

# OPERATION AMBASSADOR

According to Hilary St. George Saunders, unofficial biographer to the Commandos, credit for their conception goes to a Royal Artillery General Staff Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Dudley Clarke. In June 1940 he was Military Assistant to Field-Marshal Sir John Dill, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and, in the aftermath of the evacuation from Dunkirk, recalled, 'what other nations had done in the past when their main armies had been driven from the field and their arsenals captured by a superior enemy'. Lieutenant-Colonel Clarke later wrote on the evening of June 4 that he tried to marshal his ideas into the outline of a plan: a plan which revolved around the idea of carrying on guerilla warfare against the enemy . . . much as the Boers had done in South Africa and the Jews more recently in Palestine.

While it now seems certain that the idea of a 'Commando' force was born on Tuesday, June 4, 1940, the fact that the Prime Minister had written a memorandum on the same subject to the Chiefs-of-Staff that same day throws some doubt on the origination of the idea. It was immediately after Winston Churchill had delivered his memorable oration in Parliament on the recent traumatic events in France and the dangers which lay ahead for Britain, that he wrote as follows: 'It is of the highest consequence to keep the largest numbers of German forces all along the coasts of the countries they have conquered, and we should immediately set to work to organise raiding forces on these coasts where the populations are friendly'.

Initially referred to as 'Striking Companies', the new organisation came into being with unusual speed. While circulars were being issued to all military commands calling for names to be put forward of volunteers willing to embark on special service of an undefined but hazardous nature, the first operation was launched on June 23. That night a small force in several boats, including Lieutenant-Colonel Clarke as observer, landed in various places on the French coast in the Pas de Calais area. The ease with which the raiders had made unopposed landings was encouraging as was the subsequent morale-boosting communique issued to the general public.

By now, Sir John Dill had approved the title of 'Commando' for the new force which was to consist of ten separate Commandos of 500-odd men each. Leaving the designations of Nos. 1 and 2 for a tentative idea for special airborne commandos, No. 3 Commando was the first to be formed on July 5. Captain John Durnford-Slater, serving as adjutant for the 23rd Medium and Heavy Training Regiment at Plymouth, was selected as its CO, being instantly uplifted two ranks to Lieutenant-Colonel.

The composition of a Commando was specified as 250 ordinary ranks commanded by 247 NCOs (sub-divided into 122 lance-corporals, eighty-one corporals, forty-two sergeants and two WO2s). Officers consisted of twenty-four subalterns, ten captains (each in charge of one Troop) and one major.

Volunteers for the Commandos had to be already fully trained soldiers and inevitably there was opposition from some commanders to a unit which could take their best men and had the smell of that aversion to all regular soldiers — a private army. At the same time, some COs were only too quick to approve the release of their more troublesome types but Lieutenant-Colonel Durnford-Slater commented that, 'we never enlisted anybody who looked like the tough guy criminal type as I considered that this sort of man would be a coward in battle'. However, he was not against accepting minor offenders as the threat of being returned to their units (or RTU as it was termed) was a stabilising force and a unique form of punishment.

Commando troops received exactly the same training as normal infantry except that it was tougher and greater emphasis was put on being able to be independent and highly mobile. The only difference was that the men were not barracked but had to find their own accommodation for which they were given a daily allowance of 6s. 8d. — a small yet important facet of their training to be self-sufficient.

The HQ for No. 3 Commando was located at Plymouth and it was from the nearby harbour at Dartmouth that they sailed for their first operation on the evening of July 14.

On July 2 (two days after the occupation of Guernsey had begun), the Prime Minister sent a minute to General Lord Ismay, the head of the Military Wing of the War Cabinet Secretariat:

'If it be true that a few hundred German troops have been landed on Jersey or Guernsey by troop-carriers, plans should be studied to land secretly by night on the islands and kill or capture the invaders. This is exactly one of the exploits for which the Commandos would be suited. There ought to be no difficulty in getting all the necessary information from the inhabitants and from those evacuated.'

Accordingly, four days later, a Guernseyman was taken to the island by submarine to carry out a reconnaissance codenamed ANGER. Formerly a member of the Royal Guernsey Militia but now a Second Lieutenant in the British Army, Hubert Nicolle was taken ashore by collapsible boat by Sub-Lieutenant J. L. E. Leitch and landed on the beach at Le Jaonnet Bay on the south coast. The plan was that Second Lieutenant Nicolle would reconnoitre the proposed landing area on the north side of the island

**HMS Scimitar, one of the two S-Class destroyers which carried the embryo Commando organisation on their first major operation of the Second World War.**

and return to the beach to be picked up two days later. His place on the island would then be taken by two other officers who were also familiar with the locality and who could then guide in the Commandos.

The switch took place on the night of July 9/10 — Second Lieutenants Philip Martel of the Hampshire Regiment and Desmond Mulholland of the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry being landed in a similar fashion via submarine and boat.

Second Lieutenant Nicolle reported that there were 469 Germans on the island and that, although machine gun posts had been set up around the coast, the main body of troops were concentrated in St. Peter Port.

On the basis of this information plans for Operation AMBASSADOR were laid. After landing, forty men from H Troop, under Captain V. T. G. de Crespigny, were to create



**Brigadier John Durnford-Slater, who commanded the newly-formed No. 3 Commando on Operation AMBASSADOR. After a very active war, in which he participated in operations from North Africa to the Arctic Circle, he died tragically under the Brighton Belle Express near Haywards Heath on February 5, 1972.**



Photokrom Co., Ltd.]

