

# TELEGRAPH

GAZINE



**THE  
DEFENCE OF  
BRITAIN**  
...a hole  
in the ground  
which led  
to a Resistance  
headquarters

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# COLONEL GUBBINS

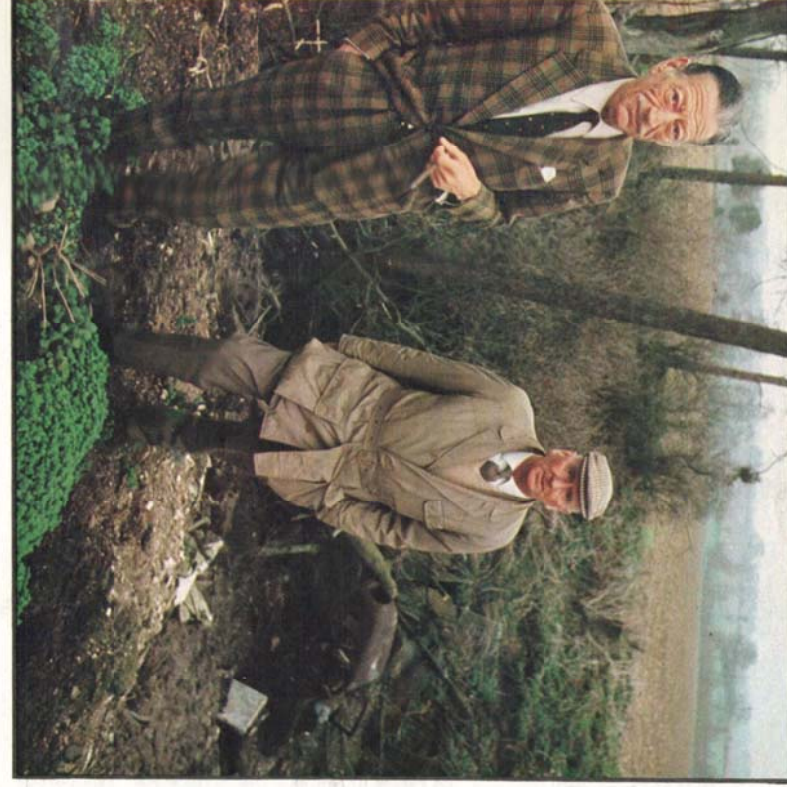
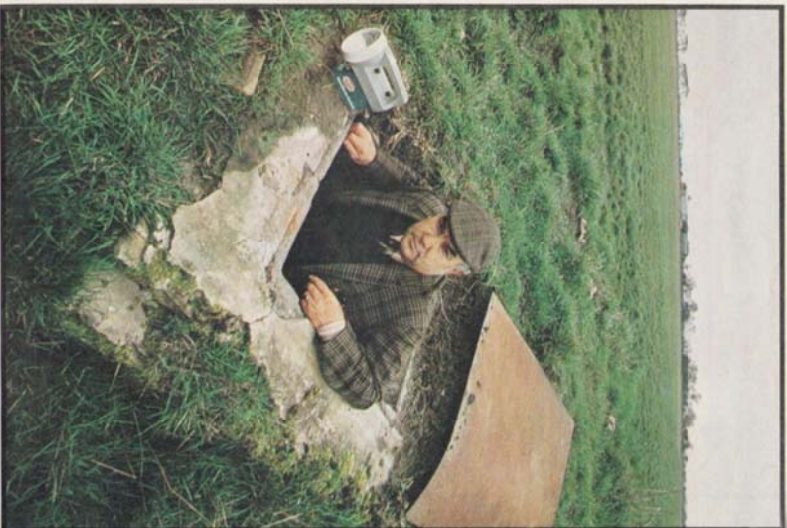
Few people to this day know of the underground resistance movement organised in Britain during the Second World War. Poised to act in the event of a German invasion, its members garrisoned hideouts of their own devising. They were regarded as expendable.

# THE ARMY'S SECRET

By DAVID PRYCE-JONES. Photographs by PATRICK WARD

GENERAL Sir Colin McVean Gubbins (on cover) makes no claims. He will not write his memoirs. Over 70 and retired now, he lives in a small white-painted Buckinghamshire farmhouse. The place is as trim as he is. In spite of being near the Strategic Air Command base, it is very isolated at the end of an unmade country lane, and is in its way a hide-out, somehow suitable for the man who would have led the underground resistance in the event of a German invasion in 1940.

