

Interview with Auxilier Walter Denslow aged 92

Interviewers Mr. Andrew Gregson and Miss Chris Pickersgill from Colyton Grammar School

What do you remember particularly about the Home Guard Walter?

The Home Guard? Well, we were in that only a short time – in the Home Guard, and then as I said, two officers came up from Plymtree [IO Captain Edmundson from Plymouth - NH] and they were looking for men who knew the area well and also had a knowledge of Fieldcraft.

By Fieldcraft, what exactly do you mean?

Well! Fieldcraft is knowing all the objects around the surrounding area, like, and could identify them, you see and, of cause, a town person couldn't do that and we could. And then we....

That means that you had been in this area for a long time, does it? You really know the area extremely well!

That's right - we did. Yes, oh yes. All the way round and we were working on the land, you see, and we knew everywhere. And, then we had to find a cave to operate from, called OB we called it.

What does that stand for, OB?

Operation Base.

Right! OK.

And then, we went, and then the army offered us a Nissen Hut and we put that underground after weeks of labour with two trapdoors, one for escape and one for entry. We camouflaged it and, and when we left the trapdoor, we covered it with leaves and put a tree over it. A branch of a tree over it.

And that was every time you left, was it?

Every time we left, yes.

So, would you have been living there permanently once the Nissen hut had been buried?

Yes. When we got it all ready, we stayed nights in it, and went from there and done patrols throughout the covers, you know, in the woods and that.

Which woods would these be?

Well, there's Morganhayes Cover and Wicksin Cover, that's two and in fact, we went anywhere really.

How big an area were you expected to patrol? How big an area would it be?

Well, it was miles I suppose really.

Miles!

Yes. We could travel 5 to 6 miles a night, like easily.

And what sort of hours would you have been patrolling then? Yes, how long? Would you have started work at 8 o'clock or 9 o'clock or?

Well particularly, we started in the evening doing patrols, you know, and when it was dark, of course, we finished work early on the farms, and then we had to go on these patrols. And then, they brought us some ammunition and guns and taught us how to shoot and we had to be very efficient at that, and we practised and practised and practised, because they told us that we had to be accurate enough with a gun to hit a man's eye at fifty yards, because if you done that, he would die without alarming the rest of the sentries. And, of course, we did get very professional at it.

What sort of guns did you have?

We had Sten guns.

Can you tell me about a Sten gun?

Well, Sten guns are an automatic gun, with rapid fire, and quite a simple gun. They invented it during the war, I think.

Was it easy to carry around with you?

Yes, we used to carry that sometimes, but chiefly, we had rifles. We had a 303 rifle, a .22 rifle and a revolver. A Smith and Wesson .38 Revolver.

And each person would have been, have been armed with all those things, would they?

Oh yes

Right! And so, you were trained in what circumstances you would need to use (Walter - That's right!) which weapon.

But the object of the whole thing, you see, was to - if the Germans invaded us, which was expected at that time, we had to let them pass over us, and we had to go to the OB, let them pass over us, and come up behind, in the night and destroy all the things we could. Tanks etc.

So, you were expecting a land invasion at that time (Walter – oh absolutely, yes) rather than coming over by air.

That's why. It was Churchill who invented it.

So where did you expect them to land if you thought they would be going past Morganhayes Cover?

Well, on the shores, all up through. There were patrols from, almost from, Lands' End right to Dover you see. Patrols of seven men. And well, my brother was one of them. And then there was a Mr Leonard Pike and his brothers, and two more farmers, but we didn't see a lot of them after we formed the Patrol. They were so busy on the land and that.

Did you suggest that you were doing a day's work first, on the farm and then you were up all night?

Yes, yes.

And how many days a week, or how many nights a week, would you be patrolling?

We would be patrolling about twice a week.

Right!

Sometimes we would be called extra, because other Patrols came to visit us, and if one of them was coming, then we used to go and meet them you see. We had an old building, you know the Tower here, the Water Tower up the top there?

