

If the terrifying scenario of a Nazi invasion of Britain had become reality a group of specially selected resistance fighters lay in wait for them

By Adrian Lee

IN BRITAIN'S darkest hours during the Second World War it seemed only a matter of time before German forces swept across the Channel. Our army was in disarray following the retreat from Dunkirk and Winston Churchill tried to rally the nation with stirring speeches.

But behind the bravado the Prime Minister was a worried man. Secretly he began planning for the day when the Nazis invaded and Britain suffered the same fate as other occupied European nations.

Churchill ordered the foundation of a guerrilla movement which would attack conquering German forces from behind their own lines. In the summer of 1940 the recruitment began of some 3,500 men to spearhead this resistance.

The volunteers, who used the cover of the Home Guard for their activities, were trained in the use of explosives, taught to become silent assassins and heavily armed. In the event of invasion they would melt away from their homes and try to cause havoc as Hitler's troops marched through Britain.

Officially the British Resistance did not exist and they were given the nondescript title of Auxiliary Units. It was not until the Sixties that details began to leak out but even now the Government does not acknowledge the bravery of these men. However, next month veterans from the 640 patrols that were scattered around the country will for the first time take part in the Remembrance Sunday parade past the Cenotaph.

The movement was founded in July 1940

when Germany was battling for the air superiority that would be the trigger for Operation Sea Lion, the invasion of Britain, to begin. Hitler's army chiefs were so confident they predicted Britain would be occupied within a month.

Churchill began to formulate his resistance plan and because of its isolation Coleshill House, a stately home near Swindon, was chosen as the headquarters for the guerrillas.

They were led by Colonel Colin McVean Gubbins, who had served with distinction in the First World War. He was also an explosives expert and had written a handbook on guerrilla warfare.

"Churchill felt that Britain had been rendered almost defenceless after Dunkirk and wanted to be prepared for the worst," says Tom Sykes, founder of the Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team, which has traced the history of the resistance movement. "These men would not come out and fight the Germans face-to-face but as soon as the church bells rang to signal invasion they would go underground. They would then be involved in guerrilla warfare such as destroying rail and supply lines and setting booby traps."

Each patrol consisted of about six men with a single leader and the recruits all knew the local area like the back of their hand.

"They were the sons of the soil, such as farmers and poachers, who knew how to live off the land," adds Sykes. "The focus was mainly on coastal areas, which would have been the first points of invasion, and the network stretched from Scotland to Cornwall."

Although the men wore the uniform of the Home Guard during training to protect their true identity they would have operated in civilian clothes after invasion. Each patrol had a purpose-built bunker with an escape tunnel but the volunteers knew that they faced almost certain death if the Germans invaded. They were under strict orders not to be captured. Each patrol, or cell, was expected to operate independently with no contact with colleagues in adjoining areas.

"Life expectancy would have been about two weeks and these men were under no illusion that this would be a suicide mission if an invasion happened," says Sykes. "But they

CHURCHILL'S SECRET ARMY



NO SURRENDER: If the Nazis invaded Churchill ordered that secret patrols, such as the one in Hampshire, inset below, would carry on the fight



were allowed to tell no one, including their families, of the role ahead."

As a result some members of this clandestine unit suffered abuse from neighbours who felt they should be away fighting and it was not uncommon for the men to be handed white feathers. But on Thursday evenings they would slip away from their homes and day jobs and travel to Coleshill House for weekends of intense training.

TREVOR MINERS, now 89, was part of a resistance patrol based in Perranporth, Cornwall where the long sandy beaches were considered especially vulnerable. He recalls: "I was only 16 and I took the place in the patrol of my brother Eric, who was sent away to fight. For a young man it was quite a thing. You couldn't even tell your parents. It was very exciting to have our own secret bunker."

"If the Germans did invade we would have been expected to stay there for three or four weeks, then come out and attack from the rear and do as much damage as we could."

He was issued with a Smith & Wesson revolver and a commando knife which were carried at all times. Other weapons included Sten guns and a sniper's rifle with telescopic sights. His kit included water purifying tablets and food rations for three weeks.

Trevor, who became a miner after the war, adds: "We were trained in the use of all types

of explosives, including phosphorus bombs, Molotov cocktails and booby trap devices. We were shown how to use magnetic clamps fitted with gelignite and attach them to tanks or a railway line just to cause as much disruption as possible." In fact the men of the resistance were usually better armed and trained than most regular soldiers.

Another task for the guerrillas would have been to assassinate collaborators and possibly key figures such as police chiefs whose knowledge would have been crucial to the Germans.

Quite how effective the fighters would have been against 200,000 invading Germans was mercifully never put to the test and the organisation was wound down later in the war when the threat of invasion receded. Some of the men went on to join the SAS, putting their expertise to good use.

It's estimated there are about 100 surviving veterans and some remain bitter that their role in the conflict has been overlooked. After the war the only recognition for Churchill's secret army was a small badge presented to each veteran bearing the numbers of their three battalions: 201, 202 and 203.

Tom Sykes says: "To see the veterans and family members march past the Cenotaph will be an emotional day for all of us. Although the members of the British Resistance have never themselves asked or pushed for recognition it is fantastic that the country finally gets the chance to appreciate the ultimate sacrifice they were willing to make to ensure our freedom."

THE NAZIS' HIT LIST

THE names of 2,820 prominent Britons and exiles living here to be arrested if Germany won the war were contained in a Nazi "black book".

It ran to 104 pages and Hitler is thought to have ordered similar documents for every country he planned to invade.

In addition to politicians, broadcasters, academics and members of the Royal Family, the SS's Sonderfahndungsliste GB (Most Wanted List) included celebrities such as Noel Coward who was an outspoken anti-fascist.

On learning of the book after the war writer Rebecca West, another who was listed, is said to have sent a telegram to the actor saying: "My dear - the people we should have been seen dead with."

Another public figure to be included was the founder of the Scouting movement Robert Baden-Powell, because the Germans regarded the scouts as a spying organisation.

Beside each name was a record of the German security officer who would be in charge of the arrest. Others on the blacklist included writers Virginia Woolf, HG Wells and EM Forster.

About 20,000 copies of the book were printed but most were destroyed in a bombing raid on a German warehouse.