PETIT PORT.

[London.

When the tide serves, this is one of the best bathing places in the Channel Islands, though many steps must be descended.

a diversion for No. 11 Independent Company who would attack the aerodrome in the parish of Forest. The latter unit was split into two parties. The first comprising twenty men under Captain Goodwin was to land a mile or so further to the west, nearer the airfield, while the second party of sixty-eight men, commanded by Major Todd, was to come ashore at Moye Point directly south of the target.

Meanwhile at Devonport, the destroyers HMS *Scimitar* and HMS *Saladin* were waiting to transport the men and act as escort for the seven RAF rescue launches which would take the troops from the ships to their respective landing beaches. At the last minute, bad weather delayed the operation for twenty-four hours but there was no means of informing Lieutenants Martel and Mulholland on Guernsey. No sooner had this first flaw in the plan become evident than another problem befell the mission.

In his autobiography *Commando*, Lieutenant-Colonel Durnford-Slater explained what happened:

"Since we were to sail from Dartmouth, I had breakfast at the Royal Castle Hotel on the morning of the 14th. I was excited, naturally, at being on the verge of our first operation, a very secret affair of course, and it came as rather a shock when I saw my sister Helen sitting at the next table with her husband, Admiral Franklin. Helen saw me and smiled happily.

"Hullo, John! What on earth are you doing here?"

"We've got some troops training in the area," I said. "What are you doing?"

"She said they were down to visit their son at the Royal Naval College. I felt uneasy but tried not to appear so. Fortunately, for the strain was growing, I was called out to the foyer of the hotel a few minutes later. An officer from Combined Operations Staff had just come off the night train from London. He said: "Colonel, the whole plan has been changed. Jerry is too strong. He's been reinforced at some of the places where we had intended to land."

"We moved into a bedroom of the hotel and worked out a new plan on the spot. Now we were to land at Petit Port on the south side of the island, just west of the Jerbourg

Peninsula and not on the north coast as originally decided. We were to sail at six o'clock that evening. Our role was still to create a diversion for the Independent Company which was to attack the airfield.

"We completed our preparations in the gymnasium of the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. Many of the weapons had been specially brought from London, as tommy guns and Brens were in very short supply and could only be issued for actual operations. We obtained the help of some cadets from the college who thoroughly enjoyed the work of loading the magazines and helping us in general. We planned the approach with the naval commanders and started to brief the men. Before we realised it, it was a quarter to six, and we had to embark hurriedly in the destroyer. It was a lovely summer evening and as we steamed out of the harbour most of the town was out walking on the quay. I wondered what they thought of our strange-looking convoy.

"I went over the final details with my officers in the Captain's cabin of the *Scimitar* on the way across. We had been so busy all day, dealing with naval officers and obtaining and issuing our special weapons, that this was the first chance our officers had had to discuss it all together.

"Lieutenant Joe Smale's party was to establish a road block on the road leading from the Jerbourg Peninsula to the rest of the island, so that we should not be interrupted by German reinforcements. My own party were to attack a machine gun post and put the telegraph cable hut out of action. Captain de Crespigny was to attack the barracks situated on the Peninsula, and Second Lieutenant Peter Young was to guard the beach. Peter did not relish this job as he wanted more action.

"All right," I told him, "if it's quiet, come forward and see what's going on."

"You chaps satisfied with the arrangements?" I asked finally. They nodded. We synchronised our watches. The password for the operation was "Desmond".

