Operational Bases or OB’s as they were known, were concealed underground chambers, designed to hold between 4 and 8 Auxiliers. Usually built by the Royal Engineers in woodland, with a camouflaged entrance and emergency escape tunnel; it is thought that around 1000 were constructed.

**DESIGN** The primary requirements for the OB were that they should be concealed, habitable and reasonably weatherproof. A standard design was used, comprising an underground chamber, roofed with corrugated iron. The end walls were brick, with a brick shaft at one end leading to the main entrance, and an escape at the other end with a second brick shaft, measuring c. 2.5m x 4.5m. The shafts were concealed by camouflaged trap-doors.

Because of the camouflage and secrecy associated with these buildings, they are generally poorly represented in records of known sites from the period. Some Patrols also had an additional concealed Observation Post connected to the OB via a telephone line.

By the end of 1940 about 300 hideouts were already in use around the country, and another 61 were ready by the spring of 1941. There were some 500 by the end of that year, and although no later figures are available, upwards of a thousand existed at the time that the Auxiliary Units patrols were disbanded. No two were identical, but most were eventually made large enough to house six or seven men in reasonable comfort, although many at first were little more than fox-holes with log roofs, so badly ventilated that candles sputtered from lack of oxygen and the men who tried sleeping in them all night awoke with headaches. Each hideout was eventually fitted with bunks, cooking stoves, Tilley lamps and other comforts provided by the Army, and each was stocked with food and water, in some cases sufficient to sustain a patrol for as long as a month. Wherever dampness was a problem the tinned foods were frequently replaced so that there was never a chance of besieged Auxiliary Units patrols being finished off by food poisoning.

Most hideouts had plenty of room for the patrols’ arms, ammunition and sabotage material, but in some areas subsidiary hides were dug nearby to hold these and additional stores of food. Many of the hideouts eventually had chemical lavatories, and a few even had running water and some rudimentary form of drainage. The hideouts were so well concealed that anyone walking over them would not notice that the ground beneath their feet had been hollowed out, or that it was unusual in any way. And of course the hideouts had to be made impossible to detect from the air.

Paints were found that would resist condensation, and efficient ventilating systems, often terminating above ground in tree stumps, were devised. When several senior officers from Coleshill went to the Lincolnshire fens to inspect patrols there, they were invited to stay for dinner in one of the hideouts. The officers expected a makeshift meal, probably served on packing cases full of stores, but when they slipped down through the trapdoor they were faced with a long dining table covered with a crisp damask cloth. The candles were in candelabra, and the cutlery on the table gleamed.

At the end of the war Royal Engineer demolition teams were sent around the country to destroy all the Auxiliary Units operational bases to keep them from becoming the hideouts of criminals on the run, or play places where small children might easily get hurt. However, a number of the hideouts were not destroyed and, although most of them have by now caved in, leaving only rain-washed dents in the ground to mark their positions, a few still survive, mostly on private land where they are unlikely to become a nuisance. The Coleshill Auxiliary Research Team is doing all it can to document and record these bases before the elements take over, or they are vandalised.

Discover more on our website or scan this QR code with your smart device to be taken straight there.

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