

Myth and Reality: The Second World War Auxiliary Units

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Summary

The British Auxiliary Units of the Second World War, an elite commando organisation based around the Home Guard, are explored as a case study of how quickly myths can develop in modern history and how difficult it can be to restore historic objectivity. The article describes the myths that developed around secrecy and purpose; how a reliance on oral history created a history that differed from the official records. A misunderstanding of the role of the organisation created the myth and romance of the 'British Resistance Organisation' which has been perpetuated as a useful marketing tool at the expense of historical integrity.

Any study of modern history carries risks of being based upon undigested facts or being overloaded with emotional connection to the period. A study of the First and Second World Wars pose particular risks in the popular use of oral testimony and second-hand family memories, which are often influenced by the later reading of participants. History written from a personal perspective is not necessarily accurate or that which would be recognised by those engaged in the great matters of state. Modern publishers and film makers add to the problem by trying to condense complex issues to dramatic headlines and appealing sound-bites. Commercial and marketing interests begin to out-weigh history. In a remarkably short time the myth of events and personalities can overtake the reality and become enshrined as the accepted truth. It can be difficult to shed such myths, thus distorting an appreciation of history for future generations. Thus the centenary commemorations of the First World War in Britain still tend to be largely driven by long out-dated but emotional historical tropes, some created by the government and newspapers of the time for propaganda purposes but blindly accepted by later historians. This present study takes, as an example of this process, the development of the legend of the British Auxiliary Units of the Second World War.

In the summer of 1940 the British government and the War Office faced the sudden realization that invasion was now a realistic prospect – something that had previously been largely ignored. However, in utmost secrecy, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS aka MI6) had already put in place the basis for a long-term resistance movement (now known as Section VII), based on its earlier creation of an intelligence network in Eire. To complement this, and based upon the established principle within SIS of a layered structure of self-contained organisations, Section D of SIS also began to mobilise a larger-scale guerrilla force – the Home Defence Scheme. The War Office, fearful of this developing as an SIS private army of civilians acting outside of their control, countered with plans for a more ordered commando force based around the newly-formed Local Defence Volunteers (LDV: later re-named the Home Guard).² Unlike the SIS operations, however, the Auxiliary Units were designed to principally operate in the coastal counties where the enemy would first land, rather than being a national organisation.

Authorisation to create the War Office Auxiliary Units was given by the War Cabinet in June 1940, although mobilisation did not properly begin until July. They had two quite separate

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² Atkin 2015, *passim*.

branches. The Operational Patrols comprised small teams of well-equipped Home Guard commandos (together with a small number of regular army Scout Patrols) who would go to ground upon invasion and support regular troops by attacking pre-determined targets on the flanks and rear of an invading army. The Special Duties Branch (SDB) was the intelligence-gathering arm, but had no means of direct communication to the Operational Branch. In practice it was a completely separate organisation. The role of both arms during an invasion would have been limited, not least because the Operational Branch never did acquire wireless communications and those of the Special Duties Branch from 1941 were very limited and fragile. The SDB mainly developed as an internal security body, eaves-dropping on 'loose talk'. Its anti-invasion role became a useful cover for this more sensitive role in the post-war period, when spying on one's neighbours seemed rather 'un-British'. The Auxiliary Units are popularly labelled as Britain's resistance or 'last ditch' movement, and virtually any modern media story will automatically describe them as such. Yet this attribution is fundamentally flawed – which is not to downplay in any way the actual contribution of the organisation to defending the country during any invasion. But a distinction must be made between organisations designed to operate in a military capacity during an active anti-invasion campaign and those who would mount resistance after occupation.

The founders of the Auxiliary Units, Colin Gubbins and Peter Wilkinson, had a background in a research section (MIR) of the War Office to develop irregular warfare on military lines.³ Wilkinson had also worked closely with Section D of SIS (the 'sabotage service'), which considered irregular warfare from a more secret, civilian, perspective. Both men were clear that the organisation was only intended as a short-term attempt to hinder the movement of an invasion army. The Auxiliary Units were, therefore, a military expedient to operate as commandos within what was anticipated to be a month-long campaign and focussed upon coastal operations, rather than an attempt to create a national resistance organisation that would operate under longer-term enemy occupation. Gubbins concluded that the Auxiliary Units were 'designed, trained and prepared for a particular and imminent crisis: that was their specialist role.' He added, 'We were expendable. We were a bonus, that's all'.⁴ They were not, therefore, the 'last ditch' of Britain's defence by the simple fact that they were intended to support a still active British field army, buying valuable time for the latter to regroup and, in the view of General Thorne in the anticipated invasion zone of Kent and Sussex, to also cover the flanks of a British counter-attack.⁵

The role of the Auxiliary Units in relation to a resistance organisation had been discussed by the War Office at the time, not least because of the influence of SIS in their foundation. There was disquiet within government over the morality of civilians waging war in Britain, seen as being contrary to the principles of the Hague Convention (although the British government had no qualms in encouraging foreign civilian resistance groups). Wilkinson explained the contemporary confusion of purpose. He favoured the development of a long-term, civilian, resistance organisation. By contrast, the War Office only wanted a uniformed body for immediate action against an invading army. Wilkinson believed that the Commanding Officer of the Auxiliary Units, Colin Gubbins, fell half-way between the two opposing views. Gubbins was obliged, however, to follow the War Office line.⁶ Wilkinson's assessment of the General Staff opinion is confirmed by a letter from General Paget, Chief of Staff to the C-in-C Home Forces. Outraged by reports that Section D of SIS had been recruiting men for the civilian Home Defence Scheme (HDS) and were preparing for guerrilla warfare in areas of occupation, he was keen to stress that the Auxiliary Units Operational Patrols were a military formation, were uniformed members of the Home Guard, and that they had no connection to the ungentlemanly operations of the HDS in trying to create a civilian resistance.

