

Our subterranean resistance lay in wait for Nazis

By Mo Farrell

LANGRISH House near Petersfield has become the subject of intense interest following a visit by archaeologists researching top secret WW2 underground bases.

Earlier this year, members of the Great War Archaeology Group working with Bristol University, scanned the grounds of Langrish House looking for the spot where they suspect an operational base for resistance fighters was situated.

Using magnetometry equipment, the archaeologists spent two days examining the area for evidence of secret wartime activity and they are now analysing the data gathered.

The base would have been manned by an elite guerrilla unit highly trained to be the last line of defence against a Nazi invasion.

Now a hotel, the house was owned during the war by Lt Col Edward Talbot-Ponsonby, the father of current owner, Nigel Talbot-Ponsonby. Talbot-Ponsonby senior was the unit patrol leader for Langrish. Other members were Fred Cable, George Lambert, Dick Tuff, Newton Smith and Reg Rogers.

Like many of these fighters, Edward Talbot-Ponsonby told his family very little about his courageous wartime role so what Nigel Talbot-Ponsonby does know was gleaned over the years and pieced together.

"At night, he would go by stealth, walking around the area with col-

leagues and creating cells throughout the hills. They were very, very expert and clearly it was all very secret. Had an invasion happened, these special forces would have gone to cells all over the south of England and as the Nazis advanced, they'd come in behind them. The average Home Guard had one weapon, the special forces were very well armed. My father was always unstinting in what he gave but he didn't really talk about it. Knowing about his role now, it has transformed my view of him. It was amazing."

It's estimated that there were hundreds of similar subterranean bunkers ready for action around England, Scotland and Wales from July 1940 until November 1944 and at least 375 patrols.

Initiated by Churchill and set up by Colonel Colin Gubbins in response to fears that the Nazis might invade Britain, they were manned by volunteers highly trained in weapons use, assassination techniques, unarmed combat, intelligence and sabotage with the aim of disrupting, demoralising and terrorising the advancing Nazis.

Self-contained and autonomous in the event of an invasion, these cells of resistance fighters were made up of between four and eight men and women, with excellent local knowledge and resourceful enough to survive for long periods in concealed and cramped underground conditions accessed through camouflaged entrances and emergency escape tun-

nels. Many of these 3,500-strong fighters were young men barely out of their teens, some were women, most were civilians with no military experience. Their mission was almost certainly suicidal.

The top secret army, known deceptively as the Auxiliary Units, wore uniforms like the Home Guard in order not to blow their cover, and was the only resistance movement in the world to be formed in advance of an invasion.

They were trained to attack enemy supplies and Nazi troops in Hampshire once the invasion of Britain was under way and they were all willing to leave their families, and give their lives in order to defend their country. The average life expectancy of an auxilier was predicted to have been two weeks after going into action.

Neither rank and file servicemen nor the British public had any idea of the resistance infrastructure being established during the war and it wasn't until 1945 that news of its existence was revealed.

However, many auxiliers took their secret to the grave and only now is the general public learning more about Churchill's audacious army and the courage of those who took part.

For the past two years, research has been undertaken by a nationwide network of amateur and professional historians and archaeologists, called the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART).

The CART project is a huge one and the National Trust-owned Coleshill estate in Oxfordshire, as the nerve centre of the secret army's high command and the training base where thousands of auxiliers learnt their hardcore guerrilla tactics, was an obvious place for researchers to concentrate their early efforts.

CART has been putting its findings from Coleshill and from sites around the country into an Auxiliary Units database and now has a list of Auxiliary Unit members. However, it needs more information from auxiliers who may still be alive, from their relatives and from those who may know about, or who want to research for themselves, auxiliary units in their area.

Not far away in Buriton, south of Petersfield, it's thought there may have been another auxiliary unit while in the Privett/Froxfield area, there is also some evidence of a base or patrol, but it's thought Hampshire has many more of these secret bunkers and patrols.

