

OPEN FILES AND HIDDEN SECRETS: A RE-EVALUATION OF THE SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE IN WESTERN EUROPE 1940-1942

*Dr Tom Keene*¹

When you're starting to climb a big mountain the advice goes: don't look up: the steep way ahead may discourage the uncommitted. The same, I suspect, is largely true of a PhD: if you *really* knew just how much work lay ahead, you'd probably never get started. Mine started almost by accident, though I didn't realise it at the time. It began, in truth, not with academic study *per se* but with research for a television documentary on a famous wartime raid during World War Two made for BBC Television in 2004. Unlike the mountain climber, however, I was unaware the journey had started, nor that my own particular mountain peak was far away, its summit shrouded in the mist of the years stretching ahead.

My interest as a sea kayaker was in a World War Two raid by canoe on the Bordeaux docks. The raid – small enough and inconsequential in its time – gained fame after the war as the raid of *The Cockleshell Heroes* which was both dignified by a good book² by C.E. Lucas Phillips and diminished by an inaccurate film.³ Yet, as the years slipped by, a rumour persisted: that, on the very night that Major Blondie Hasler's Royal Marines completed their 80 mile paddle into the very heart of enemy territory to plant bombs on German shipping in Bordeaux harbour after having been dropped off by submarine at the mouth of the Gironde river, members of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) – Churchill's clandestine cloak-and-dagger organisation tasked to 'set Europe ablaze' - had been about to attack the same targets by simply walking through the dock gates with bombs hidden in their knapsacks. As far as the Royal Marines were concerned, the wartime poster that enquired of train travellers: 'Is Your Journey Really Necessary?' seemed as though it might be apposite.

I began to make a few enquiries. The first port of call, naturally, was The National Archives, formerly The Public Record Office, that vast concrete octagonal building at the bottom of a

¹ Tom Keene is a writer and television producer. He can be contacted at Tom@longbowprods.co.uk.

² C.E. Lucas Phillips, *Cockleshell Heroes*, Heinemann, London, 1956.

³ Historically inaccurate and with many liberties taken to add excitement and 'human interest' to the film.

quiet residential road in Kew. But, of course, it was in London. And I was in Devon. The journey would become very familiar in the years ahead.

My raid was known formally as Operation *Frankton* and the *Frankton* files at TNA DEFE2/216, 217 and 218, I was soon to discover, had long been picked clean by professional historians for any ‘untold’ story. What had **not** been tied-in to the story, however, was the Personal File of the SOE agent dropped into Bordeaux at the relevant time and put in charge of the SOE *reseau*, or circuit, known as *Scientist*. Did Claude de Baissac have a SOE file at TNA, I wondered? And, if he did, might that now have been released into the public domain? It was by no means certain. The SOE had been wound up in 1946 and an estimated 87 per cent of all SOE files had been destroyed either by accident, fire or the deliberate weeding by bored clerks awaiting demobilisation at the end of the war.

Breakthrough Discovery

And then – a breakthrough: File HS 9/75 revealed that Claude de Baissac had, indeed, been parachuted to the *Scientist reseau* in July 1942. And there, turning over the faded pages typed on war-economy flimsies, I found his mission: to attack axis shipping in Bordeaux harbour. I could hardly believe my luck. But it was no myth: there it was, confirmed page after page in a long closed and overlooked file. There was even a post-action report from de Baissac describing how his own men were on the quayside on their final recce when the Royal Marines attacked. At last, the true background to what one German officer described as ‘the outstanding commando raid of the war’⁴ could now be told. That was the story I turned into *Frankton’s Shadows*, an award-winning documentary for BBC television. Necessarily short on detail, that TV programme planted the nagging seed of intrigue and speculation that would grow into a fully-formed and rather grown-up PhD: how was it possible that such confusion had been permitted? Surely both units were on the same side; there was *supposed* to be co-operation between something like the SOE and the Combined Operations, wasn’t there? Well yes – and then again, no. It was this conundrum that set me on my way – that and the addictive pleasure of turning over original files and realising that, just possibly, the last person who had handled the file in my hands *right now* had got up from a desk in London somewhere to make sure the blackout curtains were fastened. Heady stuff.