As Colonel Gubbins, to give him his rank at the time, he was the only Englishman to have raised a secret standing army in this kingdom since the Middle Ages. At the height of the invasion crisis Churchill was personally endorsing Colonel Gubbins and the guerrilla formations he was preparing for underground resistance: the Auxiliary Units. Not very many people at all were then, or ever, in the know. The underground army has not been discussed by those who were in it, especially not by Colonel Gubbins. A former colleague says of him, "Hard working. A Gunner. He's the kind to get things done, and there weren't so many of them in the old peace-time army." Even the start of Colonel Gubbins's life has a perfect John Buchan-esque touch. He was born in Tokyo, where his father was a member of the Legation, a leading authority on Japan and author of standard works about it. The Gubbins side of the family were Irish. His mother was Scottish, a McVean from the island of Mull where Sir Colin spent a large part of his childhood, and then Christchurch, he was ready for the First World War, in which he served on the Western Front until wounded late in 1918.



In the second week of June, 1940 Colonel Gubbins, just landed back from Narvik, was ordered to report to the CIGS and the Vice-Chief of Staff who had been briefed by Major Holland, and then and there they told him to organise a resistance network in this country. After Dunkirk, a German invasion had become an imminent likelihood. England lay more or less defenceless and unprepared. There were scarcely 200 anti-tank guns in the arsenal, with about twice that number of anti-a's. How exactly had the CIGS put it? "You get on with it, you'll find now," they said.

Section D had already been dumping arms around the country, but no coordinated scheme existed, there was no body of properly trained men, no instructor in weaponry. The only real initiative to date had been taken by General Andrew Thorne of XII Corps, whose command included the south coast from Greenhithe to Holy Island in Hampshire. At his request the War Office sent him Peter Fleming, brother of Ian and famous already for his adventures and journeys around the world, in order to organise a "say-behind" party in Kent and Sussex. In the event of a German bridgehead being established within XII Corps areas, these "say-behind parties" were to come into action.

Peter Fleming set up his headquarters in a farmhouse called The Garth within sight of the Maidstone-Canterbury road, but with a quick retreat into wooded hills behind. His staff of about ten included Michael Calvert, later a counter-insurgency expert. Civilian helpers were soon being recruited. Preparations for laying mines and demolition charges began, and some targets like bridges were actually wired. The first regional training centre had got under way. (Peter Fleming 1940, published in 1957.)

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Meanwhile a few rooms in 7 Whitehall Place were temporarily provided for Colonel Gubbins. "I grabbed a few officers who had been with me in Poland and Norway," good chips," to begin with, he divided the whole South Coast into sectors and assigned one of his officers to each of them to set up a regional training centre. When Peter Fleming had already checked-out was taken into the scheme.

Lord Kintore, the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Forces, put at his disposal the Intelligence forecasts of German intentions, "for what they were worth" as Sir Colin says deprecatingly. Directorate or large-scale

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could hand depended on my neck". He was shifted once and for all into the world of irregular warfare. The meagre resources for undercover operations were being tentatively grouped under MI (C), or Military Intelligence (Research). One particular element coming in was Section D, a secret department in the Foreign Office whose purpose was to investigate the possibilities of subversion and sabotage in enemy-held territory. Section D was small enough to be something of a family circle, although already in its bosom was Kim Philby. Another element was the War Office department known as General Staff (Research) which was virtually



David Symonds (above left) at the entrance to his bunker underneath a field in Romney Marsh. A farmer who was originally a Territorial, he soon joined the Auxiliaries. The hideout in Romney Marsh (left) was constructed in 1940. It had to be concrete because of the wet; others on the hills were made of corrugated iron and railway sleepers.

Above: Both farmers at Little Leighs near Blandford, Dorset (left) and David Tarrinton stand by the Dorset's Pit in which they and five others built their underground hideout. Their names, on "quiet ways of killing Huns", was disguised as a copy of the Gardener's Calendar for 1937.

the private set-up of Major Holland. Military effort and political aims were at last being co-ordinated to try to overcome bureaucratic weaknesses and priorities. Thanks to Holland, Colonel Gubbins now took charge of the military side. "The proverbial two men and a boy, last-minute stuff" in the words of a colleague.

Useful for the courses were started in London for specially selected people not in the army but likely to be useful in a tight corner: explosives, counter and foreign languages, and men who had far-ranging business connections. Some 15 to 20 at a time, these hand-picked few were given some

double-quick, elementary training in wireless procedure, small-arms and explosives. Colonel Gubbins wrote three booklets of instructions which have become standard works in their turn, as he says "often in hands about to shoot English soldiers".

MIR still hoped that warfare in Nazi-occupied countries could be prepared in advance. One has the impression that Colonel Gubbins was everywhere in demand, for not only did he go on long trips round the Balkans and up to the Baltic, but he was ordered to Warsaw, in August 1939, teaching the city just about of the German army. He was also on the disastrous expedition to Norway.

handings by the enemy on any part of the coastline had to be reckoned on.