The object of these fighting patrols is to provide within the general Home Guard organisation small units of men, specially selected and trained, whose role is to act

³ MIR (Military Intelligence Research) was a small unit created in December 1938 to explore military-based irregular warfare. It worked closely with Section D of SIS (sharing an office) who were simultaneously developing civilian-based irregular warfare.

⁴ Pryce-Jones 1975, p.184.

⁵ General Thorne commanded XII Corps and founded the XII Corps Observation Unit, a forerunner of the Auxiliary Units.

⁶ Sutton, S., 'Farmers or Fighters. Dissertation on the existence and function of Britain's 'secret army'. Auxiliary Units in southern England during 1940-44'. Unpublished BA dissertation 1995, Canterbury Christchurch College.

offensively on the flanks and in the rear of any German troops who may obtain a temporary foothold in this country. These men, being members of the Home Guard, will of course fight in uniform.⁷

It is perhaps not surprising that the official War Office view of their scope of operations, with an oft-quoted life expectancy of just two weeks, was not necessarily shared by the volunteers on the ground. Some Intelligence Officers offered encouragement that perhaps the men could survive longer and some patrols made their own plans for this possibility, hiding additional supplies. The interpretation of their role by the volunteers began to diverge even more from the official perception in the late 1960s, when the popular *Dad's Army* TV series seemed to turn membership of the Home Guard into a joke and became an incentive for Auxiliaries to emphasise their distinct nature. General Paget was explicit about the wearing of Home Guard uniform by the Auxiliaries but this matter has nonetheless aroused some denial and consequent confusion as to the status of the Auxiliary Units. Intelligence Officer Stuart Edmundson wrote:

There was no uniform in 1940. They were given denims to protect their clothes ...
I never trained a man in uniform and we never intended them to fight in Home Guard uniform.⁸

According to Herman Kindred, an Auxiliary from Suffolk, 'Our "real uniform", if you like, was just plain army denims, but they were only really to protect our ordinary clothes'. Both Edmundson and Kindred seem to have forgotten that, when the Auxiliary Units were founded, the only uniform for most LDV / Home Guard was an armband worn with civilian clothes. The Home Guard uniform for the rest of 1940 was army-issue plain denim overalls about which Edmundson and Kindred were so dismissive; the Auxiliary Units were therefore dressed in step with the normal Home Guard.

After an initial period of confusion over their rationale, the Auxiliary Units were trained to operate as small teams of uniformed commandos, working from their underground hides or 'Operational Bases' and in isolation from the rest of the community. This was in sharp contrast to the methodology preached at the unofficial Home Guard Training School at Osterley Park, organised by former International Brigade commander Tom Wintringham. Here, the training approached the more classic vision of resistance groups and closely followed both HDS and initial Auxiliary Units methodology. Osterley students were told to pick off stragglers on the flanks of an advance including tanks, transports, dispatch riders and sentries. 'It is our job, when the enemy is on the march, or his foraging or scouting parties are out, to harass his flanks, to snipe every straggler. Hit and run. Hit and hold them up. Hit and scatter them'. They were also prepared for the task of working behind enemy lines: 'Since offence is the best form of defence, operations against such units must be carried into areas which may be overrun by the enemy'.⁹ Crucially, Wintringham suggested that if being overrun, Home Guard members should bury their rifles and uniforms, blend back into the community, and then fight on as civilians in secret teams of two or three, armed with more concealable revolvers and explosives. In 1941 Wintringham and long-time guerrilla 'Yank' Levy provided more advice on the methodology to be employed and suggested that large boxes should be hidden ready to act as caches for supplies and civilian clothes.¹⁰ The course included advice on how to destroy ammunition dumps and vehicle parks, how to prepare ambushes, and how to poison the water supply in occupied areas by throwing dead dogs into wells.

Remember that the guerrilla has to work like a ghost. He has to undermine the morale of the enemy by being always unexpected and always dangerous. If the Nazis seize an English county we must make it impossible for them to send dispatches about that county without a heavy escort of armoured cars.¹¹

⁷ Letter of General Paget to Captain Sandys, 30 July 1940: TNA CAB 120/241, quoted in Atkin 2015, p.74.

⁸ Stuart Edmundson, quoted in Warwicker 2004, p.93.

⁹ Levy 1941, p.74.

¹⁰ Levy 1941, p.36.

¹¹ Wintringham 1941, pp.27-8.

There were no illusions either about what was to befall them or how they were to treat the enemy. No quarter would be given: 'Above all remember the enemy is ruthless, and similar medicine must be handed to him'.¹² Security was everything. 'The most profound secrecy should cover the actions and plans of each group. On no account should others be taken into confidence for fear of accidental betrayal'. Ironically, the plans of the Osterley Training School to create an unofficial guerrilla force from the Home Guard was widely telegraphed to the Nazis through publications such as *Picture Post* and *Life* magazines. One of the founders of the School was Edward Hulton, proprietor of *Picture Post*, who was involved in the propaganda work of Section D of SIS. Such deliberate warnings to Hitler that Britain was preparing an in-depth defence and that any invasion was likely to prove more costly, and take longer to achieve, than anything the Nazis had faced previously, was an important part of the strategy to dissuade Hitler's generals from the task. The invaders would have had limited fuel supplies and any delay to their plans caused by having to mop up guerrillas would be disastrous. It is also quite possible that Hulton was used by Section D to discretely feed useful hints on methodology into the training course, and that in July 1940 the Osterley students were seen as a potentially useful source of recruits to the HDS when it was ready to expand from its secret core into a partisan army.¹³ Thus, in 1940, the Osterley trainees would have been at least as important to the war effort as the Auxiliary Units and were arguably better trained. Tom Wintringham and his ex-International Brigade comrades were not so completely ignored by the official war effort as is often assumed. Wintringham – renegade communist but also War Office lecturer and long-time correspondent with General Thorne – may well have been an unknowing agent of the British secret service. Much to the dismay of MI5, there was even an attempt to make Wintringham's colleague, former commissar Hugh Slater (now commissioned as an instructor at General Thorne's Scottish Command training school) a major in Military Intelligence.

