

The Auxiliars go “Overseas”

There is a little-known story about the Auxiliary Units and their role in the D-Day preparations. During the war some Auxiliars were asked if they would volunteer for overseas service. This service was to train as paratroopers and to sabotage the German supplies behind enemy lines. Some as you may be aware did leave the Auxiliary Units and joined the newly formed SAS. The scheme ran out of steam and the training did not gather much pace and eventually stopped altogether.

In May 1944 orders were received by 201 Battalion GHQ Reserve that they were to take part in a “Special” operation. Volunteers were to be sorted and those that had previously signed up for “Overseas” roles were to be included. Part II orders were then sent out to the selected AU men. This eventually led to men from various Patrols in Scotland, the Borders and Northumberland travelling to Newcastle Central station on a special train. In command of the train was Major Robert Charlton Hall.

Major Hall was a veteran of World War 1 having joined the Machine Gun Corps. He served as a Lieutenant with the MGC and was badly injured (hands and arms) in the severe hand to hand fighting at Passchendaele in 1917. Between the wars he worked as a banker and bank manager. After the call for men to serve in the Local Defence Volunteers, later the Home Guard in World War 2 Robert Charlton Hall joined and became a Major in the 14th Battalion of the Northumberland Home Guard (Bedlington HG).



Major Robert Charlton Hall (centre) with 14th Bn. (Bedlington) Northumberland Home Guard.

At Newcastle Central station other men of the Northumberland Auxiliary units joined the train. Among them were several Group commanders, Captain J “Peter” Robinson with his men from the Swinhoe/Broomford, West Fallodon, Warenford and Shipley Patrols. The Carmichael brothers were also there with their respective men from Lt. J W L Carmichael’s Scremerston, Allerdean and Halidon Hill Patrols from the Berwick-upon-Tweed area. Lt. Alan Carmichael had his Paxton Dene, Netherwhitton, Felton and Hebron volunteers with him.

A good number of Major Hall's own men also turned up. His Patrols were mainly from the south eastern corner and largely men involved in the mining industry unlike their comrades from further north in the county who tended to be from the farming communities. Tot Barrass and Richard Needham of the Hartford Patrol both joined their C/O on the mystery trip.

The train left Newcastle and headed south. Arriving in London the men received orders to leave the train only to walk across a siding and onto another "Special" train. The train skirted London and again headed south. It halted in Southampton Docks. From here the Auxiliars were marched to waiting boats, still unaware of their final destination. The docks were a mass of military equipment and soldiers all being boarded onto ships. This was the invasion fleet awaiting orders to sail for the French coast.

The 201 Bn. Auxiliars sailed through the vast armada of ships and out of the Solent to their destination... Freshwater on the Isle of Wight! Not quite the overseas trip most of the Auxiliars were expecting.

On arrival the men were marched over the island and were assigned areas to patrol and observe from. They scouted out the island looking for all possible landing sites and setting up their own defensive positions, they dug in and waited. The C/Os took over Farringford House, once the home of Alfred Lord Tennyson, that had been previously used by the Canadian army who had been the island's garrison before the arrival of the 201 Bn. men.

The Isle of Wight was thought to be vulnerable to counter-attack from the German army in northern France hence the importance of guarding it until the invasion fleet had left. The Auxiliars did constant night time patrols on the island. The Germans landing on the island in the form of a counter attack had to be stopped at all costs, also German spies finding out what was being put together on the south coast of England and where this colossal force was going to strike had to be protected.

The Auxiliars were on duty while the initial bombardment of the French coast took place. The ground shook under their feet with the constant shelling. Richard Needham remembered the start of the aerial attack on France, "I watched as the planes flew out over the channel towing the gliders....it was awesome"

The vast fleet had set sail for France and the Auxiliars watched it sail into the distance. Tot Barrass and Richard Needham along with the other members of Major Hall's men guarded a power station just before the invasion and in the week following. This was the Pluto Power station in the pavilion of Sandown's miniature golf course. This was the pump house for the fuel line to the Mulberry harbour in the channel to be used by the Allies following D-Day and to supply the needs of the army as they pushed on into France.

Another building the 201 Bn. men guarded was a hospital, an odd choice as it was painted up with Red Cross symbols. They found out later that under the hospital was in fact a top secret communication centre which hid a cable. This was a telecommunications land line laid under the Channel and into occupied France and it had been there and in use throughout the war without the Germans ever finding out.

