

Osterley Park Home Guard Training School 1940

The Osterley Park Home Guard training school was the UK's first official training centre for the Home Guard, established in July 1940 by Spanish Civil War veteran Tom Wintringham. It was set up to teach Home Guard volunteers, who were often undertrained, how to fight as a resistance force against a German invasion, using guerrilla warfare and urban combat tactics. The school was short-lived as a civilian-run institution, as the military took it over after just three months, but its model was replicated at other training centres.

- **Purpose:** To train the Home Guard in effective combat techniques for repelling an invasion, including guerrilla warfare, urban combat, and using improvised weapons.
- **Founder:** Tom Wintringham, a journalist and Spanish Civil War veteran, established the school on July 10, 1940.
- **Training Methods:** Wintringham taught skills like using shadow and cover, improvised grenades (like the satchel bomb), and the Molotov cocktail.
- **Government Suspicion:** Wintringham's left-wing political views and the school's innovative, less conventional training methods caused suspicion within the government.
- **Official Takeover:** The military took control of the Osterley Park school within three months of its opening, but they based their new, official training schools on Wintringham's model.

Key Aspects of the School:

- **Curriculum:** The courses, typically two days long, moved beyond conventional military drills and covered practical skills such as:
 - Guerrilla warfare and street fighting.
 - Hand-to-hand and knife combat, taught by Canadian Bert "Yank" Levy.
 - Camouflage techniques, taught by surrealist painter Roland Penrose.
 - The creation of home-made explosives and incendiary devices (like Molotov cocktails), taught by Major Wilfred Vernon.
 - Methods to disable enemy vehicles, such as deflating tyres.

The 9th Earl of Jersey, a friend of the school's sponsor, allowed the use of the grounds and some estate workers' houses at Osterley Park, a stately home in Middlesex (now West London). Although thousands of volunteers attended the courses and the school gained international fame, it faced disapproval from the War Office and Winston Churchill due to Wintringham's communist background and the fear of creating an armed, politically radical civilian force. The government took over the school in September 1940 and closed it in 1941, absorbing its innovative training methods and staff into new, officially approved Home Guard schools across the country.

In a regular newspaper article, "I See Life", journalist Charles Graves wrote about his experiences training as a Home Guard at Osterley Park at the end of July 1940, and this seems to have been during

that period of transition when Churchill decided that the Local Defence Volunteers would be re-named the Home Guard, which took place on July 22nd 1940. Some of the men seen in the pictures are still wearing LDV armbands *below*:



ON THE MARCH TO A LECTURE: Members of the Home Guard on their way to a field in the grounds of Osterley Park, where lectures and demonstrations are given by experts

'Although the Osterley Park Training School has been open for less than a fortnight, it wouldn't surprise me if its immediate success tempts the War Office into starting 50 or 60 similar schools for Home Guards throughout the country.

By the end of the week dozens of public schools will be closing for the holidays and these would make admirable training centres until the third week in September, when the schools reassemble. The object of the Osterley Park Training School is to provide an intensive two-days course in certain aspects of modern warfare.

It is staffed by a group of men with actual knowledge and experience of fighting in France, Flanders, the North-West Frontier and Spain, with Tom Wintringham, who was a colonel in the International Brigade, as overseer of instruction and personnel. I have just spent three hours there and, as a result, promptly enrolled for the 48-hours Home Guards Course beginning tomorrow at 9 a.m.

The school doesn't teach drill and its aim is to give the largest amount of serviceable information directly related to the conditions of present day fighting in the shortest possible time, and to teach it in such a way that those who take the course will be able to pass on to their own detachment what they have learnt

Now I hear that the Southern Railway are thinking of sending 800 section leaders to take the course. And already big firms like Dickenson's Paper Mills are sending detachments who arrive in their own blue dungaree battle dress, complete with black berets, emergency rations, blankets, rifles, steel helmets and gas masks. What's more their mates do overtime to make up for the two complete days in which they are absent from the works.



