

# SAS



## D-DAY MISSIONS

AS OPERATION OVERLORD BEGAN, THE SAS PARACHUTED INTO FRANCE WITH INSTRUCTIONS TO CAUSE HAVOC, CUT RAILWAY LINES AND KILL GERMANS

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER



*As the British forces landed on the Normandy beaches, the SAS had already caused havoc for the Nazis across France*



**W**hen David Stirling was granted permission to expand the SAS in September 1942, he appointed his brother, Bill, as commanding officer of the second regiment. Bill was the eldest of five children, and David's senior by four years. The siblings shared a similar military background (Scots Guards and commandos) but differed in personality.

One wartime SAS officer who knew them both, Anthony Greville-Bell, recalled: "I was very fond of Bill. He was a very deep, intelligent and well-read man. Bill was cleverer than David. [He] was more charismatic and more physical, the younger brother, and was outwardly very good at dealing with higher-ups and getting what he wanted. Bill was much quieter and more intellectual, and in terms of dealing with authority I think he was better than David."

Nonetheless, the brothers agreed on how the SAS should be deployed in any given theatre of war, and after David's capture in January 1943, Bill became more determined than ever to adhere to the principles outlined by his brother when, in 1941, he'd produced a plan for a special forces unit to operate behind enemy lines in North Africa.

In the summer of 1943, lieutenant colonel Bill Stirling had clashed with the HQ 15th Army Group about how 2SAS should be used in Italy, but that was just a foretaste of the bitter row that erupted the following March when the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) issued the SAS Brigade with its operational instructions for D-Day.

They tasked the SAS brigade (which now comprised 1SAS, 2SAS, two French regiments, 3 & 4, and a company of Belgian soldiers) to parachute into Normandy between the landing beaches and the German reserves 36 hours in advance of the main invasion fleet. Their job would be to prevent three panzer divisions of reserves from reaching the beaches once the invasion began.

Bill Stirling was aghast when he read the operational instructions. It was a suicide mission, and a type of warfare for which the SAS was not trained. Paddy Mayne, commanding officer of 1SAS, shared Stirling's sentiments but the big Irishman was better suited to fighting the enemy than his own top brass. "Paddy was useless with dealing with senior officers because if they did something to annoy him, he threatened to punch their noses," said Tony Greville-Bell.

In a strongly worded letter to SHAEF, Stirling expressed his grave misgivings about the operational instructions and demanded that the SAS operate in France as they had in the desert, in the principles set down by his brother.

Before Bill Stirling could send the letter, however, Lieutenant General Frederick 'Boy' Browning intervened on behalf of the SAS, advising the chief of staff, 21 Army Group, that it would be preferable if the SAS Brigade was dropped deeper into France to attack German lines of communication, train the resistance and waylay reinforcements en route to Normandy.

Stirling sent his letter nonetheless, in order to put on record his anger with what he considered as the constant misunderstanding of the SAS by the top brass. The letter infuriated many within SHAEF, but Stirling refused to retract his criticism.

Instead he resigned, and his decision to fall on his sword was not in vain. On 28 May, 21 Army Group issued an amended order for the SAS Brigade to replace the original order two months earlier. Now the SAS Brigade would carry out 43 missions in France, all but one (Titanic, involving a six-man party dropping into Normandy to spread confusion with dummy parachutes), entailing the insertion of SAS units deep behind enemy lines to attack the Germans.

**"BILL STIRLING WAS AGHAST WHEN HE READ THE OPERATIONAL INSTRUCTIONS. IT WAS A SUICIDE MISSION, AND A TYPE OF WARFARE FOR WHICH THE SAS WAS NOT TRAINED"**

**Left:** Lieutenant colonel Brian Franks replaced Bill Stirling as CO of 2SAS and later parachuted into France to join the ill-fated Operation Loyton

**Right:** Paddy Mayne was one of the SAS originals, replacing David Stirling as CO of 1SAS following the latter's capture







# OPERATION HOUNDSWORTH

CAUSING CHAOS ACROSS FRANCE, A SQUADRON CUT OFF VITAL GERMAN RESOURCE AND COMMUNICATION LINES

The first major mission into Occupied France was code-named Houndsworth, and involved A Squadron. Their task was to cut the railway lines between Lyon and Paris, train the numerous local groups of Maquis and generally make nuisances of themselves.

