

Fall 8-20-2013

The Auxiliary Units: Britain's Last Line of Defense During World War II

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THE AUXILIARY UNITS:
BRITAIN'S LAST LINE OF DEFENSE DURING WORLD WAR II

by

CASSY RICE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Political Science and History
Patricia Gajda, Ph.D., Committee Chair
College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler
August 2013

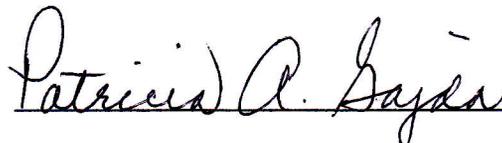
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ABSTRACT

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The Auxiliary Unit was a secret highly trained group of men especially designed by Prime Minister Winston Churchill to be last line of defense for Britain if Hitler were to invade. Hitler was growing in power and strength at what seemed to be a daily rate, and he had just taken hold of France. Churchill and the rest of the United Kingdom not only felt threatened by an invasion, but they were also exceedingly concerned that the only thing separating Britain from Nazi Europe was the English Channel. If he were to successfully invade Britain, Hitler would have to overcome many obstacles, such as the Royal Air Force, the English Channel, the regular Army, and the Home Guard. After taking these into consideration Hitler devised Operation Sea Lion, a plan for invading England. Once Churchill and the War Cabinet became aware of Operation Sea Lion, they devised a form of protection should Sea Lion actually be deployed. This protection took the form of a new unit, one unlike anything the United Kingdom had seen before. It was a combination of intelligence and resistance, military in character, and under the aegis of the Home Guard. The men came from all walks of life and were individually hand picked by Maj. Colin Gubbins, a specialist in guerilla warfare. Although trained to carry out specific duties, they never had the opportunity to go into action.

1. INTRODUCTION

Roughly twenty years elapsed between World War I and World War II. Those who fought “the war to end all wars” witnessed new horrors of violence and death of comrades in unprecedented, massive numbers. Those who followed them two decades later found an even more modern and mechanized world in which the enemy seemed to no longer abide by the long-accepted rules by which combat was to be conducted.

Not long after the end of World War I, Germany began to violate many of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. It exceeded the number of troops permitted in the treaty and secretly began building aircraft to be used, not for civilian aviation, which was permitted by the treaty, but for war. Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, and within two years he brazenly and illegally announced unilateral German rearmament, in violation of the treaty. A year later he marched his troops across the Rhine into territory that the treaty had declared a demilitarized zone. Few voices of protest were heard concerning these blatant violations. A series of alliances and non-aggression pacts were hurriedly negotiated by the diplomats across Europe as Germany continued to flex its muscles. Hitler annexed Austria to the German Reich early in 1938; he gobbled up the Sudetenland of western Czechoslovakia in the autumn of the same year. With this action, the British government finally relinquished its policy of appeasement. It was clear that Hitler’s appetite had no end. Neville Chamberlain, who had been Prime Minister since 1937, had followed a course of appeasement. After the fall of France in 1940, Winston Churchill would replace him as Prime Minister. He

had long been calling for British rearmament to halt German expansion and aggression in Europe. He would soon develop some other ideas about how a war, if one must be fought, might be fought in ways other than on the battlefield. These ideas regarding guerilla warfare and highly secret home defense units are the main subject of this thesis.

Before Europe could recover from the shock of Hitler's actions in Austria and Czechoslovakia, he struck against the Republic of Poland at first light on September 1, 1939, the date that has been largely accepted as the beginning of World War II in Europe.

This, however, was a new kind of war. Hitler unleashed *Blitzkrieg* on the country, a lightening war that simultaneously launched infantry, artillery, and cavalry on the ground and the squadrons of the *Luftwaffe* in the air. As per a recent pact Germany had concluded with the Soviet Union, Germany took the western portion of Poland for itself and the Soviet Union took the eastern portion. Poland had expired even before the month of September had.

Hitler's use of *Blitzkrieg* not only allowed Nazi Germany to move quickly and conquer an enormous amount of Europe before the Allied forces came to arms in defense of Europe, but it played a major psychological role as well. *Blitzkrieg* ignited fear in the hearts and minds of the unconquered people of Western Europe. Germany did, in fact, unleash *Blitzkrieg* over Western Europe in the spring of 1940. Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Netherlands, and even France had fallen. By June 18, when Churchill

addressed Parliament with an update on Britain's wartime effort, the Nazis had already reached the beachheads of Normandy. The only thing separating Hitler and Nazi-occupied Europe from the United Kingdom was the English Channel.

Before the United Kingdom declared war on Germany, Hitler held high hopes that war between his country and the United Kingdom could be avoided. Even after the devastating embarrassment the British troops faced at Dunkirk, Hitler expected the British to beg for mercy.¹ As Britain continued to stand unwavering at the notion of peace with Germany, any desire Hitler might have had to avoid conflict with the United Kingdom quickly faded into oblivion. Power hungry and greedy as he was, the idea of expanding and having the United Kingdom under his control was enticing enough for him to order his officers and advisers to draw up a plan of invasion. It was known as Operation Sea Lion. This operation consisted of a basic plan to cross the channel, how the troops were to land, and what sort of weather would be conducive to the success to this sort of operation. Hitler's troops would invade by sea, but only if they could have the *Luftwaffe*, the German air force, gain air superiority over the British Royal Air Force and the British navy cleared from "the narrow space in and on both sides of the straits of Dover."² Hitler was confident that this could be accomplished and a German amphibious invasion could not fail. A rumor that such an operation was in the works was cause enough to send a panic throughout the British government.

¹ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), 17.

² *Operation Sea Lion* ADM 1/19902 NID01234/1946; Germany: People and Social Forces: Report on Operation "Sea Lion" (Invasion of England) 1945-1946; Richmond, England: British National Archives, 2013.

On June 18, 1940, Churchill addressed the House of Commons and stated, “The battle of France is over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin.”³ As fear ran throughout the country, the British people considered how they could defend themselves at home. Fear of a German invasion had reached its height among the British masses, while Churchill, a full year in advance of the June 18 address, stressed the necessity of not underestimating the threat of Germany invading England.⁴ At that time, in 1939, he proposed that a home defense force be formed by the men who could not serve in the regular Army.⁵ More than a year later, a home defense force had yet to materialize. An announcement advertising the creation of a Home Force was finally made two months prior to Churchill’s “Finest Hour” speech in 1940. On May 14 the Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden spoke to the nation during a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) broadcast in which Eden made an appeal to the men who were not allowed, for any particular reason, to enroll in the regular Army, to join the home forces, the Local Defense Volunteers (LDV).⁶

The measures to defeat such an attack must be prompt and rapid ... In order to leave nothing to chance, and to supplement from sources as yet untapped, the means of defense already arranged, we are going to ask you to help us, in a manner which I know will be welcome to thousands of you. ... Men of all ages who for one reason or another not at present engaged in military service, ... Now is your opportunity. We want large numbers of such men in Great Britain who are

³ Winston Churchill, “Their Finest Hour,” *The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Churchill War Rooms, London*, June 18, 1940/2013, <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/1940-finest-hour/122-their-finest-hour>

⁴ Documentations where Churchill expressed that an invasion was not to be overlooked. PRO, CAB 65/1, WM 55(39)2; PRO, CAB 65/1, WM 66(39)5

⁵ S. P. Mackenzie, *The Home Guard: A Military and Political History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 19.

⁶ Mackenzie, 32.

British subjects, between the ages of seventeen and sixty-five, to come forward now and offer their services in order to make assurance doubly sure.⁷

A clearly evident and visible home volunteer force helped to ease the minds and comfort the hearts of the British people; however, Churchill was not satisfied with the volunteer forces being the last line of defense for the country.

Another form of defense that suddenly began to appear all across Europe after Hitler invaded each country was the resistance group. For instance, soon after Hitler seized Poland, and the Polish government in exile was established in London, a Polish underground movement was formed. The idea of these groups was to relay intelligence reports to their allies in England and to commit acts of sabotage and kill as many Nazis as they could before they themselves were killed. Poland was not the only country where resistance groups were formed. Germany itself had a small underground resistance unit, as well as France. While these groups resulted in many successful moments, and proved to be essential to the Allies in gathering intelligence, they had many pitfalls. These units were hastily thrown together; therefore, they oftentimes were not sufficiently well constructed to be efficiently run, and they did not always have the necessary resources to optimize their missions. Churchill recognized these problems as a deficiency of most resistance groups and feared that if the Axis invaded the United Kingdom, the same problem would occur here in any resistance groups that the British people might form. If the United Kingdom were to stand a chance against an invasion, they would have to be prepared. In Churchill's opinion, the Local Defense Volunteers,

⁷ Anthony Eden, *Freedom and Order: Selected Speeches, 1936-1940* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1947), 72.

which would be renamed the Home Guard at a later date, and a quickly formed resistance group could not offer the country a sufficient amount of security.

Intelligence reports compiled by resistance groups constituted a considerable contribution to the allied cause. The Allied war plans heavily depended on the accuracy of the intelligence they received. At times when resistance groups could not physically inhibit the activities of the Nazis, gathering as much accurate intelligence as possible and relaying it to the Allies could sometimes prevent or disrupt their operations. When the intelligence reports came through to the Allies, a governmental department specializing in the collection and decoding of the intelligence reports from abroad aided the war effort. This governmental department was Military Intelligence Five, known as M.I.5. The department still plays a critical role during wartime, as it can provide the Prime Minister updates on foreign developments and advise him on which resources are available for use if any counter actions are desired.

However, the primary job of the British Military Intelligence is to collect data about their enemies' whereabouts and movements. With this as their primary job, the military intelligence is able to construct a nearly accurate depiction of what Hitler's next move would be. This department also studies the many different types of warfare, and the best way for them to be put to use in the field. A branch of military intelligence was created specifically for research and conducting experimental units designed specifically to fight by using guerilla warfare tactics. This branch was known as Military Intelligence (Research), or M.I.(R). Its members consisted of highly intelligent men who were at the top of their fields in studying as spies, in guerilla warfare tactics, and resistance

activities. Among these were Field Marshal Edmund Ironside, whose official title was Commander-in-Chief of the Home Forces; Maj. Colin Gubbins, who was the expert in guerilla tactics; and Capt. Peter Fleming of the Grenadier Guards, an expert in the art of spying and deception. Because of their expertise, these men were extensively sought after. They did not last long in their positions under M.I.(R); however, the services that they did provide while a part of military intelligence resulted in the formation of a new, unique defensive unit.

The greater part of the intelligence reports that the government was receiving left the vast majority of the members of the military intelligence to strongly expect an invasion to occur at some time during the summer of 1940. Fearing this, the British formed a secret, elite unit that specialized in intelligence and resistance activity while operating under the disguise of the Home Guard. In the event that an invasion would occur, this unit would stay behind to defend England and provide an opportunity for a counterattack. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the creation of this unit as a response to Operation Sea Lion by examining a few failed attempts of an elite clandestine group created by Churchill and military intelligence; the recruitment, training, and possible target missions; and most importantly the profound need for the Official Secrets Act.