One fundamental problem in terms of any putative longer-term resistance role for both the Operational Patrols and the Special Duties Branch of the Auxiliary Units was that they had no means of communication once organised military defence of the country had collapsed. It should be noted that the wireless network of the SDB relied largely on the survival of regional army HQs in a fixed location. The Auxiliary Units could not, therefore, continue to operate in any strategic, or co-ordinated, capacity after any retreat, let alone surrender, of the army. As David Lampe pointed out in 1968:

The Special Duties Organisation of Auxiliary Units was beyond doubt the part of the organisation that would have collapsed most quickly after the Germans got a foothold in Britain, for underground broadcasting from fixed stations is untenable.¹⁴

By contrast, it should be remembered that at this stage in the war SIS were already distributing clandestine long-range wireless sets in Scandinavia and France for the use of the future continental resistance organisations. Following any occupation, the true British resistance – the SIS Section VII – equipped with mobile long-range wireless sets and working from within the community rather than from separate hides (that always carried the risk of discovery) – would come into its own. They might even take advantage of the likely focus of the Gestapo in rounding up any surviving Auxiliary Units members rather than searching for a completely separate organisation.

Despite the fundamental weakness of its structure, the myth still continues that the SDB was a resistance organisation. An oft-repeated story is that of the teenage courier Jill Holman in Aylsham, Norfolk. She was supposedly instructed to collect intelligence on German troop movements whilst casually pony-trekking through the middle of the Nazi invasion forces. This is a romantic and somewhat naïve notion. In fact, the story dates to 1942 when German invasion was becoming more unlikely.¹⁵ Instead, Norfolk now faced the 'friendly invasion' of the US 8th Army Air Force! Jill's father, Dr Holman, was a local OUT station operator and the Intelligence

¹² J. Piling, *Report on Osterley Park LDV Training School*, 5-6 August, 1940, pp.1 and 4: Wintringham Papers.

¹³ As described in the 1939 pamphlets by Colin Gubbins: *The Art of Guerrilla Warfare* and *The Partisan Leader's Handbook*.

¹⁴ Lampe 1968, p.135.

¹⁵ Quoted in Simak and Pye 2014, p.131.

Officer, Captain John Collings, had become a frequent visitor.¹⁶ One suspects that 16-year-old Jill was actually recruited in order to keep an overly-curious teenager occupied – although she may never have realised the deception. The more likely front-line of intelligence-gathering during any invasion would have been the ‘Phantom’ units of the GHQ Liaison Regiment. Proven during the campaign in France, these were skilled linguists and expert wireless operators whose role was to criss-cross the enemy lines in heavily-armed patrols, equipped with scout cars and motor-cycles, able to intercept enemy transmissions and in constant wireless communication with GHQ. The complicated wireless system of the SDB did not become fully operational in a combat sense until 1942 (when hidden bases for the IN Stations were finally introduced). The wireless network survived mainly because it might provide another layer to the early warning system in case of enemy raids.¹⁷

The Auxiliary Units were created by the War Office in the summer panic of 1940, designed to counter an invasion that was thought to be imminent and with little thought for their longer-term future or role. Once that threat was passed there was a problem of what to do with them as the volunteers in the Operational Patrols had been assured that they would not be returned to normal Home Guard duties. A new role had to be found to justify the organisation. The Operational Patrols were therefore re-invented as well-armed reconnaissance teams to counter the anticipated threat of German commando landings; fear of parachute landings reached levels of near paranoia in the War Office during 1943-44, although the threat from the German special forces Brandenburg Regiment was real enough.¹⁸ Major Nigel Oxenden, Training Officer and compiler of the wartime Auxiliary Units history, was openly cynical about the re-tasking, describing the rumours of raids as ‘a gift to IOs’ (Intelligence Officers of the Auxiliary Units) and ‘a wonderful tonic for fading enthusiasm in the ranks’. He went on ‘Sceptics wondered whether it was ever intended as anything more. The effects, with careful nursing lasted for the next two years’.¹⁹ Many photographs show Operational Patrols of this period heavily armed with an increased allocation of Sten guns to meet this new role. The work involved acting as scout patrols for the local Home Guard and a number of joint exercises were held. The Home Guard had also been reorganised to meet the threat of raids and were now in many respects better equipped to meet the threat than were the Auxiliary Units. The Home Guard had the advantage of increasing provision of transport and heavier weapons provided for the purpose and, most importantly, also had mobile wireless communication with their HQ.

In January 1943 the War Office carried out an analysis of the potential future use of the Auxiliary Units.²⁰ It concluded that the Auxiliary Units were unlikely to be used in the future; and that the fit officers and men amongst its ranks were needed elsewhere. In the following month, the Auxiliary Units exemption from call up was cancelled. This was an important signal as to the declining status of the Operational Patrols (although the earlier exemption from call-up had already been widely by-passed by men frustrated in not being able to put their training into practice). They were defended, in September 1943, by the C-in-C, Home Forces, Lieutenant General Franklin in correspondence with the Under-Secretary of State – but largely in terms that it was less trouble to keep them than to disband them. In November 1943 all ‘A’ medical grade officers and men in the Auxiliary Units had to be listed ready for redeployment. The men on the ground may have been oblivious to the problems increasingly affecting the Auxiliary Units at a strategic level, but the removal of their special status brought this home and, as a result, both recruitment and morale suffered.

There is an unreal air to the Auxiliary Units in their later history. They began to overplay their tactic of presenting themselves as being so secret that no-one should question their role and function. In November 1943 the Auxiliary Units requested 52,000 of the new Type 77 phosphorous grenades but were told they could only have 2,000 for training purposes. In February

¹⁶ Clusters of OUT stations operated by civilians reported to an IN Station, usually based at an army HQ and operated by service personnel.

¹⁷ Atkin 2015, Chapter 9.