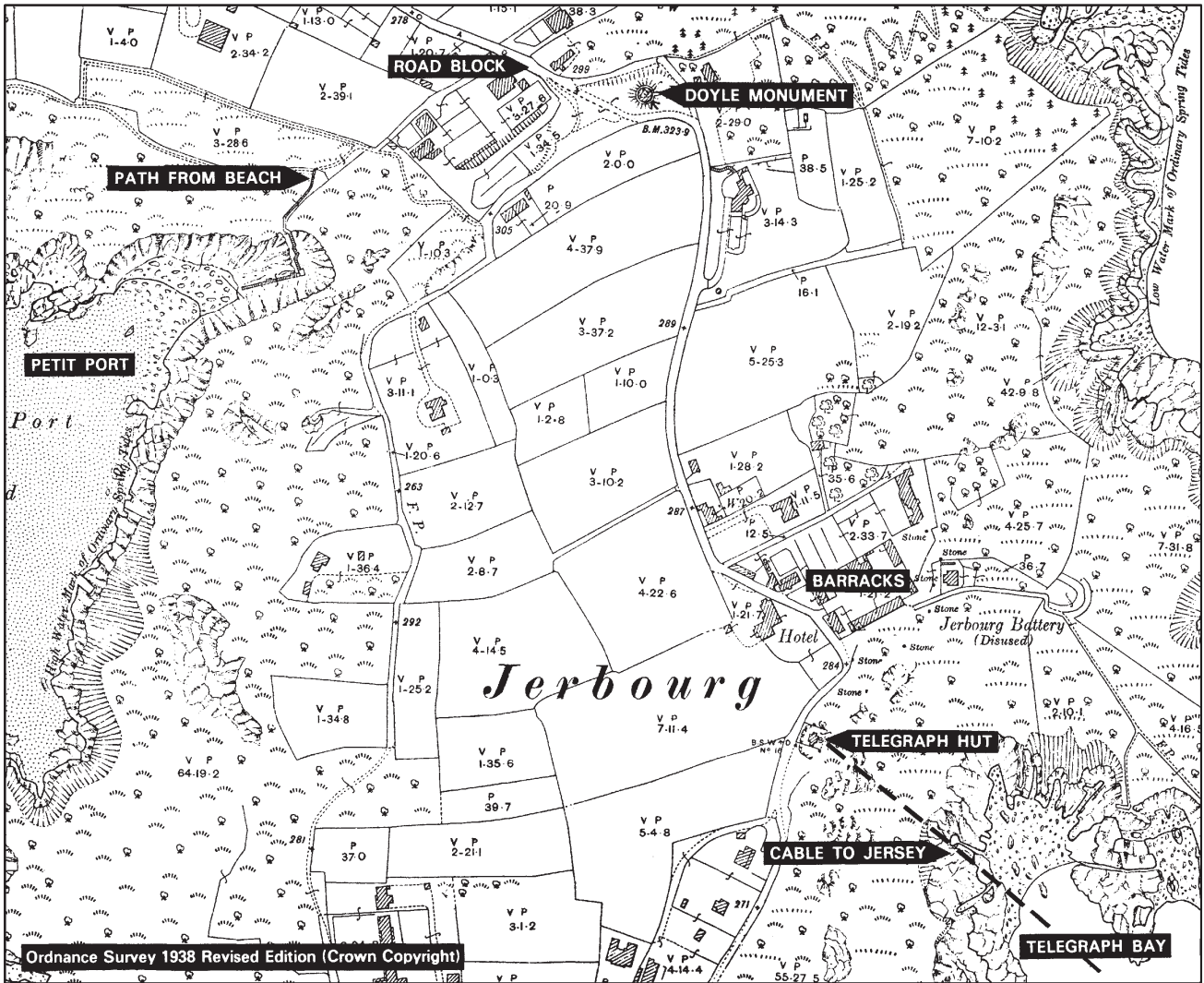
The official report compiled after the raid then explains yet another set back: 'Permission to proceed was received by telephone at 1800. Crash boats Nos. 300 and 301 were found not in a fit condition to undertake the voyage and they had to be left behind. In the revised plan, No. 1 landing (Durnford-Slater) was left undisturbed; No. 2 landing (Captain Goodwin) was halved in size and took only No. 302 crash boat, and No. 3 landing (Major Todd) was allotted crash boats Nos. 303 and 313, the remaining men being put into the whaler of destroyer H54 (*Saladin*).

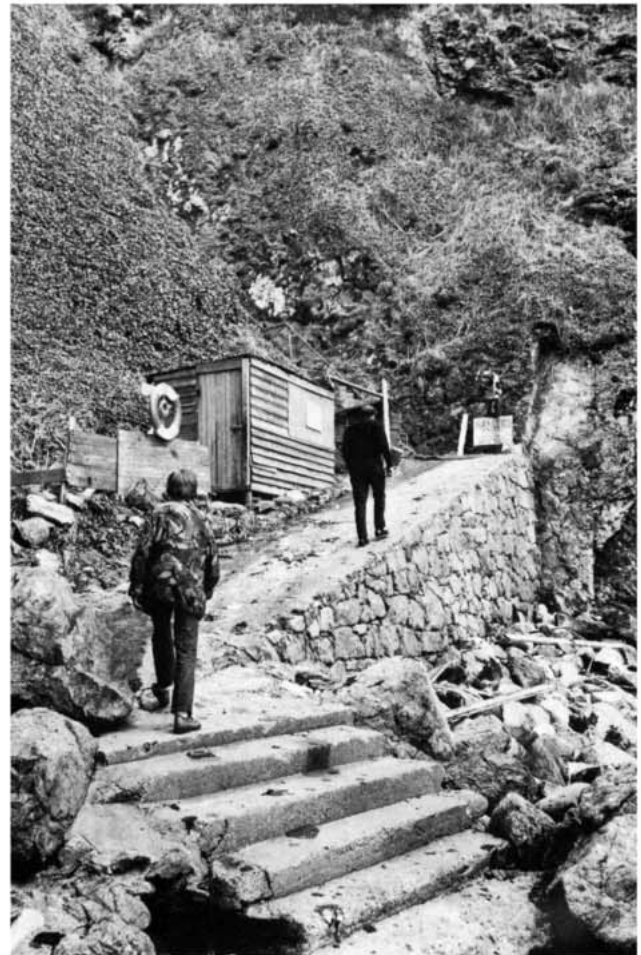
Owing to the trouble over crash boats 300 and 301, certain stores had to be transferred to other crash boats and two of the serviceable crash boats had to make extra trips to embark the men in the destroyers. The convoy started from Dartmouth harbour at 1845 hours and proceeded to sea at the speed ordered. For some reason (possibly an extra trip to collect life belts), crash boat 313 was delayed in starting, and at about 1950 hours she was 5 or 6 miles astern of the convoy. For a time she kept at this distance, so speed of convoy was reduced to 15 knots to allow her to catch up. 313 came up well for a time and then dropped astern again, so the speed of the convoy was still further reduced to 10 knots; 313 then came into her correct position just before nightfall. Speed was then increased to 18 knots.

