

War heroes who never went to war

The Auxiliary Units were one of the most secret operations of WWII. Now its former members want a medal for their services

Why were such secret units needed?

In the late 1930s, senior figures in the Secret Intelligence Service and the War Office grew convinced that appeasement would never prevent a Nazi invasion. So, defying high-level opposition, they quietly worked on a pre-emptive "Last Ditch" survival strategy. But it was only after the fall of France in May 1940, with Britain isolated and its depleted forces in no state to repel an invasion by the German armies occupying northeast France, that Winston Churchill ordered those plans to be activated.

What did the plans involve?

Churchill ordered Colonel Colin Gubbins (later to "set Europe ablaze" in the Special Operations Executive) to create a secret network of civilian volunteers, known as GHQ Auxiliary Units. In the event of occupation, regular British forces would withdraw to the "GHQ Line" just south of London, leaving behind the Aux Units who, from underground bases, would harry the enemy's supply lines in order to slow down advancing German troops and give the regular army time to mount a counter-attack. The Units were divided into three sections: Special Duties – an intelligence-gathering service, spying on enemy troop movements; Signals – a network of underground radio stations to transmit that intelligence back to GHQ; and the six-man Fighting Patrols – aka the Highworth's Fertilisers (*see box*).

What experience did Gubbins bring to the task?

He had cut his teeth serving in Ireland during the Troubles and experienced at first hand the success of the irregular Irish Volunteers led by Michael Collins. They formed the model for Gubbins's Fighting Patrols, each led by a sergeant and co-ordinated in a given region by a local commander. Kent was the likeliest invasion area, and the first Aux Unit was established in a secluded farmhouse in Bilting by Peter Fleming, brother of Ian. By the end of August 1940 there were units as far north as Brechin on Scotland's east coast and as far south and west as Land's End and Pembrokeshire.

What kind of men were recruited?

Volunteers, mostly operating unpaid (for what seemed like a suicide mission), they were mainly selected for their knowledge of local geography, but also had to be physically tough. They could be anything from students to factory workers, but ideal recruits were foresters, farmers and gamekeepers (one Aux Unit had a poacher and a gamekeeper on the same patrol). Often farmers were chosen as patrol leaders and asked to select recruits from their labour force. At a time when motor vehicles were a novelty outside towns, it was often only farmers and their workers who had the mechanical knowledge to maintain (and sabotage) motor vehicles. Also, at a time of fuel rationing, farmers could be sure of extra coupons. And villagers would think nothing of tractors or farm lorries trundling back and forth.



Auxiliars relaxing in one of their Operational Bases

How secret were their activities?

Auxiliars (motto: "Be Like Dad – keep Mum") had to swear an oath of secrecy, and were told they'd be shot if they disclosed their role to outsiders. As cover, they were allocated to Home Guard battalions and given Home Guard uniforms. (Though to compare them to the Home Guard, as a senior officer put it, would be "like comparing the Brigade of Guards to the Salvation Army".) Difficulties arose when they were found not taking part in normal Home Guard exercises. Some were victimised by the local community, who thought they should be out fighting for King and Country. Others, unable to explain their absence at night, were accused of nefarious or extra-marital activities.

What were they to do once the Germans had invaded?

They had orders to leave their homes and move to pre-prepared Operational Bases underground, some in existing tunnels and mines, others (500 or so) constructed of corrugated iron sections sunk into the ground with escape tunnels and access via concrete pipes or grassed-over trap doors. Operational stores and rations were sufficient for 14 days only: Auxiliars who survived this period were to revert to their civilian occupations in the hope of a successful British counter-attack. If discovered by the enemy, they were expected to shoot themselves rather than be taken alive.

What actions were they to take during the 14-day period?

Each patrol, operating within a 15-mile radius, was to emerge at night and carry out attacks, not just on aircraft, railway lines, fuel dumps etc, but also on senior German officers. There were plans to booby-trap the smartest lavatories in the stately homes of Kent, on the basis that Nazi generals would be based in the grand houses and commandeer the finest facilities. Recruits were given sealed envelopes containing lists of potential collaborators – all to be shot if the Nazis landed. These included not just known fascist sympathisers but unsuspecting county chief constables who, it was reckoned, would have information the Germans would want.

Do these men deserve a medal?

They may not have seen action, but they were ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for their country. When stood down in late 1944, they were told their existence would never be acknowledged. In 1996, however, shortly after a group of ex-Auxiliars had staged their first-ever reunion, the Ministry of Defence agreed that some could apply for the 1939-1945 Defence Medal. But since not all were deemed to qualify, they have continued to demand recognition for their services. As the 70th anniversary of their formation fell on 4 July this year, the MoD is being urged to recognise their role before it is too late. All former Auxiliars are now being invited to declare their involvement and contact the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team on 01865-600045, or consult the website www.coleshillhouse.com.

The naming of Highworth's Fertilisers

The Fighting Patrols got their name from the Wiltshire village of Highworth, where selected recruits had to report to the village post-mistress before being taken to nearby Coleshill House, the Aux Units' secret HQ, for a weekend's training in fieldcraft, sabotage and unarmed combat. Unarmed combat was taught by W.E. Fairbairn, founder of the Shanghai police Riot Squads, author of *All-in Fighting*, and co-inventor of the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife – a lethal dagger with which all Auxiliars were equipped. Recruits were taught deadly close-fighting techniques such as the "sentry hold", the "Japanese strangle" and "drawing the smatchet" (a fearsome broad-bladed knife). They were shown the best places to stick a knife in, and trained in the use of the garrotte.

In July 1942 the Aux Units received their own Top Secret training manual disguised as an agricultural supplies diary – *The Countryman's Diary, 1939*. Its cover read: "Highworth's Fertilisers. Do their stuff unseen until you see RESULTS!" The Diary's 40-odd pages were crowded with examples of sabotage and demolition devices and booby traps that SOE agents used within occupied Europe. In the event, the Auxiliars only ever engaged in practice missions, but after the War the SAS recruited extensively from the Aux Units, so their training wasn't entirely in vain.