

THE BOMBS OF RETRIBUTION

During the evening of 14 July 1944, a force of de Havilland Mosquitoes of the RAF's 140 Wing took off for their next operation over Northern France. However, it was not, as Ken Wright reveals, a typical mission for the Mosquito crews.

The reason for the raid began in May 1944, when the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) had issued orders for 'A' and 'B' Squadron 1st Special Air Service to carry out two operations in German-occupied France. 'B' Squadron was to operate in the area of Poitiers under the codename Operation *Bulbasket*. The squadron's orders were that it was to team up with the various French *maquis* groups to establish a base from

which they could conduct operations intended to disrupt German personnel and supplies heading north to reinforce defences attempting to repel the Allied invasion of Normandy.

On 6 June 1944, an advance 'B' Squadron party was parachuted into France under the command of Captain John Tonkin and his second in command, Lieutenant Richard Crisp. Two additional groups from 'B' Squadron were also parachuted in, one on 7 June and the other on 11 June. With the latter group came a number of Willys Jeeps armed with Vickers K machine-guns.

MAIN PICTURE:

Special Forces personnel pictured at the improvised airstrip known as "Bon Bon" which was located some thirty miles north-east of Asnières. It was through this ad hoc airfield that the survivors of Operation *Bulbasket*, along with other Special Forces staff and assorted Allied evaders and escapers, were evacuated by the RAF during August 1944. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books: www.pen-and-sword.co.uk)





ABOVE:

Troopers of 'B' Squadron 1st Special Air Service pictured around 12 June 1944, perhaps with other Special Forces personnel and members of the *maquis*, at the Operation *Bulbasket* camp established to the south of Montmorillon after the main party's arrival. The advance party, which included Captain John Tonkin, was flown to France by a Handley Page Halifax of 'B' Flight, 161 (Special Duties) Squadron, on the night of 5-6 June 1944. The men landed on their drop zone – an area of the Brenne marsh nineteen miles south-west of Châteauroux – at 01:37 hours on the morning of the 6th. On the ground to meet them was Captain Amédée Maingard, a member of SOE's F Section and part of the SHIPWRIGHT network. Two further groups from 'B' Squadron were parachuted in – one on 7 June 1944; the second on 11 June 1944. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books)

BELOW LEFT:

Three of the officers who participated in the ill-fated Operation *Bulbasket*. From left to right are Captain John Tonkin, Lieutenant Tomos Stephens and Lieutenant Richard Crisp. Stephens is wearing civilian clothing in preparation for a reconnaissance patrol to locate German petrol trains. This photograph was taken on 10 June 1944; within a matter of weeks two of the men, Stephens and Crisp, would be dead. Tonkin was one of sixteen survivors evacuated by an RAF Hudson on 7 August 1944. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books)

BELOW RIGHT:

Sergeant Johnnie Holmes (seated front) and three other members of 1 SAS with their camouflaged Jeep in the Forêt de Verrières near Châteauroux, June 1944. All except Holmes were captured by the Germans on 3 July 1944, and executed four days later. Holmes was evacuated by air on 7 August 1944. Holmes' first action during *Bulbasket* was carried out on the night of 10/11 June 1944, when he and two others "removed" a length of railway line some fifteen to twenty feet long under a road bridge north of Châtellerault. (IWM HU66209)

To prevent discovery by informers or German patrols, the camp sites were constantly changed. On 25 June, a camp had been established in woods near the small town of Verrières not far from Poitiers. Here, the ground sloped gently down into a valley where there was a good supply of fresh water from a stream. In the camp were forty SAS troopers, an American, Second Lieutenant Lincoln Bundy USAAF, who had joined the group after his P-51 Mustang had been shot down on 10 June, and ten French *maquis* fighters.

The German Security Police, the *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD), in Poitiers became aware that the SAS group had established itself in the area of the Forêt de Verrières. On 1 July, a number of SD agents were despatched to try to pinpoint the camp's location. Once the position of the SAS camp had been established, SS-*Obersturmführer* Hoffman, the SD's acting second in command and the individual responsible for operations around Poitiers, immediately began to gather a force to mount an attack.

