



Frank Colenso

Frank Colenso was involved in the civil defence of Cornwall from the early days of the Second World War. He kept three diaries, in 1939, 1940 and 1942 and has kindly lent these to the Second World War Experience Centre. They give a fascinating insight into the Home Guard and how it became such an important part of British wartime life.

In May 1940, the war had reached a critical stage, the British Army defeated in France, and in full retreat. The port of Falmouth, Cornwall, provided refuge to thousands of the weary servicemen evacuated from France via Dunkirk, in hundreds of vessels ranging from the largest, down to little cabin cruisers. As a Red Cross nurse, my mother, Florrie Colenso nursed many of them at Falmouth Hospital.

In June 1940, the pitifully few who survived the torpedoing and sinking of the SS Lancastria (when hundreds of lives were lost) were landed in Falmouth. This fact was an official secret at the time, although we knew of it, locally. Also arriving were refugees of many nationalities from Holland and Belgium. The Dutch Navy, after the German occupation of Holland, brought its ships and staff to Falmouth harbour to set up a new base to carry on the fight, from our shores.

On 5 July, 1940, the German Luftwaffe preparing for invasion of England, extended its attacks on south coast ports and towns to Cornwall, with their first air-raid and bombing of Falmouth Docks. On 8 July 1940, a bombing air-raid on the town caused damage and casualties. We all knew our country was in peril, Britain unguarded and ill-prepared to defend itself.



Frank Colenso, 20 November 1942 (aged 18) on joining the RAF.



An extract from Frank's 1940 diary.

Partial transcript of 1940 Diary pages:

- 30 June 1940 Perranporth with Nick. 3 hours travelling by bike. dinner and tea there. Went via Truro; returned via St Agnes.
- 5 July 1940 Friday morning post.and afternoon. FIRST AIR RAID. Evening w.shop with Nick.
- 6 July 1940 Morning usual. Afternoon air Raids. Evening with Nick joined L.D.V. CYCLING PATROL.

The next months, until September, later became known as the "Battle of Britain", in Winston Churchill's words, when the Luftwaffe was soundly beaten by the RAF. The plans and preparations of the German invasion of our country abandoned.

On 6 July 1940, in reaction to the air-raid, the locals, aware of the real threat of an imminent German invasion, responded to a call-to-arms, to enlist in the Local Defence Volunteers (LDV).

The Recreation Ground that day was packed with men, women and boys like myself and all had their details recorded. As a youngster, two days off being sixteen, and well below the age limit of seventeen years, I was nonetheless put on the volunteers' list, along with other lads of a similar age, and formed into a special group.

Thus began our service in what was before long to be re-titled "Home Guard", and so we wore our khaki armbands, black-lettered 'LDV', for only a few weeks. Our part in the defence of the town and surrounding country was to be formed into a "cycle patrol", led by the Reverend Lewis, vicar of Penwerris Parish, in Falmouth. On the evening and night patrols through the roads and lanes of the nearby villages the only weapon carried was the vicar's World War One 9mm automatic pistol. Our job was to quietly travel the district, on the look-out for anything unusual or suspicious. We knew the byways and footpaths so well that we hardly had need of maps.



An extract from Frank's 1941 diary.

Partial transcript of 1941 Diary pages:

- 10 September 1941 Usual. Evening lecture with Bill. Guard with Nick (joining RAF next ---) Dog watch. Pay night.
- 11 September 1941 Usual (tired). Home 8.35. Got stiff neck for 2 days now.
- 12 September 1941 Usual. Evening In workshop; finished making plane (smoothing plane).
- 13 September 1941 Usual. Afternoon TOOK RIFLE ALL TO BITS & greased & cleaned it, OK now.

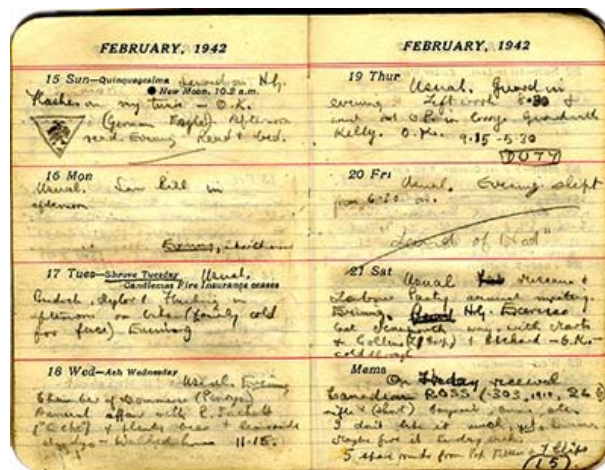
Before long, our evening parades at the DCLI Drill Hall taught us about various weapons, with rifle practise on the .22 calibre rifle indoor range there, progressing to .300 and .303 calibre shooting at Calamansack Range by Helford River. And so we soon got integrated into the Home Guard proper, and our platoon mounted a night guard every sixth night on one of the many guard-posts around Falmouth. One post was on Pennance Golf Club, the course overlooking the bay, one at Pendennis Castle Drive, one at Swanpool Beach Café and one at the Crag Hotel, Maenporth (on the coast) and then at Ponsharden Shipyard on Penryn River at the edge of Falmouth town, and at Trescobeas area.

We dug trench systems, sandbagged parapets, made mortar positions (especially permanent ones), fixed spigots for our Blacker Bombard mortar, where we knew all the ranges of the immediate ground, and the weapon could be quickly mounted and loaded.

We rotated our guards and patrolling by changing places with the other platoons, so we became quite familiar with our countryside. Exercises with the Army were often on a Saturday, all through the night (hoping to get home to a Sunday lunch!) which toughened us up and proved that we had the real advantage in knowing the areas so



well. We could quickly form an ambush to intercept the 'enemy' - then vanish out of sight. "He who fights and runs away, will live to fight another day..." - a good motto for the Guerrilla Platoon, which I later joined as a sniper. We took shooting seriously, on the rifle range. Having each put twopence into a kitty, there were substantial prizes to be won - like one shilling and tenpence for top score! Not much of a win, you may think - but then it would buy three pints of beer at the NAAFI (services canteen) at sevenpence a pint.



An extract from Frank's 1942 diary.

Partial transcript of 1942 Diary pages:

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| 15 February 1942 | Flashes on my tunic OK (German Eagle!) Afternoon read. Evening read & bed. |
| 16 February 1942 | Usual. Saw Bill in afternoon |
| 19 February 1942 | Usual. Guard in evening. Left work 8.30 & went on OP. in lorry. Guard with Kelly. OK. |
| 20 February 1942 | Usual. Museum & Labour Party annual meeting. Evening HG Exercise...cold though. |
| (Mems) | On Friday received Canadian ROSS (.303,1918,246) rifle & (short) bayonet, ammo etc. I don't like it much, yet... Maybe fire it Sunday week. 5 spare rounds... & 7 clips. |

My Home Guard service lasted for two years and two months, by then being old enough to volunteer for the Royal Air Force, in advance of waiting for conscription.



The Second World War Experience Centre
Reproduction of an article from the Centre's website
<http://www.war-experience.org/collections/civilians/alliedbrit/colenso/default.asp>

Coincidentally, during his career in the RAF (Mobile) Repair and Salvage Unit, Frank served with in Burma with [Thomas North](#) who also features on our Personal Experience pages. He sent us a photograph of Cpl North to illustrate, "with his black hair and good show of teeth" why he was nicknamed "Tojo".



Corporal Thomas North.