



In mid-August 1944, several parties of Free French paratroops of the 3ème Régiment de Chasseurs Parachutistes (3ème RCP, known to the British as the 3rd SAS) were dropped into the Burgundy region in eastern France to establish two behind-the-line bases — code-named 'Harrods' and 'Barkers' — from which they were to harass German forces in the area. Two weeks later these paratroops were reinforced by two of their own Jeep platoons who reached them after a daring and adventurous 650-kilometre overland trek from the Normandy bridgehead

(Operation 'Newton'). On September 4, these SAS troops launched a co-ordinated attack on the town of Sennecey-le-Grand, an assault that involved a daring charge through the town by four of the Jeeps. The action, as epic as it was suicidal, ended in tragedy with heavy losses on both sides, but firmly established Sennecey-le-Grand as a place of legend in SAS history. The memorial which today stands at Sennecey is in fact the central memorial for all wartime SAS units, not just the Free French but the British, Belgian and Greek SAS as well.

SAS TRAGEDY AT SENNECEY-LE-GRAND

By Jean-Pierre Garnier

After the Allied landings in Normandy on June 6, 1944, several operational parties of Special Air Service (SAS) paratroops were dropped behind the German lines in various places in German-occupied France.

Created in the Libyan desert for behind-the-line operations by Captain, subsequently Lieutenant-Colonel, David Stirling in 1941, by 1944 the SAS had grown to a brigade comprising British, Free French and Free Belgian troops. The British contingent made up the 1st and 2nd SAS Regiments, the Free French the 3ème and 4ème Bataillons d'Infanterie de l'Air, redesignated the 3ème and 2ème Régiments de Chasseurs Parachutistes in March 1944 (but known colloquially to the British as '3rd SAS' and '4th SAS' respectively), and the Belgians the 5th (Independent) SAS Squadron.

The mission of the SAS troops dropped into France was to disrupt enemy communications and conduct harassing operations against German troops, either to prevent them from reinforcing the front or to delay their retreat. To do this, the SAS were to sabotage railway tracks and rolling stock, block main roads, interrupt telephone networks, deliver hit-and-run raids on enemy personnel and facilities, and so on. Whenever possible, these operations were to be carried out in co-operation with local Resistance groups.

Initially, the SAS troops were primarily dropped in Brittany, but, as the Allied breakout into interior France became more imminent, SAS bases were established in regions further afield — in Poitou, Limousin, Burgundy. By mid-August 1944, there were 11

bases in operation — three of them established by British troops from the 1st SAS, the remainder by Free French from the 3ème RCP. Their strength varied from between 20 to 75 men, most bases having a strength of about 30.

Two of the French SAS bases were in the Burgundy region in mid-eastern France. When the Allies were planning Operation 'Dragoon', their landings in southern France (see *After the Battle* No. 110), they anticipated that the German 19. Armee of General der Infanterie Friedrich Wiese, which was defending the Riviera coast, would eventually retreat north along the Rhône river valley to northern Burgundy where they were expected to meet up with troops of the 1. Armee of General der Infanterie Kurt von der Chevallerie withdrawing from south-western France. Together these forces would then probably try to organise a new defence line in the Vosges mountains in order to prevent Allied forces from reaching the German border.

Allied headquarters thus planned to have SAS units operating in Burgundy to hinder the German withdrawal and delay the link-up of their forces in that area. On the night of August 12/13, and the following nights, several operational parties of the 3ème RCP were dropped in the area, seven of HQ Company and six of the 1st Company. They established two bases: 'Harrods' (45 men under Lieutenant Jean-Francois Porot), located near Montceau-les-Mines, a town about 35 kilometres south-west of Chalon-sur-Saône; and 'Barkers' (30 men under Lieutenant Hilaire Colcombet), set up some 35 miles

further to the east, in the forest of Péronne, around the village of Plottes. The commander of the 3ème RCP, Commandant Pierre Château-Jobert (nom de guerre 'Conan'), established a command post at the hamlet of La Vineuse, located about midway between the two bases.

The SAS troopers joined forces with the regional FFI (French Interior Forces) under Capitaine de la Ferté ('Ferrant'). These Maquis groups, some 3,000 strong, had been organised, trained and supplied with arms drops by two SOE agents, Flight-Lieutenant Albert Brown-Bartrolli (alias 'Tiburce' or 'Toto'), who had been landed by Hudson near Angers in October 1943 with orders to set up an underground circuit in the Saône-et-Loire region, and Gabriel Chartrand ('Dieudonné') who had arrived in May 1944. From D-Day onwards, their circuit — known to SOE as 'Ditcher' — had been attacking German communications, blowing up rail and road bridges, derailing trains, and attacking road convoys. Their area of operations was the triangle formed by the towns of Macon, Paray-le-Monial and Chalon-sur-Saône.

While the men of 'Harrods' teamed up with the maquis groups of Benoît and Deprez and concentrated on the RN74 (the Paray-Chalon road), those of 'Barkers' liaised with the maquis of Cluny, Tournus, Corlay, Sennecey and Chalon, aiming their attacks on the RN7 (the Macon-Chalon road).



Capitaine Guy de Combaud-Rocquebrune, commander of the Jeep Company of the 3ème RCP who led Operation 'Newton'.

To increase the SAS troops' mobility and firepower, the brigade staff also planned to drop Jeeps to the SAS operational areas in France. The specially modified armed Jeeps had originally been conceived, developed, and positively tested in Libya by David Stirling and his men in co-operation with the Long Range Desert Group. Usually crewed by two men, they had proved very efficient during desert operations in attacks on Italo-German airfields. The improved version used in North-West Europe featured twin-barrelled Air Pattern Vickers machine guns with a very high cyclic rate of fire in an armoured shield, manned by the front-seat passenger, and a single-barrelled weapon in the rear. The vehicle now carried a crew of three. By 1944 the RAF had developed the technique of dropping the Jeeps by parachute (using four huge parachutes and dropping from the bomb bays of four-engined Albemarle aircraft of No. 38 Group, RAF), although the technique had yet to be tested in battle. However, in late August 1944, with one beach-head in Normandy and another in the Provence to supply for, the Allies faced a shortage of air transport, and the Jeep droppings were postponed several times.