Among the instructors at Osterley are four ex-members of the International Brigade, including two Spaniards, one of whom is an ex-matador; the other couple are English soldiers of fortune, and the practical way in which they show you how to lob Molotov bombs *left*, rig up dannert wire, knife sentries and decapitate enemy despatch riders with a coil of thin wire is most stimulating.

The lectures on camouflage and sending messages and so on (two of which I heard) are obviously bang up to date. After all, young Indian Army officers with personal knowledge of guerrilla warfare must be



Stringing a wire across a road.

ideal instructors for what is the Home Guard equivalent of an Army crammer or the Staff College and Camberley. As to which it wouldn't be a bad idea if the Home Guards who do the course could be given the designation of P.M.W. (Passed Modern Warfare) on the principle of P.S.C. (Passed Staff College) for Regular Army officers, and if and when the War Office decide to start a number of similar intensive training centres for Home Guards, all section leaders should, in my humble opinion, be compelled to go to them.'

A short time later Charles Graves wrote another article after having taken the full course:

'Well, that 48-hours intensive guerrilla warfare course at the Osterley Park Training School is first class, and Home Guards taking it derive

much satisfaction when they learn that the aggregate active service of the instructors is 34 years since 1935! It is also good to know that three of them, acting as a sub-section in the International Brigade, disposed of 27 enemy tanks, off their own bat, so to speak. We had only half an hour's instruction in street fighting, but two streets of condemned houses are to be made available, and the owner has given permission for them to be demolished and utilised in any way the instructor in street fighting desires.



A sandbagged rifle nest

When the course ended on Saturday night several Home Guards who came from all over the country, told me that most of what they had learnt was at variance with what they had been taught in their own areas, and wondered how they could tactfully inform their platoon commanders and company commanders, who knew they had gone to take the course. One Home Guard, indeed, said that he had taken the course against the wishes of his company commander.

The answer is, I think, that there are two schools of thought about the duties of the Home Guard.

One is that they should be offensive and the other that they should be defensive. And it looks as though the former is going to win now that the title of Local Defence Volunteers (accent on the defence) has been scrapped. Certainly, the Osterley Park course is bloodthirsty to a degree, but I don't think that any Home Guard who feels slightly anxious about the German warning that we will be treated at *francs-tireurs* (civilian guerillas that should be shot if captured) need worry.

If the Germans by any chance effect a landing in this country their tanks and parachute troops will have no time to take prisoners, whether they are Regular troops or Home Guards. So, we will all be in the same category, and the more we hunt them the better.'

I found a second article about the Osterley Park Home Guard Training School, this was in a different publication, not a newspaper but a magazine called 'The Sphere', however, I think Charles Graves was the author of this too.

'I should say there are no charges. If you want to rough it very slightly for the night you can take your own blankets, and if you apply early enough, they'll find a bed for you. There is a batman to cook your rations for breakfast, and to call you. Otherwise, an hotel is not far away.

At the head is the expert Tom Wintringham, and he has picked men with him. They give their services and prefer to remain anonymous, but they are an Indian Army officer from the Sappers; and ex-R.N.A.S. officer who was much in Spain; a gunnery expert; an expert in field tactics; an Englishman who fought in the last war in the French army, won the Croix e Guerre and the Medaille Militaire and never seems to have stopped fighting somewhere, and three Spaniards who are giving their services after their experiences in their own county. Philipe, an Asturian miner, and Antonia, a toreador, were dynamite experts, while Ricardo, a medical student, became a brigade leader.



Parade was at 9 o'clock and clothing was varied from uniforms to old trousers, sports coat and mackintosh, because work goes on wet or fine. At Osterley they concentrate on teaching attack. There is no drilling – the less of that they think, the better. Practical information talks are given in a large and shady field *left*, in which a cunningly camouflaged marquee can be used in case

of rain. The first talk dealt with war generally. One instructor explained, "It is no good having a 'namby-pamby' attitude. For years the Germans have instilled a war mentality, until they forget everything but war. Some people still have the peace mentality.