With the invasion fleet gone and the attack on the French coast turning into a success, slowly, the Scots and Northumberland Auxiliars returned home later in June 44. This was however not the end of the Auxiliary Units on the Isle of Wight as 201Bn left, the men who had volunteered from 202 Bn were already on their way. Again this movement of men was done under tight security. The members of the 202 Bn got their orders to board a "Special" train at York.

Arthur Clubley a farmer and member of the Sunk Island Patrol from East Yorkshire remembered the train they were put on was all compartments. "We were given priority over everyone else on the train, even some regulars". The Auxiliars sat in the compartments with the blinds pulled down to avoid contact with anyone else on the train. On arrival in London they disembarked the train and were taken straight to Lyons for a meal. They entered via a side door and the public had to wait outside in a queue until they had finished. This is when they heard about the invasion of France having started on the wireless. The men were served a full English breakfast and then marched back to the station and put on another train just as the 201 Bn men had before them. With the news of the invasion now common knowledge the Auxiliars of the 202 Bn now were sure France was to be their destination. However they too found themselves eventually at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight

arriving at their patrol and guard duty areas on Tuesday 13th June 44 exactly one week after the initial invasion of D-Day 6th June 44. The second phase of the D-Day landings was now under way and again the island was seen as a potential weak spot. If the Germans could mount a hasty attack from the north west of France they could still scupper the Allied invasion plans.

Eddie Shaw of the Beverley South Patrol had signed up for overseas duty and now found himself on the Isle of Wight as part of the underground garrison. He and his Patrol marched out from Freshwater for about ten miles following the western side of the island. This was to be their area. They patrolled the same ten miles of the island's 57 mile coastline, night and day watching the sea and air for enemy attack. No German counter attack ever came and the 202 Bn men returned home at the end of June.

Meanwhile in Norfolk the Auxiliars were also preparing to head overseas to destinations unknown. Corporal John Everett of the Alby Patrol recalled that about four days before the start of "Operation Overlord" individuals from some of the Patrols were asked to deploy for a "Secret" mission. He and three others had orders to go to Eagle Corner, Erpingham where they were to be picked up by army transport. This is when John found himself with Billy Seaman (Baconsthorpe Patrol), Peter Neave (Assistant C/O Group 3), George Able (Aylsham Patrol) and Robert Bix (Matlaske Patrol) at Norwich railway station. At the station other Auxiliars started to appear. It became obvious that they had all received the same orders. The speculation in the station was that they were going to a port to be shipped to the Channel Islands as part of a task force to re-capture islands. Once onboard the train they were read their orders and told they were going to the Isle of Wight though no further information was passed to the train full of Auxiliars. On arrival at London's Liverpool Street station they quickly transferred to Waterloo. From here the train took them to Portsmouth arriving at Beach Station.

From Portsmouth a boat took them across the Solent landing the men at Ryde Pier. Once on the Isle of Wight the Auxiliars were taken by army transport to Newport. The temporary HQ was next to Parkhurst prison, here the men were split up and allocated various duties. John Everett went with some Welsh Borderers and was stationed at Freshwater. Some other members of 202 Bn. arrived at the same village, these turned out to be members from County Durham, mainly miners as John found out.

On the morning of June 6th John could clearly see part of the invasion fleet leave the Solent heading for northern France. Later he heard the bombing and shelling that was taking place on the Normandy beaches. He could see palls of smoke on the horizon together with aircraft and ships coming and going from England to France as the re-taking of occupied Europe had begun.

John Everett and his mixed Auxiliary Units continued to patrol the Isle of Wight in case of a German counter invasion attack. After three weeks John was relieved of his duties on the island as others appeared. He returned home along with the other Auxiliars he had travelled with.

Other Norfolk Auxiliars who were at the Isle of Wight were Donald Llewellyn Dagleish from the Baconsthorpe Patrol was based at Sandown and guarded the nearby airfield. They took over from some regulars who went on leave. Armed with .303 Lee Enfield rifle and .38 Smith and Wesson pistol also having a striker board stitched to one leg and his dagger to the other he was prepared for anything. He recalled on the trip to the Isle of Wight while crossing London he had to take cover when a "Doodlebug" bomb hit a cinema killing several people.

Mrs R M Wroth recalled her husband, who was one of four Wroths in the Holkam Patrol, saying while at Southampton that he had never seen so many ships in his life, it looked like there were "enough to walk across the Channel".

