



MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 9

Memories of Service with the LDV/Home Guard, Mitcham 1940-1942 By J B Pritchard

I was still at Mitcham County School for Boys when I joined the L.D.V.s (the Local Defence Volunteers) on 23rd June 1940, aged 16. With the fall of Dunkirk and the miraculous withdrawal of the British Expeditionary Force from France the appeal had gone out over the wireless, and thousands still in civilian occupations wished to do what they could to defend England in the invasion, which everyone was expecting that Summer. I was signed on as a dispatch rider by my uncle, Lauri Shepard, who at the time was deputy commander. A veteran of the 1914-18 War, he had seen four years continuous active service in Flanders with the 5th Seaforth Highlanders.

I did my first guard duty at the Canons A.R.P. post. There were two of us, one armed with a 12-bore shotgun and two cartridges, and the other with a tin hat! Our sole item of official “uniform” was an L.D.V. armband. Whilst on duty we challenged a caller who, failing to give a satisfactory response, was promptly escorted to the guardroom. It turned out he was a member of another L.D.V. Company testing to see whether we would challenge him! As a dispatch rider (on my own bicycle) I had use of a tin hat. I remember one trip to Morden A.R.P. / H.Q. post in the middle of a heavy raid. I had to dive for shelter twice down Morden Road.

The headquarters of the Local Defence Volunteers, and later of the Home Guard, was the clubhouse of Mitcham Golf Club, near Mitcham Junction Station. On early L.D.V. parades we were put through the basic movements of rifle drill, using broom sticks, on the putting green at the side of the club house, where we also did P.T. In July 1940, when we had 60 members, we received our first rifles. These were U.S.A. Ross rifles of 1917 vintage, and packed in grease. Six were cleaned with boiling water for the guard that night. There was no difficulty in finding volunteers for guard duty! We received our uniforms on Sunday 18th August 1940. By then we all had rifles, ammunition and tin hats, and within a short time our title was changed from L.D.V. to the more imaginative Home Guard, and we became "A" Company 57th Surrey (Mitcham) Battalion wearing the badge of the East Surrey Regiment. Parades now included rifle drill (bayonet drill, once the bayonets arrived) and exercises over the Common.



Members of 57th Surrey (Mitcham) Battalion Home Guard; Commanding Officer Major E L Shepard, c. 1943

On the opposite side of the railway from the Golf Club House, off the Carshalton Road, there was an anti-aircraft battery of 3.7" guns, manned by the Honourable Artillery Company. The first fairway in front of the Club House was covered in wire mesh about two feet off the ground, presumably some form of detection for the battery. When their guns fired our H.Q. shook alarmingly.

Some night duties were spent at Mitcham Police Station so we could be available to assist the police and A.R.P. if necessary. We had to turn out every time the Air Raid warning sounded, which was every night during the Blitz, and we watched the heavy raids on London which lit up the whole sky. We saw planes lit up by searchlights and some shot down by the A.A. guns - always a great boost to morale. When bombs dropped in Mitcham we turned out to guard damaged shops and factories against looters. Up to November 1940 Mitcham had five "land mines" - high explosive devices suspended on parachutes - dropped on it, two of them being the first to fall in England. I well recall being called out to protect property in Morden Road and behind the Methodist church, damaged by these mines. An unexploded A.A. shell landed in the back garden of my parents' house in Mitcham Park, and that evening, whilst we were listening to the B.B.C. 9 o'clock news, a bomb landed in the same crater, bringing down two ceilings and blowing in windows. Further up the road a house was hit and completely demolished. We worked with the A.R.P. to get two occupants out all right, but the next day the body of a third person was found.

On leaving school I joined Lloyds Bank at Putney. The manager was not best pleased when I told him that as a member of the Home Guard I would not be able to do Fire Watch duty at the bank! Cycling to and from work could be exciting with the air raids, and I remember seeing firemen returning from the Blitz covered in grime, and dead tired. Every time the air raid warning went we had to shut the bank and take cover in the strong room. One raid lasted from 9.30 a.m. to 2 p.m., so we opened when we should have been shutting.

In those days many homes were without telephones, and as dispatch rider I had to call out members of my section whenever there was an emergency warning, such as the sighting of parachutists. We would then take up position on the golf course, usually lying in a ditch or bunker waiting for Jerry parachutists to arrive. Fortunately each call was a false alarm. One night we were out all night and were later told the "parachutists" were puffs of A.A. fire drifting across the moon!

On other occasions it was reported a light had been seen on the Common signalling to the bombers. We would spread out across the golf course and search the whole area. On really dark nights it was somewhat hazardous with all the ditches intersecting the Common. We invariably had someone fall in, usually choosing a ditch full of yellow slime! On return to the Company H.Q. he would not be allowed in the guardroom because of the smell!

