

The scene:

The Royal Observer Corps observation post (known as Fox One) at Great Horkesley, North Essex, in 1944

Characters: All the characters are members of the Royal Observer Corps**(5 male characters and 1 female character)**

- Rudsdale: A curator at Colchester Castle Museum and secretary to the Essex War Agricultural Committee
- Carter: A student awaiting call up to the RAF
- Minter: A tractor driver and agricultural worker
- Diaper: An elderly ploughman
- Mr New: A full-time senior member of the Royal Observer Corps
- Miss Rodgers: A member of the Royal Observer Corps staff at the Control Centre in Colchester

Synopsis:

It is June 1944, the Allied invasion of France is about to begin, rumours are circulating of a new Nazi rocket weapon - the V1 – and in North Essex, the Royal Observer Corps post at Great Horkesley is about to gain a new observer - E.J. Rudsdale, a curator at Colchester Castle Museum and wartime secretary of the Essex War Agricultural Committee.

The Royal Observer Corps Post at Great Horkesley looks over the River Stour Valley to Stoke by Nayland Church. It is a small brick-built platform, about 4ft from the ground, surrounded by a brick parapet about 5ft high. On the west side is a roofed extension, making a tiny room not more than 8ft by 3ft, with a fireplace, an old desk, the seat out of a motor bus, two rifles, some shelves holding boxes of ammunition and official books, a notice-board with a rota and the “post procedure” and notices about rations and clothing coupons.

In the centre of the post is the “instrument” and the plotting table, marked off in numbered squares. The instrument is made of brass, showing heights in hundreds of feet, fitted with a sighting piece and various adjusting screws (see paintings and photographs of the Royal Observer Corps at the end of this script).

Further information:

This play is based on a Second World War diary account written by E.J. Rudsdale in 1944 of the Royal Observer Corps Post at Great Horkesley. Rudsdale (1910-1951) was a museum curator at Colchester Castle Museum. I have researched and published Rudsdale's diaries as a book entitled: *E.J. Rudsdale's Journals of Wartime Colchester*. Rudsdale wrote a play based on his experiences of working for the Royal Observer Corps, which is sadly lost, so I was inspired to transform his diary account into a play to draw attention to the role played by members of the Royal Observer Corps in the Second World War and to mark the 75th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

Carter who appears in the play was Douglas Carter (1927-2016), who was born in Boxted in Essex. After serving in the Royal Observer Corps as a young man, he joined the RAF in 1944. He later returned to Boxted and re-joined the Royal Observer Corps, remaining a member until the Corps was disbanded in 1995. He also became Boxted's historian, writing a number of books on the history of the village. This play is dedicated to his memory.

Scene One: 1st June 1944

[Sound of two men talking softly at the Observer Post]

Diaper: Fox One calling – two planes seen – 6153 - flying East – height 9,000 – friendly.

Diaper: Fox One calling – six planes seen – 6131 – flying East – height 9,000 – friendly.

[Rudsdale enters]

Rudsdale: Hello, my name's Rudsdale. I've been sent from the Royal Observer Corps Control Centre at Colchester. I'm a new Observer.

Minter: Hello, I'm Minter and this is Mr Diaper.

Diaper: Pleased to meet you.

Minter: We hadn't been told you were coming. Are you going to be stationed here?

Rudsdale: Why yes. The Centre wrote to me several days ago asking me to report here this evening. *[He pulls out a letter and shows Minter and Diaper].*

Minter: That's them at Colchester all over! They expect us to hold the fort here but they don't tell us what's going on over there. Well let's get you a cup of tea, Mr Rudsdale, and we'll show you what to do.

[Minter gets up, passes Rudsdale a mug of tea and then takes his seat at the plotting table. Diaper passes Minter the headpiece phone set to put on].

Minter: Now this here is the plotting table and the instrument. It's how we measure the height and speed of the aircraft coming over our sector and then we report it to the Centre at Colchester over the phones and record it in the Post Log Book.

Diaper: Ah that's right. *[He indicates the log book on his knee].*

Rudsdale: So the Observer has to do all this location of aircraft himself? I always imagined there was some sort of instrument which automatically located enemy aircraft and registered their height.

