

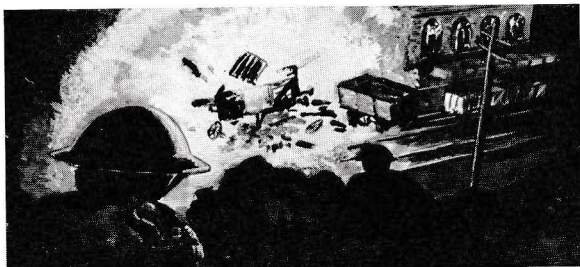
By day he was manager of Bedlington branch . . . at week-ends a but by night he was Group Commander in the North East's wartime

Major in the 'secret arm

ROBERT HALL: RESISTANCE LEADER

UNKNOWN to the populace, throughout the invasion 'scare years' of 1940-41 the North East had its own secret army of freedom fighters. These locally recruited part-timers were trained for their ultimate task of sabotage and destruction if the Germans ever landed by undertaking the testing of the defences of airfields and army headquarters in the area.

Another role, until now concealed by their pledge of secrecy, was that of bodyguard to the Royal Family during residence at Balmoral. The authorities feared attack from German paratroopers who might have landed with orders to kidnap or even kill the King, Queen and the two Princesses.



One group of freedom fighters was composed almost entirely of Bedlington miners and led by Mr Robert Hall, then aged 42 and Manager of our Bedlington branch. Mr Hall lived three roles. By day he was the respectable bank manager; at week-ends he was a Home Guard major; his third, more secret role, he played out at night.

'Obviously, my wife never knew what I was up to. But I had been appointed a group commander of the resistance in our area and most of our training had to take place in darkness. It was not until years later that I dared tell her what I'd been up to. It was safer for her not to know because if the invasion had come she would have nothing to tell interrogators.'

Mr Hall was recruited to the secret army shortly after the outbreak of war. He was a first war veteran who

already carried hand wounds from the Battle of Passchendaele. The Halls lived in a semi-detached house in Bedlington—a house with a difference. Stored at one time in the wooden garage were 'enough plastic explosives, gelnite, detonators and other paraphernalia to blow up not only Bedlington, but Ashington, Morpeth and Blyth to boot.'

Mr Hall personally recruited each man in his five patrols for 'maquis' work in Bedlington, Chevington, Stobswood, Ellington and Cramlington. They were then despatched to a secret headquarters at Colesworth House, in the south, for training in unarmed combat, demolition, fieldcraft and blowing up railways. Each man recruited was told that if he was wounded after occupation and proved a hindrance to his colleagues—he would be shot.

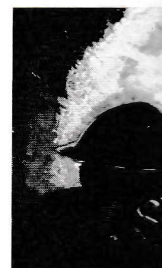
'I suppose that in the event I would have carried out that distasteful job,' said Mr Hall. 'But you must remember the feeling of the times. They were, of course, quite desperate and invasion seemed very likely.'

'The patrol members had to know the truth to a large extent and were told what to expect if the Germans came. In spite of family responsibilities, they volunteered to a man. I had a splendid bunch of chaps—mostly all pitmen—even today I regard them as the salt of the earth. Frankly, I recruited them on unusual grounds. I liked to hear of troublemakers, rabble-rousers and fighters. Or the chaps who obviously wanted excitement. I would then interview them to try and establish their adaptability to the job required. Then they had to sign the Official Secrets Act—and as an additional incentive to secrecy it was sometimes mentioned they'd be shot if they broke silence!'

Among the first tasks required of the newly-formed Bedlington group was to establish suitable places for their underground hideouts. Some, Mr Hall recalled, were 'gems' of ingenuity. They were situated at widely-scattered points throughout the area. One at Stannington was next to a stream.

'It was almost on the Bedlington-Morpeth boundary

in a small wood entrance. At Stannington was a pit heap, in the Acklington area a tree. The entrance



Each hideout was a bunker for nine months, explosives concealed 'air' in the woods. The balanced rollers. It would be inside the clump pulling a small

'On another lawn about 100 yards bunker beneath I discovered—grass—that it was stick attached to concealment place Bedlington. T Mr Hall. 'When Their fieldcraft could actually proved it to me rabbit in a field remember his poacher—said.'