

In 1940 Churchill built a **top secret** army: a British resistance movement primed for a **Nazi** occupation. History tells us it was never needed – but a new movie imagines a very different scenario...

WORDS BY DAN DAVIES

# When the Nazis took Wales

**A**utumn, 1944: Russia has fallen, the D-Day landings have failed and the German Wehrmacht has invaded Britain. The country is now under enemy occupation. Panzer divisions and columns of Nazi troops sweep westwards, striking fear into a demoralised nation whose forces lie decimated across the shell-landed landscape of mainland Europe.

In a remote valley in the Black Mountains of Wales, farmers' wives awake to discover that the men of the village have vanished during the night. Like women across Britain, they silently suspect their husbands, brothers and sons have melted away to join the Resistance, whose members are hiding out in the hills and woods, awaiting the inevitable arrival of German troops.

Although this might sound like just another imagined account of what might have been had Britain failed to hold Hitler at bay, *Resistance*, a new British film starring Michael Sheen, famous for his portrayals of Tony Blair and Brian Clough, shines a light on the little-known story of the British Resistance Organisation (BRO). This top-secret and highly trained civilian army was designed to wreak havoc on occupying enemy forces.

The author of the novel the film is based on insists this fictional past is based on 'what was, at one point in time, an all too possible future'. Owen Sheers explains his book was inspired by the stories he heard of brave farmers in his native Wales going on training missions in the dead of night, armed with caches of weapons that were stashed away in elaborate underground bunkers in the woods. Such stories, it transpires, were not the stuff of local folklore, but rooted in the truth.

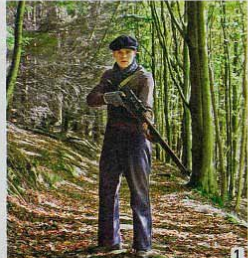
Established in 1940 on the orders of Winston Churchill, the British Resistance Organisation was the government's highly classified response to the threat of imminent invasion following the evacuation of British troops at Dunkirk. Churchill stated that regular defences required 'supplementing with guerrilla-type troops' that would 'be responsible for hitting the enemy in the comparatively soft spots behind zones of concentrated attack'. The aim was to deny mobility and disrupt vital supply lines.

'The order for a government-funded and -trained insurgency was extremely controversial,' says Sheers. 'It casts a chilling new light on Churchill's 1940 speech in which he vowed that "we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never



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► surrender'. Churchill was effectively advocating continuing acts of sabotage regardless of the reprisals'. Sheers goes on to explain that members of these Auxiliary Units recruited throughout Britain were informed that their average life expectancy would be two weeks once the enemy had been engaged. They were also under orders to carry out selective execution of collaborators – even if they happened to be family members, friends or colleagues – if they compromised the security of a patrol. 'We all assume we'd want to resist,' says Sheers, 'but the reality opens up some difficult moral questions.'

Colin Colin McVean Gubbins was put in charge of recruiting about a dozen regional 'Intelligence Officers', who were in turn ordered to enlist this predominantly rural network of civilian saboteurs. More than 100 cells were formed, each operating in areas with a 15-mile radius. Units were divided into Special Duty Sections, who were required to gather intelligence and leave reports in secret locations, and Operational Patrols, or 'combat units', which were smaller groups of four to eight men who would carry out attacks using plastic explosives, bombs ingeniously concealed in tobacco tins and tyre-bursting mines disguised as lumps of coal.

The men recruited for operational duties were selected chiefly for their knowledge of the local terrain – farmers, poachers and gamekeepers among them. Having signed the Official Secrets Act, they received intensive training in guerrilla-warfare techniques, including unarmed combat, sabotage and demolition, on weekend courses at Colehill House, the Auxiliary Units HQ near Swindon.

