

'SET EUROPE ABLAZE!'

British commando Peter Kemp did just
as Churchill ordered, fighting oppression
in Europe and elsewhere By Adam Nettina



In the summer of 1943, after staging raids in occupied France, Kemp (at left, wearing fez) aided the resistance movements in Albania.

One can only imagine what was going through Peter Kemp's mind as his Soviet captors drove him toward the imposing facade of Moscow's infamous Lubyanka Prison in February 1945. The grim facility wasn't just the home of the Soviet secret police, it was the architectural incarnation of fear and control Kemp had been fighting from the outset of the year in the closing months of World War II. After six weeks of dodging both German patrols and advancing Soviet armies in the confused battle for Poland, Kemp's fate must have seemed both ironic and fitting.

The irony was that Kemp wasn't, at least in any official sense, an enemy of the Soviet Union. In fact, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) commando had worked alongside Soviet soldiers only weeks before to disrupt German operations in occupied Poland. Yet for Kemp the unfortunate details that had led the Soviets to capture him and his team probably didn't alleviate his fear. After all, years before he had fought against some of the same communist soldiers who now held him prisoner. To some degree an ignominious fate in a Soviet gulag may have seemed an understandable end.

Fortunately for Kemp the drive by Lubyanka was but a passing moment. Within a few hours the tension of his captivity melted away through diplomacy. A footnote in the complicated Allied diplomatic history of World War II, it was just another episode in the Englishman's decade-long flirtation with strife and danger.

Kemp's path to becoming one of Britain's foremost World War II commandos began in Spain. While some 2,000 Englishmen volunteered for service with the communist-backed Republican army during the Spanish Civil War, Kemp was one of a handful of Britons who fought for the Nationalists.

The recent Cambridge graduate began his service in Spain with the Requetés, a monarchist and staunchly Catholic paramilitary force drawn from the Carlists of Navarre. A more unlikely candidate for service with the red-bereted soldiers could not have been found; Kemp, neither loyal to the House of Bourbon nor Roman Catholic, also hadn't been personally affected by the "Red Terror" political violence that had incited the conservative uprising. Still, he had been appalled at the bloodshed in the days preceding the July 1936 outbreak of the civil war, explaining to a friend he couldn't stand by while leftist mobs murdered people "simply

because they were priests or nuns" or "because they had a little money or property."

Perhaps an equal motivator was the thirst for adventure that characterized the rest of his life. He told the same friend he wasn't yet ready to become a lawyer, and the opportunity to fight in a foreign country was "a splendid chance for me to go out on my own, to see a strange country and get to know its people and language, also to learn something about modern warfare."

Little did he know how much he'd learn about warfare over the following decade.

Kemp's service in the Nationalist army reads like a narrative of the civil war. He participated in the siege of Madrid and battles of Jarama and Bilbao. In 1937 he left the Requetés and joined the elite Spanish Legion—becoming one of the few foreign officers in the ranks—and participated in the counteroffensive that reclaimed Teruel in early 1938.

A gifted writer and storyteller, Kemp wrote about his experiences in his 1957 memoir, *Mine Were of Trouble*. In it he displays a penchant for building suspense, offers the occasional real-life comedic anecdote and writes with poignant honesty about the darker side of the conflict. Of special note is an incident in March 1938 when Kemp interrogated a captured Irishman who claimed to be a Republican deserter. While Kemp had doubts about the man's story, he decided to try to save him from certain summary execution. Kemp made small talk with the prisoner as he appealed to one superior officer after another to spare the Irishman's life, eventually making his way to a high-ranking colonel. Passionately explaining the prisoner's claims and confidently adding his own plea for the man's life, Kemp received a curt answer.

"Just take him away and shoot him."

There was nothing Kemp could do, and as two escorts trailed behind to ensure he carried out the order, he felt sickening dread and guilt. "I've got to shoot you!" Kemp stammered to his prisoner. "Oh, my God!" gasped the Irishman. Then, realizing Kemp had done all he could, and that the situation would have been the same had their positions been reversed, the man held out his hand and said a simple thank-you. "God bless you!" replied Kemp. And with that he stepped back and ordered his escorts to shoot the Irishman, forever ashamed of his role in the execution.

