

THE MILITARY INTELLIGENCE CORPS AT WENTWORTH WOODHOUSE

I originally thought it would be virtually impossible to find anything much about the history of Wentworth Woodhouse during the Second World War, when it was used by the Army, and specifically by the Military Intelligence Corps., because of the Official Secrets Act, or its wartime equivalent; but I find that there is one film about the military use of the House during and after the War; and three published works about the work of the Corps - one history and two memoirs by men who received training at Wentworth Woodhouse.¹

The film is particularly exciting, since it was made in 1944 and deals with the motorcycle training course which the Army ran at Wentworth Woodhouse, which lasted three weeks, and aimed to teach recruits, not only how to ride a motorbike but how to maintain one, and eventually how to 'rough riding' over an obstacle course, and in particular, how to deal with a machine which stalled while going uphill. Answer: lay the machine on the ground, grapple with it so that it is pointing downhill, pick it up, mount it, and kick-start it so as to go down, before attempting to ride back up again.

The film can be viewed online, in two versions, short (15 minutes) and long (28 minutes). Both versions were shot in colour and both have the short title *Dear Sergeant*; and both are silent, except for the old-style martial music on the longer version. The first may be found at www.yorkshirefilmarchives.com/film, the second at www.hitchcocksmotorcycles.com.² Each takes us briefly through a course, from the arrival of the new recruits at Elsecar(?) Station, to their first clumsy attempts to ride their machines - some of them have great difficulty in kickstarting them - to their trips out on the road (near Hoover, or up to a village on the moors which looks to me like Bolsterstone, or through the street of a town, which has been identified as Eldon Street, Barnsley). Some of them take a tumble, more than once into a hedge; but none seems the worse for wear, and by the film finishes, they have mastered their machines, and they 'pass out', in the military sense.

Although the film is more exciting, the history and the memoirs are of broader interest, because between them they tell us the entire history of the Military Intelligence Corps at Wentworth Woodhouse, from 1942 through to 1946(?), four years when it evidently played a vital role in the war effort, and when training of many types other than motorcycling was given.

The history is by a well known military historian, Nick Van Der Bijl and is entitled *Sharing the Secret: The History of the Intelligence Corps 1940-2010* (Pen & Sword, Barnsley, 2013). The passages about Wentworth are as follows:

¹ The Appendix contains two newspaper reports which I found in the British Newspaper Archive.

² Melvyn and Joan Jones have a DVD of this film.

To cater for US forces arriving in southern England and to meet the enlargement of the Intelligence Corps, the majestic Wentworth Woodhouse country seat of the Fitzwilliam family, six miles from Sheffield, was selected as HQ Intelligence Corps. The Corps establishment had risen from 492 officers and 2,427 other ranks in January 1941 to 1,560 and 3,492 within the year. In late October 1942, the Depot, Quartermasters and Other Ranks' Wing moved into the magnificent stables near the main entrance of the estate while the HQ and Officers' Wing moved into the main house six months later. The cookhouse and NAAFI were located in the riding school. Towards the end of the war, military training took place at Beaumaris in North Wales. Intakes of about eighty undertook a twenty-eight week course managed by 2 (Training) Company.

After arriving at Rotherham Station on Tuesdays from training regiments, the new platoon were issued with bedding and allocated to double-tiered beds in Nissen huts.³ Furniture was sparse and the ablutions basic. After tea, the platoon was issued with leather motor-cycling coats, helmets and gauntlets from the Company Quartermaster and the next day were allocated their motor-cycles from a mix of about 120 machines that included BSA 500ccs, Norton 16s, Ariel 350ccs, 350cc Royal Enfields and Matchless GL3s from several sheds. Divided into sections of six under an instructor, the next three weeks were spent learning to ride on a cinder track and then roads and finally conquering the hazards of cross-country, negotiating obstacles from climbing slag heaps to streams and a bear pit. Only sand was missing, although mud and water was not. The last two days was spent on tests. In spite of crashes, spills and sometimes terminal damage to the bikes, only one soldier is thought to have been seriously injured when his machine caught fire.

The course was generally considered to be great fun, as it had been in 1939. This intake was not expected to do guards or fatigues. The training schedule was usually 8.45am to 6.30pm, Monday to Saturday. Recreation was not forgotten, with lorries taking off-duty soldiers to Rotherham and Sheffield either for a night out or a weekend's leave. The platoon then moved into rooms in the stables, each named after a famous British battle⁴ and more luxurious with single beds and hot and cold water, and a three-week phase of learning British Army organization and administration, weapon training, drill, physical fitness and obstacle crossing, report writing and map reading.