The boys in A Squadron considered themselves a cut above the rest of the SAS brigade. They were veterans of the desert, a few – like Johnny Cooper, Jeff Du Vivier, Reg Seekings and their commanding officer, Bill Fraser – were even ‘Originals’, among the 66 men recruited by David Stirling in 1941.

But it was one of the recent additions to the squadron, Captain Ian Wellsted, who got Operation Houndsworth underway on the night of 5 June. As the Allied invasion fleet sailed for the Normandy beaches, Wellsted and four others parachuted into the thickly-forested, rolling countryside of the Massif du Morvan, west of Dijon. Their task was to ensure the area was safe for the arrival of a second 20-strong SAS party under the command of Bill Fraser, which duly dropped without incident on 11 June.

By June 22, the remaining 46 men of A Squadron were safely inserted into the Morvan, with Fraser’s HQ camp established at Vieux Dun and a second base approximately ten miles south, not far from the village of Montsauche, under the command of Alex Muirhead and Ian Wellsted. The local Resistance group,

Maquis Bernard, camped in the forest close to Wellsted’s men and he recalled that, “although full of enthusiasm, none of the Maquisards, even the most military of them, had any idea of true discipline and were liable easily to be discouraged. Their true worth depended entirely upon the capacity of their leader and the use of their local knowledge.”

On June 24 the Maquis tipped off the SAS that a convoy of Germans and White Russians [Soviets fighting for Germany] was on its way to ambush what they believed to be ‘Canadian paratroopers’. Forewarned, the SAS turned from the hunted to the hunter. “We just toddled off to a road that they would have to pass back to their camp,” wrote sergeant John Noble. “We waited four hours on that road until at long last they came. We were spread over 200 yards along the road and on a pre-arranged signal we opened up. Their order of march was a truck with a 20mm [cannon] on it, a private car, another truck with a 20mm, followed by a motorcycle. I had the first truck to deal with.”

By the time Wellsted arrived at the scene, Noble’s Bren gun had done its work. “The leading German lorry was blazing furiously,” recalled Wellsted. “The windscreen was shattered and the bodies of the men in the cab lolled grotesquely in their seats... beyond the first truck was a small civilian car. It, too, was stopped and derelict, and a huddled form

twitched on the road beside it.” Once the last of the resistance had been overcome, the SAS vanished into the forests, leaving behind a scene of death and destruction. The German retaliation was swift and savage. The next day, eight truck-loads of soldiers burned the villages of Montsauche and Planchez to the ground, raping and killing with impunity.

On June 26 a force of around 300 Germans and White Russians attacked the forest where they believed the SAS to be hiding. But there were no guerrilla fighters and their prey slipped away, having gunned down dozens of Germans as they moved clumsily through the trees.

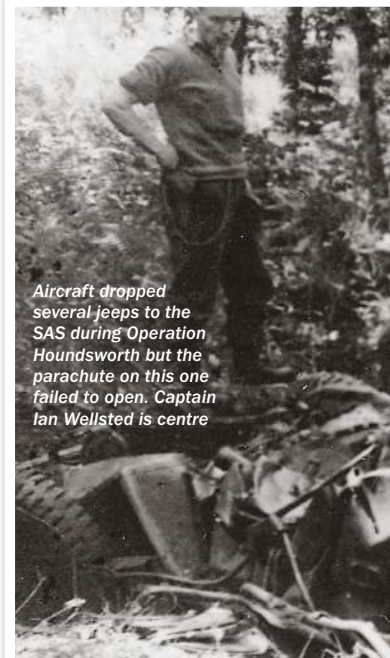
For the rest of June and into the beginning of July, heavy rain fell in the Morvan and there was little activity, either from the SAS or the Germans. Then on 5 July, the SAS received a resupply of food and equipment, including three jeeps dropped by parachute. One of the jeeps was given to Johnny Wiseman, who with a signaller and a couple of other men, departed in the direction of Dijon, where over 30,000 Germans were stationed. Their mission was to

**“ONCE THE LAST OF THE RESISTANCE HAD BEEN OVERCOME, THE SAS VANISHED INTO THE FORESTS, LEAVING BEHIND A SCENE OF DEATH AND DESTRUCTION”**

*Right: Paddy Mayne (left) arrived in France on 7 August with Mike Sadler (right) and the pair first paid a visit to Bill Fraser in Houndsworth*



*The men of Houndsworth familiarise themselves with a mortar prior to their successful attack on Autun*



*Aircraft dropped several jeeps to the SAS during Operation Houndsworth but the parachute on this one failed to open. Captain Ian Wellsted is centre*



select targets and call-up RAF air strikes, which they did with considerable success.

