

Churchill's secret army in Cornwall – new information discovered on St Ive patrol

More information on Cornwall Aux Units still needed by the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART)

In 1940 the prospect of a Nazi invasion was a very real one. Britain, having lost most of its military equipment in the Dunkirk invasion, was to all pretence and purposes on its knees.

The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV), later renamed as the Home Guard had just been formed famously armed with pitch forks and ancient weapons. However, a group of civilian volunteers were being put together to help resist the initial stages of any invasion.

The Auxiliary Units, were patrols of 6-8 men in reserved occupations or under or over the age to join the regular forces. They were formed into units the length of the country, from The Orkneys to Cornwall, along the east and south coasts, with the full support of Churchill. They were dug operational bases, underground bunkers where they would disappear as soon as the invading army entered their area. From there they would come out at night to cause as much chaos as possible. Destroying transport and transport routes, blowing up ammunition or food dumps, destroying airfields and causing as much disruption as possible to slow down the advance and give the regular forces time to recover and counter-attack. Their life expectancy for around a fortnight at most.

They were highly trained in sabotage and silent killing (some patrols had weapons to take out high ranking German officials and even British collaborators). Each man had to sign up the Official Secrets Act and told the nearest relatives and friends nothing of their role.

There were around 36 such patrols around Cornwall, and a group of researchers with the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART) have recently found further information about a patrol near St Ive.

The patrol was set up by Sergeant Jack Bice who was originally from another patrol in the Menheniot area. Also included were Charlie and Archie Barrett, with other possible members including; Reginald Kelly, Henry Body and John Kitt.

Charlie and Archie were farmers at Woodcocks Eye. Not only were they in reserved occupations but even more importantly were the first ones able to drive tractors on the farm. The attached photograph is of them at the Aux Units HQ at Coleshill House in Oxfordshire where they have taken place in national patrol competition in 1943/1944 (when the secrecy around the patrols had been lessened considerably as the threat of invasion dropped).

The man in the middle of the photograph is thought to be Lt. Bill Mewton who was in charge of the local patrols. He was a Liskeard school caretaker

However, that is all we know at the moment we are really keen to hear from any relatives of any of the patrol members, Lt. Bill Mewton or anyone with information about the whereabouts of the St Ive operational base, or indeed, any information regarding patrols in Cornwall.

Many thanks to the Barrett family for providing the information we have so far.

Please contact Nina Hannaford or Westcountry researcher on cartdevon@gmail.com.