¹⁸ TNA KV 4/194, f.16.

¹⁹ Oxenden 2012 (typescript 1944), pp.14-15.

²⁰ TNA WO 200/738.

1944 they had to be firmly told that they did not have priority for ammunition over other army units.²¹ Pressure for their disbandment intensified from April 1944, even as some patrols were being deployed to the Isle of Wight:

There is a very strong feeling in high places in the War Office that the time must be approaching (if it has not already arrived) when Auxiliary Units will have ceased to justify their continued existence.²²

The final edition of their explosives manual was published in 1944 under the disguise of the *Countryman's Diary 1939*. The cover contains a jokey reference to their HQ at Coleshill House: 'produced by 'Highworth Fertilisers' with the rider that 'You will find the name Highworth whenever quick results are required' which suggests that security was no longer a high priority. The booklet was by now almost a souvenir edition. Unaware of the doubts being raised in the War Office, the Operational Patrols were still recruiting locally in order to make up their depleted strength. John Hartwright of Worcester was enrolled into Joshua Patrol on 27 May 1944; John Thomas from Crowle, Worcestershire, was enrolled into the Auxiliary Units even later on 12 June 1944. Such men were unaware that on 17 May, the War Office had recommended the withdrawal of all regular army personnel from the Auxiliary Units which would be reorganised on a purely Home Guard basis.²³ On 5 June, as the invasion fleets for Normandy were preparing to set sail, Colonel Douglas was summoned to a meeting in the War Office to discuss the future of the organisation; the decision was made to close it down, although the Operational Branch would stagger on until November. But interest was failing. Many of the supplies of explosives were deteriorating in the neglected hides. The explosives packs began to be removed in July and some stores of Type 36 grenades were declared unserviceable.²⁴ Sadly, the organisation had drifted in purpose and momentum after the invasion-risk days of 1940-41.

The January 1943 report had concluded that if the Operational Patrols were ever used it would be around the flanks of the highly militarized area between Hampshire and Norfolk.²⁵ This is indeed what happened in the run up to D-Day. From May to September 1944, volunteers from patrols selected from across the country were sent to the Isle of Wight in relays to supplement regular troops who were guarding the vital pump-house for the Pluto Pipeline (carrying fuel to the invasion beaches) and a secret communications centre, disguised as a hospital. The pipeline was considered a priority target for German commando raids and who better to help guard the terminal than the poachers turned gamekeepers of the Auxiliary Units. But even as they were being dispatched to the Isle of Wight, the final decisions were being taken to close down the organisation. Oxenden in the draft of his official history of the Auxiliary Units summarised the changes of fortunes in the organisation as being

- 1940 'a blaze of wild priority'
- 1941-2 a phase of organised power 'guarded by a security that nobody could get past, however much they might resent it'
- 1943-4 'a realisation that the soundest attitude was unobtrusiveness' in the hope that senior officers might forget their existence.²⁶

The Special Duties Branch of the Auxiliary Units was stood down in July 1944 and the Operational Branch followed in November, in tandem with the rest of the Home Guard, as originally promised.

Immediately after the end of the war in 1945 there was a brief flurry of publicity that identified the Auxiliary Units (both operational patrols and the SDB) as a clandestine force. Stories of the European resistance and partisan armies had already become current in the press and, not to be left out, this terminology was seized upon by newspapers as a shortcut means of describing the British organisation. A brief account of the Auxiliary Units was even published in the service

²¹ TNA WO 199/936.

²² War Office to Major General Callander, GHQ Home Forces, 25 April 1944: TNA WO 199/738.

²³ Memo of War Office to Colonel Douglas, 17 May 1944: TNA WO 199/738.

²⁴ TNA WO 199/937.

²⁵ War Office, January 1943, quoted in Warwicker 2004, p.43.

²⁶ Oxenden 2012 (typescript 1944), pp.17 – 18.

newspaper *Sunday SEAC* on 15 April 1945, describing ‘an elaborately organized maquis’. *The Times* obtained a copy of the stand-down letter to the SDB and an account was published on 12 April 1945 under the heading ‘Britain’s Secret “Underground” – Invasion Spy Force Stood Down’. Two months later, on 14 June, the *Western Morning News* also ran a story on the ‘British Maquis’. The Auxiliary Units then dropped out of sight. Meanwhile, SIS created one key plank in the legend of the SDB by destroying all of its TRD wireless sets as part of a wider programme of scrapping as many other wartime clandestine wireless sets as it could find. The TRD sets were not necessarily singled out for any super-secret feature (indeed they were not terribly effective as a spy set) but rather they were easier to locate in the UK than the other types which were scattered throughout Europe. Nonetheless the legend grew that the sets were so revolutionary that they had to be specially destroyed. In fact, by 1944, 40% of the sets used by the SDB were actually the notoriously noisy, and now redundant, WS17 sets.