Developing a Methodology

Books and papers had been written about the SOE *ad nauseam* – but mostly about the glamorous, sharp-end agents-into-France-by parachute sort of stuff that relegated the

⁴ C.E. Lucas Phillips, *Cockleshell Heroes*, p.4.

London in-fighting that surrounded the SOE in its formative years to almost footnoted stepping stones on the way to the more exciting story of agents in enemy-occupied territory. Yet the politics, Westminster back-biting and in-fighting that surrounded the SOE, I was to discover, were central to the SOE's story of stunted early development. Professor Kevin Jefferys in the University of Plymouth's History Department supported my proposal and I began research under the friendly, watchful and endlessly enthusiastic eye of Dr. Harry Bennett. Might there be other examples, I wondered, where lives had been lost or missions endangered because of the SOE's obsession with secrecy and its sense of beleaguered encirclement in those early years of the war?

Any PhD begins with a thorough grasp of the known subject, for one cannot make an original contribution to a subject – the *sine qua non* of any PhD in whatever discipline – without a thorough understanding of what had been written, unearthed and discovered before. So – the first year or eighteen months were spent... reading. Reading anything and everything that promised to take me further into the arcane world of the Special Operations Executive.

I began by forming a template by breaking my subject into perhaps a hundred different sub-headings. These covered everything from agent training to argumentative rows in Whitehall to DZs (Dropping Zones) in France and the parachuting of explosives to Resistance groups. I then read ALL the respected factual histories of the SOE, gave each book a serial number and listed by page every reference to a particular subject. Thus, at the end of a year's study, I could look up, say, 'wireless transmissions from France' and find 86 different references spread across 13 books. I was beginning to build my data base.

There were, I discovered, very few SOE agents still living – and fewer still who had been the movers and shakers of the SOE policy in London that I was looking for. Secretive to the last, few of those who had held high office had left memoirs. Sir Charles Hambro, the Head of the SOE in 1942, had, allegedly, ordered his daughter to burn his papers in the fireside grate even as he lay on his death-bed. One expert however who **was** still very much alive was Professor (and well known politician) M.R.D. Foot. He was not only the official historian of the SOE in France but had actually served as a Combined Operations Intelligence Officer during my period of study. Over tea in his London club, the ever-courteous Professor proved an invaluable help and guide into that arcane world of the SOE. And arcane it was.

The SOE began as a desperate solution to desperate times. Created in July 1940, it took dark shape in those momentous, hot summer days while Britain awaited German invasion. For a while at least, the SOE offered glittering promise: it was new, it was untried, it offered

the possibility of success and – above all else – it filled a gap: at a time when there was little else, the SOE offered the *hope* that subversion and the arming of those who found themselves living under German rule – the setting ablaze of occupied Europe – might help pave the way to eventual victory. It would do so coupled to an effective blockade of the German economy and a gathering air offensive which would, hopefully, pound German industry to ruin. That was the theory, at least. It must have been a very hot summer.

It is easy at this remove to forget that nothing in those early wartime days was pre-determined and allied victory was by no means a certainty. If invasion was beyond Britain's foreshortened reach in those early years of 1940-1942 then Prime Minister Churchill at least required Britain to lean forward into Europe, to pluck German sentries from their posts and ensure that German units that might be deployed somewhere else spent their days guarding empty coastline. Operation *Frankton* – the raid of the *Cockleshell Heroes* – grew out of such a mentality. There were those in Whitehall like the successive Ministers of Economic Warfare Hugh Dalton and Lord 'Top' Selborne who still believed – erroneously – that one way to significantly damage the German war effort was through that first World War strategy of blockade: attacking German ships in Bordeaux harbour would both tweak the Nazi's nose and achieve a worthwhile strategic objective. Perhaps. And so Major 'Blondie' Hasler began training his men in Southsea, Hampshire, for what one of his volunteers would later describe as a 'suicide mission' deep into enemy territory.

