

Wartime West Sussex 1939 - 1945: HOME GUARD AND OTHER VOLUNTEER UNITS

Home Guard in Ardingly

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My Time as a Teenager In the Ardingly L.D.V (Home Guard), by Leslie Simmonds

It was 1939 and I was seventeen. I was in the back garden when I heard a bell ringing. I went out the front of the house and along came Bert Lewry ringing a hand-bell. He had a gas-mask bag slung over his shoulder and a helmet with A.R.P. on it. He said "Take cover – the war has started". It seemed strange as there was nothing happening, although, later on, when things did happen, the A.R.P did some fine work.

At this time I was working for C.V. Hobden, Builders, learning to be a Carpenter and Joiner and I was lucky to be amongst so many first class tradesmen. Work slowly came to a halt and we were all given the sack..... About this time we were asked to join the L.D.V (Local Defence Volunteers). We all had to meet at Hapstead House one evening a week..... Sergeant-Major Hole came up from Ardingly College and started to teach us foot-drill. We marched up and down Hapstead House drive and around the flowerbeds, and although I say it myself, we came to be quite good at it.

It was strange to think that if it hadn't been so sad, it would be very funny! Bert Williams was in the L.D.V. and he only had one arm. He was our Company Runner and used a bicycle with a back-peddalling brake. He could roll a cigarette with one hand better than a man with two hands! His nickname was Snatchy – he was forever pulling his trousers up with one hand! Also our chief Store and Office man was Charlie Ayling (Nimble) – he only had one leg – I think he lost the other one in the First World War. He was a very nice man. With all our deficiencies, we would have fought to the end.

Soon after we had learnt our foot-drill, we were issued with our denim uniforms and our Ross rifles and bayonets. These rifles proved to be very accurate. Sgt.-Major Hole then started to teach us rifle drill. We worked hard at this – he was very strict – "Everybody, chins up, a-a-a-attention, up 1-2, across 1-2, away 1-2, up 1-2 across, down 1-2, stand easy". This was shoulder arms. One had to be good at maths to cope with all this!

To start with, our Headquarters was E.H Munnion's old Workshop on the crossroads. The signpost boards on the crossroads had been removed, so that if the Germans invaded, they would not know which way to go. We were a little confused ourselves! After a time we moved our headquarters to the old Scout Headquarters at the back of Hapstead Farm.

It was a busy time – men went to work all day, came home for something to eat and then did a couple of nights training, perhaps more, and stood guard duty one night a week, patrolling the village.....

Nobody was out of work for long – I got a job up at Highbrook Timber Yard making 'A' frames to go into trenches in London. This was before the air raids

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started. I received 6d for a 6ft. frame, so the more frames one made the more money one earned. I did this for some time, then one day Charlie Hobden asked me, and eleven other men, to go back and work for him and Ken Holman. They had got the job of revetting the River Ouse.

We assembled in Hobden's Yard and were given picks, spades, saws, axes, etc. We were taken in the back of a lorry to Gold Bridge, Newick. The idea was to dig the banks upright on the North side of the river, to form a tank trap, if the Germans invaded. We were to cut down the trees and make poles 3ft 6", which were to be used as uprights to hold back the whattles that were to be made from the smaller branches. The poles were then wind-lashed back tightly to the banks.....

While we were at Newick the bombing started and there were dogfights overhead. It was quite exciting. I don't think, at that time, I realised how serious the situation was. I saw a Jerry bomber come down north of us and we had bets as to where it had come down. It turned out to be Lywood Cottages and Horsted Keynes Viaduct. That night I rushed down to have a look – it was a bit of a mess. I got hold of a piece of wreckage, about 12" long and took it to the Garage to show Gordon Henley.....

Also, while we were still at Newick, a Spitfire made a forced landing on the field we were in. The pilot was Polish and the aeroplane had been shot down.

We dug and straightened the banks of the Ouse from Newick to Balcombe Viaduct. Whilst we were working on the river, my Dad and many others were preparing shuttering for the many pillboxes along the Ouse. This work was all done under canvas in Ardingly Station Goods Yard,

We were very busy in the Home Guard while this was going on. Men were on duty every night. On Sunday, Sgt.-Major Hole had us down at Ardingly College rifle range, teaching us how to shoot properly – in the prone position, hold the rifle firmly with both hands, get the top of the foresight level with the top of the back sight, hold one's breath and squeeze the trigger – and with a bit of luck it was a bull. I used to really enjoy this. He must have been a wonderful teacher because, when I was called up into the Royal Sussex Regiment, I was excused foot-drill and I was in the Company's rifle team (big head!).

German planes flew overhead night after night. One night, while we were on duty at Lullings, we heard a whistling noise and several bombs were dropped in Wakehurst valley. It was lucky that they dropped there and that nobody got hurt. On another occasion a lot of incendiary bombs were dropped around Rivers Farm and our local A.F.S were called out. It was quite a to-do at the time – all stirrup pumps were go!

The Newfoundlanders had arrived about this time and had taken over several large houses around the village. The Canadians were at Wakehurst Place, the Rectory and the Chapel Schoolroom. We also had evacuees from London.

We were given bayonet training at Brook House – there were four or five rough frames with sacks of straw hanging by a rope. We had to run up to the

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sacks and stop and the Sergeant in charge would say – "At the throat, point". Then we had to push the bayonet into the sack, pull it out, and "on guard". This was very hard work. I think the bayonet is an awful weapon. If you are an Infantryman there is no getting away from it. I once had a bayonet go between my left arm and my chest and right through the small-pack on my back! The only good thing is that it happens very quickly. I kept that small-pack until I was wounded in Northern Italy, where I lost it.

