

METRO in focus

Our army of last resort

LOOKING back now, it seems unthinkable that, during the most desperate days of World War II, a German invasion of Britain appeared inevitable.

With Adolf Hitler's forces surging through France and efforts to halt their advance abroad faltering, Britain's high command began making secret preparations.

That meant assembling a civilian army that would act in what Winston Churchill described as 'guerrilla formations' to mount a last-ditch fight to preserve the nation's liberty.

Thousands of volunteers signed up to 'stay behind' in a mission so secret they could not even tell their families. They agreed to, quite

A few thousand men, who were prepared to die in a last-ditch fight to stop Hitler taking over Britain, could be honoured this November – 73 years late. **HAYDEN SMITH** looks at the 'secret army' formed in the darkest hours of World War II

literally, go underground in the event of an invasion and destabilise invaders in any way they could.

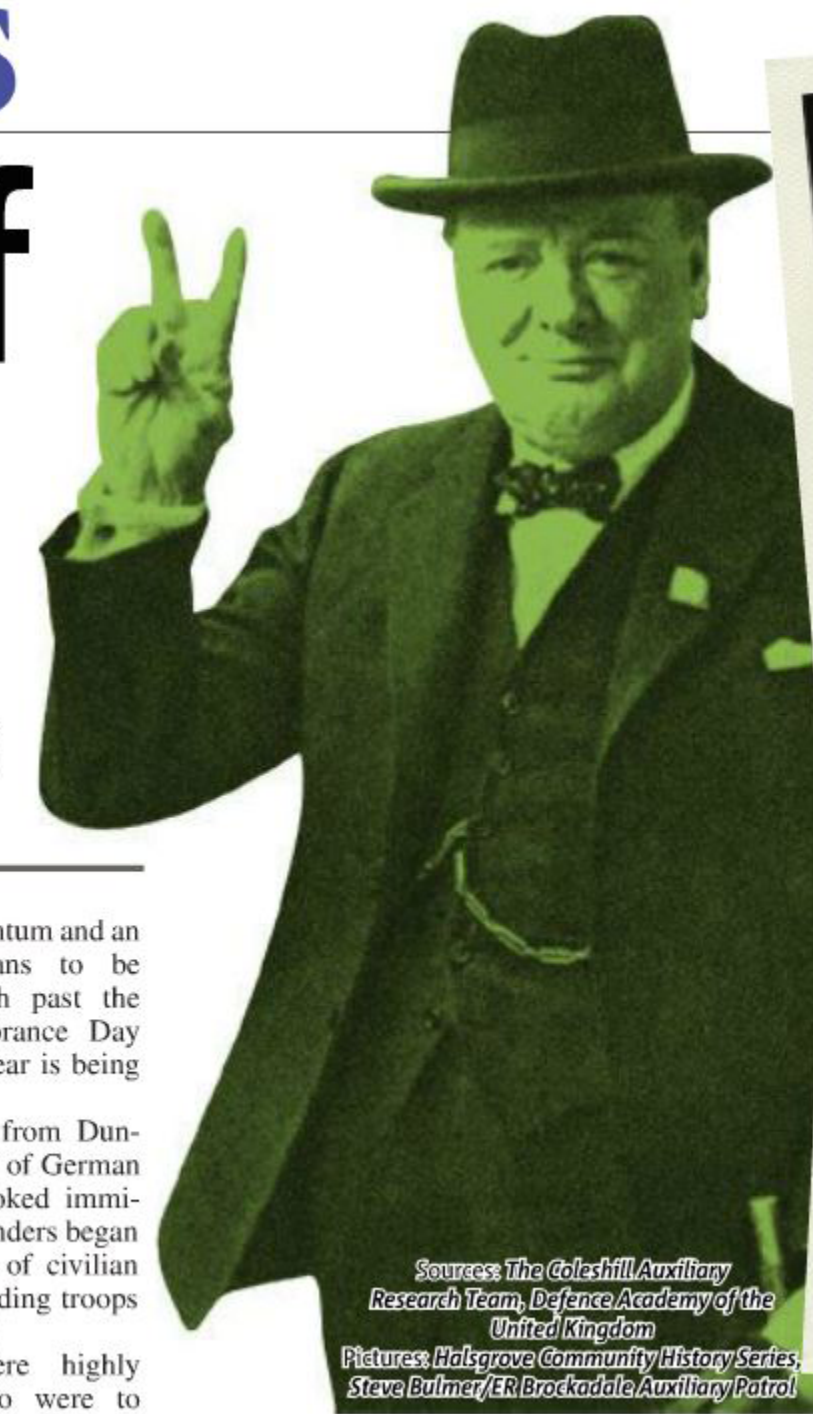
The Auxiliary Units and Special Duties Sections were dubbed Churchill's 'secret army' but, despite the sacrifices they were prepared to make – they were given a life expectancy of just a fortnight in the event of an invasion – official recognition since the war has been scarce.

