

THE SUMMER OF 1940

By Stanley Herbert Williams (born 15 July 1917)

Who will ever forget who lived through it, the sunshine day after day, the clear skies. It seemed weather was made for the enemy armoured forces in N.W. France as they swept their way, with their new concept of warfare, through the disorganised forces of France, Belgium and the British Expeditionary Forces. These latter in two short weeks were forced back upon the port of Dunkirk in NW France. The Belgians outfought surrendered, the French fighting desperately, but spread out in a long line 400 miles long, could only retreat before the concentrated arrow head attack of the Germans.

The British under Lord Gort resisted too and forced the enemy to halt temporarily in a pitched armoured battle at Arras but subsequently back they had to go, to be conveyed back to England by hosts of small boats and ships from the port and adjoining beaches of Dunkirk. It was then that the government appealed to every able bodied person to enlist in its L.D.V. (the Local Defence Volunteers) then changed to the 'Home Guard' to prevent, by every means possible, the landing on these shores of German invasion forces.

I don't think anyone really gave much hope for our chances of survival at that time. He would need to be a super-optimist to do so in the face of the brutal facts; but the will to resist was very strong! Very few were for giving up without a fight.

And so we volunteered for 'Dad's Army' as the T.V. show has it and very true to type that show is, except that although there were "funnies" there was also a serious aspect to it.

In the early weeks of course we were only names on a register, no uniforms, no guns, no organisation, but slowly it took shape. 'Have you heard Richardson, the Quartermaster' has some gear in?' So up to Mr Richardson at 'The Crossways' at Osborne we would go, sure enough some uniform had arrived and 'first come, first served' was the rule.

Our first C.O. was a retired District Commissioner from Kenya and what he lacked in military skills he made up for in enthusiasm and improvisation. "Now look here you chaps" he would say 'I've arranged for you to go on guard tonight on Osborne Golf Course. I've got it on pretty good authority that Jerry is coming over tonight and he's coming down like flies by parachute and they are going to seize Osborne House for their H.Q., so I want you all to muster at 8.00p.m. He produced a drum made from an elephant's foot, 'Bang it like hell as they descend and I will rush over with my elephant gun to lend you a hand'

And so we went, fortunately not a sound was heard but a few nights later one of the heavy air raids on Portsmouth took place and there was plenty of sound and plenty of hardware raining down out of the skies. Later on as bombing raids gave place to incendiary or "fire bomb" attacks we were fire spotting from the towers of Osborne House and later still searching the grounds for parachuted mines.

During this period our patrol was on guard during the winter of 1940-41 in Osborne grounds, our base was the old stables where we slept when not on patrol and had our

solid fuel stove for keeping warm and cooking light meals. We patrolled the grounds in pairs for two-hour stretches and then tried to sleep for the rest of the night.

One night we were alerted that a glittering large metal object had been seen in a clearing of a nearby wood, someone reported a partially alight bonfire. On arrival we were told to remove all metal objects about our persons, as it could be a magnetic mine. The bomb disposal man told us what to do if he was blown up and then proceeded to walk towards it while the rest of re-located to a safe distance till a voice shouted 'It's OK chaps come and have look at a mine, it's quite safe now'. We all moved forward and gazed upon a beautiful set of horse's harness and a barrel. obviously left by a carter!

About this time we had a call to our Home Guard unit for two volunteers to join a "special" unit that was being formed. No details were given and an interview would be necessary before one knew whether one was successful or not, Eric Morey and myself volunteered.

Why one volunteered for this sort of unknown thing is difficult to say, but we were young men, about 24 years of age, and I suppose with a sense of adventure, this and the possible scent of danger one subdues one's natural fears.

We had an interview at the Norwich Union Offices in Quay Street, Newport one Saturday morning. Mr Blishen¹, who was the manager there, was to be the commanding officer in charge on the island and we knew him as Major (later Colonel) Blishen and with him was an officer in Grenadier Guards uniform, Captain Clive², who was organising special units in the south of England.

He told us the unit we had volunteered for was secret and that was all he would say! If we wanted to change our minds now was the time, afterwards would be too late, we both agreed to stay.

These units, as they were known, were formed by GHQ as basic guerrilla units to be left behind should the enemy invade the U.K. and whose job would be to harass the enemy forces in every way possible. Organise other centres of resistance and become a means of communications between the regular forces in unoccupied Britain and occupied districts.

To this end should the enemy invade - and they were expected daily for a year or so, we would disappear underground literally. For underground O.B.s (Operational Bases) had been sunk underground in the most concealed positions possible, carefully camouflaged and with concealed entrances and exits and had been equipped with necessary basic supplies and munitions. Our O.B. was situated in what is now known at Robin Hill Country Park.

We had as Sergeant, one Martin Moore³, a native of Arreton village, in his early forties and a well-respected life long inhabitant of that place. If anything had happened and we had to operate in anger this choice would have proved extremely valuable as this was the largest village in our operational area. During night exercises we often had to contact Sergeant Moore in his back garden coming down via the down and open fields.

1 Capt. HCA Blishen in 1942, later Major, and post-war Colonel, commander, Group 9 (East Wight), Auxiliary Units

2 Capt. EB Clive, later Major, Intelligence Officer in charge of Auxiliary Units Hampshire and the Isle of Wight

3 Martin Blake Moore, born 30 June 1896

Fred Buckett⁴ was Corporal, another countryman and one well versed in the district and in country ways. He caught rabbits in snares as we traversed the country at night and would have been invaluable as a supplier of fresh food.

