

SOE's 'PROSPER' DISASTER OF 1943

SOE's F section had a large circuit, based in German-occupied Paris, codenamed 'Physician', usually known by the codename of its organizer, 'Prosper'. In late June 1943 the German secret police abruptly arrested most of its leading figures ; one of whom co-operated with the Germans after arrest and helped them search out most of the circuit's numerous arms dumps. There were several hundred more arrests, most of which led to deportation to Germany and in many cases to death. The 'affaire Prosper' made a major French press sensation in the middle nineteen-forties ; most of the blame was publicly laid on 'Prosper' himself, who never came back to clear his own name, for he was murdered in Sachsenhausen in 1945. This article, by his second son and namesake (who has no recollections of him) and by the official historian of SOE in France (who never met him), seeks to clear up what went wrong. It is based mainly on previously unused material in SOE and air ministry archives, listed below,¹ with some gaps filled in by reconnaissance by the younger Suttill on the ground, viewing sites and talking to the families of past participants.

Francis Suttill ('Prosper') had been born in Lille in 1910. His father was English, his mother French, and he spoke fluent French, though not with a perfectly French accent ; he could pass easily in France as a Belgian. Before the war he was a Lincoln's Inn barrister, and volunteered for secret work in France on the strength of his French. After SOE's usual training courses, he parachuted into France on 1/2 October 1942, leaving a wife and two small boys in England. He landed unobtrusively near La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, east of Paris, not near Vendôme as previously believed,² with J F Amps a former Chantilly stable-hand as his assistant. Amps turned out unsuitable for the work for which F had intended him, and was allowed to go quietly back to his wife. Suttill went at once to Paris, where he met his courier, Andrée Borrel ('Monique'), a Frenchwoman who had arrived by parachute (the first woman to do so) a week earlier. He was completely new to resistance ; she had had plenty of experience of it already, as courier in the now famous 'Pat' escape line which ran between Brussels and the Pyrenees. Un-happily for the new circuit, she was used to working in a group of close friends, resisters from the earliest moments of the occupation, whose standards of security did not quite match the needs of the moment or the skills of the Gestapo.

Suttill's orders have not survived the muddle into which SOE's papers, never very orderly, fell when the service was wound up in 1946.³ He and Borrel at once made a month-long tour of northern France to examine potential for forming resistance groups, and to start up such groups wherever suitable. He decided to pursue contacts in two main areas that were to remain under his own control, one in eastern Normandy under George Darling a Frenchman of English descent, and one on the middle Loire under Pierre Culioli, a former French infantry officer, also recruited on the spot. He foresaw also groups in some other areas to be handed over to other organizers, forming separate circuits in due course. The map on the facing page shows his principal known parachute dropping-grounds and several of his neighbours', with whose activities his own circuit became entangled by unforeseen circumstances, despite SOE's policy of keeping circuits as separate as possible from each other. This wide extension of his working area, together with his links with other circuits, was bound to endanger his own circuit's security, as London might have noticed.

There was so much for him to do that he was sent, unusually, two wireless operators, Gilbert Norman ('Archambaud') and Jack Agazarian ('Marcel'). Norman, son of an English business man who had worked in Paris, had been at school there and could pass for French. He dropped near Tours, a month after Suttill; Agazarian came to join him and to lighten his work load later in the year, dropping in the Seine valley upstream of Rouen. He too could pass for French. His wife Francine, who was French, arrived by Lysander near Poitiers on 17 March 1943. She was not quite robust enough for the clandestine struggle, and was withdrawn – again by Lysander – with her husband, who had fallen out with Suttill, on 16/17 June, crossing on the landing-ground Noor Inayat Khan who arrived to reinforce Suttill's by then swollen circuit.⁴

Noor Inayat was an Indian princess, descendant of Tipu Sultan by a cousin of Mary Baker Eddy's. She had spent much of her childhood in Paris, where she broadcast childrens' stories before the war, and spoke fine French with a light English accent. Her light brown skin prevented her from passing for a Parisienne. She had been a corporal wireless operator in the WAAF, and answered a routine service call for volunteers for unspecified dangerous duty.⁵ The training staff thought her unfit for service in the field, but F section was short of wireless operators and insisted on using her. She was to work with Emile Garry, recruited on the spot by Suttill to run a sub-circuit round Le Mans, and was to start with put in the charge of Professor Balachowsky the entomologist, just outside Paris.

