



OPERATION NECK

14 AUGUST 1943

Spy, SOE agent, and the first British operative to land on Italian soil during WWII, Dick Mallaby's real wartime experiences resemble a Hollywood thriller. In his recently published book, *An Englishman Abroad*, **Gianluca Barneschi** recounts Mallaby's incredible story. The following extract from the book details Mallaby's preparations before inserting into Italy

Dick Mallaby was a perfect candidate for SOE. Besides being young, reckless, sporty and multilingual, in the course of his military career he had also qualified as a paratrooper and was a skilled wireless operator. And he had grown up in one of the countries which Britain was now fighting.

While the Italian state security services had placed Dick Mallaby and his family under surveillance from the outbreak of war, in Britain, Special Operations Executive had not immediately spotted his potential.

It is fair to say that the trump card on Mallaby's CV – the fact that he had lived in Italy for a long time, and had a perfect knowledge of its language, customs, transport network and geography – was not immediately relevant, given that, apart from Allied bombing raids, in the opening years of the war events were played out far from the Italian peninsula. However, from the point of its creation SOE had attempted to carry out missions in Italy, and, even at the highest level, it was wrongly believed that beneficial subversive and guerrilla activities could be stirred up in Mussolini's homeland.

However, at the end of 1941, in the wake of events in Africa, the theoretical number of Italians available for missions against their homeland increased, as did the need for Italian-speaking Brits to run them. So, the military situation became more favourable for someone with Dick Mallaby's skills.

Dick Mallaby, as already noted, officially joined SOE on 15 January 1942 as an escort officer, translator and interpreter. Having completed his training, he was sent to Suez to work with a group of Italian volunteers, including both prisoners of war and civilian

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internees. Mallaby was tasked with escorting the most promising volunteers to Haifa, Palestine. Whilst there, he took the opportunity to take parachute and radio-telegraphy courses at SOE's Mount Carmel training camp. But something much more interesting was beginning to take shape.

During the first months of 1942, SOE had planned to set up a radio in Italy, and it was decided that the Trieste area, a strategically important part of enemy territory, would be the ideal location. SOE's Cairo headquarters conceived a special operation (codenamed Pallinode) aimed at infiltrating an agent to make good use of this device, and from October 1942 began to train Italian volunteers for such a mission.

It was a risky operation even by SOE standards, considering its use of an Italian on a mission against his own country, against standard operational norms.

Efforts focused on Bruno Luzzi, a 30-year-old Tuscan from a moderately socialist family, recruited in 1941 by SOE in Addis Ababa, where he had been working for the past six years in

aviation. Luzzi was given the codename Kelly (or D/E 42).

In November 1942, Kelly learned the details of his mission and was placed in the hands of Dick Mallaby for specialised advanced training, which took place in Haifa and Cairo. The plan was for Kelly to reach Trieste with the help of SOE's Slovenian branch, by first parachuting into Yugoslavia and then boarding a merchant ship.

Once in Trieste, Kelly was to hook up two local agents working for SOE (codenamed PSI and agent 900) and keep each in contact with SOE by means of a radio (sent from London via Bern, Switzerland), in order to communicate operational needs, agree details of subsequent missions and provide all sorts of useful information.

Agent 900 was in fact Eligio Klein (alias Almerigotti, alias Giusto), an Italian double agent from Trieste whom the Servizio Informazioni Militare had already turned with great success and without arousing British suspicions.

According to John McCaffery, SOE's head of Bern from February 1941 who also managed Italian affairs, Klein was a “first-class agent on which everything could be waged”, given that “we will never have a more able man in our pay”.

Klein claimed to be Jewish, a fact that should have raised British suspicions given the race laws in force in Italy, and had passed himself off as a former army officer who headed an anti-fascist organisation called Comitato d'azione (Action Committee), comprising 1,500 members. Despite the clumsiness of all this, Klein was blindly trusted by SOE; ignoring basic precaution, he was even put in touch with other agents operating in Italy.

A mugshot of Dick Mallaby, used with kind permission from the Mallaby family



Below: One of the last photographs of Dick Mallaby, used with kind permission from the Mallaby family



Cesare Amè, head of SIM until 18 August 1943, describes the operation in his book *Guerra segreta in Italia (Secret War In Italy)*, "Every week or so the British sent a suitcase to Italy containing 30-40kg of various sabotage materials which, through our agents, regularly fell into our hands ... It was necessary for the agents to demonstrate the use made of the material. SIM carried out a detailed study of all unrelated incidents of and facts related to sabotage that took place in Italy, in all their variations, to appropriately inform the agents so that they could transmit the results to the British as evidence of their alleged work."