The Seaton Water Tower? Yes!

Well, if you go towards Sidmouth about ½ a mile, there's an old building down on the right, down across a field, that's where we used to meet, there.

And did you have a uniform?

Oh yes. I've got the pictures of it there.

So, would this be the exact sort of uniform that the Home Guard would have been wearing? There's nothing to distinguish.

Ah no, there wasn't much difference in the uniform. I was just thinking of all the army uniform I had. And, of course, we had the revolvers, you can see there, one revolver there, see?

Ah yes, yes.

Three left-hand ones from America.

Left-hand ones?

Yes, see, it's on the left. They never had any right-hand ones.

So, you are right-handed, are you?

Yes.

And was it difficult to use as a result?

We used to carry them behind and then you could take them, like that.

Right! So why did the Americans make all left-handed ones, or were these the surplus ones?

They couldn't supply us with, not the Americans couldn't, not all of us, not with right-handed ones, because we don't carry guns in this country, but the Americans got a lot, and they sent over those, because they were left-hand ones and they didn't use them so much.

Right, O.K.

So where were we?

So, presumably, this special unit had been formed in 1940, had it? Do you remember when it was first formed?

It says on that -1 think it does, doesn't it?

July, 1940.

Yes, that's what I thought, yes.

And that's when you first started it?

To '44. Yes, well then, of course, they started training us with explosives, and to make bombs, and told us where to put them on the tanks and the tracks of the tank. Not on the tank itself, because, if you ruin the track of a tank, it's useless.

Right!

You see. And we done a lot of, well actually I don't know why they picked me to use the explosives a lot, because the other chaps were nervous of it, and I, it didn't seem to affect me. I don't know why, but it didn't. And in fact, after the war an officer came home and said that I should take it on as a living, because I wasn't nervous with it.

So, you expected to find the Germans in the middle of the night, without them seeing you hopefully, and sort of booby-trap their tanks.

Yeh. We had to get into their supplies, and we practised going into the British camps overnight. We went into the Beer Head one, Long-tailed Titmouse, the head one there, and we had to get in and out without being caught. We had rockets to put time pencils on. Time Pencils, I don't know whether you know about that?

No, I don't!

Shall I explain it?

Yes please.

Well Time Pencil is - there was five different colours on the Time Pencils, and that means five different times, that they would go off. The first one was a half an hour, and so on, right up to 4 hours. And how it worked - if you'd like me to explain the Time Pencils, shall I?

Yes please.

Well, one end, you pushed the safety fuse in, a spark would set it off. And the top end, there was a fluid in the top end of the Time Pencil, and when you squeezed that it ate through a little wire that held on the spring. The spring and plunger went down, knocked the cap, set fire to the safety fuse and, I suppose, a detonator and then explosive.

And what was the purpose of these?

Well, if we got into the camp of the Germans you see, we could put these down, put the Time Pencils going, and be well away, before they went off.

Right!

You see, if we had a long way to go, we'd have a longer time on the time pencils. So....

And how much damage would it do?

Oh well, it depends how much gelignite you put in it. We had loads of them, we had enough in the OB to blow up Beer.

Oh. I see!

Yes. We could put bundles of it in and connect it up you see, and we used detonators about that long, as big as a pencil and you pushed it into the explosive with the safety shears, and that would set the explosive off. And, so that's how we were taught to do the explosive. And we had to practice getting in the camps and out again and without being caught. We were caught once along Beer Head.

So, the English in the camp didn't know when you were coming? It was a...

They didn't know we were coming, no! They didn't know, and we got in Long-tailed Titmouse and out again, and nobody knew, until the rockets went off. And nobody caught.

That must have been a shock for the people there?

Yes, but they caught us out at Beer Head. But it was a bit amusing there, because one of the chaps, a real commando on our camp, he had the door off in 5 minutes. And he went back through the barbed wire and he got back to headquarters, and he had blood all over him. He tore through the barbed wire you see, and clothes. He was a daredevil. Oh dear!