The security of this group was of utmost importance, which meant that the fewer people in command who knew about it, the better chance it had to succeed in the mission in case of invasion. The whole success of this elite unit hinged on the ability of its members to be completely invisible, not just in their actions in the field, but also in

any official documentation and records. Secrecy was the defining characteristic of these men; therefore, an official name for any sort of records had to be as ambiguous as possible. Major Gubbins was given the task of naming this unit. He searched for a name that appeared to be particularly common, and could describe a multitude of actions without sounding overly suspicious.⁸ A name that fit Major Gubbins's requirements exactly was the Auxiliary Units. Not only could the Auxiliary Units on paper simply be overlooked, but their name was fairly similar to a subsection of the Home Guard called the auxiliaries, which to any prying eyes could very easily be confused with the newer units. It was the perfect name for a group that was not supposed to exist.

This new and innovative group that was forged by the men mentioned above, was the type of group Churchill envisioned to be the leading unit for the United Kingdom's security after a German invasion. The Auxiliary Units took on components from all three necessary branches of home defensive groups such as the Home Guard, resistance groups, and intelligence gathering. These men were highly trained in the effective use of resistance activities and were equipped to handle situations far above any member of the regular Army's training or knowledge. They were proficient in gathering an incredible amount of information on any situation they encountered, and had the equipment readily available to them to transmit reports inconspicuously to headquarters right under the highly suspicious German invaders' noses. The leaders within the individual groups of the Auxiliary Units had the authority to take out any objective they saw as benefiting the resistance cause, without requiring permission from

⁸ Stephen Budiansky, "Churchill's Secret Army," *World War II* 23, no. 4 (2008): 32.

headquarters first. While practicing for their active duty missions, the practices served dual purposes. The missions required the men to be virtually invisible at night as they would sneak onto military or home guard bases, and they were to disable airplanes or any other machinery without any immediate visible damage being evident. After completion of such a task the members of the Auxiliary Units would have received successful training, and the military or home guard base commanders were alerted to their security discrepancies. The most impressive aspect was that the men who served in the Auxiliary Units were trained so efficiently that they could conduct their missions during the day or night without arousing any suspicion.

It required talent for members of the Auxiliary Units to walk among their neighbors while performing a mission and to be invisible while doing so. But it also demanded utmost silence. These men operated under such secrecy that their own family members had absolutely no knowledge of their clandestine participation in the war efforts. In another measure taken to ensure that such groups as the Auxiliary Units were kept confidential, even after signing the Official Secrets Act, the Auxiliary Units were broken into smaller groups of about five or six men operating within any given area. Several of these groups could be operating in either the same or overlapping operational areas, and they would have absolutely no knowledge of each other. Secrecy was essential to the surprise factor and success rate in the event of an invasion.

Field Marshall Ironside, Major Gubbins, Captain Fleming, and several other men of their caliber came together to brainstorm and construct this unique unit in response to Operation Sea Lion. The Auxiliary Units were created from the imagination and intellect

of the members of Military Intelligence (R), reported directly to Prime Minister Churchill; they wore the same uniforms as the Home Guard and kept the secret of a lifetime. In the event of a German invasion, the Auxiliary Units would be called into duty, and they were prepared to serve their country in a manner unlikely to have been witnessed before. The men who served as part of the Auxiliary Units carried the heaviest part of the burden of the United Kingdom's chance of survival after invasion.

2. FEAR OF GERMAN INVASION

The defense of a small country can be naturally reinforced by its geography. Britain's location as an island country off the coast of Continental Europe could, for a time, help protect the country from invasion. It would soon cease to be an island, however, once the early invention of technological wonders, particularly radar, became a reality. A determined enemy would have to cross the tumultuous English Channel probably by way of France. As Germany and the United Kingdom went to war in 1939, there was very little precedent to fear a German invasion. Germany might have been gaining momentum in controlling many areas throughout Europe, but Hitler's sights were not on the French coast until well after his invasion of Poland in September of 1939.

By the spring of 1940, following a curious period the Americans came to call the "phoney war," the Nazis turned their attention to the countries of Western Europe. In doing this, they unleashed *Blitzkrieg* against them. While Poland had been the first to experience the Nazi *Blitz*, France now bore the brunt of it. The Nazis were quickly approaching the French coast, and on May 27, 1940, British troops began to rapidly be evacuated from Dunkirk over a span of nine days. By June 4, 1940, British troops had been completely evacuated from Dunkirk as the Nazis had reached the French coast. German invasion of Britain appeared to be imminent. Fourteen days later, on June 18,

Prime Minister Winston Churchill told Parliament that he feared the Battle of Britain would soon commence.⁹

Churchill had long been warning his government and countrymen to never underestimate what Hitler could accomplish, and for the government not to overlook any indications that might reveal what Hitler's true plans for Britain were. After a quick victory in Poland, Hitler soon turned his full attention on France. Once the Nazis gained control over the majority of Europe, the next logical target to the west was the United Kingdom, thus leaving Churchill's fear that the front would inevitably be brought home to England not to be entirely unfounded.

A German professor, Dr. Ewald Banse, had published a book in English six years earlier, in 1934, entitled *Germany, Prepare for War!* This book extensively discussed the ideas of a German invasion of England, as Banse even went into detail on how a cross channel invasion could be successful. The German authorities worked quickly to allay any suspicion that Banse's work might have had any truth to it. The German authorities even went so far as to discredit Banse as an "irresponsible theoretician."¹⁰ In 1936 a quick cover-up by the German government could make the stories of this book appear to be nothing more than a bizarre theory; however, four years later it represented what Nazi Germany's genuine intentions had been all along.

⁹ Winston Churchill, "Their Finest Hour," *The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Churchill War Rooms, London*, June 18, 1940/2013, <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/122-their-finest-hour>

¹⁰ Peter Fleming, *Operation Sea Lion: The Projected Invasion of England in 1940, an Account of the German Preparations and the British Countermeasures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 32.

Banse's theory may have been one of the first publicly announced indications of what Germany's plans were since the Nazi party came into power in 1933, but it certainly would not be the last. Another indication came in early October 1939 when plans were devised to invade Belgium, Holland, and Luxemburg with an outcome that would provide an opportunity to attack Britain. Operation Yellow, as the strategy came to be known, did not specifically refer to a cross channel invasion, but it did express an evident desire to bring the war to Britain's home front.

On July 1, 1940, Hitler and his top advisors stood on the coast at Calais in France gazing at the white cliffs of Dover in England.¹¹ Hitler wanted the United Kingdom under his control, but he hoped to achieve this without having to stage a full-scale invasion. After France was conquered, he was willing to offer generous terms of peace to the British government due to a certain amount of respect that he maintained for the English people.¹² However, to Churchill and the vast majority of the British population, surrendering was not an option. In mid-July the official orders came from Hitler to construct a strategy of invasion, to be code named Operation Sea Lion. Britain's time had come. The fear of German invasion was no longer a mere threat. It was becoming a reality.

¹¹ "Hitler Postpones the Invasion of Britain," *BBC*. Accessed Spring 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/hitler_postpones_the_invasion_of_britain; For a picture of this event go to the website above.

¹² William Manchester and Paul Reid, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill Defender of the Realm 1940-1965* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2012), 35 [E-book accessed Spring 2013, from Kindle Database].

OPERATION YELLOW

At the end of 1939 Western Europe was increasingly vulnerable to falling under Nazi control. On October 9, after Poland had fallen, Directive Order Number Six was given, which would accomplish the goal of gaining more ground on the German Western Front. This operation laid out Hitler's plans for seizing control of the Western Europe.

Directive Order Number Six, also known by its code name Operation Yellow, was an offensive action that would cross Luxemburg, Belgium, and Holland to defeat the French Army, and its allies.¹³ Acquiring Holland, Belgium, and Northern France would offer a base for "waging aerial and sea warfare against England."¹⁴ A plan for the invasion of England was not directly included in Operation Yellow. Its primary purpose was to provide a place from which to launch a successful attack against the United Kingdom. Not only did Operation Yellow provide grounds from which to launch an attack, but it also provided a base from which an amphibious invasion could be launched.

Hitler never followed through with Operation Yellow as it was postponed indefinitely some time in January 1940. The operation had originally been postponed twelve times owing to bad weather and then, finally, because intelligence reports suggested that complete copies of the orders had fallen into the hands of the Allies.¹⁵ An interception of a German copy of Operation Yellow by the Allies indicated that

¹³ Peter Fleming, *Operation Sea Lion: The Projected Invasion of England in 1940, an account of the German Preparations and the British Countermeasures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957): 16.

¹⁴ Fleming, 17.

¹⁵ Fleming, 17.

measures were being put into place which would easily provide a base for a full frontal attack on England.

To the United Kingdom, Operation Yellow represented clear and blatantly evident intentions for an attack by Germany. Although Hitler postponed Operation Yellow indefinitely, there was no way for the British to know, beyond reasonable doubt, that this operation was no longer an actual threat. Nevertheless, it would have been unwise for the British government not to attentively observe any move that the Nazis made near the French coast. A German intention to attack the United Kingdom was evident, and the British would have to take rigorous precautions to defend their home front.

FIFTH COLUMNISTS

If leaking operational plans and strategically maneuvering troops along the coast of France were not sufficiently daunting to ensure a paralyzing fear of imminent German attack among the British population, then an entirely different form of psychological warfare would definitely do so. As the act of espionage was on the rise, both German and British governments benefited from sending agents into enemy territory to blend in with the crowd and gather intelligence. Spies had become feared among the population. Women were especially warned to be careful to whom they spoke and what they spoke about because a spy could be among them. Posters commissioned by the British government were hung all across the country reinforcing the necessity of keeping

quiet.¹⁶ However even more feared than spies were the agents known as Fifth Columnists.

The concept that a group of agents could infiltrate an area without a population knowing that they ever existed added another level of discomfort and distrust during a time of war. However, during World War II a German Fifth Column could possibly have existed only in the minds of the people and not in reality. Whether an actual Fifth Column existed, and would be used against the United Kingdom, was irrelevant. The British fear that it would be unleashed against them was real. It was widely believed that the Germans had depended heavily on a Fifth Column during their conquest of Norway. Because reports of their existence were never disproved, they assumed a higher level of credibility which only contributed to the widespread fear.¹⁷

Three more factors fed the fear of the existence of a Fifth Column: (1) the mere mention of a Fifth Column asserted a great deal of psychological power over its presumed targets; (2) because Germans were routinely in possession of the best technologically advanced weapons and were known for their wide use of propaganda to accomplish their goals, it would be foolish for the British government not to assume that the Fifth Column was a part of their arsenal of weaponry; and (3) because Churchill and the United Kingdom were regarded as threats to Hitler, that provided a good reason why a Fifth Column should be present in the United Kingdom, if only for intelligence

¹⁶ Poster: "TELLING a friend may mean telling THE ENEMY" as depicted by a picture of women chatting. Kenneth W. Rendell, *World War II Saving the Reality: A Collector's Vault* (Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, 2009): 39.

¹⁷ Peter Fleming, *Operation Sea Lion: The Projected Invasion of England in 1940, an Account of the German Preparations and the British Countermeasures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957): 59.

purposes.¹⁸ It was also believed that if Fifth Columnists were to arrive in the United Kingdom, they would most likely arrive as German paratroopers under the cover of darkness.

