

The Secret Defenders of Bodiam and the Sussex Coast.

I wonder how many local people today knew or know that in 1940, and for the four years after, that hidden somewhere in the hedgerows and woods of Ewhurst, Staplecross and Bodiam, lie the hidden bunkers and observation posts of a very secret guerilla-type force. They were tasked with sabotaging and ambushing the advancing German forces which were expected to land on the South Coast under 'Operation Sealion', Hitler's plan to invade England soon after the fall of France in the summer of 1940.



Members of the Bodiam Auxiliary Unit dressed as Home Guard

July 2015 marked the 75th Anniversary of the formation of that secret force, the GHQ Auxiliary Unit, part of the much larger British Resistance Organisation. And here, the top-secret Bodiam Auxiliary Unit was formed, under the cover of the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) or Home Guard. It was manned by nine willing local men who were prepared, and trained to stay behind, - and die if necessary, in the face of overwhelming odds.

A little background is probably necessary. In June 1940 Britain stood alone. After the evacuation of the BEF from the beaches and harbour of Dunkirk and the fall of France soon after, it was very clear that Britain had been left almost defenceless. The British Army on the Continent had capitulated, and not even that remarkable evacuation could hide the scale of the defeat. Disheveled,

weary and weaponless, the men of the BEF had arrived back in England – just pleased to have survived their unpleasant baptism of fire. Britain’s material losses during the campaign had been astounding, with its army’s stores, weapons, vehicles and equipment left behind and strewn across Northern France. Britain’s new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had confided in private with his Ministers that in reality it was: “*The greatest British military defeat for many centuries*”. And with such a defeat came a huge risk to the security of the nation. But Churchill’s now famous rallying cries made an instant impression. Dunkirk had proved, with its much-publicized civilian participation, that the war was much more than just a conflict between armies on the Continent, over which the British public were powerless to determine the outcome.

But now the new and very real threat of a German invasion, along with the necessary myth of an army saved by the ‘little ships’, brought the nation together. A sense of involvement that had been lacking since the declaration of war in September 1939, now burst forth. Britain had sleep-walked into the war and it took the reverses in France and the Dunkirk evacuation to wake her from the complacency and over-confidence that existed prior to those events. Dunkirk provided Britain with a second chance that had to be seized. And the eloquence of Churchill’s patriotic and determined rhetoric captured the mood of the nation and inspired the citizens of Britain to unwavering defiance in the face of the German invasion threat.

Preparations for the defence of the country were instantaneous. By mid-July 1940 over a million men had enrolled in the Local Defence Volunteers, the forerunner of the Home Guard. In the south of England, roadblocks and pillboxes sprang up everywhere to cover obstacles and approaches – and you can still see fine examples of ours today along the banks of the Rother at Bodiam. Signposts were rearranged or removed, barbed wire and beach fortifications were laid, and women and children were evacuated to safer parts of the country. This was total war, and it seems almost extraordinary now, but the country really was bracing itself for imminent invasion. Hitler’s offer of peace to the British government after Dunkirk had made no impression on them or a people determined, as Churchill put it, ‘*That if the British Empire and its Commonwealth should last for a thousand years, men will still say: “This was their finest hour”.*’

By the 16th July 1940 Hitler had lost patience. In his Directive No 126 issued on that day, he stated, ‘*In spite of the hopelessness of her position, England has so far shown herself unwilling to come to any compromise. I have decided to begin to prepare for, and if necessary carry out, an invasion of Britain*’. It seems highly unlikely that Britain could have fought off or resisted a German invasion at that stage in the summer of 1940. Churchill knew this and after his,

'*We shall fight them on the beaches*' speech, he reportedly covered up the BBC microphone and said, '*but we've only got bottles to do so*'.

Certainly the BEF was in no position to fight. On their return from Dunkirk, Army formations existed in name only and the nation, dazed by recent events, had virtually no defensive preparations in place. The recently created LDV units, with pitchforks and the odd shotgun, would have provided little more than a spirited but futile resistance. The depleted Navy, as well as the RAF, was Britain's only real hope of defence against the might of the Germans. But Churchill saw the importance of uniting the whole nation together in a common purpose. He saw it as vital to include the involvement of all able-bodied men and women in playing an active part in its defence, and especially those men who were too old to fight or in reserved occupations and ineligible for call-up. His aim was to harness the defiant spirit of the whole nation with the single purpose of fighting for its very existence.

One such outcome was to give a much more purposeful role to the LDV and later the Home Guard, in effect to free up the Army to re-organise and re-equip itself in preparation for the long war ahead against the Nazis.