Not all the members of the Mitcham Home Guard were so lucky. On the night of 26th April 1941, when members of "B" Company were on duty at their headquarters in the Tower Creameries on Commonside East, they were alerted by what they thought were two parachutists descending on the Common. Unfortunately the parachutes were mines dropped by German aircraft. Some of the men were killed as they ran towards the "parachutist", whilst others died in the explosion and fierce fire which followed after one of the mines fell on the Creameries. In all 15 members of "B" Company lost their lives that night. They were buried with full military honours in war graves at London Road Cemetery, opposite Figges Marsh, and their names are recorded on a bronze plaque unveiled at the Creameries in 1962.

The image created by the "Dad's Army" series on television is not too far exaggerated, and we had many similar characters and the incidents are often familiar. Initially, the Home Guard was poorly equipped, but the situation gradually improved, and we were equipped with Browning machine guns and P.I.A.T. mortars, grenades and more ammunition. We also improvised, making our own "Molotov cocktails", and placing barrels of oil on the railway bridges to be poured on the road and set alight. Weapons courses took place at Nonsuch Park, Cheam, and we practised firing at Bisley, staying there all day. Enthusiasm and dedication were certainly not lacking, and with time the units became quite efficient. However, having seen what the real war was like, I have to admit that had the Germans landed, we would have been brushed aside quite easily, although we would undoubtedly have caused some casualties.

Exercises were an important part of our training. One practice attack was on the Gas Works and surrounding area, defended by another Home Guard unit - we won! We also had exercises with the Army - sometimes a company of Guardsmen - defending the Common whilst they acted as the enemy. There were road blocks on the railway bridges at Cranmer Road and Commonside West, to be manned in an emergency. These consisted of large concrete blocks with gaps for traffic to pass through. The gaps could be closed by inserting railway lines bent into a V into holes in the road. During the threat of parachutists and Fifth Columnists we sometimes set up road blocks on the main roads. Each car was searched, names of occupants taken and reason for journey and destination recorded. I don't remember ever finding anything suspicious, but it put the wind up many people, who thought the invasion had started.

In addition to the road blocks, there were brick and concrete pill boxes at strategic points, and a house on the corner of Madeira Road/Commonside West was reinforced and turned into a strong point. These we manned during the invasion scare and then on training exercises. After the invasion threat was over, guards continued at night and training, route marches, etc., were carried out at weekends. After one guard duty, when unloading the rifle, one chap left one up the spout and shot a hole through the ceiling! Most nights were spent at the Coy. H.Q. at the Golf House. If the weather was bad patrols were cancelled, and we played darts instead!

My close friend Den Jenner, head boy at Mitcham County School, also joined the Home Guard. A couple of years my senior, he had volunteered for the Royal Air Force, and was soon called up to be trained as a fighter pilot. I recall vividly one Sunday morning parade on the school playing field (now the London Road Playing Fields) being disrupted by Den sweeping low over the assembled Home Guards in a Spitfire, much to the delight of those who knew him, and to the considerable annoyance of the Commanding Officer, Major Farley. The manoeuvre, which was of course not only dangerous but highly irregular, was carried out at extreme low level, and with insufficient height to clear the electricity pylons, Jenner had to fly beneath the power cables before climbing away. He subsequently served in North Africa and Italy, where he was killed in a flying accident.

An R.S.M. from the Royal Tank Regiment attached to Home Guard G.H.Q. once gave us a lecture on automatic weapons. He was responsible for training the Home Guards in London. His talk influenced me to join the R.T.R. when called up. After his talk we didn't have any pieces left over when reassembling the machine gun! On another occasion we were taken to Epsom race course to watch a demonstration by three light tanks of the Royal Tank Regiment. I was impressed by their black overalls and beret.

I was posted for a week's attachment to the 1st Battalion Welsh Guards on Wimbledon Common. (They had been in the counter-attack at Arras in the retreat to Dunkirk). I slept in the Quarter Master's Stores, and attended all parades. I ate in the Sergeants' Mess and found Officers, Sergeants and everyone most helpful. The Guards' drill was a bit different to that with which I was familiar, and since I was put in a squad without any preliminary training, I made an awful hash of it! In retrospect, it must have been comical to watch - somewhat like a comedy stage sketch. However, I learnt a lot by joining in all parades and patrols and talking to them all.

I served in the Home Guard until I was called up in November 1942, having by then been promoted to the rank of lance-corporal. I joined the Royal Tank Regiment, and landed with the 7th R.T.R. in Normandy on D Day + 12, finishing up in Hamburg when the Germans surrendered. We were equipped with Churchill tanks.

My time in the Home Guard was at times hilarious and at times dangerous, but I learnt much from the training and talking to veterans of the 1914-18 War. This benefited me greatly when I joined up.

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Further information on Merton Historical Society can be obtained from the Society's website at www.mertonhistoricalsociety.org.uk or from Merton Library & Heritage Service, Merton Civic Centre, London Road, Morden, Surrey. SM4 5DX