The immediate fear of a German Fifth Column already existing among the British people now suddenly turned ordinary citizens into objects of suspicion. They feared that their own neighbors were German agents strategically placed to undermine the British government. Besides the Allied High Command intercepting intelligence of German operations that clearly stated an attack or invasion on the United Kingdom was imminent, the idea that a Fifth Column existed produced the bulk of British fear and distrust of the enemy. It sparked enough commotion that led to a specialized task for the home forces to primarily stand guard watching for potential Fifth Columnist paratroopers to arrive.¹⁹ To help ease the widespread fears, the government published posters illustrating the uniforms of German paratroopers and German sailors.²⁰

OPERATION SEA LION

One can imagine the fear of Britons when the Nazis finally reached the French coast on July 1, 1940, and Hitler was seen by the people of Calais, standing in a distinctly Napoleonic pose with one foot forward, a hand resting in his jacket pocket, as

¹⁸ Peter Fleming, *Operation Sea Lion: The Projected Invasion of England in 1940, an Account of the German Preparations and the British Countermeasures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957): 59.

¹⁹ Stephen Cullen, "The Home Guard: 1940-1944," *History Review* 49, (September, 2004): 1.

²⁰ Poster of what a German Airman and German Sailor uniforms look like so the British people would be able to recognize the enemy immediately.

Kenneth W. Rendell, *World War II Saving the Reality: A Collector's Vault* (Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, 2009): 39.

he gazed through binoculars at the white cliffs of Dover.²¹ By this point it was clear to him that Churchill had no intention of surrendering Britain under any circumstances. This almost certainly meant invasion of the island kingdom was imminent.

Sixteen days later on July 16, after the French surrender was official, and the British had yet to ask for peace after the embarrassment at Dunkirk, Hitler gave orders for Directive Number Sixteen to be developed.²² Its code name was Operation Sea Lion. It provided directions for how the landing would occur and what provisions should be taken after a successful landing. Deployment of Operation Sea Lion hinged on certain circumstances such as optimal weather conditions and tactical advantages that must be met to the absolute fullest. The orders were requested and construction of plans for an invasion of England was officially under way.

One of the major obstacles for attacking the United Kingdom was the successful crossing of the English Channel. A successful attack would have to be launched before the end of summer. It was already well into the month of July, and the vast majority of Operation Sea Lion had yet to be constructed. One part of it had to be implemented immediately. The German Air Force, the *Luftwaffe*, would have to immediately subject the British to air raid attacks, and on July 10, 1940, the Battle of Britain began.

The orders for Directive Number Sixteen were still six days away from having Hitler's official stamp of approval; however, during time of war every minute that passes

²¹ Sam White, "When Hitler Gazed at The White Cliffs of Dover," *The Argus* no. 30,609 (October 4, 1944): 16. <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/11364014>.

²² David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 17.

is valuable time that can dictate in which direction a battle will be won. The *Luftwaffe* would have to begin their campaign immediately to ensure that Operation Sea Lion could in fact be carried out. Churchill recognized the significance of the *Luftwaffe* bombings as the Battle of Britain commenced, and although he was unaware that Operation Sea Lion was not yet an operational strategy, he addressed the nation on a BBC broadcast on July 14 where he stated the following:

We may therefore be sure that there is a plan—perhaps built up for a year for destroying Great Britain, which after all has the honor to be his main and foremost enemy. All I can say is that any plan for invading Britain which Hitler made two months ago must have had to be entirely recast in order to meet our new position. Two months ago—nay, one month ago—our first and main effort was to keep our best army in France ... Now we have it all at home. Never before in the last war—or in this—have we had in this island an Army comparable in quality, equipment or numbers to that which stands here on guard tonight.²³

The United Kingdom was quickly preparing for the inevitable German invasion, as the *Luftwaffe* brought down the fury of the Germans on London.

Churchill was correct to have a suspicion; however, it was not until July that the idea of Operation Sea Lion came into existence. The initiative for Operation Sea Lion came from the Navy's Grand Admiral Erich Raeder, who suggested the plan in late May.²⁴ The *Luftwaffe*, it will be remembered, was already engrossed in the Battle of Britain; however, should Operation Sea Lion be deployed, it would then play an integral part of the operation. Commander-in-Chief Hermann Göring of the *Luftwaffe* was not as

²³ Winston Churchill, "War of the Unknown Warriors," *The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Churchill War Rooms, London*, July 14, 1940/2013
<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/126-war-of-the-unknown-warriors>.

²⁴ *Operation Sea Lion* ADM 1/19902 NID01234/1946; Germany: People and Social Forces: Report on Operation "Sea Lion" (Invasion of England) 1945-1946; Richmond, England: British National Archives, 2013.

enthusiastic about Operation Sea Lion as the rest of Hitler's advisors seemed to be. Göring was not particularly happy with the concept that the *Luftwaffe* could in fact be the lone decisive factor in the success of the operation.²⁵ However, his discomfort with their integral part of the plan should not be confused with his confidence in the strength and capabilities of the *Luftwaffe*. Prior to the war Göring, along with the rest of the German air force, was quite confident in their capabilities of "crushing Britain without aid."²⁶

Operation Sea Lion dictated that a German cross-channel invasion would occur if, and only if, the *Luftwaffe* could gain air superiority over the British Royal Air Force and the British Navy would be cleared from "the narrow space in and on both sides of the straits of Dover." Kent and Sussex were the designated landing beaches. Once the troops landed, they would slowly make their way inland and begin to set up the protocols for occupation as listed in Directive Number Sixteen.

September 21 was the probable earliest date for deployment of Operation Sea Lion. Should it commence on that date the *Luftwaffe* was prepared to begin their large-scale attacks on Birmingham and Liverpool by August 29, with additional raids in the London area on September 6 and 7.²⁷ The *Luftwaffe* was heavily participating in the suppression of the RAF, and the Navy was in position and prepared for launch. All that they were awaiting was the all clear from the Führer.

²⁵ *Operation Sea Lion* ADM 1/19902 NID01234/1946; Germany: People and Social Forces: Report on Operation "Sea Lion" (Invasion of England) 1945-1946; Richmond, England: British National Archives, 2013.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Before Operation Sea Lion was set to launch, Hitler remained fairly unsure about the whole operation. Its success heavily depended on the *Luftwaffe* and their overpowering of every bit of force that the British had on high alert. It could under no circumstances fail, because failure would result in “political consequences which would far exceed the military.”²⁸ Pressure grew. Failure was absolutely not an option. Weather conditions for crossing the channel were quickly deteriorating. As September 21 inched closer, Hitler had yet to finalize the orders for the actual deployment. On September 13 Hitler postponed the invasion. However, on the following day, to keep pressure on the British, he ordered a full-dress continuation of preparations for invasion.²⁹ On September 17 Hitler postponed Operation Sea Lion for the remainder of the year, as he turned his focus towards expanding the German borders on the Eastern Front.

Operation Sea Lion remained a relatively serious threat throughout the summer of 1941. This allowed the Germans to better prepare and to ensure a more successful invasion of England. Hitler’s focus, however, remained on the Russian front, and any plans to continue Operation Sea Lion eventually fell to the wayside. The United Kingdom was out of danger from an invasion by the end of the summer of 1941. Any British preparations that were made in an effort to counter a German invasion, however, were continued well throughout the war, even after the fear of an invasion subsided among the British people.

²⁸ *Operation Sea Lion* ADM 1/19902 NID01234/1946; Germany: People and Social Forces: Report on Operation “Sea Lion” (Invasion of England) 1945-1946; Richmond, England: British National Archives, 2013

²⁹ *Ibid.*

SUMMARY

Before the fateful day that Operation Sea Lion was indefinitely postponed, the United Kingdom had already been in imminent danger of invasion. Nazi Germany was extremely powerful, and according to its track record, once Hitler was determined to conquer a country, German forces made it happen. If Hitler had been serious about an invasion of England, no amount of British resources would have been able to stop it.

The British forces might not have been able to prevent a German invasion, but they were prepared to fend off an attack. Churchill stated in his July 14 BBC address to the nation that all of their best military resources were at home prepared and willing to defend their country. He went on to establish to every listening British citizen and to any German informants who might be intercepting the broadcast as well, that standing behind the highly trained and efficient regular Army were “more than a million of the Local Defense Volunteers, also known as the ‘Home Guard,’” ready to fend off any invader.³⁰ The regular Army and the Home Guard numbered in the millions; and while the amount of visible security was encouraging, Churchill recognized that the Home Guard would not be a match for the Nazis. The United Kingdom needed something more powerful in its arsenal.

In the event of a German invasion, Churchill had designed an elite ultra secret group that was prepared for duty at a moment’s notice. This group would serve several

³⁰ Winston Churchill, “War and the Unknown Warriors,” *The Churchill Centre and Museum at the Churchill War Rooms, London July 14, 1940/2013*
<http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/126-war-of-the-unknown-warriors>.

functions during the invasion. They would be able to relay intelligence to headquarters, but, most importantly, they would have the greatest opportunity to inflict damage and harm on the Nazis, all while providing the regular Army time to regroup and counter attack. The Auxiliary Units had been vigorously preparing during the summer of 1940, and they patiently waited for the call into action.

3. THE CONCEPTION OF AN ELITE GROUP

By the summer of 1940 Hitler stood at the coast of France desiring the United Kingdom to be within his control. Prime Minister Winston Churchill dreaded the day when, as far as the eye could see, the English Channel would be full of German naval vessels. The people of the United Kingdom feared the Germans, but not entirely for the sake of their security. Churchill, along with the majority of the other popular British government leaders, had spent countless hours on BBC broadcasts in the previous months, reassuring the population that not only were the highly trained regular Army standing guard but also a Home Guard that stood at an intimidating number in excess of one million members. The German invaders would not stand a chance against these insurmountable odds. Little did the masses or the majority of the leaders within the government know, but Churchill had something incomparably different in preparation that was designed to efficiently confront an enemy invader.

As the summer months proceeded and the peril of an invasion loomed, Churchill recognized the importance of having a back-up plan for both the Home Guard and the regular Army. On July 2 the Prime Minister spoke to the War Cabinet, insisting upon the need for a guerilla force that would allow itself to be overrun by the enemy and then plan and execute attacks from behind enemy lines.³¹ The guerilla-type troops that Churchill spoke of would later become known as the Auxiliary Units. They, however, did not

³¹ Winston Churchill, "The History of the Auxiliary Units and British Resistance Movement," *Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team*, January 1, 2013/2013, <http://www.coleshillhouse.com/the-auxiliary-units-history.php>.

immediately become the ideal type of resistance group. Several other prototypes of Churchill's ideal unit were constructed and disbanded before the Auxiliary Units finally became a reality.

In the year prior to the birth of the Auxiliary Units, two separate branches of the government had been intensely researching the inner workings and functions of resistance groups. The development of the ideal group that Churchill had envisioned to be the last line of defense for the United Kingdom came from a specialized branch within the War Office known as General Staff (Research), or G.S.(R). This particular branch of the War Office had been created even before the war began in 1939, but it had only enough resources available at that time to conduct research and produce reports. Another group that was closely connected to G.S.(R) was Section D, which was created by the Foreign Office. Section D was originally directed not only to study resistance groups, but also to create a group that could function at an advanced level while operating top-secret missions. However, Section D failed to provide something substantial that could live up to Churchill's vision, and it eventually merged with the newly formed branch of Military Intelligence (Research) toward the end of 1939, which operated under the British government's intelligence agency M.I.5, but in wartime reported to the War Cabinet.