No one was more frustrated at the delay than the commander of the Jeep Company of the 3ème RCP, Capitaine Guy de Combaud-Rocquebrune. A former French cavalry officer, aged 39, and a father of six children, he had joined Britain and the SAS, together with his friend Hilaire Colcombet, escaping from France via the Spanish jails and the internment camp at Miranda del Ebro. Impatient to go, on August 14 de Combaud suggested to Brigadier Roderick McLeod, the commander of the SAS Brigade, to have his Jeep unit taken by boat to Normandy, offering to drive the 600 kilometres to Burgundy from there!

Brigadier McLeod approved the proposal: he liked the idea of an overland penetration which was much easier to set up than an airborne operation. Besides, the French captain's spirit and self-confidence were infectious. Thus Operation 'Newton' was born.

Nineteen Jeeps of the 3ème RCP's Jeep Company were soon gathered in the SAS camp at Fairford, in Gloucestershire, together with their crews: six officers and 51 other ranks. They represented five SAS platoons, four of four Jeeps and one of three. Each platoon was headed by an officer. Every Jeep was fully armed, loaded with rations for the crew for 14 days, and with a sufficient petrol supply to run 800 kilometres (500 miles) without refuelling. Each Jeep



Sous-Lieutenant Charles Picard, commander of the other Jeep platoon that went to Burgundy with de Combaud's.

carried a No. 38 radio set; for longer-range communications, each platoon had one No. 22 set and one MCR1 receiver; to report back to SAS Headquarters at Moor Park in England, de Combaud's Jeep carried in addition a Phantom set. Every third Jeep towed a trailer.

The 'Newton' operational orders, drawn up on August 15, stipulated three different destinations for the Jeeps: one platoon (three Jeeps) under Sous-Lieutenant Jean Valayer was to go to SAS base 'Dickens', located east of Cholet in the Poitou region; two platoons (eight Jeeps) under Sous-Lieutenants Gabriel de Sablet and Henri Plowright were to go to 'Moses', south of Le Blanc in the Limousin; and two platoons (eight Jeeps), commanded by de Combaud himself and by Sous-Lieutenant Charles Picard, were assigned to 'Harrods' and 'Barkers', the two SAS bases in Burgundy.

The choice to send de Combaud himself to the Saône-et-Loire area was not made at random, for the captain was at home there. He

had lived part of his youth at his uncle's, Baron Thénard, who owned a beautiful castle at La Ferté, a small village some ten kilometres south of Chalon-sur-Saône. He knew a number of people there, among them André Jarrot, alias 'Jean Goujon', one of the leaders of the Chalon Resistance, with whom he had also been in jail in Spain. Evaded to Britain in November 1942, Jarrot had been parachuted back into France — together with Raymond Basset ('Marie') — by SOE's RF Section in August 1943. The network they set up ('Armada') embarked on a long run of successful sabotage actions. Having returned to Britain in March 1944, Jarrot had arrived in France a third time in July as De Gaulle's 'Regional Military Delegate' in Saône-et-Loire.

The operational order called for all 19 Jeeps to travel south-west together, to Nantes, where the Americans had established a bridgehead across the Loire, and cross the river in that area. As soon as the leading American troops were contacted, de Combaud was, in consultation with the American commander, to make a plan for infiltration. Once through the lines, the Jeep force was to travel from one SAS base to another, dropping off platoons at their assigned places. The suggested axis of movement was: Nantes — 'Dickens' — north of Poitiers — 'Moses' — north of Limoges — 'Snelgrove' (another 3ème RCP base, north of Guéret) — south of Moulins — 'Harrods'. Orders were for the Jeeps to initially move only at night, in small numbers, and never all be on the road simultaneously. Movement had to be cautious and slow since the aim was to arrive intact at the bases before beginning offensive operations.

The Jeep force left Fairford camp on August 16. Late on the 18th, men and machines boarded an LCT to cross the Channel. They disembarked the following morning, August 19, near Courseulles, on what had been Juno Beach on D-Day. Losing no time — the Riviera landings had started on August 15, and the progress of the American and French troops up the Rhône valley was developing much quicker than anticipated — the party set off immediately, driving south via Caen and Thury-Harcourt to St Rémy, 50 kilometres inland, where they camped for the night.



Although taken during another operation and showing troops of another Free French SAS unit, this picture serves well to illustrate the type of Jeeps used by the 3ème RCP in Operation 'Newton'. The three Jeep teams shown here belonged to the 2ème RCP (also known as 4th SAS) and were pictured in a French town during Operation 'Spencer'. Launched on August 29, 1944 and terminated on September 15, 'Spencer' sent 54 Jeeps of the 2ème RCP south across the Loire to attack and harass German convoys in the Vierzon — Bourges — Sancere — Briare area and further afield. (Amicale SAS)

Next day (August 20) they continued south, travelling via Condé-sur-Noireau and Domfront to Mayenne — all territory that had already been liberated by the Americans. On the third day, they reached Evron, where de Combaud liaised with the headquarters of Lieutenant General George S. Patton's US Third Army. The next day, August 22, they drove to Laval. Here the column split up. Though the original orders called for all 19 Jeeps to stay together until after the Loire crossing at Nantes, de Combaud had already considered that such a route would make his trek to Burgundy too long, so he decided to part from the others at Laval. He would stay north of the Loire, planning to bend southward with the river beyond Orléans. So while the three platoons bound for 'Dickens' and 'Moses' headed south to cross the Loire river in the Nantes area, he and Picard went east. (Before leaving Laval, having heard that Général de Gaulle happened to be in town that day, de Combaud presented his two platoons to him.)

That day de Combaud and Picard drove some 150 kilometres, through Le Mans and ending up at Vendome, where they stayed for the night at the Château de Coucé. Lieutenant Picard recalls: 'Driving at night would have been conspicuous, so we drove at daytime, and discovered an excellent technique: on arrival at a village, we would go to the post office and ask the clerk to call her colleague in the next village or town. If she said it was all clear, we drove on. If not, we just waited for the enemy to move away. People invited us for dinner, we slept in private homes, once in a hospital and another time in a monastery with nuns! We were not even really nervous. We were young.'

Next day, still in liberated country, they sped on through Orléans and Montargis, where they linked up with the forward units of Patton's army.



