

James H. Renwick Memories

After the fall of France in 1940, it was decided by the government that beside the Home Guard there should be an underground intelligence service, recruited from local people, which in the event of a German invasion would stay behind the enemy lines and collect information to pass on to the British Army.

In late 1943, I was transferred from the Home Guard to this service. (I forget what it was called, but as it was a secret service it probably had an ambiguous name.)

It was by this time well organised and had a network of radio stations scattered throughout the country. These stations were set up by the regular army and were most cunningly concealed. The one I operated was near Harting.

A little over half a mile on the Petersfield road from Harting a lane leads off to the right, round the base of a small hill called Torbury Hill. A tunnel was dug west to east under the shoulder of the hill. To enter it, you had to find a particular small tree stump (among many others). Clearing away the earth and leaves disclosed a trap door to which the stump was attached. This hinged up to allow access to a chamber about six feet square and perhaps eight feet deep. It was lined with larch posts, set vertically, and apparently had no exit. However, in one of the posts was drilled a hole approximately a quarter of an inch in diameter. A piece of fencing wire pushed into the hole tripped a catch. A section of the wall could then be swung back, allowing access to a tunnel similarly lined with larch, and at the other end – on the other side of the ridge – was an exit similar to the entry. This was to be used only in an emergency and I never went through it. The radio room was off the main tunnel through another concealed door.

I had to make contact once a week with my control station – whose call sign was Houston – and pass messages in code. A fairly simple code, which was changed every day, was used. It consisted of a board containing 676 squares (26 x 26). In each of these squares was a letter, a number, a suffix or prefix, or a word.

Along the top and down the left hand side of the board were slots into which could be inserted strips marked with the letters of the alphabet. To encode a message, you found the word you wanted on the board and then read off the co-ordinating letters at the top and side of the board. If the word wanted was not on the board – as, for instance, a place name – it might have to be built up letter by letter.