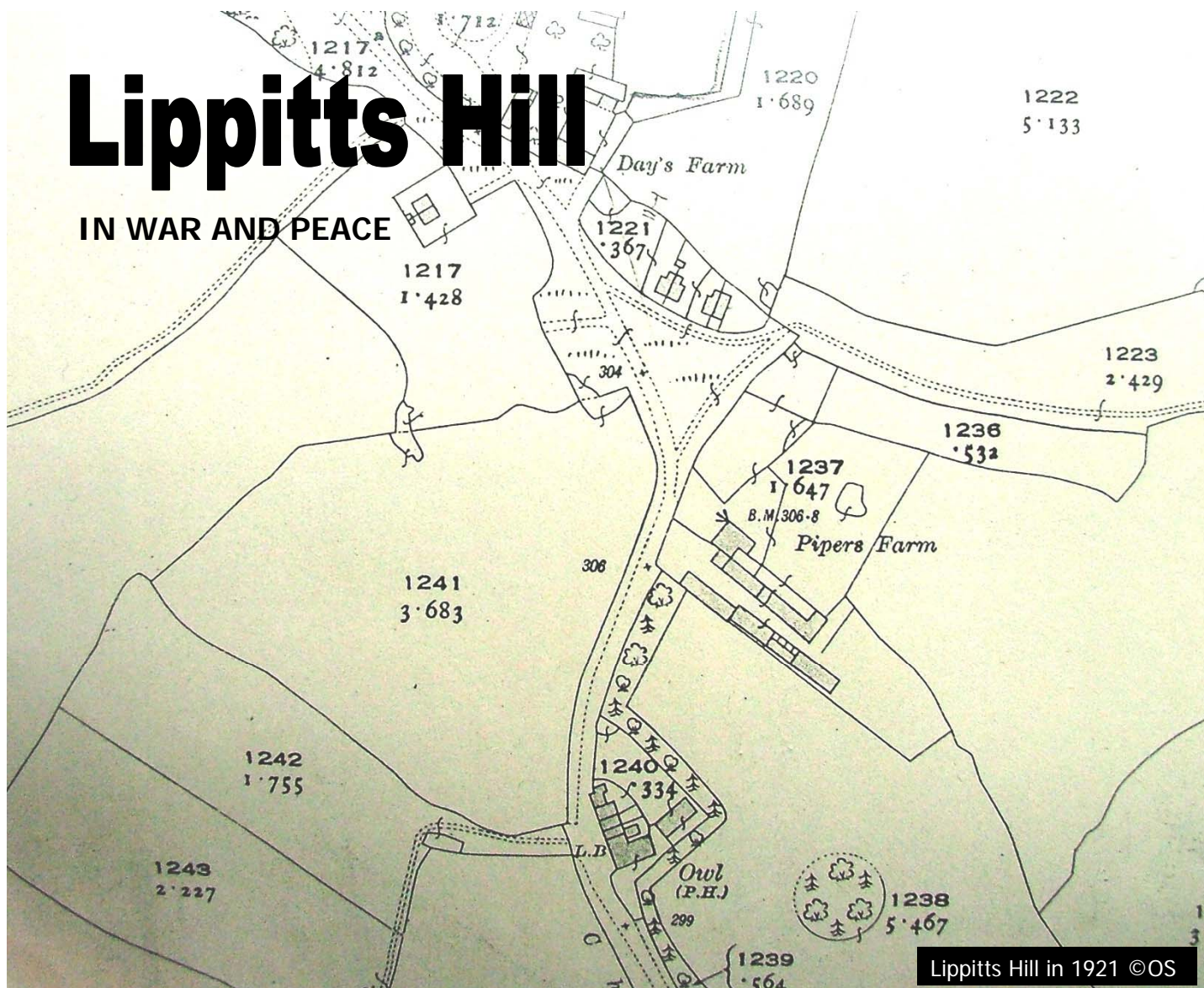


# Lippitts Hill

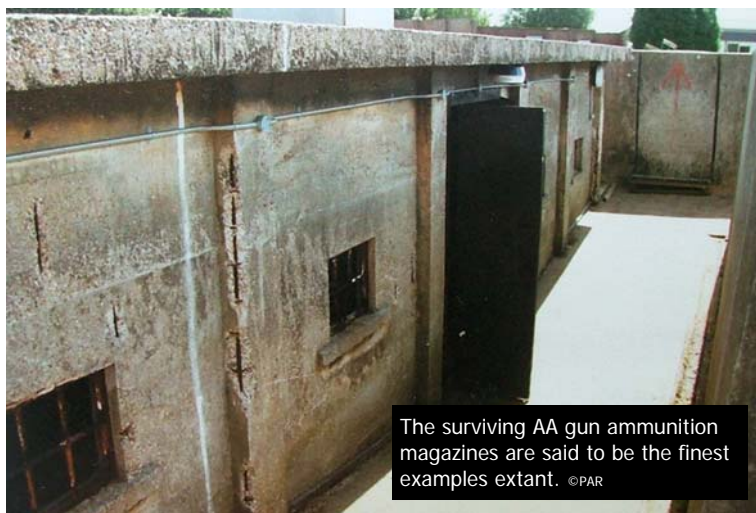
IN WAR AND PEACE



Lippitts Hill, the feature situated to the south of Waltham Abbey and set between Epping Forest and the village of Sewardstone, the one time home of the highwayman Dick Turpin, might easily passed through history as an unremarkable bump on the landscape were it not for the needs of war. A name derived from Lipped Hill it was as Leppetts Hill that the War Office first took notice of it as a London Defence site immediately prior to the Second World War. The plot of land that evolved into Lippitts Hill Camp was a thoroughly “green” site, the home of a small rose nursery, until the needs of war ejected the nurserymen and workmen arrived and erected the first of many warlike structures.

Quite why this military take-over of the peaceful nursery took place is obscure. An adjoining hillock to the north, and adjacent to Thompson’s Wood, had served as a gun site in the Great War and remained largely intact if little used throughout the new conflict into the present day. Perhaps it was decided that they needed far more guns to protect the arms factories in the valley in the 1939-45 war.

British anti-aircraft artillery [AAA] of 137 HAA Regiment, 26 AA Brigade, was set atop of Lippitts Hill to guard the eastern approaches of London. To this unit Lippitts Hill was site E7 and manned by 631/148 Battery in con-