Landfall was made at about the time expected and the convoy then went to within about 5 miles of the shore in order to check its positions. Visibility was poor, there was some mist and the moon was obscured. The high cliffs at the western end of the south shore of the island were easily distinguishable but it was extremely difficult to distinguish any points on the coast to the westward. Beyond the ending of the cliffs there appeared to be a number of rocky points protruding with misty



Petit Port in April 1979 with its 'stairway to heaven' still looking exactly as it was forty years ago.





spaces and low lying land in between. Destroyer H21 (*Scimitar* — *Editor*) and crash boats 323 and 324 broke away and passed destroyer H54 on the starboard side. (They were not seen again by H54 until Dartmouth was reached on the return journey.) Just as H21 was disappearing into the mist and slight drizzle ahead she appeared to be turning in towards the coast. When the Captain of H54 was satisfied that he had reached position Y, he stopped, the crash boats came alongside and the whaler was put into the water. The troops were then embarked in the boats, crash boat commanders were shown the points on the shore by the Captain of H54 and the boats had all left the ship by 0045 hours.'

Lieutenant-Colonel Durnford-Slater then describes what happened when they arrived off the island:

'The launches purred away from the mother ship. The naval officers in charge of the launches started off on the agreed course, watching their compasses carefully. My own eyes were on the cliffs and I was astonished to note that we were heading out to sea in the direction of Brittany. "This is no bloody good," I said to the skipper of our launch, "we're going right away from Guernsey."

'He looked up from his compass for the first time. Then he looked back and saw the cliff.

' "You're right! We are indeed. It must be this damn degaussing arrangement that's knocked the compass out of true. I ought to have had it checked."

' "Don't worry about the compass: let's head straight for the beach."

' "Right!"

'About a hundred yards from the beach a black silhouette seemed to approach from our port side. In undertones some of the men murmured, "U-boat!"

'Momentarily my heart sank. What a mug's game this was! Why hadn't I stayed at home in warmth and comfort? Then I realised that

Recreating history. *Left: The rocky beach with the stone ramp leading to the staircase. Right: Ken Tough, Guernsey branch secretary of the Channel Islands Occupation Society, lives up to his name and sets the pace.*

the U-boat was only a rock which bore the exact shape of a submarine superstructure.

'At that moment the launches, simultaneously and side by side, hit bottom. As they had not been designed as landing craft, they drew several feet of water. Besides, as the plan had been postponed for forty-eight hours, the tide was not half-way out. It was high. The bottom, instead of being smooth sand as had been calculated, was studded with boulders. I jumped in, armpit-deep. A wave hit me on the back of the neck and caused me to trip over a rock. All around me officers and men were scrambling for balance, falling, coming up and coughing salt water.

'I doubt if there was a dry weapon amongst us. Once on shore, we loosened the straps of our battledress to let the sea pour out. Then, with a sergeant named Knight close behind me, I set off running up the long flight of concrete steps which led to the cliff top, 250 feet up. In my eagerness I went up too fast. By the time I reached the top I was absolutely done, but Knight was even worse, gasping for breath like an untrained miler at the tape. I was exhausted myself and my sodden battledress seemed to weigh a ton. My legs were leaden, my lungs bursting. I could hear the squeak and squelch of wet boots as the rest of the troop followed us up from the beach. Fortunately the night was warm.

'I had an idea we were already behind schedule and I led on between a few small houses. We had to be clear of Guernsey by 3.00 a.m. As we passed each house, a dog inside began to bark. Presently there was a chorus of barking dogs behind us.

' "For God's sake, come on," I panted to Knight, who seemed to be slowing down. "We haven't got all night."



Where's Ken? Half way up and flagging — this must be Sergeant Knight!



'By then I had my second wind and didn't feel tired again during the operation. My headquarters party was close on my heels: Lieutenant Johnny Giles, CSM Beesley, Knight, two lance-bombardiers and a sapper. Another dog began to bark.

' "Shut up!" Johnny Giles yelled at it and the barking became louder.

' "This is going to alert the whole damn island," somebody remarked ruefully.

'One of the staff officers in London had suggested sending an aeroplane to circle over our operational area with a view to deadening any noise we might make and I had accepted this idea. At this moment I saw the aircraft, an Anson, circling above us at about three hundred feet. He was plainly visible and his exhaust pipes were glowing red.

'The machine gun post, which was the first objective of my little group, was at the tip of the Jerbourg Peninsula, eight hundred yards from the landing place. I went as far as the barracks with de Crespigny. Just before going into the barracks, de Crespigny broke into a house to get information from the householder. I went in with him through the back door. However, the man we found was so terrified that he had entirely lost the power of speech; all he could do was to let out a series of shrieks. We left de Crespigny and began climbing down the cliff. I sent Beesley, Knight and the others to the cable hut. Johnny Giles and I crawled up on either side of the little mound in which the machine gun nest was dug. I carried grenades and a .45 Webley; Giles, a giant of well over six feet, had a tommy gun.

'We jumped to our feet and into the nest, a sandbagged circle. We were both ready to shoot, but I found myself face to face with Johnny's tommy gun; and he with my Webley.

' "Hell!" Johnny said bitterly. "there's no one here!"

'We went down to where the others were cutting the cables leading from the hut. Knight asked me rather plaintively:

' "Please can I blow the place up, sir?" He had a pack of demolition stores on his back and was aching to use it.

' "No. Apparently the Germans don't know yet that we've come. There's no point in announcing it. Just cut the cables."