Colin Gubbins published several training manuals, including 'The Art of Guerrilla Warfare'. This set out nine principles to which the Auxiliary Units were to adhere, outlining the necessity of going to ground, operating under the cover of darkness and only embarking on missions when there was a secure line of retreat. Other, similar booklets were also issued to the units, with innocuous titles such as 'The Countryman's Diary' belying their deadly contents. Some of the men

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who read them would go on to join the SAS years after the Auxiliary units were shut down in 1944. Among the trainees was Les Bulley, a lathe setter in a munitions factory in Glascoed, Monmouthshire, just a few miles from the Olchon Valley, where *Resistance* is set. Bulley and his brother Charles were members of Jonah Patrol, one of eight Auxiliary Units in the county. They were issued with Home Guard uniforms, as a cover for their frequent nocturnal activities, and told to wait for 'when the balloon went up'.

**S**allie Mogford, a 50-year-old civil servant who acted as an adviser on the film, only learned of her grandfather's involvement in the British Resistance Organisation after his death in 2002. 'I was shocked,' she says. 'Both he and his brother Charles were very gentle people who loved the country and were never aggressive. It's hard to imagine them as trained killers and saboteurs, but the truth is that with their commando-style training and the weaponry they had, they were better-equipped than most of the regular soldiers.'

'Some time after my grandfather's death, I visited Oradour-sur-Glane in France. Hundreds of men, women and children had been murdered there by the Germans during the war because they suspected a resistance cell was operating from the village. If the Germans had invaded Britain and my grandfather had

been called into action, this could well have been the fate that awaited my mother, grandmother and aunts'. Mogford is a member of the Colehill Auxiliary Research Team (CART), a group of volunteers that has been uncovering the story of Britain's secret wartime army since 2009. CART's investigations have also unearthed the remains of many of the 500-plus underground bunkers from which these patrols would have launched their clandestine raids on the enemy.

These concealed bunkers, or Operational Bases (OBs), were dug out by Auxiliary Unit members, or in some cases created by the Royal Engineers. Accessed via a camouflaged entrance, they generally consisted of a corrugated-iron main chamber fitted out with bunks, a cooking stove and provisions to sustain a patrol for up to a month, as well as a smaller secondary chamber and an emergency escape tunnel. Some were more elaborate, with chimneys incorporated into hollow tree trunks or spring-loaded entrance hatches designed to look like woodpiles, while others existed in disused mines or caves. In Kent, the architect of some of the most ingenious bunker designs was none other than Captain Peter Fleming, older brother of James Bond creator Ian Fleming. (Indeed, the author refers to an 'ingenious secret bunker' hidden in a woodland setting in a Bond short story, most recently published in a collection under the title *Quantum of Solace*. Fleming had obviously been inspired by the work of his younger brother.)

Some 20 miles away from the steep escarpments of the Olchon Valley, the remains of the OB for Jonah Patrol can still be seen off a wooded path in Wentwood Forest. The second chamber and tunnel have now collapsed, although much of the brickwork remains intact. In an early scene in *Resistance* we see a group of civilian fighters being pulled out of just such a bunker by Nazi soldiers before being executed. Thankfully, the Germans never did manage to invade Britain, meaning the brave men of the Auxiliary Units weren't made to suffer a similar fate. ■

*'Resistance' is out on November 25. For more information on the Auxiliary Units, visit colehillhouse.com*

**The secret tunnel that was home to some of Britain's toughest troops**

Members of the British Resistance Organisation's Sandford Levy Auxiliary Unit at their Operational Base near Winscombe, north Somerset. The 1/4-mile-long tunnel was originally excavated in 1830 by a local entrepreneur looking for ores.

1. George Iwan Rheon, a young member of the British Resistance Organisation (BRO) in *Resistance*. 2. Tommy Atkins (Michael Sheen), a local recruiter for Auxiliary Units, awaits his fate. 3. Maggie (Sharon Morgan) and Bethan (Kimberley Nixon) help a dying sheep the Germans have dug out of a snowdrift. 4. German soldiers clear a path as Bethan (Nixon) walks by. 5. Some of the weaponry made available to resistance fighters on display at the Museum of the British Resistance Organisation in Suffolk. 6. The remains of Jonah Patrol's Operational Base in Wentwood Forest, near Newport. 7. A replica Operational Base at the BRO museum.

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