junction with sites at Friern Barnet and Dollis Hill. As a precaution the Battery was well spread out with its HQ in Derwent Crescent, Whetstone, N20. Within weeks they were in operation against sporadic targets, both friend and foe, venturing near to the Lea Valley. Within a year the guns were at full stretch against the enemy onslaught on London.

The site only came fully into its own after the entry of the United States into the war from late in 1941. In the summer of 1942 the British guns gave way to B Battery of the US 184th AAA and the site was extensively refurbished. The GI's were equipped with 90mm [3.54 inch] M1 towable AAA. In December 1943 the British gun unit was still shown at Lippitts Hill, although it was non-operational.

The majority of the concrete structures that remain on site today were erected by the British, gun emplacements, sunken block houses and a control room were supported by permanent roadways and a range of wooden and concrete buildings. In spite of all this infrastructure in-place on their arrival the GI's had to wait two years before they had an opportunity to fire their guns in action.

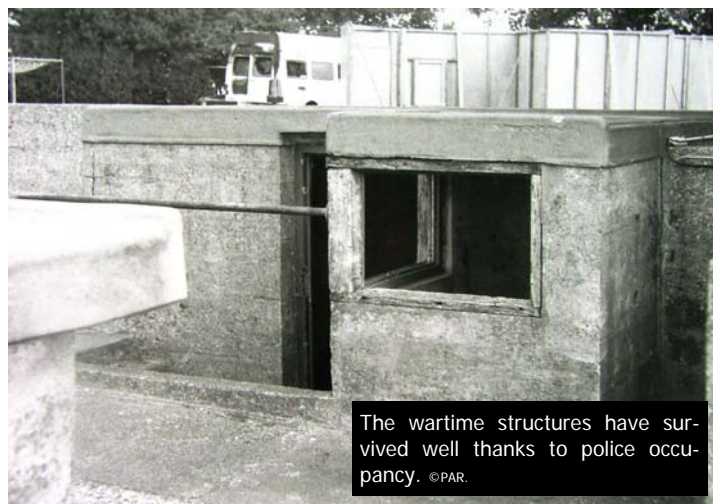
The 184<sup>th</sup> AAA Gun Battalion remained responsible for Lippitts Hill but on March 14, 1944 Battery B of the 115<sup>th</sup> Battalion relieved the 184<sup>th</sup>'s Battery A to allow the 184<sup>th</sup> to participate in Mobility Training prior to D-Day.

Any lack of real action was undoubtedly eased by the close proximity of 'The Owl', an Essex clapboard watering hole that took on the mantle of local entertainment for the camp. Three months after the first taste of action for the Americans, in the wake of D-Day, in mid-June 1944 they were gone and the camp was temporarily abandoned.

