

I'm in the home of Mr Robert French in Ickham and his father was a member of what came to be known as the Secret Army. I want to ask him a few questions about what he knows about what his father did during the war. When did you first learn that your father actually had played a rather interesting part in the Second World War?

Well I knew he was a member of the Home Guard and there was a programme that came on called Dad's Army that made him absolutely furious because it was derogatory and the people who were in the Home Guard were very sincere and I'm sure that they were highly committed. So he was in the Home Guard and we used to take the Mickey out of him about that a little bit and it wasn't until I was about sixteen, seventeen or eighteen that he told me that they'd be selected to do special services and that they'd had special training and that they worked in a different way to the Home Guard. Many of the people in the Home Guard, in fact nobody knew that they were doing anything else. It was totally secret.

Just to make sure that we've got the location right, your father was a farmer in the area of Kingston, Barham. Which farm?

Yes. It was Heart's Delight Farm and the driveway goes up through the forestry that surrounds the pumping station in Covet Lane and it was actually in the pumping station that the Home Guard used to form up and do its manoeuvres and most of them had wooden guns or to start with they didn't have guns at all and they would have a pitchfork over their shoulder or something. They did wear a Home Guard uniform and they did drill so they were becoming a force as the war broke out.

So, your father was selected to do this special work in case the Germans invaded and took over the country, what in fact was their mission once the Germans had taken control?

The Special Forces were to go underground, to let the Germans literally to invade and the whole game was to harry their supply line. So they were to stay underground for a couple of days and then they were to come up and attack the supply lines. So that was the goal and they reckoned that once they started operations their life expectancy was three days.

Clearly, Kingston was near to the A2 and railway lines. Where was their base in fact?

The base of my father's whatever it was called, his little patrol or whatever, was actually at the top of Kingston on the lane near Jesse's Hill and on the edge of the wood and they had what they called a base there an O.B. an observation base. The whole purpose was to go underground. It was kitted out with all the ammunition and firearms that they needed and enough food to supply them for about a month.

So the idea was they would come out and perhaps attack a convoy and then retreat to their base.

Yes. The plan was more to attack stationary vehicles. They were going to work at night and they were trained that if they went into a lorry park not to indiscriminately destroy the lorries but they had to destroy the left hand half shaft on the back axle.

Why?

Because you don't carry many spare half shafts. They knew that if they did left or right there might be just enough spares to keep the trucks going but if they destroyed all of one sort of the half shaft they could immobilise an awful lot of lorries that could not be got back into action quickly.

So this is very specific, very skilled training they were put through for this, did he tell you much about this?

Not a great deal but I do remember some colourful incidents. They were taken to a place called the Garth where they were trained in particular in explosives and concealment and that sort of thing and that was I believe at Godmersham near Canterbury so the training was close by. Because it was secret and even the people in the Home Guard didn't know what they were doing, obviously they couldn't be one for long periods of time or people would say "Where have you been?" In times of war people weren't travelling about much so it had to be pretty close to home.

I believe that when you were a boy you actually found this observation post.

He actually showed me one day and so the observation base was very interesting. How you got in was by lifting a root and it was cantilevered. So you lifted the root and you could access the hole straight away, but before you did, what was absolutely critical was that you placed a marble in a knot hole. The marble ran down and into a tin cup at the bottom and went clink. If anybody else lifted that root and didn't put the marble in, they were shot dead because they were deemed to be a threat. One way or another if they discovered the base they would talk about it and they would be unreliable. If they didn't put the marble in they were deemed hostile and that they would be shot first and questions asked second.

This hole has now been rendered out of service has it?

I believe they put a hand grenade down it at the end of the war and just destroyed it wholesale.

It must have been quite an ample size?

It was big enough to sleep seven people. I think the bunks were quite tiny and it wasn't comfortable but seven people could survive down there. They had to have pipes to let the air in and out and that sort of thing. I don't really know very much about it except that it was armed and it was supplied.

I think you were saying it was put close to the road.

Yes, it was put close to the path and close to the road. The obvious reason for that was that a good tracker can see footprints in damp leaves and that sort of thing and if you've got eight people walking through a wood it's no good putting it in the middle of the wood because there would be a path that might be as big as one left by a family of badgers going in and out and the Germans would have a path straight to it. So it had to be virtually one step off the road and one step off the path so that it didn't leave a trace. It was cleverly worked out.