The Germans have no mercy or compunction. I say if you see a German soldier and can shoot him unawares in the back, then shoot him. If you are defending a house, the peace mentality will say, what nice furniture – must have cost a lot - have to be careful. No, smash the furniture to build a good barricade, knock down a wall to get a good field of fire."

Lunchtime makes a welcome break and four minutes' walk away is a real country pub. Bread, pork pies, veal and ham pies, sausage rolls, sausages, pickled onions and cheese, and good beer washed it down.

In one section there were a general, two colonels, a distinguished man about town of the old days and an advertising director of a famous firm. They were being taught the use of cover, and how to approach silently. One lesson was demonstrated by masking a man completely, seating him on the ground and placing a bunch of keys between his legs. The object was to obtain the keys before he could point out your position. They soon found that crawling, even upwind, was too noisy. The knack is to walk with

bent knees, one hand on each, placing the feet carefully in a straight line. In that position you are balanced and can stop dead in a fraction of a second. It was a joy to watch the excitement of a man who, after three minutes of circuitous creeping, reached the keys.

For the practical use of cover there is a fine wood nearby with plenty of undergrowth (and brambles). The instructor stood in the centre and the class scattered 200 yards round him. Then, crawling, they had to get as near him undetected as they could, while he pointed out to each how he had given himself away. One man got quite near and then stood behind a tree. But he had not the build. "Sorry, you'll have to stand sideways," came the rebuke.

To end the first day came talks and questions on guerilla tactics and street fighting, so crammed with practical experience as to be bloodthirsty. Out came the notebooks again and down went the important points for repetition to colleagues. It was grand stuff, as most of them said when at 6.30 the first day ended.



8.30 next morning saw no absentees. A half hour on messages, another on German Tactics to Expect, and then it came to the teaching of the throwing of bombs *left*. The Spaniards came into their own. Light cement dummies of the right size and shape were used. It looked simple enough. No. 1 position, left leg forward, knee bent (I am talking for a righthanded man), both hands in front. No. 2, right arm back, left arm and shoulder pointed as for a javelin throw, and No. 3, the hurl, following through flat on the face in one movement, with no curiosity to see where it has gone or what the effect was, if you are wise. But it's not as simple as it looks. One man nearly hit the front rank man lying only five yards ahead of him. Others reached thirty yards. It was clear how they improved with practice.

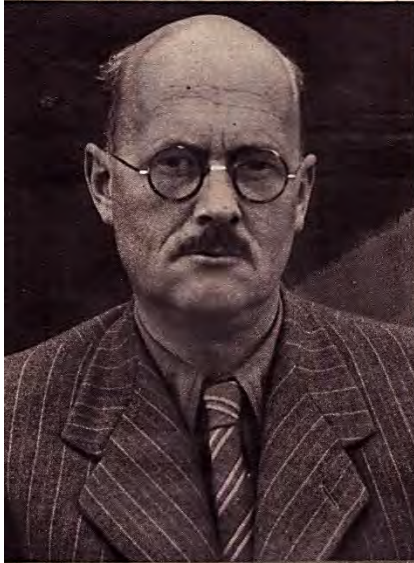


REPRESENTING A TANK: A car pulling a trailer—a supposed tank—over the landmine. For obvious reasons only a small quantity of black powder is used in the carrying out of these demonstrations

And so, to vivid talks of anti-tank fighting, and then practical work. A car drawing a farm van *left*, represented a tank as it roared down the road. Cunningly concealed ahead was a blockhouse. The 'motor-cyclists' – enthusiastic boys on bicycles, were allowed to pass, to be dealt with by trip wire and rifles, while the tank came on. The blockhouse opened fire, to which the tank replied, its attention drawn from pits either side from which poured a shower of bombs as it drew level. The road and surroundings were perfect for this demonstration, which I have outlined very briefly. One bomb pit, which is correct, I

noticed was so shallow that a tank passing over it would not crumble the edges, and so narrow that it would be safe to lie in it and let the tank pass over.