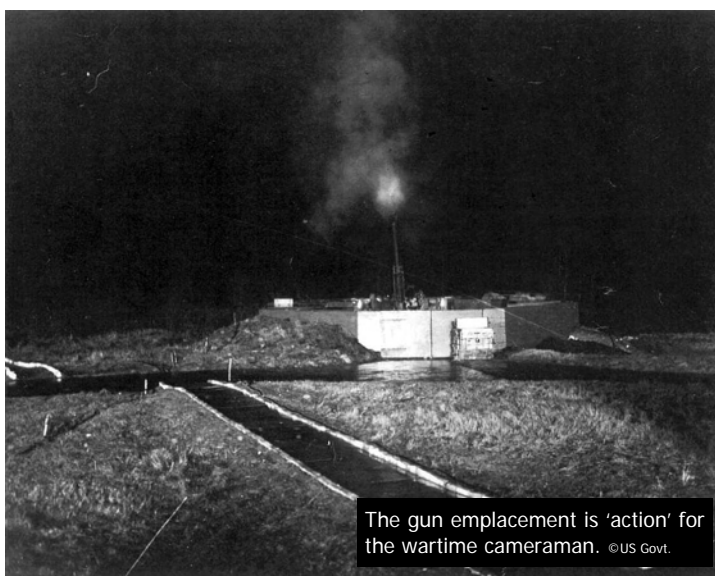
The site was taken over by the British again and as the bombing threat on London eased turned into a prisoner-of-war camp for captured German soldiers. Many of the warlike features, such as the gun emplacements, were buried in spoil for security reasons. The occupants of the camp took employment in local agriculture in the early years after the war whilst remaining housed in the camp barracks.

The Germans too left their mark on the hilltop and the first thing that greets any modern day visitor to the main entrance is the carved concrete statue of a man completed by Rudi Webber 540177 in October 1946. Like most of the wartime features, it has stood the ravages of time well.

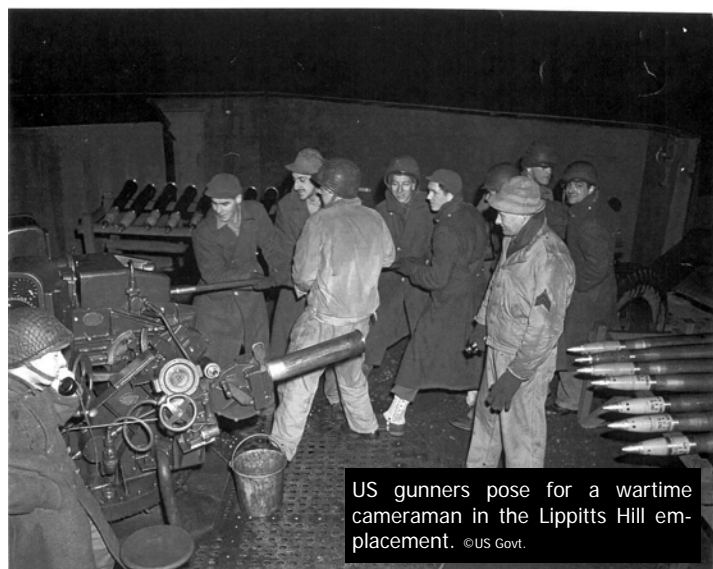
As had the GI's, the Germans too moved on in the late 1940s. Among those former enemies that chose to remain and settle in England was the late



The wartime structures have survived well thanks to police occupancy. ©PAR.



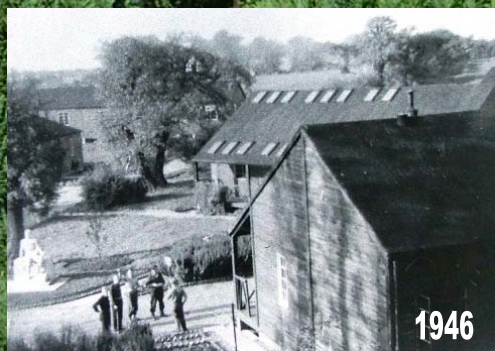
The gun emplacement is 'action' for the wartime cameraman. ©US Govt.



US gunners pose for a wartime cameraman in the Lippitts Hill emplacement. ©US Govt.



