

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

Home Guard in West Wittering

From the *West Wittering Women's Institute Village Scrapbook*.

Account written in 1946, by F. H. Shaw

THE WITTERING HOME GUARD.

By Mr. F.H.Shaw.

It started on Captain Hutcheson's tennis lawn and it was owing to the indefatigability of Captain Hutcheson and in spite of his tin leg that the L.D.V. was formed into a cohesive body, but only by degrees. I was introduced one delightful spring morning to its initial activities and told to join Corporal Boughton's section. Corporal Boughton eyed me with a certain amount of nervousness and apprehension and said: 'Of course, we don't know much about it yet,' and we stood looking at one another until Captain Hutcheson's watchful eye obliged the section to some sort of activity, so it marched round and round and up and down and we were started on a five years' experience of some value in regard to human relations, and we learnt that to have a sense of humour was the most important thing in the world. Soon we learnt that our platoon was part of a company: and that company was part of a larger formation: and that larger formation was presided over by many high-ranking naval officers, and it was one or other of these admirals who came to inspect and admire our military formations which were entirely strange to them and sometimes even to ourselves. We were issued with armlets, badges and three denim uniforms and told off for guards. Each night, the guard assembled outside the telephone exchange in Cakeham Road, slipped the denim over their civilian clothes and carefully examined the hedgerows for possible German agents and malefactors, for suspicion was very much in the air and many innocent people were suspected of the darkest designs.

An outstanding case of suspicion was a daytime affair, when a man was reported to be acting in a curious manner during an air raid. He dodged from cover to cover and showed a general desire to remain hidden. The postman who was also a keen L.D.V. and a lady confronted him and he was taken into some sort of custody, but refused to show his papers, or give a reasonable account of himself. After long delays, it was discovered that he was a noted bird watcher and was endeavouring to take photographs of birds in their natural haunts.

My first guard was under the command of Corporal Boughton who entertained us the long night through with tales of ancient village prowess, tales of domestic happenings, interspersed with much laughter. He told me the local names of many wild flowers and was of very great value in keeping the spirits of his guard at the highest level. On my complaining of my advancing years and the hardship of being kept from my bed, he said on one occasion: 'It be better to wear out than to rust out,' which I thought very profound.

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It was the guards' duty to stop all cars at night and examine the credentials of the occupants. This led to many amusing incidents which leads me to mention Colonel Smith, D.S.O. who was the oldest and in many ways the youngest of us all. On his 72nd birthday, while he was on guard, he stopped a car of merry-makers. He said: "They seemed as if they had been drinking more than was wise and could not find their identity cards." Some time was spent in looking for them when a jovial female voice from the back of the car called out: "Give the boy some sweets and two shillings and let's get on." Whether the sweets and the two bob were handed over, the Colonel did not reveal to us but he was highly pleased that his birthday had been remembered.

Unless I am careful, this account of the Home Guard will become an account of Colonel Smith's doings, the best and bravest of his kind.

Later, the Home Guard had a headquarters and various kind ladies took turns to clean the premises and well they did it. Various elderly gentlemen mounted guard during the day, reading what periodicals could be provided and getting generally bored. Unfortunately, the locks on the doors were somewhat defective and more than one lady helper got hopelessly trapped in the lavatory and could not escape. It was then that Colonel Smith showed his great resourcefulness by releasing the imprisoned ladies from the outside with the aid of a bent teaspoon which he always had handy.

When Colonel Smith was on guard, he insisted on making the tea and was so entertaining and instructive that the nights passed quickly. On Christmas Day, he always took the guard as a matter of course and provided various extras in the way of Christmas fare and would even sing a song though his voice was not of the best. His scraps of poetry, recited when on guard, helped to while away the hours. On my first guard with him, I came upon him in the light of the moon reciting Romeo's speech:

"Lady, by yon blessed moon I swear..."

In this short account of the Home Guard, it is impossible to mention everyone and how wonderful they were, considering that so many came on guard after a heavy day's work in the fields. I must, however, mention Mr. George Kewell, (see page 47,) whose manly form was not to be confined by an ordinary army belt but was compassed by an outsize trunk strap. He had a large gusset let into the back of his trousers to allow free play of movement. He was great on Discipline with a capital D. and kept us all well up to the mark. Mention must also be made of Leslie Mackintosh, later second in command to Captain Hutcheson. He worked hard and with great courtesy in spite of his failing health.