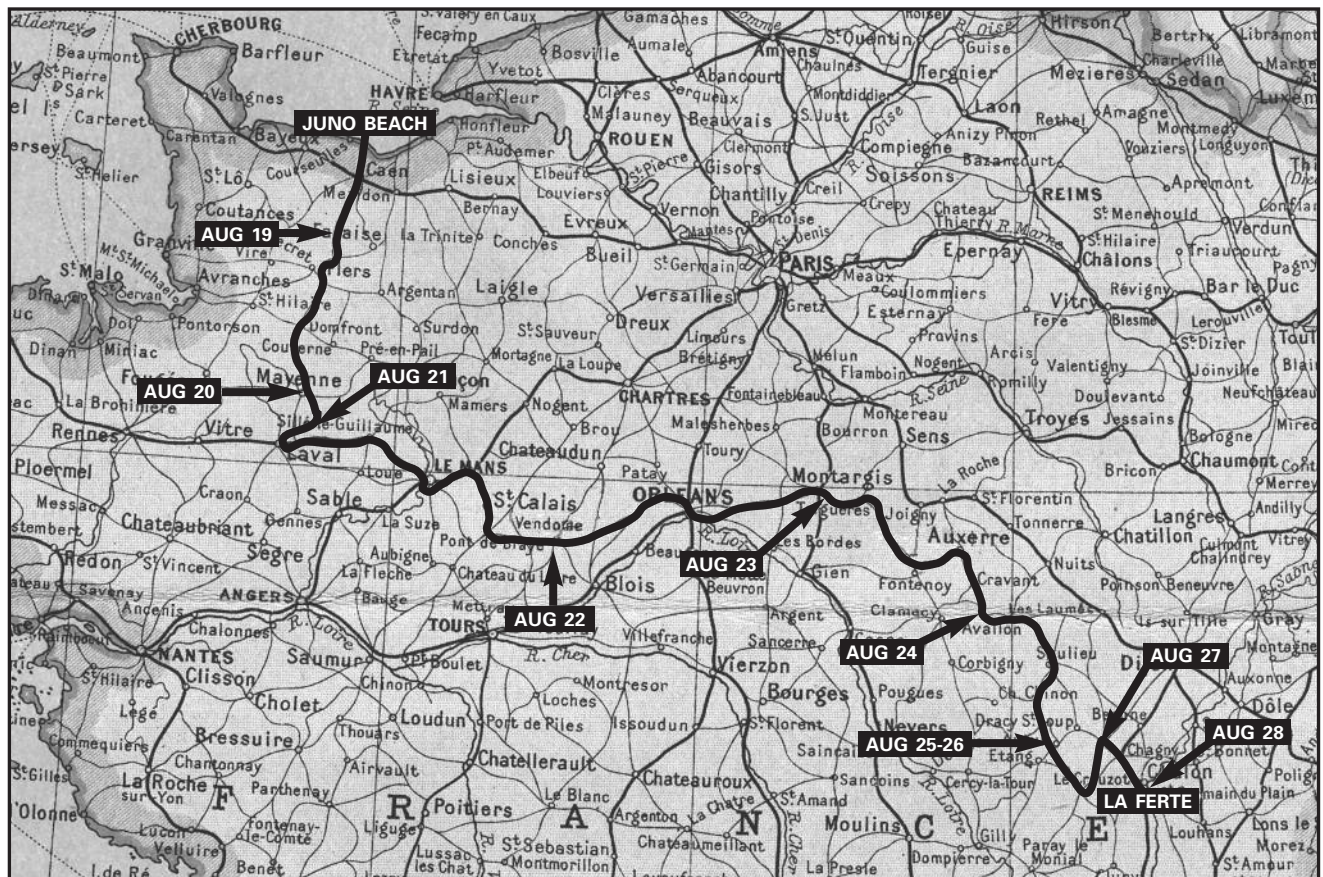
Another picture taken during Operation 'Spencer', giving a good view of the twin-barrelled Vickers machine guns carried by the SAS Jeeps. (Amicale SAS)

The following day, August 24, they left Montargis in company with an armoured reconnaissance platoon of the US 3rd Cavalry Group. Some 60 kilometres on, at the town of Aillant, the column was suddenly confronted with determined German resistance. The two SAS platoons left the Americans and managed to drive round the enemy positions. They were now behind the lines in enemy-held territory.

As they passed through the town of Auxerre, the French population came out in droves to give the Jeep party a joyous welcome. The SAS troopers had to subdue the townspeople and explain they were only passing through and that the Allied main force was still a long way away. Now on a more south-easterly course, they reached Sermizelles, where they were stopped by mem-

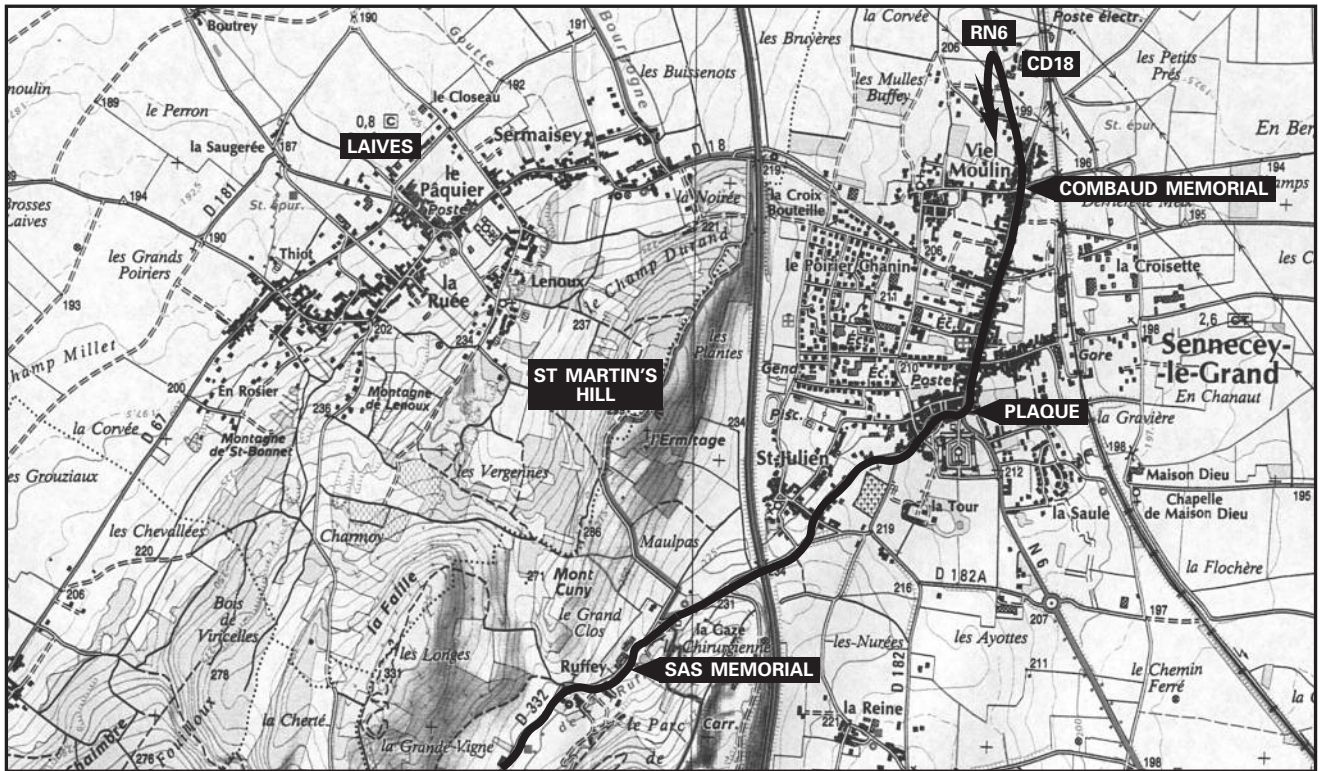
bers of the FFI who told them that the next large town, Avallon, was at the moment occupied by German troops who were retreating through it from south-west to north-east.