The AA gun emplacements are now filled in with soil. ©PAR



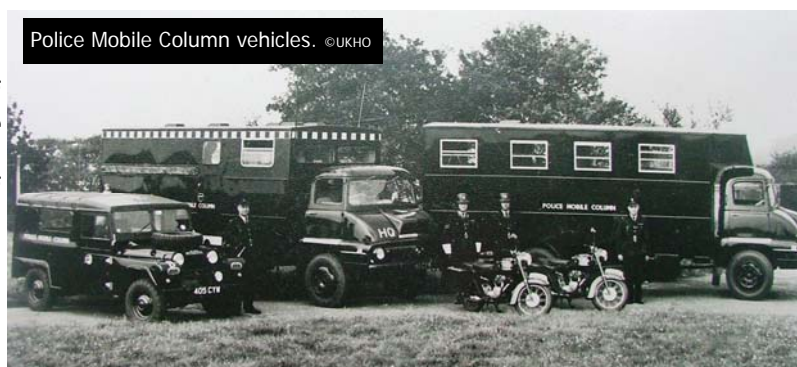
Signs of German occupation—the concrete statue that still graces the entrance to the camp. ©PAR

Walter Weiland. Wally became a naturalised Briton and this popular figure held the post of Town Mayor in Waltham Abbey over forty years later in 1989. Popular that is until he took the salute from the British Legion at the annual Remembrance Sunday parade. Many understandably balked at having a former Nazi soldier taking the role of mayor at the event. They got over it though.

After the war the American's erected a simple memorial to mark the period of their occupation. Situated on the south-west corner of the camp the dedication and unveiling ceremony was undertaken by Mrs Lewis Douglas, the wife of the US Ambassador.

As for the former gun-site, it was one of hundreds, many of which were grubbed out and returned to agricultural use leaving little trace of their passing, the army increasingly found little use for its facilities in the post war years and it may have gone the way of several others in the area, suffering a rash of squatters, dereliction and eventual destruction by bull-dozer, had it not been for the arrival of the Metropolitan Police.

In the 1950s the police across the country were faced by a requirement on them to operate a large proportion of the UK's Civil Defence provision. Part of this was periodic operation of the *Home Office Civil Defence Police Mobile Column*, a mixed group of trucks, jeeps and motor cycles tasked with rescue in the event of nuclear war. The London police moved in training for this and added police cadets, resting horses and local continuation training of police dogs.



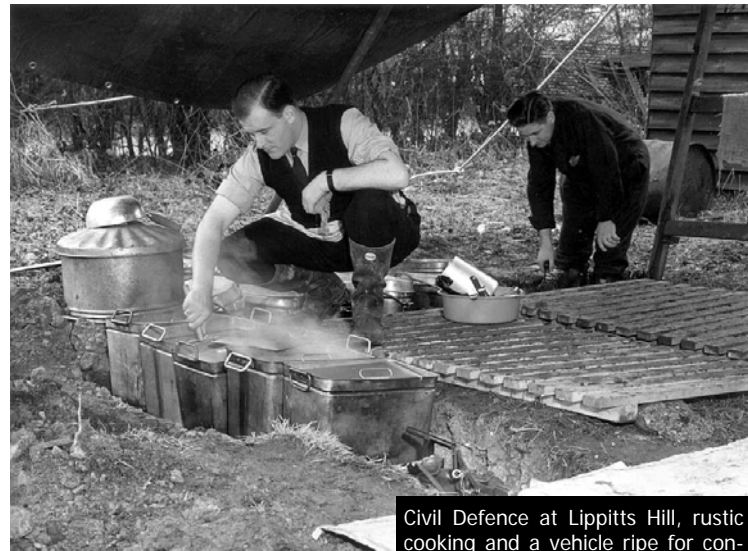
The training task undertaken by the officers with the Mobile Column in particular was extremely unpopular with the residents for the high levels of noise it created when in the locality. The local authority at that time, the Waltham Holy Cross UDC, made several representations to the Home Office about its activities only to be curtly advised that as a war defence measure there was nothing could, or would, be done about it. The principle behind this formation was that it would travel around the United Kingdom, from force to force, to stay with each for a few weeks at a time to train a group of officers in learning the skills of living rough and surviving. In addition, officers were expected to learn vehicle conversion and maintenance.

When, in 1960, the army showed a wish to dispose of the camp, the police bought it and set about making it fit the police task more closely. The Civil Defence Control Room built in 1946 was converted into a police wireless base station and "spare" police information room to replace Scotland Yard if it were ever flooded, a not unlikely event that has never yet occurred. The local Waltham Holy Cross Council planning authorities granted the use of the site as a training school.