The formation of the Bodiam Auxiliary Unit in July 1940, can trace its origin to this urgent need for all-out involvement in the country's defence. It was one of a number set up, mainly in the south of England as a highly secret, covert force "*...to act as guerrilla troops who will allow themselves to be overrun and who thereafter will be responsible for hitting the enemy in the comparatively soft spots behind zones of concentrated attack*". The British High Command had concluded that if the Germans had successfully achieved a landing on the south coast then the only way to slow down their inevitable advance on London would be to deny them their mobility and to cut their vital supply lines. The lines of 'dragons teeth' concrete blocks still evident at Cripps Corner are evidence of the plans to channel any advancing German forces into 'killing zones' and 'nodal points' where the advance could be stopped, or at least slowed down. But an important part of this defence plan was the role to be played by 'stay-behind parties' who would hide in secret and well hidden underground bunkers and then emerge once the main forces had passed to report on the movement of the enemy or to attack or sabotage his lines of communication and supply.

The men who would man these bunkers were LDV volunteers formed into regional GHQ Auxiliary Units. The secrecy surrounding their very existence would be fiercely guarded throughout the time of their operational readiness, from July 1940 until they were stood down in June 1944 after 'D-Day' and the invasion of Normandy. The Auxiliary Units were commanded from Coleshill House near Swindon and it was here that these very carefully selected 3,500

volunteers, - all men, were trained in special war fighting techniques and skills. They were drawn largely from amongst farmers and their farm-hands who were already serving in the LDV or later Home Guard, and who had lived all their lives on the land over which they were expected to fight – and probably die. Local knowledge and a deep understanding of country ways were to be their principal skills and attributes. As cover, the men were allocated to local LDV and Home Guard battalions in Scotland, northern and southern England, and wore its uniform, but they never declared to others in their units what their real role and purpose was. They received special training at weekends to ensure secrecy, and were trained in reporting information, gathering intelligence and how to destroy bridges, railway lines, fuel dumps, and armoured vehicles, as well as in techniques of ambush.

The Auxiliary Units were organised into County Areas and in each area were a number of Groups with intelligence liaison officers from the Regular Army who were responsible for particular areas of the County. These Groups commanded a number of Operational Patrols formed of between four and eight men. Sussex was designated as Area 13 with its Regional HQ based at Tottington Manor at Small Dole in West Sussex. The Bodiam Patrol was part of Group One, along with the Mountfield, Hellingly, Beckley (Broad Oak), Herstmonceux, Crowhurst, Icklesham, Ashburnham and Iden Patrols. The Patrols were supported and trained by two groups of Regular Army personnel formed into Scout Patrols, one patrol to cover the east, and the other the west of the County. The Scout Patrol in the east was led by Lieutenant William Ashby, with thirteen men from the Queen's Royal Regiment under his command.

Each of these local Operational Patrols operated from their own secret underground hideouts or Command Posts which contained an observation post, escape tunnels with disguised exits, bunk beds, ammunition and weapons store, chemical toilet, primus stove cooker and rations store, all lit by electric light. The Patrol Commander would have received information about approaching enemy troops or targets in the immediate area from one or two of his underground forward lookout or observation posts (OPs), which were dug into high ground and well hidden on the most likely approaches, anything up to three miles away. These OPs had direct field telephone links with the 'command' hideout. Each OP was very well hidden and measured about 8 feet by 6 feet, dug deep into the ground and lined with wood or corrugated iron. Each would have had room for only one man inside it, with a small amount of food and water to sustain him on his vital task. This was to watch for any enemy movement and report back the details of the numbers and location of advancing German troops. He would telephone this information back to the men in the command hideout, and here the Patrol Commander would decide which targets could best be sabotaged - usually at night, and

what type of equipment would be needed to do so. The men in the OPs would have been replaced every twenty-four hours if possible, but they were trained and equipped to stay inside their small lookout posts for anything up to a week at a time.

Unfortunately very little is known about the Bodiam Auxiliary Unit or its Operational Patrol, as none of the men involved ever talked about their secret role in the defence of Britain in the years of its most recent threat from invasion. We don't know where they had their OPs or their Command Post but it is likely to have been in the area of Udiam Farm. We do know now that it was commanded by Sergeant Sydney Brabon of Udiam and that others involved were most likely to have been Arthur Brabon and Frank Jarvis of Udiam Farm, Ernest Goodsell, Jack Shoobridge and S G Barber of Bodiam, Louis Osborne and Charles Simmons of Ewhurst, E D Smith and W W Ensum of Hurst Green.

For more information on this whole remarkable episode in our localities' recent history, you can read about it in Stewart Angell's book '*The Secret Sussex Resistance*' or see more on the British Resistance Archive website at: <http://www.coleshillhouse.com/bodiam-auxiliary-unit-and-operational-base>.

The British Resistance Archive would be pleased to hear from anyone who has any further details on where the Patrol was based and what it's specific role was.

The Auxiliary Units were kept in being long after the immediate threat of a German invasion had passed in late 1940, and were only stood down in the summer of 1944 once the war had been taken back to the Continent. The Bodiam Auxiliary Unit never went into action nor was its expertise ever put to the ultimate test, and so the Units' existence did not become known to the general public until a book on the subject was published in 1968.

Even then it wasn't until the 1990s that the details of the GHQ Auxiliary Unit were eventually made available for research, and even these details are largely incomplete. Men of those days kept their secrets, which for those of us with an interest in local military history, is a pity!

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