"From October 1942, sabotage material intended for the network of agents, which in the meantime had spread to Southern Italy and the Italian islands, was delivered in c.150kg bidons which British submarines deposited at certain points on the Tyrrhenian coast or was parachuted onto lakes Viverone, Lesina, Varano. Since the choice of location, day, time etc had previously been agreed, the material was picked up by SIM's elements, who were aware of everything."

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Agent 900 was considered a fundamental element within SOE's Italian organisation, so much so that he received funds worth millions of lire and from December 1942 was in possession of a radio. It also meant that his purported exploits were highlighted among SOE's major successes, and even included in reports sent to Churchill himself (who was delicately made aware of the subsequent discoveries).

Among the materiel that was intercepted by the Italians in those years was a packet of suicide pills that they promptly replaced with harmless substitutes, in order to exploit the possibility of interrogating anyone considering such a macabre shortcut, as well as to develop an antidote.

Klein's true role was discovered by the British only in November 1943, when this serious infiltration was revealed by SIM personnel who had begun to collaborate with the Allies in southern Italy.

Thus a dismayed and terrified SOE realised that most of McCaffery's most important agents were working for SIM (and initially also for the Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo – OVRA – the Organisation for Vigilance and Repression of Anti-Fascism, the Fascist intelligence organisation) and also that all the safe places indicated by agent 900 within Italy were run by SIM itself.

Attempts were made to gloss over this embarrassing affair, above all towards the political-military leadership. That was successful and became the official line in post-war authoritative accounts and works about SOE, generating erroneous but persistent reports and statements.

In fact, in 1945, when the unmasked Klein was questioned, the resulting report tried to portray him as a skilled and keen double agent actually working for the British. This version

Dick Mallaby poses with some Italian soldiers in Monopoli, in 1944. Used with kind permission from the Mallaby family



obliterated the fact that even the person who acted as a courier and link between McCaffery and Klein – Elio Andreoli – was a SIM agent, who not only had the opportunity to intercept all the shipments of money and materiel, but also to verify the correspondence and evaluate the behaviour of Klein. The cross examination of British, American and Italian secret papers reveals that SIM agents, shrewdly, did not trust Klein as much as the British.

It is no wonder that the Italian secret services were the only functional apparatus of the Kingdom of Italy to receive consistent praise and attestations of superior skills from the British military and historians.

William Deakin (who, besides being a friend and 'literary assistant' to Churchill during the war, was an SOE agent prior to dedicating himself to the writing of history) praised the Italians as Allied intelligence's "most brilliant professional opponent operating in any European country".

Churchill himself on several occasions expressed the belief that SIM formed the most efficient part of the Italian armed forces, even stating that "SIM did not lose the war". Erwin Rommel confided to a SIM agent that he

trusted the Italian information services more than the German ones, an opinion based on the amount of strategic and secret information given to him, which proved enormously useful for his initial successes in North Africa.

It has taken until the 21st century for a more critical approach to finally be offered, with Roderick Bailey correctly stating "the Second World War was not the heyday of British secret service vetting". In no case was this more obvious than in McCaffery's blind faith in agent 900, a faith so extreme that it was not shaken even when he was informed by other sources that agent 900's network was a creation of SIM.

Returning to Pallinode, a detailed picture of its continual, drawn-out deferments and operational modifications emerges from secret documents in the British and American archives. The first documentary evidence, dated 8 August 1942, reveals that SOE's Cairo branch was informed that the planned operation was to deliver an agent (possibly an Italian) into north-west Yugoslavia, who was then to be taken into northern Italy. Three days later, in reply to this, it was pointed out that the usefulness of an agent without a radio was very limited.

As a consequence, the Bern station became involved, both to guarantee safe houses through the groups operating in Trieste, and to arrange the dispatch of a radio.

The response from Bern was positive and SOE's leadership speeded up preparations, giving notice on 24 August that the operation was in "an advanced state of planning". However, almost a year passed between planning and execution.

A top-secret message dated 30 September stated that a cryptographic code plan called Maraschino had been set up for the mission, while on 7 October the Bern station announced that the safe house in Trieste was Flat B on the third floor of No. 14 Via Diaz, belonging to Mrs Maria Pitacco (the pass phrase was "I am the friend of Mr Remo Dussi, who made arrangements for the room with you").

On 16 October, Cairo reported that agent Kelly could not enter action before 19 November, with the prior consent of the 'welcoming committee' in Yugoslavia; the communications of that time reveal there were also major problems with the required false papers.



A Special Operations Executive radio hidden within a suitcase – these radios were key to SOE missions

Four days later, a message from London expressed satisfaction that Kelly had not “gone off”, given that “this would have been particularly frustrating since we set up the Trieste base – something that was not easy to do – and our reputation among our people in Italy would have suffered if we had not been able to do our part of the job”.

