

BATTALION HEADQUARTERS PLATOON

By Captain A. E. Turner

After Mr. Eden's appeal, North Dean became the centre of an enthusiastic body of Home Guard, and a bond of union was formed between some sixty men, remotely situated at farms and homesteads and who had, in the main, no previous knowledge of each others' existence. They formed a section of "A" (Hughenden) Platoon, Wycombe (County) Company, and were drawn from North Dean, Hughenden Valley and Bryants Bottom.

As in most rural areas, there had been in the early days the inevitable "O.P. on the hill" to man every night. This O.P. overlooked Hughenden Valley from a point on the boundary of Speen Village, 600 ft. above sea level. Those days brought many incidents, from the falling of bombs and crashing aircraft within the vicinity, to personal clashes between the men and civilians. Some incidents were real, and some of an imaginary character. One of the latter type is perhaps worthy of record. It should be noted that, owing to Bomber Command H.Q. forming the North Dean Section's western boundary, the zeal of its members was such that it was hardly safe for any stranger to pass through the area at all, and this particular incident occurred one night in July 1940, when only two of the three detailed for duty at the O.P. turned out, the third being taken ill suddenly, emergency reserves at the time not having been organised. It was a warm night and the visibility was good when the Section Commander visited the O.P. at 10 p.m. and saw the first man "turn in" under the eaves of a haystack, and the other man posted for four hours' duty armed with a shot gun. At 2 p.m. a thundering crash on the door awoke the Section Commander, who found one of the guards panting outside his house, and between gasps for breath outlined a broken story of "being attacked". In the light of a half moon the man heaved a sigh, and with the opening remark "My b...y heart stood still", explained how from the hedge which formed the north side of the field in which the O.P. was situated, a machine gun suddenly opened fire on him, and it was a miracle that he was alive to tell the tale. He pointed out that it traversed the length of the hedge with bursts of fire. The Section Commander was inclined to view that the whole thing was an hallucination caused by long hours of duty and the prevailing tension, and began to explain how phosphorescent lights did float around hedgerows at that time of the year, and that the noise may have been the creaking of a rheumatically joint in a cow. The man, however, stuck to his story, whereupon the Section Commander decided to wait until there was enough daylight to investigate. An hour passed quietly away, when from the direction of the hedge to the east came distinct sounds of rat-a-tat-tat followed by flashes of light. Orders were given to move towards a gap in the hedge, just then discernible, to intercept the party. The atmosphere had now become tense, and it was felt that things were going to happen. But there

was quick disillusionment. Two sturdy figures became silhouetted in the gap and they proved to be linesmen connecting up a battery, which had just moved into the locality, with various O.Ps. They had chosen the Home Guard Observation Post, not knowing it, and were in the act of laying up a field line on the hedge. The sound and light effects, resembling bursts of machine-gun fire to a realistic degree, were caused by the reeling off of wire from a steel drum with a square spindle hole revolving on a steel tube, and the lights came from two hand lanterns which, swinging on the opposite side of the hedge caused flashes of light to appear on the other side through the leaves.

The R.E. corporal in charge was informed of the gravity of the situation, and that he might feel thankful to have escaped that kind of death meted out to rabbits in this part of the world, to which he agreed with evident relief. The following night the story acquired a dramatic flavour as it was related with fervour in the “local”.

As time went on the parochial outlook of the section hardened. The men settled down to a regular basis of training, feeling that the one place the Germans would attack first was North Dean, and consequently the one Sunday in four when the whole platoon foregathered at Hughenden Manor was not popular with the men. This feeling gave the Platoon Commander some headaches in his endeavour to fuse the villages and encourage the spirit of co-operation. The presence of the Company Commander on these platoon parades reminded the men that a company did exist, but they felt little inclined at that stage to give it much thought. It was known that the Company Officers, down to Platoon Commanders, met weekly in High Wycombe. Those meetings were shrouded in mystery, because although it was surmised that big decisions were taken, only the portions affecting the sections were dealt out to them. This produced a feeling of some awe for Company Headquarters, which might for all the world have been the Home Guard Whitehall so far as the men of the North Dean Section of Hughenden Platoon were concerned. They had on one occasion heard of the existence of a Battalion through an inspection, one Sunday, by a high ranking officer who it was said was in command of a large body of men corresponding to a battalion in the army, but very much larger and more complex in its composition! There the matter rested until one Sunday in June 1942. It was one of those Platoon Parade Sundays and the Platoon Commander had ordered a route march with the object of showing all ranks where the “callers” resided, the list having just been revised.