The third phase of three weeks was reinforcing military training by exercising on the Yorkshire moors. Finally, an intensive fortnight was spent on Field Security at the School of Military Intelligence, first at Matlock and then, from 1945, at Frensham, near Farnham, Surrey. Some students spent a

³ Shown in the film referred to above.

⁴ The film referred to above clearly shows that one of the battles was Corunna (fought in 1809).

week with the Sheffield City Police Criminal Investigation Department learning investigation and the application of forensic evidence. On passing out from training the platoon was posted to 3 (Holding) Company in the Nissan hut complex to await their movement orders. Activities included further driver training.

Among those who trained at Wentworth Woodhouse was Sapper Justin Brooke, a Finnish and Swedish speaker, who had been a member of the 1936 Public Schools Exploring Society expedition to Finland. When, in November 1939, the Soviet Union, then allied to Germany, attacked Finland, he was among several thousand volunteers who assisted the Finns defeat the Red Army. Many stayed after the ceasefire and deployed along the Soviet border; however, when the volunteers were demobilized in May 1940, many were trapped in Finland by the German occupation of Denmark and Norway. Brooke spent the next year learning Finnish and then, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union in June 1941, the volunteers travelled by train to Sweden and were flown to RAF Leuchars on the weekly diplomatic flight. Brooke returned in April 1942 and when asked why he had not answered his 1940 call-up papers, he replied that he had been in Finland. After basic training with 1 Training Battalion Royal Engineers in Clitheroe, he took a language test in London with two corporals and passed out from Wentworth as a member of the Intelligence Corps."

At the beginning of July [1945?] an officer and four other ranks from Intelligence Corps (Field) were among the first to collect 'demob' suits and join the search for employment as the War Office responded to the dire economic circumstances in Great Britain by beginning to disband its wartime Armed Forces and returning requisitioned properties to their owners. Demobilization was based on age and length of service and soon gathered pace, gaps being filled by existing Intelligence Corps and transferees. The Corps establishment stood at 3,027 officers and 6,585 other ranks. The Interrogation Wing in Cambridge closed and the Intelligence School moved from Matlock to Frensham in Surrey, where it remained for a year before moving again to the former Detailed Interrogation Centre at Wilton Park, Beaconsfield. Wentworth Woodhouse was returned to the Fitzwilliam family and to sorry decline. The HQ and Depot moved to Oudenarde Barracks, Aldershot.

[There are then several paragraphs dealing with service in the Far East].

In Germany in July 1946, as the British Military Government transferred control of the British Zone to the Control Commission for Germany (British Element), HQ Intelligence Corps (Field) transferred its responsibilities to the 2,500-strong Intelligence Division in Herford and disbanded. A last act of its Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Hockliffe, was

to move the School of Military Intelligence to Wentworth Barracks, Herford⁵, where it became the Intelligence School (Germany). The administration and training of Intelligence Corps in Germany and Berlin devolved to 273 FSS."

The first memoir is that of a Frenchman Maurice Vila, who managed to escape from France and wrote later about his experiences in Britain, in *My War in Two Armies*, published by the BBC in 2005 as part of an archive of World War Two memories, on www.bbc.co/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/65a7855365.shtml. The relevant section relates to the preparations for D-Day in 1943 (and therefore to the European theatre of war). It is interesting that Vila tells us that motor cycle maintenance as part of his training, but he does not specifically refer to the motorcycle course referred to above.

On the 17th April 1942 I successfully passed a medical examination in Hounslow for National Service and on the 18th September that year I attended an army interview selection test also in Hounslow. I finally received my call-up to the British Army on the 22nd February 1943 with instructions to report on the 4th March to the General Service Corps, Chichester Barracks, Sussex, where I was enlisted and became Private Vila No 14549494 of No 9 Squad, No 2 Coy, No 10 Primary Training Centre. While I was undergoing military training at Chichester I made an application for service in the Intelligence Corps as I thought this would give me the opportunity of serving in a unit where a knowledge of languages was a useful qualification.