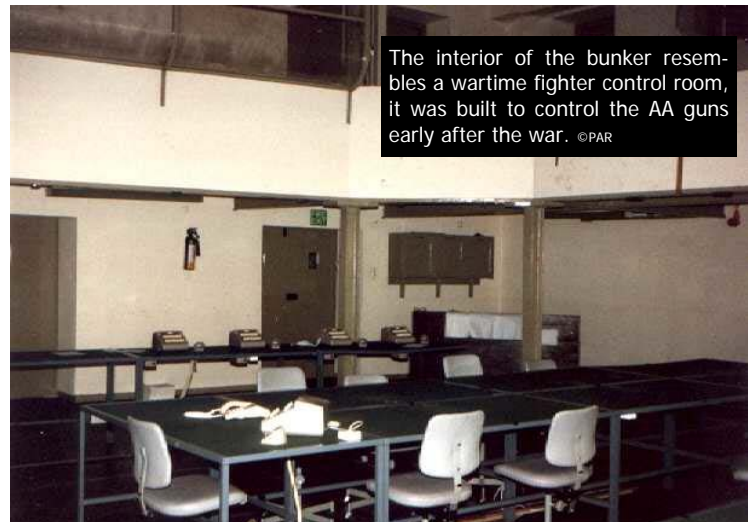
The Police Mobile Column was a somewhat flawed concept. No one had adequately explained how the police officers on these convoys of vehicles were to survive in the face of highly radioactive fall-out, protected only by the thickness of the vehicle bodywork. It was not surprising then that late in 1965 the Labour Government sought to abolish the Mobile Column system as an economy measure. Only a single further column was operated in 1966.

Lippitts Hill survived the loss of its occasional user and continued to thrive with a diversification of effort. Civil Defence did not leave the site, a stand-by feature of the underground bunker, as a nuclear fall-out proof refuge, remained for another twenty five years. All of the local nuclear air attack warning systems, using lines provided by the then General Post Office, later Telecom, remained controlled from it until their final demise in the wake of the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact threat in the 1990's.

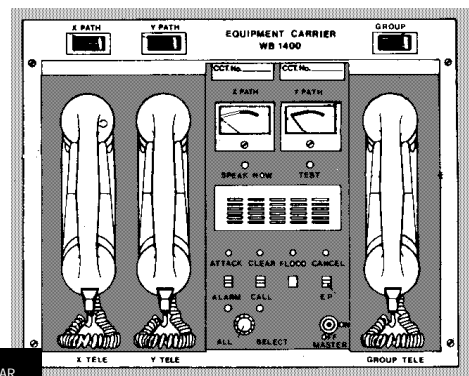
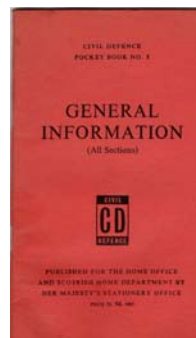
At the removal of the Mobile Column, the locals understandably breathed a deep sigh of relief. The sense of relief was very short lived however, for before the old beast had actually been removed, in August 1966 three police officers were murdered in Braybrook Street, West London, and Lippitts Hill quickly became a centre for an urgent need to train more police officers in the use of



Civil Defence at Lippitts Hill, rustic cooking and a vehicle ripe for conversion training. ©MP



The interior of the bunker resembles a wartime fighter control room, it was built to control the AA guns early after the war. ©PAR



Civil Defence paraphernalia ©PAR



An early aerial view of the camp by the helicopter unit showing the barracks, landing pad and the new firing range being built. ©MP

guns. The construction of a new weatherproof pistol firing range was not cleared until 1973. The building was to have its flaws but it did enhance training on site. Shortly afterwards a field craft training house – a shell of a building with few trimmings – was erected at the east end of the new firing range.

From a relatively small start, external pressures from criminals, terrorists and politicians resulted in ever more growth for this branch of activity within the camp. In comparison, the other occupants of the establishment the gun training grew in importance where others grew more slowly, or not at all. Eventually, one of the primary first users of the camp, the Police Cadet Corps, left the site and were eventually, many years later, disbanded altogether.

A further exhibition of technology, and a clear sign of things to come, took place at Lippitts Hill police camp the following year. For a fortnight exposed to the full glare of publicity, in June 1967 three noisy Bell 47G Sioux helicopters loaned from the Army operated out over London in daylight in a trial that inexorably led to further trials and the eventual basing of similar police helicopters on a permanent basis at Lippitts Hill from 1976.

As a small adjunct to this increased activity, security at the camp was increased. A significant number of US callers from the old 184th still wished to see “their” memorial so the security fence was re-directed, and the police ceded a corner plot of the camp, to place the American memorial outside the camp adjacent to a public footpath on the edge of the West Essex Golf Club course. Quickly, the wooden sign, for that is all it was in its original form, suffered at the hands of vandals. In May 1976, as part of ongoing US Centenary Celebrations, the American’s renewed the memorial to the 184th. A brick and stone built column was better



One of the three Army Bell 47G with police signage based at Lippitts Hill in 1967. Army pilots and police observers formulated early flying tactics ©PAR

able to survive outside the security of the camp, but being outside the security cordon it was vandalised over the years to the extent that it became simply a brick column with no explanatory plaques.