After the merger, M.I.(R) inherited the orders from Section D to create an elite, secret group, trained in guerilla warfare. When Churchill spoke to the War Cabinet, on July 2, 1940, declaring the need for a guerilla force, he also announced that on the previous day, he had appointed Maj. Colin Gubbins to M.I.(R) to help lead in research

and training of his specialized field of guerilla warfare.³² July 1, 1940, the day that Gubbins was assigned to M.I.(R), is considered the day that the Auxiliary Units were officially created. There would, however, be one more version of an elite resistance group formed in the months immediately before the Auxiliary Units came into existence. A successful prototype called XII Corps was formed as the brainchild of another member who was chosen to help construct this type of unit, Capt. Peter Fleming from the Grenadier Guards. The XII Corps served as the template for the Auxiliary Units.

Roughly two months after the official birth of the Auxiliary Units in July, Churchill wrote to the Secretary of State for War, Anthony Eden, on September 25 speaking of his admiration for how far along the unit had come. Churchill stated:

I have been following with much interest the growth and development of the new guerilla 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.³³

The Auxiliary Units came together in entirety over a short period of two months and developed to fullest potential with elite status.

G.S. (R), AND M.I. (R)

Research is a vital resource used by virtually every successful organization or government. Every government depends heavily on the reports that its research branches produce. They act as think tanks for governments on practically every subject.

³² Major Nigel Oxenden, *Auxiliary Units History and Achievement 1940-1944* (Parham: 390th Bombardment Group Memorial Air Museum, 1998): 1.

³³ Peter Fleming, *Operation Sea Lion: The Projected Invasion of England in 1940, an Account of the German Preparations and the British Countermeasures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957): 270.

Prior to and during World War II, the British government created two research branches under the direction of both the War Office and the Foreign Office. The General Staff (Research) was created as a subunit of the War Office's jurisdiction, while Military Intelligence (Research) was created by the Foreign Office. Eventually it was determined that the research being conducted by both was sufficiently similar to warrant their consolidation.

The General Staff (Research) branch was a rather small department embedded within the War Office and overseen by Lt. Col. John Francis Holland of the Royal Engineers.³⁴ Holland's line of research concentrated on the field of guerilla warfare. He had primarily studied the Boer forces against the British, the rebel forces in China and Spain, and his own insights gained from his personal experience in Ireland during the Irish Civil War.³⁵ He focused his studies on how these forces maneuvered into offensive positions, surrounding their enemies without suspicion, the type of simple and home-made weapons that they used, and most importantly, the guerilla tactics that they used. Holland's research paralleled some of the major work that was being produced in the Foreign Office of Military Intelligence Directorate, so in 1939 the two offices were merged while remaining under the direction and control of the Foreign Office and renamed Military Intelligence (Research).

Major Holland continued with his research under the newly formed Military Intelligence (Research) after the merger. In 1939 Maj. Colin Gubbins had come on as

³⁴ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 84.

³⁵ Lampe, 84.

an important member of M.I.(R), but primarily in the capacity of a consultant. It would not be until July 1, 1940, when Churchill assigned him to use his position and knowledge within M.I.(R) to construct an actual guerilla resistance group.

Major Gubbins was notably an expert in guerilla warfare and the organization and training of such groups. Before the construction of what would become the Auxiliary Units, Gubbins penned several books that discussed in-depth guerilla tactics and the appropriate use of these skills. These books would eventually become the fundamental training manuals for every one of Britain's attempts to form clandestine units.³⁶ In 1939 Gubbins was sent into the field in Europe to attempt to organize guerilla type resistance groups in Poland and Czechoslovakia. Unfortunately, he had less than a month in Poland, which barely allowed any time for him to begin to train a few of the soldiers before Hitler invaded.³⁷

In the months before Gubbins had left for Poland and during the time after he returned home to London, he was able to privately train a few hand-picked British citizens in these techniques. Gubbins and Holland both worked to select them so that if Hitler brought the war to Britain, at least a few preselected soldiers would be immediately available for action.³⁸ By the time Churchill ordered the creation of the Auxiliary Units, Gubbins and Holland already had several of their leaders trained in the fundamentals.

³⁶ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 85.

³⁷ Lampe, 85.

³⁸ Lampe, 85.

M.I.(R) and Gubbins were also responsible for training some of the members of the French resistance movement, along with a few individuals who were headed into Norway. The latter were called Independent Companies, and they were British subjects. Their goal in Norway was to attack the German army, the *Wehrmacht*, between Oslo and Narvik, using guerilla techniques.³⁹ Sending these Independent Companies into Nazi-controlled countries was essentially sending in insurgents, and by doing so they directly counter-acted the British government's policies regarding interference.⁴⁰ Thus, M.I.(R)'s actions were immediately classified "Most Secret" and would stay that way indefinitely.

Military Intelligence (Research) produced some of the most incredible secret units that participated in clandestine operations, which ultimately hindered many of Hitler's plans. The Auxiliary Units was the brainchild of M.I.(R), and the prominent leaders in the creation of the Auxiliary Units served vital time under M.I.(R) operations. M.I.(R)'s Norwegian campaign manufactured many of the top-notch facilitators of the Auxiliary Units. Besides Maj. Colin Gubbins, who trained and led the Independent Companies, Royal Engineers Capt. Michael Calvert and Capt. Andrew Croft joined Gubbins. Another important member who joined M.I.(R), and was an integral part in the Auxiliary Units, was Capt. Peter Fleming from the Grenadier Guards.

M.I.(R) reached the security clearance status of "Most Secret," which meant reports that any members produced could be seen only by the direct leaders of M.I.(R),

³⁹ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 86.

⁴⁰ John Warwicker, *Churchill's Underground Army: The History of Auxiliary Units in World War II* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2008): 42.

select members of the War Cabinet, and Prime Minister Churchill. Later, after the actual physical creation of the Auxiliary Units, the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Forces Gen. Edmund Ironside, would also receive the security clearance to M.I.(R). General Ironside's connection to the Auxiliary Units primarily consisted of coordination, because both the Home Forces and the Auxiliary Units would be operating in overlapping areas. This specific research branch of the Foreign Office developed the technology and wisdom of an elite resistance group unique to the United Kingdom.

SECTION D

As war neared in 1938, the British Foreign Office decided to create a branch that would specialize in collecting enemy intelligence and operating in the field of sabotage. This branch would eventually grow to be more than just a British countermeasure group. It would also become the first branch asked to build an elite secret guerilla resistance group. Section D was born in April 1938; the D standing for Destruction.⁴¹ Royal Engineers Maj. Gen. Laurence Grand was appointed to lead it. He reported directly to the Chief of Secret Intelligence Services, Sir Stewart Menzies.⁴²

Grand would come to be the quintessential spymaster of the decade. The resources and reports that Section D produced were all related to techniques used in intelligence gathering and combat. The central objective of Section D was originally to “investigate every possibility of attacking potential enemies by means other than the

⁴¹ John Warwicker, *Churchill's Underground Army: The History of Auxiliary Units in World War II* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2008): 16-17.

⁴² In the widely popular James Bond stories, Menzies is rumored to be “M”. David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 67.

operations of military forces.”⁴³ Section D’s research, if simply modified, could also provide the government with a group similar to a guerilla force that they had already called for.

When the earliest orders came down for the creation of the guerilla force, they were handed to Major General Grand and Section D. Maj. Colin Gubbins, who was the local British expert on the topic and the initial choice. Because he was indisposed at that time in Norway with the Independent Companies, Grand was the next best choice. Members of Section D had the extensive knowledge needed to construct such a group and were proficient in using the types of weapons that a resistance group would use. Unfortunately, they failed at connecting all the pieces.

The members of Section D envisioned what weapons the stay-behind army would use and practiced how the weapons could be scattered throughout the United Kingdom. The assumption was that after the bombs were hidden, the stay-behind army would finish off the Nazis and disarm any weapons. The idea was by no means flawless, but it was manageable enough for the guerilla forces to make do. The only problem was that Section D neglected to form the stay-behind armies and lacked the proper techniques that were needed to train a stay-behind army.⁴⁴ Section D could not produce the ideal guerilla resistance force that Churchill imagined, but it did provide an exceptional place for the Auxiliary Units to build onto.

⁴³ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968): 83.

⁴⁴ Lampe, 87.

Section D failed in communication between field agents and their superior officers, along with the fundamental skills of integrating the concepts, but it succeeded tremendously in one very important aspect. It formed an impressive network of agents that would be exploited to the fullest extent in the special duties section of the Auxiliary Units.⁴⁵ Due to the delicate type of work that Section D did produce, all agents even those from the lowest level of the section, were submitted to the security classification of “Most Secret,” the same as members of M.I.(R). Section D lacked the sophistication and resilience that was needed and expected of an elite guerilla resistance unit.

XII CORPS

The XII Corps became the first guerilla resistance group successfully to be created and would go on to serve as the prototype used by M.I.(R) when constructing the Auxiliary Units. The XII Corps were originally vetted under the Home Guard by Gen. Andrew Thorne and flourished under the leadership of Capt. Peter Fleming, who was now a part of M.I.(R). General Thorne served and was evacuated from Dunkirk, and when he returned to the United Kingdom, he was assigned to the command of the Home Force XII Corps of Kent and Sussex.

Once Thorne was given command of the XII Corps in June 1940, he enlisted Fleming’s help in training the men in the guerilla units in the tactics he had witnessed in Prussia.⁴⁶ As Thorne began to construct his version of a guerilla force in June, it

⁴⁵ John Warwicker, *Churchill’s Underground Army: The History of the Auxiliary Units in World War II* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2008): 25.

⁴⁶ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968): 107.

appears that he was oblivious to the fact that his own image of the XII Corps mirrored the very actions of M.I.(R). Fleming, although enlisted by Thorne, had been initially recommended to Thorne for the training position.⁴⁷ Thorne had expressed his desire to the War Office to create a guerilla-like force out of the XII Corps, and they suggested that Captain Fleming had the unique skills of spying and guerilla tactics that made him the man for the job.

The XII Corps was in training to become a credible guerilla resistance unit, but Thorne recognized that it was missing an important characteristic. For the ultimate chance of success, the unit had to be able to go underground while maintaining its organization. It had to be military in character and, most importantly, every aspect of XII Corps actions and members had to maintain complete secrecy.⁴⁸ As it became apparent to Thorne and Fleming that these characteristics were detrimental to the success of the Corps, Gubbins and the remaining members of M.I.(R) were at the same time diligently constructing the Auxiliary Units.

As Fleming established the design of the XII Corps, he realized that all training of members would depend on his own personal knowledge. Fleming eventually made a connection with another member of M.I.(R)'s previous Independent Companies, Capt. Michael Calvert. Calvert was also in the area working on similar training for guerilla tactics and was the M.I.(R) Intelligence Officer for resistance activity in the Sussex area. Fleming and Calvert began to work together to forge ideas that would best serve the

⁴⁷ Peter Fleming, *Operation Sea Lion: The Projected Invasion of England in 1940, an Account of German Preparations and the British Countermeasures* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957): 270.

⁴⁸ Fleming, 270.

resistance movement. Fleming's concepts and XII Corps section were officially incorporated into the Auxiliary Units, while a Home Force XII Corps, separate from Fleming's section, remained operating in the Kent and Sussex area.

Fleming had done such an excellent job at creating the training techniques Major Gubbins had envisioned for the Auxiliary Units, that Gubbins designated Fleming's area in Kent as the first official training center.⁴⁹ Gubbins would also designate the XII Corps as the model for every future Auxiliary Unit to be constructed.

