

Fiction meets fact in wartime 'what-if?' tale

Billed as a wartime story of secrecy and sacrifice, *Private Resistance* explores a re-imagined clandestine struggle on the Home Front. As the play prepares to come to Norwich, **Steve Snelling** looks at the story behind it and examines the truth about Norfolk's guerrilla army.

In the dead of night, a small party of men, their faces smeared with boot polish and streaked with mud, emerge stealthily from their underground lair buried beneath the ruins of Baconsthorpe castle.

They are wearing an assortment of ill-fitting uniforms. Two of them are wearing badgeless cap-comforters and three more have balaclavas.

Their pockets are bulging with hand-grenades and at least one of the party is weighed down with a haversack filled with explosive. All are carrying weapons of one sort or another, from knives to sub-machine guns.

Without a word, they scurry across a road and, like the poachers some of them once were, they make the most of what ever natural cover there is before vanishing into a copse where they are quickly swallowed by the inky darkness.

A few hours later, the rural peace is shattered by a single loud explosion that shakes a nearby roost of rooks into startled flight.

The morning reveals a scene of destruction. A section of railway track, perhaps 25 feet long, has been ripped from the ground and scattered in scorched and ragged fragments across the surrounding fields. Not far away, in a roadside ditch, the bodies of two young German soldiers are found. Their throats have been slit.

It is early September 1940, two months since the German invasion, and this is the first of three so-called 'terrorist' outrages perpetrated against the army of occupation inside a week. A few days later, a fuel storage depot on the outskirts of Holt suddenly erupts in flames. It takes days to bring under control.

Sabotage is suspected and a couple of neighbouring farms are torched in angry reprisal. But worse is to follow. On a quiet country lane near Hunworth, an open top car is sprayed with bullets. Among the dead is a high-ranking Gestapo officer.

The response to the 'assassination' is immediate and ruthless. Fifty hostages, men and boys aged between 13 and 79, are seized, marched to a remote farm, lined up against a ramshackle barn and machine-gunned.

There are no survivors...

Of course, none of this actually happened, but the truth is it might well have done. Had history taken a different course in that extraordinary summer 72 years ago such tragedies of war would almost certainly have been enacted here, in our own backyard.

Indeed, the kind of actions and consequences described may well have proven as commonplace here as they would later come to be in the occupied countries of mainland Europe.

Resistance and retribution would, almost certainly, have been a reality of life and death beneath the swastika in Norfolk. And, hard as it is to imagine a struggle that never happened, the fiction I have sketched is founded on hard fact.

For there really was a secret subterranean bunker below one of Baconsthorpe castle's ruined towers. And there really did exist a band of armed saboteurs, members of so-called Auxiliary Units, whose mission it was to wreak havoc behind enemy lines in the event of a German invasion.

Railway lines and fuel storage depots would have been high on their list of priority targets as they ambushed and harried the enemy with a series of hit-and-run actions.

But just as it is possible to envisage the acts of resistance so it is possible to predict the terrible and terrifying reaction. Based on the evidence of subsequent events in France, Poland, Russia and elsewhere, it is safe to say the make-believe Hunworth 'atrocity' would have been an all too plausible outcome.

All of which, even now, scarcely bears thinking about. And yet that is precisely what Norfolk-based playwright Ivan Cutting wants audiences to do as he compels them to confront the demons and dilemmas of a worst case 1940 scenario.

Private Resistance, an Eastern Angles Theatre Company production currently touring the region, turns history on its head with a drama set in a wartime Britain where the deliverance of Dunkirk has been re-imagined as a disastrous defeat, the battle of Britain has been lost and an invading German army is steadily advancing across the country from its landing sites in the south.

The action is set on the borders of

“Had history taken a different course in that summer 72 years ago such tragedies of war would almost certainly have been enacted here, in our own backyard.”



Suffolk and Essex in the area around Manningtree, near an important railway junction and close to a major port and focuses on a group of disparate characters caught up in the conflict; a doctor's wife, a spirited young ATS recruit, a boy scout desperate 'to get one over Jerry', an injured army officer determined to carry on the fight and a local gamekeeper who knows the lie of the land.

"Basically, it's about a group of people in a tough place," says Ivan.

"It's about the lengths some people are prepared to go to in order to defend their country and to fight for their beliefs. And I hope it will also stimulate audiences to reflect on their own beliefs and principles, why we went to war and so on.

"The play is really about how far we would have gone to try to repel an invasion. A lot of people made a lot of noise about standing up to the Germans, but, of course, if the invasion had actually happened such gung-ho decisions would have been a lot harder to take.

"I'd like to think there are no villains in the show. It's not about just painting one person as a collaborator and one person as not. Most heroics come out of nothing. You don't have time to think about it.

It's about different shades of grey. At what point do actions constitute resistance and at what point do they become collaboration.

"It's very difficult to draw those lines, particularly when you're fighting an enemy on your own door step."

The play, which is directed by Naomi

Jones, drew inspiration from a meeting the 58-year-old Eastern Angles artistic director had with a would-be British resistance fighter more than 20 years ago.

"We were doing a show called *On the Home Front* and I went to interview this guy who had served in the Home Guard," recalls Ivan. "But it turned out that he had actually served with a special force that was linked to the Home Guard. It was one of the Auxiliary Units.

"He told me how they'd built an underground bunker and explained that they were going to disappear down there when the Germans arrived, lie low for a couple of weeks and then pop up behind enemy lines to destroy supply dumps, power lines and things like that. My tongue was hanging out as he spent the next hour telling me all about their training and how they would have tried to tackle the invaders."

