



THE BANFFSHIRE GUERRILLAS

Banffshire may seem an unlikely place for guerrilla operations, but the dark days of World War 2 gave rise to some astonishing developments which remained a secret for decades afterwards.

BACKGROUND

Let me take you back to May 1940, when German forces had overrun France and the last British troops had been evacuated from Dunkirk. It quickly became apparent to the British government that Hitler was likely to launch an invasion attempt and that establishing a home-based defence force was a matter of the utmost urgency. Some readers may remember hearing Anthony Eden's broadcast appeal for volunteers, which led to the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers, later known as the Home Guard.

By late June intelligence reports suggested that the expected German assault would come in the form of a seaborne force, with the most likely target being the beaches of south-east England. Briefings with military personnel responsible for this area convinced Churchill that resources were hopelessly inadequate and he ordered a covert resistance force to be set up. The name chosen for this, 'Auxilliary Units' was considered a nondescript term unlikely to arouse unnecessary attention, and avoid any hint as to their real purpose. Command of this was put in the hands of Major Colin Gubbins, an explosives expert and Peter Fleming who had experience in military intelligence. Gubbins felt that the entire coastline from south Wales right round to northern Scotland was vulnerable to attack and extended the deployment of Auxiliary Units to cover these areas.

ORGANISATION & RÔLE OF AUXILIARY UNITS

Local patrols were set up, usually consisting of 6 - 8 men who were carefully selected, primarily from the ranks of the Home Guard. As secrecy was of paramount importance, all recruits were required to sign the Official Secrets Act. Auxiliary Units had no official status, but were nominally attached to one of the regular army regiments. Unsurprisingly, there is no formal record of patrols or their members and so it's almost impossible to obtain any information from official sources, but it has been calculated that about 3,500 men were involved nationally. In this area patrol leaders were often schoolmasters, the other recruits being mainly farmers or farm workers whose knowledge of their own locality would be essential for the night-time operations they were expected to undertake.

In Grange a patrol was formed under the command of George Fisher as Lieutenant, schoolmaster at the Crossroads and a veteran of WW1. Willie Ingram of Greenbog was Sergeant and seven other members have been identified by name. It has also been possible to establish the identities of eight members of the Deskford patrol.

Similar groups were based in Clochan, Spey Bay, Orton, Spynie, Kinloss and Darnaway.

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The principal rôle of these units was sabotage following the expected Nazi invasion. One of their first tasks, with assistance from regular army units, was to construct a secret 'Operational Base' (OB) for each patrol. These were basically 'elephant shelters', with a corrugated iron roof built into a hole in the ground, reached through a trap door camouflaged with earth and heather, and a ladder leading down into the body of the shelter. 2' diameter concrete drain pipes formed a separate outlet which emerged some distance away amongst whin bushes. The location of the Deskford OB was near the foot of the Bin, in the woods close to Braidbog. In



Site of the Roehill OB

Grange an OB was first built on the edge of the Gallowhill wood close to Gordonston, but this seems to have deteriorated rather quickly and it's impossible to pinpoint its position. In late 1943 a second OB was established at Roehill - this one is still visible today.

Having established suitable OBs and stockpiled weapons, ammunition and provisions, these guerrilla units would literally go underground, emerging only at night to disrupt enemy activities, using explosives and booby traps to destroy bridges and railways and put vehicles and aircraft out of action. Their effectiveness in harrying the Germans would have been short-lived, but it would have allowed valuable time for the regular armed forces to launch a co-ordinated resistance.

TRAINING & EXERCISES

Intensive training in all types of clandestine warfare was given during weekend courses at Coleshill House, a secluded country estate in Wiltshire, where some of the prototype OBs used for training can still be seen today. In Scotland a similar centre was set up at Melville House, near Cupar in Fife, where recruits were trained under the command of the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders and the Scots Guards. Experts such as Major Gubbins gave detailed instruction in the use of explosives, sabotage techniques and booby traps. Patrol members were also given training in unarmed combat and silent killing by W.E. Fairburn whose considerable expertise had been acquired during his service with the Shanghai Police.

Regular training continued as part of the routine of each patrol, often under the supervision of a group leader seconded from the regular forces. As well as handling weapons and explosives, recruits were expected to be skilled in mapreading and by good fortune a few examples have survived of the written training materials which were actually used by the Grange patrol, and probably also by other units the length & breadth of the country.

