

THE AUXILIARY UNITS

The memories of Captain Stuart Edmundson

Having received orders from my Colonel in Tiverton to report to the War Office at 7 Whitehall Place, at 11.00 hours the next day, 13 July 1940, I took the night train from Exeter to Paddington. This was my first wartime train journey and set the pattern for all those which came afterwards.

The train had started in Penzance and called at Plymouth, so when it arrived in Exeter it was grossly overfilled. I fought my way on and got into a corridor. This was very dimly lit. All the windows were painted out with blue paint. There was a very small light in each compartment and one shaded light in each corridor. The passengers, troops of all ranks and sexes were crammed in as many as could fight their way for a place.

On arrival at Paddington, I cleaned up a bit in the Paddington Hotel, had some breakfast and at the right time reported to 7 Whitehall Place. I was directed to a room on the second floor. There was no name on the door of its occupant which was unusual in the War Office. Inside I found three or four officers sitting around wondering what it was all about. By 11.00 hours we were six in number from mixed regiments, when Major Peter Wilkinson appeared through a side door. He explained that we had been selected for special duties and everything we heard in this room, and subsequently, was to be regarded as top secret. Our new C.O. was Colonel Colin Gubbins R.A., who would very shortly come in and brief us.

Shortly afterwards Gubbins appeared; he had a tremendous record from the First World War where he had a very distinguished career. Following this, he had served in Ireland with the British Forces during the Troubles, and afterwards had written several pamphlets on guerrilla warfare, which had become textbooks for the army. Recently he had been on the Norwegian Campaign. Before that, he and Wilkinson had been together on some mission to Poland. When the Germans invaded they had very great difficulty in getting out across Europe to the British lines. In Norway, Gubbins had commanded the Independent Companies, which were the forerunners of the Commandos. He was then a Brigadier but on his return to England he reverted to his substantive rank of Colonel.

In his brief he told us that Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, was convinced that the Germans were going to invade England. We had extremely limited resources, having left all our equipment in France at the evacuation of Dunkirk, and the personnel had been hastily reformed in this country but were by no means ready for battle. The Germans were poised on the other side of the Channel, and Churchill had decided that there must be a resistance organisation built up in England, that would allow itself to be overrun in the event of the Germans advancing, and would come out behind their lines and harry their communications. We were to form this force. We had been specially selected and after we had finished at Whitehall Place, must return to our designated areas. The following day we would receive a staff car and an R.A.S.C. driver, and a little later a consignment of weapons. We were to name a contact point before we left the room.

Our task was to select trustworthy men in our areas, in my case Devon and Cornwall. They were to sign the Official Secrets Act and find a couple of their friends, whom they could trust, to join them. In the first instance we should form cells of three men, if necessary we could have them screened by security to make sure they were trustworthy. It would be our task to arm them and train them; the whole to be carried out in total secrecy. He appreciated this was not an easy task, and it was left to us to carry it out as best we could and as we thought fit. When they could be found, we would have posted to us two subalterns, each with a scout section of about twelve men, to help with the training and make hiding places for the arms and personnel. We must find bases for these troops which would not attract too much attention and, as soon as possible, dig or form proper hideouts where arms and personnel could go to earth until they were overrun. The organisation would be known as the Auxiliary Units and we were to be known as Intelligence Officers. We would be made up to the rank of Captain if we were not already there. There is a very good account of this meeting in Donald Hamilton-Hill's book "S.O.E. Assignment". Two I.O.s were already at work, Fleming a reserve officer in the Grenadier Guards in Kent, and Croft in Essex.

The first officers of Auxiliary Units were:-

H.Q.

Colonel Colin Gubbins, R.A. - Commanding Officer
Major Peter Wilkinson, Royal Fusiliers - Second in Command
Major Edward Bedington-Behrens, RA. - Recruiting
Major Bill Beyts, 6 Rajputana Rifles, Indian Army - Training
Captain Hon. Mike Henderson, 16/5 Lancers - Q