The next day, August 25, with the help of the local post office lady who kept them informed about German moves, the SAS party managed to sneak through the town, passing between German columns unnoticed. As had happened at Auxerre, on seeing the SAS Jeeps, the people of Avallon were convinced they were being liberated so once again the SAS men had to dampen their enthusiasm and tell them to be patient. That night, the party stayed at the village of Larochemillay, in accommodations provided for by a Maquis group led by a British SOE officer whose second-in-command was an American downed airman.



During the first four days of their voyage across France, the SAS Jeep Company travelled in one column of 19 Jeeps, but at

Laval on August 22 de Combaud took leave of the others, taking eight Jeeps on a separate drive to the east.



On August 28, de Combaud reached his destination — the area around Sennecey-le-Grand in northern Burgundy — the stage for his final act of September 4.

After a one-day's break among the partisans, the party continued on its way on the 27th. In order to reach their destination area, they had to cross the Canal du Centre and the railway that ran on its bank. At their first attempt, at the level crossing of Les Gratoux at La-Croix-des-Mares near Montchanin, the Jeeps ran into unexpected German fire and although the party managed to withdraw to safety, one man, Caporal Jules Lebon, had been seriously wounded. (Left in the care of some locals, he died in the hospital of Le Creusot on August 30.) Both platoons withdrew some ten kilometres to spend the night in the forest, near Antully.

Next day, August 28, they made a new attempt to cross the canal and railway, near Perreuil, and this time it went without a hitch. Soon after, the eight Jeeps entered La Ferté, the village where de Combaud had spent part of his youth, joining up with the SAS paratroopers of 'Harrods' who had been in action here for two weeks. They had reached their destination.

In ten days, De Combaud and Picard had virtually crossed France from west to east. Of some 650 kilometres travelled, at least 250 had been through enemy-held territory or no man's land. Having done so during daytime and with such a large number of vehicles was an extraordinary feat indeed.

As per his orders, de Combaud decided to split up his force. He and his platoon would stay in the La Ferté area with the 'Barkers' force and engage in operations along the RN6, the main Lyon-Dijon road which ran just three kilometres to the east. Lieutenant Picard and his four Jeeps he ordered to carry on to 'Harrods', the SAS base located near Montceau-les-Mines, some 35 kilometres further west, from where they were to assist in operations along the RN70. Picard and his men left at once.

Establishing a base for his Jeeps at the village of Tallant, De Combaud visited his relatives at the nearby Château de la Ferté and went to see his friend André Jarrot in his Maquis hide-out at the village of Corlay. On the 28th he reported to his battalion commander, Commandant Château-Jobert, at

his CP in La Vineuse. There he also saw again his friend, Lieutenant Colcombet, who happened to come in to report on a successful ambush of a German column on the RN6.

Now de Combaud was ready to begin operations. On August 30, his Jeeps participated in an attack on a German convoy near the village of Serrozan on the RN6. Their 12 Vickers machine guns added considerable firepower to the attack and some 15 lorries were destroyed and an estimated 150 German soldiers killed or wounded. In reprisal, the Germans shot a number of civilians and set fire to two nearby farms.

On September 1, the SAS Jeeps joined in another attack on a convoy of marching men and horse-drawn transport. Again, the Germans were hit hard, but one paratrooper was killed, Chasseur Nguyen Ba, a colonial soldier from Indochina.

On the 3rd, a plan was hatched to launch simultaneous attacks on four towns along the RN6: (from south to north) Macon, Tournus, Sennecey-le-Grand and Chalon. The FFI and SAS commanders had received information that the American and French force coming up from the Provence had reached Lyon on the 2nd, a long time ahead of schedule. Although clearing the city centre was still in progress, the Allied vanguard had moved on and was now approaching Macon, barely 40 kilometres south of Sennecey. Attacks on the RN6 would hinder the German withdrawal and put more German troops in the bag.

All four attacks were to be carried out by the FFI; the one at Tournus would be strengthened by the SAS party under Lieutenant Colcombet; and the one at Sennecey by the parties of Capitaine Christian Boissonas and Sous-Lieutenant Jacques Zermati and by de Combaud's Jeeps.

The mayor of Sennecey had informed André Jarrot on the 3rd that a large German convoy would be forming up in town during the night for an organised withdrawal of men and equipment back to Dijon. The Germans had ordered the mayor to supply them with food for 1,000 men, and the convoy was due to hit the road at 0600 hours. (Having noticed that so far Allied aircraft had

refrained from strafing and bombing convoys in inhabited areas, the Germans had made it a habit to stop in towns or villages.)