THE AUXILIARY UNITS

After much deliberation, countless hours of piecing together fragments of what could be an exemplary force, and a few semi-failed attempts at constructing such a group, the greatest version of an elite clandestine Auxiliary Unit finally was formed on July 1, 1940. Major Gubbins was appointed its leader, although, many members of M.I.(R) did significantly contribute to the formation of the Auxiliary Units along with him.

The Auxiliary Units were the epitome of what a guerilla resistance force could be. Their purpose was to stay behind when the Nazis arrived, to surpass the regular Army, and to destroy "the enemy's personnel and materiel."⁵⁰ They were expected to be nearly invisible as they operated behind enemy lines, all while being able to fashion a weapon from virtually anything nearby. The Auxiliary Units' primary mission, besides intelligence

⁴⁹ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 107.

⁵⁰ *Auxiliary Units Special Duties Organisation: Eligibility for Defence Medals, 1939-1945*, WO 32/21918; Richmond, England: British National Archives.

gathering, was to wreak havoc on the invaders by destroying the “enemy’s supplies and communications.”⁵¹

Roughly more than 6,000 men enlisted in the Auxiliary Units by the summer of 1942.⁵² These members were split into three divisions numbered 201, 202, and 203. Division 201 included all units from Scotland and Northumberland; division 202 included units from Yorkshire and southwards to the Thames and Wales; and division 203 included the units from the commands of the south and southeast.⁵³ The three divisions covered the coastal region of England and Scotland that bordered the English Channel, which was where a German invasion was most likely to occur.

There were two tasks for which the Auxiliary Units were responsible: “Operational Patrols,” in which the men would conduct missions of sabotage, and “Special Duties and Signals,” in which the members gathered intelligence and relayed messages to and from headquarters. The unit was divided into small sections scattered throughout the English coast and part of the Scottish coast as well. Each section was assigned its own specialized task. A small group of four to eight men would be responsible for either Operational Patrol tasks or Special Duties and Signals tasks, but never, under any circumstances, be responsible for both. For reasons of security, they never duplicated or even rotated tasks. Such procedures also allowed each section to intensely focus on

⁵¹ Nigel Oxenden, *Auxiliary Units History and Achievements 1940-1944* (Parham: 390th Bombardment Group Memorial Air Museum, 1998): 1.

⁵² *Auxiliary Units Special Duties*, WO 32/21918, Richmond, England: British National Archives.

⁵³ Neil Storey, *Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009): 46.

its particular training. Any number of sections could be operating within a given area, and because of the cover of security, they would have no knowledge of each other.

Although this unit never experienced active duty, the members practiced guerilla tactics on a regular basis and would even participate in dry-run events against the British Royal Air Force and military bases to discover where their security was most vulnerable. The chain of command that the Auxiliary Units followed was officially under the supervision of the Commander-in-Chief of the Home Forces, Gen. Edmund Ironside. During the early months while the Auxiliary Unit was still in its infancy, however, Major Gubbins had a direct line to Prime Minister Churchill, where he reported upon the finer points of the unit's operations. Because Gubbins and Churchill maintained a relatively close connection throughout the development of the Auxiliary Units, Gubbins was able to request any weapons or support that might have been needed, and the unit would almost certainly have its requests filled. Although the Auxiliary Units officially reported to Ironside, the purpose of doing so was to enhance communication efforts between the stay-behind Army and the Home Forces during any invasion. Gubbins would need to immediately communicate with Ironside in such an event, and the two divisions would have to coordinate at some point as well. In reality, all reports to Commander-in-Chief Ironside were regarded more or less as courtesy calls. All other official business relating to the Auxiliary Units, such as training, missions, and progress reports, were sent directly to the War Cabinet and the Prime Minister.

The members of the Auxiliary Units required a quick and official disguise, which would allow them to operate in the manner in which they had been trained and

instructed. This disguise came from the Home Guard, where many of the members had originally joined as volunteers. However, because the Auxiliary Units were held to such high levels of secrecy, official records of members within the unit were not included on personnel rolls of the Home Guard section for which they were designated. Therefore, in the event of an invasion, if a member were to be captured by the Nazis, he would not be given the same rights or protection afforded to a soldier or volunteer as declared by the Geneva Convention.⁵⁴ The members would be tried for espionage and treated without mercy as terrorists.

The Auxiliary Units were truly a unique group in Britain. They were created as the brainchild of M.I.(R), and embraced the finer qualities of spies but operated in a military manner. They acted under the aegis of the Home Guard. The Auxiliary Units were the ideal guerilla resistance force that Churchill envisioned to be the last line of defense for the United Kingdom.

SUMMARY

During summer of 1940, the United Kingdom discovered the key characteristics that would launch a resistance movement into something greater, and potentially more successful, in hindering enemy actions. Other European countries, such as Norway and France, struggled for their resistance movements to become anything more than groups of men and women who adamantly opposed the Nazi regime. The Auxiliary Units of the United Kingdom did, however, have an upper hand in the matter, as they had the

⁵⁴ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 91.

opportunity, well in advance of an invasion, to organize and efficiently train their members.

Churchill had long recognized that a large contributing factor to the failure of resistance groups throughout Britain and Europe came from their lack of training and organization. With the proper amount of time set aside to enforce strict routines, the probability of success of the movement would improve. There were, of course, several other factors that played into the favorable outcome of these units: secrecy, first and foremost; the right leadership; and the ability to operate underground. General Thorne heavily emphasized the necessity of the last of these.

The leadership of the United Kingdom reveled in the concept of such an exquisite unit, but it took several serious attempts before the Auxiliary Units became a reality. The first attempt was through Section D, followed later by the XII Corps of Capt. Peter Fleming. Section D failed because of its inconsistency in connecting different aspects of the unit. However, Section D set up suitable first attempts of how the unit could operate. The main problem was that they approached the creation of a guerilla resistance group from the wrong angle – a spy’s perspective. This shortcoming, however, also proved to be the same operational technique absorbed by the Auxiliary Units Special Duties and Signals section when training new members in the art of spying. Section D neglected to efficiently use weaponry or train and organize its members, but it was successful in providing a handbook with which to train spies for the Auxiliary Units.

The next attempt was far more successful than Section D, and it became the model for how the Auxiliary Units would be constructed. This was Capt. Peter Fleming's very own XII Corps, which covered the areas of Kent and Sussex. It is because of Fleming and the XII Corps that underground operational bases were officially added to the design of the units. The XII Corps delivered on every aspect of a resistance movement that was specialized in guerilla tactics. The XII Corps, while given guidelines to be created in the guerilla fashion, was designed entirely by Fleming's own imagination. Training was essential for the members to become proficient in guerilla tactics. The XII Corps excelled in this. Gubbins admired Fleming's dedication, and by August 1940 the XII Corps ceased to exist under the Home Forces, but had become the first of the Auxiliary Units.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the many research documents and reports that were extensively studied by G.S.(R) and M.I.(R). The former was studying guerilla tactics even before a German invasion of England was imaginable. Lieutenant Colonel Holland had previously been preoccupied with understanding his own experiences in Ireland during the Irish Civil War and then attempted to compare these to similar radical forces in Spain during the Spanish Civil War and in China. Holland's research, done during his time at G.S.(R), followed closely with research that was also being constructed at M.I.(R). The two branches merged to share their research. G.S.(R) and M.I.(R) together developed the Auxiliary Units.

The most impressive aspect about G.S.(R), M.I.(R), Section D, and the Auxiliary Units is their high level of secrecy that was maintained. The concept of creating a

guerilla resistance force was shuffled around between several departments before it finally became the Auxiliary Units. Because of this it is surprising that German Intelligence never picked up on even a whisper of this concept.⁵⁵ Virtually every member, in the years leading up to the creation and through the active years of the Auxiliary Units, had to sign the Official Secrets Act, which was essentially a confidentiality agreement stating that the member was strictly forbidden from mentioning, discussing involvement in, or disclosing any knowledge that might be associated with the Auxiliary Units. The Official Secrets Act, along with its “Most Secret” status, preserved the Auxiliary Units as Britain’s best-kept secret.

⁵⁵ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1968): 83.

4. RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

Once the elite clandestine guerilla force had taken shape on paper in the form of the Auxiliary Units, the next step was to transition from the purely theoretical to the practical stage of implementation. This stage in creating the Units was likely to be the most difficult, given that recruiting and training members could unravel all the hard work Major Gubbins and the rest of M.I.(R) had put forth.

Identifying members to recruit for an elite operation required an amount of time that Gubbins could not spare. Membership in the Auxiliary Units was enormously selective. It was demanding for both recruiters and recruits. The Auxiliary Units did not take unsolicited applications or casual volunteers. Each member was individually selected and extensively vetted.

The Auxiliary Units were a stay-behind Army that was split into much smaller sections and patrols, recruited largely by civilians. They were expected to maintain their regular jobs and also continue to complete all of their assignments and duties for the units. Once the enemy arrived, they were then expected to retreat to their hideouts/Operational Bases, and at that moment, they would become full-time guerillas, emerging at night to sabotage and destroy the enemy's property without detection.⁵⁶ Training for these missions, and providing real-life scenarios for the men to practice, all

⁵⁶ Norman Longmate, *If Britain Had Fallen* (London: Greenhill Books, 2004): 207-208.

while maintaining utmost secrecy, proved to be just as challenging as recruiting members would be.

The conception of the Auxiliary Units and the research that supported its creation were nearly flawless. Major Gubbins was more than enthusiastic about bringing the products of his imagination to life through this unit, and Prime Minister Churchill was eager to see the Auxiliary Units become a reality that July of 1940. The only thing left to do was to recruit members, intensively train them for their missions, and maintain silence; this clandestine unit would later become known as Britain's best-kept secret.

RECRUITMENT

Recruiting members for the Auxiliary Units proved to be one of the most time-consuming tasks. It not only took time but it required an extensive background check, and members were specifically selected based on their professions, perseverance, and dedication. The most important criterion that every member had to meet was the ability to keep a secret. Fortunately for Major Gubbins, the commanding officers within the Auxiliary Units ranks were, for most part, already preselected through their mutual work with M.I.(R). However, identifying the lower-ranking members was not always so easy. The Auxiliary Units largely recruited males due to the physical requirements of the work, but women were not overlooked. In fact, women played a fairly sizeable and vital role within the Auxiliary Units as a part of the Special Duties and Signals squadron.

When recruiting, Gubbins and his officers looked for young men who were disciplined, creative, and resourceful, and had the ability to maintain a secret. The

civilian recruits were hand-picked by the officers for their extensive knowledge of the countryside acquired in the line of their professions, for example, gamekeepers, farmers, clergy, doctors, and local officials.⁵⁷ Not only were they already knowledgeable about the countryside, but also they could move around the town without detection or suspicion,⁵⁸ hiding in plain sight. Superseding all these, however, was the candidate's ability to maintain secrecy. Upon selection, the new member was aware only that he would be serving his country; he would not learn about the Auxiliary Units or his position within it until he signed the Official Secrets Act. Members of the units took this secrecy as seriously as it was intended to be while their families were blissfully unaware of their involvement. One unfortunate woman remained suspicious throughout the war, thinking that her husband was having an affair because of his constant absence during strange hours.⁵⁹

The creation of many of the units began when Major Gubbins chose the officers. Initially, twelve men were selected for their specialist skills. They were officers who had already shown themselves to be of the highest quality with drive, initiative, and understanding of the objective.⁶⁰ The original twelve all entered the units at the rank of Captain. If someone who met all the requirements for the position was selected but ranked lower, he was immediately promoted to Captain upon becoming an Auxiliary

⁵⁷ Nigel Oxenden, *Auxiliary Units History and Achievements 1940-1944: Britain's Secret Wartime Resistance Army*, ed. Andy Taylor (Parham: 390th Bombardment Group Memorial Air Museum, 1998): 3.

