The Roman army and British resistance
By Michael Coleman

NARRATOR: By the year 47 AD, just four years after they’d arrived, the Romans had conquered most of the south and east of Britain from what is now Exeter to as far as what is now Lincoln. This was fast going in those days! The Roman army really was the greatest the world had ever seen. The Roman army was made up of professional soldiers, men who were paid to fight. They’d agreed to join the army for 25 years. There were two kinds of soldier: legionaries and auxiliaries...

LEGIONARY: I am a legionary! We’re true Romans and we’re the best fighters in the army!

AUXILIARY: I’m an auxiliary. I joined the army after those rotten legionaries invaded my country and captured me. Well, it was better than being executed.

LEGIONARY: All legionaries belong to a group of 80 men, called a century. That’s why our group leader is called a centurion.

AUXILIARY: Auxiliaries belong to a regiment called an auxilia. An auxilia has 1,000 men!

LEGIONARY: Well, our centuries are grouped into legions. That’s where we legionaries get our name from. And a Roman legion has 5,000 men, so there!

AUXILIARY: All right, but when it comes to a battle, which group gets put at the front? The auxilia!

LEGIONARY: Yeh – because it’s your job to protect us legionaries. Which means you get killed first! Ha-ha! Boo-sucks to you!

NARRATOR: Whether you were a legionary or an auxiliary, life in the Roman army was tough and dangerous. But it was well paid – and not just in money...
LEGIONARY: Wa-hey! I’ve just been paid!

AUXILIARY: So have I! Lots of lovely coins...

LEGIONARY: And...a big bag of salt!

NARRATOR: Yes, soldiers were partly paid in salt, which they used to stop their food going mouldy. Nearly 2,000 years later we still say that somebody who does a good job ‘is worth their salt’. Another reason for the success of the Roman army was its fighting equipment. It wasn’t just good – it was very good!

BRITISH CHIEF: Trusty warriors! Soon you will face the Roman Army! Do you know what to expect?

WARRIOR: A big punch-up, sire! Hand-to-hand fighting! Bring it on!

CHIEF: Valiantly spoken! But before they get close enough for that the Romans like to use long-distance weapons. Be prepared for thousands of arrows to land on you. After that they’ll use a giant catapult called a ‘ballista’ to hurl great big rocks and balls of fire at you.

WARRIOR: And...er...then it’s hand-to-hand fighting?

CHIEF: For those of you still standing, yes. But...

WARRIOR: But what? We’ve got our swords and shields, ain’t we?

CHIEF: And so have they. Except that their shields aren’t like our little ones: they’re tall and curved so it’s hard to get at them.

WARRIOR: They’ll jump when I do, though!

CHIEF: Er...possibly. Roman soldiers wear armour to stop swords getting through, whereas we have...

WARRIOR: No armour at all!
CHIEF: True. But even so, my brave men, I believe we can beat them. Agreed?
Men? Where are you going? Wait for me!

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NARRATOR: On the battlefield the Roman army was also really well organised. They were a bit like a top football team. They didn’t simply charge around, they used clever tactics...

REPORTER: With just a few minutes to go before the battle kicks off, I’m here with the Roman army’s head coach, General Plautius! General what’s your game plan, today?

PLAUTIUS: We’re going to attack them as if we were an animal!

REPORTER: What – as fiercely as a tiger? As powerfully as a rhinocerus?

PLAUTIUS: No. As slowly as a testudo.

REPORTER: Testudo? That’s a tortoise, isn’t it?

PLAUTIUS: Correct! Testudo formation, men!

REPORTER: Oh, dear. It looks like I’m going to be in the middle of things. The men have surrounded us to form a square shape.

PLAUTIUS: Front row: shields before you! Left column: shields up on your left! Right column: shields up on your right! Everybody else: shields over your heads!

REPORTER: Wow! It’s like being inside a tortoise’s shell!

PLAUTIUS: And just as safe. Men – advance!

NARRATOR: Organisation, equipment and tactics: all these help to explain why the Roman Army was so good, and how the invasion of Britain succeeded...
NARRATOR: This isn’t to say that the Britons were beaten easily. There were two occasions especially when the Romans didn’t have things all their own way. In 60 AD the king of the Iceni died and the Romans seized his kingdom. His wife, Queen Boudicca, waited until the army went off to attack another part of the country and then she led a revolt...

BOUDICCA: And what a revolt it was! We attacked Camulodenon and burnt it down. Then we did the same to Londinium. And after that it was Verulamium. Well, of course the Roman army then rushed back. Me and my warriors were beaten in a final battle...

NARRATOR: And in that battle, or shortly after it, Queen Boudicca died. Exactly how she died isn’t certain - but there’s a legend that she’s still in London...buried under Platform 9 of King’s Cross station!

NARRATOR: A second example dates from 122 AD, in the time of Emperor Hadrian. By then the Romans were threatening the people of what we now called Scotland – who they called ‘Barbarians’ – and the Barbarians had been fighting back! So Emperor Hadrian decided he’d invaded enough of Britain...

CENTURION: New instructions, lads! From the Emperor Hadrian, on how to deal with the Barbarians.

SOLDIER: Give ‘em a good hiding!

CENTURION: Er...no. It’s us who’ll be hiding – behind a huge wall!

NARRATOR: Hadrian’s Wall took over six years to build. Lots of it still remains and it’s clear that it was a lot more than a wall. Parts of it housed soldiers in small forts. Forts were buildings with high walls designed to prevent an enemy attack. The Romans built them throughout Britain. Whenever they captured a place they built a fort for some of their soldiers to stay and live in. A fort’s location was carefully chosen...

AGENT: Good morning, Centurion! Welcome to Hot Plot, the Estate Agents who care. How can I help?
CENTURION: I'm looking for a plot of land. A big plot of land.

AGENT: Something in the village, with lots of friendly neighbours?

CENTURION: No. Out in the open, so we can see our enemies coming. Up at the top of a hill would be perfect, so we can fire nasty things down on them from above. And near a stream or river to give us fresh water.

AGENT: A-ha. Don’t tell me – you’re building a fort, aren’t you?

CENTURION: Affirmative!

AGENT: I ‘fort’ so!

NARRATOR: Forts helped the Romans keep the land they’d won. Even so, they really didn’t want to have further battles trying to keep it. That meant persuading the tribal kings – and their people – to live peacefully alongside them...

GENERAL: Well, we’ve had a good battle, Your Majesty, but the best side won in the end. Us. The Romans. So now I want you to talk your tribe into accepting us and living like we do.

QUEEN: Why should I?

GENERAL: Because if you agree we’ll let you stay in charge.

QUEEN: And if I don’t agree?

GENERAL: We’ll make you a slave and take over anyway.

QUEEN: You know, I’ve always fancied living like a Roman!

NARRATOR: And so, throughout the length and breadth of Britannia, the Romans had arrived – and they were staying. For the Britons, big changes were on the way.