Intelligence Officers

Captain Peter Fleming, Grenadier Guards - Kent & Sussex
Captain John Gwynn, Grenadier Guards - Sussex & Hants
Captain Lord Ashley, Grenadier Guards - Hants & Dorset
Captain Stuart Edmundson, R.E. - Devon & Cornwall
Captain Andrew Croft, Essex Regiment - Essex, Suffolk & Norfolk
Captain Donald Hamilton-Hill, Seaforth Highlander - North Norfolk & Lincs
Captain Eustace Maxwell, Argyll & Sutherland Highlander - Durham & Yorkshire
Captain Hamish Torrance Highland Light Infantry Forth, Berwick & Northumberland

After some discussion with the other Officers and with the Headquarter staff I went down to Kent to see what Peter Fleming was doing. He was the elder brother of Ian Fleming, creator of the James Bond series and was not unlike him. He had been an explorer in civil life and had walked across various distant parts of the world, usually accompanied by some young woman. Croft was another explorer, he had made several journeys across the Greenland Ice Cap and was the holder

of the Polar Medal, a snow white ribbon; I have never seen another. The other Officers had led more or less normal careers, with the exception of Hamish Torrance who had been in Norway at Narvik, during the German occupation and had escaped in a rather daring manner.

In the evening I got the night train from Paddington to Plymouth, again jammed into the corridor. I had plenty of time to ponder on the magnitude of my task and by morning had worked out, more or less, how I would proceed. I knew from my fertiliser days, a number of men in Devon and Cornwall, and thought that I knew those whom I could trust.

On arrival in Plymouth I went home for breakfast, I had nowhere else to go and my wife was rather surprised to see me believing me to be in Tiverton. Shortly after breakfast Driver John Alford R.A.S.C. appeared with an army staff car for my use. Alford and I stayed together for the whole of my time with the Auxiliary Units and we became good friends, having various scrapes together. We are still in touch and exchange letters every Christmas.

After breakfast I left for Cornwall and started work. During the day I made several contacts between Plymouth and Helston. I had a wonderful response. All types and conditions of men were prepared to come forward at my request and help, by finding two or three others to form a cell. They were all prepared to sacrifice themselves, knowing full well that should the Germans arrive their expectation of life would be very short indeed. It was a long day, having spent the two previous nights standing in the corridor. Cornwall is a very long county, so I was glad to kip down somewhere, and Alford and I found billets for the night.

The following day I headed for Devon, crossing the Tamar by the Torpoint ferry. As I drove through Plymouth I thought I had better return home to see if there were any messages for me, that being the only contact point I had. I found an interesting situation. The night before when I was away, my wife had looked out and seen a 5 ton army truck standing in the drive to our little house. An escorting officer came in and asked for me, she of course had no idea where I was. He said he could only hand his load over to me and must stay. Time wore on, she fed him and his driver, and settled him down on the sofa for the night. The driver, on her suggestion, took the lorry round the back into the grounds of a Blind Asylum. He thought this was an excellent idea from the security point of view and slept the night on top of his load. While the lorry was in our front garden there was a small air raid, and my wife afterwards boasted that she had more explosives in her front garden at that time than the Germans had up above.

I then had the problem of where to put this load. Before I had been posted to the Auxiliary Units, I had had a special assignment manufacturing "Molotov cocktails", for the newly formed L.D.V., the forerunners of the Home Guard. I had done this in a derelict Palmerston Fort, called Fort Austin, made of solid granite, on the southern outskirts of Plymouth facing the moor. There we set up a bottling factory, filling the bottles with a mixture of petrol and creosote. We acquired a crown corking machine from the local brewery, and I bought up all the fuzee matches from the joke shops in Plymouth for their ignition. I also had to go out and lecture the L.D.V. on how to use these bombs assuring them, which was absolute nonsense, that two or three would stop a tank. I thought, therefore, that Fort

Austin, which was now empty, would be a very suitable place to hide my load. The Officer and I with Alford and the driver carried somewhere about 300 boxes in, and hid them in a 'dungeon'. I signed for the load and the Officer departed happily to London, having discharged his duties.

Each of these boxes contained:-

5 lbs gelignite

3 Mills bombs

2 magnesium incendiary bombs

3 oil incendiary bombs

Box detonators

Instantaneous H.E. fuse

Fast burning fuse

Slow burning fuse

Selection of 'Time Pencils', delay switches ranging from 10 minutes to 2 weeks.

Colour coded.