⁵⁸ Norman Longmate, *If Britain Had Fallen* (London: Greenhill Books, 2004): 208.

⁵⁹ Arthur War, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 93.

⁶⁰ Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk's Home Guard and 'Secret Service' 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 200.

Units member. These Commanding Officers were known within their units as the Intelligence Officers. Ideally, each one of the twelve would be in charge of his own section. To recruit below this level, the officer would select whom he would assign as his patrol and unit leaders for the section; they, in turn, would recruit several suitable men.⁶¹ This recruiting plan simplified the process and ensured that only the best would be chosen to serve.

Although recruitment of members heavily depended on this structure, Major Gubbins continued to search for and identify individuals he saw for specific positions. Gubbins also recognized the need for the Auxiliary Units, when on duty to coordinate with officers within the regular Army and the Home Forces. During his search for coordinating officers, he determined that some of the best patrol commanders had to come from the ranks of the regular Army. Gubbins approached General Ironside and requested the authority to go to the regimental bases and select the best men to be training officers with titles of junior officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and privates.⁶² Ironside agreed and promoted Gubbins to Colonel in July 1940.

The men Gubbins subsequently recruited for training purposes had been the best in their platoons, incredibly resourceful, and most knowledgeable about the countryside. It is no wonder that commanders all across England were becoming impatient and resentful at the newly promoted Colonel Gubbins because he was taking their best and

⁶¹ Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk's Home Guard and 'Secret Service' 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 201.

⁶² David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 90.

brightest men away from them.⁶³ These specifically selected recruits were grouped into scout patrols, and for every Intelligence Officer there would be a scout patrol assigned to him.

While Gubbins was out recruiting members for the scout patrols, he discovered that an even quicker way to recruit members would be to take them directly from the Home Forces. These men would still have to meet all the criteria and pass the background checks. The clandestine nature of the units dictated that recruitment could not be done in the open. When Gubbins enlisted men from the Home Forces, they would suddenly be dropped from the Home Forces roll because of the Official Secrets Act, and many of the commanders were left in the dark about why these men were suddenly being dropped. This confusion caused a few of the men to be threatened with court-martials because they had not reported to drills and refused to return uniforms and weapons.⁶⁴ In fact, they continued to wear those Home Forces uniforms and use them as part of their cover stories. While many members came directly from the ranks of the Home Forces, an equal number were originally under the impression that they were volunteering for the Home Guard until they had to sign the Official Secrets Act. No official record of their existence appeared in the Home Guards central records.⁶⁵

The final stage of the enlistment process for every member was the extensive background check. Colonel Gubbins and his officers were far too busy recruiting

⁶³ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 90.

⁶⁴ Lampe, 91.

⁶⁵ Norman Longmate, *If Britain Had Fallen* (London: Greenhill Books, 2004): 208.

members to run the background checks themselves; therefore, that task fell to the local police departments or to M.I.5, the national domestic intelligence services. They were ordered to conduct comprehensive background checks and did so without explanation of their purpose. The background check, however, was more of a formality intended to ensure that the individual had no connections with the enemy. In one recorded instance, two men who had previously served time in jail were selected due to the very crime that had placed them in jail to begin with. They were known for their skills of theft and for breaking and entering without detection. Skills like these could be essential for an operational patrol whose mission required them to enter an enemy encampment and disable machinery or weapons without being noticed.

Recruiting the right men for the Auxiliary Units was crucial. They had to fit an ideal almost perfectly and, above all else, they had to be willing to sacrifice their own lives without giving a second thought. In the event of invasion, the recruits knew that once they went into active duty, being captured was not an option. If caught, their last bullet was theirs.⁶⁶ If they were caught carrying explosives, they “preferred to blow themselves up along with their captors.”⁶⁷ Recruits were honored to be selected. They saw the Auxiliary Units as a great opportunity to serve a cause worth dying for.

TRAINING AND MISSIONS

Training for the Auxiliary Units was a top priority that required dedication and practically every free weekend any member might have. By taking members directly

⁶⁶ David Carroll, *Dad's Army: The Home Guard 1940-1944* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002): 98.

⁶⁷ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 99.

from the lines of the Home Forces and regular Army, physical fitness and military discipline were usually attributes that the men had already acquired. Therefore, the men did not have to spend several weeks of basic training before beginning their official training for the specialty duties that they would be performing. However, regardless of the amount of training the men were receiving for the Auxiliary Units, they were still expected to perform regular training hours with the local Home Force units.

Operational Patrols constituted the larger section of the Auxiliary Units. Their actions normally took place within about fifteen miles of their operational bases.⁶⁸ If an invasion were to occur, their first and immediate mission would be to isolate themselves and remain autonomous from the regular Army until a successful counter-attack could be made or they were completely wiped out.⁶⁹

Before being sent off on training exercises, during initial training, recruits learned about the use of certain weapons. They learned how to create a weapon from virtually nothing and how to be invisible at night. These training exercises would resemble actual, live scenarios where at times the Commanding Officer of a base would not be notified of a pending dry run until the following morning. Practice was vital in the Auxiliary Units' training, so that if called into action they could be confident in their ability to complete their duties.

In the earliest days of the Auxiliary Units, before an official headquarters or training grounds were established, recruits would train in guerilla tactics and sabotage in

⁶⁸ Neil Storey, *Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009): 44.

⁶⁹ Storey, 44.

the homes of the intelligence officers.⁷⁰ Naturally, this arrangement could not last very long for both security reasons and the continuing growth of the program. Gubbins established an official training facility at an old estate near Swindon. It had ample property available for training. Coleshill House became the official home of the entire Auxiliary Units program in July 1940. All 6,000 members would go through Coleshill for training or lectures at one point or another during their service with the units. Headquarters, too, would eventually relocate to Coleshill from its office space in London at Whitehall Place.⁷¹

Coleshill was located near the town of Highworth in Wiltshire; however, members could not just drive up to Coleshill House upon their first arrival. They were instructed to report to Mabel Stranks, the post-mistress at the Highworth Post Office. When they submitted proof of their identity to her, Stranks would go into her office to make a phone call. When she reappeared, she told them that someone was on the way to retrieve them. After that, Stranks would meticulously ignore the recruit and refuse to answer any further questions.⁷² Soon either a civilian automobile, or an Army vehicle with the Home Forces identification number 490 on the license plate would show up, and the new recruits would be on their way to Coleshill for training.⁷³ Stranks refused to direct even

⁷⁰ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 43.

⁷¹ Nigel Oxenden, *Auxiliary Units History and Achievements 1940-1944: The Official Story of Britain's Secret Wartime Resistance Army*, ed. Andy Taylor (Parham: 390th Bombardment Group Memorial Air Museum, 1998): 5.

⁷² Stephen Budiansky, "Churchill's Secret Army," *World War II* 23, no. 4 (October 2008): 33.

⁷³ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 98.

military personnel to Coleshill. She would, instead, telephone Coleshill to have someone from there come to pick up the military convoy that had just arrived.⁷⁴

Early training included instruction on unarmed combat, practice in the efficient use of a knife, particularly the Fairbairn-Skyes fighting knife, which was a standard piece of equipment in the Auxiliary Units' weapon collection. This knife was the one weapon that every Auxiliary Unit member was required to have on his person at all times.⁷⁵ They were extensively trained in the uses of the knife, and taught that as long as the knife was on their person, they would not be at a disadvantage. The men were also extensively trained in other forms of weaponry. They learned how to create explosives, even how to use the leg of a chair as an object to inhibit the enemy if nothing else was available. Because in time of war weapons of any sort tend to be a rarity, the Auxiliary Units had to become resourceful in learning to defend themselves in any situation they encountered. Because Churchill had a strong desire to see this unit become something exceptionally inspiring, Gubbins did not hesitate to make any requests to Churchill for new or more weapons. The result was that the Auxiliary Units acquired access to the most technologically advanced weapons that were being developed. Many times, the Auxiliary Units received new devices to be used as field studies before the regular armies received them. The time pencil tended to be a favorite of the Auxiliaries.⁷⁶ This was a time-delayed detonator device for an explosive that was relative, in size and looks, to an average pencil. All the member had to do was attach the time pencil to the

⁷⁴ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 98.

⁷⁵ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 46.

⁷⁶ Ward, 50.

explosive of choice and rotate the top portion of the device to the designated time delay, and then walk away.

Since an important role that was strongly stressed among the Auxiliary Units was the need to remain “invisible,” noisy weapons needed to be avoided whenever possible. Of course, explosives were noisy and usually created a scene, but explosives had delays on them, which allowed for the men to escape the scene before detonation. Every member had an unofficial side arm, but that was considered to be a weapon of last resort. The men were also equipped with “a single, silenced, high-velocity” rifle that had a telescopic lens attached to it.⁷⁷ This weapon had a major problem, however, because the telescopic lens would go out of alignment after nearly every use. They would more often than not prefer to simply tape a pillow to the end of the rifle to use as a silencer, if needed, rather than use the telescopic lens.

Training would almost always occur during nighttime. The vast majority of their missions would be conducted under cover of darkness; therefore, the best way to prepare for such a mission was to practice heavily during the night. Training at Fleming’s training grounds, however, was usually conducted during the daytime. To prepare members who trained for nighttime missions in Kent, they were required to wear dark goggles.⁷⁸ This allowed for another teaching technique to be employed. There would be two opposing patrols on the course at the same time, while there would be Auxiliary Unit members as spectators watching from the top of the hill that the course

⁷⁷ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 48.

⁷⁸ Stephen Budiansky, “Churchill’s Secret Army,” *World War II* 23, no. 4 (October 2008): 33.

was on. The spectators would be able to view what was being done well and what was going wrong.⁷⁹ This perspective allowed members to see maneuvers that would best work at night and to expect and be prepared for any contingency.

Once members were given a certain amount of training they would be sent out to practice live missions that simulated scenarios they might well encounter. These live practices not only allowed for the Auxiliary Units to ultimately become prepared but also gave the military bases a chance to study their own weak security points and practice in a more realistic setting. A live mission was conducted at the Royal Air Force Chivenor air base. The Auxiliaries broke in during the night, placed small charges between parked aircraft, and retreated. They caused a diversion with a false attack on the main gate and allowed themselves to be captured.⁸⁰ While the officers of the base were laughing at them for their perceived failed attempt, the charges detonated.⁸¹ This live scenario was more of an interactive mission with the local base, but it turned out to be a success for the Auxiliary Units because of their practice in deception.

Another live scenario that proved to be a success occurred when a unit sneaked into a base at Tangmere, removed two screws and disabled an inspection plate from the tail of each of the planes.⁸² The next day the intelligence officer of this unit called Tangmere base and told them the raid they had been expecting had occurred the night before. The Commanding Officer did not believe this to be true, as he stated angrily,

⁷⁹ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 110.

⁸⁰ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 49.

⁸¹ Ward, 49.

⁸² Ward, 94.