Kemp's sojourn in Spain soon came to an abrupt end. In July 1938 an exploding mortar round mangled his hands and nearly tore off his jaw, wounding him so grievously that his fellow legionnaires considered leaving him untreated, as they didn't expect him to live more than a few



Tasked with supporting anti-German resistance across the occupied regions of Europe, Kemp and his fellow SOE operatives supplied the various movements with demolition explosives, weapons and even fake feet, intended to be worn over shoes to confuse German patrols.



hours. But Kemp defied their expectations, surviving several surgeries and eventually recovering enough strength to return to England. The following July, a few months after Francisco Franco's Nationalist forces had wrested control of Spain, Kemp returned to apply for a discharge from the legion. There he met Franco face to face, politely listening as the victorious *caudillo* spoke of the dangers posed by the Soviet Union and how Britain would have to take the lead in the fight against communism in the years to come. When the time came for Kemp to leave, Franco asked Kemp what he'd do now the war was over.

"Join the British army for this coming war," Kemp responded, aware of the dangers posed by both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.

Franco smiled. "I don't think there will be a war."

Not for Spain, but Kemp's war had only just begun.

September 1939 saw Hitler invade Poland, Britain declare war on Germany and Kemp's uncle lecture him on how the British army should let him wear his Spanish decorations. A more pressing concern for Kemp was whether he'd be allowed to fight at all. Initially rejected for service by a medical board due to his injuries, he turned to military connections, which led to his recruitment by a mysterious organization he later recalled "seemed to have no name."

The covert agency was MI(R)—the Military Intelligence (Research) department of the British War Office. A forerunner of the SOE, MI(R) was a consolidation of various military initiatives directed toward unconventional warfare. The organization gained importance in the wake of the 1940 German invasion of Norway, when partisan operations came into favor as a way to combat the Nazis. As the Germans rolled across France, Kemp and fellow commandos were setting up one of the early SOE training courses in England. And by February 1941 Kemp's superiors had promised him an assignment, with the forewarning, "Hardship shall be your mistress, danger your constant companion."

The location was familiar—Spain, which British intelligence claimed Hitler was primed to invade. But the only dangers Kemp confronted were bar fights in Gibraltar and a depth-charge attack from a British destroyer that mistook the Royal Navy submarine transporting him for a German U-boat. As 1941 rolled on, and the German invasion of Russia convinced the British a Spanish invasion was not imminent, Kemp returned to London. There he met Major Gus March-Phillipps, head of a British commando unit, a man Kemp thought "combined the idealism of a Crusader with the severity of a professional soldier." With his deputy, Captain Geoffrey Appleyard, March-Phillipps devised a plan to stage cross-channel raids on German signal and observation posts. While small in scale, these raids would yield prisoners for interrogation and also keep the Germans off balance along the entire occupied coast of Europe, hopefully forcing them to redeploy units from other theaters.

In Kemp's first operation with the team March-Phillipps led a dozen commandos in a nighttime raid on a German-occupied lighthouse on the Casquets rocks, just northwest of Alderney in the Channel Islands. Kemp vividly described the action in his 1958 memoir, *No Colours or Crest*, relating how the commandos, having slipped silently ashore from their rubber boat, caught the seven-man enemy garrison "with their pants down—or rather, with their pajamas on." Kemp, however, was injured when a fellow commando's knife accidentally pierced his thigh. It proved a fortunate wound, as he was not with the team 10 days later when it met disaster during a raid on the Normandy coast of occupied France. Soon after March-Phillipps and his men dragged their boat ashore, a German patrol discovered the commandos and bracketed them with machine gun fire and grenades. The major and two others were killed, the others all ultimately captured.

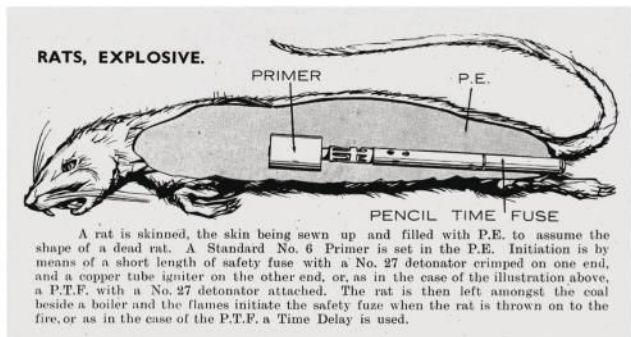
Kemp had little time to mourn. Two months later he led a nine-man team on a nighttime attack on a German signal station at Point de Plouézec on the Brittany coast. His commander specifically instructed him to avoid casualties: "Remember, Peter, I don't want any Foreign Legion stuff on this party!"