As recorded, in 1976 the police permanently based commercially hired helicopters at Lippitts Hill. The small Enstrom F28 two seat helicopters then used had suffered from vandal attacks at their former base of Elstree Airport and Lippitts Hill offered enhanced security over all of the other sites investigated over a ten year period. Initially the helicopter was based there five or six days a week, parked on the grass close the spot where the Bell helicopters had operated a decade earlier.

Site security was then primarily the single strand fence and the elderly resident caretaker, Reg Marks, and his daughter. Occasionally the local police car patrol from Waltham Abbey might call in to give this, little understood, new item of aerial technology a cursory look over before cajoling Reg into putting the kettle on. After a couple of years a portable building was put up as a crew room and a minimal concrete landing pad installed to the west of the large new firing ranges being erected on a site close to the south fence. Although much of the wartime fabric of the gun-site remained in being, signs of modern expansion were everywhere.

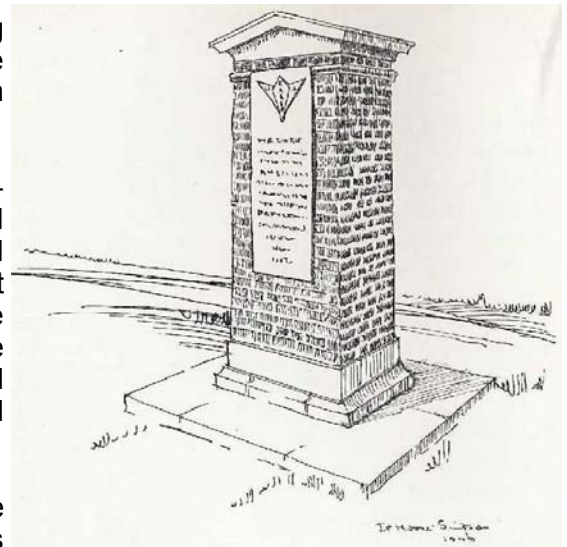
Eventually, faced by a change in flight requirements, in 1980 the Metropolitan Police were obliged to purchase their own aircraft and, inevitably, based them at Lippitts Hill. The new arrivals were two, eventually three, American manufactured, Bell 222A helicopters costing a basic £500,000 each, plus an extensive array of equipment and ground support. The equipment carried by these included a high powered searchlight and a remote control television camera - "Marconi Heli-Tele" - developed a few years earlier to spy on the IRA in Ulster and able to zoom down to take in minute detail from amazing distances.

After a period of working up with the first of their new high-tech toys, on Wednesday 26th November 1980, the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit, the first such in the United Kingdom, was officially launched to the press and people of London. Within the new hanger at Lippitts Hill, accompanied by the Police Commissioner of the day, Sir David McNee, the Home Secretary, Rt Hon William Whitelaw [later Lord Whitelaw] unveiled the Force Crest on a Bell registered with the "personalised" marks G-META.

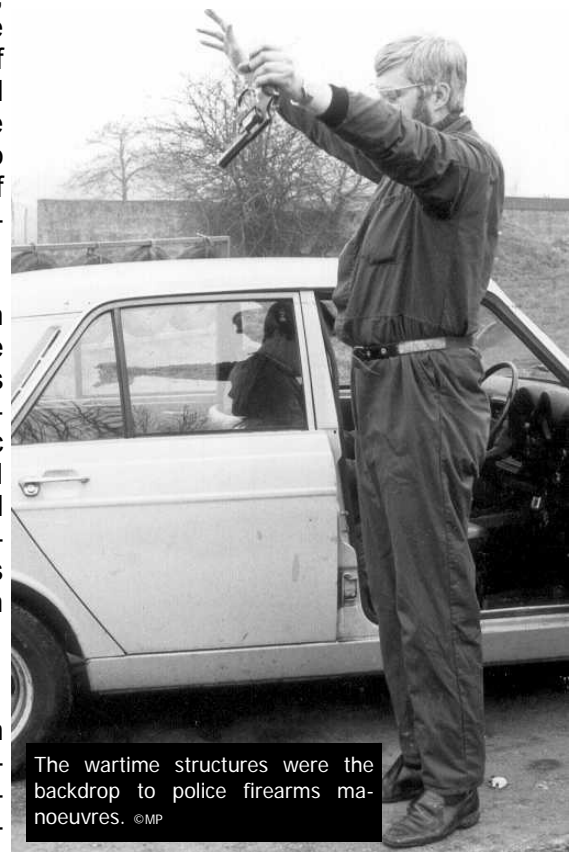


William Whitelaw and David McNee with the new Bell 222. ©MP

With million dollar helicopters around, security had to be enhanced, and for a period the site was patrolled by armed officers and dog handlers from the local stations. Eventually, early in 1983, the increased capabilities and importance of the resident firearms wing resulted in continued security being arranged internally. The expansion of facilities within the site was a continuous process and no complaints were forthcoming at the time. The helicopters, like the guns be-