Pressure switches

Trip switches

Coils trip wire

Crimping tool

Sticky tape

Later each cell received:-

Tommy gun and ammunition

.300 American Service rifle

.22 rifle with telescopic sight and silencer

Commando knife per man

Short strap on rubber boots

Ration boxes

1 gallon jar rum - sealed

Blankets and ground sheets

4 Sticky bombs

Box 808 HE. explosive

Box plastic explosive

A box phosphorus grenades (A.W. bombs)

I had nobody to leave in charge of the load, so took a chance and went into Devon where I made contacts. I had the same response as I had had in Cornwall. Devon is a very large county, I believe the second in the country after Yorkshire, and has,

of course, like Cornwall, coast on both sides. I came back to Fort Austin that evening and managed to persuade my T.A. Company Commander in Tiverton by phone to let me have half a dozen Sappers on temporary loan for a week, so that I could deal with the situation. This he did which was splendid of him because, of course, I was unable to tell him why I wanted them. One of these I later managed to get transferred to my establishment as you will read later.

Now began a couple of weeks of the most intensive work for me, nearly always carried out at night. I had to distribute, in the back of my staff car, one of these boxes to each cell and give rudimentary training in their use to the cell leader who had to find some suitable hiding place. We either buried them in the ground or hid them in derelict cottages suitably camouflaged.

At the end of two weeks I got two subalterns to help. One from the Devon Regiment, Hugh Palliser, a splendid young man, very wild, who had run away from school to fight in the Spanish Civil War. When you kept him under control he made a good officer and was suitable for the work. In Cornwall I had a solid character, John Dingley, another subaltern who had been the manager of Dingleys Bank, now taken over by the National Provincial in Launceston. He had come through Dunkirk with the D.C.L.I. and having reached the beaches, not wishing to get wet, had walked another three or four miles under fire and boarded a destroyer dry shod on the whole.

With each subaltern I went to their depots. The Devons in Exeter and to the D.C.L.I. in Bodmin. I was helped in this by Bill Beyts who came down from Headquarters. We persuaded the Adjutants to let us have a sergeant and 12 men to form our permanent patrols. They were transferred to my establishment. I got a requisitioned house near Ivybridge facing the Moor for the Devons and Hugh Palliser moved in, and arranged security, and rations for the men. It proved to be a very good headquarters for them for the whole time I was in command. For the Cornwalls I had an empty cottage in the middle of a wood near Bodmin specially requisitioned for me.

These troops made my life a great deal easier as the subalterns were able to take over the training and help me in the general administration. By this time I had got an H.Q. establishment of my own consisting of a sergeant clerk, one sapper, an R.A.S.C. truck driver and a 15 cwt truck, my own driver and a despatch rider and motor bicycle. Fort Austin was now quite unsuitable, so I had requisitioned a beautiful old manor house between Okehampton and Tavistock. As far as I can remember it was called Lydford Manor and we moved in. We were also accumulating stores for the construction of hideouts. Eventually I had a full section working on the construction of these which were very elaborate affairs. To fill the vacancy for a Sapper I had Sapper Durston who had been in the T.A. with me transferred to my establishment.

On 25 August 1940 the Prime Minister wrote a minute to the Secretary of State for War which read:-

“have been following with much interest the growth and development of the new guerrilla formations known as Auxiliary Units. From what I hear these units are being organised with thoroughness and imagination and should in the event of

invasion prove a useful addition to the regular forces. Perhaps you will keep me informed of progress”.

In August 1940 it was decided to take over Coleshill House, an Inigo-Jones mansion, near Highworth, Wiltshire as the headquarters of the organisation and training centre. There was plenty of room for the storage of arms and explosives, and large grounds for training. Courses were held every week and the warriors, from peers to poachers, kipped down in the stables. I sent up parties of key men from my two counties each week. All training was carried out with live explosives and ammunition. Shortly after H.Q. left Whitehall Place it was destroyed by enemy bombs.

By this time the heavy night bombing had begun on Plymouth and London. The Battle of Britain was raging. One was always filled with anxiety for one's family. Morale among the troops remained high.

Through the autumn and winter of 1940 I carried on recruiting, and my officers with the training. By Christmas of that year we had built up 500 fully armed men in the two counties. They were first class people, all absolutely dedicated to what they were doing and I am sure had the crunch come they would have given a very good account of themselves.