With most German units having been sent to the coast to help stem the Allied advance, he was only able to assemble a scratch force of about four hundred troops. The main component of the attack force was comprised of elements of the *Götz von*

Berlichingen holding battalion of the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division which was based at Bonneuil-Matours some fourteen miles north-east of Poitiers. Other personnel were drawn from the Poitiers *Feldkommandantur*, a number of radio units and a Reconnaissance Bicycle Squadron of the 158th Security Division.

Early in the morning on 3 July 1944, the German forces began their silent movement towards the camp and were able to get close to the sleeping SAS and *maquis* before being spotted. The German forces attacked.

Taking the SAS completely by surprise, a brief fight ensued. Most accounts agree that there was total panic and the majority of the men attempted to flee down the hill, straight into the hands of the waiting Germans. Tonkin tried to stop the Frenchmen from running in that direction and he sent three of his officers, Lieutenants Richard Crisp, Peter Weaver and Tomos Stephens to try and stop them. It was the last time that Tonkin saw any of them alive.

It seems that the officers managed to organise some of the remaining *maquis* and they tried to break through the circle of German troops. Stephens and several





SAS troopers reached the edge of a cornfield but got no further than twenty yards beyond the tree-line before coming under heavy fire. Stephens was hit and wounded, dropping down at the edge of the forest. Lying wounded, he urged the others on to try and escape into the woods.

Stephens was discovered by the Germans hiding in the undergrowth. He raised his arms in surrender but a German took Stephens' rifle and bludgeoned the officer to death with the butt of the gun. His battered body was left lying on the ground.

Those French *maquis* fighters who were not killed in the brief battle were shot on the spot. The British prisoners and the American airman were rounded up, bound and sent in trucks to Poitiers. The captives included three seriously wounded SAS men. By sheer luck Captain Tonkin, a handful of SAS and four French *maquis* succeeded in escaping into the forest.

The prisoners were incarcerated in the military prison in Poitiers where the SD tried, but failed, to obtain information about SAS operations. As there was nothing further to be gained from the prisoners the Germans were now faced with having to carry out Hitler's infamous *Kommandobefehl* – the order that all captured and wounded Allied Commandos, and similar Special Forces personnel, should be executed.

General der Artillerie Curt Gallenkamp, who commanded

the German forces stationed in the area, and who was duty bound to ensure that the order was carried out, quickly left Poitiers to undertake an inspection elsewhere – leaving the various local commanders to agonise over how they could bypass this disgusting duty. No-one wanted to do it.

Eventually, the decision rested with Gallenkamp's Chief of Staff, Oberst Herbert Köstlin, who, after exhausting all options, including seeking military legal advice, finally authorised the executions.

On the night of 6 July 1944, all the prisoners, with the exception of the three wounded SAS troopers who were in a hospital, were loaded into trucks and driven into the forest at Saint-Sauvant approximately twenty miles from Poitiers. The execution was to be carried out by a firing squad comprising men from the Reconnaissance Bicycle Squadron.

At dawn, the German officer in charge of the execution party, Hauptmann Dr Erich Schönig (Gallenkamp's Senior Intelligence Officer) informed Lieutenant Richard Crisp, the senior ranking prisoner, through an interpreter on what was about to happen. Schönig added that as a German officer it was to his personal shame that he had to carry out his orders. Lieutenant Crisp in turn, informed his men of their fate. One can only imagine what would be going through the minds of the condemned men at the time. Perhaps it was already painfully obvious why they were there? An unexplained journey through the night to an isolated forest with, according to a



later report, their hands tied behind their backs, must have left them in little doubt.