Norman, Andrée Borrel and the Agazarians fell into the habit of meeting in the evenings, after work, at a café in Montmartre to play poker. This and other socialising was dangerous, as they had all been warned at the Beaulieu schools; they used their own judgement.

The others habitually called Norman 'Gilbert', his forename; it was also the codename of F section's air movements officer, the now notorious Henri Déricourt. He organized Hudson and Lysander pick-up operations, but had nothing to do with parachute drops, which circuit commanders organized. Confusion between the two Gilberts was quite common, as on the well-known occasion in May 1943 when a couple of Abwehr agents from Holland met the wrong Gilbert by mistake, and missed a chance to penetrate 'Physician'.⁶ In fact Déricourt was working for himself, rather than for either side in the war; there is some evidence both that he betrayed some agents to the Germans, and that he protected others. There is no evidence that he played any part in the arrests of Suttill, Norman or Borrel. But – without a word to any of his F section colleagues in France that June, not even to André Watt his own wireless operator – he showed the Germans all the mail that passed through his hands, in both directions, and they copied it. They thus secured a big advantage in interrogations, when they could quote to captured agents correspondence the agents had thought quite private with their wives in England.

Suttill had a few days in England in the late spring of 1943, coming out by Lysander on 14/15 May and parachuting back six nights later on 20/21 May,⁷ from which a legend has grown. This legend is based on something that first appeared in a novel in 1985,⁸ and was then supported under pressure by the elderly Buckmaster, once head of F section; it cannot be true. Suttill is supposed to have had an interview with Churchill, in which he was misinformed that France was about to be invaded; but in fact throughout Suttill's brief spell in England Churchill was abroad, so they cannot then have met.⁹

A further legend has grown up – *Perfide Albion* at her most devious – that Suttill's circuit was deliberately betrayed by the British to the Germans, for secret service reasons that remain impenetrable. There was no possible British interest that could be served by such a betrayal, which never took place. Not long before J H Bevan, the head of the wartime deception service, died, Foot discussed this precise point with him ; and was assured by Bevan that he did not trust SOE as secure enough for his purposes, and only used it thrice. Once, on 8/9 June 1944, was to reinforce 'Fortitude' – the grand deception that covered 'Overlord' the invasion of Normandy – by calling out all Belgian sabotage resistance.¹⁰ Once was for operation 'Animals' in Greece, which like the better-known operation 'Mincemeat' provided cover for 'Husky' the invasion of Sicily. The third case, more relevant to the present issue, was operation 'Starkey', mounted in too much of a hurry in summer 1943 to mis-persuade the Germans that an invasion of France was imminent and would take place in early September.¹¹ SOE played a minor role in 'Starkey', without perhaps realising it. France Antelme, a Mauritian major who had first reached France in January 1943, came back (with Suttill, with whom he had made friends in Paris) on a second mission in May, to organize food supplies and finances for a landing force. Suttill himself had been warned to expect more sorties by the June moon than had already reached him in the previous six months. Both men assumed that there would be a major allied landing in 1943 ; F section did not know till July that it was to be postponed to 1944. 'Starkey' was not thought a success in Whitehall, and Bevan is reported to have been 'deeply unhappy about the unintended consequences of the operation for the resistance movements'.¹²

One important segment of 'Physician' survived the disaster : its communist element. Suttill was in contact with the communists' private army in Paris, a branch of the Francs-Tireurs et Partisans (FTP), and secured some arms drops for them ; but the FTP were so secure that nobody could get in touch with them easily or quickly, and whatever arms they got, they kept well hidden. These weapons figured no doubt among the 600 small arms that their leader, Colonel Rol-Tanguy, believed he had handy when the Paris rising began in August 1944.

