

Extracts of George Thomas' Diary

from Roma Leon

The first training session which is in a lot more detail is held at Denbies in Dorking. This was a regular Home Guard training school. The day after he got back he reported to his new Unit.

The second training session in May 1943 must be Coleshill, but he has learned discretion by then.

The July 1943 reference is to two other members of the Ditchling Patrol

George had unique spelling which we tried to copy verbatim

December 1942.

1st. At H.G. the Major talked to N.C.Os on Patrols. I heard that I have been transfered but am retaining my arms til after I come back from the Junior Leaders Course next week, all other equipment is transfered with me.

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6th. Left home in full kit feeling very much like a pack horse and cycled as far as Keymer where I left my bike and walked the rest of the way to the station just in time to see the train come in so I couldn't get a ticket and didn't think about getting it the other end so I had to wait an hour till the next train 4-39 p.m. which arrived at Redhill 5-30.

This made a bad conection at Redhill where I had to wait till 6-00 p.m. for a train to Dorking in which we were packed 15 to the carriage. One fellow I shared my sanwiches, (which I took as emergancy ration) with had two hours to wait for a conection, so travel was taking a good slice of his leave.

Luckily there was a lorry waiting at Dorking Station for me, for 'Denbies' is perched on a hill overlooking Dorking about two miles out by road and a mile as the crow flies.

I was supposed to have arrived at 6-00 p.m. but a hot meat dinner awaited me searved by a corpral in the A.T.S. which I ate on my own as the rest of the students had gone to the lecture room where I found them later in time to hear the Standing Orders and to see a film show of the Vagso Raid. This finished about 9-30 and after exploring the part of the house we oquiped, the bar, Ante-room etc. I retired to bed.

My room companions are a Serg. Maj. from Yorkshire who came of from Dunkirk with an injured ankle and is now a P.S.I. attached to the Leicester H.G. A Seg. from the 16 London (both of these are humorists) who talks like Sid Walker and is a porter in civil life. A Srg. from Leiscestershire a huge tall fellow about 16 stone with a ruddy face and a prominent nose and grey hair going thin who played up to the humorists, and a short quiet Srg. from Devon who served in the Navy last war. All of them have very distinctive dialects and I should say have seen both sides of 50.

There are about 70 of us on the course coming from all over the country south of Yorkshire with a considerable contingent from Wales, from Majors down to L/Corprals. I am the only representative of Sussex and apart from London none of the other counties seem to have more than two.

It was interesting guessing what the letters of the flashes meant LON and COL are both London BRG Birmingham and COV Coventry were the only towns with flashes the rest were county ones. Shropshire and Norfolk have coloured flashes like the regulars which seems a much better idea although they had to pay for them.

Camp beds with biscuite mattresses, pillows and four blankets were provided so I slept very well, till Revelie at 0700 hrs.

7th. We had breakfast at 7-45 of porridge, sausages potatoes and fried bread, bread butter and treacle and tea. This was followed by 30 min. drill on the drive in front of the house by Capt. Webb D.C.M. He is a cockney, straight as a ram rod, very straight mouth, a R.S.M. voice and almost bald so he is never seen in a field service cap. The drill was very ragged which is natrual with fifty different Regements drilling together for the first time but he says by the end of the week its different. This was followed by half an hour talk in the lecture room on the opperational role of the Home Guard by the Commandant Lieut. Colonel Nicholls a short thick set man with a round head and strong glasses. He has many quaint mannerisims when he is speaking and has a touch of wit which holds his audiance well.

At 10-30 we loaded into trucks and were driven to Brockam Pits for demonstrations of weapon characteristics and the boys using the weapons knew their job too and put over a good show which would give any-boby confidence in the weapons at our disposal. They also gave examples of fire control and fire penetration. A bullet takes some stopping.

We finished up with Battle Inoquulation which was good. We came under fire from mortars and showered with gravel but covering fire from machine guns firing tracers over our heads cleared the mortars and we continued to advance and coming into some trenches filled with smoke and gas so thick that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. One Lieutenant with a leaking mask panicked and boy oh boy did the officer in charge tick him off for he went down to the ground groaning as if his last moment had come.

While we were gropeing along trenches land mines started to go off above us and did the chalk fly, there were bits the size of tennis balls bangging down on our helmets and arms, one bit numbed my wrist for me. There was a lot of blast from these too and it seemed to press the air down in the trench on to you.

We all survived but coming home to dinner in the trucks the gas coming up of our clothes made everybodies eyes smart.

Dinner at 1-15 p.m. was soup, tongue greens and potatoes and sweet.

The rest of the day was spent between the lecture room and the dinning hall. Between dinner and tea at five, Capt. Webb spoke on the Tactical handling of Sub-Artillery and was that hard to keep awake, sitting in a warm room after a good meal when you are used to working in the open.