“You never got in here last night!”⁸³ The Auxiliary Units, had in fact, entered the base and disabled all of the planes at Tangmere. An operation such as this one would have been a valuable resource used when disabling the enemy’s airplanes. They never had to blow the engines up and cause a commotion, when all they had to do was to disable the tail. Disabling the tail in this manner is not immediately visible to a brief inspection of the aircraft. When the plane would attempt to take off, the tail end would have ripped off. The airplane would be just as disabled as it would have been without an engine.

These live scenarios represented actual missions that the Operational Patrols would be able to conduct after the Nazis invaded. The Germans would first attempt to re-supply and re-equip their troops.⁸⁴ This is where the Auxiliary Units would begin their work. They would disrupt communication lines, railway lines, tanks, airplanes, and any supply lines of food or transport. After an invasion the Auxiliary Units would also destroy any British equipment so that the Germans could not use it. The Operational Patrols were vulnerable to a certain amount of danger, and the members were prepared to take whatever chances were required.

The second section of the Auxiliary Units was named Special Duties and Signals. This unit served to be a vital component to the intelligence community because, if an invasion occurred, they would be the men on the ground reporting German positions back to headquarters. Special Duties and Signals was also the section that not only

⁸³ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 94.

⁸⁴ Ward, 87.

allowed women to join their ranks but also depended on their feminine qualities to gain access to certain areas that would provide any form of adequate intelligence.

Those in Special Duties and Signals were “trained to identify vehicles, high ranking officers and military units, gather information and [to] leave reports in dead letter drops.”⁸⁵ The information that was left at the dead letter drops would be collected by a runner and taken to a secret radio transmitter, which would be operated by a trained civilian.⁸⁶ In a few cases the trained civilian radio operator was the local clergy official. However, women were commonly associated with this section of operating the wireless network.⁸⁷ A woman, in particular, who was recruited for the Auxiliary Signals Unit was Barbara Culleton. She was in charge of reinforcing organization for the radio network.

The communications network, as the Auxiliary Signals was sometimes called, was commanded by Senior Commandant Beatrice Temple. The women of this unit would establish transmitter and receiving stations that were often located near a wooded area and some distance away from the operators’ living quarters.⁸⁸ Culleton was one of the few women who went into the field to establish these communication networks, while Temple oversaw the network from an office at Coleshill.

Probably the most dangerous activity performed by all the Auxiliary Units was assigned to the Special Duties and Signals Section. It called for selected members to stay above ground after an invasion and “pretend to collaborate with the Germans while,

⁸⁵ *Auxiliary Units Special Duties*, WO 32/21918 Richmond, England: British National Archives.

⁸⁶ Neil Storey, *Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009): 45.

⁸⁷ David Carroll, *Dad’s Army: The Home Guard 1940-1944* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002): 94.

⁸⁸ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 103.

in fact, spying on them,"⁸⁹ a position that required even more secrecy than the whole unit combined. Only a few select officers knew about this in addition to the one performing it. The individuals who played this role would leave a message in a predetermined dead letter a drop, identifying the target.⁹⁰ There would be no way of contacting this operative because such contact could compromise not only their identity and assigned task, but also risk exposing the Auxiliary Units as well. Assignments in Special Duties and Signals could have proven to be more dangerous than those to be carried out by the men serving in the Operational Patrols.

Once the Nazis arrived, the Auxiliary Units would have only a few good weeks in which to wreak as much havoc on the invaders as possible. The Germans would soon begin to realize that the act of sabotage was the work of a resistance movement, and they would seek to uncover its members and capture or kill them. Once the Auxiliary Units went into action, they were not expected to live more than fifteen days.⁹¹ They would not allow themselves to be taken hostage. If something were to go wrong, and they were caught before taking their own lives, they clearly understood that because of the secrecy surrounding this unit that they would be on their own. Their names would not appear on any records of the Home Guard or regular Army; therefore, they would

⁸⁹ Norman Longmate, *If Britain Had Fallen* (London: Greenhill Books, 2004): 212.

⁹⁰ Longmate, 212-213.

⁹¹ Neil Storey, *Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009): 44.

not be afforded the protection that the Geneva Convention provides to prisoners of war.⁹²

As the days spent underground increased and reached the fifteen-day mark, their food and supplies, kept in the operational bases where they were staying, would begin to run low. At that point their final mission would be to eliminate any German officers, Nazis, and any traitors. Traitors by now would include any persons who fraternized with the enemy. That would also include anyone simply asking a German for a cigarette. If a member of a patrol was severely injured and could not make it back to the base, members of his patrol unit were prepared to kill him rather than leave him behind. However, as resourceful as the Auxiliary Units were, if they had to kill one of their team members they would not merely leave the body or bury it. They would turn it into an opportunity to kill more Germans by booby-trapping it.⁹³ The men of the Auxiliary Units had to be prepared to take the lives of members of their community or even their patrol if the moment called for such actions.

There was a bottle of rum in every operational base, which was not to be opened until the final days. It is rumored that within the cap of the rum bottle were instructions to eliminate certain people who would have knowledge of the Auxiliary Units operating in the area.⁹⁴ One section was prepared to kill the head of the local police because of what

⁹² Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk's Home Guard and 'Secret Army' 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 203.

⁹³ Stephen Budiansky, "Churchill's Secret Army," *World War II* 23, no. 4 (October 2008): 33.

⁹⁴ David Carroll, *Dad's Army: The Home Guard 1940-1944* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002): 96.

he knew.⁹⁵ The Auxiliary Units depended heavily on secrecy, and no one with knowledge of the units could be left to jeopardize the security of this unit after an invasion.

The only way that the Auxiliary Units could be successful was to appear to be virtually non-existent. The Auxiliary Units would remain a secret for several decades after the war was over. Many members feared that the war was not over and the Auxiliary Units would be called back into training.⁹⁶ That would only work if the Auxiliary Units remained a secret.

OPERATIONAL BASES

General Thorne discovered, while he set up the XII Corps, that for the Corps to be most effective, it would need to go underground and operate out of a base. This concept of an operating base/hideout was welcomed and adopted by Gubbins and the Auxiliary Units. The home bases eventually dropped the name “hideouts” and adopted the name “Operational Bases.” These OB’s provided members of the Operational Patrol with a camouflaged area that would allow them to strike the enemy and then disappear to relative safety.⁹⁷ Operational Bases were scattered all throughout the United Kingdom, some in the most absurd locations and disguised by using the environments

⁹⁵ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 93.

⁹⁶ Ward, 121.

⁹⁷ Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk’s Home Guard and ‘Secret Army’ 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 203.

around them. The bases numbered over 500,⁹⁸ and wherever an Auxiliary Unit was stationed there was an Operational Base to accompany it.

The Royal Engineers developed the design and constructed the bases. The Operational Bases were not excluded from having to maintain the level of secrecy that accompanied the rest of the Auxiliary Units. They too were built under “Most Secret” conditions; therefore, they had to be built either during the nighttime or on the weekends.⁹⁹ The OB’s contained everything imaginable that the Auxiliaries would need. They had several weeks worth of food, water, blankets, a stove, radio, a chemical lavatory, and, most important of all, a place to conceal all their weapons and explosive devices. Every OB consisted of the essential utilities for the Auxiliary Units with which to survive. But they were not all identical. The construction of OB’s could vary, depending on the area in which they were located. In Scotland an OB was constructed in an abandoned coalmine, while another OB was in the cellar of a ruined castle.¹⁰⁰ Something that all OB’s had in common was an escape tunnel.¹⁰¹

The sizes of all Operational Bases were similar. They were roughly twelve feet beneath ground, large enough for about six grown men, and they were usually lined with concrete walls that were two feet thick.¹⁰² There would be an entrance through a concealed door, which would be disguised by some natural features, for example, tree

⁹⁸ Neil Storey, *Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009): 46.

⁹⁹ Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk’s Home Guard and ‘Secret Army’ 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 204.

¹⁰⁰ Norman Longmate, *If Britain Had Fallen* (London: Greenhill Books, 2004): 210.

¹⁰¹ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 90.

¹⁰² Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk’s Home Guard and ‘Secret Army’ 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 206.

limbs, leaves, and the usual brush found in wooded areas. After entering the trap door, there would be a shaft of about ten feet in diameter that the men would have to descend, to finally reach the OB.¹⁰³

Operational Bases would be set up with a stove with which to cook the food, and a radio network for communication. In the earliest version of the OBs ventilation proved to be an issue, especially when the stoves were being used. The Royal Engineers studied the problem and created a solution for fresh air to enter and bad fumes to exit without revealing the location.

There was much effort that went into the secrecy of the OBs. The amount of secrecy that surrounded the construction was so great that some OB's were not even officially recorded, especially the ones not built by the Royal Engineers. The OBs were built under secrecy, and camouflaged so well that only a member who knew what to look for could find them. The Auxiliary Units could not afford for someone to follow them back and discover the OB, or to discover it by literally stumbling across it. The secrecy of the OBs was held to a high standard; therefore, an Auxiliary member would be assigned to monitor the entrance from a concealed lookout post.¹⁰⁴ To ensure the secrecy, the only way a member could enter was if he knew the secret password, and/or used a predetermined signal. For one OB, for example, the secret signal was a member rolling a marble down a concealed drainpipe.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 90.

¹⁰⁴ Ward, 91.

¹⁰⁵ Ward, 91.

As much as they attempted to stop people from accidentally stumbling across the OBs, there were a few instances when that did happen. People might simply have been taking a walk and got lost in the woods, or had taken a short cut home and hobbled over the trap door. There was a story in a local newspaper one day that announced a “surprising find of a mysteriously forgotten ‘air raid shelter’ that was found in the back garden of a house in Rottingdean, Sussex.”¹⁰⁶ The article also mentioned finding a large quantity of guns and ammunition, which caused them to question if the shelter had been involved in illegal activity of some sort.¹⁰⁷ The article had exposed the Operational Base, and could have potentially jeopardized the whole operation; however, the men assigned to that OB simply abandoned their compromised base and left the findings to be auctioned off with the proceeds sent to a hospital. Men who were a part of the Auxiliary Units knew exactly what had been found and chuckled at the conclusion that it was an air raid shelter that housed illegal gun activity.

Besides the rare occasion when a pedestrian accidentally discovered an OB, a major problem with concealing the OBs faced the Auxiliary Units. As the seasons began to change, the surrounding natural features changed, and it would become harder to keep the OBs hidden. During the winter months it would prove to be almost impossible to cover up the track of Auxiliary members who entered and exited the OB. In the event of an invasion, the OBs would stay concealed for maybe a month or two before the seasons would change. After an invasion, if the *Luftwaffe* conducted a reconnaissance

¹⁰⁶ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 95.

¹⁰⁷ Ward, 95.

flyover, they would almost certainly be able to detect them during the winter months, especially if they were looking for any signs of resistance movements.

Operational Bases were a necessity to the survival and operations of the Auxiliary Units. The OB would be the members' home during an invasion, and like a diary, the discovery of it could mean exposing all the secrets of the entire Auxiliary Units, not just the local patrol unit. The confidentiality level of "Most Secret" was applied to the Operational Bases, and was strictly observed throughout the Auxiliary Units.