The plan was that a mixed force, composed of FFI fighters and the SAS parties of Boissonas and Zermati, would gather at dawn in the woods west of the town, at the foot of the Colline de St Martin (St Martin's Hill), and get ready for an enveloping attack. In the meantime, de Combaud's four Jeeps would assemble near the stone quarry of Ruffey, three kilometres south-west of town. From there, they would start as silently as possible, and drive through the suburb of St Julien to the southern end of Sennecey centre. Then, two abreast, the Jeeps would charge up the long and wide main street, with all 12 machine guns firing at maximum rate at the vehicles and troops on each side, the idea being to wreak as much havoc on the enemy column as possible and create maximum confusion. Once at the northern end of the main street, the Jeeps would get away by turning right at the Y-junction, north-eastward, onto the CD18, and after making a wide circle round the north via St Ambreuil, return to the west side of Sennecey and join the ground attack from St Martin's Hill.

A few hours before the attack was to go in, the plan had to be slightly altered, due to a foolish action by a few young and inexperienced Resistants. On the 2nd, an FFI party had silently occupied the village of Laives, three kilometres west of Sennecey. In the late afternoon of the 3rd, seeing three German soldiers approach from Sennecey, instead of keeping silent and unseen, the young partisans on watch at the edge of the village opened up on them from too great a distance; missed, and saw the three armed soldiers run back to Sennecey. The Germans reacted immediately: within the hour, their troops had attacked Laives, driven the FFI men out, taken the village and, worse, occupied St Martin's Hill.

Faced with this new situation, the SAS and FFI decided to carry on with the charge of the Jeeps as planned, but to change the start point of the infantry attack to an area further north, a far less favourable terrain, mostly flat meadows and fields which offered poor cover compared with the woods on St Martin's Hill.

At 0430 hours on September 4, the four Jeeps left their base at Tallant, a hamlet south-west of Sennecey, heading for their starting point at Ruffey. On the way, they briefly stopped in Corlay where André Jarrot was waiting for them with one of his men, André Rivot, a native of Sennecey, who would be their guide. There was no seat for him in the Jeeps, so Rivot sat on the bonnet of de Combaud's vehicle, holding on to the front Vickers mount. At Ruffey, the Jeep force formed up as follows:

Jeep No. 1, in the front left position: Capitaine Guy de Combaud-Roquebrune with one NCO, Caporal-Chef Jean-Paul Pache, and two FFI volunteers: Sous-Lieutenant Jean Magdelaine (an officer just graduated from St Cyr Military School, he had joined the Jeep column in Orléans) in the back seat, plus André Rivot on the bonnet.

Jeep No. 2, front row right: Adjudant-Chef Jacob Benhamou, Jeep leader, and two NCOs, two brothers, Sergeant Gilbert Djian and Caporal Lucien Djian, plus one FFI man, Nectoux.

Jeep No. 3, back row left: Sous-Lieutenant René Aubert-Stribi and two privates, Chasseurs 1er Classe Robert Barkatz and Roland Lombardo.

Jeep No. 4, back row right: Aspirant (Officer Candidate) Joseph Trameni and two privates, Chasseur 1er Classe Alexis Beaudé and Chasseur Bailleux.

The gunners in the Jeeps on the left-hand side were to shoot at the left side of the street, those on the right at the right side. Each of the machine guns on the Jeeps had a stock of 5,000 rounds of mixed tracer and armour-piercing ammunition.

Meanwhile, in Sennecey, the Germans were organising their convoy. All through the night new groups had unexpectedly arrived in town, and estimations are that there were between 1,500 and 3,000 Germans in Sennecey that morning. Lorries, motorcycles, horse-drawn carts, bicycles, commandeered civilian cars, all sorts of vehicles cluttered the wide main street on both sides. German soldiers were everywhere. Some were washing or shaving, others packing and getting ready for departure. Here and there an officer was giving orders for the column to form up.



The attack on Sennecey, September 4. Starting out from Tallant, the four Jeeps of de Combaud's platoon stopped at this house at Montceau-Ragny in the village of Corlay, which was a headquarters of the FFI in the area. Waiting on the steps were André Jarrot, the 'Military Delegate' for this FFI region, and André Rivot, the local guide who would show the SAS party the way into Sennecey. The latter sat on the bonnet of de Combaud's Jeep, and the convoy moved off. Today, a plaque on the house records its role in Resistance history.

No one has ever been able to establish the exact composition of the German units that were in Sennecey that morning. Charged with holding open the escape routes for the 19. Armee and 1. Armee in the Chalon sector was the 716. Infanterie-Division of the IV. Luftwaffen-Feld-Korps (part of the 19. Armee), reinforced by Kampfgruppen from the 16. Reserve-Division and the 159. Infanterie-Division of LXIV. Armeekorps (of the 1. Armee), but that does not necessarily mean that the troops at Sennecey belonged to those units. The German convoy could equally well have been made up from any of the numerous other combat formations, Luftwaffe units, and police, supply, administrative and other rear-echelon personnel that came streaming into the area

from southern or south-western France during those chaotic days.

At 0700 hours de Combaud's force launched its attack. As the four Jeeps entered St Julien, contrary to what had been anticipated, the crews suddenly discovered, at a crossroads, that the Germans had posted sentries at each corner. Pressing the accelerator, de Combaud made a sharp right turn. His Jeep sped off, followed by the other three. The unexpected move threw André Rivot off the bonnet and onto the roadside. Getting up, he quickly took to his heels and made good his escape. The rush encounter took everyone by surprise. Not a single shot was fired on either side. The German sentries just stood looking, stunned and open-mouthed, without any reaction.



It was now just three kilometres to Sennecey. As they entered the suburb of St Julien, the Jeeps arrived at this crossroads where, to their surprise, the crews saw German sentries standing in the gardens all around. Reacting quickly, de Combaud,

driving the lead Jeep, rapidly steered his column into the turning on the right. The Jeeps got away safely, but unfortunately they had now lost their guide, Rivot, who had been thrown off the vehicle by the unexpected turn.

With engines revving loudly, the four Jeeps rounded the church and the castle and, after a last left turn, entered the main street and started their charge. Rushing along, with all Vickers blasting away, they spat a deadly hail of bullets at the German column parked on either side of the main street. Whole rows of men were mown down; they fell in the roadway, on the pavement, in doorways. Horses, horribly wounded, neighed in agony. Riddled with tracer and armour-piercing rounds, trucks and carts started smoking, then burst out in flames. A tornado of fire, smoke and explosions swept down the street.

The mad charge along the one-kilometre-long main street cannot have lasted longer than two or three minutes. Already the Y-junction at the northern end was getting close. The Jeeps were supposed to turn right here, onto the CD18, to leave the town towards St Cyr. The lead Jeep reached the junction but, instead of turning right, sped straight on along the RN6. The three others followed close behind.