Early reading of the works of others fleshed out the overall picture but skimmed on the very details I was looking for. Which is where Kew came in: trips to London and the endless poring over files in the hope that something new would emerge that might flesh out a growing sense of a story that had yet to be told. And, slowly, that story **did** emerge: about the way in which the Military establishment viewed the whole concept of 'ungentlemanly' warfare – even while Britain awaited invasion there were nasty, spiteful little files and petty memos that were more about turf war and protecting paper empires than tackling the common foe. There was an early and particular mission planned by the SOE that involved dropping SOE agents into Brittany to assassinate German *Luftwaffe* Pathfinder aircrew as they travelled by coach to their airfield. The RAF was asked to supply the aircraft that was needed for the mission – and initially declined because 'the dropping of men dressed in civilian clothes for the purpose of attempting to kill members of the opposing forces is not an operation with which the Royal Air Force should be associated.'⁵ The view of that senior RAF officer – Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal - was considered a little unhelpful but

⁵ MN.R.D. *Foot SOE In France*, (Frank Cass, London, 2004) p.140.

perfectly acceptable. The Secret Intelligence Service on the other hand – Britain’s traditional and long-established network of agents both at home and abroad - bitterly resented the arrival of the SOE, not least because they felt that agents running round France letting off loud explosions would do nothing at all for their own soft-slipped approach to discreet intelligence gathering: never mind that the SIS had trouble gathering anything at all of any significance, given that most of its agents had been swept up with consummate ease once the ‘Phoney War’ of stalemate, stand-off and inactivity in Western France had ended in May 1940.

The SOE was also resented by the Royal Navy for planning to trespass on ‘their’ enemy coast, by Bomber Command who resented lending aircraft to armed civilians of dubious merit who never told anyone what they were doing and by the Foreign Office who felt they were just not... well... proper chaps. That was a fear that chimed with a deep-rooted and wider unease: that, post-war, the SOE with its supposed left-wing leanings would bring about the socialist re-orientation of western Europe.

The SOE had other problems of its own too, not least because occupied France in 1940 might as well have been the far side of the moon. There was no ‘Resistance’ in place, no groups of young men hiding in woods with Sten guns and berets waiting to avenge French capitulation. Overall, in the early years of the war, the French population accepted German occupation in a mood of sullen indifference although, naturally, that is not how France now chooses to remember its less than glorious recent past. That said, one of the high-spots of early documentary research was to track down and interview those now-elderly and frail men and women in France who had actually befriended – at risk to their own lives and those of all their family - Hasler’s Royal Marines when they slipped ashore and tried to make their way overland to Spain and safety. Actually walking the ground and meeting some of those involved – not all of whom would make the final edited version of my Thesis – had its own rewards: finding near Bordeaux the elderly French woman whose husband had literally stumbled upon two filthy, camouflaged Royal Marines hiding in her shed after the mission had been accomplished and they were attempting to evade home overland via Spain; talking to the old labourer whose meagre lunch had been stolen from his barn in Montlieu Le Garde by two of Hasler’s evading Royal Marines who then left a thank-you note *in English*; standing beside a new monument to the raiders near Pointe Du Grave estuary and seeing the unveiling of a tableau with the picture I had tracked down and unearthed after much effort of the only one of Hasler’s *Cockleshell Heroes* whose photograph had never been seen before

– all these remained the little extras that brought history alive, made the journey of historical research and discovery so worthwhile.

WRITING UP

I suppose two years must have been spent reading and researching before I began the first chapter. For a while I found myself putting off that moment when all my studies and intellectual endeavours would be put to the sticking point. However, once that process began I found enormous relief and satisfaction in committing my theories and investigations to hard copy. And even more relief when those who read my early drafts appeared satisfied with the result! Gradually, other unexpected bonuses emerged, too: an approach from Lord Paddy Ashdown for assistance with **his** book to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the raid in 2012 and then a subsequent approach from the BBC to act as Historical Consultant on their documentary of the raid which would be presented by Lord Ashdown and transmitted in autumn 2011.

Many hurdles remained, of course: the collation and editing of material; the editing and painful deletion of nice-to-have material that would have taken the final count to well over the stipulated 100,000 words; the gathering in and collation of Footnotes (959 in all); the absolutely *correct* notation of these in the formal Thesis (There *must not*, for example, be a gap between a bracket and the first capital letter within that bracket). Irritating? For sure. But then, as I was reminded more than once: PhDs are not **supposed** to be a casual assembly of random thoughts, but they **are** supposed to be exemplars of intellectual rigour.

So now, here I sit – with two little letters and a full stop before my name. Was it worth all the pain, the thought, the worry and effort? I rather think it was.