And so, how did you try and approach the camps? Were you crawling on all-fours?

On all-fours, yes, quietly.

Or, on your stomach?

Oh yes, you couldn't go upright, you had to go on all-fours, just crawl and choose the darkest spots like, behind the place. But it was very nerve-racking. But the most difficult job I had to do, they picked us up one night in army trucks, we didn't know where we were going like. They took us down to a place called Thorverton I believe it was. Do you know Thorverton?

Yes, I used to go to Thorverton.

There was a hall there, and seven patrols met there, and when we got there, they gave us a map. And on the map, there was just North, South, East and West and just a red dot, and in the middle of the night we had to find that dot. Strange country, black. It was very different. I had to lead Branscombe Patrol, not on my own, and I led it where I thought I found it, but they only had about half of us found our targets.

And this was, just again, as practice?

Practice, see.

So, you would expect to be given pretty accurate information about where the German camp was that you were aiming for?

That's right. 'Twas a British camp and we had to make out it was a definite German camp, and there was a deep river there and this Commando chap, he said, "you stay here", he said, "I'll swim across". And in the dark of the night, he entered this black river. And we got in and put the flash there and the time pencil and we got about 200 or 300 yards away, when it went off. That woke them up. They were big solid thunder flashes, about this big around you know.

I am quite surprised that the assumption was, that the Germans would stop at night. I would have thought that they would be keeping going at night under cover of darkness.

Well, I suppose they had to have camps where the head ones were operating from, didn't they? I should think so.

Any rate, that's what we had to do, and well then, they took us on a bomb-throwing excursion. Four different kinds of bombs I threw. I don't know why they picked me, they did, to do it. One was a sticky bomb. It had metal casing. We pulled up the casing, pulled out the pin and when you lobbed it onto whatever it was, a tank or anything, it would stick there until it went off. About four seconds. The other, was a flask, just like an ordinary fireman flask, and you threw that one, and that exploded on contact. And then, there was another one, the Mills bomb. The ordinary Mills bomb (like a hand grenade). But the one I didn't like was what they call the AW bomb.

I've heard of those. I haven't heard of the Mills bomb.

It's a fire bomb, and if you smash it, it would come flames everywhere it landed, and you couldn't put it out you see. Water wouldn't put it out or anything.

So, what was it?

It was the interior of the bomb that was rubber solution, Benzine and phosphorus and the only way to stop it from burning was to bury it. Keep air from it. But you come up the next day and pull back the earth and it would burst into flames again. And it would burn under water just the same. If it splashed on you, it would run right through you. An awful bomb that. Any rate we threw all those and the army came up and...

And you were practising with them live, were you?

Oh yes, practice and practice and practice again, throwing them over a mound about twelve feet high. Well, one of the chaps was nervous, and live bombs, you know, real live ones, and instead of going over the top, it landed nearly to the top, and rolled right back amongst us.

Oh gosh!

And we were very lucky. And of course, we'd been taught that if that happened, we were to drop on our faces with our helmets towards the bomb, which we did, because the Captain shouted, "DOWN". And it went off, but I think we were very lucky, because it was a sand pit, and it must have rolled into a hole and most of the force went upwards.

It could have been very nasty!

Oh, it was nasty, and only one shrapnel hit the helmet of a chap. Of course, we were flat on our faces with our helmets towards it, because there was a seven second fuse on that one, but in real mud combat, you have four seconds you see.

It's not long, is it?

No not long, but this was seven seconds and it gave us a little more time. It was nerve-racking. We had another accident. You know the Colyford bridge here, well, there's a dyke either side of that, and we had to come down through that dyke. And down through it was trip wire for the explosives and if we hit the trip wire, it went off.

And who had put the trip wire there?

Well, they, the army done it before.

