Stanton Parish History Recording Project

Personal Reminiscences File:- PR006a

PLAIN TALES OF HOME GUARD DAYS No.1 - TOM GOLLINS

As Dad's Army fans will know, the Local Defence Volunteers came into being following the announcement by the Foreign Secretary, Sir Anthony Eden, at the time when German forces had overrun the Low Countries. Invasion by sea and with parachute landings further inland were feared.

Those eligible to serve had to contact local police and in our part of Shropshire that meant P.C. Vearnals at Shawbury.

In a short time those who had given their names to him were called to a meeting at Shawbury Parish Sail on the evening of 29th May 1940. The war situation vias about as black as a thunder cloud but it was a cheerful crowd who gathered outside ready to go in to the meeting for enrolment and instructions as to future plans. Most of *us* were involved in farming - a reserved occupation, a few had served in World War One.

I recall a late arrival just before we moved in, Jack Lay, who drove one of the lorries in the area. It belonged to Mr A Jeffries of Stanton Mill. Jack had been out delivering to and collecting from farms and had to rush to get to the meeting on time. Ramsey Prior greeted him:

"Did you hear the news this evening, Jack."

"No, I've hardly had time to get some tea and change. *'

"Well, Hitler heard about us meeting tonight and he's asked our Government for peace terms."

Smiles all round.

When we got inside and the meeting began, we learned that our Company would be commanded by Mr Jones, now to be Major Jones, Estate Agent for the Acton Reynold Estate. His second in command Captain Hugh MacKenzie, a retired Indian Army Officer.

A 'section* was formed for those from the Hazles area, to be under Sgt. Dick Williams. He took a dozen or so of us in hand and gave us drill instruction on the yard at the rear of my farmhouse - Stone House Farm. We had no rifles and no uniforms, so we used shotguns, hay forks, brooms and anything else to enable us to go through the motions of drill. Our antics greatly amused my wife watching us from the kitchen window. Her confidence in our ability to defend home and country was non-existent.

On the *25*th June,1940 while training pilots were circling Shawbury Aerodrome practising night flying, a German plane came in with them and dropped a stick of bombs one of which landed across the road in P.C. Vearnal's garden and blew him out of bed! We lived about 3 miles away and I slept through the noise and that didn't increase my wife's confidence in the Local Defence Volunteers.

An interesting sequel followed on July 2nd. This was a hot day and we were busy carrying hay. I had left the hayfield to do the milking, hand milking in those days. I was seated under a cow, milking away, when my friend Reg Spencer came into the cowshed. He was the blacksmith at Stanton-upon-Hine Heath and a well-known cricketer. He and I played for Harcourt Cricket Club.

"Tom", he said, "Captain MacKenzie called to see me at the shop. He wants you and me to be at his place at nine tonight. We've got to take guns and cartridges and we've got to say nothing to anybody. It could be dangerous. It's got to be very hush-hush. "

"Do you know what it's all about, Reg?"

"No, I don't know anything except we've got to be prepared for anything. There's only part of us going."

A little before nine o'clock we two set off on our bikes, shot guns slung across our hacks, cartridges in our pockets, suitably clad to be as inconspicuous as possible and LDV arm-bands in place.

Our way was down Muckleton Lane, a well rutted lane which you needed to know to ride along safely. It was still light of course, which was helpful.

We arrived at Cpt. MacKenzie's bungalow in Old Poole Wood and found Ramsey Prior who lived with his parents in a bungalow on the opposite side of the lane. He was also prepared and ready to move.

We filed into Captain's car and he drove off to Shawbury. Shawbury church is on the edge of the village with the cricket field just beyond it. Near the gates of the churchyard we joined a muster of about twenty. Capt. MacKenzie stood on the step and in a loud clear voice began to explain what we were about to do and why. When. the German plane had come in v:ith our planes and dropped his bombs, some of the pilots reported seeing a blue light, only visible directly above it. That might mean someone was using a chimney, or a devise similar, to signal to the enemy. A Fifth Columnist, possibly an Air Force officer, tall, athletic and armed with a revolver and probably carrying hand grenades, was the suspect.

By now, bedroom windows behind us were opening and heads were appearing at them.

"Excuse me, Sir" said an urgent voice, "there's an officer lives in that house behind us and that's his wife at the window."

Captain's voice dropped a few decibels and he continued

"The planes will be flying tonight as usual, circling the Drome and if they see a blue light they will fly in decreasing circles. Tou will be stationed around the area in pairs and you will move I n as they do this. No one will be in the area tonight as anyone in it is likely to be the man. Tiy t o take him alive but don't let him escape."

Ramsey turned to me

"Let's go together, Tom eh?"

"O.K."

Then Captain had an afterthought

"I'd better have a runner to keep in touch with you. Ramsey Prior will be my runner. ' Then Reg,

"You and me Tom, eh?

"Right ho"

Someone said

"Don't we need a password?."

"Yes, we'll have a password. The password is 'Dick'."

With that we moved off to our transport which I believe vas Jack Lay's lorry. We dropped off in pairs around the area to be enclosed, at intervals of about 200 yards. Reg and I were to the west of the Drome in a hayfield

which had just been cocked. As we faced the Drome, on our left was a pair of cottages and on our right a disused garage, whose chimney might be used, behind us the road.

We brought two cocks of hay together, loaded our guns, and sat down so that from that lower position we could have seen anyone silhoueted against the skyline.

We were comfortable, the night was still, the scent of the hay fragrant. We spoke in whispers and time moved slowly. The planes were going up away from us, circling left and coming behind us, descending, switching on their landing lights.

Suddenly the sound of a boot kicking a stone! Down we went prostrate, guns forward and cocked. A shadowy figure was approaching to our left. It must be the suspect. No one else was to be inside our circle. he figure came between us and the cottages and was lost to sight.

"You challenge him, Reg. I'll have him covered."

"Hands up. Who goes there?."

A frightened voice cried "Dick".

What a relief! It was Ramsey. He passed on to the gate leading to the road and went along the road behind us. "Dick.. Dick.. Dick. " we could hear him saying. It is strange how wildly irrelevant things spring into your mind. I thought of the crocodile in 'Peter Pan'- you know, the one that swallowed an alarm clock whose ticking gave away its whereabouts.

After a while we could hear Ramsey approaching again "Dick.. Dick[11], when he reached us he said,

"Why didn't you answer. I've been sent round to tell everybody to start moving in. Captain thinks they are reducing the circles. Can[5]t see it myself"

Reg and I began to move stealthily towards the Drome and came eventually to a hedge. A plane came in, switched on its landing lights. Something blue in the next field. It moved. It was a blue roan cow. Relief again.

A little further on we came to a henhouse in the corner of a field. It was well away from the farmhouse. Cautiously we approached. Listened carefully. Creeping up to it we discovered it was empty.

Almost immediately we heard "Dick. .Dick" again. Ramsey came to tell us it was now called off. We returned to the road, joined our transport and returned to Shawbury. Captain's car took us back to Old Poole Wood. Home on our bikes, cartridges unused, gun barrels clean. Two hours sleep and then up for milking for me.

I wonder. Had some of the R.A.F. officers been pulling our company commander's leg? Did a blue light ever exist?

Later when Ramsey was serving in North Africa. I had a letter from him. "Do you ever go chasing blue lights now?" We didn't.

That was our first active service.