The Wickham Wander

Gerry Lambourn shows his scars

We all know that RMARG work parties, although light-hearted events, often reveal the group's exemplary military discipline and strong leadership. This was just such an occasion.

Permission had been obtained to explore an area near what had supposedly been a practice glider airstrip at Wickham, just up the road from Welford.

We assembled at 12.30 sharp (at the Pub, of course) and then proceeded in a westerly direction to the allocated activity zone. There, we consumed our victuals as past experience has taught us that this could be our last meal for some time. We were then addressed by our C-i-C, Alan. After a few introductory remarks he handed over to Don for our briefing.

Characteristically, there immediately appeared a dense smoke screen which was most effective in hiding our preparations from prying eyes. The detailed and meticulous plan for the day was quickly explained. Having no equipment of my own, my chest swelled with pride when I was given responsibility to carry the tape and pins to indicate areas we had surveyed. We then 'donned' our protective gear and made ready for the task ahead. An impressive array of equipment had been assembled.

Our first obstacle was a securely padlocked metal gate. Undaunted, we clambered over the adjacent three-bar fence and assembled on the other side – that is, all except George. Clearly, George was going to have problems with the fence, so as is normal for RMARG, a cunning plan was hatched. (The ingenuity of the group is legendary.)

Discarding the obvious solutions of helping George climb over the fence or walk down the lane and into the field, the group inserted George through the fence between the middle and upper bars. Five eager volunteers leapt forward and manhandled him through, managing somehow not to decapitate our veteran in the process. We formed ranks, glowing at our early success.

In front was the heavy equipment, whilst those of us in the second rank were lightly armed with spades, forks and other digging implements. As we stood gazing over the churned and muddy field ahead of us, we could not help reflecting on those who had before faced such a challenge. Yes, there was fear. You could tell by the nervous fiddling with equipment, the senseless jokes and the tinkling sound of running water from the guys by the hedgerow. But not one of us faltered.

At this point our field officer selected his own equipment, a choice which I feel he will reflect on even unto his twilight years. For he stood in front of the assembled ranks with two mutilated coat hangers and declared in all seriousness that he was going to dowse for metal objects. Military discipline faltered at this point as those assembled doubled up with laughter and ribald comments flew back and forth including the age old cry of "You'll have someone's eye out".

Ever ready to lend support in moments of crisis, I stepped forward and stated that dowsing was a very effective technique and that I was pleased to see someone with the courage to use the old methods. Unfortunately this caused another outbreak of mirth and I was rebuked with "If you can't keep your sarcastic comments to yourself, you can bugger off home now." I returned to my place, somewhat crestfallen.

The squad now moved off in columns of two. My suggestion that Don is a Dowsy old Sod was ignored and he soon stopped in front of me with his wires crossed, or rather his coat hangers. With a triumphant smile he told me to dig there. I dug a hole the size of a shell crater without success. Undeterred I back-filled it and proceeded to the next spot. This went on for some time. I eventually realised there was a pattern to this hole digging. The dowsing rods were twitching every time Don stood over a large cow pat, thus confirming a suspicion I had fostered for some time – if you want bulls**t ask a committee member.

Even Don was a little exasperated at this stage and went off to get his new metal detector. I took the opportunity to see how the troops were doing. Surveying the field I noticed that we had sacrificed conventional military formation for a more

unorthodox, SAS-style operation. Three of them were leaning on a fence in animated conversation.

Two were digging in the middle of the field where we had been told specifically not to dig. And, of course, one group was heading straight for the wood, which was out of bounds. Seriously alarmed, I shouted to the membership secretary to chase the group and collect the 2005 subscriptions before they trod on something explosive.

Don's metal detector was considerably more successful than his previous equipment and we soon had a large collection of rusty nails. When I announced that the nail pattern was typical of a Viking ship burial I was again subjected to a verbal barrage, which contained some words I hadn't heard before. For example, until then I hadn't realised that the Vikings used rowlocks! It was at this point that James had a rare find – an ancient silver coin in good condition. He carefully marked the position on his GPS and we felt more confident of further finds.

I was growing concerned that the stress was beginning to get to some of the troops as there was constant reference to PCB's (at least that's what I thought they said). I recalled lurid tales from Vietnam and wondered if the lads were snorting substances – at least that would explain some of their weird antics. However, my hearing was obviously faulty, for it turned out that the word was PSP. (We found quite a lot of that, although it still leaves unanswered the question of the odd behaviour.)

We had reached the next fence line and I stood talking to Tony about the exciting developments with the Broad Gauge track and locomotive at Didcot Railway Centre.

So engrossed was I that I failed to notice that James's dog, which had been sniffing around me all afternoon, was now copiously urinating up my trouser leg. Tony brought this to my attention (after the dog had finished, of course) but before I could seek assistance another, more serious, crisis arose. George was approaching the fence line.

George looked at the fence. The members looked at George. With a great cry, eager arms outstretched, the troops descended on him, hell bent on finding another novel way of transferring him from one field to the next. George, a look of terror clouding his face, tossed his walking stick beyond the fence and with the nimbleness of one twenty years his junior, vaulted over, collected his stick and strode off across the next field with a scowl on his face.The group was now spread over several square miles of Berkshire and our leaders had disappeared completely.

A patrol, comprising Tony and myself, set out to find them. We eventually found one of them in the woods, engaged in hand to hand combat with an eight-foot scaffolding pole. There were a number of these hidden in the undergrowth, which apart from a few shotgun cartridges, had been left undisturbed. This is where we had the greatest successes of the day. Soon we had a growing collection of pieces of metal, plastic knobs, dials and other flotsam.

Then we discovered what later turned out to be gold, in the sense of dating evidence - a Coca-Cola bottle. As you may be aware, until recent times Coca-Cola bottles were dated. This one came from 1944 – proving that the strata for the other finds was contemporary. We had discovered one of the World War II burial pits from the airfield.

The light was starting to fade, and this seemed a good point to call a halt to the recce and head back to base. Carefully marking the spot for further investigation, we returned to our starting point for debriefing.

This had been a skirmish not a battle. Those of you who lived through Coleshill 2003 will know what a battle is like. We shed an occasional tear for comrades who lie there still, buried alive when the pit was back-filled before they had climbed out. No, today our casualties were light. George will need psychotherapy for his fence-o-phobia. My specialist tells me that the K9 variant of dermo-urinitis is quite rare and persistant. Sadly Don may never be able to clutch his rod again.

As twilight fell and the sun sank in the West, we bade our farewells in time honoured fashion. (I really think the committee should discourage anything more than a manly handshake.)

But at the end of the day (which it was) our thanks must go to our esteemed officers Alan and Don. And let's not forget James, after all, it was his idea!

These men have no fear, or common sense. Men who despite continual failure will still seek more. Men who will always take up the leadership role, despite repeated requests not to do so. Of such men is England made. God help us.

THE END *(or is it?)*