After tea there was a lantern show on the principles of concealment by Capt. Penrose of the Royal Sussex who used to help at the Burwash Field-Craft School in the early days of the H.G.

Dinner at 7-15 p.m. Soup, beef greens and potatoes. Treacle pudding, biscuits and cheese and coffee. The food was exellent and the service by the A.T.S. would make most restruant mangers green with envy.

The last secion of the day from 8-15 to 9-30 on the tactical handling of Automatic Weapons was taken by Capt Cormack of the Seaforths who was in dress uniform. He is about 6 ft. with a long oval head, black hair parted high on right side of head thinning back on his forhead and on top, blue eyes, long straight nose, thin clipped moustache full length of lip and a strong chin.

A very interesting talker illustrating it with episodes from Dieppe and other places.

8th. We had grilled herrings for breakfast, which was most thoughtless on the caters part for it was followed by half an hours drill in respirators. From that we went to half an hours talk on battle drill followed by a perfect demonstration of it parade ground fashion outside. We returned to the lecture room for another lantern show on Concealment from the air with some photos of denbies from the air showing the effects of camoflague on Nisen Huts also saw how difficult it is to hide tank ditches, how an upturned face shows up and how tracks reveal things.

After lunch we took a stroll round the park noteing the concealment of weapons during which we saw a Smith Gun which was the only one I hadn't seen or handled before of all the H.G. weapons. It looks a useful bit of work.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in the L.R. describing a T.E.W.T. for tommorrow and instruction on Appreciations and Orders which is the main object of a T.E.W.T.

Capt. Nielson R. Fus. gave this instruction and he is a very clear fast talker, so fast that last week some of the Welsh students asked him to talk slower as they had to think in Welsh. He has very blue eyes which are even noticable at the back of the hall. He looks in his twenties, is very hansome with full length brown bushy moustache tapering to points but not waxed. He has a strong chin, long straight nose and dark brown hair parted high left side of his head.

Dinner is a formal meal and we have to wait till the Commandant takes his seat before sitting down and likewise after he must start the smoking and leave the table first. All other meals you start when you arrive and get up when you finish. Dinner tonight was soup, steak and kidney pie potatoes and peas, trifle, biscuits and cheese and 'dolls house' cups of coffee.

After dinner there was a film show of a night patrol which I saw at Hassocks the other Sunday but there was an interesting discusion on it afterwards with everyone finding the faults which the 'instructors' made.

After a short visit to the Ante-Room where I wrote a short letter home and a glance in at the bar which is in the basement I retired to bed which is on the fourth floor. The lift is not working so we climb stone steps round the lift shaft. 80 of them from the bar to the fourth floor.

Our room is conected by a communicating door with a much larger room with a big bay window in which there are twelve beds. The house is U shaped with the closed end where our room is facing East and we look out of our window on to one of the prettiest views I have ever seen, Dorking snuggling in the valley guarded by Radnor Hill and Box Hill to the S.W. and N.E. respectivly and gently rising wooded land to the S.W. while to the South is undulating tree studded land stretching away to the blue distance of the South Downs just visable on a clear day.

The South Wing of the house is still oquiped by Lord Ashcombe and we are in the North and East sections or rather part of them for on our floor there are five large rooms connected to small rooms like ours along one side of the corridoor while on the other side which is the inside of the U are bath rooms and W.Cs, three of each. There is a grand staircase which would take about eight abreast on it which twists down in four flights with a wooden bannister. This is roped off but boy would you be travelling at the bottom if you slid down it if you took the corners safely.

9th. Marched to Dorking directly after breakfast for the T.E.W.T. and strolled round the town planning a defence of the place which is not quite so picturesqe as it looked from Denbies but the view is wonderfull all round with the view to Radmore Hill to the N.E. crowned by the Georgian Mansion of Denbies just showing above the beech trees of the parkland.

We were split up into syndicats for this exercise and not one of us gave exactly the same defence scheme as the School, but they do not claim that theirs is the best scheme but it was well worked out.

We went back to lunch in open order and were quite ready for it after the uphill climb.

The afternoon was spent in the L.R. where we had 'Clearing a House' 'Clearing a Street' 'Verbal Orders' and 'Setting and Conducting an Exercise'.

Capt. Cormack strikes you as the best instructor for he concludes we know quite a lot about the subject being N.C.Os and Officers and keeps us thinking for ourselves on the subject for he will suddenly fire a question at someone to keep our full attention, although he is a very interesting type of speaker and could command attention without that characteristic.