No one will ever know for sure why the Jeeps missed the turn. Some say the St Cyr turn-off was blocked by German transport; others say it was hidden from view by transport parked on the main road.

A few hundred yards further on, the four Jeeps braked sharply: coming towards them, barring their escape route, was a convoy of German trucks (empty transport, it seems, coming to Sennecey to fetch troops). A few bursts of fire were exchanged, then de Combaud ordered a U-turn. The only option left was to go back up the main street again, and try to escape by the same route they had used the other way only minutes before.



Sennecey's main street looking north is still very much like it must have appeared to the SAS men in their Jeeps at the start of the charge. On the extreme right, a small plaque affixed next to the water pipe records that this is the spot where one of the Jeeps met its end (see page 10).



In a modern-day version of the Charge of the Light Brigade, the four Jeeps dashed up the main street firing their machine guns at the German columns parked on either side. Caught completely by surprise, the German force — mostly foot soldiers and horse-



drawn transport — suffered gruesome losses. These images of dead horses and wrecked horse-carts are stills from film footage shot by a local amateur cine enthusiast the following day, after Allied forces had entered Sennecey from the south.



The Y-junction at the northern end of town where the Jeeps should have turned right in order to escape into the countryside. Instead, they raced straight on, continuing up the RN6. Today, the old side road to St Cyr ends in a cul-de-sac at the former railway crossing some 200 yards beyond the junction.

Racing at full speed, their Vickers still firing madly, the Jeeps retraced their route, zigzagging among bodies of German dead and wounded, past shot-up horse wagons and smoking car wrecks. But by now the Germans had recovered from their initial surprise and shock. The paratroopers were shot at from everywhere, from behind lorries, from doorways, from first-floor windows.

Shortly after the U-turn, as he reached the junction with Rue du Viel Moulin on the right, realising perhaps they would never make it to the far end of the village, de Combaud tried to turn right and escape to Laives and La Ferté. As he made the turn, his Jeep ran over a fallen bicycle. The bike jammed between the front wheel and the mudguard, stopping the Jeep on the spot. A hail of bullets hit the occupants. De Combaud and one of his men were killed instantly, but the third man managed to get out of the Jeep and reach the stairs in front of a nearby house, before he too was mortally hit.

The three other Jeeps dashed straight on



Left: Seeing their escape via the RN6 blocked, the Jeeps swung around and came racing back into Sennecey looking for a way out. This is the main street, looking south, with the turn-off into what was then the Rue du Viel Moulin on the right. *Right:* The first Jeep, that of de Combaud, met its end at this spot.

Stopped by a bicycle that got stuck in one of its wheels, the vehicle was raked by German fire from all sides. In a matter of seconds, the entire crew was dead. The amateur footage shot the day after included this image of de Combaud's wrecked and upturned Jeep.



Left: In Jean-Pierre Garnier's comparison, the memorial stone for de Combaud and his men can be seen on the extreme left, showing that it was placed almost exactly where the Jeep was stopped and the captain met his death. The corner house on the left is that of the Gemetti family where the bodies of the SAS troopers that had been killed in the charge were taken after the battle. All of them, even those showing no sign of life after capture, had been shot through the head. *Below left:* Another shot of the wrecked Jeep, this time looking north-west. It is not entirely clear whether the vehicle overturned by its own speed when it came careering round the corner or whether it was turned over by the Germans or French civilians later, possibly to appropriate its wheels. *Below right:* The shed on the corner beside the Gemetti house has been replaced by two others, but the tall roof of the first house on Rue du Viel Moulin (now Rue Guy de Combaud) provides the link between the two photos. Note the steps in front of the house — this is where the last member of Jeep No. 1 fell.





Although Jeep No. 1 carried only two SAS men — de Combaud and Pache — and one Resistant (Magdelaine), strangely enough the text on the memorial stone reads: 'Here fell Guy de Combaud and five of his SAS paratroopers', i.e. a total of six. Presumably, the stone is commemorating the crews of both Jeeps No. 1 (de Combaud) and No. 2 (Benhamou), each of which had three men killed — but only if one includes the FFI man.

down the main street in a hopeless, desperate rush. Enemy fire now blanketed them from all sides. In Jeep No. 2, now in the lead, a bullet hit the FFI volunteer, Nectoux, in the head. He fell from the vehicle but miraculously managed to crawl to a garden fence, climb over it and hide in a nearby attic. (A local inhabitant, Louis Jusseau, found him there shortly after and brought him to the infirmary improvised by the local nuns. Despite his head wound, Nectoux survived.) Seconds later, the Jeep he had been travelling in crashed into the wall of a house and exploded into flames. The three wounded paratroopers on board — Adjutant Benhamou and the two Djian brothers — died in the blaze.

Close behind, the two remaining Jeeps raced on, firing off the last of their rounds. Aubert-Stribi, in Jeep No. 3, was now trying to find a side turning to escape from the deadly mêlée in the village street. But his luck was out. A Panzerfaust round hit his Jeep square in the middle, wrecking it. Barkatz and Lombardo were killed at once,



However, if this is so, the wording of the wall plaque further down the street (opposite the turn-off to St Julien — see the map on page 6) is positively puzzling: 'Here fell four French soldiers' — but the last Jeep to have all its crew killed, Aubert-Stribi's No. 3, carried only three men, not four. Moreover, the two memorials together add up to a total of ten men killed instead of the accepted nine!

but Aubert-Stribi jumped off, Colt in hand. Exchanging shots with his assailants, he managed to reach a doorway before he too was killed.

By now all three men in Jeep No. 4 were wounded but still they drove on in a desperate attempt to get away. They were the only ones that made it. Following the same route they used to start the attack, their bullet-riddled Jeep came to a final stop in front of the cemetery gate which they had passed on the way in just a few minutes before. Coming towards them were the FFI partisans and SAS troops that by now had launched their attack on the town. Thinking they were Germans, some of the FFI opened up on them but Aspirant Trameni, at the wheel, shouted at them to hold their fire. In a last effort, the three injured paratroopers — Trameni, Beaudé and Bailleux — stumbled out of their wrecked vehicle, the only SAS men to survive this suicidal action.