Back in the Morvan, the arrival of the jeeps provided the SAS with the means to range far and wide in harassing the enemy. In the most audacious attack, Wellsted and Muirhead targeted a synthetic oil factory at Autun, 25 miles from the SAS camp. "Mortar bombs were plumping most satisfactorily into the factory area at the range of 700 yards and dense clouds of steam were seen rising from broken pipes," wrote Muirhead. "Then with a roar the 7 Vickers K opened up at 200 yards spraying the whole area with tracer and incendiary. Each gun pouring two full pans into the rising steam."

Several times sabotage parties cut the railway lines to Paris, slowing the Germans as they transported men and munitions towards the heavy fighting in Normandy.

The most successful such operation was led by the desert veteran, Jeff Du Vivier, who in late July laid three pressure charges under a 50-yard stretch of track. It was a complex and time-consuming job for Du Vivier and his two comrades, but their patience was rewarded when a munitions train appeared a few hours later.

The engine was destroyed and ten of the 40 wagons were blown off the line, damaging several anti-aircraft guns. Best of all, noted Du Vivier in his report after the action, the Germans were left "very frightened and demoralised" by the sabotage.

Fittingly, the final ambush was carried out by A Squadron's CO, Bill Fraser, who on 3 September attacked and killed seven German officers. Five days later, the squadron arrived in England having been replaced by Tony Marsh's C Squadron. In their three months in France, Fraser's men had killed or wounded 220 Germans, derailed six trains, destroyed 23 motorised vehicles and damaged a synthetic oil refinery. Their casualties were two dead and seven wounded.

*The Nazis called them 'terrorists' but the SAS were World War II's most effective special forces unit. Tough, fit, disciplined and intelligent, the SAS killed 7,733 Germans during operations in France*

Illustration: Jean-Michel Girard, The Art Agency



**"THE ENGINE WAS DESTROYED AND TEN OF THE FORTY WAGONS WERE BLOWN OFF THE LINE, DAMAGING SEVERAL ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS"**



# BEHIND ENEMY LINES

CRUCIAL TO THE ALLIED EFFORT, VARIOUS SAS SQUADRONS ENTERED GERMAN TERRITORY AND CAUSED MAYHEM FOR THE ENEMY, DESTROYING WEAPONS, SUPPLIES AND COMMUNICATION AND TRANSPORT LINES

## OPERATION COONEY

A French SAS operation that entailed inserting 18 small sabotage teams by parachute. Cooney's aim was to isolate Brittany by cutting its railway lines within 48 hours. The mission began on 8 June and forced a battlegroup of the German 275th Division heading towards the beachhead to abandon the railway and take to the road, arriving 48 hours behind schedule.

## OPERATION TITANIC

Commanded by Lieutenants Poole and Fowles, Titanic comprised four men and its mission was to create a diversion just behind the Normandy beaches prior to the arrival of the main invasion fleet. This was done by throwing several sandbags dressed as paratroopers from the aircraft that were fitted with firecrackers to explode on landing. It wasn't a success.

## OPERATION HAFT

A reconnaissance mission in July to radio back details of German positions ahead of the breakout from the Cotentin Peninsula.

## OPERATION DINGSON

A French SAS mission in Brittany in June, culminating in the Battle of St Marcel, which cost six SAS and 300 Germans dead.

## OPERATION BULBASKET

Commanded by Captain John Tonkin, Bulbasket was a 1SAS operation that began on the night of 5/6 June when the men parachuted into the countryside south of Poitiers. From the start, the operation suffered from the proximity of large numbers of enemy troops and at dawn on 3 July the camp was overrun with the Germans who captured 31 SAS soldiers, all of whom were executed.

**Right:** To supply the SAS parties with jeeps required four huge 90 foot parachutes for each vehicle



**“THE OPERATION SUFFERED FROM THE PROXIMITY OF LARGE NUMBERS OF ENEMY TROOPS AND AT DAWN ON JULY 3 THE CAMP WAS OVERRUN WITH THE GERMANS CAPTURING 31 SAS SOLDIERS, ALL OF WHOM WERE EXECUTED”**



## OPERATION GAIN

About 60 men from D squadron, 1SAS, operated for two months in the Rambouillet area, approximately 30 miles south of Paris. Though they lost several men, the SAS inflicted much damage on the Germans in a series of hit and run raids, while also derailling two trains, cutting 16 railway lines and providing important intelligence on German troop movements close to the capital.