He took the 'Verbal Orders' and told the Officers to tell their N.C.Os What not How to do the job. To give orders and not 'coffee houses'. To be brief and relevant and gave us several ways of remembering all we wanted to tell ie:- 11 MAI; In Italy Mussolini Always Interfers. and the best of the lot Aye Aye M.A.C. which all remind you of the sequence Information (a) of Enemy (b) of own Troops.

Inter-communications. Re-arranged signals rather than timing.

Intention

Method.

Administration.

Inter-Communications. Pre-arranged signals rather than timing.

Always 'Any Questions?'

After dinner all the tables were cleared and we held a Brains Trust in the Dining Hall with the Commandant in the chair and all the other instructors present and I got the impression that we are very up to date in our area. One fellow stumped the Trust for the first time by a problem he was set when acting as umpire in an exercise between his unit some Dutch and Polish troops in which the opponents really came to grips and he wanted to know what he could do when neither side knew the others language or English.

When it was finished the air was thick with smoke although it is very high pitched and the A.T.S. had to stay up late to lay breakfast after we had cleared out.

10th. Letter from home with birthday greetings, they say that Peggy is pretty well lost without either Frank or me at home.

We had outdoor battlecraft directly after breakfast so all dressed in denams. The fog was drifting up out of the valley and it took a long time to get light and visibility was very short. I had to place out a squa[...] in a hasty defence position and was thankful of having had some practice at it before. The instructor only stressed various points.

Afterwards we had to apply Battle drill to a piece of common-land and was it wet for crawling. We changed directly we got in and dried our denims on the radiator while we were having lunch, after which we changed back again for clearing the wood at the bottom of the valley of a small enemy force. The weather was kind and it was pretty dry in the wood.

After tea Capt. Cormack gave the most interesting talk of the week on Patrols. He stressed the point of stopping to listen while on Recce Patrols by a story of an exercise in Scotland where a H.G. Coy. attacked an airdrome defended by the R.A.F. Reg. The R.A.F. had a standing patrol out but they got worried at H.Q. because no messages were coming back and all seemed quiet so they sent out another patrol to contact them but this also failed to return for the H.G. mostly deer-stalkers had sent out a patrol which had laid up and mapped out the movements of the R.A.F. patrol and then silently taken them picking off the last man first and so on up the patrol.

Talking about silent weapons he said that Frank Levy who is a geruila expert would tell you always to hold your thumb up the blade he said 'To feel the sympathy as it goes in.'

After dinner he really enjoyed himself for he took N.C.Os on Verbal Orders. I had to give orders to my squad to take up a fire position to give covering fire for a right flanking movement by the other two squads.

11th. Drill this morning was quite good for we understood Capt. Webb's language. Not quite guardsmen yet though.

The weather looked very threatening but was fine apart from a few spatters. We had message writing and verbal message competition outdoors followed by instruction on tank destruction by Capt Cormack in the L.R. Afterwards there was a film on the same job followed by one on tank obstacles. The little 'dollies' we originally had are hopeless but all the other ones in the district now in use are pretty efficient.

After lunch we had an exercise and it was funny the way the officers avoided falling in at the ends of ranks as it happened I had a Major and several Lieutenants in my squad, and it so came when numbering them off that the Major would be 2 I.C. so he hastily changed places with a young Welsh Lieutenant (also a Thomas) from Carmarthon. His Battalion has large blue ribbons like sporans sewn to the back of their collars.

After tea the Commandant gave a talk on the principles of instruction in which he said it was the duty of all instructors to keep their eyes open for men to take their places and to give them an opportunity by taking a rest on their special subjects and giving them the chance to instruct for he a fellow may listen to you twice on the same thing with interest but after that will know just what is coming and will be thinking 'Now it is just about here where old Brown brings out that story of that guy who got a sticky bomb stuck to his shoulder.' instead of noting what you are saying.

But if you retire from one subject always swot up another for you can be fresh on that.

After dinner a Staff Officer of the H.G. Directorate came along to answer questions of administration and supply. He didn't look very old but had a chest full of ribbons and knew all the answers.

After this we all retired to the bar for a sing song, all the Instructors giving a turn before we closed with Auld Lang Syne, Land of my Fathers for the Welshmen and the King.

We retired to bed just after 11-00 p.m. with a request from the Commandant not to make a lot of noise and all seemed very quiet and we had made our beds and all but the Serg Major were between the blankets when the door silently opened and two of the Welshmen clad in pyjamas slid stealthily in.

They were in room C and wanted our cooperation on a raid on room F for the purpose of seizing the Devon Captain who has acted as Company Commander for us and carrying him to the bathroom for a ducking in cold water.