My posting to the Intelligence Corps finally arrived and I left Longmoor Camp on the 13th July 1943. On my way I spent the night at my home in London (then still at 112 Edith Road, West Kensington, W14) and left the following day for my new training depot of the Intelligence Corps at Wentworth Woodhouse, near Rotherham, Yorkshire, in the No 2 Company. During training at Wentworth, all soldiers retained their previous regiment's denomination (in my case a sapper) and as a result there was a wide variety of service personnel from different units. The training there was more intensive and strenuous than anything I had done before; it included a three weeks' course at Smedley's Hydro at Matlock, Derbyshire, where we attended lectures on all aspects of security. I completed my training at the Wentworth Depot in October 1943. The training included motor cycle maintenance, as these machines were to be our normal method of transport.

I was then posted to No 49 Field Security Section which was stationed at Fort William, Inverness-shire, on the 6th October with the rank of Lance Corporal in the Intelligence Corps.⁶

⁵ Herford is in North Rhine, Westphalia, in Germany. It is interesting that they had a barracks there named Wentworth!

The second memoir is by a Canadian and is entitled: *Translating the Devil: Captain Llewellyn C Fletcher Canadian Army Intelligence Corps In Post War Malaysia and Singapore*" by Gordon D. Feir (Lulu Publishing Services, 2014). It is interesting that Fletcher tells us that he received very little training at all at Wentworth Woodhouse! But conditions were now very different, since Fletcher's military service was undertaken after the end of the War in Europe, and indeed after the end of the War with Japan. On the other hand, Fletcher does mention the notorious open-cast mining conducted in the gardens of Wentworth Woodhouse, on the orders of 'Manny' Shinwell;⁷ and he does give us an outsider's view of Yorkshire as a whole.

[1946] After six days in Bramshot Camp, we were transferred to the British intelligence Corps Depot in Earl Fitzwilliam's palace, Wentworth Woodhouse, four miles from the city of Rotherham in Yorkshire County. The beginnings of the palace estate stretch back 700 years, but it reached its highest importance as the home of Charles the First's ill-fated administrator, Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Stafford, and its present buildings are only about 300 years old. What a fascinating palace with a frontage of 600 feet, exceeded only by that of Buckingham Palace! It has 365 rooms and is situated on an artistically landscaped holding of 250 acres. Here we saw the greatest in European architecture, sculpture, art, and the trophies of hunting and armour of feudal days.

To visit the Great Rooms and reflect on all that had happened there, walk the corridors, visit the orchards, herds of deer, mausoleum and cupolas, and other special buildings was to take a walk through British history from the Age of Elegance of the British aristocracy. Even the horse stables possessed grandeur in architecture and furnishings superior to most homes.

Wandering over the estate of Earl Fitzwilliam's Wentworth Woodhouse, one keeps running unexpectedly into all sorts of cozy nooks, arbours, walks, gardens, parks, swimming pools, acres of greenhouses and so on. At one place I came on a doorway over which was the inscription,

*There is healing in a garden,
When one longs for peace and pardon;
Once past the gate, no need to wait'*

⁶ I was very interested to see this man's posting to Scotland, because a year or two ago my wife and I visited the *Musée du Debarquement no 4 Commando* in Ouistreham (the port of Caen), where they have an exhibition, and a film, concerning the French servicemen who trained at Spean Bridge, prior to the D-Day landings in June 1944. I presume these must have included Maurice Vila. Spean Bridge is only ten miles from Fort William.

⁷ See in particular Catherine Bailey's *Black Diamonds* (Penguin, 2008); and Roy Young's *The Big House and the Little Village* (Wentworth Garden Centre, 2000 & 2011). There is also a very good photo in the House itself.

For God is in the garden.

I entered and started down a dark spiral staircase that made me wonder if I were descending into one of those mysterious medieval dungeons that we read about in our story books. A rustling sound in the weird half-light startled me for a moment till I realized it was not a ghostly visitation, but only the wind rustling dead leaves. Upon reaching the bottom, much to my surprise I really did emerge through a doorway into a garden, a most artistic one with rocks, shrubs, and places where a myriad variety of flowers bloomed in season. Near the centre was an ancient locked stone lodge. Carefully placed in the garden and its surroundings were beautifully artistic examples of classical statuary. In England we reflected on the history of the aristocracy and their majestic estates. Their first ancestors stole their great holdings by force and became the feudal lords, sometimes being called the 'robber barons'. Their successors made their castles, palaces and grounds centres of art and culture, from which the great masses were excluded. 'The Revenge of Time' has changed all this.