The Auxiliary Units reappeared in a 1952 article in *The Spectator* by Peter Fleming on the XII Corps Observation Unit. He published a broader discussion of the Auxiliary Units in *Invasion 1940* (1957) in which he describes the ‘stay-behind’ parties of XII Corps ‘or, as it would have later been called, a maquis or resistance movement’.²⁷ The nomenclature was beginning to take hold. Interestingly he went on to describe the Auxiliary Units as ‘secret, at any rate in intention’, an early clue that they were not necessarily, in practice, the top secret organisation of modern legend. John Warwicker confidently asserted in 2008 that no name of an Auxiliary Units officer was recorded on any Army or Home Guard list.²⁸ But as more documents have become publically available it is clear that details of the Auxiliers, including their officers, were carefully recorded on Home Guard enrolment forms. Lists of patrol organisation were even posted openly on Home Guard notice boards as Part II Orders, the logic being that it would reduce the mystery surrounding men who did not parade with the rest of the Home Guard. From 1942 they even began to wear distinctive shoulder patches. The attachment of Home Guard volunteers to the Auxiliary Units was, from October 1942, even over-stamped on their Identity Cards. To make matters even worse, some Auxiliers travelled to the training HQ at Coleshill, Highworth, wearing their large American revolvers on their hips. A Home Guard private toting a revolver would have immediately excited attention. In effect, their best security was to hide ‘in open sight’ but the deception would not have fooled the enemy for long and they would have been easy to track down. It was not for nothing that a Group Commander from Worcestershire gave the wife of one of his men a small .22 calibre pistol with which to protect herself – or ensure that she was not captured.²⁹ But for the founders, security was not an over-riding issue. After all their function was simply to operate in support of the regular troops by attacking the rear and flanks of an invading army. An anticipated life expectancy of just two weeks (longer than most beach defenders or Home Guard could expect in the invasion zone) seemed to make security concerns superfluous! From 1942, a detailed central register was kept of all Auxiliers, including, in some cases, their addresses and telephone numbers – a Gestapo officer’s dream!³⁰ In sharp contrast, in 1941 Felix Cowgill of SIS had made it clear to MI5 that no register would ever be kept of their resistance organisation in Section VII. Even in 2016, no information has ever been officially revealed about the membership or organisation of Section VII.

The increasing paranoia of the Cold War meant that writers such as Peter Fleming and Bickham Sweet-Escott found that official restrictions began to be placed on anything connected with British intelligence during the Second World War. There was a particular reluctance to acknowledge the role of SIS both as a precursor to the Auxiliary Units and also in their early organisation. Sweet-Escott’s excellent, whimsical, memoir on his work with Section D and SOE – *Baker Street Irregular* – was written in 1954 but permission for publication was not given until 1965 and then only a sanitized account, removing all direct references to SIS. The book did contain references to a number of incidents in the sometimes chaotic distribution of arms dumps by the Home Defence Scheme (HDS) in June 1940, which became the basis of the subsequent

²⁷ Fleming 1957, p.270

²⁸ Warwicker 2008, p.109.

²⁹ Lowry and Wilks 2002, p.82.

³⁰ Cowgill to Comyns Carr, 28 April 1941: TNA KV 4/205; TNA WO 199/3389.

published dismissal of the efforts of Section D to create a guerrilla force and resistance organisation.³¹ Such stories might well have been allowed to be published exactly to create such a myth and thereby dissuade further investigation. It is very noticeable that the wartime history of Section D, written by SOE in 1943 but never envisaged for public release, contains an enormous amount of detail on foreign operations of Section D including naming the agents and their operational structure. By contrast, discussion of the HDS is confined to a single paragraph and the names of its organisers are not provided. The existence of SIS operations within Britain was already a sensitive subject. The son of one of the heads of the HDS was one of the compilers of the SOE History and whilst the name of Viscount Bearsted appears throughout the document in connection with other Section D activities in Europe, his contribution to the HDS is not revealed. The evident concern to maintain absolute secrecy over the HDS suggests that it was more successful than implied by the dismissive tales of chaos that were allowed to be published by Sweet-Escott. William Mackenzie continued this policy of minimum acknowledgement and mentioned the HDS only briefly in his otherwise comprehensive summary of the work of Section D in the first official history of SOE which was completed in 1947 but not released to the public until 2000.³² The official myth of an inconsequential and incompetent Section D organisation in Britain was now well-established. Later historians Michael Foot and David Stafford, more interested in promoting the role of SOE as a pioneer of irregular warfare, were content to uncritically repeat David Lampe's 1968 collection of their disaster stories (Lampe relied largely on Sweet-Escott's account). Foot wrote-off Section D's attempts to create stay-behind units during the fraught months of 1940 as 'incompetent'.³³ David Stafford's opinion is that the work 'became a fiasco: too many of its organisers were arrested as German agents while preparing ammunition dumps and expanding badger sets as underground HQs' which sounds more like a conflation of the HDS with early SDB disasters where underground hides and buried radio sets were discovered.³⁴

As further sources have been made public or have been re-discovered in obscure government files within the National Archives, recent historians have been more charitable about the work of Section D overall. In 2004 Davies suggested that there had been a 'systematic undervaluation' of the achievements of Section D, particularly in regard to clandestine political warfare.³⁵ This assessment was followed by Mark Seaman in 2006 who commented on 'the remarkable contribution of Section D and MIR to SOE's eventual success.'³⁶

The Auxiliary Units became a particularly sensitive subject during the Cold War. From 1948, NATO planned a European anti-Soviet 'stay-behind' network clearly based upon the wartime Auxiliary Units. Members of what became known as the 'Gladios' (only formally acknowledged in 1990) were trained in England by the SIS. Meanwhile the SAS trained to go to ground in North Germany in the event of any Soviet invasion – using a version of the Auxiliary Unit-type operational bases. Unfortunately some units of the 'Gladios' went rogue and conducted their own terror campaign in order to make anti-communist repression more acceptable, which heightened official paranoia about their wartime antecedents. The concept of the Auxiliary Units was once again a 'live' secret and detailed publication of their activities was discouraged for as long as possible. It is, however, a fallacy to believe that their existence was maintained as a complete official secret. A brief summary of their role in harassing the flanks and rear of an invading army was included in the volume of the official History of the Second World War dealing with Home Defence (1957).³⁷ It was, however, David Lampe's pioneering publication of *The Last Ditch* in 1968 that first brought their existence to popular attention. Lampe's book also provided the source of many of the continuing myths: clearly influenced by Fleming's wording in 1957, he repeatedly described the Auxiliary Units as the 'British resistance organisation' and set the tone

³¹ Sweet-Escott 1965, pp.38-9.

³² Mackenzie 2000, p.52.

³³ Foot 1984, p.17.

³⁴ Stafford 2010, p.122.

³⁵ Davies 2004, p.119.

³⁶ Seaman 2006, p.19.

³⁷ Collier 1957, pp. 130 and 297.

for the focus on secrecy that has been followed thereafter, including an over-emphasis on the separation of the Auxiliary Units from the Home Guard.

