

Of the later War Years- Auxiliary Units.

"Should you ask me whence these stories,
Whence these Legends and Traditions, with
their nasty sounds of banging, and their
smells of smoke and almonds, I should
answer, I should tell you, tales they are
of Home Defences, of a very secret movement...."

W. Joyce. Apologies to Longfellow.

These words, a parody on Longfellow's Hiawatha, were written by a retired Bank Manager named Joyce, who was a member of the North Devon Auxiliary Unit. The poem goes on to tell of the formation and training of these Units.

Soon after the fall of France, Winston Churchill decreed that a Resistance movement should be set up in the occupied countries of Europe, (Set Europe Ablaze! he said.) Having got this underway, he turned his thoughts to the British Isles, and the very real prospect of a successful German invasion of this country.

The Home Defences at this time consisted of the Regular and Territorial troops that had escaped from Dunkirk, and the newly-formed Local Defence Volunteers. (L.D.V.) later known as the Home Guard.

Churchill recognised the need for a British resistance movement, similar to those set up on the Continent, who would be used to sabotage and harass the German forces, should they invade and occupy Britain and so the Auxiliary Units were born.

These units were formed from selected volunteers who, by reason of age or occupation were not eligible to serve in the Regular forces. As such, they included farmers, factory workers and students, like myself. (By this time I was studying for my Professional Examinations.)

As a "cover" these units were given the name of Auxiliary Units, and were provided with similar uniforms to the Home Guard, their regimental badge being that of their County Regiment. They were, however, distinguished by their Battalion Number, which in the South of England was 203, and by the weapons they carried, usually a revolver and the Fairburn dagger or fighting knife.

They trained in secret and never paraded with the Home Guard, considering themselves the elite of G.H.Q. Home Forces, under whose auspices they came. Members were recruited by personal contact, were subject to a strict vetting procedure and required to sign the Official Secrets Act.

Each patrol of up to ten men, operated from an O.B (Operational Base.) or "hideout". These were underground bases, hidden in dense woods or other inaccessible places, constructed, sometimes by the patrol themselves, but more often by sections of the Royal Engineers.

These bases contained stocks of food, explosives and armaments, sufficient to maintain the unit, and included such comforts as rudimentary beds and chemical toilets.

In each county, a company of Regular troops was responsible for the organisation and training of these units, and this is what my brother Roy was doing before he joined the S.A.S Regiment.

Whilst I had been quite happy carrying out my A.R.P duties, I longed for something more active and adventurous, and it was through my relationship with Roy that I was recruited in the Auxiliary Unit, based in Barnstaple.

Our O.B. was, in fact, at a place called Spreacombe, between Braunton and Croyde, and it was in the woods there that we trained. Although I enjoyed shooting with revolver or Sten gun, my main interest was in explosives, of which we had an ample stock, and devices for sabotage and fire-raising which had been especially designed for the use of Resistance movements by Churchill's "Boffins".

Hence the "sounds of banging and the smells of smoke and almonds" referred to in the heading to this chapter.

One of the explosives, I think, blasting gelignite, had a distinctive almond smell, whilst another, known as "808" left you with a nasty headache after handling it.

The National training base was near the little village of Highworth in Wiltshire, and our training manual (Disguised as The Countryman's Diary 1939 !) boasted that "Highworths Fertilisers do their stuff unseen-until you see-Results!"

The full story of the Auxiliary Units is told in the book, "The Last Ditch." by David Lampe.

I was proud to serve in this force, which, although the need never arose, would, I think, have inflicted considerable damage on any occupying troops.

Having said that, and in the light of what happened in France, I doubt that our resistance would have lasted more than a few weeks, and I dread to think what would have been the fate of the local townsfolk and, particularly, my parents, which would have resulted from our underground activities.. Little did my mother realise that the wooden box under my bed contained enough explosive to make a nasty mess of Lynton House, had I been careless!

The Auxiliary Units were disbanded in November 1944, following the successful D-Day landings in France, and most of our weapons and explosives were handed in for use in the last battles of the war. A few odd sticks of explosive remained, and these were disposed of in a field outside Barnstaple on Firework night 1944, much to the dismay of the local residents, and a herd of Jersey cows grazing there!

The patrols from all over Devon were assembled in Exeter, where we were officially "stood down".

Apart from the odd mention in other war-time histories, the existence of Britain's Secret Army has never received much publicity or recognition, but the letters which were sent to all members are recognition enough, as was the Defence Medal which accompanied them.

30 Nov.1944.

c/o G.P.O. Highworth.
Nr.Swindon. Wilts.

The War Office has ordered that the Operational Side of Auxiliary Units shall stand down. This is due to the greatly improved war situation and the strategic requirements of the moment.

I realize what joining Auxiliary Units has meant to you; so do the officers under my command. You were invited to do a job which would require more skill and coolness, more hard work and greater danger than was demanded of any other voluntary organization. In the event of "Action Stations" being ordered you knew well the kind of life you were in for. But that was in order; you were picked men, and others, including myself, knew that you would continue to fight whatever the conditions, with, or, if necessary without, orders.

It now falls to me to tell you that your work has been appreciated and well carried out, and that your contract, for the moment, is at an end.

I am grateful to you for the way you have trained in the last four years. So is the Regular Army.... It was due to your reputation for skill and determination that extra risk was taken- successfully as it turned out,- in the defence arrangements of this country during that vital period. I congratulate you on this reputation and thank you for this voluntary effort.

In view of the fact that your lives depended on secrecy, no public recognition will be possible. But those in the most responsible positions at General Headquarters, Home Forces, know what was done, and what would have been done, if you had been called upon.

They know it well. It will not be forgotten.

(signed) Frank W.R.Douglas.
Colonel. Commander Auxiliary Units.

18 Nov.1944.

G.H.Q. Home Forces.

To;- Commander Auxiliary Units.

In view of the improved war situation, It has been decided by the War Office that the Operational Branch shall stand down, and the time has come to put an end to an organization which would have been of inestimable value to this country in the event of invasion.

All ranks under your command are aware of the secret nature of their duties. For that reason it has not been possible for them to receive publicity, nor will it be possible even now. So far from considering this to be a misfortune, I should like all members of Auxiliary Units to regard it as a matter of special pride.

I have been much impressed by the devotion to duty and high standard of training shown by all ranks. The careful preparations, the hard work undertaken in their own time, their readiness to face the inevitable dangers of their role, are all matters which reflect the greatest credit on the body of picked men who form Auxiliary Units.

I should be glad, therefore, if my congratulations and best wishes could be conveyed to all ranks.

(signed) H.E.Franklyn. General
Commander-in-Chief. G.H.Q. Home Forces.

Letters sent to all members of Aux.Units, after disbandment.