The Army. And had they told you or not even mentioned it?

No, no, they didn't tell us about it you see. And, we had to find it out ourself. Of course, in real action you would have to do these things you see. And we cut down through, and several went off, but when one went off, we jumped to it, what had happened, you see, what they had done, and we felt for them with our hands, down in the mud. And, of course, we were black and blue and mud all over. We got down to the bridge and we had to climb that bridge from the water's edge, up over the top, without any help.

No ropes, nothing?

Nothing at all. One man would go like this, and another man went on the top, and another one on the top, and another one on the top again, until they reached the top. And one chap, I suppose his hands was muddy and he slipped from the top and landed right back on the deck and blood was coming out of his ears, his head and everywhere. They took him away to hospital but I never heard what happened to him afterwards. And then we had to go

across the road, down the bridge the other side and then we had to go through the water there, where the deepest part of the river, I was the smallest of the crew and they dragged me across on the end of a rope. I was under water, oh dear [mumbles], I don't know.

What sort of exercise was this a part of?

Well, I suppose it was to get us used to any sort of obstacles, you know, trained, trained for anything like. That was the object of it, I suppose.

Right.

You know, we went on a lot of those excursions, at various times over the 4 years.

So, was the training as intensive throughout the whole of the 4-year period or..

Yes. In fact, it got, it got more difficult as the years went by. It started lightly and then they taught us how to set booby bombs, and anything like that, and they put men all around the field, to test our fieldcraft. They hid them, half hid them, at a distance of like 200 or 300 yards, and we had to find them with our eyesight to train us to pick out these unusual objects, you see. Oh, 'tis very nerve-racking, but I don't know why, but I seemed to half enjoy it [mumbles]. There were times when we went on all these excursions at night, we blew up things with bombs we made ourselves, you know with gelignite, and that.

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Yes. In fact, it got more difficult as the years went by. It started lightly and then they taught us how to set booby bombs, and anything like that, and they put men all around the field to test out fieldcraft. They hid them, half hid them, at a distance of like 2 or 300 yards and we had to find them with our eyesight to train us to pick out these unusual objects you see. Oh, 'tis very nerve-racking, but I don't know why but I seemed to half enjoy it. There were times when we went on all these excursions at night, we blew up things with bombs we made ourselves, you know with gelignite and that.

You were expected to make bombs yourselves as well as Walter – Oh yes being given them.

I mean we blew down old buildings. We could...

Just for practice?

Just for practice. To do that we had to put an ordinary bomb, that I explained just now, and have an instantaneous fuse run right around the building and set bundles of gelignite at periods around the building you see. And they all went off with an instantaneous fuse at the same time.

It must have been quite alarming for members of the general public, all of this going on?

Yes. They used to say the Commandos are out again. They thought we were Commandos, you see, cos, we were told not to say anything about our job.

Even to close family?

Not to family. We didn't talk much during the war, in case, you know.

So, did you feel seven men was about the right number of men? I mean, it seems very few, if you're thinking about trying to take out a German base.

Well, no actually, I think it was the other way round, because the more men you've got, the more noise you make you know, whereas one or two can get into a camp and out again, whereas another two or three might make a noise, and I think one or two or three was better than six or seven.

Right! So, you broke up into different groups, did you?

We went different sides you see, of the camp, and made our own way. In fact, we went in solo as a rule and it was quite nerve-racking, because it was all done by night you see.

Did you develop particularly good night vision, do you think?

No. In fact we picked the nights that was worse, I think, because if there's a good wind blowing, they didn't hear nothing. I got in the mound at Long-tailed Titwell, [Titmouse?] and I put one of those big camouflages against the door where there was a light, and I came over there quick. He went off, I heard it go off on the other side. But we went to several more places, but I don't know where they were to, cos it was all darkness and at night and all done quietly.

Right! So how big an area would the seven of you have been covering. Where would the next special unit have been based?