Although it was intended that each unit should operate in isolation, there were many occasions when neighbouring patrols took part in joint exercises. One of these took place late at night on 21st November 1942 when members of Grange and Deskford units defended an OB at Muldearie against attackers from Clochan. In fact, there are quite a number of unofficial reports of the Grange patrol

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operating not only in conjunction with Deskford and Clochan, but in areas covered by other patrols, so it's quite clear that there was good communication between each unit.



Occasionally weekend camps were organised at Blairmore House, the local HQ in Glass. Given the secret nature of the Auxiliary Units, it's rather surprising that this group photo was taken at one of the camps. Most members of the Grange patrol can be identified, as well as senior officers Capt. Gordon-Lennox and Capt. Cochrane.

SECRECY

Considerable care was taken to ensure the secrecy of this resistance force. If the Nazi invasion had materialised, their duty would have been to go to ground and effectively become invisible saboteurs. They were not expected to survive longer than 10 – 14 days in these circumstances. The risk of detection and capture was high, and they were under instructions to take their own lives rather than betray their comrades under interrogation. For these reasons, documentation relating to their activities was practically non-existent, and written training materials were minimal. A rare exception to this was a 42 page manual on the essentials of sabotage, carefully disguised with a cover claiming to be 'The Countryman's Diary – 1939'. One chapter was devoted to the most effective means of damaging certain targets, and of calculating the amount of explosives required, with the advice, "if in doubt, double the calculated charge"!

As already mentioned, all recruits were prohibited from discussing their activities, even with their own closest families. The general belief was that they had been selected for special Home Guard duties, but in fact the Auxiliary Units had no formal standing and names weren't recorded either on Home Guard or official army lists. While this ensured their anonymity, it had other advantages from the point of view of the authorities. During the course of the war new types of weapons, ammunition and explosives were constantly under development – plastic explosive being one example. Before being made available to regular troops, this was issued for use by Auxiliary Units – and who better to carry out hazardous testing? In an organisation that didn't officially exist, there would be no need for anyone to come up with awkward explanations or take responsibility for any accidents which might occur.

GRANGE PATROL LOG BOOK

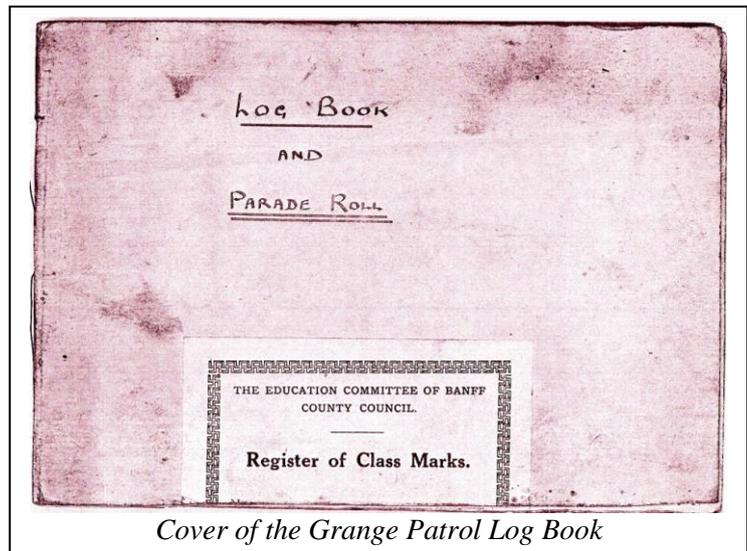
Despite the official policy of secrecy, however, detailed information about local patrols came to light recently, in the form of a log book recording all the meetings of the Grange patrol from

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November 1941 until August 1944. It's impossible to be certain who was responsible for this unauthorised record: the prime suspect is Crossroads schoolmaster George Fisher, who commanded the patrol. Although it was found amongst paperwork in Willie Ingram's desk at Greenbog, it's not recognisably Willie's handwriting. Each entry in the log book relates to a meeting of the Grange Patrol, recording its date and time, as well as a summary of the activities undertaken and a list of those present, identified by surname alone, perhaps as a concession to concerns over security.