## OPERATION RUPERT

A 2SAS operation that only began in the middle of August when the men parachuted into eastern France with instructions to sabotage railway lines between Nancy and Chalons-sur-Marne. By this time, however, the Germans were withdrawing east with the American Third Army in hot pursuit, so the SAS for a time acted as reconnaissance patrols for their allies.

## OPERATION HARDY

The forerunner to Operation Wallace, Hardy's mission was to lay supplies and provide intelligence for Roy Farran's squadron when they arrived.

## OPERATION HAGGARD

B Squadron, 1SAS, dropped west of the Loire in early August, establishing a base between the towns of Bourges and Nevers. Ordered to spread 'alarm and despondency' among the Germans, they did just that. In one attack on 25 August, they ambushed a German convoy with a huge roadside bomb before mopping up the survivors with small-arms fire. An estimated 100 Nazis were killed.

**“ORDERED TO SPREAD ‘ALARM AND DESPONDENCY’ AMONG THE GERMANS, THEY DID JUST THAT. IN ONE ATTACK ON 25 AUGUST, THEY AMBUSHED A GERMAN CONVOY WITH A HUGE ROADSIDE BOMB BEFORE MOPPING UP THE SURVIVORS WITH SMALL-ARMS FIRE”**





# OPERATION WALLACE

HEADING EAST TOWARDS AUXERRE, C SQUADRON FOUGHT A COMPANY OF THE AFRIKA KORPS AND TOOK DOWN A TRAIN IN THE PROCESS

The officer who replaced Bill Stirling as commanding officer of 2SAS was lieutenant colonel Brian Franks. Charming and debonair, he nonetheless grew increasingly frustrated as the summer of 1944 wore on at the lack of opportunities for his regiment. A couple of missions were aborted at the last minute because of concerns about the operational area, and when the first parties did insert in August, they were soon overrun by the American Third Army, now on its dash east across France.

So when Major Roy Farran and 60 men of C Squadron, 2SAS, disembarked from their Dakotas at Rennes airfield in 20 jeeps, they were determined to waste no time in taking the fight to the Germans.

It was August 19 when they motored away from Rennes towards Auxerre on the start of Operation Wallace. Four days later, the SAS had their first contact with the enemy when they encountered a company of tanned Afrika Korps, recently arrived from Italy and still in their tropical battledress of khaki shirts and blue shorts. "Everything had seemed so peaceful," recalled sergeant major Harry Vickers. "When we heard the explosion, we turned the bend and saw Farran getting everyone organised."

Farran was a veteran of many a firefight and knew the importance of seizing the initiative. He ordered one section to cover their right and then sent Vickers's section, with their four Brens, into the hedgerow on their left. The Afrika Korps soon attacked, believing their superior numbers would prevail. "I started to spray the hedge with

bullets and as I did so I could hear the Germans shouting rude things at us," said Vickers.

The fight lasted an hour and cost the Germans dozens of casualties. The SAS lost no one and withdrew to find another route to Auxerre. By the end of August, they had reached their operational area and began hunting out Germans. Vehicles were destroyed, roads were mined, billets attacked and on one occasion a train strafed as it chuffed down the line

On 30 August, they ambushed a convoy of 30 trucks as they approached the German garrison in the Chateau Marmont in Chatillon. Vickers, awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his courage during the attack, was the first to open fire from a distance of 20 yards. In his memoirs, Farran described how "the first five trucks, two of which were loaded with ammunition, were brewed up and we were treated to a glorious display of fireworks.

Vickers, years later, recalled it "as all a bit bloody." The SAS suffered one fatality in the ambush; the Germans lost nearly 100 men.

Operation Wallace continued to inflict heavy casualties on the Germans in the first week of September, the aggression and mobility of the SAS helped by the growing confusion in the

enemy ranks as they began their withdrawal to the east.