The platoon was proceeding in the direction of Speen, when a halt was called and two officers emerged from a car which had pulled up at the side of the road. One was recognised as the late Company Commander, who it was known had recently left the Company and had taken over the nebulous organisation known as the 4th Bucks Battalion, which existed in some sort of way at Marlow. With him was a giant of a man – a captain. The Colonel then called up the officers to meet the Adjutant. Little did they realise then, however, how much their presence

would be felt, and in fact that the whole aspect of their future outlook would be changed by these two men. The column proceeded on its way, and for the North Dean Section it was the last route march with “A” (Hughenden) Platoon.

Events moved rapidly – soon rumours were flying in all directions that the Battalion was going to take on real shape, and that it would issue orders which would be felt right down to sections. Then followed a report that this awe-inspiring organisation might come to North Dean to live. It did – on 4th September 1942 the Battalion Commander moved into the east wing of North Dean House, the residence of Mr. B. Seebohm Rowntree. All the local Home Guard were most anxious to know how the Battalion H.Q. staff was made up and how it would affect them and particularly their watertight outlook. They were not kept waiting long before they learned. A captain with a limp – by name Tosland – said to have lost a leg in the last war, and known as the Administrative Captain – seemed to be in charge of the installing arrangements. He was a shortish man with the most highly polished buttons, Sam Browne and shoes in the British Army. His smart appearance made us feel that he took a pride in his job. He visited the local pub and, rumour had it that he was endeavouring to make arrangements for the staff to have lunch and tea daily at the “Sportsman’s Arms”. This move was very popular and highly appreciated by the villagers of North Dean.

Then an intelligence officer, with winning ways, appeared on the scene. The staff picture was completed by two permanent staff instructors, who, it was learned, would soon be knocking hell out of us in a new form of training which was to be inspired by the new giant Adjutant. A smart little W.V.S. lady, who generally accompanied the Captain with a limp, and a typist with rimless spectacles formed the feminine element of the party.

A Sunday “house warming” party marked the opening of the Headquarters. A liberal draft of beer and spirits moved the feelings of the large party of Home Guard officers and high-ranking officials from other war-time services to an outlook of friendliness and co-operation on a scale previously undreamed of. Lieut.-Colonel Kentish had taken over command in real earnest. So this formidable team settled down to work.

The Section Commander was summoned to attend a C.O.’s conference, where he was introduced to the officers who have already been described. He was informed that the section would now become the Battalion H.Q. Platoon, providing personnel for defence, Signals and Intelligence. The platoon would have to furnish a night guard of three men at H.Q. and all the necessary specialists would start training at once. A Signals Officer, Lieutenant Chater, of “E” Company had been appointed – whilst the Section Commander, who would now command the new platoon, was required to study communications with a view to its development within the

Battalion area which comprised about 125 square miles. Communication equipment at that time consisted of one G.P.O. telephone at Battalion H.Q.

When the Signals Officer descended on the waiting and expectant platoon to give his introductory talk on Signals, he was introduced to the men at North Dean Village Hall by Lieutenant Waddington, the Intelligence Officer, who, incidentally had also made a requisition for men for Intelligence work after the initial sorting out had been completed. A few introductory words by Lieutenant Chater on the subject of signals and then the men were ordered to parade on the village green, where they were given flags – much to the delight of the small children standing by – and the most weird but spectacular motley of flag-wagging followed. Lieutenant Chater seemed well pleased with this beginning, and took down names and particulars of a number of potential signallers. Unfortunately the men did not feel that way about the cold douche they had received. The change of outlook was too rapid for them, and the same night the Platoon Commander received a deputation of N.C.O.s who had previously shown so much enthusiasm in the defence scheme of North Dean village, expressing strong disapproval at the treatment which made them and their previous qualifications seem redundant. To a man they wished to give up their stripes. Persuasion, however, prevailed, and by the end of the first month a section was busy on Signals training and another on the adaptation of schemes for the defence of Battalion Headquarters.

An extremely capable man, by name Kerridge, had throughout his service with the Home Guard carried on a “one man” signals course, based on his experience in the Navy, and had interested one or two junior members in the mysteries of the flag, lamp and buzzer. These men were to prove an important nucleus in the plans which followed.