Nineteen forty one was a long year, we were still on full alert and expecting an invasion though some of the tenseness of 1940 had gone. During this year we converted the small cells into patrols of anything up to 8 men and built much more elaborate hide-outs for them to operate from and to keep the stores. Down in West Cornwall there was no great problem as many of the men I had recruited there, were or had been, tin miners. That part of the world is completely honeycombed by old workings and some of these chaps were able to go from coast to coast in Cornwall through these old workings without coming to the surface. It was a terrifying experience going down with them as water was dripping through everywhere. The passages, of course, were totally dark and we only had the light of a candle or a torch and had to jump over shafts going down lower, at the bottom of which you could hear water running. These men were particularly tough and mad keen to get their hands on a German. I think the Germans would have had a short shift had they landed at that part of Cornwall.

My operation orders had warned me that a German diversionary landing was expected somewhere on the Devon/Dorset borders between Tony Ashley's country and my own. In fact it was learned later from records captured after the war that the Germans had planned an army group of 3 Divisions to land in the vicinity of Lyme Regis. This, of course, had meant intense work for us and I had built up several patrols in that area, they were good chaps. I had a very good gamekeeper at Uplyme and an extraordinary character who lived in Seaton, whom I made a sergeant, who organised several patrols behind the coast.

Towards the end of 1941, when most of the work had been done, Headquarters decided that my area was too big. They now had an establishment for many more Intelligence Officers and divided up several areas. Consequently I handed over Cornwall to John Dingley and concentrated on Devon. This really did not make much difference to me as the organisation had been set up in both counties and

was running smoothly. Hugh Palliser had returned to the Devons, and I had a new Scout Officer Roy Bradford who was more stable. Roy later served with the S.A.S. and was killed in France leaving a widow and one child.

By the autumn of 1941 the tension in the country had lessened. The threat of invasion for the time being had grown less. However, the organisation was kept in being and in a high state of readiness. On 22 June 1941 Germany had declared war on the Soviet Union. In Volume III of his 'History of the Second World War' Winston Churchill wrote:-

"The entry of Russia into the war was welcome but not immediately helpful to us. The German Armies were so strong, that it seemed that for many months they could maintain the invasion threat against England, while at the same time plunging into Russia".

I was getting restless, I felt I had done all I could in the organisation of the Auxiliary Units in Devon and Cornwall. I had, however, the strongest reasons for remaining in Devon as long as possible because my wife was then expecting our second child and I did not want to return to the army and be posted overseas. I stayed on then too long, but for good personal reasons. Also at the end of 1941 our house in Plymouth had been very badly damaged by bombs and Iris had had to flee. She was now sharing a furnished house at Launceston in the middle of Cornwall with her sister whose husband was serving with the West African Frontier Force in Nigeria.

Early in 1942, however, I felt that it was time to move. Gubbins had gone to be Operations Director of S.O.E., the Special Operations Executives. Most of the original Intelligence Officers had joined S.O.E. I applied for a transfer. At this time I wanted to get back to my unit but they were on their way to Libya and I had been out of touch for too long. I was posted to the R.E. depot in Ripon where it had been evacuated from Chatham which was too near the front line.

I must pay tribute here to the cooperation that I, a junior captain in the Auxiliary Units, received from the highest ranks in the fighting formations who were then in Devon and Cornwall. Lt.-General Charles Alfrey in command of 8 Corps could not have been more helpful. He gave me several specific tasks to carry out if he had to retreat. In the same way Major General Freddy Morgan of 77 Division helped. Afterwards he had a highly important role in the planning of the D-Day landings.

We were on occasions helpful to the armed forces when we carried out infiltration exercises on their camps. On one occasion when 8 Corps was doing a full scale withdrawal from Devon and Cornwall into Dorset where they were to take up new positions, Charles Alfrey asked me to see if I could get into their camp. They went into Largar for the night near Okehampton. Every track and road was full of tanks, guns and heavy equipment, and the troops were camped all around. I took with me my Devon sergeant and two of the irregular troops. Under their cover I managed to enter the camp, in company with the sergeant who covered me. I wormed my way underneath the command post caravan. Here I could hear every word that was spoken. I came out having left a souvenir of a time pencil to which was attached a detonator stuck into a potato which stopped the little bits of aluminium flying around. We went to a prepared rendezvous on the moor from

where I asked the corps commander if I could speak to him. He was very worried by my report and the sentries and commanders received a fairly considerable rocket. We were very unpopular.