On 7 September, Vickers opened fire on two German staff cars he saw speeding down the road, killing a battalion commander and his second in command. The following day the SAS destroyed five German petrol tankers. On 13 September they launched a mortar attack on the enemy-held town of Langres, raining down bombs from a commandeered Peugeot. "It had a sliding roof in the first place," recalled Bob Walker-Brown, the officer who led the assault. "We enlarged it, took out the back seat and stuffed the mortar on top of a lot of sandbags. It says a lot for the Peugeots of the time."

Three days later, Farran made contact with the US Seventh Army, bringing to an end to Operation Wallace. In his report he estimated that he and his men had killed or wounded 500 Germans, destroyed 59 motorised vehicles, plus a train, and blown up 100,000 gallons of enemy fuel. 2SAS casualties were seven dead and seven wounded. "This operation proves that with correct timing and in suitable country, with or without the active help of the local population, a small specially trained force can achieve results out of all proportion to its numbers," he concluded.

**"HE ESTIMATED THAT HE AND HIS MEN HAD KILLED OR WOUNDED 500 GERMANS, DESTROYED 59 MOTORISED VEHICLES, PLUS A TRAIN, AND BLOWN UP 100,000 GALLONS OF ENEMY FUEL"**

## A VETERAN OF OPERATION KIPLING

ALEXANDER 'ALEC' BORRIE WAS BORN IN LONDON IN 1925 TO A VETERAN OF WORLD WAR I WHO HAD SURVIVED FOUR YEARS IN THE TRENCHES. WHEN HE WAS 14, BORRIE LEFT SCHOOL AND BECAME AN APPRENTICE JOINER AND DURING THE BLITZ HE WAS INVOLVED IN REPAIRING BOMB-DAMAGED BUILDINGS. IN 1942, AGED 17, HE ENLISTED IN THE BRITISH ARMY AND WAS POSTED TO THE HIGHLAND LIGHT INFANTRY

### WHEN AND HOW DID YOU JOIN THE SAS?

In 1943, my battalion was posted to the Orkney Islands to guard against German raiding parties. Nothing happened and eventually in January 1944 the battalion was disbanded. We were given the choice of joining the Commandos, Parachute Regiment or the SAS; I chose the SAS, nor really knowing what they did.

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

I was interviewed by the commanding officer, who was Paddy Mayne, and once accepted, I was ordered to Darvel in Scotland where 1SAS was based. I later found out that I was one of only 30 from 300 to be chosen by Mayne. By the time we'd finished the parachute training at Ringway, the number was down to about 15 men.

### CAN YOU DESCRIBE SOME OF THE SAS TRAINING?

A lot of exercises in the Scottish countryside learning how to navigate and also endurance marches. We learned about explosives, how to blow trains off lines and we even got to

drive a steam train in case once we were in France we ever needed to move it up the line.

### WHEN DID YOU GO TO FRANCE?

I was in C Squadron, commanded by Major Tony Marsh, and we went in to replace A Squadron [see Operation Houndsworth] on Operation Kipling. On August 19, the squadron, plus about 20 jeeps, landed in Dakotas in Rennes and motored down to near Orleans. It took us about three days and I was in a section under the command of Lieutenant Roy Close.

### WHEN DID YOU FIRST SEE ACTION?

I've heard it said we went on a seven-day patrol. I don't remember it like that, I recall we just drove around looking for targets. We got word that there were three German trucks driving along the Nevers road, so Roy Close decided we'd ambush them on a bend where a rough gravel track led up towards some woods. As the trucks came into view

we opened fire, destroying the vehicles and killing about 15 Germans.

### WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

What we didn't know was that the convoy had an armoured escort. So the next thing it all went off, this heavy machine guns knocking great lumps out of the trees around us. Roy Close yelled "back up the track." But the jeeps were stacked one behind each other so it wasn't easy. One ended up in a ditch and another, Close's, got stuck over a log with its wheels spinning. I was driving the third jeep. We managed to free the log and the two jeeps sped off leaving the third behind.