Meanwhile the Platoon Commander began a survey of the Battalion area, as a foundation to the work of setting up intercommunication between the five companies and Battalion H.Q. The plan for this work had to be evolved in the painful knowledge that no signalling equipment had been, or at that time was likely to be, issued for the purpose, the area to be covered was relatively vast, the companies widely separated and Company Commanders little interested in anything outside strictly Company affairs. The weight of influence now issuing from Battalion H.Q. was, however, to change all that, and co-ordination embracing the whole Battalion began to take shape. The knowledge that the Battalion as such had a late start was a painful realisation. Other Battalions, it was learned, had evolved specialist branches and were able to “lay on” schemes involving the whole Battalion. This applied particularly to urban units, such as obtained in High Wycombe. Undaunted by that knowledge, however, the work went ahead under the most efficient leadership of Colonel Kentish, who was always ready to give sympathetic consideration to any constructive scheme which would be likely to promote growth to the Battalion. At one and the same time he commanded respect, reflected friendliness, gave

considerable scope to the triers, and took a personal interest in individuals without harmful partiality. These qualities had a great effect in encouraging junior Officers, N.C.O.s and the men to make efforts well beyond that which might be considered reasonable even for keen Home Guards. The result was that by the early part of 1943 not only had the H.Q. Platoon evolved signallers trained and qualified on Army standards, but equipment in the form of signalling lamps with a range of upwards of five miles in daylight, buzzers and sundry other equipment, in sufficiency to enable the Platoon Commander who by that time had taken over the actual duty of Signals Officer, to put a signals plan for the Battalion into operation.

Lieutenant Chater continued the good work of Signals Training which towards the end of 1942 had extended to the companies, each having its own signals section under the direction of the Battalion Signals Officer.

The signals plan which had been evolved had peculiarities and features not common to any other Battalion in Bucks Sub-District. Briefly the scheme consisted of a series of signals stations forming a perimeter round battalion H.Q. and adjacent to Company H.Qs. Their position was determined on the basis of visual signalling by lamp. Two of these stations were manned by signallers attached to Battalion H.Q., while companies supplied signallers for other stations and generally there were two per company. Thus it will be seen that a comparatively large number of signallers had to be trained in order to man these stations. The home-made lamps were really a revelation, and did great credit to the men who by great industry produced them. A particularly enterprising and skilled signaller was discovered in "C" Company, Second Lieutenant Higgs, who eventually took over the duties of Signals Training Officer from Lieutenant Chater and became an able assistant to the Battalion Signals Officer. He produced good results both in visual signalling and line work. At Battalion H.Q. a signals office was constructed which in layout was admirably adapted to the use for which it was required. Much talk had been heard of the help the G.P.O. would give in the matter of communications if only approached in the right way. The Signals Officer had no difficulty in persuading Lieutenant Pratchett of the G.P.O. Home Guard, High Wycombe, to co-operate. This officer proved to be of the utmost help. Nothing seemed too much trouble to him and he appeared delighted to work with a headquarters that had a plan. Very soon after his introduction arrangements were made to superimpose a group of telephone systems on the visual plan now in existence, the G.P.O. to supply the equipment on loan. Thus a rapid means of H.Q. communication was set up between Battalion H.Q. and each of the five Company H.Qs.

The first demonstration, which was given on the third birthday of the Home Guard, attracted the attention of the Battalion as a whole as well as the public to the big developments within the 4th Bucks Battalion H.Q. organisation during the previous nine months.

It was decided on that occasion to depart from the usual form of birthday parade with a route march and brass band as the one and only item on the programme. The march took place in the morning and the Commanding Officer took the salute at North Dean amidst a large number of spectators. The column, led by the Platoon Commander, followed a bugle band of the Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry at 140 to the minute. Notwithstanding that extraordinary speed the route march was covered without mishap, and the platoon returned to North Dean at mid-day to consume nine gallons of beer in brilliant sunshine.

The event of the day was to take place in the afternoon. Plans were prepared in minute detail to demonstrate exactly what the men had been training for during the past nine months, since the Battalion took real shape.