The Last Ditch excited renewed interest in the topic but, in the absence of easily-accessible official documents, the next wave of publication would rely heavily on the memories of veterans, a generation that took seriously their instructions to never reveal their secrets! It was only in 1992 that John Warwicker managed to secure written permission from the Cabinet Office for former members of the Auxiliary Units to tell their story and this has led to the present flood of books recounting their experiences as part of county histories. But as early as 1957, Peter Fleming warned on the risks of distorting the history of the Second World War by over-reliance on oral history of veterans. He wrote in the Foreword to *Invasion 1940*:

Yet legend plays a large part in their memories of that tense and strangely exhilarating summer, and their experiences, like those of early childhood, are sharply rather than accurately etched upon their minds. The stories they tell of the period have become better, but not more veracious, with the passage of time. Rumours are remembered as facts, and – particularly since anti-invasion precautions continued in force for several years after the Germans had renounced their project – the sequence of events is blurred.³⁸

If that was true in 1957, how more problematic it could be forty years later when veterans of the Auxiliary Units finally began to tell their story, exacerbated by the fact that, by then, many had read other published accounts of the Auxiliary Units which coloured their own memories. This is not to deny the value of oral history, and the perceptions of those who took part in conflict have their own value, but such accounts need to be tested against the official documentation – difficult if this is destroyed or suppressed.

No source mentioned to Lampe the second SIS organisation in this story: Section VII. The first official, if tantalizing, reference to it was not until Keith Jeffrey's *MI6* of 2010, as no-one in the Cold War Ministry of Defence had any interest in correcting this omission to the story of Britain's preparations for clandestine warfare.³⁹ A comment of an early CIA analyst on the *Lucy* spy ring is apposite:

The profession of intelligence may owe some duty to Clio [the mythological muse of history], but it cannot be said to be the general one of cleansing all confusions and deliberate disinformation from the public record about intelligence matters.⁴⁰

SIS would have approved of the CIA statement. It had no wish to make any comment that would draw attention to its own wartime operations and, having already allowed public ridicule of the activities of their Section D, the increasing focus given to the Auxiliary Units served them well in diverting popular attention from their creation of Britain's real resistance organisation. SIS itself was not officially acknowledged until 1992 and the policy of SIS is still that it will not comment upon the work, or even existence, of past agents of the Second World War unless this is already in the public domain. As the Cold War intensified during the 1960s, there was an evident concern that a good idea, used once, might be useful again in the future and so best to keep it a secret! Many of the agents of Section VII were already middle-aged during the Second World War, deliberately chosen as being established members of their community with good excuses to travel through their district. They were too old for conscription and also less likely to be taken to Germany as forced labour, which would have disrupted the network. One teenage member was ordered to go into hiding upon invasion in order to avoid conscription. Most of these volunteers had already passed away and had no opportunity to tell their story when the barriers of secrecy began to break down. Of the survivors, most continued to maintain their silence and took their secrets to the grave. They followed the lead of the head of the resistance, David Boyle, who managed to write a 323-page autobiography without once mentioning that he had spent most

³⁸ Fleming 1957, p.9.

³⁹ Jeffery 2010, pp.361-2.

⁴⁰ Tittenhofer 1969, p.51.

of his working life in SIS.⁴¹ Those few volunteers that have passed on their reminiscences rarely knew precisely for whom they were working; their stories appeared disjointed and difficult to interpret until the discovery of documents in The National Archives set their memories in context.⁴²

As more documents concerning the Auxiliary Units trickled into the National Archives, or were selectively released to researchers by the Foreign Office SOE Advisor, many of the assumptions made by Lampe could be shown to be incorrect, but the aura of the Auxiliary Units as a 'resistance' organisation seemed unstoppable, which was not helped by a lack of detailed references in many published works, meaning that scrutiny was difficult. Research tended to focus on the local aspects of the Auxiliary Units – the history of county patrols and their members. Received wisdom on the wider context of the organisation was simply passed from one publication to another and overall there has been a tendency to view the Auxiliary Units in isolation rather than to analyse them as part of the wider anti-invasion planning. The pioneering national historian in this field, John Warwicker, fought against the tide but his fundamental statement on the nature of the organisation in 2008 has been resolutely ignored in most subsequent publications and web-based presentations, in favour of a simpler media sound-bite referring to 'resistance'.

It was never intended that the Auxiliers were to compare with the men and women of the European resistance movements...[they] were seen only as a short-term, expendable, harassing force intended – with the blessing of the British High Command – to be of some useful influence in local battles.⁴³

The failure of modern historians and enthusiasts to properly recognise the character of the Auxiliary Units evidently caused exasperation to the original second-in-command, Peter Wilkinson who wrote in 1997 'any suggestion that Auxiliary Units could have provided a framework for long term underground resistance is, in my opinion, absurd'.⁴⁴ Historian Arthur Ward later reported 'Sir Peter told it like it was, obviously irritated by the myth of a secret society of ninja-like assassins that was becoming an accepted part of Aux Unit folklore'.⁴⁵ The assassination role of the Auxiliary Units is, indeed, questionable. Stories of secret death lists abound and army HQs were certainly frustrated by the refusal of MI5 to release to them details of suspected collaborators. In some cases the army took matters into their own hands and arrested innocent people. Leaving such a list in the hands of local men who would remain in the area upon invasion therefore makes some sense. However, there was at least one false alarm when the Operational Patrols did go to ground believing invasion to be underway – but no bloodbath of local people ensued! There is no mention of assassination as a role in the surviving agenda or notes for the 1941 Patrol Leaders course at Coleshill; neither is there any mention of taking their .22 calibre rifle out on patrol.⁴⁶ Some Auxiliers have been adamant that the .22 calibre rifles equipped with 'silencers' and telescopic sights were issued to each patrol for the purpose of assassination but, in truth, they were a poor tool for such a job. A clean, silent, kill with such a rifle would be difficult, if not impossible – especially at night; the maximum range was c.100m and the small calibre meant that not just a head shot, but an accurate shot into the eye socket, was required. The telescopic sights needed to achieve this were low-powered by modern standards and both Auxiliers and armourers reported frequent problems with them shifting out of alignment. The 'silencer' is more accurately described as a sound moderator; it would hide a muzzle flash and would make the sound of a shot indistinct – but not silent. The sound level could be reduced by using a sub-sonic round but this would reduce the range and power of the shot. Together, these factors made it a risky weapon to rely upon for any assassination, or to eliminate a sentry during a sabotage mission. Undoubtedly something of a status symbol, the .22 rifle was probably more use in 'shooting for the pot'. This is not to say that the Auxiliers were not equipped for the silent

⁴¹ Boyle 1959.