Two other connexions of Suttill's circuit are worth mention. He had inherited from the broken-down 'Carte' circuit, that promised wonders from the Riviera but on the sabotage front did nothing at all, Carte's secretary Germaine Tambour who lived in eastern Paris with her inseparable sister Madeleine. Germaine Tambour was Suttill's first point of contact, and the sisters' apartment was much used by his circuit. They were arrested on 22 April 1943, because of the earlier carelessness of a 'Carte' courier, and by June Suttill was deep in negotiations to buy them out from their Abwehr captors : a perilous affair.

However, this was not his undoing. Two Canadians, Pickersgill and Macalister, parachuted on 15/16 June to a reception in the Cher by Culioli, with whom they stayed for a few days while he tried to improve their false papers. They were to form a new circuit in and near Lorraine called Archdeacon. On the 21st he was driving them to the station to take a train for Paris when, in the small town of Dhuizon, they fell into a chance road control at which the Canadians were held for checking (on account of the accent of one of them). Culioli drove off, with his courier Yvonne Rudellat, and crashed his car into a wall, claiming after the war that he had meant to kill them both. Both survived, badly injured.

In the wreck of the car the Germans found the Canadians' weapons and W/T set ; worse, they found messages addressed to 'Archambaud', and worse still his address. He was living with an old school friend called Laurent, in the west end of Paris, on the corner of the Boulevard Lannes and the Avenue Henri-Martin. At the moment when the Germans raided the Laurents' flat, just after midnight on 23/24 June, Norman had spread out on the dining-table a large assortment of false documents, including the identity cards of all the principal members of the circuit.¹³ New regulations required a tiresome change to each identity card, re-setting its photograph. This gave the Germans another major advantage, Suttill's address, on which they pounced at once. Andrée Borrel was caught with Norman and the Laurents.

Suttill was out of Paris that night, visiting George Darling his leading sub-agent near Gisors. When he got back next morning to his digs in Paris, in a small hotel near the Porte St Denis, German police were waiting for him in his room and arrested him at once. An unconfirmed report says that he was interrogated continuously for three days by the Sicherheitsdienst at the Avenue Foch, without being allowed to sleep or even to sit ; emerging from this ordeal with a broken arm, but without having made any dangerous admissions. Another, more reliable, report describes Norman as assisting at the interrogation of Suttill, which lasted without interruption for several days and nights, filling in the details piece by piece, or making Suttill clarify what he wished to conceal.¹⁴ The universal rule in resistance in those days was to say nothing for at least two days, to give one's unarrested companions a chance to change addresses and identities. Suttill stuck to these rules fully, and said nothing he should not, then or later ; he was soon sent away to Berlin for further questioning at Himmler's headquarters.

Norman was more malleable, and co-operated with his captors to an extent that they were not expecting.¹⁵ Only one survivor of the circuit said that Suttill had made '*un arrangement*' ; this was Culioli, who said he was told so by Norman. The basis of this deal was that if his subordinates surrendered their arms, they might be imprisoned but would not be killed ; only the circuit's leaders would receive the death penalty. Norman himself played a full part in accompanying the raiding parties that visited a great many of the circuit's arms dumps.¹⁶

This celebrated pact, on which so many lives hung, has never appeared : not a single copy has been found in any part of the French, German or British archives, nor did anybody but Norman ever say at the time that it existed. Where is this famous document ? Why did nobody ever see it ? It is irresistible to conclude that Norman made it up, as a cover for his own co-operation with the Germans.