SOME OF THE MEN WHO TEACH AT THE HOME GUARD SCHOOL



Tom Wintringham

Director of Training. From 1916-18 he fought in France. He went to the Spanish War as a journalist. He stayed there to become the first commander of the British Battalion of the International Brigade. In this war, Wintringham's articles in *PICTURE POST* and elsewhere have established him as one of our best-known military writers. The taking over of the school by the Government gives official approval to the campaign to give proper training to the Home Guard.



Peter Wyatt-Foulger

Commanding officer. In the last war he was a captain in France and the Near East, commanding infantry, armoured vehicles and machine-guns. Now he lectures on anti-aircraft musketry. When Home Guard members report at the school for a course, he forms them into platoons and appoints temporary officers. He disposes the rifle unit and anti-aircraft sentries in readiness for low-flying aircraft. If German aircraft fly overhead, he directs ground fire against them.



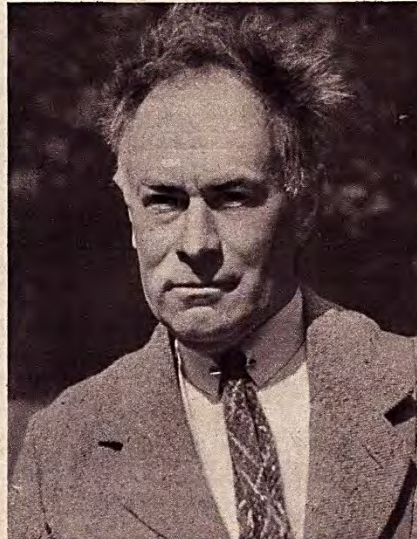
Hugh Slater

Expert in the tactics of modern warfare. Learnt street fighting in the International Brigade in Spain. Found out how to destroy tanks in command of the British Anti-Tank Battery later in the same war. In 1938 he was appointed Chief of Operations XV Brigade Staff and was engaged in the planning of the successful crossing of the Ebro in 1938. When not fighting wars, is a painter and journalist.



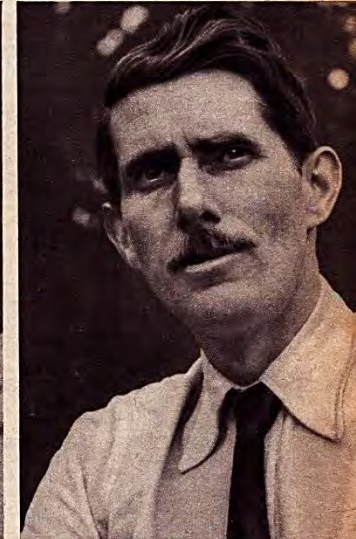
Stanley White

One of the chief instructors of the Boy Scouts' Association. He learnt scouting from Baden-Powell himself. Now he passes on his knowledge of scouting, stalking, patrolling to the Home Guard. By Boy Scout training games he teaches them to be "first-class irregulars." Besides instructing at Osterley, he is also in charge of the headquarters of the Boy Scouts at Giltwell Park, Essex.



Wilfred Vernon

The mixer of Molotoff Cocktails and dispenser of improvised explosives. During the last war he was senior technical officer at the Felixstowe Air Station (R.N.A.S.). Later he became aircraft designer. Now instructs in how to tackle parachutists and aircraft, how to improvise mines and grenades, how to identify enemy planes and put them out of action. Wilfred Vernon is the ideas man who stages the mock warfare devices, and invents new ways of making bombs.



Roland Penrose

Lecturer and practitioner in camouflage. By profession he is a member of an organisation carrying out camouflage schemes for factories and Government departments. By leaning, he is a surrealist painter. He has exhibited his modern paintings all over the world. In his spare time he teaches the principles of successful camouflage to the members of the Home Guard.

Well, that is something of what is being taught and what the Home Guard enthusiasts are learning and passing on. In this article I have omitted, of necessity, certain details of the training; but I do emphasise

that the Osterley Training School is a pioneer, and I congratulate the organisers on their efficiency. It only remains for the idea to be developed all over the country. I trust and believe that it will be; and that very soon there will be a measure of uniformity in the training of all those who are determined that never will this soil be yielded up without the bitterest struggle.'