'We went back to see if we could help de Crespigny's party. It was pitch dark and, as I approached, Corporal "Curly" Gimbert burst through a hedge at me. The next thing I felt was a bayonet pushing insistently through my tunic.

' "Password!" Gimbert hissed.

'He was a big, powerful man. It seemed a long time before I could say anything. There have been worse occasions since, when I've been less scared. At last I remembered the word and let it out with a sigh.

Left: Second wind. Above: On the flat at last.



Looking back along the path where it passes the houses (which existed in 1940) and meets the Jerbourg road. Wot no dogs?



The derelict telegraph hut, spared the attention of Sergeant Knight and his explosives in 1940 for us to photograph nearly forty years later.



*Above:* This is the road block set up by the Commandos beside the Doyle Monument. It was the job of Privates Fred and Pat Drain to cut the telephone wires on the right-hand side of the road — a seemingly unusual case of two brothers participating in the

same raid (Carel Toms Collection). *Below:* The Germans carried out their own brand of demolition work on the monument — see page 12. Although it was rebuilt after the war, its replacement no longer contained an internal stairway and observation platform.





“Desmond!” I said.

‘Gimbert, recognising my voice, removed the bayonet quickly.

“All right, Colonel.”

‘I thought he sounded disappointed.

‘When we rejoined de Crespigny, his men had finished searching the barracks. There, as in the case of our machine gun nest, no one was at home. It was past time for the fireworks at the airfield between the Germans and our Independent Company. I listened. The night was still. Ignored, the dogs had stopped barking some time before. I looked at my watch and saw with surprise and some dismay that it was a quarter to three: time to go.

‘We formed up on the road between the barracks and the Doyle Column, a monument we had used as a landmark. It was easy to guess from the muttered curses that the others shared my disgust at our negative performance and at the fact that we had met no Germans. George Herbert was particularly upset and begged me to give them a few minutes more to visit some houses nearby which he thought might contain Germans. In this atmosphere of complete anti-climax it was clear that none of us wanted to leave but I called the officers together.

“We’ve got to be back on the beach in ten minutes.” I said urgently.

‘They got their men going on the run. In short order, I herded them like a sheepdog down the concrete steps. Still the enemy showed no sign that he knew of our visit.

‘I was last down from the cliff top with Peter Young clattering just ahead of me. Near the bottom I accelerated and suddenly realised that my feet had lost the rhythm of the steps. I tripped and tumbled the rest of the way, head over heels. I had been carrying my cocked revolver at the ready. During the fall it went off, seeming tremendously loud and echoing against the cliffs. This, at last, brought the Germans to life. Almost at once there was a line of tracer machine gun fire from the top of the cliff on the other side of our cove. The tracers were going out to sea towards the spot where I thought our launches must be awaiting us.

“You all right, Colonel?” It was Johnny Giles’ anxious voice.

“Yes.”

**The rocky foreshore which made the embarkation such a fiasco. The dinghy with the weapons (and Fred Drain) sank on the right-hand side and Fred and three other men were left behind. When we showed him this picture, it immediately brought back the memory of their later interrogation on this same beach by a German officer who stood in the centre with his back to the sea. Fred felt sure he was leaning against the large rock in the foreground during their grilling.**

‘I told him to get on with forming the men up on the beach. I had landed hard on the rocks and was shaken and bruised but there was nothing seriously the matter. I never carried my pistol cocked again.

‘Within five minutes my men were all formed up on the beach. I knew now that we were late for our rendezvous — it was ten past three — and that if the destroyers had obeyed instructions they were already steaming towards Britain. Then I saw the dim shapes of our launches about a hundred yards out.

“Come in and pick us up!” I shouted.

“Too rough! We’ve already been bumping on the rocks. We’ll stove our bottoms in if we come any nearer.”

“Well, send your dinghy in for the weapons.”

‘They did. It was a tiny craft, no more than nine feet in length. With each load of weapons went two or three men. As it came in for the fifth run, a high sea picked it up and smashed it against a rock. The dinghy was a total loss and one trooper was reported drowned.

“The rest of you will have to swim for it,” I ordered.

‘Fortunately we were equipped with Mae Wests and we all started to blow them up.

‘Some of the men began peeling off their uniforms and wading into the sea. Three men came up to me in the darkness. I recognised Corporal Dumper of Lieutenant Smales’s road-block party.

“Could we have a word with you, please, sir?” Dumper said. He seemed a little nervous.

“What is it?”

“I know we should have reported this in Plymouth, sir,” he said apologetically, “but the three of us are non-swimmers.”

‘I was ready to explode. The original letter calling for Commando volunteers had specifically mentioned that they must be able to swim. Then I calmed down.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can do for

you except try to send a submarine to pick you up tomorrow night,” I said. (*Conflicts with Private Drain’s recollection — see below.*)

“Thank you, sir,” Dumper said. “Sorry to be such a nuisance.”

‘I removed my tunic and struck out in the water. Some of the men, with more wisdom than modesty, preferred to swim naked. I had the added handicap of sentiment. In my right hand I carried a silver cigarette case which my wife had given me; in my left a spirit flask which had been my father’s. A rough sea had come up since our original landing. In these circumstances the hundred yards to the launches seemed endless. For the first fifty, breakers thundered and broke over my head. It took, I suppose, seven or eight minutes to swim out but it seemed hours and I was exhausted. As a sailor bent down from the launch to drag me aboard, the final effort of helping him, to my great annoyance, made me let go of the flask and case. When I was interested again in such matters, I noted that my wristwatch had stopped. I asked the time.

