

Bob Maloubier, SOE agent - obituary

French agent recruited into the Special Operations Executive whose daring missions included blowing up a German supply vessel and a factory



Bob Maloubier, who has died aged 92, was one of the last surviving French agents of the Special Operations Executive; twice parachuted into his native land, he carried out a series of daring sabotage missions with fellow agents including Violette Szabo, whom he attempted to rescue from the hands of the Gestapo. After the war he was a founder member of France's special forces.

Robert Maloubier (always known as Bobby, or Bob) was born on February 2 1923 in Neuilly, on the outskirts of Paris. His father, Eugène, and mother, Henriette, were both former teachers who had lived and worked around the world, notably in America and England. Languages were a family gift, and later in life Bob Maloubier would speak English almost without accent.

A keen sportsman, Eugène Maloubier encouraged Bob and his elder brother Jacques to pursue all forms of athletic activity, notably cycling. With the German invasion Jacques was called up into the artillery. Bob's father, then working as a press attaché for a car manufacturer, was offered two places by his company in a vehicle fleeing Paris. Bob's mother refused to leave her son behind, but the young man convinced her that he would be able to cycle out of the city quicker than they could drive. Several days later, after 400 miles, the family was reunited at Saintes, north of Bordeaux. There his father gave Bob 1,250 francs, half of what he had

managed to save, and told him to flee to England and take up arms against the Germans from there.

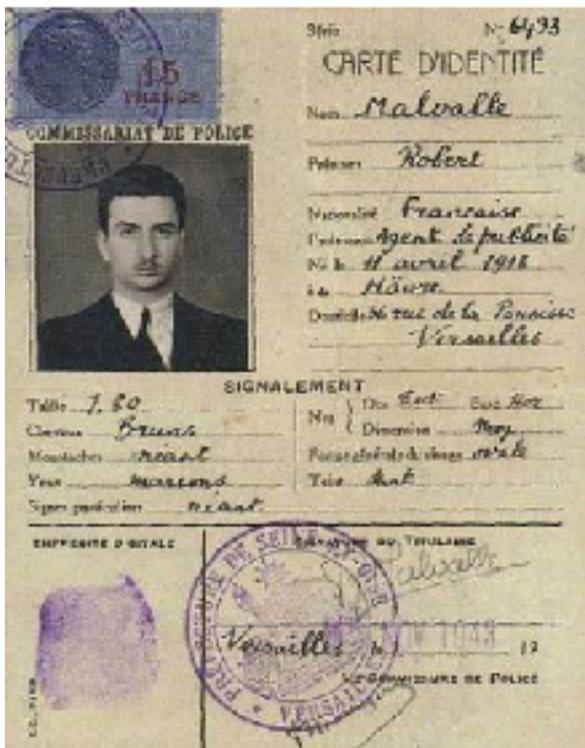
Escape proved impossible to arrange, however, so in February 1941 Bob Maloubier joined the new army that Berlin had permitted the Vichy government to form. He was determined to be a pilot and

fly to freedom, but was posted instead to ground duties in Tunisia. Only with the Allied victory in North Africa was he finally able to cross the lines. There he was introduced to an SOE officer, Jacques Vaillant de Guéllis, who recruited him into the organisation. From Algiers he was shipped, via Gibraltar, to Britain.

He arrived in London in early 1943, and was introduced to the head of SOE F Section, Maurice Buckmaster, before being sent to Wanborough Manor, near Guildford, which had been requisitioned by the organisation. “Special Training School 5”, as Wanborough was known, was designed to weed out candidates not up to the job of being parachuted behind enemy lines. Apart from training in unarmed combat, Maloubier learned to use small arms and explosives and to make radio transmissions. There were also five practice parachute drops.

At midnight one night in mid-August 1943, Maloubier was dropped into Normandy, 20 miles south of Rouen, where he became part of the Salesman network. His principal work was to train locals and receive supply drops; his cover was that he was a publicity agent called Mollier, originally from Marseille (one of several aliases), now working the region between Paris and Rouen. Passing from place to place by bicycle, staying only a night or at most a few days in farms and barns, Maloubier taught recruits how to use pistols, machine guns, grenades and explosives.

He was equipped with numerous false papers, created in London. But some were quickly shown to be useless; the paper was too thin, the colour was wrong – one was even spotted as a fake by a shopkeeper. Replacements, crafted by Resistance contacts, were of a much higher quality. Fortunately, according to Maloubier, French police who carried out the vast majority of checks were friendly and their searches perfunctory. At one checkpoint Maloubier was asked: “You don’t have a 7.5mm gun in that bag do you?” Maloubier replied that he did not, as his gun was of another calibre, and was waved through.



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Maloubier's false identity card from 1943

Lieutenant Bob Maloubier (right) and his comrade Henri Silol in Piccadilly in 1945

Security was much tighter, however, around the bridges of Rouen, where a 700-tonne supply vessel was moored. The boat, freshly painted after an expensive refit, had proved a thorn in the side of the British Navy, as it allowed U-boats to stay far out at sea without returning for fuel and food to inshore waters, where they were threatened by RAF attack.