⁴² Atkin 2015, Chapter 11.

⁴³ Warwicker 2008, p.82.

⁴⁴ Wilkinson 2002, p.104.

⁴⁵ Ward 2013, p.xxii.

⁴⁶ Patrol Leaders Course Notes 1941: BRO Museum Archive

kill and prepared to do so. Many of them enthusiastically made their own garottes and punch knives. Even at the age of ninety, one veteran was keen to demonstrate to this author the niceties of slitting an opponent's throat. Whether assassination was a significant part of their official role, or one that they assumed for themselves is open to question. Their strategic focus was one of sabotage to assist the army and the need to eliminate individuals was merely a means to that end.

In 2016, press reports will almost invariably repeat the most common myths. They will parrot the claim that the Auxiliary Units were 'The British Resistance Organisation'. They will assume that the Special Duties Branch could pass on battlefield intelligence to the Operational Patrols as an integrated intelligence organisation. The comprehensive on-line resource for the history of Auxiliary Units patrols is still branded as the [British Resistance Archive](#), and the excellent Auxiliary Units museum at Parham, Suffolk, is similarly titled as the [British Resistance Organisation Museum](#). The Auxiliary Units have also become part of the hagiography of the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, who is sometimes given personal credit for their foundation as 'Churchill's underground army' or 'Churchill's secret army'. An attractive book title can itself become part of the historic myth. Churchill's appointment as Prime Minister in May 1940 undoubtedly marked a sea change in the government determination to continue the fight against the Nazis – but the Auxiliary Units were not his personal initiative. The initial idea was that of Colonel Jo Holland of MIR, arising out of a meeting of the Inter-Services Project Board in May 1940. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff (Field Marshall Sir John Dill) and C-in-C Home Forces (General Ironside) then took the broad idea to Churchill and the War Cabinet for approval on 17 June.⁴⁷ This was an agreement in principle for the development of LDV / Home Guard commando teams, but at this stage the Cabinet and War Office had no real idea of how they would operate. It was left to Colonel Gubbins, appointed the CO of the Auxiliary Units, to produce a working organisation. The fact that the Auxiliary Units went through a number of iterations in its first few weeks of existence suggests that the Cabinet meeting of June had no clear idea of what they were actually approving. Gubbins' initial idea was that the Intelligence Officers of the Auxiliary Units would merely act as advisors to locally-organised teams of LDV / Home Guard, whose main role would be to act as guides to regular army commando units passing through enemy lines. Churchill did, indeed, take a personal interest in the development of the Auxiliary Units in their first few months but then, characteristically, appears to have lost interest and said that he no longer needed to see monthly progress reports.

The constant repetition of such misconceptions risks a proper assessment of the role of the Auxiliary Units in the Second World War. A wholly worthy admiration for the bravery of the men and women of the Auxiliary Units has, at times, led to an uncritical hero-worship of the organisation and its personnel. One review of *Fighting Nazi Occupation* (on Amazon UK) took exception to the fact that it had dared to repeat the contemporary opinion of a senior officer of the Auxiliary Units (ATS Commander Beatrice Temple) that one of the later Intelligence Officers, Douglas Ingrams, was 'very ineffectual'.⁴⁸ This authentic statement from 1943 was omitted from the reviewer's own 2014 study of the officer's career with SDB, but is rather supported by the officer's wider service history.⁴⁹ Temple's comment was illustrative of a wider change in the Auxiliary Units, as officers fit for front-line service were transferred out of the organisation.⁵⁰ In July 1944 the CO of the Auxiliary Units, Colonel Douglas, wrote of the culling of his Intelligence Officers: 'Regarding officers for retention I have not suggested anything of very high grade - either mentally or physically - there are no pocket Napoleons'.

There was a marked change in the composition of the officer class of the Auxiliary Units from 1941 onwards. In 1940 the leaders (Colin Gubbins, Peter Wilkinson and G.H. 'Billy' Beyts) were dynamic personalities with considerable experience in irregular warfare. Under them, the intelligence officers were individualistic, not to say eccentric; a high percentage were, however, above the age of 40 and unsuited to front-line service. Instead they were mature, self-reliant

⁴⁷ Minutes of War Cabinet, 17 June 1940: TNA CAB 65/7/65.

⁴⁸ Beatrice Temple Diary, BRO Museum Archive.

⁴⁹ May 2014; see relevant entries in Army Lists.