“Half-past three,” the Captain said.

“My God! We’ll have missed the destroyer completely.”

‘The discipline and bearing of the men during the difficult swim out to the boats was admirable. There was no shouting or panic; each man swam along quietly. The crews of the launches were continually diving in to help the most exhausted men over the last stages of their journey. Altogether, this most difficult re-embarkation was carried out quietly and efficiently.

‘With dawn half an hour off, it looked as if we should have to head for home in the launches. This was not a prospect to bring delight. The crews of these boats were brave men, mostly yachtsmen with no service experience. At this point, they seemed unable to reach a decision for further action. The second launch had just broken down: ours threw it a line and had it in tow. There was a



general discussion of the situation by all hands. Even the engine attendant left his recess to chip in.

“What the hell are we going to do now?” he demanded.

“This was too much for me.

“For heaven’s sake,” I snapped, “let’s stop the talking and pull out to sea.”

They did as I suggested.

I was sure that by now the *Scimitar* had gone; a certainty shared by all aboard the launch. It now seemed doubtful that, towing the other launch, we could make it to England, even if we were lucky enough to escape German fighters which could easily nip out from airfields on the French coast. I felt that only a piece of extraordinary luck could save us.

“May I borrow your torch?” I asked our Captain.

He handed it to me and I flashed it out to sea, knowing that this was a despairing hope.

To my delight, a series of answering flashes came back from just beyond the point. The *Scimitar*’s Captain, I later learned, had decided to take one last sweep around for us on his way home! He was exposing himself to a tremendous risk of air attack, as daylight was only a few minutes off and the Luftwaffe had many airfields within a few minutes’ flying time. Our own air cover of Hurricanes could not be expected at this time to operate so near to the coast of France.

After blowing up the ailing launch, we transferred to the destroyer.

Captain de Crespigny, noticing that I was shivering with cold, kindly lent me his tunic. I wore no shirt and put the tunic directly over my bare shoulders and arms. Just before getting to Dartmouth, de Crespigny said:

“Oh, by the way, Colonel, I do hope everything will be all right.”

“What do you mean?”

“I forgot to tell you that I’ve been suffering from scabies,” he said.

I rushed off for a hot bath in the Captain’s bathroom. Like the operation itself, nothing came of it. My own tunic, which had my name sewn into the collar, was picked up next morning by the Germans on the beach. Durnford is a well-known name in the Channel Islands and some of the Durnfords there were harried a good deal by the Gestapo who thought that I might still be lying up in the island, harboured by namesakes.

We arrived back in Dartmouth, safe but distinctly down in the mouth, at eight o’clock in the morning.’

While all this was taking place, the other two landings were proving even more abortive. Captain Goodwin led the second landing party away from the *Saladin* in boat No. 302 at forty minutes past midnight. Although supposedly on course for the landing beach, it seems that this boat’s compass was also defective, possibly caused by weapons being stacked too close, and instead the men arrived on another island believed to be Sark. Although they retraced their course, by the time they reached the *Saladin* it was 2.25 a.m. and too late to continue with the operation.

Because of the shortage of boats to transport the main party ashore, the *Saladin*’s whaler was used to augment boats 303 and 313 and was taken in tow by the latter. However, soon after leaving the destroyer, it began to leak badly and ship water. Although attempts were made to pump and bail out, the amount of water in the whaler increased and the men had to be taken off and shared between the two air-sea rescue boats, with the whaler tow being taken over by 303. With the extra load, and trying to tow a waterlogged boat, speed was minimal and, at 1.45 a.m., 303 turned back to the destroyer which was reached just over an hour and a quarter later.

Major Todd in 313 with thirty-six men on board had struggled on to try to reach the beach but by 2.00 a.m. he estimated they were still a good twenty minutes from the shore. He had also lost contact with 303 and therefore decided to abort. However, they could not even find the *Saladin* and had no alternative but to set course for England direct. Plagued by engine trouble, at first light they were met by RAF fighters which provided an escort until they reached Devonport at 10.00 a.m.

*Winston Churchill, who had expected great things from his latest brainchild, was not amused when he received the report on AMBASSADOR. He sent a scathing directive to the headquarters of the embryo Combined Operations: ‘Let there be no more silly fiascos like those perpetrated at Guernsey’ and, as a result, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes was brought in to become the new Director of Combined Operations.*

*According to the official report, four men were lost in the operation (not including*

*Lieutenants Martel and Mulholland). Gunner John McGoldrick of the Royal Artillery was simply reported as ‘missing believed drowned’ and Corporal Dennis Dumper, 1st East Surrey Regimental Police, and Privates Fred Drain (2nd Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire Regiment) and Andy Ross of the Black Watch as ‘missing, probably prisoners-of-war’. Not until we traced Fred Drain in February 1981 were we able to piece together exactly what had happened after the launches departed. Fred, now a successful building contractor in south London, clearly remembered the night . . . and the five years of captivity which followed. It was he, not John McGoldrick, who had been in the boat with the weapons when it capsized in six feet of water and he was only saved from drowning by his brother Pat who was also a Commando on this raid.*

*Both the Drain brothers had joined the 2nd Battalion of the Bedfs. & Herts. before the war and had volunteered for Commando service shortly after being evacuated from Dunkirk. They were both assigned to H Troop, Special Service Troops, and received very little ‘Commando’ training other than a few days practice with a small boat.*