The prisoners were given time to say any goodbyes. Then the executions began. The following description of the men's final

ABOVE LEFT:

Taken by the PRU Mosquito flown by Flight Lieutenant Hester (Mk.IV DZ414), this poor quality image was captured during a low pass over the burning Château du Fou on 2 August 1944. In the days after the RAF's Bastille Day attack, Captain John Tonkin and the other survivors of *Bulbasket* were informed that the German SS troops targeted in the raid had relocated to the Château du Fou, some seven miles south of Châtellerault. Tonkin promptly radioed Britain requesting a further retaliatory strike by the RAF. The mission was delivered in three waves on 2 August 1944; no less than twenty-eight bombs were dropped to devastating effect. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books)

ABOVE RIGHT:

In December 1944, after the German Army had been driven from the area, men working in the forest near Saint-Sauvant discovered an area of disturbed branches and broken earth. They started to examine the site and uncovered what remained of a number of bodies. The local *Gendarmerie* was informed and on 18 December started excavating the grave. A number of the bodies were wearing Allied uniforms. Here an autopsy on one of the recovered bodies is being carried out in the forest. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books)

BELOW:

Three de Havilland Mosquito FB Mark VIs of 487 Squadron RNZAF flying in tight starboard echelon formation, with 500-lb MC bombs on fitted on underwing carriers. Four of the squadron's aircraft participated in the attack on 14 July 1944. (IWM CH12412)



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moments was later provided by Schönig:

“The execution was accomplished militarily and with dignity. The parachutists died in an exemplary, brave and calm manner, after the decision had been made known to them in the English language ... the prisoners – they were not chained – stood in a line. They linked arms ... The fire order was given by *Oberleutnant Vogt*.”¹

Any personal belongings and identity tags were removed from the bodies by *Hauptmann Schönig* before burial by the firing squad in three, already prepared, mass graves out of sight of the killing ground.

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The Germans then turned their attention to the three wounded SAS troopers who were in hospital. Trooper Joseph Ogg had a bullet wound and possible fracture of the tibia below the knee which had turned gangrenous; Trooper John Williams had a gunshot wound in the back which was badly infected; and Trooper Henry “Sam” Pascoe, the most seriously ill of the trio, had a deep, wide wound at the base of his back.

From what few details are known, it is believed that on or around 13 July 1944, the three SAS men were visited by *Hauptmann Dr Georg Hesterberg*. Whilst they lay gravely ill in their hospital beds, Hesterberg administered a series of lethal injections. Their bodies were disposed of secretly and to this day their whereabouts remain unknown.

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The day after the German attack upon the camp in the *Forêt de Verrières* the survivors had tried to regroup. Tonkin himself came across Stephen's body which had been left with those of the executed *marquisards* in the village of *Verrières*.²

On 5 July, Tonkin asked for a retaliatory bombing raid against the Germans for the killing of Stephens. He had identified the location of the German base at *Bonneuil-Matours*. This was a barracks complex,

identified as being the sleeping quarters of most of the German troops responsible for the operation in the *Forêt de Verrières*.

Tonkin's message, with a map reference for the German base, may not have been sent on the day he stated but by 12 July a Special Forces message was received in London which identified the target. This was sent by *Jedburgh* team “Hugh” which was also operating in the area. It read: “Request special bombing of HQ Boche Colonel commanding repression columns *Indre, Vienne, Creuse et Loire*. Situated *Bonneuil-Matours*. 15 km south of *Châtellerault*. Château 450 meters south-east of crossroads east of village. 100 metres south of road from *Archigny*. Defence company in wood 30 metres east of trenches along *River Vienne* from crossroad 200 yards to south.”

The building identified was the *Château de Marieville*, an imposing residence sited on a hill on the east bank of the *River Vienne*. It had been requisitioned by the officer commanding the 17th SS *Panzergrenadier* Division's holding battalion. The SS troops themselves were in barracks along the lightly wooded west bank of the river. A nearby bridge provided an excellent reference point for the air attack.