Well! I suppose it more or less, I should say, was like the boundary of the parish, I should say. On the shore bit, it was only up through the shore mind, it was only about 1800 from Dover down to Lands' End. That's all - about 1800 of us.

So, it would have been very much centred on the Axe Valley?

That's right, yes, yes. We didn't go very far but I think we must have gone outside the valley at sometimes because we travelled for quite a while sometimes. I daresay some of the other Patrols came into our territory, you see, and when you look back over it, we had to go over obstacles 18 feet high just the same method as the bridge.

And so, presumably, only one person needed to get to the top of the bridge or whatever the obstacle was?

That right yes, and then pull the others up, and it's surprising how you can do that. But it's surprising too, that you can go out on the darkest of nights with no lights, and it's surprising how your eyes get accustomed to the darkness, and you can see quite well after a while, about half an hour. We slept in the bushes out there, and covers outside, night times and sometimes we were called out.

So how effective do you think your unit would have been, if you had really had to deal with a German camp.

I think, come the end we should have got a few of them, because we were learning quite fast, and knew by the end, in the beginning we were quite amateurish, but in the end, you know, we knew when to move and when not to move and when there, if there was a moon to hug all the shadows and everything like that, you see.

So, it was rather ironic that you would have been of more use when there was less likely of an invasion, because the most dangerous time was 1940, wasn't it?

Yes! When they thought, they were going to invade you see. But apparently, it was Churchill that thought this up, I think he was going on like the Resistance in France, I think that was where he got the idea from. But we were, you know, it was all hush hush. Nobody knew anything, in fact Mike [a local Axmouth man] didn't know anything about this.

So, if one of the seven of you met each other when you were out during the day, you wouldn't have shown any particular signs of recognising them?

No. I stopped once down in Sidmouth. I came out the cinema there, I went to see a film, I was enjoying a film and the police were outside. They wanted to know who I was. They accepted my word; I didn't tell them anything. They said they had to leave me alone so I think they may have been told about it.

And so, what sort of precautions did you have to take in case you were captured by the Germans.

I don't think there was any. No. That was it, when we were captured, I don't think we should last long, because there were soldiers with their tracker dogs and they would have tracked us back with their dogs you see, back to our own base. That's what I think would have happened.

Oh, I see. You would have expected the Germans to come over with their dogs.

Well, I think they would do, yes.

Right! I hadn't considered that at all before now.

I think they would do, because I think they were more or less doing that out in France. You know they went into France before they were to come over here. And I think that is where they got the idea from. Course we were in the middle of the cover out there. Do you know Morganhayes Cover?

Yes, I used to live in Southleigh, I actually lived in morganhayes so we overlooked the Cover.

Oh yes. One part of it is called Westpicks or something. Oh no I can't remember the name. I went down there after the war and looked down into the OB and there were spiders down there as black as night. They never seen daylight and they were this long. I don't know what they fed on, I'm sure. And I came home, but now I went down and since then it's all been pushed in, destroyed.

But you wouldn't have been actually in the base very much, in the Nissen hut underground very much at all, would you? If you were going out on training most of the time.

No, that's where we had to go if the Germans invaded, you see. We had to go to the OB right away. And, of course, everything was in the OB. Well, of course, we had food and everything as well there. But there was a big problem with that because washing up dishes and that. We had a few dishes that water ran outside you see, and you had to camouflage that. It was very difficult, that was. Yes, and we managed it.

Presumably, you had problem with having a toilet as well. It was difficult.

It was. Yes, it was.

So, did you feel quite confident, after all the training that you had had?

Not really, no. To be honest. We had army chaps and that sort of thing, come up from Plymtree, taught us how to fight with knives and one thing and another. 'Tis awful when you come to think back over it, isn't it.

I suppose you've just got to think of it in terms of self-defence, haven't you?

Oh, that's right, it was.

Once taught, never forgotten Walter - that's right, yes *Not a person to meet on a dark night, obviously!*