The infantry attack on the town never really got off the ground. Nervous and inexperienced, the FFI volunteers fired their

weapons from too far away and were easily stopped by the German counter-fire. In an effort to get the troops moving, Capitaine Boissonas got up and started running towards the enemy, hoping his example would be followed, but he was cut down after a few steps, falling on the edge of the Laives road. Nearby, Lieutenant Zermati's group was equally pinned down. As German snipers opened up from trees, casualties among the attacking force began to mount. Soon the FFI fighters began to slip away to the south. With German reinforcements steadily arriving from Tournus, the SAS saw the hopelessness of their situation and the attack was called off.

The audacious Jeep attack into Sennecey had cost the Germans dear: an estimated 400 or 500 Germans had been killed and 300 injured. Over 30 horse-drawn transports and other vehicles had been destroyed and over 150 horses killed. However, the SAS had paid a very heavy price: of the 11 paratroopers on the Jeeps, eight had been killed. The ground attack had added another two fatalities. Of the three FFI men aboard the Jeeps, one had been killed.

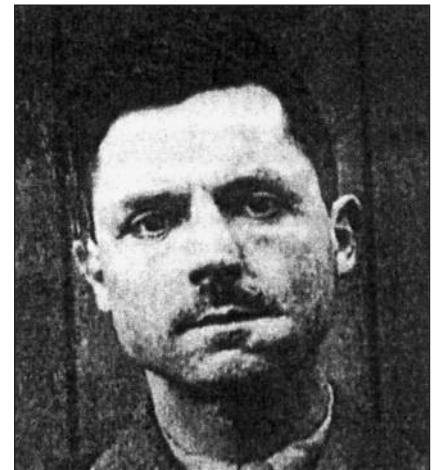
None of the four attacks on the RN6 planned for that day fared very well. The one on Macon was launched too late, arriving five minutes after the last German truck had left. The attack on Tournus did not materialise because the main FFI group involved, the local FTP (Franc-Tireurs et Partisans), did not show up in time; Lieutenant Colcombet, realising that Allied armour was already approaching the town, then cancelled the attack by his SAS party. The assault on Sennecey had ended in tragedy and failure. And the one at Chalon had very little impact.

Having been informed — by telephone or by a messenger from Sennecey — that their colleagues up the road were in trouble, the SAS party under Colcombet marched to Sennecey where they arrived at noon. So did the parties of Lieutenant Porot and Sous-Lieutenant Albert Rouan from the 'Harrods' base who arrived from Montceau-les-Mines about the same time. Dispersed fighting with the retreating German troops continued around Sennecey until well into the afternoon, especially at St Martin's Hill and around Laives.

Before evacuating the town, the Germans were only able to bury some of their many dead, as Allied troops were rapidly approaching from the south. As they hurriedly left, they caught a group of farming people from Laives, men and women working a threshing machine in a field, and took them along to use as a human shield during their withdrawal. When they were some distance away from the town, they shot all 14



The last Jeep, Trameni's No. 4, miraculously made good its escape, coming to a final stop here in front of the municipal cemetery on Route de Jogy, just outside the town. All four men aboard were wounded, but survived.



Capitaine Christian Boissonas of the 1st Company of the 3ème RCP, killed during the infantry attack on Sennecey.



Memorial to the 16 civilians murdered by the Germans at Laives during their retreat.

hostages. The oldest was 74 years old, the youngest just 16. Earlier, they had already shot two villagers, Pierre Girardot, caught carrying a weapon, and his 15-year-old son Pierre. (In reprisal for these killings the FFI would fetch 28 German prisoners of war from Chalon and execute them outside Laives churchyard the following day.)

Sennecey was finally liberated in the early afternoon of that September 4 by tanks of the French 1ère Division Blindée, part of the French IIème Corps which was operating under command and on the left wing of the US Seventh Army. Advancing from Macon to Dijon on the west bank of Saône river, they entered the town via the RD981 and St Gengoux.

Such is the story as it has been told since the war. The charge of the four Jeeps into Sennecey has become part of SAS legend and assumed almost mythical proportions in French military history. But some people, of the most reliable kind, do not agree with the accepted version. For example, SAS veterans Hilaire Colcombet and Charles Picard (today retired Général Picard) are convinced that Jeep No. 4 did not take part in the charge through the town. According to them, when de Combaud's force first entered the main street, this Jeep missed the last bend and crashed into the wall opposite (where a small marble plaque has since been affixed). The three men on board scurried away from the crash and saved their lives that way. Neither Colcombet nor Picard witnessed the action first-hand, but both came to Sennecey soon after the drama (Colcombet only a few hours later). Both are convinced, from what

they were told then, that only three Jeeps participated in the charge.

Yet another version comes from André Rivot, the guide who was thrown off Jeep No. 1. He says maybe only one Jeep, de Combaud's, actually took part. He says that, curiously enough, after the tragedy, one Jeep was found abandoned in a side street.

André Rivot's version is hard to believe, for two reasons. Firstly, the results of the attack. Even if the official figures of the German losses are inflated, it is improbable that one Jeep alone, and one that went up the main street only once (it was stopped shortly after turning back) could create such havoc. Secondly, if three of the four Jeeps really did not participate in the charge, why then was the number of paratroopers killed during the action so high.

Confounding the problem for anyone trying to sort out fact from fiction is that very few inhabitants of Sennecey actually witnessed the tragedy. A large part of the population had left the town at the time, finding shelter at friends or relatives in the neighbourhood. And most of those who had remained were hiding in their cellars when it happened and did not dare to look out.

George Mugnier, who was 20 at the time, still lives at the end of what was then Rue du Viel Moulin, barely 150 yards from the junction where de Combaud fell. He says: 'When the noise of the battle ceased, I peered through shutters half ajar. I could see German troopers kicking the bodies of paratroopers that were lying on the ground, at the other end of the street.'

Jeannette Gemetti lived right on the cor-

ner of the main street and Rue du Viel Moulin (she still does). She too was in her twenties. She remembers: 'The day before the battle, Underground authorities had informed my father that it would be very hot on the 4th, and advised the family to stay away. So we cycled to some relatives in a neighbouring village. When we came back, once the battle was over, we found that the house had been broken into and turned into a sickbay and mortuary. Many bloodstained bed sheets littered the floor.'

Hilaire Colcombet remembers it was in that same house that, after the action, he saw the body of his friend Guy de Combaud and of other dead paratroopers. 'Besides their other wounds, all of them had been shot in the head. Perhaps that was to obey Hitler's "Kommandobefehl" regarding the SAS.'