Steve Mason, CART's Hampshire representative, says: "Little is known about Hampshire but we think there are rich pickings - there could have been forty or more units. There were patrols at Langrish and maybe in Petersfield and across the county border in Midhurst because the road network was key. Units were usually on the coast but what's emerging is a second tier of auxiliary patrols along the A272, the equivalent of the A27 further inland. All the sites were along the main roads because the Nazis used the main roads. These units were sometimes underground in elite houses. It was very clever but incredibly dangerous."

Mr Mason is keen for those interested in the Auxiliary Units or who have knowledge about them, and especially the location of the unit's underground operations bases (OBs), to get in touch.

"We are already researching units in Horndean, Lovedean, Hambledon, Clanfield, Buriton and Langrish, and would be delighted to hear of any information about these or other units in East Hampshire."

"Many Auxiliers are either unaware that they are now allowed to talk about



Lt Col Edward Talbot-Ponsonby, the Langrish patrol leader

their experiences or believe that no-one is interested - nothing could be further from the truth. It would be a tragedy if information about this remarkable group of men and women disappears as that generation fades."

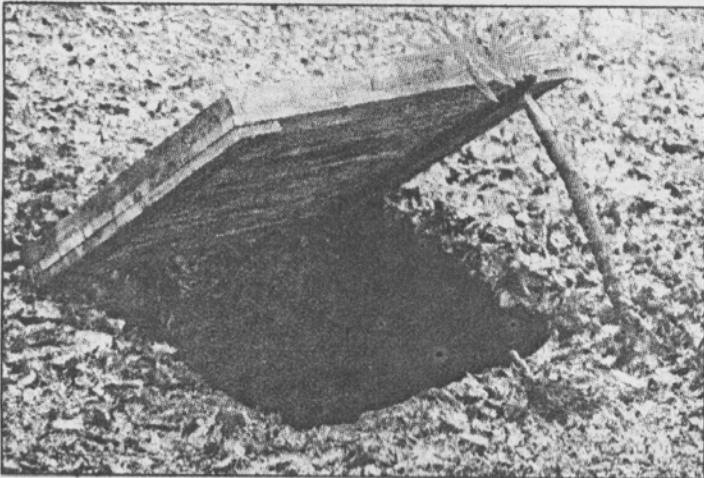
"At CART, we are determined to ensure that this does not happen and that those remaining members of the Auxiliary Units gain the recognition they so richly deserve."

For further information about Hampshire's Auxiliary Units and how you can help CART go to www.coleshillhouse.com, call 0872 045 9940 or email carthampshire@gmail.com

CART is also looking for a researcher for Surrey where no Auxiliary Unit locations have yet been found. Email hq@coleshillhouse.com

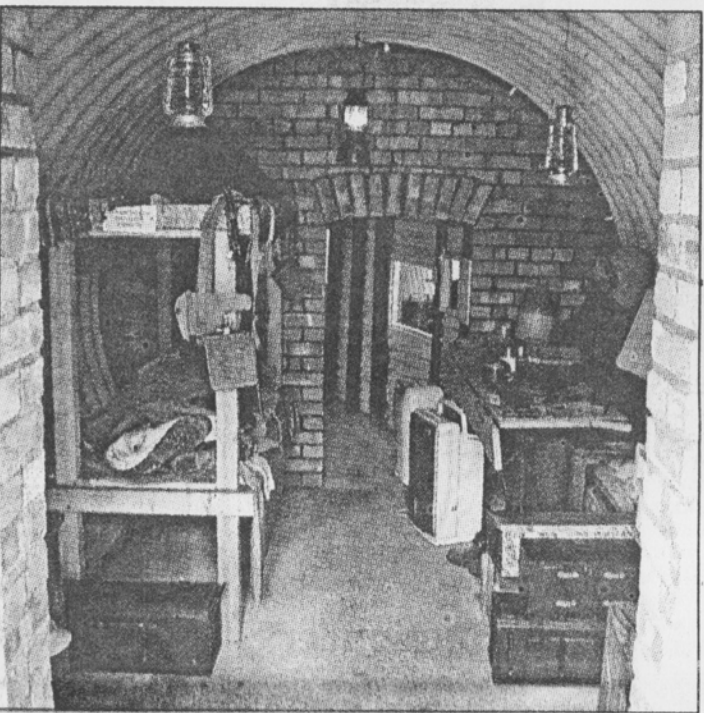


Nigel Talbot-Ponsonby beside a wartime tunnel his father started to excavate in the vaults of Langrish House