As it turned out, the raid would need plenty of that "stuff." After discovering mines, barbed wire and sentries guarding the position, Kemp realized the only way to take the station would be by frontal attack. Splitting his men into three groups, he led one squad and nearly managed to sneak into position to launch the attack.

Nearly.

As one of the commandos thumbed a grenade, the two enemy sentries on duty heard the metallic click and realized the threat. Before the Germans could react, however, the grenade detonated with a deafening blast, the sentries dropped, screaming in agony, and the commandos rushed the guardhouse with Thompson submachine guns blazing. A lone German fired wildly as they approached, but a quick gun burst from Kemp and another man knocked him down. The commandos killed another German foolish enough to rush into their path, but just as Kemp had rallied his men at the enemy position, the German garrison came to life. Machine gun fire poured out of adjacent buildings, and Kemp, realizing his team faced more than a dozen enemy troops, ordered a retreat. After running headlong through a posted minefield, the commandos scrambled down a cliff, tumbled into their assault craft and paddled safely back to their waiting motor torpedo boat just as a German flare turned the darkness into daylight.

With no prisoners to show for his raid, Kemp composed his after-action report feeling like a defeated man. Unknown to him at the time, however, then Major Appleyard—who had succeeded March-Phillipps as unit commander—included the report in a briefing to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. According to Appleyard, Churchill blurted an enthusiastic one-word response: "Good!"



Kemp's attack on the Brittany coast was the last small-scale raid the SOE undertook in France. His unit disbanded in early 1943, and once again he found himself as a commando without a command. That changed in the summer of 1943 when he volunteered for service in Albania.


His Balkan mission got off to a rocky start. During the parachute insertion Kemp, while complacently admiring "the soothing, pastoral scene" on his descent, missed the drop zone and suffered a concussion. Once he'd regained his senses, he met with William McLean and David Smiley, the British liaison officers who ran the mission in-country. They did not have welcome news. Albania, like much of the Balkans, may have been under Axis occupation, but that hadn't kept its various political, ethnic and religious factions from infighting, often violently.

Over the next several months Kemp found partisans in the communist National Liberation Movement (abbreviated LNC in Albanian) reluctant to ambush weaker German and Italian columns yet all too willing to battle their countrymen in the rightist National Front. On one occasion Kemp noted that an LNC brigade commander leading 800 fighters refused to attack a platoon of 20 Germans—ostensibly for fear of casualties. Only years later did Kemp learn the commander had refused to fight that day because he was preserving his force for the much larger civil war to follow (the man was Mehmet Shehu, Albania's communist premier from 1954 to 1981). On more than one occasion Kemp was forced to bargain with Shehu and Enver Hoxha, the immediate postwar communist dictator of Albania.

Kemp's work in Albania—training peasants to become guerrillas, coordinating ambushes and battalion-sized operations, taking reports and mediating disputes between rival warlords—was very much that of a modern-day special forces adviser. The partisan negotiations often felt like a losing battle. The fluid game of alliance and backstabbing spiraled even further out of control in the wake of Italy's September 1943 surrender and the resultant influx of Italian soldiers into the ranks of the various anti-Nazi groups. Yet Kemp took on such challenges daily in rugged backcountry conditions. Buoyed by airdrops from Cairo and hospitality wherever he could find it, he ranged between Albania and Kosovo throughout the summer and fall of 1943.

In so doing, he had many close calls with the Germans, who aggressively occupied Albania in September, helped in part by National Front supporters who feared a communist takeover. On one occasion north of Peshkopi, a German contingent attacked the house in which Kemp was staying.

Among the tools of the trade available to Kemp, his colleagues and their resistance allies were, from top left, the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife; booby-trapped explosive rats; radios made to fit in luggage for both concealment and mobility; and the subminiature Minox 9.5 mm spy camera, designed in 1936 by Walter Zapp.



After firing his pistol at oncoming infantrymen and screaming at his radio operator to abandon their bulky wireless set, Kemp fled into the Kosovo backcountry just as a storm rolled in. The combination of the burning houses, pillars of smoke and lightning from the “somber blackness of the sky” was a scene he’d never forget.

Kemp’s attempts to win the goodwill of Albania’s multiple ethnic and political factions ultimately drew the ire of the communist partisans, who accused him of being a “traitor” and protested to the British government. Soon ordered to cease his efforts in Kosovo, Kemp hiked out to the SOE headquarters in Montenegro in February 1944. He forever regretted his role in helping to arm a future satellite of the Soviet Union.