Since the war many have wondered why de Combaud — a sensible man of 39, cool and self-controlled, and well trained in SAS hit-and-run tactics — agreed to an attack that was clearly very risky, if not suicidal. Hilaire Colcombet has all these years vainly tried to understand what may have motivated his friend. As he says: 'With my stick, we mounted many ambush attacks on German convoys on the RN6 in the Tournus area. I always ordered a withdrawal after four or five minutes, and we ran back into the woods. My men knew they were to shoot for a limited time only, then break off and go.'

'No man made more efforts to reach Britain and join the fighting than Guy de Combaud did. By August 15, most of his fellow Free French paratroopers had already been dropped into France and were fighting the enemy, but he was still idle, waiting on British soil. He feared that the war might come to an end without him. When at last he reached the Sennecey area, the Allied forces were only a short distance away, coming towards him at full speed, and he may have thought that his war was about to be stolen from him. Hence a desire to do more than necessary, more than he would have done in ordinary circumstances.'

Maybe de Combaud acted the way he did because he was on home ground, and so may have felt he had to do more than usual. This is the opinion of another French SAS veteran, Michel Starckmann, who says: 'It was a mistake on the part of the SAS commanders to send him to a place where he felt at home. He would never have participated in such an affair if he had been sent to a place he did not know, and where he did not know anybody.'

The people of Sennecey never forgot the



Left: Just a few hours after the tragic action, French troops of the 11ème Corps of Général Goislard de Monsabert, attached to the US Seventh Army, entered Sennecey in strength from the south, bringing final liberation. In this still from the amateur film, a Bofors anti-aircraft gun rolls by in the direction of



Chalon. The columns passing through the town belonged to CC1 (Combat Command Sudre) of the 1ère Division Blindée with elements of the 2ème Régiment de Spahis Algériens de Reconnaissance attached. Right: The same houses on Avenue du 4 Septembre today with No. 77 on the left.



Left: The SAS dead were buried in the town cemetery a few days after the drama. Here, the vicar and his clerics in their white surplices lead the funeral procession from the church. The coffins of the dead are carried on two Jeeps. Another still



from the film. Right: Jean-Pierre's comparison was taken from the same window of the Sennecey town hall. The large building in the left background was totally hidden by trees in 1944. The church steps are just visible on the left.



Above: The SAS graves at the municipal cemetery were marked by white Crosses of Lorraine. *Right:* Today stone crosses have replaced the wooden ones of 1944. The obelisks in the background, to the left of the piper, pinpoint the spot. Picture taken during the 2002 commemoration.



Left: Capitaine de Combaud was buried in the chapel of the Château de la Ferté, in a tomb shared with Capitaine Jacques Thénard, the son of the baron who owned the castle. An officer serving with the 61ème Groupe de Reconnaissance Divisionnaire, he had been killed in action near Longwy on May 13, 1940.



The tomb (right) is located below the grilled window on the left. When de Combaud's widow Ghislaine de Menthon died in 1993, she was buried in another family estate, the Château de Talmay (Côte d'Or) and, in compliance with her will, Guy de Combaud's remains were taken there and he now rests at her side.



Above left and right: At the northern end of Sennecey along the RN6, close to the spot where de Combaud's Jeeps made their U-turn, today stands the 'Resistance Wall'. Commemorating all who fell during the war and the liberation of Sennecey, the memorial panels include the names of the SAS dead as well. Note that some of the SAS fell in actions earlier than September 4, like Chasseur 1er Classe Marcel Sanchez, killed at Bois de la Ferté on the night of August 17/18, and Aspirant Georges Lyon-Caen, killed at Sennecey on the night of August 22/23.

sacrifice of the SAS for their liberation. The village main street is now named Avenue du 4 Septembre, the Rue du Viel Moulin has become Rue Guy de Combaud, a monument to honour de Combaud has been erected on the spot where he fell, and every year, on September 4, the battle of Sennecey is solemnly commemorated.

Because of its place in French SAS history, Sennecey was also chosen as the location for the main SAS memorial in France. The memorial — an initiative of Georges Caïtucoli, then National President of the Amicale des Anciens Parachutistes SAS (French SAS Association); Hilaire Colcombet; and André Jarrot — was unveiled on September 4, 1984 — the 40th anniversary of the Sennecey action. Designed by artist (and SAS veteran) Jean Mélinand, it stands near the Ruffey quarry on the very spot where de Combaud formed up for his attack.

Attending the inauguration ceremony were David Stirling and Lord Jellicoe, then president and vice president of the British SAS Regimental Association. Impressed by the new memorial, the following year they proposed to 'internationalise' the Sennecey monument by making it the unit memorial for all nationalities that served in the wartime SAS. The French proudly accepted the idea and on September 4, 1988, the memorial was rededicated with the addition of bronze panels on either side listing the names of British, French and Belgian SAS soldiers who had died in the 1939-45 war. (This made the SAS unique in being the only regiment in the British Army to have its main memorial outside the UK.)

Unfortunately, by 2001, the British SAS Association had found that the list of British dead they had submitted had been very incomplete (partly due to the fact that many names of SAS dead were inscribed on the Rolls of Honour of their parent regiment and not on those of the SAS). So on September 4, 2002, in yet another rededication ceremony, several bronze plaques, bearing the names of the 96 men who had been overlooked the first time were added to the memorial. Now the names of all 507 SAS killed in action during the Second World War — 301 British, 183 French and 23 Belgians — are recorded on the memorial.



A regular participant in the yearly commemorations at Sennecey is Jean de Combaud (centre), Guy de Combaud's only son, who was nine in 1944. Under the name of Jean Sorel, he became a famous film actor in the 1960s, his best-known film being Luis Buñuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967) with Catherine Deneuve. Today he lives partly in Paris, but mostly in Rome where he continues a successful career as a stage actor. This picture of him was taken during the 1984 ceremony, when he posed with two of the survivors of the Sennecey charge: Alexis Beaud (left) and Joseph Tramoni (right), from the crew of Jeep No. 4, now both dead. (Amicale SAS)



Re-dedication of the SAS Memorial on September 4, 2002. In all eight bronze plaques were added, giving the names of 96 British SAS and six French SAS that had been forgotten when the memorial was first dedicated in 1992. Here, Earl Jellicoe, Patron of the British SAS Regimental Association, delivers his address.