Jess Hodges (Marsh Gibbon HG) (2003 Track 10)

-It was about a year before the war started when things was happening in Poland with all the mass slaughter and that they decided we needed some local defences and only people who were not military age could join. Hitler had gone into Danzig then – the corridor they called it. Just before the war the government announced we should prepare for war. You’ll never guesss the way we local villages prepared. There was An old cattle waggon big enough for one beast drawn by horse was taken to the top of Windmill Hill above the village to be the lookout HQ. The LDV used it at weekends and if they were needed at nights.

-Later on there was an auxiliary Fire Service set up and a man called Felix Chivers, I think he came from Sweden, working in the village and he got the fire service organised. They had stirrup pumps, ladders and buckets. The ARP in those days was called out if the alarm went. I was ARP at first and then I was conscripted into the HG. I was in a reserve occupation so served in the village throughout the war.

-We were attached to the Waddesdon Battalions in the local villages around here. We had two Sergeants, one was from the Bedfordshire Regiment and the other was from the Life Guards I think. They were retired from the army and were working as security guards at Waddesdon Manor but they came back into it when the HG was formed. They were Sgt Court and Sgt Arms.

-We used to train in front of Waddeston Manor. It was a private house then but the Rothschild’s weren’t living there at the time. We had permission to parade and do all our exercises by the house. A bus used to take us from the village to the manor.

-Ashendon was our rifle range training place.

-When we were using the old cattle truck on Windmill Hill you took what weapons you had got from shotguns to broomstick handles. It was a long time before we got uniforms. We used to do training without uniforms. We got American Ross rifles eventually. We used to train without uniforms with them.

-We used to have an ejector cup to put on the end of the rifles to fire hand grenades (Mills bombs) from them. They would go about 75 yards. You put a charge in the rifle, the cup on the end and fire them and away they would go. The grenades had 7 second fuzes on them. You would take out the pin and handle would fly off. Then you would have 7 seconds before they would explode.

-We had exercises where live ammunition was used in battle conditions. They took place at Ashenden. There was a valley there where you could go along they would fire over the top of you.

-We had a Spigot Mortar there. We had anti-tank rifles for street fighting, we had sticky bombs which if you could have got close enough to the enemy tank you could have blown the tracks off with them.

-There were about 30 HG in the village. Some of the older members dropped out as they became too old to serve.

-We had tree trunk barriers to protect the village. There was a road block at the top of Station Road on the top of the hill to Twyford.

There were small Nissen huts on the back road where ammunition was stored during the war. The ammunition, grenades, weren’t primed so there was nothing dangerous in them. They were all up Station Road, the Blackthorn and Hethe road. They went from Edgecott to Marsh Gibbon.

-Before I was conscripted into the HG I was in the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS). We had quite a lot of drills and had to be out when the alarms went. We had to turn out when they were bombing Coventry. You could hear the bombers going over and see the glow of the flames. We were called out for raids on London a well. You could stand in the bedroom and see the flak in the sky from here over London.

-We used to have our HQ in the village hall. They have built a bungalow now where the old village hall used to be. The army requisitioned it for local women to pack ammunition to be sent back to the ordnance depot at night. They would bring the ammunition in Lorries in the morning and return it at night. The women were called ‘Packers’.

-We used to meet down the village pond for drill and so on, down where the old village shop was.

-We had to carry our rifles around with us. There weren’t any defensive structure like pill boxes bult in the area. We had five rounds of .303” ammunition each; with Sten guns you were allowed one magazine of ammunition each. You could have it automatic or single firing. The gun would off up and down in your hands, when it was on automatic. There were a lot of accidents with those Sten guns.

-We used to do automatic firing up at Ashenden and got proficiency certificates and badges for it. You would stand firing at 100 yards at a target, then go closer and kneel down, then crawl and finish up 50 yards from your target.

-People accepted being the HG could be dangerous. We didn’t have much to face the enemy if they came. It was life at the time and you just go on with it.

-In the Fire Service, even before the war started we had a 12 month course with the St. John’s Ambulance Service. The local officials used to come and lecture us. It held us in good stead when we were in the HG as we knew how to carry out First Aid. Everybody was supposed to have the same training as I did but many people didn’t have it.

