far superior to that of 1953, communications have improved vastly and people in the areas worst hit in 1953 live in much more substantial accommodation.

Whilst a flood of 1953 magnitude could still lead to extensive flooding throughout the county, Essex Police flood plans are now integrated with those of the Environment Agency, the County Council and local authorities. The Police of Essex will not have to stand alone as they did in the early hours of Sunday 1st February 1953 but will control and co-ordinate an integrated response, should the North Sea pay us an unwelcome visit once more.



**1953 — "Breach in Sea Wall"  
at South Fambridge**