The scheme went well for a start, the two big sergeants from my room went to room F and asked if they could see the Captain and when he got out of bed and came to the door they seized him and carried him between them to the waiting bath. Then things started happening for the Lance Corporal that had answered the door had seen the others filling the bath and smelt a rat so quickly mobilised the rest of the room and sallied out to the rescue before there was time to get his clothes off.

Afterwards they planned to get the Lance Corporal who had foiled the plans but it fell through as it might cause a noise and Lady Ashcombe is just recovering from a serious illness so it was decided to call it a day.

12th. A perfect sunny day. We had 15 minutes drill after breakfast and Capt Webb informed us that the drink record for the place had been broken again the previous night, 357 pints were sold.

Afterwards we had an hour and a half discussion on the course in the L.R. followed by a closing address by the Commandant in which he told us we had to train ourselves so that when the time came for action our minds would be 100% on our job and not wondering how our people were getting on at home in the next street, for unlike the Regular Army we had to fight among our own kith and kin. He said there were examples which proved we would not fail in that task, in the N.F.S. which would be putting out fires one end of the town to return home later to find their own home burnt and in the A.R.P. services who spent hours rescuing others to return home to find others digging for their relatives.

The course finished at 10-15 a.m. and the majority collected haversack lunch and were taken in trucks straight to the stations. 19 of us however remained to lunch in the dinning hall at 11-30 spending the hour while waiting reading the papers in the Ante-room or in the bar.

I caught the 12-30 train from Dorking Town Station and by sprinting under the sub-way at Redhill I managed to catch a fast train to Brighton arriving there at 2-30 p.m. I left my kit in the booking office and strolled round Brighton looking at the shops which didn't look very much like Xmas and were not so crowded as I expected to see them so close to Xmas.

I eventually made my way to the Odeon where I saw 'Coastal Command' which has 'Target for Tonight' beaten all ends up, and this was supported by 'Are Husbands Nessasyry' which was quite ammusung.

From there I went to Harris's for a great plate full of Spratts and Chips roll and butter and coffee which cost me 1/6, and from there I went over the road to the S.S. but they had no skates for hire so I went up in the balcony and watched for an hour and the ice sure was crowded.

Came home on the 9-28 p.m. and worked out that the week had cost me just £1 which included 9/- messing fee at Denbies which I can reclaim from Battalion.

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15th December 1942

Reported to new Unit H.G. henceforth comment brief or non-existent.

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May 1943

14th. Harrowed the ground I cleared of broccoli and then got ready for ----- . We left home at 13-30 hrs Dick driving me up to Staplefield where I changed over to -----'s car which is an S. S. and holds the road at 60 liked the '8' at 30.

It was a scorching hot day and it was a perfect trip. We passed through a great variety of farming country and I noticed that the wire-worm had had been busy on the corn on lots of the hillland. We passed one trainer drome with planes practicing landings and takings off, it was miles away from anywhere and gave a couple of young trainers a lift to the nearest town and they said it was the first drome they took the air from. They both still had down on their faces.

We arrived at our destination at 17-00 hrs. in time for tea. Most of the other fellows from all over England Scotland and Wales came in time for dinner at 19-30 hrs. which was a four course

meal. We dine in the officers mess.

After dinner there was an opening address on the object of the course followed by Churchill's speech on the Birthday of the Home Guard, and then a lecture on Orders after which we were each given a scheme to prepare orders for. Bed 1-00 a.m.

15th. Breakfast 8-00 a.m. followed by a full days work during which we inspected planes, tanks, etc. and all the time was spent discussing farming with a grand bunch of fellows from all over the country.

The Scottish fellows were well dressed when they arrived as there was six inches of snow on the ground when they left Scotland. They all slept in the same hut as us and we had a bit of a party tonight so were as late to bed again tonight.

16th. Had to lecture on one of the eight subjects picked at random for five minutes. I didn't mind which I got and had only covered the first half of my subject in 5 min. but I couldn't keep it going for that long. Had lunch and left for home at 12-30 p.m. and caught the 4-27 at Horsham for Brighton where I had tea and then spent the rest of the evening skating.

When skating finished I went up to the station to catch the 10-28 p.m. which was the last train showed on the board but it turned out that it didn't run on Sundays so I set out to walk home and had got as far as Pycombe before I managed to get a lift from a dispatch rider billeted at Morley's garage who gave me a lift as far as there and I got home at 11-40 p.m.

Coming home through Reading we saw a parade of about four Coys. of Home Guard with Cadet Corp, A.T.C. Naval Cadets, Scouts, Guides, Cubs, Brownies and B.R.C.S. they had three bands to march to. At several other places they had H.G. birthday parades and I hear that Sussex 16. all paraded at Lewes.

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17th July 1943

Dick, has gone on a weekend H.G. course to where I went in May. He has gone with Bert Holmes.