

'We're doomed!'

A brief introduction to British W.W.II stay behind networks

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The broadcasting by the BBC during the Christmas period 2015 of a comedy drama based around the creation of the Dad's Army television series, reminded me of how the Home Guard were used during World War II as the cover for a slightly more deadly type of troops.¹ These secret soldiers were known as Auxiliary Units, and they were tasked with being part of any immediate British resistance movement that would form in the event of an Axis invasion of mainland Britain.

In the very early stages of the war – particularly in the summer that followed the withdrawal from Dunkirk in 1940 – such an invasion was a real possibility. The Axis powers did have plans to invade Britain but Operation Sea Lion, as it was known, was eventually delayed indefinitely. At the time, this was partly due to a tactical error by Luftwaffe commander Herman Goering.² The RAF were thus able to regain fighting strength. The German high command decided that the time was not right, the moment was missed, and the British border remained uncrossed.

This we know with the benefit of hindsight; but until about 1943, and the lead up to the Allied D-Day landings, the situation was not so clear. What if Hitler – already known to be an impetuous leader – had suddenly decided to cross the

¹ This is not to belittle the men who did serve in the Home Guard, many of whom had fought with distinction in the First World War and knew exactly what war was really like. The actor Arnold Ridley, who played the mild-mannered Private Charles Godfrey in the Dad's Army series was himself a wounded veteran of both World Wars. See <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1239929/Dads-Army-actor-Arnold-Ridleys-son-belittled-fathersawesome-heroism.html>>

² Goering decided to change target priority from British radar stations and airfields to the factories building the aircraft. See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/invasion_ww2_01.shtml>.

English Channel? Even before Dunkirk, in the late spring of 1940 as more and more of France fell under German control and following War Cabinet discussion of the proposal, Winston Churchill instructed Colonel Colin Gubbins³ to form a resistance force of civilian volunteers. These were the Auxiliary Units.

Malcolm Atkins argues on his website⁴ and in his books that the role of the Auxiliary Units has been exaggerated by the passage of time. He argues that it was that efforts of MI6 which were most influential in the establishment of a stay-behind network. I disagree – and not just because MI6 had insufficient resources within the UK for what needed to be a substantial operation. There were, indeed, efforts by MI6 to establish networks, but they were somewhat disorganised and hampered by internal departmental secrecy. Two different small-scale networks were instigated by MI6 in 1940. Section D recruited some men for their civilian Home Defence Scheme, and there was an even smaller Section VII. The Auxiliary Units, however, were a much larger scale operation than either Section D or Section VII.

Any such large-scale effort within the UK border by one of the security agencies would have more naturally been the responsibility of MI5, but they were already stretched to full capacity in attempting to monitor both German and Communist agents who were already in place.⁵

Roughly 3,000 men were eventually recruited into the Auxiliary Units. Initially these volunteers were already serving in the Home Guard but they were soon augmented by others

³ Gubbins was later to be a major figure in the Special Operations Executive. More interestingly perhaps, for *Lobster* readers, in the post-war years he was linked to the Bilderberg Group. On this see the brief description at <<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/1030021611>>.

⁴ <<http://www.mwatkin.com/organisation/4587917189>>

⁵ The potted history of MI5 available online at the National Archives is blunt: 'In early 1939 the Service contained only 30 officers and its surveillance strength was only 6.' <<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C280>>

For an indication of how MI5 approached their task, see <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/secretfiles-mi5-plot-nazi-britain-world-war-ii>>

who were of call-up age but in reserved occupations.⁶

The Auxiliary Units' uniforms bore the insignia and number of their fictitious Home Guard battalions – the 201st in Scotland, the 202nd in Northern England and 203rd in Southern England. However, the 'uniforms' in question were just denims to cover everyday clothes. It would seem unlikely that, in the event of an invasion, patrol members would have had the time to don these extra items of clothing, just so that they would be following the exact letter of the order from on high. Doing so would also have made them a more noticeable presence and less able to blend into the community during the lead up to any actions.