Since the original log book is a unique historical document, it was sent for safe keeping to the Museum of the British Resistance at Parham in Suffolk, where it's accessible to anyone interested in the history of the Auxiliary Units. However, a full transcription of its contents can be obtained from the author on request.

The first entry is dated 4th November 1941 (a Tuesday), when George Fisher, Willie Ingram, Sandy Pirie, Jock Reid and Donald Cruickshank met at 7.30pm for training on the Browning machine gun mechanism. The entry for the



Cover of the Grange Patrol Log Book

following week records that a lecture on patrol was delivered by Lt. Cochrane (commander of the Spey Bay patrol), who was accompanied by Sgt. Morrison. By 18th November there were two additional members: John Robertson and Jimmy Munro, and the evening was devoted to patrol exercises from 7.30pm until 10.45pm. A couple of weeks later the unit had their first training in "demolitions – method, practice" and on 16th December were introduced to "thuggery practice" – otherwise known as unarmed combat, silent killing and similar activities not normally expected of country gentlemen. Their first experience of "grenade throwing" came just a week later, and on 22nd February 1942 they had progressed to using live grenades. The final members, Jimmy Irvine and Jock Henderson joined the patrol on 10th March and 7th April respectively.

The log book indicates that it was rare for any of the members to miss training sessions, but on 24th March 1942 there were three absentees: Willie Ingram, Donald Cruickshank and John Robertson. Both Willie and John in their later years recalled a long rail journey that all three made to the Auxiliary Units training centre at Coleshill and the exceptionally cold weather at the time. That certainly seems a likely explanation for their absence on 24th March.

From the spring of 1942 the Grange patrol met twice each week, usually on Tuesday evenings and Sundays, and in different locations depending on the training activity. The Gallowhill quarry was a favoured place for "demolitions" and "booby traps", with Burnend quarry also being used occasionally. Mill of Paithnick seems to have been the most popular location for "grenade throwing". Indoor meetings, usually for training in map-reading, were held either at Crossroads School or at the West Church Hall at Gallowhill. Their first "away" exercise was recorded on Saturday 28th March 1942 at Strathmill in Keith. There is no detail given as to the nature of the exercise, which lasted from 9pm until 1.30am the next morning.

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Nov 29 th	Grenade throwing ^(over) at mill of Paithnick. Lieut Fisher present. Ingram, Pirie, Robertson, Irvine.	
Dec 1 st	Browning mechanism, taking bearings at school. Ingram, Pirie, Reid, Cruickshank, Henderson, Irvine.	9.30-11.30.
Dec 3 rd	Rifle practice with .22 at Keith range. Henderson absent.	19.30-22. 20-22.
Dec 6 th	Rifle firing at blackcat 5 rounds Del. 300 yards. 10 rounds with .22. 40 yards Reid absent	10-12.
Dec 8 th	Patrol practice. School to mill of Paithnick and back.	19.30-21.30
Dec 10 th	All present. Firing .22 at Keith S.B.R. range. 25 yds.	19.30-21.30
Dec 13 th	All present - also Lieut Fisher. Exercises at Burned quarry. Lieut Fisher present.	10-12.
Dec 15 th	Ingram, Cruickshank, Robertson, Henderson, Irvine, Munro, Pirie, Map reading in school. Lieut Fisher present.	19.30-22.
Dec 20 th	All present. Grenade throwing at mill of Paithnick	10-12.
Dec 22 nd	Ingram, Pirie, Cruickshank, Henderson, Irvine. Patrol practice attacking O.B.	19.30-21.30
Jan 3 rd 1943.	Ingram, Pirie, Reid, Cruickshank, Robertson, Henderson, Irvine. Browning firing at blackcat	10-11.30.
Jan 5 th	Ingram, Pirie, Irvine. Ambushes, Booby traps, Thuggery. Reid absent.	19.30-21.30

A sample page from the Grange Patrol Log Book

Other entries are frustratingly vague, such as the one for Monday 25th May 1942, which simply states “Scheme at Kinloss”, beginning at 8pm and lasting until 6 the next morning. The outcome isn’t reported in the log book, but years after the war, Grange patrol members spoke with pride of their success in penetrating airfield defences and they chalked swastika marks on aircraft tyres as evidence of their achievement. Only a few days later the log book records a “Scheme at Cullen” which almost certainly involved the Deskford patrol and possibly others from the area.