During World War II the government occupied many of these for military purposes. Some of the nobility have been taxed out of existence or have become tourist guides in the proud houses of their ancestors, but now government-owned museums. So today they belong to the masses, who tread their ancient courts and view their great works of art, sculpture and architecture. It was a long time before some of us discovered that the present Earl was a modest British colonel of high caliber and shared our lot, undistinguished from any other officers. The government allowed him to maintain a few special rooms for his own family. Our stay here did have a very unpleasant feature. Never had we suffered so much from cold. Coal was of necessity rationed, but even in normal times, the British, so progressive in other respects, had never learned to warm their buildings, at least according to Canadian standards."

Other Ranks were unable to secure enough coal to warm the Quonset huts, except at the start of day.⁸ Even officers, who occupied single rooms in the palace, each with its own fireplace, could not secure enough coal for warmth for any length of time. Listening to the weird wind whistling down the hallways helped us to understand why so many palaces and castles were thought to be haunted. A very ornate drawing-room with an architecturally artistic fireplace was our Officers Lounge.

A few of the more corpulent British officers shut off the heat from the fireplace, first by facing it to warm their fronts, then by turning round to

⁸ A Quonset hut was a pre-fabricated, corrugated metal hut, based on the earlier Nissen hut, but developed in the USA. The writer was probably referring to Nissen huts; but understandably, since he was from Canada, called them by the North American name.

warm their behinds. A few feet away trying to type at a writing table, I found my fingers blue and numb with cold. Our British comrades said, "What's the matter with you Canadians, always complaining about the cold, when you come from a country with a very cold winter climate?" Our reply was somewhat sarcastic, "In our country fire is something to keep us warm not just to look at in a fireplace."

Ironically, the palace estate sat on a rich seam of coal, as did much of the surrounding farmland, which was being strip-mined right up to the buildings. The dredges put subsoil and shale in one pile and top soil in another, digging to a depth of about sixty feet. Other dredges scooped out the nine foot deep seam of coal. Then the soil was put back and leveled off. In a year or two the lush grass or grain fields covered all traces of mining operations. We had few other dislikes besides lack of heat. However, one perhaps is worth mentioning, the antiquated toilet facilities and the toilet paper, which was but a slight improvement over sandpaper.

At Wentworth Woodhouse we didn't have much training in preparation for our service in Asia, so spent as much time as possible seeing all we could, singly or in groups. I went to London for another visit and called at the University of London School of Asiatic Studies, where our British comrades at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, had received their linguistic training. That night, together with a variety of other Allied officers, I was a dinner guest again of Mrs. Agnew, one of the hostesses of the Overseas League. The next evening, in a box near that of the Royal Family at Royal Albert Hall, we heard the London Symphony orchestra render selections from Beethoven and Brahms.

Upon returning from our Scottish tour to our military headquarters at Wentworth Woodhouse in Rotherham, Yorkshire, I joined a party of Canadian personnel who were taken for a visit to a Dutch refugee community. The main function of this place was the rehabilitation of Dutch children who had suffered from malnutrition after the German occupation of Holland.

A visit to York City, county seat of Yorkshire, and ancient capital of Britain, was another great adventure. The first thing that strikes a visitor is the nine hundred year old sturdy Roman wall which nearly surrounds the city.⁹ Visiting York Minster and descending the crypt of the church, one finds parts of structures dating back thirteen hundred years. Fifty feet beneath the bottom of the stairway there is even some Roman pavement dating back to about one hundred and fifty AD. The central dome of the cathedral is two hundred feet high and is so wide at the base that it would dwarf a

⁹ A 900 year old Roman wall is a contradiction in terms, since the Roman occupation lasted from approx. 43 CE to approx 310 CE; but at the same time, most of the walls in York are in fact medieval, rather than Roman.

Saskatchewan Wheat Pool Elevator placed under it, if you can imagine such a thing.

Our guide pointed out to us places where some of the bloodiest battles in British history were fought and ruins still remaining from the attacks of the Republican leader, Oliver Cromwell, and his Roundheads or the Royalists under King Charles I. The oldest street in the city, The Shambles, is well preserved as a museum with upper stories projecting over the narrow street so that one could reach out and shake hands across the street. Another unique museum piece was a street preserved as two hundred years ago, entirely under a glass roof, showing pavement, horses and carriages in wax, a palanquin, one of the first fire engines ever to be used, an ancient hearse, store fronts, and other strange exhibits of long ago. On March 13th we were in London again in the cold.