The others in the patrol were Ted Phillips⁵, a young farm worker nearly as wide as he was tall, always smiling from his pink-cheeked face and a real fund of the latest local gossip! Ted knew where and what every farmer's crop was, adept at obtaining turnips here, cabbages there etc, not forgetting rhubarb and other fruit.

Bill Westmore⁶ another farm worker from Arreton was also a useful chap knowing all the footpaths from boyhood and able to predict the trend of the weather.

George Hayward⁷ was the oldest member of the patrol, a man in his early fifties; he was employed as a stoker at the East Cowes Power Station and had in his youth and during the First World War been in the Royal Navy as a stoker. He was a little slower than myself at crawling through hedges etc., but what he lacked in mobility he more than made up in 'esprit de corps'. If things went a little awry or did not quite go to plan, the rest of us got a bit dispirited - George would always say 'Now then me lads - no letting the side down, orders is orders. George had been on H.M.S. Glasgow, the only British ship of the ill-fated South Atlantic Squadron to escape destruction at the Battle of Coronel in 1914 at the hands of the Germans under Von Spee. He recalled how they had used up all their coal and burnt the ships furniture and wooden fittings to maintain pressure in the escape through the Straits of Magellan to the Falkland Islands.

The Royal Engineer Sergeant and Corporal were employed full-time in constructing the O.B's, maintaining stores of explosives and giving us instructions during the evenings and at weekends, their names were Sergeant Coasley⁸ and Corporal Dowling⁹. We were each armed with a Smith and Wesson 35 revolver (not automatic) as revolvers were more reliable under most conditions and a commando type knife as personal weapons.

The patrol had a .45 Thompson sub-machine gun, for which I was personally responsible and had to be able to take to pieces and re-assemble under action conditions. Browning .300 automatic rifle, 12 boxes of Mills grenades and six packs or boxes of high explosives, complete with necessary detonators, plastic and safety fuses, delayed action fuses and tinned rations.

Occasionally we would 'go down' for the night or weekend as might be ordered and sometimes would engage in exercises with regular and irregular units.

Our holidays during these years were often taken up with advanced training and some of us, myself included, attended training school for two weeks in explosives and guerrilla work at Coleshill House, Highworth, near Swindon, under the tuition of regular army officers and some who had operated with the partisans of Yugoslavia in

4 Frederick Hilton Buckett, born 28 December 1909

5 Raymond Edward Philips, born 14 September 1919

6 William Edward Westmore, born 18 August 1905

7 George Hayward, born 19 January 1886

8 No name Coasley found – No Royal Engineers Sergeant on Auxiliary Units War Establishment. Possibly Scout Section Sergeant

9 Corporal Dowling Royal Engineers

their campaign against the occupying Germans. We learnt the art of immobilising A.F.V's, how to move at night, how to set up booby traps and operate and maintain weapons and explosives.

We also trained during holidays at Quarr Hill House at Binstead and Long Lane woods at Downend. On this occasion one of our instructors was Lieut. Marchant¹⁰ of the Royal Green Jackets, we later heard that he had been killed operating with Tito's partisans in Yugoslavia.

This too was the time of the Battle of Britain. At work we were being constantly interrupted by air raids or at least scares.

One morning some fighter-bombers attacked the shipyard at East Cowes, before we started work. I remember going down the road and seeing the unexploded bombs lying in Ferry Road, some had also passed through the hulls of ships in the ship yard without exploding and had finally killed some people in York Avenue.

On May 4th 1942 Cowes itself was heavily attacked by bombers and some 150 people were killed. The real target were the shipyards and naval bases along the River Medina, but thanks to a fine defence, by close range weapons from the Royal Artillery and ships in the harbour, notably the Polish destroyer, 'Blyskawica' which was undergoing a refit at J.S. White's and the numerous French "chasseurs" at their base at Marvins old yacht yard not too much damage had been done in the target area. It was a night to remember not to be repeated.

One had a feeling of helpless resignation, sitting in an air raid shelter and listening for the approach of the enemy on their bombing run. The night being torn asunder by the explosions of hundreds of incendiary bombs. People were amazingly calm at least in our shelter of 50 people, the eldest being Jode Attrill who was 92, he just sat quietly and lived to be 105!

After the raids our own house in Victoria Grove was so damaged by near misses, as to be uninhabitable and we went to live in Wootton until it was repaired. This took so long we were there for two years.

I used to travel to Cowes each day by train from Wootton Station to Mill Hill Station, Cowes and remember one particularly hair raising trip home on the day of the Commando Raid on Dieppe¹¹. The landing at Dieppe by the Canadian forces had alerted the Luftwaffe and they were engaged in low level attacks on ports and installations on our side of the channel on a day of low cloud.

We had left Cowes and were on the way to Newport when some low flying aircraft passed overhead and great was the excitement when various people peering out saw they had German markings. Anti-aircraft fire was underway and when we arrived at Newport we were told to get out and take cover, where we did now know. Another enemy plane roared low overhead and everyone lay flat on the platform, this disappeared and we sheepishly got to our feet, climbed back on to the train and completed our journey.

¹⁰ Lt JJ Marchant, Wiltshire Regiment, Scout Section officer, Auxiliary Units. He had previous served in the ranks of the Victoria Rifles, one of the predecessor regiments of the Royal Green Jackets, who were only formed in 1958. He was dropped behind the lines in France and later Burma and survived the war.

¹¹ 19 August 1942