But, almost 70 years after they were stood down, a campaign to raise awareness about the groups

has been gaining momentum and an application for veterans to be included in the march past the Cenotaph on Remembrance Day for the first time this year is being considered.

After the evacuation from Dunkirk in 1940, the arrival of German troops from France looked imminent. So, senior commanders began to establish a network of civilian saboteurs to attack invading troops from behind their lines.

Auxiliary Units were highly trained volunteers who were to



Sources: The Colehill Auxiliary Research Team, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom
Pictures: Holsgrove Community History Series, Steve Bulmer/ERI Brockadale Auxiliary Patrol



CHURCHILL'S 'SECRET ARMY' IN NUMBERS:

At the time of stand-down in 1944, more than **1,000** underground bases had been built

Operational patrols consisted of between **4** and **8** men

As cover, they were allocated to Home Guard battalions 201 (Scotland), 202 (northern England), or **203** (southern England)

3,500 men trained as Auxiliary Unit members at Colehill House in Oxfordshire

The Special Duties Section had about **4,000** members



strike at targets from underground bases beneath the British countryside.

Recruits were drawn from reserved occupations and those who were too old or young to be called up to the mainstream services.

They they were subjected to a rigorous interview process.

According to one unconfirmed story, members were vetted by a senior local police officer who was to be assassinated in the event of an invasion to prevent membership of the Auxiliary Units being revealed.

Recruits were issued with explosives, weapons and vital supplies. They were to disrupt and, where possible, destroy the enemy's supply chain and take out targets in their local areas.

They would be supported by the Special Duty Sections, whose members were trained to identify vehicles and military units so they could go underground to pass on messages to the combat sections of the Auxiliary

Units. Bob Millard was a teenager in the Home Guard in 1940 when he was approached with a cryptic sounding proposition.

He told Metro: 'It was not whether there was going to be an invasion, but when it was going to come. I was approached and asked if I wanted to join something "a bit more interesting".'

'So I said yes and they asked me all sorts of questions and then a week later I was contacted and told, "You can join my lot," and I replied, "Who are your lot?"'

'So I had to sign the Official Secrets Act before being told we were to go underground and come up behind enemy lines in the event of an invasion.'

THEIR operation was top secret. Mr Millard's wife of 67 years, Josephine, was unaware of his involvement with the Auxiliary Units until he attended a reunion in 1994.

'You just didn't talk about it, really,' he said. 'As far as my family were aware I was still in the Home Guard. It was all very hush, hush. After the war, it was water under the bridge.'

In the event of an invasion, Mr Millard, now 90, was to report to his unit's operational base in an

18th-century stone mine near Bath. Hundreds of hideouts were dug in the dead of night so that no one would know they were there. They were so well hidden that many remain undiscovered to this day.

Mr Millard said he wasn't told he was expected to die within two weeks. 'They didn't tell us that. We were given about three weeks of rations. The story was that some patrols were given suicide pills because you weren't to be caught.'

He felt 'apprehensive' but not scared. 'There was a job that needed doing so you volunteered to do it,' he said. 'You didn't think much more deeply about it.'

The Auxiliary Units were kept in place after the immediate Nazi threat had passed, before being stood down in 1944. In 1945, the War Office gave some details about a resistance organisation but the groups' existence was not widely known for more than 50 years.

Mr Millard received a letter of thanks from a commanding officer at the end of the war and a small lapel badge.

He said: 'You didn't join for glory and publicity. After the war we forgot about it. It's only in recent years that people started talking about it again. It would be nice to be publicly recognised.'

Historians at the Colehill Auxiliary

Research Team have been lobbying for members of the Auxiliary Units and Special Duties Sections to be included in the Remembrance Day march.

CART founder Tom Sykes said: 'After over 70 years of silence, the veterans of the Auxiliary Units and Special Duties Section, now more than ever, deserve to get the official recognition that has for so long been lacking.'

'Although they, thankfully, were not called on, these volunteers would have undoubtedly done their duty effectively and to the end. As each year passes we lose more of these veterans and in the not too distant future there will be no one left for the country to thank and honour.'

The British Legion said the request 'will be considered alongside others received and we will do our best to accommodate them'. A decision is expected by June.

OPERATION SEALION – THE GERMAN INVASION PLAN:

In July 1940, Adolf Hitler issued a Supreme Command Directive instructing his troops to prepare for an invasion of England

The plan was to make landings along the south coast between Ramsgate, Kent and the area west of the Isle of Wight

Germany's Luftwaffe failed to achieve the necessary air supremacy during the Battle of Britain for Sealion to be launched

After a series of delays, Hitler postponed the operation in September 1940 and preparations were finally discontinued in January 1941

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