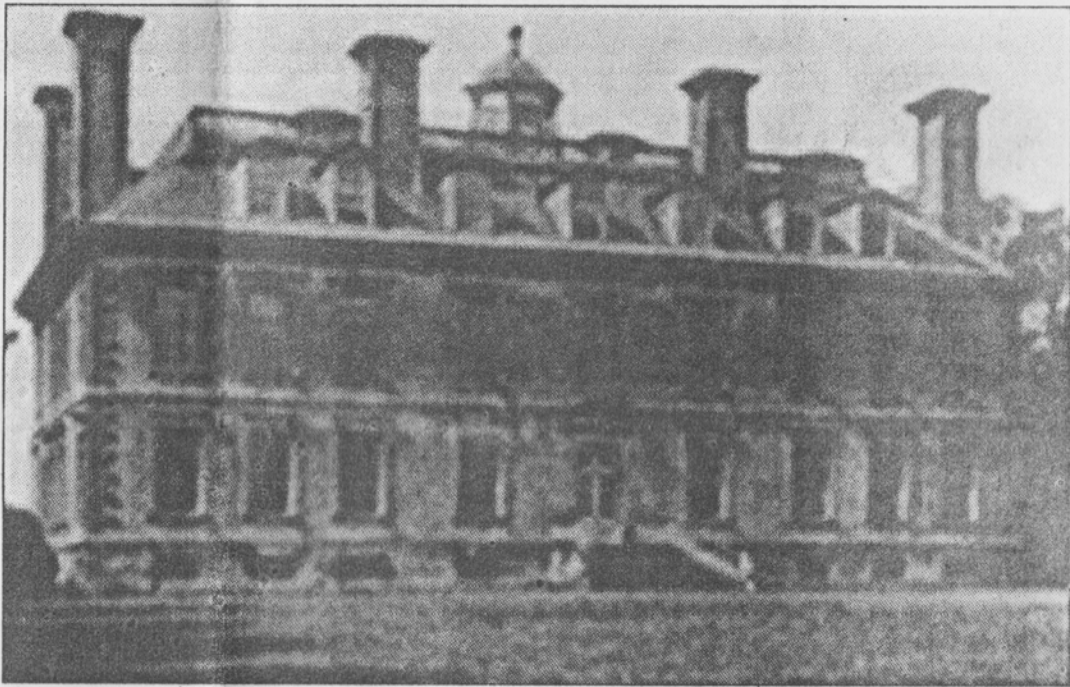
Mock-up of an escape hatch

Photo: Paula Sykes



A mock-up of an underground OB

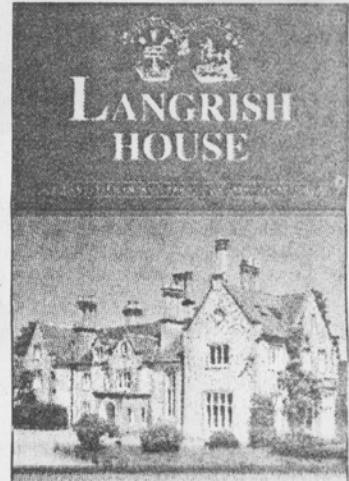
Photo: CART



Coleshill House, the Auxiliary Units' HQ and training base. It burnt down in 1952



An operations base (OB) Photo: Steve Bulmer, ER Brockdale Aux Patrol



The hotel and restaurant brochure