As the months went by the members of the Grange patrol gradually increased the range of their specialist skills. In addition to those already mentioned, their activities included “message sending & decoding”, “pistol practice” “stripping & reassembling grenades”, “tree felling”, “rifle firing” “target practice”, “telephone wire sabotage” “fitting booby traps”, “daylight movement” “ambushes and camouflage”, “switch setting”.

Although they were largely confined to the immediate area during the winter, their activities could take them much further afield in the warmer months. On April 3rd 1943 they made a foray over the border to Deskford, where they carried out an attack on parked vehicles. The Deskford patrol usually seemed to come off worse against Grange, as on 20th May 1944 when the Grange patrol reported 100% success on their part, and again on 9th June when they successfully resisted an attack by their Deskford counterparts.



During the summer weekend camps were arranged and the usual meetings were suspended on these occasions, as most patrol members were at camp, e.g. on 19th July 1942 and again on 2nd August. A series of exercises in daylight movement in the spring of 1942 took them to Darnaway, Spey Bay and Banff and two field days were held in June of the same year at Marnoch – which suggests the existence of another patrol with its base there. A further field day is recorded at Rothiemay in April 1944.

It's not clear from the log book when their first Operational Base was constructed at the Gallowhill. There's certainly no record of patrol members being involved in building it, so this may well have been done by army personnel. The first time it's mentioned in the log book is in the entry for 5th May 1942, when the patrol were engaged in "stripping wood in O.B." During the second half of August that year there were several sessions of "drying and painting O.B.", after which no further maintenance is recorded that year. A number of exercises involved attacks on the OB, so perhaps these contributed to its deterioration. There were 2 instances of "work on OB" recorded in August 1943, which may refer to the original Gallowhill hideout, but the log book entry for 3rd October is the first of many indicating a long period of "OB construction" which was almost certainly at the new Roehill site. Work continued regularly throughout the winter, almost to the exclusion of other activities. On 27th December the patrol took advantage of John Robertson's tractor to help with shifting materials for the new OB, which seems to have been more or less complete by 16th May 1944, when the tractor again proved useful for "transport of operational stores to OB". Nevertheless, the log book entries indicate that construction work at Roehill continued almost until the end of July.

The dedication of this hardy little bunch is something that stands out from reading the log book. They met for training in all seasons and all weathers, with very few exceptions. The entry for 21st September 1943 reveals that – for the members of the Grange patrol at least - resisting the Nazis wasn't first on their list of priorities – "no parade owing to harvest". Snow prevented them meeting on 27th February and 5th March 1944, and may also have been the "bad weather" which prevented work on the OB on the 12th December 1943. Unspecified "weather conditions" were responsible for the usual meeting being abandoned on 8th August 1944. The second Tuesday in August was the customary date for Keith Show which apparently continued throughout the war years. With D-day some 2 months past, perhaps the Grange patrol members realised there would be no risk to national security if they were to interrupt their routine for a day at Keith Show.

The final entry in the log book is for 17th August 1944, when all members of the patrol were present at the West Church for "revolver firing".

CONCLUSION

The Auxiliary Units were eventually stood down in November 1944, as was the Home Guard, five months after the successful Normandy landings. By this time the chances of an invasion attempt were non-existent. While members of the Home Guard were presented with defence medals, those in the Auxiliary Units received nothing more than a letter reminding them of the secret nature of their duties.



“It should not be forgotten that the members of the Auxiliary Units were volunteers or were ‘volunteered’ for a job that was perceived as particularly hazardous and could so easily have been so. Their life expectancy was reckoned at 10 – 14 days. They endured long years of, what must have seemed at the time, boring and repetitive duties, attaining and maintaining a standard of discipline and efficiency which, had it been put to the test, would undoubtedly have proved a very nasty surprise for the enemy.”
(Bartlam & Keillar)

For decades following the war the Auxiliary Units remained a closely guarded secret and the lack of documentation relating to them is a serious obstacle to researchers. Whoever kept the Grange Patrol log book made an immeasurably valuable contribution to preserving their memory.

Further reading & information sources:

“World War II in Moray”, Bill Bartlam & Ian Keillar, Librario, 2003

“The Last Ditch”, David Lampe, Cassell, 1968

“Resisting the Nazi Invader”, Arthur Ward, Constable, 1997

<http://www.btinternet.com/~david.waller/index.htm>