### ANY CASUALTIES?

The reason the jeep went into a ditch was because its driver, Joe Craig, got a bullet through his

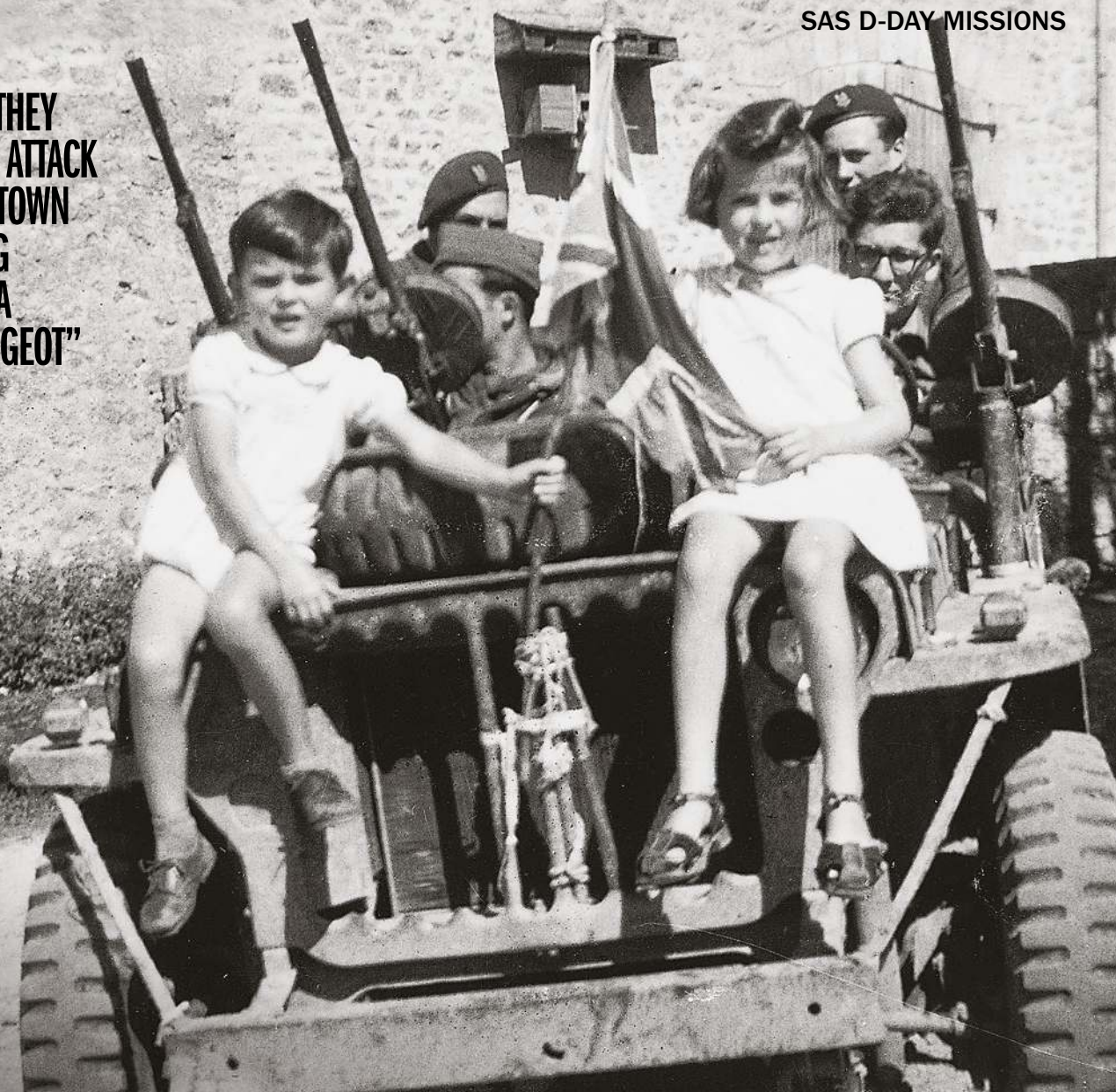
*Right: Johnny Cooper, one of the SAS Originals, at the wheel of his jeep, which he's christened 'Constance' in honour of his girlfriend*





**“ON 13 SEPTEMBER, THEY LAUNCHED A MORTAR ATTACK ON THE ENEMY-HELD TOWN OF LANGRES, RAINING DOWN BOMBS FROM A COMMANDEERED PEUGEOT”**

*The SAS were welcomed as liberators to France, sometimes prematurely, as the Germans were still in the vicinity and likely to come looking for the special forces*



hand. We cleaned the wound by pulling a cloth covered with sulfonate cream right through the hole. It healed beautifully.

#### **DID THE GERMANS GIVE CHASE?**

No but not long after we passed through the village of Chatillon-en-Bazois and the people treated us as liberators. They threw flowers at us and wanted to have a party. We tried to tell them that we hadn't liberated them and they should get back in their houses because the Germans were near.