Sketch of the permanent memorial to be erected at appropriate locations, designed by J. R. Moore Simpson, Esq., F.R.I.B.A., Chartered Architect



The wartime structures were the backdrop to police firearms manoeuvres. ©MP



fore them, were generally accepted as a progression rather than with open arms.

Over the ensuing years a great deal of tax-payers money was spent in improving the infrastructure of the camp, and the capability of the services it offered the people of London. The police camp, like the numerous stables that surrounded it, were busy, thriving, places. Both the, SAS like, armed branch and the clattering fleet of helicopters were often in the news, but only rarely on a local incident.

The site was available for use by a number of other agencies, the firearms branch receiving cross training visits from such as the SAS, and the helicopter unit regularly playing host to both civil and military helicopters paying social and business calls. For a considerable period the London Hospital based HEMS air ambulance and even the trial London Fire Brigade helicopters were able to receive fuel from the police fuel dump at attractive rates. The majority of military visits were in relation to a successful series of charity events arranged through the firearms branch.

Some of the neighbours complained about every noise emanating from the camp but the structure of the law was such that the only headway they could make was against the non-aviation content. Eventually the neighbours managed to make life untenable for the police dogs and the firearms teams and unable the oust the 24 hour rotary wing noise. At great cost the firearms branch moved out to a new location in Kent. The result for local people was that a handful of people who worked at the site lost their jobs. Fears that the air unit would move to RAF Northolt and leave the site at the mercy of squatters failed to materialise.

Into the 1990's, the large Bell helicopters were becoming increasingly noisy and performance handicapped and a number of potential replacements were examined. Some were even tested on site. In the event it was the French manufactured Eurocopter AS355N Twin Squirrel that received official blessing as a replacement type. An important addition was that it was somewhat quieter than its predecessor, whilst offering greatly enhanced capabilities.



The new Squirrel helicopters had been preceded by a number of similar machines hired in to temporarily replace one of the Bell's damaged in 1987, but the first of the type owned by the police, registered G-METD, arrived in August 1993.

It was around this time that local residents started to agitate against the variety of unwelcome noises being emitted by the site, Although the site had been chosen because it was in a remote area with few neighbours it was pressure from this quarter that sculpted the future of the operations on-site from this point onward. The police did not just up and leave Lippitts Hill but areas of the law where the police were on difficult ground led to the range of users being whittled down inexorably.

