

Chapter Fifteen

Barricade

14/15 August 1942

The early months of 1942 were difficult for the Allies, and there had been increasing pressure from the Americans and Russians on Britain to carry out some form of positive action in north-west Europe to form an active second front. The British chiefs of staff were right to maintain that it was not the time to try and mount even a limited incursion into north-west Europe, but considered it would be possible to mount a number of small-scale raids across the Channel which, in turn, would divert enemy resources and help relieve the increasing pressure on the Eastern Front.

The man considered best to carry out such raids was Major Gus March-Phillipps, fresh from returning from his successful West African adventure, in particular Operation Postmaster, during which he had led a small group of men in the capture of three vessels off the Spanish island of Fernando Po and then sailed them to Nigeria. March-Phillipps was now asked to form a larger group, of around fifty or sixty men, to carry out more daring amphibious raids, but this time across the Channel.

The elite group he formed was called the Small Scale Raiding Force, but the SSRF operated under the cover title of 62 Commando to avoid attracting too much attention. The unit was to target German strongpoints and signal stations along the northern coastline of France and in the Channel Islands with the aim of gathering vital intelligence. Not only would these raids provide the Allies with vital intelligence, but enemy troops would have to be diverted from other theatres to carry out garrison duties along the coast of northern France and in the Channel Islands to prevent further raids from taking place.

Based at Anderson Manor in Dorset, March-Phillipps began to assemble his team of trained commandos. He had with him members of his *Maid Honor* crew that had taken part in Postmaster, including Geoffrey Appleyard as his trusted second-in-command, Graham Hayes and Anders Lassen, as well as others from the crew. The rest of the men came from all backgrounds. Half were officers and the other half from the ranks, including some from Allied nations, but all had been specifically hand-picked for the

task.

It was soon down to intense training, with the aim of turning the men into masters of their new role. There were new skills to learn, with much time being spent in boats learning how to navigate at sea and how to handle the vessels in all kinds of weather. Time was also spent in the water getting used to swimming in full clothing and keeping equipment and weapons dry. March-Phillipps strongly believed his men should be fully independent and they should not rely on anything or anyone when operating behind enemy lines.

To take a small raiding party across the Channel, March-Phillipps had secured the use of one of the Royal Navy's experimental motor torpedo boats, MTB 344, colloquially known to the men as the *Little Pisser*. With a crew of eight under the command of Lieutenant Freddie Bourne, the *Little Pisser* could carry a raiding party of twelve. She was capable of reaching a speed in excess of 40 knots and was designed to sit low in the water to make visual detection harder. One of her main advantages when operating close to enemy-occupied coasts was that she was able to run relatively silently on an auxiliary engine, thus enabling the raiding party to creep close to the enemy shore without being heard.

The *Little Pisser* had also been adapted to suit the team. The torpedo tubes had been removed to provide room to carry a light landing craft to get the raiding party from the MTB to the shore. The team had acquired a number of small collapsible flat-bottomed assault boats, made with wooden bottoms and canvas sides, known as Goatleys; each Goatley was capable of carrying a dozen or more men and could be quickly assembled in just a few minutes. They also had a Dory, a small, lightweight and shallow-draft boat made of wood with a flat bottom, high sides and a sharp bow. It could also carry a dozen or so men, but was not as flexible as the Goatley once ashore. Two Vickers and two Lewis machine guns had been retained on the MTB to provide some form of defence, but in reality these would prove little match for a more heavily armed German E-boat.

By the middle of June, although training was complete and the SSRF was ready to carry out its first operation, there followed a period of raids being planned and then cancelled for a variety of reasons, such as fog or unusually bad weather in the Channel, or because of problems with the *Little Pisser's* engine, which continued to ruin many plans. It was also a time when an increasing number of cross-Channel raids were being planned by different units and so clearance to conduct a raid could not always be obtained.

Finally, on the night of 14/15 August 1942, the first raid took place. A German direction-finding station had been located to the north-west of Pointe de Saire on the eastern coast of the Cherbourg Peninsula, and was proving to be a continuous nuisance

to Allied shipping in the Channel. The initial plan was to undertake a large-scale assault on the station, including air support, but the headquarters of Combined Operations decided instead to carry out a scaled-down operation using the SSRF.

The operation, called Barricade, was less ambitious but nonetheless daring. The raiding party was tasked with conducting a reconnaissance of the area and with carrying out an attack on an anti-aircraft gun site located near the direction-finding station, killing the enemy or taking prisoners as required. March-Phillipps would lead the raid, with Appleyard as his deputy. Also included in the raiding party of eleven were trusted colleagues Hayes and Lassen, and making up the group were Colin Ogden-Smith, Hamish Torrance, Graham Young, André Desgranges, Alan Williams, Jan Hollings and Tony Hall.