For such pin-point bombing there was really only one air force unit that could deliver the required precision. This was the RAF's 140 Wing, part of No.2 Group, whose *de Havilland Mosquito* squadrons had successfully bombed the Gestapo prison at *Amiens* in France a few months earlier. The request for the raid was made in person by the SAS Brigade's Intelligence Officer, Captain Michael Foot.

The attack force comprised of fourteen *Mosquitoes* supplied by each of 140 Wing's three squadrons. Wing Commander David Dennis led four aircraft from 21 Squadron, Wing Commander “Black” Smith led the four aircraft of 487 Squadron RNZAF, and Wing Commander Gordon Panitz the remaining four from 464 Squadron RAAF.



Making up the numbers were two *Mosquitoes* from 140 Wing's headquarters staff. One was flown by the raid leader, Group Captain Peter Wykeham-Barnes (with Flying Officer Chaplin as his navigator), the other by Wing Commander (Flying) Reggie Reynolds with his navigator Flight Lieutenant Ted Sismore, the Wing's navigation leader.

Fighter escort for part of the way would be provided by twelve *Mustang Mk.IIIs* from 122 Wing's 65 Squadron. The plan was for aircraft with high explosive bombs to first open up the target, then follow up by six *Mosquitoes* equipped with the new American M76 phosphorus incendiary bomb, and, finally, more high explosive.³

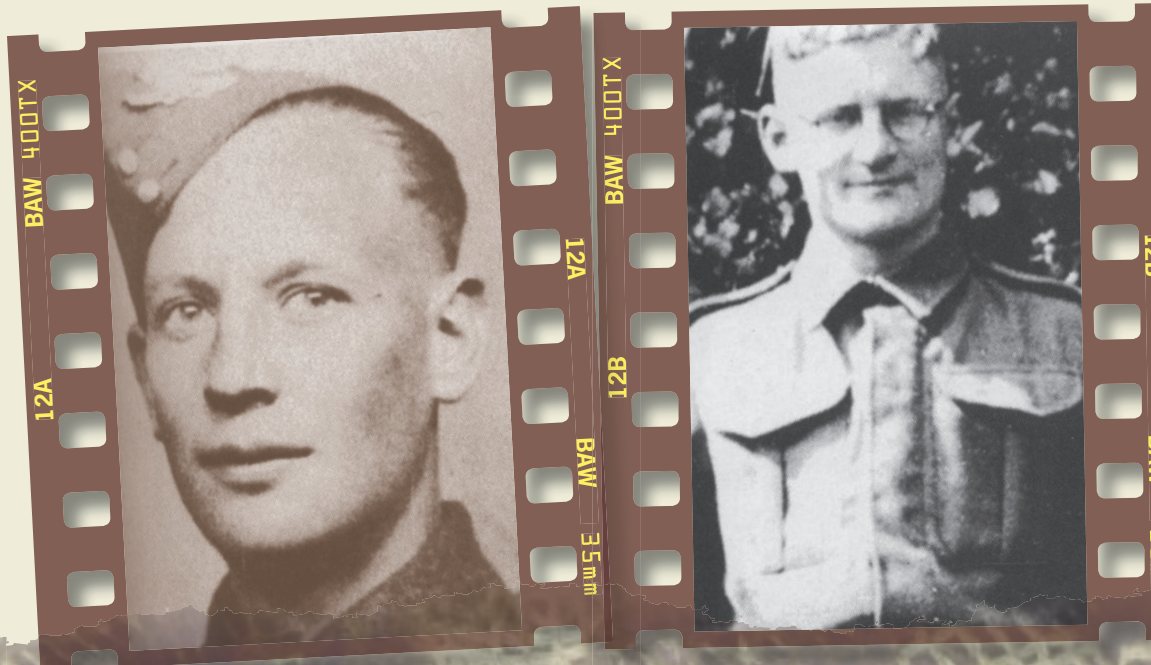
The men informed that the reason for the mission was that the Germans had “bashed somebody's head in” – a reference to the death of Lieutenant Stephens. In his pre-flight briefing Air Vice-Marshal Basil Embry urged his men to “let the bastards burn” – but he warned them not to talk about retribution if they were shot down and taken prisoner: “... Don't shoot your mouth off about retaliation. You can't out-piss a skunk!” he is reported to have said.