#### **HOW DID THE REST OF THE PATROL GO?**

We just continued to drive around looking for targets. We

had a couple more shoot-ups but by this stage of the war, we were running out of targets because the Germans were fast retreating east.

Eventually we got ordered down to Dijon, I believe to look for any German snipers who had been left behind.

#### **WERE YOU AWARE THE GERMANS HAD ORDERS TO EXECUTE ANY SAS SOLDIERS THEY CAPTURED?**

We were told about the order and so we knew what would happen if captured. When you're 19, you think that might happen to others but not you.

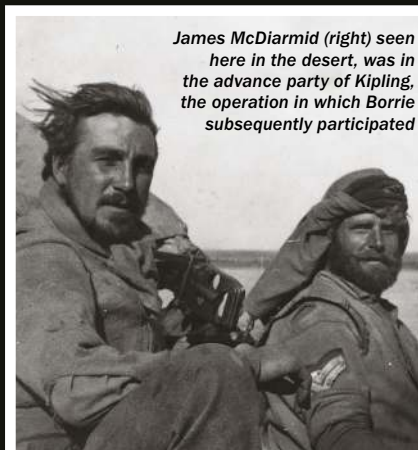
#### **DID YOU COME THROUGH THE WAR UNSCATHED?**

No, on 14 April 1945 my jeep drove over a landmine as we advanced into Germany. My sergeant, Sandy Davidson, who had just become a dad, was killed and another trooper was badly burned. I spent several weeks in hospital recovering from wounds to my right leg.

*Below: Paddy Mayne, a pre-war rugby international for Ireland, takes the SAS in scrum practice during a light-hearted training session in Darvel (April 1944)*



*Tony Marsh (left) and Roy Close*



*James McDiarmid (right) seen here in the desert, was in the advance party of Kipling, the operation in which Borrie subsequently participated*







(l-r) Major Pat Hart, Paddy Mayne and Roy Farran wait for their transport at Stavanger airport in Norway, in the summer of 1945



# OPERATION LOYTON

WITH THE VOSGES REINFORCED TO STOP THE ONCOMING THIRD ARMY, THE SAS WERE CHARGED WITH ATTACKING THE WITHDRAWING NAZIS

With Operation Wallace having run its course, Roy Farran had hoped to lead his men east to link up with another 2SAS mission, code-named Loyton. But word reached him that the Nazis, determined to stop the Third Army advance towards Germany, had brought in reinforcements who were well dug-in along the east bank of the Moselle River. Additionally, the Americans, in their dash across France, had stretched their supply line to breaking point. Instead Farran led his squadron to Paris to enjoy a week's leave in the French capital.

The men on Operation Loyton, meanwhile, were involved in a deadly game of cat and mouse with the Germans. The SAS advance party had parachuted into the rugged region known as the Vosges in late August with orders to attack the enemy as they withdrew into Germany. The drop zone was a meadow encircled by forest and near the village of La Petite Raon, "Not the best landing for me as I

could see that I was drifting towards the trees and pulling hard on my rigging lines didn't help," recalled Dusty Crossfield. "I crashed through the branches and came to rest swinging gently with no idea of the distance between me and the ground. I punched my quick release and dropped heavily to the deck – it must have been about 15 feet. Someone was running towards me and I reckon I had my colt 45 out faster than John Wayne, but the quick cry of 'Tres bien, Angleterre' saved the lad from being shot."

Among the Maquis reception committee was 21-year-old Henri Poirson. "One of the British, sergeant Seymour, hurt his ankle on landing so we had to carry him back to our camp," he said. "The next day captain Druce [the SAS commander] decided they needed a new base because there were so many Germans in the area it was becoming dangerous."