The Village Hall was to be the token Battalion H.Q. On the stage a signals office had been set out. The Intelligence Section was under the direction of Lieutenant Blake, the former Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Waddington having become Second in Command of the Battalion. Blake had made a splendid show, covering practically the entire wall area of the hall with diagrams and the like familiar in an Intelligence room. The scheme to be carried out was one to demonstrate how communications worked from Battalion H.Q. to companies, and how the Intelligence and Signals operated together. Two token Company H.Qs. were set up, one at Speen and the other at the Harrow public-house in Hughenden Valley. Communications set up were field lines, D.Rs., wireless sets No.38 (borrowed and seen for the first time on that occasion), pigeons, cyclists and runners.

A large number of the public witnessed this very successful demonstration. The scheme was explained to them as it proceeded by Lieutenant Turner by the aid of a loud speaker. Lieut.-Colonel Ward, Oxford and Bucks Light Infantry, the inspecting officer, was literally astounded at what he saw and heard, and expressed great satisfaction. An indication of the impression the whole demonstration made on him may be gleaned from the fact that on the following morning he visited the village and inadvertently went to the Village Hall, thinking it was the 4th Battalion H.Q.!

The first real test came on the night of July 10th-11th, 1943 in Exercise Intercom I, involving Sector H.Q. and the 4th and 7th Battalions. The purpose of the exercise was to test communications, Intelligence procedure and co-ordination of both from Sector down to Company level. The scheme was prepared by the Sector Commander, Colonel Reynolds. Duration of the exercise was from 4 a.m. to 10 a.m. As against the single G.P.O. line telephone, which was the only physical means of communication available for us at Battalion H.Q. when it moved into its headquarters at North Dean less than twelve months previously, the alternatives available during this exercise were, visual signals to each Company, field telephones to each

Company, group system, line telephone, D.Rs, pedal cyclists and runners. The total number of registered messages handled by the system during the exercise was 469. The signals clerks showed extraordinary ability in handling the messages, and would not have disgraced a Signals office manned by the Royal Corps of Signals.

At the subsequent conference it was disclosed that the 4th Battalion had put up an extraordinarily good show.

By July 1943 the outlook of the H.Q. troops, then some seventy strong, had changed to a radical degree. Men were thinking in terms of a Battalion area to be organised for defence instead of a village which, previously, had been the only idea in their minds.

A second big communications exercise for the entire sector came on October 24th, 1943. Again the Battalion received a remarkably good report, and at the conference which followed it was highly commended for the results achieved. The analysis records adequately demonstrated that, notwithstanding the delayed start the 4th Battalion had against other Battalions in the sector, it had more than made good by comparison at this stage.

After the exercise the Battalion, at the request of Bucks sub-district, organised a demonstration of Battalion H.Q. functioning in a battle for the benefit of all Signals and Intelligence Officers in the sub-district. The C.S.O. Eastern Command, Brigadier Murphy, attended the demonstration as well as some Battalion Commanders. Officers were shown round the Headquarters in parties and full explanation given of all equipment and the methods employed. It was a well organised event, and the Battalion was highly complimented by Brigadier Murphy. The gathering of some 60 to 70 officers expressed keen approval of what they had seen, and it drew from the Commander of an adjacent sector a request to repeat the show for the benefit of all his officers.

Shortly after that demonstration the Signals Officer was moved to sector to organise and take charge of communications at that Headquarters. Lieutenant Crockett was appointed Signals Officer in his place and Lieutenant Parsons in charge of the H.Q. platoon. Both these officers had rendered valuable service and had at all times given the fullest support possible in their respective spheres.

Interest throughout the platoon was at all times at a high level. Training at H.Q., whether specialist or otherwise, largely took the form of active exercises after the basic training period had been completed. Throughout the Battalion more than 70 dispatch riders were given a special course and more than 100 trained signallers stood on the register at one time. In the signals tests finally organised by Bucks Sub-District, with Royal Corps of Signals examiners, the 4th Battalion was credited with the greatest number of passes in Central Sector, Bucks Home

Guard. Thus, regardless of the handicap of a late start, men rose from a humble section to hold premier place in the Home Guard Battalions in the county. Extraordinary talent, previously dormant, was discovered and developed, and men of all ranks of the H.Q. platoon feel proud that their job of work in the country's time of trial was well and truly done.

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These personal memories appear in HOME GUARD BUX 4 – Records and Reminiscences of The 4th Buckinghamshire Battalion Home Guard by Lieut.-Colonel L. W. Kentish, D.S.O.