After a couple of months in Montenegro, Kemp returned to England, too late to participate in ongoing SOE operations toward D-Day. He wasn’t too late to hear word of the impending Warsaw Uprising, though, and eagerly joined a liaison team about to parachute into Poland as advisers. Once again, however, communist politics overrode British plans, and his team was ordered to stand down for fear they’d be fighting alongside “collaborators” and “fascists.” Left with little outside support, the Polish Home Army fell to the Germans in less than nine weeks while the Soviet Red Army watched from the east bank of the Vistula and did nothing.

Not until October 1944—too late to save Warsaw—did the SOE secure political approval to drop teams into Poland. The Home Army fighters who greeted Kemp on a snowy night after Christmas were by then a meager force just trying to survive. The British operative had suffered another parachuting mishap, this time badly injuring his knee on landing. Kemp’s spirits remained up, however, as his Polish hosts shared nothing of the backstabbing nature of the Balkan partisans. On New Year’s Eve they sang together and drained numerous bottles of vodka in celebratory toasts to Poland and Britain and the “damnation of our common enemies.”

As the *Wehrmacht* in Poland disintegrated in the winter of 1944–45, just who constituted “the enemy” was no longer as clear as it once was. Aside from a few brushes with German patrols and one near-miss when a Panther tank ambushed a group of resistance fighters, Kemp was able to avoid major action against the Nazis through mid-January. But fear was pervasive, as the uncertainty of the Red Army occupation weighed heavily on local communities. Kemp and his team received one last set of instructions as Soviet units closed in on the nearby village of Wlynice: *Hand yourselves over to the Russians.*

They did just that, and at first everything proceeded smoothly. The Russian soldiers invited themselves to a local residence of note, and aside from consuming more than their share of vodka and speaking rehearsed lines about respecting Poland’s borders, they caused no great trouble. That all

changed on January 18 when a Red Army major general—more likely a member of the Soviet secret police—accused the British operatives of being German spies, disarmed Kemp and his team and sent them to a local estate under armed guard. There Kemp watched as the Russians confiscated the animals and belongings of the landowner and physically abused the family living there. The Russians made no pretext of their intentions. “When we’ve beaten the Germans,” one captain bluntly told Kemp, “we’re going on to fight the British.”

Kemp’s captivity took a steep downturn when the Russians transported him and three other commandos east to Czestochowa and imprisoned them at gunpoint. Inside their tiny cell the commandos passed the time playing bridge while surviving on swallows of dirty water and two pieces of stale rye bread a day. Straw-filled mattresses “alive with vermin” were included in their accommodations.

On February 12 the Russians flew Kemp and the others to Kiev. A few days later they arrived in Moscow, feeling the “dregs of despair” as their captors drove them past Lubyanka Prison. Their despair turned to relief within a few hours when the British mission secured their release, although the Russians provided neither an apology nor an adequate explanation for their detention. On his return to England he surmised it may have had to do with the Yalta Conference and the question of postwar Poland, on which the Russians had designs. The episode served as another reminder of the perils of communism, which had spurred Kemp to war a decade before.

War’s end did little to slow Kemp. He remained active in world events amid the unfolding drama of the Cold War. Months after his release in Moscow he parachuted into Siam (present-day Thailand) to deliver arms, food and medical supplies to the French in their war against both the Japanese and communist Viet Minh. A decade later, despite having retired from the British army, he found his way to Hungary as a reporter during the 1956 uprising. Before his death in London in 1993 Kemp traveled to hot spots in Eastern Europe, Africa, Central and South America, and Southeast Asia, even seeing sporadic action during the Vietnam War.

Yet his enduring legacy remains in Europe, specifically his integral role in helping resistance movements across the continent battle oppression. Indeed, when one examines the life of Peter Kemp, the question is not so much where he did fight but rather where his idealistic spirit and tireless service did *not* take him. **MH**

Adam Nettina is a freelance writer and editor and frequent contributor to Military History. For further reading he recommends William Mackenzie’s The Secret History of SOE: The Special Operations Executive, 1940–1945, and Peter Kemp’s Mine Were of Trouble, No Colours or Crest and The Thorns of Memory.



The SOE developed and used a variety of weapons, including (clockwise from top left) knuckledusters, the Welgun (which Kemp carried into Albania), the Thompson submachine gun and the Welrod suppressed pistol. Disguise kits, far left, were of dubious value.



Posing here in Albania with fellow British officers and fellow resistance members, Kemp later endured Soviet imprisonment but survived the war. The onetime SOE agent turned reporter died in London at age 80 in 1993.