ABOVE RIGHT:

The site of one of the three mass graves in which the thirty-one men executed in forest near *Saint-Sauvant* were initially buried as it is today. Most of the identity tags of the men buried in the three pits had been removed but two remained which identified the bodies as being those of members of Operation *Bulbasket* – Trooper Donald Livingstone and Corporal William Allan. Another of the bodies, that of Lieutenant Crisp, was identified by a name inside the battle dress tunic. A further body in civilian clothing was identified as that of Lieutenant Lincoln Brundy of the 486th Squadron, 352nd Fighter Group. (With the kind permission of Richard McMahon)

RIGHT:

The three wounded troopers who were killed by lethal injection. From left to right are: Trooper Joseph Ogg, Trooper Henry “Sam” Pascoe, and, far right, Trooper John Williams. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books)





LEFT and ABOVE:

Today, a memorial stone stands in the Forêt de Saint-Sauvant to mark the site of the executions. The tall granite stone, paid for by the community in Rom and unveiled on 23 June 1973, was placed adjacent to the track where the German firing squad performed their dark deed at dawn on 7 July 1944. (Both images with the kind permission of Richard McMahon)

BELOW RIGHT:

The bodies of Ogg, Pascoe and Williams have never been located. This memorial plaque was erected beside their colleagues' graves in Rom cemetery, whilst all three are officially commemorated on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission's Bayeux Memorial.

were scored on the Mosquitoes.

Over the Bay of St Michael the Mosquito formation was met by their Mustang escort led by Squadron Leader Lamb whose duty was to provide daylight protection for the raiders. Strict radio silence was maintained as the fighters and bombers crossed the French coast near Saint-Malo. Not being equipped for night operations, the escorting Mustangs had to leave the Mosquitoes sixty miles to the south of Rennes and return to their French base at Martragny before dark.

Embry realised that if the Germans thought that the raid was in retaliation for the murders they too might respond accordingly and set off a series of potentially disastrous tit-for-tat responses. The day chosen for the raid, 14 July, was Bastille Day and it was thought that coming on such a symbolic day the attack would help boost the morale of the French.⁴

The fourteen aircraft took off in pairs from RAF Thorney Island at 20.55 hours on the evening of the 14th. The operation was timed to reach the target just before dusk. This was thought to be when the Germans

would be having their evening meal, thereby catching the maximum number of soldiers in the building.

The Mosquitoes assumed formation after take-off and crossed the Channel at about 5,000 feet, passing the Channel Islands to seaward and headed towards the Gulf of Saint-Malo where they dropped to 2,000 feet. An enemy anti-aircraft battery of 88mm guns, located on the island of Alderney, engaged the formation briefly. This threat was quickly dealt with by the RAF aircraft in what one pilot described as "a relatively disciplined way", and no hits

After landfall, the aircraft descended to low-level and individually approached the target which was hidden in the north-east section of a forest. The RAF's main target was the SS barracks – buildings that were contained in an area just 170 x 70 feet. The approach was made from the east in order to avoid civilian casualties and damage to the nearby village of Bonneuil-Matours, as well as minimise the risk of collision over the target.

Before reaching the target, the Mosquitoes climbed to the planned bombing height of 1,000 feet and swept into the attack with



no cloud, excellent visibility and an easily identifiable target. No warning had been given of the fighter-bombers' approach and the Mosquitoes were on the target before the Germans had time to realise they were under attack by enemy aircraft.

The bombs used were a mixture of eleven seconds delay and instantaneously-fuzed high explosives along with the phosphorus incendiary bombs. As the last crews called "bombs gone" over the target they reported that the area and the buildings were carpeted in flames. The majority of bombs fell in the target area with only a few overshooting towards the village and two exploding on the east bank of the nearby river.