-You recognised discipline in the HG. There was no backchat of the Officers and NCOs. You had to do as you were told. It was a really strict thing and was much the same as the Fire Service.

-One of our planes crashed up on Windmill Hill and there was a guard put on it up there, someone from everybody. HG, Police, Regular servicemen. They all did their turn. There was a Blenheim bomber from Bicester that crashed between Marsh Gibbon and Edgecott into one of the wide Hawthorn hedges. I went and cut some of the wood out so they could get the plane out.

-When Grendon Hall was first taken over it was a rest centre for the London Fire Service. Then they had some Polish girls up there. Later Poundon was set up a radio station. When lease lend came in the Americans set up as well. It finished up with a radio station at Charndon one on the road

 from Gawcott to Buckingham and one up at Grendon Hall. They were monitoring shipping messages and all that, and transmitting. Some of the women at the bases were FANY’s (Field Auxiliary Nursing Yeomanry) as a cover for their other activities. They had a small building at Charndon, Poundon House and a big red brick built place outside of Poundon. The only way you could get in was through a single door. The sentries would not let you in unless you had the right credentials’ and so on.

The only light to get in the building was through a little window underneath the eaves. When the Americans came they set up their HQ. It was a bit like a greenhouse with bricks up a few feet and then a glass top all round and radios inside. When they left it was left all like it. The Americans had a sentry post half way to their HQ. There was a big fight there on night and a shoot-out. They had been down the pub and go boozed up at the ‘Sow and Pigs’

-There was an old boy called Charlie from Marsh Gibbon who used to go up to the ‘Sow and Pigs’. One night I was up there at the road block when the outer sentry said “Old Charlie is coming up on his bike, he never stops but I’m going to leave the barrier across and he’s going to stop”. He usually had a bottle of whiskey or something in his pocket as well as what was in his stomach. He came up to the barrier “Open this gate you darn God Tommy, you’re not stopping me!” The other soldier was a regular and had a big Alsatian dog which he let loose. The dog jumped at Charlie and knocked him clean off his bike. Didn’t he squeal. He stopped the next time at the barrier!

-Before the war I was working at Calvert and they stopped the nightshift. That’s where I spent most of my working days up there. I was 23 at the time in November 1939. I had to get a job as an agricultural labourer. They used female labour at the brickworks after I left. I got a reserve occupation certificate. There weren’t many odd jobs about by the time I was laid off and a local farmer said “You might as well come and work form me”. When I registered they wouldn’t accept I was an ex-Calvert worker only an agricultural labourer. I volunteered for the navy and had a medical but after an examination they looked at my card and said I had no right to be there as I was an agricultural labourer. After that I never heard another thing.

-Ted Barngham(?) was an farm labourer. George Judd a farmer and an Officer, I think he was a Captain. (Major Wolf from Wincheden was in charge of the area). Bill Carter worked for Parkers the builders. Percy Campbell also worked for Parkes the builders. Bunny Hill worked at Calvert as a blacksmith. Reg Herring was an electrician at Calvert Brick Works. Bob Butler was a farm labourer.

-The area Marsh Gibbon HG looked after went out to Edgcott Poundon was in with the Steeple Claydon group. The lookout put on Windmill Hill was a covered cart, big enough to hold one animal. They eventually put a little stove in it so you could make a cup of tea. We didn’t make any defensive posts or dig trenches around here. If the siren in the village went the HG had to scramble down to the rendezvous point by the pond. It didn’t happen very often in Marsh Gibbon.

-One evening they sounded ‘Cromwell’. The church bells were rung on that evening.

-When Westcott was established as an airfield they said it couldn’t be defended. We were helping out there and some Hampshire Regiment was ordered to attach it as part of an exercise with a mock attack. I can remember we was up between here and Westcott aerodrome sat in a ditch all night. Somebody said “We can’t see anybody”, “Of course you can’t because the blokes who came and cut the wire at Westcott aerodrome have been and gone and are waiting at Finmere Aerodrome where the bombers were, to go back home!”. The Landlord of the Roebuck said they called in and had a pint before they went back to Finmere. It’s laughable really.

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