

## **George Salter – Bovey Patrol**

Born at Gatcombe Farm, brought up at Woodhead Farm in Branscombe and farmed at Ashdown Farm.

Transcript of interview recoded at George and Ina Salter's home on Monday November 7<sup>th</sup> 2005.

“During the war I was a member of the local Home Guard (Local Defence Volunteers) Special Unit, formed and trained separately to disrupt any German invasion force should they attempt to form a bridgehead in the Axe Valley.

We were local young men drawn from farming families and farm workers. Country people who had a detailed knowledge of the countryside. ‘Woody’ Wood, who drove a motorcycle and side car, led the group. I remember three brothers from Bovey Barston; Leonard, Harold and Eddie Pike and also Reg Quick and Norman Barlett as other members of the Unit.

We were sent up to an Army base near Oxford for training in the use of small arms - a revolver, knives – and their care, cleaning etc. We also learned how to handle prime and set times on Anneleese [sp?] bombs, the use of detonators, ring pull trip wires, and the use of plastic explosives. We were shown how to attach this explosive onto the tracks of tanks and set the timers. We set up booby traps and we practiced in the derelict group of old buildings at Higher Gatcombe Farm between Holyford Woods and A3052 (now demolished).

We practiced with explosives by blowing up old farm machinery. On one occasion explosives were used in the River Axe when some fish were killed. We also had regular target practice with revolvers, rifles and bayonets. I cannot remember the gentleman known as Commander Howes (a naturalised American sailor) who lived in Colyford and who was involved with this special unit. We had no contact with the normal Home Guard and did not parade with them or attend lectures.

The unit operated for over three years and was active within the restricted area behind the cliffs at Branscombe. This area was wired, barbed wired and mined. We helped construct two dug out underground bunkers large enough for 5 or 6 people to live underground for a period of 7-10 days. These were reached through a camouflaged trap door via a set of steps leading to an underground chamber with

table, chairs and bunks. There was food stored for 7-10 days, mostly tin biscuits etc. There were no cooking facilities.

We wore regulation Army uniforms of Khaki serge with Army boots – great coats etc. I remember one occasion when the trapdoor of our dug out was pulled too tightly shut and two of us fainted and had to be pulled out to be brought round. Of the two dug outs, one was located at Margan Hayes Cover, approximately opposite Lea Croft Farm. The other dug out was located in Bovey Down, close to Hangman's Stone. I think these have now disappeared but may have been photographed in the 1960s.

I believe there was a special allowance of petrol for our unit. We had an identity card with photograph. My memories of the wartime, the rationing and how local farms killed pigs for pork and bacon. Rabbits were also important for food. The 'War Agricultural Committee' ordered Stafford Common to be ploughed. Gorse, heather and bracken were ploughed with a heavy-duty 'prairie buster' plough and then the whole Common was planted with potatoes. Up to twenty land girls and German prisoners of war helped to harvest the potatoes and store them in clamps covered in bracken, straw and soil.

We heard the German bombers flying over to bomb Bristol and Cardiff and heard the bombing of Exeter. The sky was lit up with the flames of Exeter burning during the Blitz. For the last year of the War the special unit was disbanded and I joined the Branscombe Home Guard. We took it in turns to do look out duties from the cliff.

Thanks to Colyton Historical Society.