When we had these different sessions we always finished up at the Greyhound for a drink and a chat. We looked on the Greyhound as our Headquarters!

About this time we had new orders – we were not to patrol the village anymore. It was to be the job of the Special Police and the A.R.P. We were to stand at the top of West Hill at Lullings, Major Holland's House. It was quite a long walk or bicycle ride after a day's work.

Our new Quarters were above the garage, and depending on our luck, we might get four hours rest, sleeping on boards. We stood at the entrance to Lullings, overlooking Wakehurst valley. Sometimes old Major Holland would come out and have a chat – he was a very nice chap. His two sons were in the army and I think they were both prisoners of war. I know one of them had a rough time under the Japanese.....

Captain Hett had us on parade and said we were going to have an anti-tank exercise and were going to march down to Avins Bridge, put the concrete cones across the road and get behind the hedges on the side of the road. He was going to Haywards Heath in his little Austin car and would act as a tank. When he stopped at the concrete cones we were to lob grenades at the car. Our grenades were balls of screwed-up paper, but if it had been the real thing we would have used our Molotov cocktails, which we had made. They were in the care of Nimble Ayling, our storeman. Afterwards, we moved the concrete cones back to the side of the road and had a "forced march" back up to the Avins Bridge pub for a tactical lecture? After this we had another "forced march" to get to the Greyhound before they closed and another tactical talk! We had just had our Blacker Bombard delivered and we were to go down Buster Hill to the field just the other side of the river and see how it worked. This weapon was a metal pipe about 3½" dia. on a stand and it fired bottles of phosphorus. You placed the bottle in first, followed by a sorbo pad, and then the explosive, then took aim and fired. It was a bit primitive, but very dangerous. I got a pinhead-sized piece of the phosphorous on my hand and it smoked for over twelve hours.

One Saturday afternoon Cecil White (Pimple) and I went to the London Palladium to see Max Miller and Florence Desmond.....It was late when we got to Haywards Heath station and, as usual, we had to walk home. We had nearly reached the top entrance of the college playing fields when there was one hell of a whistle. We dropped into the ditch and heard a loud bang. When we arrived at the village, we found out that a land mine had exploded in the field behind Lywood Cottages. There was room to put a double-decker bus in the hole.

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Later on Pimple joined the Royal Navy on a motor torpedo board and, sadly, lost his life in the Adriatic, off Yugoslavia.

Not long after this we were taken to Sheffield Park Gardens for Mill's grenade training – I think they used them during the First World War and we used it all through the Second. Grenades are not very nice if you are on the receiving end. I think they had two and four second fuses. After being shown how to use them, we got into a trench and were allowed to throw one. Even this is quite nerve-racking till you get used to it. Anyway, we got over this and went back to the Greyhound for another enjoyable tactical talk!

We were told we were going to have a night exercise against the Canadians. They challenged us to try and take Tillings Farm. I don't think they thought much of our chances – we were only part-timers. But Jack Lewis had a good idea. He suggested that he and his understudies, who were Keepers, would have some lengths of cord for us to hold on to, and they would lead us through the Racks and West Wood and attack Tealinghurst, where the Canadians would not expect us. It was a very good idea – we really shook them. They did not think those old country bumpkins had a hope. They were wrong, thanks to those keepers. We had to make our way back to the Greyhound to discuss tactics once again! It was a good job we could still get beer.

We were having dinner one Saturday when there was a whistle and bombs dropped down the side of the road at Buxshalls Hill – luckily no one was hurt. One night, while I was asleep, there was one hell of a bang and the house shook. Dad and I got up and we could see flashing along Church Road, so we got dressed and walked along the road. We got half way up the allotments hill and the Police stopped us. All the services were doing their bit. It was the worst bombing we had in our village. I don't know whether it was a land mine or bombs, but it flattened a pair of cottages and the Lovejoys and the Stevens were killed. It also made a mess of the pair of bungalows where Mr Novelle and the Lawsons lived. The war was getting rather near to home.

I had been on the river job for some time when, together with a lot of the others, we had orders to report to the Yard with our tools, as we were going to Lewisham and Catford to repair bomb damage. It was not a very comfortable ride every day in the back of a lorry – it could be very cold and the fumes from the exhaust were awful. Still this was not as bad as what the poor people in London had to put up with. We did all we could to help them. One would repair windows, doors and roofs one day and they would be knocked out again the next. We did this work each day and came home to do Home Guard duty. We had orders to meet outside the Greyhound as transport had been laid on to take us to a new bridge on the main road near Slaugham, where a new anti-tank device was to be demonstrated. There were a lot of men from different villages there. They had rigged up some girders about 8ft. wide by 5ft. high to represent the tanks. The weapon was two English anti-tank mines fixed to a board with four small wooden wheels like small child's push-horse, with a pipe about 30" long sticking out the back. This pipe was put into another pipe, buried in the bank, with an explosive charge at the rear of the buried pipe, which was fired by an electric plunger, situated on the other side of the bank. Instructions to fire were given by a "spotter" when the tank was opposite to the mines and then you

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pressed the plunger and the mines were fired across the road at the tank. Anyway, they fired this small trolley at the girders and there was an almighty bang. We were all standing behind the bank on the other side of the road and a fellow standing about three feet away, fell down with blood pumping out of his chest – he was dead in no time. We heard afterwards that he had just received his call up papers – life can be cruel. We returned to the Greyhound very subdued. Not long after this I got my call-up papers, to join the Royal Sussex Regiment, after which I joined the East Surrey Regiment, 1st Battalion and was sent abroad.

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