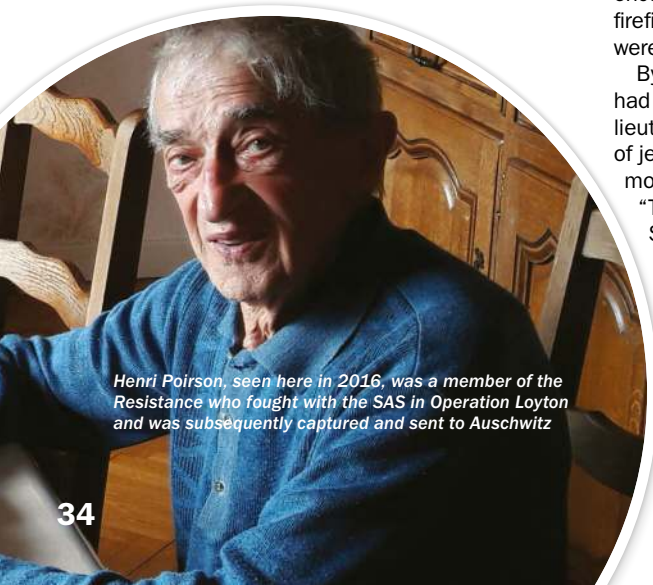
As the SAS moved through the forest, they encountered an enemy patrol and in the ensuing firefight two British soldiers were killed and two were captured, one of whom was Seymour.

By the end of August, 34 more SAS soldiers had been inserted by parachute, including lieutenant colonel Brian Franks, and a number of jeeps. That provided the British with mobility and firepower, but as Druce recalled: "The Germans had sent a division from Strasbourg to find us and we were pretty

oppressed." Nonetheless, the SAS embarked on a series of offensive patrols, shooting up any enemy vehicle they encountered on the winding forest roads. In the most spectacular raid, Druce attacked a unit of SS troops as they formed up in the village square of Mousse, machine-gunning them with the jeep's Browning and inflicting many casualties. The Germans retaliated by transporting the male population of Mousse to concentration camps; only 70 of the 210 returned.

The SAS were also learning that they had dropped into a region where history had divided the people's loyalties. Some villagers in the Vosges considered themselves French, but others had German blood and were only too willing to pass on information to the Nazis. On 24 September, Poirson was arrested by the SS as he arrived at the timber yard where he worked as a lorry driver. "They put me up against a wall and were going to shoot me but then an officer appeared and said 'no, not this one'" he recalled.

Poirson believes he knows who betrayed him, and he thinks they gave his name to the Germans only after a promise he wouldn't be executed. Instead Poirson was put on a train east, first to Auschwitz, where he spent several weeks taking the bodies of the dead to the incinerator and then Dachau, where he remained until the camp was liberated by the Americans.



Henri Poirson, seen here in 2016, was a member of the Resistance who fought with the SAS in Operation Loyton and was subsequently captured and sent to Auschwitz

**"SOME VILLAGERS IN THE VOSGES CONSIDERED THEMSELVES FRENCH, BUT OTHERS HAD GERMAN BLOOD, AND WERE ONLY TOO WILLING TO PASS ON INFORMATION TO THE NAZIS"**





The SAS participate in a service of commemoration for the victims of Moussey killed in German concentration camps

By the start of October, Franks had concluded that with the American advance stalled, Operation Loyton had no further purpose. It had been a botched operation from the start, a mix of misfortune and bad planning by SHAEF. So, on 6 October Franks split his men into five parties and instructed them to withdraw west, through an area rife with Germans. "The colonel saw us all off and scrounged a packet of fags from me as he wished us goodbye and good luck," recalled Crossfield, who left in a party of five, one of whom was Jock Robb. "All went well for us over the next couple of days despite some very close calls with the enemy," said Crossfield. "We then came up against a fairly wide river [the Meurthe] and as we undressed to swim across,

**Below:** The graves in Moussey cemetery of the three of the SAS soldiers caught and executed by the Germans

**"DRUCE ATTACKED A UNIT OF SS TROOPS AS THEY FORMED UP IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE OF MOUSSEY, MACHINE-GUNNING THEM WITH THE JEEP'S BROWNING AND INFLECTING MANY CASUALTIES. THE GERMANS RETALIATED BY TRANSPORTING THE MALE POPULATION OF MOUSSEY TO CONCENTRATION CAMPS"**

I became aware that Jock was doing nothing. He then told me that he was staying where he was because he couldn't swim. He'd lied during training and got through somehow without being found out. It was too difficult a crossing for me to ferry him over and I was damned if I was going to leave a good pal. So I got dressed again and we decided to find our own way by a different

route back to safety." The pair eventually made it through the German lines where they were reunited with Franks and the others who had returned safely.

However, 31 soldiers on Operation Loyton didn't make it back. Caught individually or in small groups, they were questioned, tortured and then executed.

Images: Alamy, Getty