So this place slept seven, were there seven in his group?

I think so, I'm not really sure but I lived in a farm cottage in Petham for a number of years and one day there was a knock on the door. I opened the door and an old man stood there and looked at me and said "Swede" and my hair stood up on the back of my neck because I knew what Swede was. Their patrol was called Swede and it was how they would introduce

themselves to each other and it was their little security code. So he stood there and this was in about 1997/98 and he'd been in this patrol with my father. When he knew I was staying there he thought he'd come along and see whether I knew what Swede was, so I invited him to come in. Unfortunately he's dead now and I regret I didn't have him round for coffee more often and pump him for information.

So clearly in 1940 there was a very strong expectation that once France had fallen the Germans would cross the Channel. I presume that was the time of maximum alert. When was he stood down as it were, do you know?

Well they kept going through the war and interestingly enough as the war was getting to its dénouement, they got better and better that was the deal because I suppose you could never be sure that the swing of fortunes might not go the other way and frankly with the V2 rockets and the things the Germans brought in at the end of the war, even though the Allies were getting into a strengthening position nothing could ever be taken for granted and therefore they did not stand them down thinking that the risk of invasion is gone. They simply got better and better at what they did and there was talk at the end of the war that they would be sent to France to help with the mopping up operations as well so again they would have been quite up to it because of their training.

One of the exercises they were sent on, my father and I think it was Mr Helbling from Duskin Farm, I believe that the pair of them were told to go and attack the big gun which was housed under the tunnel at Bishopsbourne. They had to attack it one night and this was the deal that the soldiers guarding it were told they were coming. They had to stick a magnet on the barrel to prove that they had gone in past the guards and attacked the gun. When they got there they got into the tunnel and on to the gun completely undetected although the people there were expecting them, but what they hadn't been told was that the barrel was greased. They had to shin up the barrel and the magnet had to be put on the end of the gun, not on the bottom of the gun, so they were absolutely plastered in grease. I said to him "How on earth did you shin up a greasy gun?" He said "Well we got very, very greasy."

They did it and they got in and they got out without being detected and apparently similarly the guard was carpeted for it for being so slack and not having security tight enough.

I suppose it was some years later when the Soviet Union was seen as a threat. There wasn't any continuation of that with a thought that the Russians might invade?

Not as such no, but I think most of them got involved in Civil Defence and I think my father went to places like Sunningdale for briefings on Civil Defence which is basically how to survive in nuclear attack which was important to the community. So interestingly a lot of them were involved in that.

I can't really remember who was in my father's thing but I do know that Jim Mount was involved and this chap Mr Pellett, Mounts farm manager at Petham was involved and Strib Helbling and Rex Casteer, but that's only four so I don't know who the other three were. So that's the secrecy that surrounded it. I do remember that many years later when my father was in his late sixties we were having tea one day with the Millers from Woodnesborough and apparently Mr Miller had also been one of these people which my father actually found out subsequently but didn't know during the war although they were good friends. Such was the level of secrecy that surrounded it.

Was there any recognition after the war in terms of a special medal or anything?

No, it was a secret and my father was sworn not to divulge and was very, very reticent even later on in life. Their integrity was such that they'd simply just been sworn to secrecy and until they'd been told they could talk about it they weren't going to talk about it. I think he probably felt that I was very interested and didn't really open very much about it until I was in my early twenties. Even then it was quite gradual and he felt he could speak about what they'd done.

The sort of thing that they did do which must have been quite difficult to keep secret, was they did do practice with hand grenades and things like that. I remember they had an old Austin 7 and they locked the steering and they used to haul it to the top of the hill with a tractor and let it run down. From the edge of the wood they would all throw hand grenades and see if they could destroy this moving target. As twenty year old men they must have had a great deal of fun doing this sort of thing. I can imagine that the bond between them was immensely strong.

As far as you know they didn't have reunions afterwards. It wasn't like normal army units where you might meet up.

No, after four or five years of being together they got used to the idea of not talking about it and it didn't seem appropriate.

But they would see each other around as farmers?

Yes, but I don't remember it. I did know about Swede because my father had told me that that was the code sign. If they met anybody that would be how they would introduce the fact. They would introduce it they wouldn't just say "Swede". They'd say "It's going to be a good summer for root vegetables. I think I might put some swedes in this year."

I think you described also that as a boy you discovered another building.

