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CHURCHILL'S SECRET ARMY – SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE

Gilly Halcrow

The Special Operations Executive (SOE) was established by Churchill during World War 2 to conduct espionage, sabotage and reconnaissance in occupied Europe. Gilly's lecture was designed as a tribute to the brave men and women who parachuted behind enemy lines to, in Churchill's words, 'Set Europe Ablaze'. All fees donated for delivering this talk are donated to the Dougie Dalzell MC Memorial Trust. Dougie Dalzell, who was at school in Sevenoaks, was killed in Afghanistan in 2010 on his 27th birthday while commanding a platoon of the Coldstream Guards. This fund was set up in his memory to support injured soldiers.

The inspiration behind the formation of the SOE was Churchill's admiration of guerrilla warfare, something he acquired as a result of his experiences during the Boer war. The organisation, also known as "Churchill's Secret Army", was established by the Minister of Economic Warfare Hugh Dalton on the 22nd July 1940 and had its London headquarters in Baker Street. Because its activities were concealed for security purposes, few people were aware of SOE's existence and, at least initially, its formation was greeted with scepticism and even hostility by the military establishment. However, following the appointment of Major General Colin Gubbins as Director in 1943, relations improved.

SOE directly employed or controlled just over 13,000 people, about 3,200 of whom were women. People from all classes and pre-war occupations served in SOE. In most cases, the primary quality required of an agent in the field was an intimate knowledge of the country in which he or she was to operate, and especially its language. Exiled or escaped members of the armed forces of occupied countries were often sources of agents. The organisation was prepared to ignore many contemporary social conventions to further its aims. Thus it employed several known homosexuals and criminals (using them to teach such potentially useful skills as lock-picking) and was prepared to use women, not merely as support staff, but in combat roles. Those women sent into the field were trained both in unarmed combat and in the use of weapons. Most were commissioned into either the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) or the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. The scale to which women were employed was kept secret since it was considered that their use would not meet with public approval.

Agents received intensive training in a network of training establishments (often country houses) widely distributed throughout the country. Those destined to serve in the field were sent to a commando training centre at Arisaig in Scotland where they were trained in armed and unarmed combat skills by two former Inspectors in the Shanghai Municipal Police and practised sabotage techniques by pretending to blow up the West Highland Railway between Fort William and Mallaig. Agents also received training in security, demolition methods, morse code telegraphy, camouflage and parachuting.

Considerable care and ingenuity was devoted to the providing agents with appropriate clothing and equipment. The establishments responsible for experimentation and production of equipment were located in Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire and equipped agents with authentic local clothing (often acquired from refugees), personal effects such as forged identity papers and ration books and means of concealing weapons, explosives or radios. A wide range of radios, weapons, explosive devices and booby traps were developed at a former hotel outside Welwyn Garden City known as the ISRB (Inter Services Research Bureau), The output of the ISRB, with its combination of technological sophistication and an inspired zaniness

(exemplified by such lethal inventions as exploding rats), undoubtedly inspired Ian Fleming (a close associate of the SOE) to create Q, the provider of gadgetry to James Bond.

In the second half of her talk Gilly described several successful missions undertaken by the SOE. These included:

- SOE's first operation, Operation Harling, in which Colonel Eddie Myers was parachuted into Greece and with assistance of local partisans blew up the viaduct at Gorgopotamos on the railway linking Thessaloniki and the port of Piraeus. This disrupted the movement of supplies to the German Panzer Army in Africa.
- The destruction of a heavy water plant at Telemark in Norway in a series of actions undertaken by SOE-trained Norwegian commandos. This prevented the Nazi Germany from acquiring deuterium oxide which could have given it the ability to produce nuclear weapons.
- The assassination of Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich the sadistic "Protector" of Bohemia and Moravia in Prague on 27th May 1942 by Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš (Operation Anthropoid). Wounded in the attack, Heydrich died of his injuries on 4th June. Tragically his death led to a wave of merciless reprisals by SS troops, including the destruction of the village of Lidice and the murder of its inhabitants.

She then went on to give vivid accounts of the exploits of two particularly brave and resourceful agents:

- Nancy Wake, the model for Sebastian Faulk's fictional "Charlotte Gray. She became a leading figure in the Maquis groups of the French Resistance and was one of the Allies' most decorated servicewomen of the war.
- Forrest Yeo-Thomas worked in occupied France, supporting the resistance and gathering vital information as a spy from influential Nazis. In 1944, he was betrayed and captured and was subjected to brutal torture by the Gestapo, including repeated submersion in ice-cold water and innumerable beatings. After several escape attempts he was sent to Buchenwald concentration camp and after an almost unbelievable sequence of ordeals, including being deliberately infected with typhoid to effect a change of identity, he eventually reached Allied lines in April 1945.

In concluding Gilly paid tribute to all other the agents - too numerous to mention individually – who willingly and selflessly undertook highly perilous missions and, in so doing helped to shorten the war significantly. Tragically some, such as Violette Szabo, were betrayed and suffered torture and death at the hands of the Gestapo. After the war, the SOE was officially dissolved on 15 January 1946.

As a moving postscript Gilly revealed why she had been inspired to research and prepare this talk. Her father, Colonel Ernest van Maurik, was an SOE veteran. His distinguished career included a period as an instructor at Arisaig (during which he trained those that would undertake the assassination of Heydrich) and a series of missions in Malta and occupied France. In 1944 he was parachuted into France to visit Maquis camps and successfully organised the airdrops of stores, guns, explosives, medicines and clothing which they had been struggling to obtain. On one occasion he was taking two Russian NKVD agents to London in a car driven by a young woman in FANY. To his irritation the car kept breaking down and the two had a heated argument. This young woman was destined to become his wife and Gilly's mother. Altogether, an enthralling talk.

Arthur Dewar