*It had been the brothers’ task to cut the telephone wires near the Doyle Column and this had been achieved by Fred standing on Pat’s shoulders to reach the step brackets on the post to climb up to the wires.*

*When the dinghy sank beneath Fred, Pat, a strong swimmer, said he would get him out to the boats but Fred freely admits to a fear of deep water and told his brother to go it alone.*

*He told us that all the Commandos had been advised that a submarine would surface off La Creux Mahie beach from midnight onwards on the following Wednesday (July 17) and that any men left behind should make their way along Guernsey’s south coast to the rendezvous. Having been given additional French money on the beach by those Commandos returning to England, they were in quite good spirits and had every expectation that they too would soon be home. They had a silk handkerchief map and all had compass collar studs and magnetic needles but no arms, except for a .38 Webley & Scott which Corporal Dumper wore as part of his regular attire as a military policeman.*

After the promised submarine failed to turn up to take the four men off the island, they made their way to Torteval where they called at the general store (right) owned by Mr. & Mrs. Walter Bourgaize. Here they were hidden for a couple of days, despite the fact that German troops were billeted at the house on the left at the end of the road, before they decided there was no hope of escape and that they were only putting lives in danger.





In April 1979, Walter Bourgaize was kind enough to return to his old shop (now the Torteval Shopper) to be photographed there specially for 'The War in the Channel Islands — Then and Now'.

The four men climbed the steps back to the road and began walking parallel to it but off it in case a German patrol was sighted. By doing so they came across a small wooden cabin, completely overgrown, about mid-way to La Creux Mahie. It was a sort of potting shed and had recently been used as there were tins of tangerines and some tasty cheese still inside. As this seemed an ideal place to hide up until the submarine was due, they stayed here all through Monday and Tuesday and the best part of Wednesday. To help out with food, Corporal Dumper and Gunner McGoldrick went out across the road and foraged some tomatoes.

Towards evening on the Wednesday they set out for the rendezvous, taking care to keep off the road and move through the yellow-flowering gorse. By 10.00 p.m. they were in position on the rocks on the westernmost promontory of La Creux Mahie about twenty feet from the sea. Gunner McGoldrick had dried out the torch after its ducking on the Sunday and was ready to signal out to sea with three short flashes. Midnight came and went but there was no sign of the submarine. They stayed until well after 2.00 a.m. vainly signalling and as their batteries faded, so did their spirits.

From that day until we spoke to Fred at his home in 1981, he had no idea why the submarine had not showed up. As the rescue arrangements for any Commandos left behind had been announced before the operation, naturally the men felt let down. We told him that the fly in the ointment had been the Naval C-in-C at Plymouth who, when he received Lieutenant-Colonel Durnford-Slater's report that men had been left behind on Guernsey, refused to back him up; the record simply stating that: 'for naval reasons the attempt to take the men off later was not possible'.

However, unaware that their fates had been sealed by a decision taken 250-miles away, dispirited, the four made their way back to the shed to work out what to do next. They decided to try to make contact with the locals who might help them get a boat. Arriving at a small village store in Pleinmont Road, they knocked on the door. This was answered by Mrs. Ada Bourgaize who was naturally surprised and not a little alarmed as a squad of Germans were billeted in the house at the end of the road. She recalls that when they said they were Tommies she immediately put them in her garden shed (although Fred Drain

recalls they went into a 'back room'). Mrs. Bourgaize then telephoned her husband at work and when he returned to his house, he says the first thing the soldiers asked for was 'a fag'. They were soaking wet and while they took off their wet clothes for his wife to dry, Walter Bourgaize fetched a ladder from the engineering works next door to hide them in his attic.

The men asked if it was possible to get a boat to escape and Mr. Bourgaize said he would do what he could to find out. After lunch he went to the Imperial Hotel at Pleinmont where he knew a man who owned a boat but when questioned he said that he had no petrol for it. Mr. Bourgaize arrived home around 4.00 p.m. and gave the Commandos the disappointing news.

Corporal Dumper was of the opinion that if they could steal an aeroplane, provided he could get it off the ground, he reckoned he would be able to fly it to England. However, they more or less gave up this idea when Mr. Bourgaize said the aerodrome was heavily guarded.

There is some doubt as to the exact period they spent with the Bourgaizes, — it was either one or two days — but they decided in the end that they could not risk endangering the lives of the storekeeper and his wife any longer. The Germans were conducting house to house searches and they regularly came in the shop to make purchases (although oddly

enough the store was never searched, even after they had departed).

Fred Drain remembers that they left in broad daylight one morning calmly walking up the road towards the aerodrome. He says he feels sure that although they had not spoken their thoughts to each other, they all realised the game was up and that, secretly, they wanted it all to be over. Forty years later he told us that this must have been at the back of their minds — to walk out boldly in broad daylight — rather than creep away at night when they would stand a good chance of being shot if spotted in the darkness. (This also seems borne out by the fact that, unbeknown to Fred Drain, Corporal Dumper had left all his personal possessions — a crucifix, two penknives, his watch, cigarette lighter and his stud compass together with his revolver — with the Bourgaizes.)

Before they reached the aerodrome, a German patrol picked them up and took them initially to the airfield where they were put in a room until an escort arrived to take them to the civil prison in St. Peter Port. There they were split up — Fred and Andy Ross occupying one cell with Dumper and McGoldrick (who were quite good friends) sharing another.

