

# Warnham Historical Society

Contribution No.10 (enclosure to Newsletter No.11)

## WARNHAM in WORLD-WAR 2

### Formation of the Home Guard, 1940

By Douglas Fox

Early in May 1940 the German armies began their offensive against Holland, Belgium and France and it wasn't long before they broke through the Allied defences. Events moved rapidly and the British nation became filled with apprehension as every edition of the papers reported more and more territorial losses to the Germans.

In the middle of May, Mr Anthony Eden (War Minister at that time) announced the formation of the "Local Defence Volunteers", soon after to be known as the "Home Guard". This civilian, part-time army was formed to assist the regular forces in the defence of Britain and when the evacuation of our forces took place at Dunkirk between 27th May and 4th June, the people realised that we stood alone against the impending onslaught in whatever form it might take.

In the Horsham area volunteers readily and rapidly rallied to Mr Eden's call and a battalion of the Local Defence Volunteers was formed under the command of Mr Alec Chasemore of "Pitswood", Warnham. Local village platoons were set up, each with its Commander and in addition there was a mobile platoon under Mr Gilbert Rice, which comprised members with cars and petrol to provide mobility and communications where necessary.

The Warnham platoon was under the command of Captain Harry Gregson of Ends Place and a sentry post, manned every night, was set up on Knob Hill opposite the entry to Cider Mill Farm. A small sectional hut was erected to enable off-duty members to get some shelter in bad weather. Duties started around 9 p.m. and finished between 6 and 7 a.m. next morning, taken in two shifts. The principal task was to keep watch against German parachutists and in the early days this not only meant watches on Knob Hill but checks on traffic on the main Horsham to Dorking road (some petrol for private motoring still being available). The patrols were supplemented by the mobile platoon on most nights and Warnham platoon too received support in this way.

Most members of Warnham platoon were on duty for two nights per week and one such patrol consisted of Harry Jupp (from the Post Office Stores), Len Firman (the Postman), Val Wigram from Holbrook and Douglas Fox then living at Bailing Hill Farm. The mobile element consisted of Charles Page and Harry King, both remembered from the days of the grocers in the Carfax.

Initially the weaponry of "Dads Army" as it is now known, consisted of little more than the odd shot gun or stick, but since Sussex was thought to be in the front line, it was not long before .303 rifles started arriving at the Battalion store in Park Street, Horsham from the U.S.A. These rifles had obviously been stored since 1918 and had been caked in protective grease, which presented some difficulty in removing. Light uniforms also became available with forage caps and all were quickly distributed to the local force.

As the summer wore on, German daylight raids took place with maximum ferocity and the people of Sussex had a grandstand view of the air battles in the blue cloudless skies of 1940, which proved to be one of those infrequent good summers. The ultimate end of the planes which crashed was at the R.A.F. base at Faygate (now Agate's timber yard) where could be seen a mountain of aircraft metalwork with wings and fuselages bearing German crosses, a ready reminder of

the toll the R.A.F. fighters were taking of the Luftwaffe. August 15th was probably the height of the daylight battles in the sky, with a maximum effort by the Luftwaffe and from then the night raids began, although Churchill describes September 15th as the culminating day when German daylight losses claimed by the R.A.F. were 183 aircraft destroyed, a figure subsequently revised to 56. For those in Warnham and Sussex the figure of 183 was a great tonic, since all were aware that the battle being fought over them could only be a prelude to invasion of our shores and with all the defences such as concrete pill boxes, barbed wire tank traps and anti-plane landing devices in local fields, everyone knew we were in the front line. A warning that invasion may be imminent came to the Home Guard early in September and those on duty on Knob Hill scanned the night skies for signs of parachutists, which it was thought must be the immediate preliminary to invasion of the coast. Every distant engine sound created tense nerves among the night guards and Knob Hill was particularly well suited for the watchers, with its extensive views to the south by day and similarly its view of the sky at night.

As summer turned to autumn, to help protect the night patrols at Warnham, an old pantehnicon was moved to the top of Tilletts Lane and it was possible for those off duty to get some sleep during the night, as each patrol then remained on duty or stand-by throughout the night. Sadly, Knobb Hill formed a distant grandstand for the nightly onslaught by the Luftwaffe on London and the red glow of fire became a regular sight in the northern sky. Bombs and incendiaries fell too on Sussex, being dropped indiscriminately on the countryside.

Christmas 1940 brought no let up in the air raids nor in the Home Guard patrols in Warnham, except on Boxing Day night, when it was celebrated by the patrol mentioned earlier with the help of a pint of beer from the "Sussex Oak" to help pass the long, cold night. However, not many days were to pass before the heaviest night raid of the war on London took place, on Sunday 29th December. It was mainly an incendiary raid and those on duty at Knob Hill saw the sky aglow throughout the broad expanse of the Greater London area. It is interesting to note in retrospect how the greater the intensity of the German air raids, the more it strengthened the resolve of the people to resist. This reflected itself both in town and countryside. In villages such as Warnham this same spirit was to be seen in all the forces such as the Armed Services, the Home Guard, A.R.P, Fire Service and W.V.S. to name a few, with everyone eager to play their part in the Nation's hours of peril.