From the briefing given at Anderson Manor it was clear they could expect a difficult landing and approach to the site along what was a rocky part of the French coastline. Speed was always going to be important. German E-boats were freely operating in the Channel and, being fast, well-armed and generally better suited to operating in the open sea, they posed a real threat.

Late in the afternoon of 14 August the raiding party boarded a truck and left the manor for the Royal Naval coastal base of HMS *Hornet* at Gosport where the *Little Pisser* was waiting. Just before 8.30 pm they boarded the MTB and minutes later they set off. Unfortunately, though, the port engine played up once again as it had done during the days leading up to the raid. It was not bad enough to cancel the raid but the crossing had to be made at a reduced speed of 25 knots for the first hour. Then the engine cut out altogether, leaving the MTB proceeding towards France on just its starboard engine at a speed of little more than 15 knots.

The final part of the crossing presented a further risk as the team had to navigate along parts of known shipping lanes to avoid minefields, and so had to take great care to proceed without being spotted or heard. By the time the *Little Pisser* finally arrived off the French coastline it was nearly midnight. The raiding party was now over an hour behind schedule and establishing their exact position off a darkened coastline was not easy. Once satisfied they were approximately in the right place the starboard engine was cut. They then continued slowly and quietly on the auxiliary engine until they were within a mile of the coast, when the Goatley was lowered and the men paddled towards the shore.

The raiders were now getting even further behind schedule. A strong current had meant they landed about 3 miles to the north of St Vaast, nearly a mile from where they should have been, and so by the time they landed on French soil it was nearly 2.00 am. There was now less than an hour to carry out the raid.

It was completely dark and there was no ambient light whatsoever. It felt good to be

on French soil but there was no time to hang around. March-Phillipps quickly led his men off, but they soon found they could hardly see further than the man in front, which meant that progress was slower than had been hoped. Furthermore, the fact they had not landed in the right place only added to the confusion, and the darkness made it all but impossible to determine exactly where they were.

Moving as quickly as they could across challenging terrain, the raiding party proceeded towards where the anti-aircraft site was believed to be. It was not long before they could see a building in the distance, and believing it to be part of the site they continued forwards. They then came across a barbed wire fence, but it was easily cut, and March-Phillipps led his men through.

Advancing as quietly as they could, they then came across a second wire fence. Despite their best efforts, the fence proved a difficult obstacle and the men were unable to cut their way through. On the other side of the fence they could see a sentry not too far away. Convinced they had found the right place, March-Phillipps was determined to get through the wire into an attacking position. What they did not know was that they had, in fact, stumbled across an enemy sentry post, complete with heavy machine guns – one of a chain of German defence positions along the northern coastline of France.

With time getting short, the raiders continued to try and cut their way through the wire as quickly and as quietly as possible, but the noise was inevitably heard and the sentry called for help. With four German sentries approaching their position, March-Phillipps decided to make the most of the advantage of surprise and strike first. It was now a matter of dealing with the situation as best they could and causing as much damage as possible before making their escape under the cover of darkness.

The silence was suddenly shattered as the raiders opened fire. As more enemy troops emerged from the building, the commandos continued their attack. Then, just minutes later, and having decided there was nothing more to be gained by hanging around any longer, March-Phillipps ordered his men to make their way back to the beach. Leaving all sorts of commotion behind them, the commandos disappeared into the darkness as quietly as they had arrived.

The Germans had been taken completely by surprise and had no idea of the strength of the attacking force. Furthermore, they did not realize for a long time that the raiders had made a hasty escape, nor did they know in what direction they had fled. A few flares had gone up but to no effect. As the commandos escaped they could hear the firing continuing behind them in the distance as they made their way as quickly as they could back towards the beach, leaving what they believed to be at least three German sentries dead and several more wounded.

The raiding party managed to find their Goatley, and eventually made their way back to the *Little Pisser*, although it took some finding. They again experienced difficulty

with the current and by the time they were back on board and heading back across the Channel it was nearly 4.00 am and very nearly daylight. Apart from a brief scare when they thought they had been spotted by an enemy reconnaissance aircraft when it first got light, they arrived safely back in harbour at 7.00 am, more than ten hours after they had first left port.

Operation Barricade had been far from perfect. The raiding party had not found the intended target and so had not achieved their aim, but they had gained valuable experience from landing on the enemy-occupied coastline of northern France and had succeeded in gathering useful intelligence. The operation also proved the concept of small-scale amphibious raids was feasible and signalled the start of a series of daring missions by the Small Scale Raiding Force across the Channel.