SUMMARY

During the span of the summer of 1940 the Auxiliary Units went from being nothing more than an idea – a supporting research document of an ultra secret elite guerilla resistance group – to becoming a flesh-and-blood organization with a philosophy, recruitment process, and training operations. In the beginning, the unit faced difficulties, as any new program might, but with the right leadership, which consisted of Col. Colin Gubbins and Capt. Peter Fleming, among other men of the same caliber of talent and intellect, the Auxiliary Unit was brought together as a force to be reckoned with.

Recruitment proved to be one of those early difficult tasks, but it was also one of the most vital and essential ones. Every position within the unit had to be considered. The Auxiliary Units could afford for only men who were resourceful, courageous, dependable, and loyal to become a part of the unit, for the whole program could be compromised by one slip of the tongue. The entire program had to work together like a

well-oiled machine, from the very top of command all the way down to the regular members in the patrol units. Prime Minister Churchill was regularly kept up-to-date on the progress that was being made and intervened only in matters regarding accounts when the Auxiliary Units were in need of support or materiel. The recruiting of members was a very grueling process that had to be done in a relatively short period of time. When the threat of German invasion hung most ominously over Britain, during the summer of 1940, the Auxiliary Units stood to be the actual “fighting chance” that Churchill desired for the country.

After recruitment was completed, and the Auxiliary Units had a full complement of members throughout the ranks, the next task appeared to be easier, and much more entertaining. Training the new members for their missions allowed for little leeway, and there was no compromise concerning the level of secrecy which remained on high alert throughout the entire war. Training initially dealt with combat maneuvers and guerilla warfare techniques. Once those skills were acquired, the members began to learn how to apply these skills during a mission.

Auxiliary Units were given dry-run exercises with live scenarios that would resemble very closely to the missions they would actually have to conduct. These live scenarios provided real-life experiences while allowing them to constantly improve their ability to remain invisible in their actions. However, a few of the exercises did present the men with an opportunity to truly enjoy themselves. During one of the training exercises, one of the units sneaked onto a military base and into the barracks while the

men were asleep and stole all their boots.¹⁰⁸ The goal of this mission was to practice being invisible and having some fun with their fellow soldiers.

The Official Secrets Act bound each and every member who had the slightest bit of contact with the Auxiliary Units to “Most Secret” confidentiality. The men who served in these units knew only of the other members within their unit, and had absolutely no knowledge of any other patrols or Operational Bases within their own operating area. They never even told their own families of their participation in the unit during or for decades after the war. During the war, members did not tell their families not only because it would put the entire program at risk, but also because, if the enemy invaded, the less their families knew, the safer they would be. For years after the war the members remained hesitant to speak about or acknowledge the existence of the unit either because they still felt bound to the Official Secrets Act or because they continued to feel an immense loyalty to their duties as part of the Auxiliary Units.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 94.

5. STANDING DOWN

Fear of an impending German invasion subsided and almost came to a halt after October 1940, and it eventually died out completely after the summer of 1942. The Auxiliary Units continued to train and improve their guerilla warfare techniques for the duration of the war, but a pending call to action was never as real again as it had been during the summer of 1940. Over the next several years the unit would continue to expand its ranks with new recruits, but after the first year or two the Auxiliary Units also lost many of the best and brightest members to active duty in the regular Army while, many went on to enlist in Special Forces.¹⁰⁹

Members of the Auxiliary Units expected their service was about to come to an end as the war came to a close. Even though the units had seen no live action, they had trained hard and served their purpose. However, before they stood down, two circumstances required their unique skills. Following D-Day, June 6, 1944, the Auxiliary Units were requested, owing to their expertise in security and resistance matters. The world's eyes were fixed upon the Allied forces as they landed on the beaches of Normandy to begin the liberation of Western Europe from Hitler's reign of terror.¹¹⁰ Because the Allied High Command feared that the Nazis might retaliate, members from the Norfolk Auxiliary Units were sent to the south coast of England and to the Isle of

¹⁰⁹ Stephen Budiansky, "Churchill's Secret Army," *World War II* 23, no. 4 (October 2008): 35.

¹¹⁰ Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Letter to the soldiers, sailors and airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force* (June 6, 1944). A copy of entire letter in Kenneth Rendell, *World War II Saving the Reality: A Collector's Vault* (Atlanta: Whitman Publishing, 2009): 121.

Wight to help augment security patrols in the event that retaliation materialized.¹¹¹ After roughly a month, however, when none materialized, the Norfolk Auxiliary Units returned home.

The second, and final opportunity that the Auxiliary Units were presented with before they were officially stood down, also was concerned with the pending D-Day invasion. In the days almost immediately before the Allied landings, members were asked if they would be willing to parachute into France behind German lines to link up with the French resistance and to carry out similar missions such as those they had been training for.¹¹² There was only one hitch in the plan. The Auxiliary members were not trained paratroopers, and there was an insufficient amount of time for them to train for a jump.¹¹³ Therefore, they would be making their first jump all on their own carrying their kits, and they would immediately begin to work. Practically every member who was asked expressed a willingness to continue on with their work behind German lines in France. This mission, however, was never carried out. The government halted it because the units were not paid under the regular Army category and the Geneva Convention did not cover them. Nor would their own country officially recognize their existence as a unit.¹¹⁴ These men were ready and prepared to serve and yet again were denied, ultimately because of their clandestine nature.

¹¹¹ Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk's Home Guard and 'Secret Army' 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 216.

¹¹² Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 120.

¹¹³ Ward, 120.

¹¹⁴ Ward, 120.

A large percent of the earliest members of the Auxiliary Units, from all across the United Kingdom, left their units to train with the regular forces. Many of the men would go on, eventually to become part of the Allied Forces in the D-Day landings. A member from Norfolk's Auxiliary Unit, John Fielding, trained with the British paratroops and joined Operation Bullbasket.¹¹⁵ It included paratroopers landing in France a month before the Allied landings in order to disrupt the German communication lines and serve as a decoy for the actual D-Day landings. Fielding was well prepared for this operation because it was strikingly similar to the tasks he had trained for while in the Auxiliary Units.

Just as some of the brightest members left the Auxiliary units early on to join the regular Army or Special Forces, the superior leadership did not last either. The exemplary skill and intellect that Colonel Gubbins, Captain Fleming, and even General Ironside possessed were intensely sought after. These men had served their purpose; they had succeeded in creating a unique and elite force. Once the threat of invasion disappeared, their interests and skills were needed elsewhere. The time for departure came for Colonel Gubbins shortly after September 1940. It was clear that Hitler would not invade, and Gubbins had exhausted all of his abilities and resources in the creation of the Auxiliary Units. There was little left for him to do.¹¹⁶ In November he left the Auxiliary Units, feeling pride and success for all that his brainchild had become.

¹¹⁵ Adrian Hoare, *Standing Up To Hitler: The Story of Norfolk's Home Guard and 'Secret Army' 1940-1944* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2002): 216.

¹¹⁶ Peter Wilkinson and Joan Astley, *Gubbins and SOE* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997): 73.

The XII Corps experienced a similar mass departure of its original leaders shortly after Gubbins left the units. Thorne, the original commander of XII Corps, was replaced by Gen. Bernard Montgomery, and Capt. Peter Fleming the Intelligence Officer of XII Corps, was replaced by Capt. Norman Fields. Because of the non-standard chain of command which the Auxiliary Units followed, Fields was left a little confused about to whom he should directly report. Montgomery felt the same confusion after one incident. He had only recently learned of the existence of the Auxiliary Units and had not been made aware of the fact that an Auxiliary Unit was operating in his command area. Fields was preparing to take a leave, and asked Fleming to whom he should report. Fleming responded that he should report to Coleshill House, but to also give Montgomery a courtesy call.¹¹⁷ After arranging leave, Fields placed the courtesy call to Montgomery, whose immediate response was confusion followed by anger. He had been informed neither that there was an Observation Unit within the XII Corps nor the fact of Field's existence.¹¹⁸ The whole ordeal was worked out in due time, but the amount of surprise that occurred after a simple request for leave shows how complex and secret was the organization of the Auxiliary Units.

When the official orders came that the Auxiliary Units were standing down, the men and women knew that their government would not recognize them publicly. However, by the end of November 1944 every member received a letter from the

¹¹⁷ David Lampe, *The Last Ditch* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968): 119.

¹¹⁸ Lampe, 119.

commander, personally thanking them for their dedication. The commander who sent it was Col. Frank Douglas. He said:

You were invited to do a job which would require more skill and coolness, more hard work and danger, than was demanded of any other volunteer organization. In the event of 'Action Section' being ordered you knew well the kind of life you were in for. But that was in order; you were picked men; and others, including myself, knew that you would continue to fight whatever the conditions, with, or if necessary without, order. It now falls to me to tell you that your work has been appreciated and well carried out, and that your contract, for the moment, is at an end. I am grateful to you for way you have trained in the last four years. So is the Regular Army. It was due to you that more divisions left this country to fight the battle of France; and it was due to your reputation for skill and determination that extra risk was taken – successfully as it turned out – in the defence arrangements of this country during that vital period. I congratulate you on this reputation and thank you for this voluntary effort.

In view of the fact that your lives depended on secrecy, no public recognition will be possible. But those in the responsible positions at General Headquarters, Home Forces, know what was done and what would have been done had you been called upon. They know it well. It will not be forgotten.¹¹⁹

This was about as much of a thank you that the personnel of the Auxiliary Units would ever receive from the British government until decades later.

Due to the Official Secrets Act, members had been precluded from speaking to their loved ones and friends about their service. Those who had served neither in the Home Guard, prior to their time in the Auxiliary Units, nor in the regular Army, after the Auxiliary Units stood down, faced harsh critics who accused them of not serving their country at all. One of the toughest critical statements made from the public about some of the members was that they were “evading military service.”¹²⁰ Those who faced such criticism simply accepted it and never attempted to correct their critics. The men of the

¹¹⁹ David Carroll, *Dad's Army: The Home Guard 1940-1944* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002): 100.

¹²⁰ Arthur Ward, *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (London: Constable, 1997): 121.

Auxiliary Units had been given a unique opportunity and had seized the chance to serve their country in a way that only very few were honored to do.

Commanders of the Auxiliary Units attempted, on several occasions, to arrange for the members to receive a Defense Medal, first in August 1947 and then again in October 1948.¹²¹ Nearly every high commanding officer who was either attached to the Auxiliary Units, or witnessed their abilities, filed formal applications requesting that they receive the Defense Medal and wrote several letters of recommendation documenting why these men deserved to be so honored. The government denied their requests, citing the Official Secrets Act, and the clandestine nature of the units. It would not be until the mid 1990s that the Defense Medal was finally awarded to the surviving members who could be found. Little did the public know, or the government recognize, but the silent members of the Auxiliary Units had served humbly and heroically for the United Kingdom.

The Auxiliary Units, created in June 1940, did not disband until the war was over in 1945, unlike most of Britain's Home Guard, which stood down in 1944.¹²² Due to the profound secrecy under which the Auxiliary Units operated, there was absolutely no public recognition for their service until fifty years later. In September 1996, *The Times* [of London] published an article recognizing the members for their heroic actions during

¹²¹ *Auxiliary Units Special Duties Organization*, WO 32/21918, Richmond, England: British National Archives.

¹²² Neil Storey, *Home Guard* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2009): 47.

the war. The headline read “HONOUR AT LAST FOR THE ELITE FORCE WHOSE HOUR NEVER CAME.”¹²³

¹²³ Michael Evans, “Honour at last for elite force whose hour never came,” *The Times* (London), September 7, 1996, 7.

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