From this long message it emerges that agent Kelly was meant to keep a low profile initially, avoiding any risks, transmitting messages for only a few hours a week and seeking to improve clandestine links to and from Yugoslavia. The note ended by pointing out that via the Bern station, agent 900 (the ‘head of the Italian group’) was asked to assist Kelly. Thus, Italian counterespionage became aware of the Pallinode operation almost immediately, thanks to the engagement of agent 900’s services.

According to a specific memorandum, Pallinode’s objectives were to assist the groups with which SOE was interacting in northern Italy with communications, guerrilla strategies and sabotage. In addition, the agent was to carefully monitor these groups’

“THERE IS NO BETTER FIGHTER THAN AN ITALIAN, IF HE HAS FAITH IN THE CAUSE FOR WHICH HE IS FIGHTING”

activities, without arousing suspicion. With regard to transmissions, the agent should proceed without too much involvement from local groups, making sure that information was always carefully chosen, and giving priority to that of a political and military nature. They should also execute false transmissions as a precaution, especially where the duration of the broadcast had gone on too long.

Although branch work focused on such security details, the whole operation was doomed from the outset because of SIM’s successful infiltration of SOE. This is confirmed by the confidential directives dated 22 October 1942, in which it is clear that SOE’s leadership placed complete reliance, without reservation on agent

900’s group, to whom the entire management of the mission and of the agent was delegated following his arrival in Trieste.

It was pointed out to Kelly that his security depended on the protection of agent 900’s group, which was, “doing useful work and expanding. With a W/T man to maintain contact with us they should go still ahead. There will come the time when we may need to take control over what is done there, and it would be one of Kelly’s jobs to assist in the reception of additional agents. His future usefulness will depend almost entirely on his ability to establish himself well in the confidence of 900 and prove his ability. 900 has an affiliated group at Venice (our own name for this group [is] ‘The Cubs’) and it is quite possible they may wish to pass Kelly on to Venice.”

In the following days, the relevant departments worked hard to produce the necessary false documents and to improve the cryptographic package and the supply of Italian currency. However, there were concerns about delays in organising the Yugoslav assets to provide the agent’s reception, leading to the prospect of using submarines stationed in Malta. The mission start date was postponed to January, which added the further complication of the looming winter weather; however, another more fundamental complication arose.

Agent Kelly had already caused a few problems and proved to be somewhat slow on the uptake. As a result, SOE’s leadership assigned him to the personal care of instructor Dick Mallaby in an effort to bring him up to an acceptable standard in vital Morse and radio-telegraphy skills.

Dick Mallaby’s name pops up for the first time in a secret dispatch of 7 November 1942, which states that the hesitant agent Kelly was to start an additional course of radio-telegraphy under Mallaby himself (who had been promoted to sergeant from 1 September).

The secret documents suggest that Mallaby was primarily a sort of guardian angel for Kelly (the instructions were for Kelly to be under constant watch and to have no contact with the outside world). In this period, the two of them resided between Jerusalem and Haifa.

Despite ‘Mallaby’s medicine’, the patient did not improve. Kelly, whilst a volunteer, definitively lost heart and gave up when informed of the imminent launch of his mission (especially on account of his fear of parachuting).

Commenting retrospectively on this key episode, Mallaby, expressing regret and then disappointment, consigned to posterity a phrase which, above all, reveals a great ability to identify the attitudes of Italian people, “There is no better fighter than an Italian, if he has faith in the cause for which he is fighting.”

List of the Italian Supreme Command staff moved from Rome on 9 September 1943, including a ‘Sgt Maj. Guazzini’, who is an ‘English officer of the I.S. (Lt Mallaby)’

MONKEY PLAN

CALL SIGNS

MONKEY Y H N
BASE X J K

FREQUENCIES

MONKEY 9050 A. Main Day
9630 B. Reserve Day
4525 C. Main Night
5820 D. Reserve Night

MONKEY may also use: 9350 R.
4675 L.
3979 M.
5777 P.

BASE ... 8436 E. Main Day
8630 F. Reserve Day
4645 G. Main Night
4540 H. Reserve Night

FREQUENCY CHANGE SIGNALS

X J ... "Change your transmitting frequency to"
H N ... "I am changing my transmitting frequency to ..."

SCHEDULES

At the following times G.M.T.
MONKEY ~~XXXX~~
DAILY at 1300 hrs. Transmit on A. Listen on E.
0630 hrs. " " C. " " G.

TRANSPOSITION TABLE

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0
G	T	S	A	E	Q	D	O	L	K
J	B	U	V	R	C	Z	P	M	I
H	W	Y					X	N	F

DAY INDICATING TABLE

Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.
2	5	1	3	4	7	6

ADDITIONAL CONTACTS

You write down the time required, say 1900 hrs. Add the day indicating figure for say Monday. Thus you have 19005. Then transpose into letters from any line of Transposition Table, thus: GMIKE or HNFKR or JLKFE &c.

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Images:Alamy, Mallaby Family