

**THE DAILY TELEGRAPH – OBITUARIES –  
Monday 28th November 2005**

**JACQUES POIRIER**

French Resistance leader who was trained by SOE in unarmed combat, silent killing and sabotage.



Jacques Poirier, who has died aged 83, was a Resistance leader in south-west France working for the Special Operations Executive (SOE); throughout his war service his French comrades believed that he was a British officer called Lt Jack Peters.

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Born at Neuilly, near Paris, on July 7 1922, Jacques Poirier was the son of a French air force officer and racing driver and was educated locally at the Lycée Pasteur.

When war broke out, the 17-year-old Jacques and his brother were sent to the south of the country to escape the German invaders. By 1941 he was living in Cannes, and decided to join the embryonic Resistance. He began by delivering messages and pamphlets.

The following year he made his way to England, travelling via Spain in the company of Henri Peulevé, an Englishman of Huguenot descent who had been parachuted into France by SOE. But after a difficult and dangerous journey across the Pyrenees, they were arrested in a Spanish village.

Poirier and Peulevé claimed to be escaped Allied officers who had taken part in the commando raid on Dieppe and were seeking to rejoin their units in England, but they were locked up in Figueras prison, where conditions were appalling. The two men managed to get a message to the British Embassy, which led to their being transferred to a more easy-going internment camp for officers at Jaraba, in the province of Zaragoza.

From there they were released, and Poirier travelled to Gibraltar, arriving on the Rock six months after his departure from Cannes. Due to take a seat on a flight to London via Lisbon, he had to surrender it to a general; the aircraft, which was also carrying the actor Leslie Howard, was shot down by the Germans, who believed that Churchill was on board.

On arriving safely in London, Poirier was summoned to the French section of SOE, which occupied one floor of a block of flats, Orchard Court, near Oxford Street. There he met Col Maurice Buckmaster, head of the French section, and was presented with papers in the name of Lt Jack Peters, and appointed Peulevé's second-in-command (Peulevé had also managed to get back to England).

At a commando training centre in the south of England Poirier learned to handle arms and explosives. At a further course in Inverness-shire he learned survival techniques, unarmed combat and the art of "silent killing", as well as sabotage, navigation and map-reading. He even learned how to drive a locomotive.

On one occasion, as an exercise, he and his fellow soldiers intercepted and boarded the passenger train on the Mallaig-Glasgow line, terrifying the travellers who thought momentarily that the Germans had invaded. Poirier was also trained in parachute-jumping and, finally, in clandestine security techniques - particularly how to react under interrogation.

Henri Peulevé's mission from SOE was to establish a network (codenamed "Author") in Corrèze and the Dordogne, to train teams to sabotage enemy lines of communication and arrange air drops of arms and equipment for the Resistance as a whole. Author was to form a good relationship with the Communist maquis organisation, Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP), in the Dordogne.

When Poirier was finally sent out, he was seen off at the airfield by Buckmaster, who presented him with a silver cigarette case. He was dropped in the Dordogne as planned, but landed 100 km off target; since his immediate problem was how to get to his rendezvous at the town of Brive, Poirier made his way to a local railway station, where his tradecraft momentarily deserted him as he asked for - in English - "A single to Brive, please."

Nonetheless, he arrived there safely, rendezvousing with Peulevé and also having his first meeting with André Malraux, the author of *La Condition Humaine*, who was part of the local Resistance and was soon afterwards appointed co-ordinator of the Resistance in Lot, Corrèze and Dordogne.

For a time Poirier (codenamed "Nestor" for the purposes of radio transmissions) assumed the identity of Jacques Perrier, a timber merchant. He was constantly on the move, reconnoitring landing grounds, locating arms dumps and meeting Resistance leaders. On one occasion he was asked to interview a potential recruit who turned out to be his own father.

Poirier was fortunate to be at Saint-Gervais, visiting his mother, when the Author network was penetrated and destroyed. Henri Peulevé and others were arrested; Poirier learned the news on the BBC: "Ici Londres. Message important pour Nestor. Jean [Peulevé's codename] très malade, ne retournez pas." Although tortured by the Gestapo, Peulevé divulged nothing. He was sent to Buchenwald, from where he later escaped.

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Poirier, although determined to rebuild the network, prudently went into hiding for several days. But within a fortnight Buckmaster had instructed him to establish a new network, "Digger". A British officer, Peter Lake (codenamed "Jean-Pierre"), was parachuted in as his second-in-command, along with Ralph Beauclerk ("Casimir") as radio operator.

Casimir, Poirier reported, wore horn-rimmed glasses "and looked more like an absent-minded professor than a secret agent". But he went on: "The three of us made an excellent team - in fact, we hit it off so well that André Malraux, who was sometimes tickled by our solidarity, christened us les farfelus [the madcaps]." For a short time in spring 1944 Poirier made his headquarters at Castelnaud, in La Treille-Haute, a country house overlooking the Dordogne valley.

He and Malraux liaised with the various maquis groups in south-west France, arranging for more than 80 air drops of arms and equipment. "The weeks preceding the Allied landing were exceedingly strenuous," Poirier recalled later. "I continued to criss-cross Dordogne and Corrèze by car, keeping to the minor roads. I would visit a maquis detachment or supervise one of my nocturnal air drops, then double back to La Treille-Haute to brief myself on the messages Casimir had received from London in my absence.

"I took part in attacks on the enemy and sabotage operations, often simply to show my face, because the presence of an Allied representative helped to sustain the Resistance idea in the minds of young maquisards fresh from their home, friends and villages."

Poirier was told that, when he received the radio message "the giraffe has a long neck", the Resistance was to "sabotage railway lines, destroy petrol dumps, and maximise disruption to the enemy's lines of communication. Execute well-timed guerrilla operations but avoid any large-scale action that could expose the civilian population to reprisals."

On June 4 1944 the broadcast came from London: "Important message for Nestor. The giraffe has a long neck". The maquis duly launched a series of attacks on railway lines and enemy equipment dumps in which both Poirier and Lake took part. On June 8 a huge column of German tanks and armoured cars - the Das Reich Division - set off from Montauban for the Normandy front, and the Resistance responded with hit-and-run attacks, delaying its progress by 17 days.

On July 14, 436 containers of arms were dropped at Moustoulat, as part of the wider Operation Cadillac which used seven landing sites in central and eastern France; a month later, Brive-la-Gaillarde became the first town in France to be liberated solely by the Resistance. Poirier and Lake were provided with British uniforms, dropped by parachute, for the occasion, and Poirier represented the Allies when the Germans surrendered the town.

He was awarded the DSO, and in 1992 he published a book about his wartime experiences, *The Giraffe Has a Long Neck*.

After the war Poirier joined Shell, for which he worked in Africa, Turkey, Argentina, Venezuela, Britain and Holland. He left the company in 1977, then spent two and a half years as a consultant in New York before returning to Paris, where he and a friend ran a headhunting business.

Jacques Poirier, who died on October 9, was married twice. With his first wife he had two sons and two daughters, who survive him, together with his second wife, Minouche.