Stanton Parish History Recording Project

Personal Reminiscence File:- PR006c

Home Guard - Tale 3 by Tom Gollins

In spite of the lack of preparation, the shortage of equipment, the Local Defence Volunteers took themselves seriously. The Government decided to change the name to Home Guard, A trickle of equipment began to come through. Denim battledress a limited number of .300 rifles came through from the USA. It became possible to drill with rifles and eventually bayonets arrived.

About this time - the autumn of 1940 - Reg Spencer was made a Corporal and with Tony Fletcher, similarly promoted, we began to get a military flavour in our organisation.

A few weeks later I was surprised by a visit from Captain Mackenzie to inform me that Sgt. Dick Williams was leaving the Home Guard on the account of age. I was to take his place as Sgt.

About that time a Lewis Gun became available for instruction and we were given instructions on its use in a Home Guard set up, and its care and maintenance.

On Boxing Day, 1940 Capt. Mackenzie organised a children's Party in the Parish Hall at Shawbury. He had contacts on 'the Drome' as we called it. Among those who entertained the children was a certain Percy Edwards, who gave some wonderful renderings of bird song. Later he became famous on Radio and TV. Comedians and singers combined to give the youngsters a great time.

My diary tells that we began Bayonet classes in the New Year* I recall stuffing st; tightly into hessian sacks and we practised on them. We enjoyed this but were ali hoping we never had to use them against human beings.

Lectures on patrols and how to move quietly around the countryside were on the programme. Instruction in the way to do Sentry Duty followed. In all we were meeting on Sunday mornings, usually at the corner of the Hazles Wood known as the Sand Hole. Sand had been removed over centuries leaving an area flat and about 6 feet below the level of the rest of the wood. This gave us an opportunity to practise shooting with .22 rifles. Ammunition for these small rifles was cheaper and more readily available. Some of our section became quite good marksmen.

Early in 1941 a supply of battle dress arrived and we had the job of fitting up the various sizes. We soon realised we were not a uniform size. Reg Spencer was about 6ft1in and Tom Fletcher and Frank Matthews about 6ft. Fred Brown and Tom Vaughan were about (?). There were ribald remarks as we tried to match men and uniform. Eventually we were abJe to turn out smartly.

Some of us attended First Aid Classes at Ellerdine and received First Aid Certifies This was an optional extra. So was our attempt to learn semaphore signalling, at which we never became proficient, nor did we ever use it.

Some Sunday mornings in the Spring of '41 we went for Firing Practise on the Rifle Range at the Drome. About the same time a Lewis Gun arrived and I believe put in custody of Fred Brown and Sam Butler. Soon we went to the Drome for firing practise with the Lewis Gun.

Towards the end of 1941 Capt. Mackenzie informed me that he had obtained for me, a place at Stokesaye Court in South Shropshire. It was for Officers but I found another there. He, too, was a farming man from Ellesmere. We were soon made aware we were the by grace and favour and not by right.

Here we had lectures by officers from various Regiments.

I shared a room with Lt. Mulloney and Lt. Shields from Llandudno, and others were from widely scattered areas under Western Command.

I have a vivid recollection of a night exercise laid on to apply what we had been told in the lectures. At the centre of a large grass field near Stokesaye Court was a huge oak tree. A bottle of whisky was placed at the foot of this tree. One squad of men would be detailed to guard the perimeter of the field, squads would approach from different directions and attempt of penetrate the defences and gain the prize - whisky. I was in the squad approaching from the west. The other members of this squad were mainly from the Black Counctry and they had no idea how to move about the county side in the dark. They were 'all at sea' in rural Shropshire. We approached the perimeter hedge through a small spinney. My companions were stumbling, fumbling and grumbling and I was sure our approach would be heard long before we had any chance to get into the field. I moved forward and the rest of the squad lost touch with me so I went to the left on hands and knees. A sentry walked past in front of me and I lay doggo. When he had gone I crept through a hole in the bottom of the hedge and gained access to the field and went to the tree. Capt. Naismith was there and told me the whisky had gone. The other squad had engaged the guards at the gate and one of their members had slipped past in the dark and got the prize. One other man got to the tree employing fieldcraft and that was the farmer from Ellesmere.

Soon after my return I was visited by Capt. Mackenzie who told me he was reorganising the Shawbury Company. There was to be a Hazles Platoon and I was to be its Lieutenant.