Much of the evidence on which historians have to rely in this sort of case is tainted. It consists mainly of interrogations of policemen, agents and sub-agents, either by their own side, to establish whether they are still trustworthy, or by their enemies, fishing for every useful scrap of information. Either way, the speakers are on the defensive ; many of them moreover had been professional liars, and retained the skills of their trade. The almost universal view of the French press, when the 'affaire Prosper' got its first hearing in 1945-6, that 'Prosper' himself was chiefly to blame for the disaster has nothing but Norman's word to support it, and Norman was a most interested party.

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¹ The following were the leading sources consulted, beyond those listed below, in the national archives, public record office, at Kew :

AIR 20/8452)
 AIR 20/8456) 138 and 161 special duty squadron, operational reports
 AIR 20/8476)
 AIR 20/8498)
 HS 6/640 on Placke
 HS 6/426 statement by Kieffer
 HS 9/11/1 on Agazarian
 HS 9/4244 on Antelme/Bricklayer
 HS 9/147/5 on Biéler/Musician
 HS 9/171/1 on Bodington
 HS 9/183 on Borrel
 HS 9/189/8 on Bougennec/Butler
 HS 9/1651 Cowburn/Tinker
 HS 9/379/8 on Culioli
 HS 9/421 on Déricourt/Farrier
 HS 9/522/5 on Flower/Monkeypuzzle
 HS 9/535/1 on Fox/Publican
 HS 9/536/1 on Frager/Donkeyman
 HS 9/701/1 on Heslop/Privet
 HS 9/839/5 on Goetz
 HS 9/911/1 on Lejeune
 HS 9/923/4 on Liewer/Salesman
 HS 9/1110/5 on Norman
 HS 9/1430/6 on Suttill/Physician
 HS 9/1487/1 on Trotobas/Farmer
 HS 9/1593/2 on Wilkinson/Privet
 HS 9/1621/4 on Worms/Juggler

² AIR 20/8452.

³ See Duncan Stuart, ‘Of historical interest only’, in Mark Seaman ed *Special Operations Executive* (Abingdon : Routledge 2006), 217ff. Like so many others, the authors are much indebted to Stuart for advice, but he bears no responsibility for any part of this paper.

⁴ These two paragraphs rest on the official history, M R D Foot, *SOE in France*, (new ed, London : Frank Cass 2004) 260-1. 275-6.

⁵ A new life of her by a fellow Indian, Shrabani Basu (Stroud : Sutton 2005) emphasises her support for Indian nationalism ; this kept the WAAF from giving her a commission, till SOE got her one.

⁶ Full account by Agazarian in Foot, op. cit., 278.

⁷ The operational record book of 161 squadron, AIR 27/956, misdates the first of these journeys ; corrected here from AIR 20/8474, the pilot’s report, supplemented by Maurice Buckmaster’s dairy, which reports Suttill’s arrival in London on 15 May (information from Buckmaster’s son Michael).

⁸ Larry Collins, *Fall from Grace* (Granada 1985).

⁹ (Sir) Martin Gilbert, *Road to Victory* (London : Heinemann 1986), 395, 427. Cp Foot, op. cit. 494, n 66.

¹⁰ See M R D Foot, *SOE in the Low Countries* (London : St Ermin’s Press 2001), 360-1.

¹¹ (Sir) Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception* (London : HMSO 1990), 75.

¹² Sir Michael Howard to F J Suttill, 5 February 2004.

¹³ Statement by Maud Laurent, 1950, F J Suttill papers. She had opened the door to the Germans (Foot, *SOE in France*, 280).

¹⁴ Deposition by Marcel Braun, 11 October 1950, archives départementales, Orléans.

¹⁵ One of his German interrogators, Ernst Vogt, wrote to Jean Overton Fuller : ‘It is unfortunate that he (Norman) had such a good memory. Most people forget a good many things genuinely. If he had said sometimes – I can’t remember – I might have believed him.’ (her *The German penetration of SOE* (London : Kimber 1975), 81.

¹⁶ Example in Foot, *SOE in France*, 272.