Herbert Philip Bowman of the Thorpe St. Andrew Patrol from Norwich arrived at Sandown on the Isle of Wight approximately three weeks before the D-Day invasion. He had to guard the "Pluto" pipeline and fuel dump. He was given a pick axe handle and an Alsatian dog to do this. After D-Day 700 tons of fuel passed through the pipelines to France.

A near neighbour of the Norfolk Patrols was a member of the Copdock (aka Belstead) unit from Suffolk. They were tasked with looking after the radio station at Bembridge.

Not to be left out were the Hereford & Worcestershire AU. Peter Wright from the "Samson" Patrol based at Upper Broadheath, Worcestershire did some guard duty with other members of his

Patrol on the Isle of Wight. He and the others travelled to the south coast by army transport not by train like the Auxiliers from the east and north east.

John Wythes of the "Joshua" Patrol from Crowle in Worcestershire only spent a week on the island around the time of the D-Day fleet sailing. He guarded an ammunition store.

John Boaz again from the "Samson" Patrol was issued with a Sten gun. He remembered it as being very temperamental. They set off for the Isle of Wight after spending a night sleeping on the floor of the Bulmers cider factory in Hereford. Woken at 4 am and put on to army lorries they headed for the south coast. In Portsmouth they transferred to a boat and sailed to the Isle of Wight. Here the 25-30 Auxiliers were split into four groups. One group was dropped at Parkhurst prison. The second including John was off loaded at an army camp in the middle of the island. This was occupied by the Pioneer Corps and was fairly rough. The Auxiliers were given a bell tent to use as their base. The Pioneer Corps were loading shells and ammunition onto lorries. This took place constantly from 07:00 to 21:00 every day. The Auxiliary men did night patrol from 23:00 to 04:00 each night; their C/O's had come down with them, Captain Lewis van Moppes and his brother Lieutenant Edmund van Moppes. The only serious event they had to deal with was while on night patrol.

The men were following their patrol route when they heard footsteps coming towards them. At approximately 02:30 the C/O told the Auxiliers to take cover in the road side ditch and to be prepared for action. If the approaching footsteps failed to identify themselves we were to draw our pistols and take the necessary action. The officer shouted "Halt" as the shadowy figures came closer one of the Auxiliers slipped and hit the butt of his Sten gun off the ground spraying the full 25 rounds everywhere. Fortunately no one was hurt. It turned out the two unlucky men were soldiers who had slipped out of their camp for a date with some local girls.

The use of the Auxiliers was a way of freeing up the regular army members to go on the invasion of France. Major N.V.O. Oxenden said the areas picked to supply the Patrols were where it was considered unlikely for enemy raids on their own coasts and had in fact probably been so all along. They were sent in relays for about a month between May and June 1944.

This was the last gathering of the Auxiliary Unit battalions. From the middle of 1944 the men drifted back to work and the Auxiliary Unit set up slowly wound down.

6 Jun 44 BBC NEWS BULLETINS Sheet 1

DISTRIBUTION: RA: Sigs Comd, 'C', 'A/Q' Medical, Ord: REME: Det Pro: Camp: IOW Sub
Dist: Infm Room: Maj. Hancock

Ser Time of

No: Bulletin Text

SPECIAL BULLETIN. 'D' Day has come. Early this morning the Allies began the assault on the Western side of the European Fortress. A communiqué at 09:30 hrs by Gen Eisenhower stated that strong naval forces supported by strong air forces began landing Allied Forces on the northern part of France. The Army Gp of British, Canadian and US Forces is Commanded by Gen Montgomery. Gen Eisenhower has issued a special order of the day saying "Your path will not be an easy one, your enemy is well equipped and battle hardened and will fight savagely. I have full confidence in your courage and skill in battle. We will accept nothing but full victory". This order was distributed to all Allied elements on their embarkation. His Majesty the King will broadcast to his people at 9 o'clock tonight. No details have yet come in as to the progress of the operation from the Allies, but the Germans say the points assaulted extend from Cherbourg to Havre. There have been no reports of enemy air activity this side of the Channel during the night or so far this morning.

Sources: Eddie Shaw Beverley South Patrol 202 Bn, Arthur Clubley Sunk Island Patrol 202 Bn., Richard Needham Hartford Patrol 201 Bn, Tot Barrass Hartford Patrol 201 Bn., John Everett Alby Patrol 202 Bn. Norfolk,
Adrian Hoare "Standing up to Hitler"; Nigel Oxenden's notes on the AU.;
The various named people above.