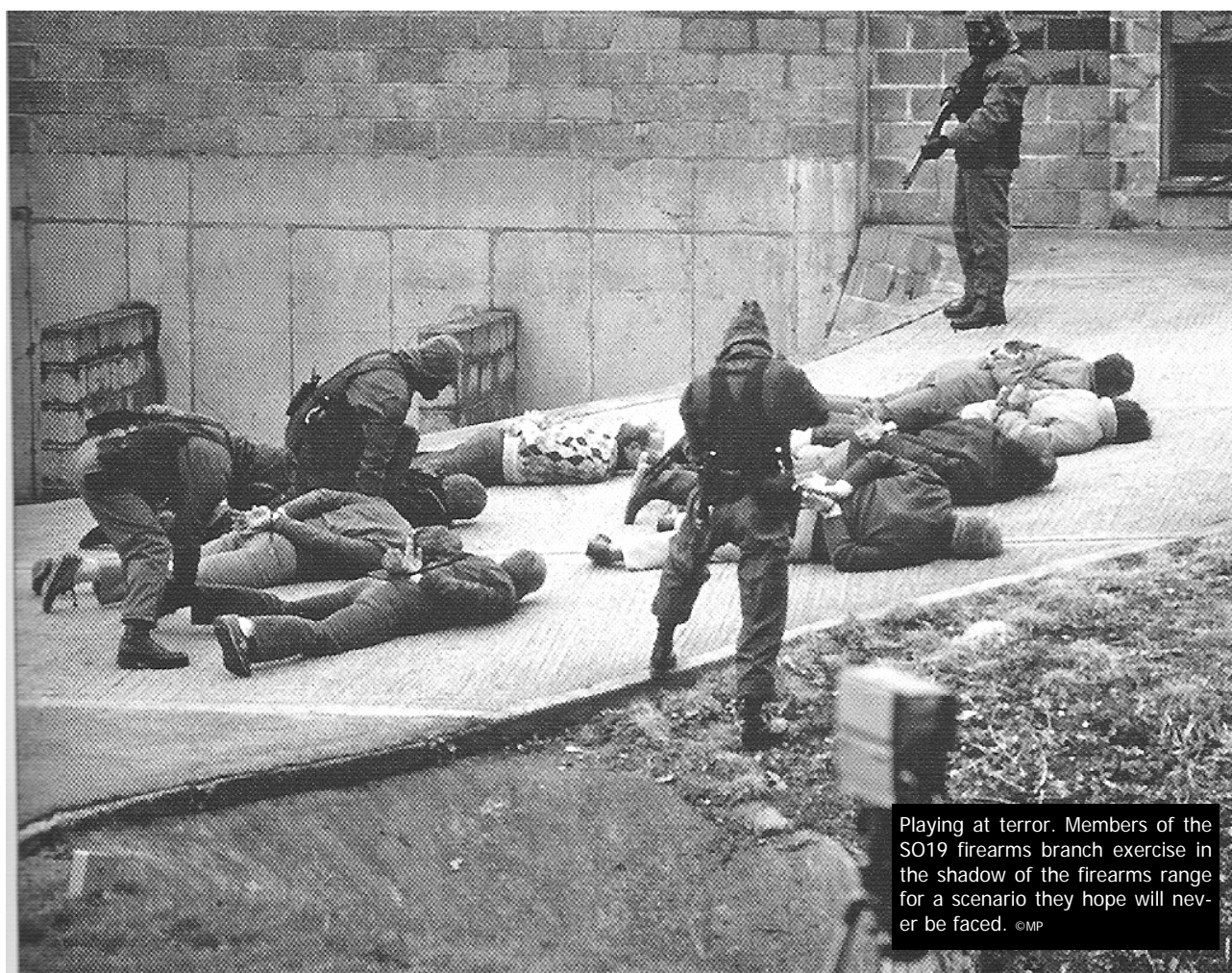
Two years later the political climate in relation to the set up of police air units had shifted somewhat and a further example of the new Squirrel helicopter delivered to Lippitts Hill was technically delivered to a new air support unit set up by the Metropolitan Police in conjunction with the police in Surrey. Thus was born the short lived South East Police Air Support Unit.

The need for the police helicopters had continued to outpace the availability and the number of hours flown each day, originally daytime, then mornings and evenings, progressed into the night. A full 24 hour availability, as offered by many other police air units, was clearly on the cards. In an effort to spread the flying load a second airbase was set up at Fairoaks Airport in Surrey. This arrangement was later dismantled as Surrey set up its own helicopter unit.

Faced by renewed local authority dismay - and a legally enforceable noise reduction order - the firearms branch sought another site for its activities in the mid-1990's. This branch had long found the limited confines of the camp a hindrance to extensive training and they took only a little persuasion to look elsewhere. Efforts to make do with the nearby derelict Royal Small Arms Factory and Royal Ordnance Factory, both abandoned by their former users by 1991, came to nought. A 1995 bid to start again on a River Thames side site near Tilbury in Essex was met by another party with a far more substantial purse and the operation was eventually settled on the other side of the River Thames at a former marine training school near Gravesend, Kent. The location cost a great deal to purchase and convert but it was difficult to access by road and double the distance from central London. The firearms operation was joined by a public order training establishment - it too driven out from its former 'remote area' site in Hounslow.

The departure of the firearms teams left the helicopter operation on its own at Lippitts Hill, a situation that greatly increased the cost burden on air support and resulted in local people losing employment on site. Where the presence of firearms, dogs and helicopter personnel could support such as on-site catering the presence of only a handful of air crew made it uneconomic.

Further pressure was placed upon the site when it was placed outside of the Metropolitan Police area by police boundary changes in 2000. The surrounding area is now policed by Essex Police.





Police officers from Europe and the USA are shown the EC145 as part of a conference event on site. ©PAVCon



One of many images from the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit Twitter account. ©MP

In mid-2007 the operation to delivery of a fleet of new Eurocopter EC145 helicopters and upgraded its basic infrastructure with new fuel facilities and refurbished hangars. By 2013 these three airframes were flying in the region of 3,300 hours over London.

From October 2012 air policing in England and Wales was vested in the National Police Air Service [NPAS] based in West Yorkshire and Lippitts Hill finally joined this organisation in March 2015.



The three Squirrel's were left out to grass for months awaiting a new owner. ©PAR