On another occasion, Freddy Morgan of 77 Division asked me if I could make an entry into the R.A.F. base at Chivenor, down river from Barnstaple, when he was visiting. I again took my sergeant and three of the irregulars, the leader of which was Gerry Slee, an accountant from Bideford. We went down the river at high tide on rafts in total darkness, which was a dangerous operation, and clambered up the sea wall, lay up at the top until the sentries had passed and managed to get through the wire. Chivenor was the RAF Coastal Command Headquarters in that part of the world and planes from there were flying far over the Atlantic on submarine patrol. That night they were coming in and taking off at the rate of about one every twenty minutes or half hour. Each time this happened the lights were switched on momentarily and we had to take cover by lying down. Huge planes were parked round the perimeter and we left one or two things behind with them. The situation then got rather difficult as the sentries were alerted and I was very much afraid that we would be shot if they saw us. I got in contact with the General and my men were called in over the tannoy. He and the R.A.F. Station Commander were rather shaken by our report, so I think we were of some help to them. This type of exercise took place in many other areas of Auxiliary Units.

On the other hand we had the utmost difficulty with some of the old dug-outs who commanded districts, and with the senior Home Guard commanders. All these men had served in the First War and were well covered with medals for gallantry. They could not stand the fact that some young pup was operating in their area, and they did not know what he was doing. We had to be very tactful and on one occasion I upset a full General. I was amused many years later, somewhere about 1972 or 1973 to read one Sunday morning in the Sunday Telegraph Supplement, an article by Colin Gubbins on security in Auxiliary Units. Here I saw my name and the words "and on one occasion Stuart Edmundson who had been a Plymouth businessman told a full General to mind his own business". I remember this incident because as I was on my way to The Tower to be beheaded for high treason, Gubbins managed to bail me out. Apparently he remembered it too.

In recent years I have been asked several times how effective we would have been if the Germans had come and what would have happened in the other areas of England. Had the Germans come in the autumn of 1940, I am quite sure that my men would have risen to the occasion, but they could not have done more than make pin pricks as they were not really fully trained, although they had a certain amount of explosives. This would undoubtedly have led to the most terrible reprisals if the Germans had followed the pattern they used on the Continent. My men, if captured, would have been subject to terrible torture.

By the middle of 1941, however, the matter would have been different. By then we were properly organised and I think could have done some considerable damage, though our expectation of life would have been very short indeed. I was given two specific tasks to carry out by Charles Alfrey as I have mentioned but these were far beyond the resources we had available. One was to destroy the Brunel's Bridge over the Tamar which joined Saltash to Plymouth and was the main railway

link with Cornwall. The other was to destroy a huge petrol dump outside Falmouth. We might have caused some obstruction on the line at the bridge but that was all. I was worried about the dump as we had the resources to make a nuisance of ourselves but we might have set off some uncontrolled flaming petrol flowing into residential areas.

I met General Sir Charles Alfrey after he had retired and was a Director of Simmons Brewery. We met on a train between Bristol and Paddington when I had been down to Bristol to see one of Fisons major factories. We had a quiet laugh about days gone by. He was an extremely nice man.

I will conclude by quoting what Gubbins himself wrote when he was transferred from Auxiliary Units to take command of operations in S.O.E. at the end of 1940. "They would have justified their existence, to what degree would have been entirely dependent on circumstances. From my judgement, based heavily on the fact that they were costing the country nothing, either in manpower or weapons, these patrols in their left behind missions, out of contact, entirely on their own with their caches of arms and stores would have given some account of themselves in the invasion areas but their usefulness would have been short lived, at the longest until their stocks were exhausted, at the shortest when they were caught or wiped out. They were designed, trained and prepared for a particular and imminent crisis that was their specialist role".

Footnote

The Auxiliary Units were not stood down until 1944. Nothing much was known about them until about 1990 when certain records were released under the fifty year rule. Since then many glamorised stories have come out in the media, told by the warriors themselves. Membership of A.U. was the big event of their young lives. This should in no way take away from the fact that these young men, all in reserved occupations, were prepared to give their best to an organisation where if an invasion had come would have meant an expectation of life in hours or days at the most.

Earl Soham

Suffolk

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