Minter: Good Lord man, no! It's all down to us and has been since the whole thing started back in '39.

Diaper: Ah yes, do you remember the big air raids of 1940, Minter? We plotted as many as 600 'planes coming in on many an occasion then.

Minter: Yes indeed. And never a shot fired at them.

Rudsdale: Well, I hope our defences are a bit better than that now!

Minter: Oh we take the fight to them these days, don't we?

Diaper: Ah, we do that.

Minter: Now, this post is known as Fox One and there are three Foxes linked together and we can hear each other speaking on the phones. Fox 2 is at Earls Colne and Fox 3 is at Sudbury. There are other posts in our region too and they are known as Easy posts and Charlie posts and you'll hear them talking on the phones too. The Centre at Colchester co-ordinates all our reports and alerts the defence systems so that they can take action accordingly.

Rudsdale *(uncertainly)*: It all seems rather complicated. I'm afraid I don't know very much about identifying planes or the heights they fly at.

Minter: Oh you'll soon get the hang of it. You sit here and watch us while we plot some planes and you can see how it all works.

[Minter takes up his position at the instrument and Diaper writes the log].

Minter: Hello Centre, Fox One here. Is that Miss Rodgers? How are you this evening?

Miss Rodgers: Very well, Mr Minter, thank you. Do you have a report for me?

Minter: Yes, plane seen, 4535, flying North West, estimated height 10,000 ... It's an American, a Liberator ...

Diaper: So what's your line of work, Mr Rudsdale?

Rudsdale: I was a museum curator at Colchester Castle but when the war began I got seconded to work at the War Agricultural Committee. I've been a fire-watcher in Colchester but I've moved to Boxted so I signed up with the Royal Observer Corps to do my war work here. And what about you Mr Diaper?

Diaper: I'm a ploughman. Worked on the land all my life.

Rudsdale: And you Mr Minter?

Minter: I'm a tractor driver. It's a good job. There'll be no more horses on farms after the war so I'll be ready for all this mechanisation they promise us.

Diaper: Ah, it won't be the same. Give me a 'oss any day of the week rather than your new-fangled machinery. 'Osses don't break down, do they?

Rudsdale: Ah, you're right there, Mr Diaper.

Minter *(changing the subject)*: Did you hear about the big bomber that crashed near here last week, Mr Rudsdale? It was coming into land at Boxted Aerodrome but never made it. You can still see the wreckage in the corner of that big field over there if you look, near Kersey's Farm.

Rudsdale: Oh yes, I can see it. An American 'plane wasn't it?

Minter: That's right. The crew had a lucky escape – 7 of them, all came down safely by parachute. But the explosion and fire when the plane hit was tremendous. The Americans are still guarding the wreck of it now. In fact one of the Americans came up to the Post last night for a cup of tea. He was talking about a new German rocket plane that's supposed to threaten us next.

Diaper: Ah, that's just rumours, that is.

Rudsdale: It sounds like I'm joining at an eventful time. Do you think there will be an invasion of France soon? There seems to have been a lot more movement of troops lately.

Minter: Well this is confidential but I hear that the route to the aerodrome is to be closed to farm traffic this week. I reckon something's in the wind.

Diaper: Ah, you're always full of tittle-tattle, Minter. Reckon we'd better be showing this 'ere chap what to do. If your rumours are right, he's going to be kept pretty busy.

[Minter and Diaper start plotting again and instructing Rudsdale on the Post procedure as the scene fades out]

Minter *(to Centre)*: Fox One – plane seen – circling post – now flying North – 5133 – estimated height 6000 – friendly – Mosquito.

Diaper *(to Rudsdale)*: When the first Observer locates and estimates the height of the plane he will say 'On' and the second Observer looks at the pointer to see what square the aircraft is over and calls Centre, makes his report and writes it down in the log. ...

Scene Two: 6th June 1944 – D-Day

Rudsdale: Hullo Minter, I didn't think I was going to make it here in time. The roads in Colchester were at a standstill because a Bren carrier blew up on the Borough boundary and caused no end of problems. They say it destroyed two houses and a lot of windows were broken but nobody hurt, except the driver.