At first, arms and equipment were practically non-existent. There were six rifles of an out-of-date pattern and no ammunition. Capt. Hutcheson, Sergt. Mackintosh and Sergt. Shaw had revolvers. The last had no ammunition for his revolver till Col. Smith presented him with six cartridges from the South African war and it is not known to this day whether they would have detonated or not. The only occasion when they were likely to be fired was in the Battle of Britain when parachutes were coming down out of the sky like clouds. On one coming down near

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his house, Sergt. Shaw buckled on his revolver, put on his cap and ran out of the front door. He was immediately assailed by a stream of machine gun bullets, whereat he promptly ran back indoors and waited for a more favourable opportunity.

On the great occasion of the sham fight between East and West Wittering, Sergt. Shaw was taken prisoner by his friend, Sergt. Phillips from East Wittering, while cowering under a bush too small to conceal him. Sergt. Phillips insisted on the surrender of his prisoner's revolver and marched him back to East Wittering headquarters. Sergt. Phillips was horrified when he found the revolver was fully loaded and might have gone off if the trigger had been playfully pulled.

There was an occasion when there was to be a proper Church Parade. I forget the occasion: probably the thanksgiving for Dunkirk. Much time and trouble was taken to clean equipment and the parade fell in under a sergeant at headquarters. One man suggested that it would be nice to have a band and that he knew where there were some instruments. The sergeant asked him if anyone could play them and what tunes they could play. The reply came that they could play Sussex by the Sea. It was then suggested that someone should run for the instruments and return in time for the Church Parade. The messenger was dispatched and later, Captain Hutcheson took the parade. No band. Just before the parade moved off, a figure was seen running across the fields with a very curious drum of a large size which gave off a deep boom every time it bounced. Captain Hutcheson eyed the approaching drum with an exceedingly jaundiced eye and enquired what was the meaning of it all. He was told it was music for the Church parade. "Put it away at once," he said, "and fall in!"

As our supply of arms increased, there was an epidemic of rifles being fired accidentally and many of our oldest soldiers bored holes in walls and trees but unfortunately not in one another. After Dunkirk, the Home Guard had to stand-to all night for it was thought the Germans might come at any moment and in fact, it was thought by most people that they must come as the country was wholly unprepared and the opportunity too good to be missed. On the second night, the authorities called for another stand-to all night, but flesh and blood could not stand another sleepless night after working all day so the order had to be withdrawn. Over this period, there was a great display of bad language, fine blood-curdling oaths and a general show of temper which was not surprising.

Later, a very distinguished soldier joined us as an unofficial private, to wit, General Harman, who helped us on many occasions with his experience. It was he, I think, who suggested an all-night exercise in telephoning orders from one platoon to other platoons and making free use of the P.O. telephone. Naturally, the telephone people were very disgruntled at this and Sergt. Shaw who had to send all General Harman's messages to other platoons received very unwilling service from the exchange.

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But General Harman was indefatigable and kept sending messages with the regularity of clockwork till about 2 a.m. when Commander Hernandez our company commander suddenly shut down the exercise.

During the scare after Dunkirk, we were told that certain road blocks and bridges were heavily mined and that we were to detonate these mines in case of invasion. We were not told exactly how to detonate them, but everyone was too busy to explain further and the mines may be there to this day for all I know.

After the feeling of extreme peril began to wear thin, there arose two schools of thought regarding the scope and use of the Home Guard. One school regarded it as a military body to be schooled and disciplined as in the Army and to take its place in the Army formation. The second school held that the H.G. could only be looked on as a band of Franc-tireurs or maquis to assist the army when possible and make every use of its local knowledge of by-paths and short cuts. The differences between these two schools of thought were brought to a head by a speech in Chichester by our supreme Commander, Colonel Leckie Pike of the Guards who asked the men if there were any poachers present, as they were the sort of men he wanted.

We do not know what would have happened if the Germans had come nor how the H.G. would have behaved, but I have no doubt that, under necessity, great deeds of valour would have been performed and who knows? The very originality of the West Wittering H.G. might have nonplussed the German military machine and caused the Germans to wonder what new military tactics had been evolved in West Wittering.

Now that the war is over and it is with added joy that many an ex-Home Guard takes to his bed at night after a hard day's work, knowing that he is not for guard, long may he do so! The West Wittering Home Guard was formed almost under the shadow of old Cakeham Tower, which has watched over the Hundred of Manhood for many hundreds of years and more than one weary Home Guard has gained comfort from its steady immobility and indifference to rain and shine, gunfire and bombs.

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