⁵⁰ Memo of 14 January 1943: TNA WO 199/738.

characters capable of using their initiative, but were also men that the regular army were able to spare. Younger officers used the Auxiliary Units as a convenient stepping stone to greater things in British special forces such as the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and later the Special Air Service (SAS). In November 1940, with the immediate invasion crisis over, the War Office felt able to release Gubbins and Wilkinson from the Auxiliary Units into the new SOE. Their successors were of a different calibre; command of the Auxiliary Units, in their comfortable HQ at Highworth House, became increasingly a reward to officers nearing retirement and seeking a final promotion to increase their pension. None had experience in guerrilla warfare and they became increasingly defensive about the role of their organisation. In early 1942, the then commanding officer of the Auxiliary Units, Colonel 'Bill' Major, wrote a personal letter to General Gregson-Ellis, the Deputy Chief of Staff, Home Forces, complaining that the Home Guard, especially in the Eastern Counties, had established a policy of guerrilla warfare for their troops saying quite openly that they were going to 'take to the woods'; which, potentially, would be competition for the role and status of the Auxiliary Units. He concluded:

I cannot believe that they will be of the slightest use in this role, and will not function at all in the face of some Bosche attack pressed home. In my humble opinion they will run like stink without firing a shot.⁵¹

Had Colonel Major forgotten that his own Operational Patrols were drawn from those same Home Guard? Colonel Lord Glanusk, aged 51 and in poor health, succeeded to the command in February 1942. A former Guards officer who had retired from service in 1924, his main concern was to establish whether the officers were 'gentlemen'. Unable to shake off traditional military values, Glanusk introduced Guards Brigade parade ground drill to the guerrilla training courses.⁵² It is hardly surprising that morale within the organisation was sinking as it moved ever further from the vision of Colin Gubbins.

If the War Office and the original organisers of the Auxiliary Units were all clear that this was not a resistance organisation, and as more detail has emerged from The National Archives, the question must be asked why the phraseology has been perpetuated. One clue was given in the Preface to the second edition (2013) of Arthur Ward's *Resisting the Nazi Invader* (1996), re-published as *Churchill's Secret Defence Army: Resisting the Nazi Invader*. In explaining why it was difficult for researchers to trace official records:

John [Warwicker] later discovered that because initially the erroneous title 'BRO' (British Resistance Organisation) was used, as opposed to the correct designation, GHQ Auxiliary Units, records about this clandestine organisation could not be found in Whitehall.

An artificial sense of mystery was therefore created. Ward went on:

The term BRO is frequently used today, I think principally because it conjures up a 007 stereotype beloved of so many 'secret war' enthusiasts.⁵³

As an illustration of how difficult it can be to dislodge old terminology, the text of the book is still that of the 1996 edition and, despite the discussion in the Preface, continues to use the term 'British Resistance Organisation'!

The term 'British Resistance Organisation' has now become fossilised in the published record. Doubts as to how this tallied with a two-week life expectancy as uniformed units of Home Guard, or equipped with a wireless set that required a high level of maintenance, had only a short range and was incapable of being easily re-located, were glossed over in favour of a romantic vision of the organisation. The contrary assessments of Wilkinson in 1997, Warwicker in 2008 and Ward in 2013 were ignored in favour of a marketing slogan. Here was a simple term that could be used to sell books, websites and tourist attractions, as well as appeal to the growing band of Auxiliary

⁵¹ Letter to Major-General Gregson-Ellis: TNA WO 199/364. Although filed with papers of autumn 1942, the letter is most likely to have been written in early 1942 by Colonel Bill Major. He had formerly been a staff intelligence officer for Eastern Command.

⁵² Quayle 1990, p.230; Letter of Forbes to Warwicker, January 2002: BRO Museum Archive.

⁵³ Ward 2013, p.xii.

Units re-enactors. The website of the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team (CART), which has contributed greatly to the popular recognition and marketing of the Auxiliary Units, was re-branded as the '[British Resistance Archive](http://www.coleshillhouse.com)'.⁵⁴ The [National Trust website for Coleshill](#) similarly adopted the 'Churchill's Resistance' interpretation in its marketing of the site of the Auxiliary Units HQ. But should romance and marketing potential outweigh historic integrity?

As the Auxiliary Units became better known, any evidence of clandestine activity risked being automatically attributed to them. The Second World War histories of Lancashire and Cheshire by Ron Freethy uncovered a number of guerrilla activities which were automatically assumed to be related to the Auxiliary Units even though there was no evidence that the latter operated within those counties.⁵⁵ Some elements could not be explained. Peter Attwater wrote his account in 1999 as a courier and wireless operator for a secret organisation in Matlock, Derbyshire from 1940-43. He was never told for whom he worked and he therefore had to reconstruct his past from the sources that were then available; he consequently assumed it was some part of the Auxiliary Units, at the time beginning to be well-publicised.⁵⁶ He was interviewed by a number of researchers over the years but as his story did not easily fit the accepted model, it was ignored.⁵⁷ A new model was needed. It was particularly unfortunate that the 2005 publication of the edited *Guy Liddell Diaries* omitted key entries now interpreted as referring to the ultra-secret Section VII activities.⁵⁸ Finally, the 2010 publication of Jeffery's tantalizing reference to the resistance organisation formed by SIS as Section VII spurred a re-evaluation of the evidence and led to the discovery of correspondence between SIS and MI5 on the subject, released into the public domain in 2003 but lying unnoticed until 2015; it finally allowed a coherent context to be provided for such operations.⁵⁹ Existing information on the Auxiliary Units should now be re-assessed against the new model.

The issues of fossilised interpretation, distorted perception, or even deliberate mis-direction are by no means confined to the Auxiliary Units or to the Second World War. For recent history there may also be a reluctance to potentially offend still-living participants, whose individual bravery is not in question. The events of the 1940s are still within the generational memory and it is not surprising that there can sometimes be a reluctance to engage with their objective history. Yet not to do so, or to fail to continue to challenge received wisdom, is to inflict a distorted history upon future generations. The myths of the First World War, 100 years ago, still show little sign of being eradicated from the popular consciousness. How soon after an event is it possible to write an objective history without causing offence, but before myths become engrained in the popular consciousness?

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⁵⁴ <http://www.coleshillhouse.com>

⁵⁵ Freethy 2005 and 2012.

⁵⁶ Attwater 1999.

⁵⁷ Atkin 2015, Chapter 11.

⁵⁸ West 2005. But see Atkin 2015, pp. 148-9.

⁵⁹ Jeffery 2010, p.361-2; Letter of Valentine Vivian to Guy Liddell, 2 July 1940: TNA KV 4/205; Atkin 2015, chapter 11.

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