Colonel Gubbins made preliminary contact with the 12 Regional Commissioners who had been appointed by the government to run their parts of the country in the event of general collapse; with Chief Constables, with senior officers in retirement, with the local establishment. Each officer in 7 Whitehall Place was clearly going to turn to men he knew or could depend on absolutely in the sector where he was responsible for a training centre – a process which was to devolve all the way down to the grass roots in the usual English old-boy style. Colonel Gubbins obtained authority from the War Office to visit infantry depots and draw, indeed press-gang, selected personnel, though they were returned to their units "once there was a real war", as one officer has it.

The polar explorer Andrew Croft had been on one of Colonel Gubbins's crash courses in London the previous year, and he was asked to set up the training centre and resistance organisation in his home county of Essex. In the South West, Stuart Edmundson, a Plymouth businessman, was chosen for the same task.

Leaders like these were the only men to know the names of everyone eventually enrolled in their regions – names were not recorded on paper. They, in turn, had to appoint subordinates to form local cells, which ideally were to consist of a commander and some five or six men. For the sake of security, each cell operated independently and had its own description as an Auxiliary Unit: a label which was carefully vague and non-descript. So much so, indeed, that rumours persist of men thinking they were being called upon for some branch of the social services.

Each man was armed with a revolver and a Fairbairn commando knife, while the cell was also allotted a Tommy gun, two rifles, hand grenades and plastic explosives, then newly introduced and a great improvement on the standard gelignite. In fact, the equipping of the Auxiliary Units seems to have been one of the more efficient sides of the operation, probably at the expense of the regular army. "One morning on my doorstep were a lot of sandbags loaded with supplies," according to one of the cell-leaders, "just had to stash them away."

Nationally all Auxiliary Units were grouped into three Home Guard battalions known as 201, which was south of the Thames, 202 north of the Thames, and 203 in Scotland. Each battalion had a headquarters and an intelligence centre. In spite of their numbers, these battalions were, of course, quite separate from the Home Guard, and were simply making use of a convenient cover, a deception which was Colonel Gubbins's idea. Though civilians and unpaid, the recruits did eventually receive Home Guard uniforms, mostly without formal designations, and as they were therefore not enrolled in official military units they were outside the rules of the Geneva

Convention, and would have been shot without hesitation on capture.

Indeed, the moment mysterious little groups of men began to muster in the countryside in the evenings, to be seen digging after dark or making inexplicable explosions, the Home Guard became suspicious. Stuart Edmundson is supposed to have told a full general to mind his own business. Resistance leaders had to be given special passes as well as identity cards, to state that "No questions will be answered by this officer."

"It was a bit of a shambles," one patrol leader is willing to admit. "Haub hush was something new then." The Auxiliary Units were to spend the summer and autumn of 1941 preparing underground bunkers. There would be three to four hundred of them, fringing the country (with the exception of the North West, where the Germans could hardly land) and complete with arms and supplies. Great ingenuity was used to conceal these places in woods, in abandoned dumps or out-houses, tunnels, behind false walls and trapdoors, even in one enlarged badger's set.

**I**n this day a tree stump stands where Peter Fleming devised it, at King's Wood above The Garth, which can be swung open on a hinge to reveal the entrance to a concreteed building below.

Contractors who built these places must have been mightily puzzled by their task, though sometimes the austerities constructed their own hideouts. A typical example was at Little Leighs, a hamlet in Essex, where a fruit farmer called Keith Seabrook says he "was pounced upon, recruited and told to 'organise a patrol'". They set about digging out the bottom of an old tree-girt hole known as "The Devil's Pit". Then, working entirely at night, they built a Nissen Hut in the bottom. Twice, when they covered it with earth, it collapsed. Finally, it was successfully finished, invisible, and reached by a concealed trapdoor entrance. It would have been their base for sabotage behind the German lines. The plan was hardly the blueprint for a long life. Seabrook, then a lean 27-year-old, remains coolly detached about the dangers. "We were regarded as completely expendable. It was a three-week existence. At the time I never counted the consequences." By 1944, he controlled 70 Auxiliary patrols from Corner to Southern, including ones in local factories, like Marconi's at Chelmsford. Throughout, he went on running his fruit farm, with a plan for the immediate evacuation of his family

always ready. Bunkers were designed to be lived in by an entire cell, and were provided with food for 20 days, and with fuel for the Tilly lamps. Also with a sniper's rifle with a night sight. "Even our wives didn't know a thing about it," and the chestnut goes the rounds in resistance circles of the woman who believed throughout the war that when her husband was away without



General Sir Colin McVean Gubbins, founder and leader of the secret wartime Auxiliary Units, with Lady Gubbins outside his present "hideout" – a Buckinghamshire farmhouse. It is somehow suitable for the man who, as Colonel Gubbins, would have led the underground resistance with his guerrilla formations in the event of German invasion

explanation he was with another woman.