Other projects then intervened, but the story stayed lodged in the back of his mind. And, strangely, it was an interest in the wartime French resistance that reawakened his interest. "I was visiting friends in France and we went to a place called Oradour-sur-Glane, a village that was literally destroyed and its people massacred by the Germans in revenge for attacks by the resistance," says Ivan. "And it made me wonder what would have happened here had we faced the same kind of onslaught."

The discovery of the Museum of the British Resistance Organisation at Parham in Suffolk allied to further



research opened his eyes to the extent of the guerrilla network and, so, the play began to take shape.

"I started thinking about what effect the existence of these Auxiliary Units would have had on local people," says Ivan, who is a founder member of Eastern Angles. "Initially, I suspect resistance would not have gone down very well with local people because of the terrible reprisals they would have suffered.

"This is what happened in France. Not everyone was keen on the resistance or willing to be involved with it. Some saw the resistance fighters as a damned nuisance.

"And another aspect of it all that interested me was what might have happened to the hidden bunkers full of explosives and other weaponry.

The Germans may have been able to counter the resistance, but they may not have been able to find the arms and the secret stores."

Given the hush-hush nature of the Auxiliary Units such a scenario is entirely believable. As late as the 1990s, when historian Adrian Hoare was researching Norfolk's 'Secret Army' for a book he was writing about the local Home Guard, information about the resistance hideouts was hard to come by.

"Some of them were dug by the auxiliaries themselves, but others were constructed by parties of Royal Engineers who had no idea what they were digging or what they would be used for," says Adrian.

With his wife Anne, he managed to locate some of the hidden Norfolk bunkers, including the one at Baconsthorpe Castle. "They were buried in all sorts of places," says Adrian. "They were often in woodland and they always had an entrance hole, which was very carefully concealed, and a second escape hole in case they were cornered."

Such operational bases, as they were officially known, were spread across the county. There were around 40 of them, from Cley to Cockley Cley and King's Lynn to Kirby Bedon, and they were usually big enough to take up to six men together with an arsenal of weapons and explosives, a month's supply of food, a radio and such rudimentary essentials as bunk beds and blankets.

Roughly 200 men were recruited into the official Norfolk resistance, although there was never any formal enrolment. They were given Home Guard uniforms as part of the subterfuge and it was only later, much later in some cases, that they discovered they were members of 202 Battalion with a base at Beeston Hall, near Neatishead.

The local commander was a decorated first world war veteran, Captain Nigel Oxenden. Known as 'Oxo' to his men, he was said to have instilled a "fearsome attitude" into his men. "We are up against a most unpleasant bunch," he once remarked, "and I feel it should be our duty to kill as many as possible."

In a letter written in October 1940, he mischievously described himself as "a

Private Resistance: From left, Matt Addis, Bishanyia Vincent, Phil Pritchard, Fred Lancaster and Frances Marshall in Eastern Angles' new wartime-inspired play which is now on a regional tour.



Britain's last ditch defenders: Members of the West Norfolk-based Group 8 auxiliaries who were prepared to resist the German army. Picture courtesy of Adrian Hoare. Below: Baconsthorpe Castle.



sort of commercial traveller, travelling in explosives, with after-sales service..."

But he was under no illusions about his likely fate if the invaders came. "Of Course," he wrote, "if Hitler lands round here, I shall find it very hard to stay alive. There is no prospect of me becoming a major..."

In the absence of an invasion, Oxenden did in fact make major and moved on to a key training role at the auxiliaries' national headquarters at Coleshill House in Oxfordshire. Meanwhile, many of those Norfolk men he recruited to the British resistance movement soldiered on until the auxiliaries were officially stood down in 1944, a few of them finding their way into the Special Air Service where they put their guerrilla training to good use in operations behind enemy lines in France.

However, the tantalising question about what the auxiliaries might have achieved had the invasion actually taken place remains, and always will remain, unanswered.

Based on the men he met while researching his book, Adrian Hoare believes they were well capable of causing considerable damage and mayhem. "Of course, they realised their days would be numbered," he adds. "They weren't naive enough to think they could defeat the Nazis on their own, but that illustrates how courageous they were. They knew that what they were getting involved in was likely to lead to them making the ultimate sacrifice."

Ivan Cutting is of much the same

opinion. "Much would have depended on the nature of the invasion," he says. "If the Germans had only achieved a tentative foothold, then they might have been able to tip the balance against them. But if they gained control, I reckon their influence would have been limited and I suspect reprisals would have turned people against them.

"What I don't doubt for a minute is that they meant exactly what they said about resisting the invaders. They were a pretty determined lot and, unlike the real Home Guard, they were well armed, very well trained and extremely fit and really could have done some damage."

Private Resistance, by Ivan Cutting – pictured right – is being staged at the Seagull Theatre, Lowestoft, on Monday at 7.30pm (tel 01502 589726) and the Maddermarket Theatre, Norwich, on Thursday at 7.30pm (tel 01603 620917). The full tour runs until May 20 and ends with four shows at the Parham Airfield Museum, home of the British Resistance archive. For a full list of performances around the region visit Eastern Angles' website at: www.easternangles.co.uk.

Standing Up to Hitler: The Story of Norfolk's Home Guard and 'Secret Army' 1940-1944, by Adrian Hoare, is published by Countryside Books,