Minter: Ah that's bad, that is. Still, you're alright. It's only just on 5pm. You can take over the log book this evening. The A class man is coming down tonight so we had better be on our best behaviour!

Rudsdale: What does an A class man do?

Minter: Oh that's our Mr New. He's a full-time Observer. He gets paid more than us, one shilling and tenpence an hour to see what we're up to. He's a bit of a stickler for accuracy so watch out!

Rudsdale *[laughing]*: He's not going to be very impressed by me then!

Minter: Did you hear all the planes taking off this morning?

Rudsdale: Yes, I heard them warming up about 2am and then at 3am there was a tremendous roar from the airfields. I looked out of the window and the whole sky was filled with 'planes, all carrying their navigation lights and dropping red and green flares. Then at 4pm the Thunderbolts took off from Bosted aerodrome and you could feel the house trembling with the vibration of all those engines in the air at once.

Minter: Yes I saw them too. I've never known the Americans take off before dawn, so I said to my wife, "Reckon this is the invasion" and then we heard it announced on the 8 o'clock news.

Rudsdale: They say there have been heavy raids on Calais and Dunkirk and the Germans have announced that landings are being attempted by sea and air.

We had the annual sugar beet competition this afternoon and the Thunderbolts flew over the whole time. Our Chairman gave the prizes to the Land Army girls and made a rousing speech about what a great day this is. But there, this rain doesn't look too good for the invasion, does it? They could have done without that.

Minter: It won't help with the hay making either. Yesterday the Americans shut the road between Wormingford and Fordham that runs through the aerodrome, just like I was told they would. They shut in about 200 people and some of our farmhands got caught up in it and we

couldn't get the milk out from the farms. Of course it was all to prepare for the invasion.

Rudsdale: Yes, we got reports in about it at our office. I tried to phone the aerodrome but all the phones were dead and I couldn't get a reply at all. Even the local police couldn't get in contact with the American commander. It was all very sudden but apparently they had postponed the invasion from the day before on account of waiting for the right weather conditions and then decided to go ahead last night.

Minter: Well we'd better start tracking some of these planes, there'll be a bit of activity this evening. *[He puts on his headset]*

Evening Miss Rodgers. You've had a busy day?

Miss Rodgers: Hullo Mr Minter. Yes, it's been frantic all day long with the invasion on. What can you see over Fox One?

[Minter starts plotting and Rudsdale writes the log. From time to time Rudsdale looks around with his binoculars]

Minter: Fox One – pair of planes seen – 5927 – flying West – height 9000 – friendly – Thunderbolts.

Fox One – plane seen – 5929 – flying West – estimated height 8000 – friendly – Thunderbolt.

Rudsdale: Do you know Minter, I can see every detail of the Stour Valley from this viewpoint. And it's just occurred to me that the view due north from here to Stoke by Nayland, is almost the same as John Constable's view in his painting of 'The Cornfield' in the National Gallery. He must have sat in the fields somewhere below the post.

...

[Mr New enters]

New: I think the idea is to observe planes not to admire the view, Mr ...?

Rudsdale: Rudsdale's, the name. You must be Mr New. I am sorry about that, I'm still getting used to the role.

New: I can see that. And where is your uniform?

Rudsdale: I haven't received it yet, I only started last week.

New: I see. I shall speak to Centre about it. Good evening, Minter. May I see your log?

Minter: Good evening, Mr New. Yes here it is.

[They pass him the log book]

New: This seems a bit thin, given the amount of activity going on today. Minter you do the plotting and Rudsdale you take over on the phones so that I can see what is going on.

[The plotting continues and Rudsdale trains his binoculars on an incoming plane]

Rudsdale: Hullo Centre, Rudsdale here at Fox One. Just spotted a Flying Fortress coming in over our sector, on 43, heading North West

New: Stop immediately! Mr Rudsdale, that is not a Fortress, it is a Liberator. Have you completed your aircraft recognition tests?

Rudsdale: No, not yet, I haven't got the hang of all this identification, I'm afraid.

New: Well this will have to change. I think I had better take over the phones. We can't have you sending out false information.

Rudsdale *(to Minter softly)*: Not getting a thing right this evening! Time for a cup of tea?

Minter: Yes I reckon, get that kettle on the boil!