

Chapter Nine

Postmaster

14 January 1942

While many daring raids carried out during the Second World War became legendary tales in the post-war era, through book or film, others remained unheard of. One probably falling into this latter category was carried out in January 1942 by a small group of men working for the SOE. The mission, called Operation Postmaster, was one of SOE's classic operations of the war and took place in the neutral port of Santa Isabel on the Spanish island of Fernando Po (now known as Bioko) off the west coast of Africa. The aim was to board Italian and German ships in the harbour and then sail them to Nigeria. It was a raid that boosted SOE's reputation at a critical time and demonstrated its ability to plan and conduct secret operations no matter what the political consequences.

Under the command of Major Gus March-Phillipps, the raiders left Britain bound for West Africa during August 1941 in a Brixham trawler called the *Maid Honor*. The 60-foot ketch-rigged *Maid*'s non-naval appearance made it ideal for operations, and for the next few months she posed as a neutral Swedish yacht operating out of Freetown, from where the crew could reconnoitre the coastline, as it was believed German submarines were sheltering there and using the river deltas in Vichy West Africa as refuelling depots for their Atlantic operations.

The *Maid* was only big enough for a total of eleven on board and so March-Phillipps had chosen his men carefully. His second-in-command was his trusted friend Captain Geoffrey Appleyard, already a holder of the MC awarded for an earlier SOE operation. The two had first met in 1940 amongst the sand dunes of Dunkirk while waiting to be evacuated off the beaches. At the time March-Phillipps was an artillery officer and Appleyard was serving with the Royal Army Service Corps, but when the Commandos formed soon after both men had been amongst the first to volunteer. While serving with 7 Commando they were both recruited by the SOE in early 1941, after which March-Phillipps had been instructed to form a Special Service Unit, with Appleyard as his deputy, to train for specialist amphibious operations. Now the training was over and

this was the unit's first opportunity to prove its value on operations.

Also on board the *Maid* was Captain Graham Hayes, a boyhood friend of Appleyard's and from the same Yorkshire village. Before the war Hayes had served as an apprentice seaman on a Finnish four-mast barque sailing from England to Australia, and later as a craftsman with a furniture company in London. The outbreak of war had brought an end to his furniture-making career. He joined the army and then volunteered for the paras before he was reunited with Appleyard and asked to join the West African adventure. The others on board were all trained commandos, but now posing as a civilian crew. There was 22-year-old Denis Tottenham, Frank Perkins, only just 18 and the youngest member of the crew, a sergeant from the paras called Tom Winter, cook Ernest Evison, March-Phillipps's batman Jock Taylor, the quartermaster Leslie Prout, a Free Frenchman called André Desgranges, and a tall, blonde Dane called Anders Lassen, who had travelled to England with the Danish Merchant Navy to volunteer for the Commandos.

The SOE always maintained a presence in West Africa from where it could observe the Vichy French, Spanish and Portuguese territories in order to identify and hinder any activities threatening the British interest. While the crew of the *Maid Honor* had been searching for submarine bases during the last weeks of 1941, SOE agents had become aware of three vessels in the port of Santa Isabel on the Spanish island of Fernando Po, 20 miles offshore in the Gulf of Guinea, the nearest island to the mainland and not far from the coast of Nigeria.

The three ships identified were an 8,500 ton Italian merchant ship called the *Duchessa d'Aosta*, a large German tugboat called the *Likomba* and a barge called the *Burundi*. The *Duchessa d'Aosta*, in particular, was of great interest. She was carrying a large load, but exactly what was on board was uncertain. Although she was supposedly carrying wool, hides and skins, as well as copra, asbestos fibre and ingots of electrolytic copper, her captain had failed to declare the full load and so it was assumed she was also carrying arms and ammunition.

To seize ships in a neutral harbour was considered extremely controversial, so British authorities in the area refused to support the raid, but permission was eventually given by London for it to go ahead. The raid was planned for late in the evening of 14 January 1942, the darkest night of the period, with no moon, and while the ships' officers would be ashore attending a dinner party arranged by an SOE agent, Richard Lippett.

Lippett had managed to get work with a shipping company that had business offices on the island. From there he had been able to make preparations for the raid and was very much aware just how sociable the crew of the *Duchessa d'Aosta* were known to be. They were only too happy to accept the hospitality of the locals ashore, as well as

hosting parties aboard, and it was during one such party on board the *Duchessa* that Lippett had first been able to glean valuable information about the ship and crew.

Even though permission had been given for the raid to go ahead, the British Foreign Office remained concerned that seizing the ships in a neutral port would be seen as an act of piracy and so a Royal Navy corvette, HMS *Violet*, was sent to the area; this would support the cover story that the enemy ships had been intercepted at sea while trying to make their way to Europe. There was also concern at the British Embassy in Madrid, as it was unclear exactly how the Spanish government would react, and so the political consequences of such a raid were considered to be potentially severe.

While suspicion of British involvement would be inevitable, tangible proof had to be avoided. To seize the ships March-Phillipps would have a raiding force of thirty-two men, including the crew of the *Maid Honor*, with the rest made up of four SOE agents and seventeen volunteers from local army units. To tow the enemy ships, two tugs were provided by the Governor of Nigeria and crewed by Africans.

Early on the morning of 11 January 1942 the tugs left Lagos. On board the larger tug, the *Vulcan*, were March-Phillipps and his raiding party of Appleyard, Lassen, Tottenham, Evison, Desgranges, Taylor and Prout, with over half of the volunteers. Hayes, aided by Winter and Perkins, was leading the second raiding party from the smaller of the two tugs, the *Nuneaton*. For the next couple of days the men practised lowering Folbot canoes and boarding a ship at sea, but the *Nuneaton* was already experiencing problems with her engines. However, there was no choice other than to press on, so March-Phillipps finalized his plan.