For the SS troops, their ordeal was far from over as survivors stumbled from their burning barracks only to be met with a deadly hail of machine-gun bullets and cannon shells as the Mosquitoes strafed the area. Knowing something of the reason for the raid, the pilots were in no mood for pity.

When the Mosquitoes finally departed, they left behind them a scene of complete destruction. Seven barrack blocks had been blasted and burnt and, as planned, the SS had been caught enjoying their evening's meal. The latter was through a measure of luck on the part of the RAF crews as the German troops had only just returned from a successful operation against the French *maquis* that afternoon.

On the return leg to Thorney Island some flak was encountered at a number of points with one Mosquito sustaining slight damage. All aircraft arrived safely back at base between 00.15 and 00.45 hours on 15 July. A total of nine tons of bombs had been dropped.⁵

Throughout the night the citizens of Bonneuil-Matours waited in fear expecting reprisals. Fortunately for them, the Germans were too busy rescuing survivors and transferring their wounded to Poitiers to worry about revenge. Other than a number of local men being compelled to lift the SS dead into trucks, the village was left alone. Two days later the German barracks were completely abandoned and the SS survivors left Bonneuil-Matours for good.

At the time of the attack, there were estimated to be some 400 troops in the barracks. Reports filtered back a few days later to 140 Wing regarding the number of German dead. The *maquis* believed 150 Germans had died in the attack; in a later report they raised the casualty figures to 200. The local *Gendarmerie* records suggest that a total of eighty to 100 were killed or wounded which is possibly a more accurate estimate. There were no reports of any civilian casualties.

RIGHT:

Once the autopsies on the bodies found in the Forêt de Saint-Sauvant were completed, on the evening of 21 December 1944, each one was wrapped in a shroud and placed in a coffin in the presence of the Mayor of the nearby village of Rom. The same day the coffins were transported to Rom, where they were guarded by members of the local *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur*. Two days later, in the presence of a large crowd (seen here), the thirty-one men were buried with full military honours in Rom's Communal Cemetery. (Courtesy of Pen & Sword Books)

BELOW:

The graves of those executed in the Forêt de Saint-Sauvant in Rom Communal Cemetery. The Cemetery lies to the south of the village about 200 yards from the Church. In this image, each of the headstones is marked by a wreath of cornflowers (bleuets). There is also a centrally placed poppy wreath. (With the kind permission of Liz Read)

Even allowing for the discrepancies in the reports, both the mission and the bombs of retribution had been a complete success. ■

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT: The full story of Operation *Bulbasket* is detailed in Paul McCue's definitive book on the subject: *SAS Operation Bulbasket – Behind the Lines in Occupied France 1944*. In the course of his painstaking research, drawing on official records and the accounts of surviving participants, the author pieced together the facts of what really happened in those dramatic eight weeks after 6 June 1944. For more information, or to order a copy, please visit: www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

NOTES

1. Paul McCue, *SAS Operation Bulbasket: Behind the Lines in Occupied France 1944* (Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley, 2009), p.88.
2. Because Stephens' body was found in Verrières it was thought that the Germans had paraded the villagers in the square and forced to watch the SAS officer beaten to death but Paul McCue, *SAS Operation Bulbasket: Behind the Lines in Occupied France 1944* (Pen & Sword Military, Barnsley, 2009), p.75, has found witnesses who saw Stephens being killed at the edge of the wood.
3. Several of the RAF aircrew involved in the raid later stated that this new weapon was effectively the first napalm bomb and that, therefore, the attack on Bonneuil-Matours constituted its first operational use.
4. There is some doubt about the extent to which the murders were known about in London. It seems that at the time the attack was only to avenge the death of Lieutenant Stephens and the seven young *maquisards*. McCue, *ibid*, pp.99-100.
5. Martin W. Bowman, *Mosquito, Menacing the Reich: Combat Action in the Twin-Engine Wooden Wonder of World War II* (Pen & Sword Aviation, Barnsley, 2008), pp, 225-6.