So ends the story, according to the published history and memoirs. While providing a fascinating companion to the film mentioned above (which I feel must have been made for largely commercial purposes, since Hitchcocks were in business to sell motorcycles), they present us with three quite different insights into the activities of the Wentworth Military Intelligence Corps at Wentworth Woodhouse,

Stephen Cooper

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APPENDIX

A search in the British Newspaper Archive for the MIC revealed only two entries, both for 1946. I found these of great interest, because back in the 1980s or 90s, I think I saw an aerial photograph - possibly in the Norfolk Arms pub at the top of White Lane, so not far from the old 'tank factory' at Thorncliffe, where they used to have a Churchill tank on display. I think it had German captions, and was of the local area; and was said to have been taken from a German aircraft, and to indicate possible targets for bombers. The point which locals made was that it seemed to indicate that there must have been a German spy at work locally, at some point.... Anyway, it is interesting that the second newspaper report appended refers to 'captured German documents', in the possession of the M.I.C., which included 'books issued to German bomber crews... with pictures of important targets in the North.'

POSTSCRIPT

Since the above was written Melvyn and Joan Jones have alerted me to the fact that on the back cover of *Chapelton & High Green, The War Years* (A Chapelton & High Green Publication, 1988), there is a photo, taken by the Luftwaffe and showing the Thorncliffe Work at Chapelton, which was found in the map room of German Air Station, near Bremen at the end of the War. This is reproduced below, with kind permission of the Chapelton and High Green Archive. Whether it was part of the sideshow organised by the Military Intelligence Corps at Wentworth Woodhouse in 1946, I know not.

Melvyn Jones writes:, of the photo: "All the departments at Newton Chambers Thorncliffe ironworks are numbered and identified. But not the Tank factory where they made 1,160 Churchill tanks. The firm believed that the various works departments had been identified by a group of Germans who visited the firm in the 1930s to advise on re-organisation of the works. But at that time the Tank factory did not exist, hence it not being identified on the photograph."

It is understood that the intelligence which enabled the Germans to identify the potential targets shown on this photograph may have been gathered by a party of German businessmen, who visited the Thorncliffe Works in the 1930s, whereas (back in the 1970s) I was told that there must have been a spy in the ironworks itself.

Artillery Stage a Mimic Battle

Between the elegant Georgian mansion and parkland scarred by open coal seams, gunners went into action at Wentworth Woodhouse on Saturday.

South Yorkshire crowds enjoyed the smoke and explosions of this mimic battle staged by the Royal Artillery as part of an "At Home" at the Depot of the Intelligence Corps, which is on Earl Fitzwilliam's estate.

It was a realistic demonstration of guns versus armour. Armoured cars were spotted in a wood near the miners' excavators. Crews manning 25-pounders engaged the "enemy" with enthusiasm. Although the ammunition was blank, it lacked nothing in noise and spectators lining the "battlefield" were thrilled.

Keen interest was shown in a display of German maps captured by First Corps troops, who were stationed near Doncaster before the invasion of Normandy. Young visitors handled German anti-tank rifles with insatiable curiosity and broadcast to each other across the lawns on British "walkie-talkie" sets.

The demonstration was attended by Col. J. S. Kemp, Commander of the West Riding Sub-District, who was greeted by Lt.-Col. A. L. Taffs, Commandant of the Depot.

German Bomb Targets

AT the Army's "At Home" at Wentworth Woodhouse on Saturday a fascinating sideshow was the Intelligence Corps' display of captured German documents. With keen curiosity and a sense of relief, Yorkshire visitors examined an invasion map showing Spurn Point, Cleethorpes, and other well-known East Coast places as potential landing points.

Books issued to German bomber crews were seen, with pictures of important targets in the North. Among such vulnerable points I noticed views of Kirkstall power station, Leeds, in an artistic setting of trees. Other places selected by the Germans for the special attention of their bomb-aimers were the I.C.I. works at Billingham, the United Bus Company's garage at Darlington, the Staithes viaduct, a railway bridge at Northallerton, and Whiteley's cable works at Pool-in-Wharfedale. What, I wonder, would Mother Shipton have said if she had known that the Germans also had designs on the glorious bridge which bestrides the river at Knaresborough? This particular illustration was obviously stolen from a picture postcard, for the river was depicted in pre-war gala mood, with many boats gliding down the Nidd.

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Back cover of *Chapelton & High Green, The War Years, 1988*.