Next morning, under heavy guard, they were taken from the prison to Jerbourg and back to the beach where they had landed. The tide was out and a German infantry captain,



Corporal Dumper's .38 Webley & Scott, given to Mr. Bourgaize with his personal possessions, is now on display in Richard Heaume's German Occupation Museum located near the aerodrome and thus quite close to the spot where they were captured.



standing with his back to the sea, then interrogated the four men in broken English as to what had actually happened and what their individual roles had been. None of the four intended giving away any information and Fred remembers leaning against a rock idly tossing a small pebble into the air and catching it. This obviously annoyed the German for it brought a swift rebuke to: 'Put away ze schtone!' Although his manner was harsh, they were not ill-treated and the German told them they had recovered all the weapons.

They were then taken back to the prison where they spent one more night before returning to the aerodrome where a Ju 52 was waiting to fly them to Cherbourg. From there, they were taken by lorry to a huge prison at St. Lo mainly occupied by thousands of French Colonial troops although there were about fifty men there from the King's Own Scottish Borderers. The camp was located in a former French barracks on the edge of town and there they stayed in overcrowded conditions until a few days before Christmas when the entire British contingent was cleared out. The subsequent journey by goods train lasted four or five days and ended at Stalag V111 B at Lamsdorf in Upper Silesia near the Polish border. This camp nominally held over 50,000 British troops but the majority were billeted outside in individual working parties repairing roads and working on farms, in factories or down coal mines.

It was at Lamsdorf that Fred Drain was split from the others and thereafter lost contact with them, but over the next four years he tried to escape three times. The last time he got as far as Vienna Central Station having jumped a coal train bound for Italy. With a friend they had burrowed themselves into the corners of an open coal truck one night and lay covered up to their shoulders. Unfortunately they had not realised that the coal in each truck had been sprinkled with chalk so that signalmen, looking down as the train passed them, could easily spot if coal had been stolen or tampered with en route. The black corners were a dead give away and both were yanked out at Vienna. They were held in Vienna Central Gestapo prison for a week before being transported back to Germany.

Fred was finally liberated by American forces at Regensburg after the PoWs had been marched 1,500 kilometres in six weeks away from the advancing Russians. He stayed in the Army; went to Korea and became a Drill Sergeant with the Bedfords until he retired from the Forces in 1958.

After the four Commandos had left the village store at Torteval, Mr. Bourgaize buried Corporal Dumper's pistol in a tin lined with hay underneath his coal heap. Both he and his wife were very frightened as every home was being searched. Three months later, he recovered the tin to have a good look at the pistol but, to his dismay, the hay had 'sweated' in the closed tin and the weapon was pitted with rust. He buried it again beside the chimney stack where it stayed until the liberation.

After the war Mrs. Bourgaize wrote to the address one of the men had given her but she never received a reply. By 1978, just before their Golden Wedding anniversary, they decided to pass on the personal items to their nephew and the pistol was given to Richard Heaume for his museum.

Second Lieutenants Martel and Mulholland (who were to signal to the boats from Le Jaonnet beach by flashing the letter D in Morse if it was safe to come in) were also left on the island. As they were Guernsey men, they managed to find refuge with their families for some time while they tried to make good their escape but, in the end, realised it would be better to give themselves up. Tragically, Lieutenant Mulholland was accidentally killed on September 3, 1945 and was buried in St. Martin's Cemetery.



After he was liberated at the end of the war, Fred Drain carried on with his regiment serving time in Germany, Korea and at the unit's home base at Bedford. He became a Drill Sergeant and very smart he looks too being inspected by the Colonel of the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Regiment, Lieutenant-General Sir Reginald Denning. Fred told us he used to announce himself to new recruits as follows: 'My name's Drain. Now let's all have a good laugh and get it over with!'



The Doyle Monument, a hundred feet high, was erected to commemorate the works of Lieutenant-General Sir John Doyle (1750-1834), one of Guernsey's most industrious Governors. Before the war, one could collect the key and a torch from the caretaker at 'Doyle Bungalow' opposite the tower to climb the 133 steps to the observation platform.



*Above:* The Germans soon put paid to that. Although it served them as an excellent lookout post, and was provided with a canopy against inclement weather, it lay directly in line with the guns of Batterie Strassburg should they wish to fire towards France (Bundesarchiv). The answer was this spectacular explosion (Imperial War Museum and Royal Court). *Below:* This is the gun position with the rebuilt tower today.



*We followed up Operation AMBASSADOR during our visit to Guernsey in April 1979. Today Petit Port is one of the few places where it is possible to retrace a Commando raid knowing that one is walking in the exact footsteps of the attackers. The steep stairway at Petit Port, leading from the beach to the Jerbourg Road, remains exactly as it was in 1940 except for repairs to worn steps. It is a stiff climb and one can imagine the exhaustion of the Commandos after climbing the steep stairway in sodden clothing weighed down by equipment. At the top the Doyle Column still stands although this is not the one seen by the Commandos. That monument was later blown up by the Germans and has since been rebuilt but on a more modest scale. At Torteval the general store is little changed except in name (no longer owned by the Bourgaizes) and not far away at Richard Heaume's German Occupation Museum one can see the pistol carried by Corporal Dumper on the first full-blooded raid undertaken by British Commandos in the Second World War.*