Training in techniques of sabotage, ambush and subversion were hardly less of a priority than recruiting. Number 7 Whitehall Place had been limited to bureaucracy. Once the basic network of resistance existed in outline, says Sir Colin, "I detailed one of my staff officers, Mike Henderson, a brother of Lord Farrington, to find headquarters outside London where we could train in seclusion." Colehill was chosen, on the Berkshire Downs; built by Prat in the 17th century, it was among the most beautiful of English houses. Behind it were extensive stables and quarters for grooms where nobody could easily snoop and discover what was up – and nor would the Pleydell-Bouverie sisters, still living in their big house, be unduly disturbed.

Colonel Gubbins moved there with his officers in August and courses were held immediately. The instructors were mostly from the Welsh Guards and their standards were not always appreciated. Some 15 to 20 patrol commanders at a time would report from all over the country on a Friday afternoon to the Post Office in the nearby village of Highworth, where the postmistress Miss Stranks had her part to play. She would tell the men to wait while she telephoned to Colehill for transport. Miss Stranks was also used as a foil. Awkward questions from those who had stumbled by accident on some secret of the Auxiliary Units were stilled by referring the inquirer to the Highworth Post Office, where he would be fobbed off or passed on, according to status or the postmistress's whim.

For the whole weekend the park at

Colehill shook with bangs, and shapes crawled in the night – once, it appears that some monumental accident with explosives occurred, but lips are still sealed about it. Then the patrol commanders were considered trained and had to return to their home base and pass the knowledge on to their men, the assortment of gamekeepers, sportsmen, miners, boatmen, village worthies and squires whom Sir Colin likes to recall. In the end, the Auxiliary Units mustered about 3,000 all told. Had the Germans invaded that crucial Battle of Britain fortnight, Sir Colin says, "the Auxiliary Units would have been ready".

Improvised virtually from scratch, to be sure, post-Dunkirk amateurs like everyone else, but more desperate. "I think the point is that the army had to fight to the last man. There could be no question of allowing the German military to establish themselves here, say on a line Colchester-Weymouth. What happens after that? Who's coming to England's help at such a moment? It was a fight with your back to the wall."

He is a chain-smoker and the snuffs he smokes are sweet. "Sipping a possumess Miss Stranks had her part to play. She would tell the men to wait while she telephoned to Colehill for transport. Miss Stranks was also used as a foil. Awkward questions from those who had stumbled by accident on some secret of the Auxiliary Units were stilled by referring the inquirer to the Highworth Post Office, where he would be fobbed off or passed on, according to status or the postmistress's whim.

So would the Auxiliary Units have

sprawls about. Lady Gubbins enters to give the dog a bone to gnaw on its favourite rug in front of the fire. Lady Gubbins is Norwegian, and they were married after the war.

Not that much effort of imagination is required to connect this domestic scene with the past. Two photographs on his writing desk show Sir Colin in full reg, with his 29 decorations. Next to them is another photograph of his son by a former marriage, John, who was killed in the war. On the walls are mementoes of various underground organisations.

**F**ore by November, 1940, it was obvious the Germans had greatly over-estimated our defensive capacities and thereby missed their unique chance of knocking us out once and for all, and Colonel Gubbins was drafted again. He was promoted Director of Operations and Training at SOE (Special Operations Executive) with full responsibility for secret missions to Western Europe, and France above all, which took him into the orbit of General de Gaulle. In 1945 he was appointed head of SOE, vanishing deeper into the obscurities of the Official Secrets Act. The stare under those bushy eyebrows gives away nothing. The personality of someone like Sir Colin is unaffected by limelight. The success of his career has lain in anonymity, and so it remains. Another colleague from the Military Intelligence Directorate, Colonel Bill Major, succeeded him at Colehill. The Auxiliary Units continued to organise and to improve their underground cells. Within a year they were highly proficient. Within a year, too, a whole network of transmitters and receivers had also been established, with women brought in as operators. Until D-Day the Germans were expected to stage retaliatory or diversionary raids somewhere along our extended coastline, and the Auxiliary Units would have come into action. But, as one commanding officer succeeded another at Colehill, the backroom boys who were urgently needed elsewhere gave way to more comfortable brass hats. Those Brigade of Guards officers posted to Colehill were now the kind of men who brought their collars with them. Tension subsided. The cells, however, continued to meet and to exercise twice a week as before.

In November, 1944, the Auxiliary Units were stood down. The secret army dispersed with less fuss but more order than it had assembled. Arms disposal remained uncertain. Some cell commanders stacked weapons away in garages and lofts and even chucked them into ponds, where 20 years later they came to light amid much amazement. Various fire-arms ammies have exposed late caches. Here and there in the countryside small boys, or lovers perhaps, may today stumble accidentally into those curiously hide-outs which have not yet been filled in. Nothing else is left, hardly even the hopes and fears which went into their construction.