Yes we did. This was an ack-ack emplacement at Barham, just on the edge of our farm in actual fact. When I was about four I remember having a marvellous game of cowboys and indians with my sisters and our chums and there was quite a gang of us, nine or ten of us and we were using real guns which we'd found in a cellar. When we mentioned over lunch what a marvellous time we'd had playing with these oily guns my father swore us never to go near it again and apparently this was ammunition left behind by the Canadian ack-ack unit. They were rather slack in tidying up after the war. It wasn't so many years after the war but they were still around. They came and Bomb Disposal took it all away and the building was pulled down.

It was the Canadian sappers who actually built the observation base in Gorsley Wood and apparently my father told me that they were not very, they should have been a bit more - what's the word? Their security was slack let's put it like that. They talked in the pub about what they were doing and they were put on a charge and straight away they were shipped back to Canada where they were given menial duties because the whole thing about building these bases was that absolutely nobody had to know that they were being built because security was everything.

Robert French – Interviewed in 2020 by John Hill

Robert French, son of Jack French, leader of the Secret Army round here in the Bridge, Barham and Kingston area. Robert, I understand your father was the chief of the Secret Army in this part of East Kent. Did he tell you about it?

No, not until later and the reason was that was that he had signed the Official Secrets Act in order to become part of this organisation and due to his integrity, he wasn't even prepared to talk about it even with the family until 1978. Then little snippets came out. He didn't unload it all

in 1978 but gradually little things came out. One of the things he told me which I hadn't remembered before – and again it was known to the groups – was that there was an observation base at Molash which is now where the gliders hang out, and it was actually a sheep trough lying in a field. But if you knew how to get under the sheep trough...The idea was that they were going to monitor the movement of the German troops passing up through Kent on their way to London because the plan was never to engage the troops as they came through but to harry them and to break the supply lines once they'd gone by. So therefore, actually monitoring the passage of troops up that line was extremely important. This particular sheep trough was known to all of the groups because if any of them were taken out the others had to fill their place and so Molash Flying club or whatever it's called now – the glider club – was actually known to everybody. This was a place where they knew about the sheep troughs. It was quite extraordinary that their knowledge was quite so good frankly.

I carry a book which I'll probably have to share with somebody in the future, which says 1938 Fertiliser Recommendations for Growing Vegetable Crops. But when you look inside it, it's actually nothing to do with growing vegetables, it's how to place bombs, what to use, how to improvise bombs, how to stick the sticky bombs on to things and how many seconds to give yourself to run away. Quite an extraordinary book and I'm very proud to have it and I'm sure it ought to be in wider circulation.

Perhaps it ought to be in the War Museum.

Yes, it's quite a thing, and the other thing which he passed me with great ceremony and if you like, significance, was a silk map of what was then then Sudetenland and he'd been given this by somebody. This map was actually for the flyers who sewed it into their jacket so that if they got shot down, they knew how to escape, what routes to take to get back. This must have been one of the farthest targets and shows the political boundaries of the time. It also ought to go into and archive.

The other thing that I'd forgotten about is that I surrendered a 2/2 gun which my father and I both used for killing foxes and rabbits over the years, to Greenfields and this gun had actually been purloined from the Hitler Youth and somebody who had come back and had served in Germany at the end of the War had brought this back as a memento and gave it to my father. I wish I knew who, it was quite a thing, and I wish I'd kept it and not surrendered it frankly, because it was something of a museum piece. It was interesting, a very lightweight gun for a 15-year-old. No doubt it killed British troops.

That's about all I can remember right now, but no doubt things will float back in time as we go along.

Of course I was very interested in the 1938 Fertiliser Guide and I took a look in to see how I could best produce good crops from a 1938 guide, but inside there was actually how to set up a bomb, where to place it, what would be a good fuse, how many seconds to give yourself to run away after you'd set it off. It's a very interesting piece altogether and I've still got this book and I'm really rather proud of. Perhaps I should share it to a wider audience now. Before anybody knows where it is and what it is, it ought to be in an archive somewhere.

It ought really to be in the War Museum or something like that.

Yes, the other thing I'm proud to be the owner of is a silk map, quite a large map, which the flying men sewed into their jackets in case they got shot down. This particular map is the Sudetenland. As a bombing raid it must have been one of the further ones from where they were. That map is very, very beautiful and was reflective of the political boundaries of the time. Very special, actually so that ought to go into an archive somewhere as well.