The Kriegsmarine, delighted with the refit, threw a party to celebrate. Unknown to them, however, one of Maloubier's men, Hugues Paccaud, had worked on the refit. Maloubier had given him a three-kilogram explosive charge, and shortly after the German revels ended that night, the U-boat supply vessel was blown up and sank. "I came down to have a look at the damage the next day," said Maloubier. "People were joking: 'Well these Germans really are clever. Now they have underwater ships to resupply their submarines.'"

At Déville-lès-Rouen that autumn, Maloubier's crew attacked a factory producing landing gear for the German Focke-Wulf 190 fighter. "We knew that there was a gardien who could get us into the factory through his lodgings," said Maloubier. Unfortunately the gardien was absent at the time of the attack. His wife refused to let Maloubier's team in, so Maloubier adopted his best German accent and ordered her to open up. Once inside, they were guided to the heart of the factory by willing French workers. Having set their charges and made their escape, the sabotage team, numbering seven or eight, returned to the farm of another conspirator, where Maloubier triggered a celebratory feast by putting a bullet through the head of a cow.

Shortly after he had knocked out an electricity substation, on December 20 1943 he was arrested by a German patrol while on a motorcycle after curfew. None of the Germans could ride the motorbike, however, so Maloubier was forced to ride it to the German headquarters with a guard riding pillion pointing a gun at his back. When they arrived, Maloubier threw his passenger to the ground and rode off, only to be hit in the ensuing gunfire.

Abandoning the bike, he made a run for it and collapsed in a freezing stream, regaining consciousness to find that the search for him had been called off. He managed to make it to a safe house in Rouen where he was tended to by Salesman's aged doctor, who visited nightly and issued a few pills to fight any infection. Maloubier did not know, however, that the doctor considered his case desperate, and the network was making plans to dispose discreetly of his body when he died. One woman was asked to stitch two potato sacks together in which the corpse would be concealed, and load it with chains so that it could be dumped in the Seine.

But after eight days Maloubier was still alive. Two years after the war, he was accosted by a woman near Rouen. "You must be Bob," she said, according to Maloubier. "My dear Madame, I don't think we know each other," he replied. "On the contrary, I know you very well," she countered. "I was meant to bury you."

He was evacuated to London to complete his recovery in February 1944 – just before, in March that year, Salesman was penetrated and several of its members were arrested, disrupting its plans for pre-D-Day sabotage operations. Maloubier was parachuted back into France, this time to the Limousin, 24 hours after D-Day, to assist the Maquis.

He was accompanied on the mission by Charles Staunton, the former head of the Salesman network, and Violette Szabo. But just days after their arrival Szabo was captured and imprisoned in Limoges.

Staunton and Maloubier travelled to Limoges to plan a rescue operation, scheduled for June 16. Early that morning, however, Szabo was transferred to Paris. She was killed in Ravensbruck in February 1945.

In the Limousin, Maloubier's duties involved organising and receiving supply drops from the air; at the end of June a flotilla of Flying Fortresses made one of the biggest drops of the war. Almost 1,000 containers of arms, fuel, food and banknotes helped to turn local fighters into a highly effective force. As the German grip on Limoges crumbled, Maloubier prevented reinforcements arriving by blowing up roads and bridges and was among the first forces to liberate the city. Later, in Paris, he was reunited with Buckmaster and with his family

As SOE F Section was wound up, Maloubier was transferred to the French intelligence service, known cryptically as the Direction général des études et recherches, before signing up for more behind-the-lines operations with Force 136, SOE's wing in south-east Asia. He returned to France in August 1946.

After the war he joined France's counter-intelligence service, the SDECE, where, in 1952, he co-founded its special forces unit of combat divers. He served for 15 years, in Indo-China but largely in Africa, as France's colonial empire crumbled. Among many operations, he claimed to have recruited and trained assassination teams who – in exchange for a French passport – were willing to eliminate arms traffickers supplying rebels in Algeria or the Far East. "I never executed anyone myself," he insisted later.

Ordered to organise a bombing in central Cairo during the Suez crisis, Maloubier found himself alone with the explosive after the man he had recruited for the job fled. "The problem was I had no idea how long was left before it was due to go off," he said later. "I had to drive out of Cairo, through the traffic, and bury it in the desert. It went off as I returned to the car."

Maloubier left the secret services in 1957 to work in Gabon, where he eventually trained the president's personal guard. Afterwards he did security work for oil companies in Nigeria and Liberia.



Bob Maloubier in 2011 at his home in Houilles, north of Paris (AFP/GETTY)

He retired at the age of 63, settling down to produce several books, written in Boy's Own style. These included two volumes of memoirs, *Agent Secret de Churchill* (2011) and *L'Espion aux Pieds Palmés* (2013). Hugely mustachioed, he was never shy of recounting his past in colourful terms.

He was awarded the DSO in 1945.

Bob Maloubier was married several times and had three children. His final marriage was to a woman 42 years younger than himself. "Not that you can tell the difference," he insisted.

Bob Maloubier, born February 2 1923, died April 20 2015