In the event of an invasion, the patrols would operate from small underground bunkers.⁷ Under the cover of night they would have carried out sabotage and disruption activities against the occupying enemy force. Would the effort involved in creating these units have been expended lightly? Would it have been done just in the hope that the force would be able to briefly hold up an advancing army of occupation, as Atkins argues?

At the time, some officials predicted that the life-expectancy of members of these units would be two weeks at most. General Paget, Chief of Staff to the C-in-C of Home Forces, wrote to a Captain Sandys on 30 July 1940 regarding the newly forming Auxiliary Units:

'The object of these fighting patrols is to provide within the general Home Guard organisation small units of men, specially selected and trained, whose role is to act offensively on the flanks and in the rear of any German

⁶ Amongst the list of reserved occupations were transport workers, farm hands, doctors and those who had taken Holy Orders. One of the wartime members of the regular SAS regiment was Rev. Fraser Mcluskey, later The Very Rev Fraser Mcluskey and Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. See <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12483930.The_Very_Rev_Dr_J_Fraser_McLuskey_Military_Cross_winning_Parachute_Padre_and_former_Moderator_of_the_General_Assembly/>.

⁷ Current photos of one such hideout are on the excellent Subterranea Britannica website at <http://www.subbrit.org.uk/sb-sites/sites/f/firle_au_hideout/index.shtml>.

troops who may obtain a *temporary foothold* in this country.’⁸ (emphasis added).

But what activities would the Auxiliary Units have got up to if an attempted German invasion had achieved anything more than a ‘temporary foothold’? I think that some indication can be found in the fact that the special training the Auxiliary Units received was extensive. This took place at Coleshill House, a 17th Century Palladian mansion in Oxfordshire. The entire grounds were requisitioned and areas for combat practice were dotted around the large estate.⁹ Instructors on the training courses for the genuine Home Guard, which took place at Osterley Park in West London, included ex-International Brigade veterans from the Spanish Civil War. These men's experience no doubt also proved invaluable for the training of the Auxiliary Units at Coleshill, just 70 miles further west.’

Malcolm Atkins argues that the Special Duties Branch of the Auxiliary Units, who had rudimentary radio communications, would be easily mopped up by any German invading force. But so too would any SIS-backed units who had also been similarly equipped with broadcasting radios. Indeed, Atkins admits that the TRD radio sets, with which Section VII from MI6 had been equipped, ‘were not terribly effective as a spy set’.¹⁰ The advantage, as I see it, that the Auxiliary Units Operational Patrols had, was that they did not possess any radios and were, thus, even more clandestine. If they had been given clearly defined geographical operational boundaries, there should have been a good chance that they would have outlasted all of the other types of units.

Following the end of the war the experience and tactics taught to the Auxiliary Units was eventually used to help create the Gladio networks in Europe. In addition, the post-W.W.II territorial army regiments of the SAS were similarly

⁸ Held within National Archives papers at reference CAB 120/241.

⁹ In this respect it was something of a precursor to the Pontrilas Army Training Area that is currently used by British Special Forces. The PATA, as it is known, includes various target shooting ranges, an aircraft assault simulator and an advanced driving skid-pan.

¹⁰ <https://www.academia.edu/21220700/Myth_and_Reality_The_Second_World_War_Auxiliary_Units>

trained for action within the borders of the UK in the event of an invasion, or of massive co-ordinated civil unrest.¹¹

I will return to this topic with an examination of UK connections to the Gladio networks and a summary of current UK special forces tasking for activities within their home borders.

Nick Must is an independent researcher with a particular interest in Special Forces. In this respect, he admits that his BSc (hons) in Music Technology from London Guildhall University is completely irrelevant.

¹¹ A not wholly inconceivable situation if one contemplates the activities of recent UK governments.