The plan was simple and straightforward, and would hopefully be carried out without a single shot being fired. The two tugs would enter the harbour and make their way independently alongside their respective targets. The raiding parties would then board the enemy ships and make fast the towing cables, while the others were to overcome any resistance encountered and place cutting charges on the anchor and stern cables. The tugs were then to steam slowly ahead to enable the strain on the cables to spring the ships from their moorings after the cables had been cut. Once this task was complete, March-Phillipps would signal the blowing of the cables by a single blast on his whistle and the tugs would then steam full ahead and tow their prizes out of the harbour.

Late in the evening of 14 January, and with the three target vessels' officers ashore and well out of the way, the raiding party entered the port. The *Vulcan* headed straight for the *Duchessa d'Aosta*. March-Phillipps could see some of the crew on board, but they paid no attention to the tug as it approached the merchantman from its starboard side.

Meanwhile, Hayes and Winter had left the *Nuneaton* in Folbots and were now paddling towards the *Likomba* and *Burundi*, which were moored together in the

harbour. Although they were challenged on approaching the *Burundi*, the watchman initially believed it was the captain returning to the ship before he suddenly realized it was a raid and promptly jumped overboard to swim towards the shore. Then, as the raiders stormed the barge, another watchman jumped overboard. Having then planted explosive charges on the anchor chain, the *Nuneaton* pulled alongside the *Likomba*, ready to take her and the *Burundi* in tow.

Back at the *Duchessa d'Aosta*, the *Vulcan* had managed to get alongside without any problems. The first to board were March-Phillipps and Lassen, before the rest of the raiders stormed the ship, taking those on board completely by surprise. While one group set the charges on the anchor chain, another searched the decks for the crew, who seemed happy to surrender without a fight. They had, in fact, little choice.

All three ships had been seized in a matter of minutes and without suffering any casualties. With nearly thirty prisoners on board, and with the raiders ready to depart, the charges were blown. The tugs struggled to gather any momentum. On board the *Vulcan*, March-Phillipps was concerned when there was no forward movement, despite the best efforts of the powerful tug. One of the charges had not blown and so Appleyard quickly set another. With no time to set a lengthy delay on the fuse, Appleyard then took cover as the explosion filled the air. Once again full power was applied to the *Vulcan's* engines and, after a few jerky movements, the *Duchessa* slowly, but steadily, started to move.

On the *Nuneaton*, Hayes had already blown the charges. Having had problems with the tug's engines on the way to Santa Isabel, he could expect further problems on the way out of the harbour, particularly under the strain of towing two vessels, and did not want to waste any time getting away. He could hear the explosions nearby and then saw the silhouetted shape of the *Duchessa* ahead of him, slowly making its way out of the harbour. Both the breeze and the current were against them, but slowly the *Nuneaton*, with its prizes under tow, crept forward against the strong tide.

As the raiders made their way out to sea, they could hear the pandemonium behind them. It had been the sound of the charges exploding in the harbour that had suddenly alerted those ashore. Many had gathered around the harbour to see what was going on, but no attempt was made to stop the ships from leaving, although some of the anti-aircraft guns opened up as the gunners believed the harbour was under air attack. The raid had taken everyone completely by surprise and it was not until several hours later that they realized the ships had gone.

Once out at sea, March-Phillipps was able to organize his men into different watches on the *Duchessa* as things were going to plan. On board the *Nuneaton*, however, it was much harder work. When daylight broke the following morning, Hayes could still see the harbour. It was hardly a quick getaway. The combination of the trouble with the

tug's engines and the difficulty of towing two vessels at the same time meant the *Nuneaton* was now sheering alarmingly in the swell of the sea. She was barely able to make 2 knots.

The *Vulcan* eased ahead and the rendezvous with HMS *Violet* went as planned. The *Duchessa d'Aosta* had supposedly been captured at sea. Escorted by the *Violet*, the *Duchessa* and *Vulcan* later made a triumphant entrance into Lagos, where they were greeted by a large crowd. Meanwhile, on board the *Nuneaton*, Hayes knew there was no chance of making it all the way to Lagos. Fortunately, the crew was able to establish contact with the Nigerians and arranged for a ship to be dispatched from Lagos to tow them into port.

Back in London, details of the raid were initially kept secret from the British chiefs of staff, although Prime Minister Winston Churchill was kept fully aware. The chiefs were eventually informed of the capture of the *Duchessa d'Aosta* a few days later; they were told that she had been intercepted more than 200 miles offshore and was being taken to Lagos.

As expected, the Spanish government was outraged by the raid and saw it as a breach of the country's neutrality and an intolerable attack on Spain's sovereignty. German reports that naval forces had entered the harbour were simply denied by the British Admiralty and countered by a British Naval Intelligence communiqué stating that no British, or even Allied, ships had been in the vicinity at the time.

Back on the island of Fernando Po, Richard Lippett was taken in for questioning by the Spanish authorities, but he managed to persuade them he had nothing to do with the departure of the ships. He was later released, but was refused permission to leave the island, although he later left secretly by canoe and made it to British territory a few weeks later.

In the aftermath of the operation, the *Duchessa d'Aosta* was sailed to Greenock and then used by the Canadians as part of the Allied war effort. The *Maid Honor*, meanwhile, was left in Lagos and was eventually sold to the government of Sierra Leone. For their part in the West African adventure, particularly for Postmaster, which had been brilliantly planned and expertly carried out, Gus March-Phillipps was awarded the DSO, while Graham Hayes and Anders Lassen were both awarded the MC, and Geoffrey Appleyard received a bar to his MC.