

Court circular

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Buckingham Palace

6th May, 2008

The Princess Royal, Patron, the Special Forces Club, and Commandant-in-Chief, First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (Princess Royal's Volunteer Corps), this afternoon attended a Memorial Ceremony for F Section at Special Operations Executive F Section Memorial, Valencay, France, and was received by Her Majesty's Ambassador to the French Republic (His Excellency Sir Peter Westmacott).

Mrs. Andrew Feilden was in attendance

The Times : 31st March 2009

Cyril Watney was recruited into the wartime Special Operations Executive (SOE) for his knowledge of French and France, having been born there, and his expertise as a radio operator acquired with the Royal Corps of Signals before being commissioned into the Middlesex Regiment in 1943.

Together with Major George Hiller, he was to be responsible for one of the most successful — and lasting — acts of industrial sabotage in France during the war.

On the night of January 7, 1944, Major George Hiller and Captain Cyril Watney were dropped by parachute to set up SOE's Footman circuit in the Lot and find out what the local French Resistance could do to assist in sabotaging the Retier factory at Figeac, east of Cahors, that was turning out variable-pitch propellers for the Luftwaffe.

One of their first contacts was a foreman at the factory who confirmed that some 300 propellers were being produced each week. Further, he had made a plan to wreck the factory — given a few fuses and explosive charges.

Hiller and Watney made up the demolitions, and by the end of January the Retier factory was out of action and remained so until the end of the war.

The pair had also been instructed to track down an elusive member of the French Resistance operating under the name of "Colonel V?ni" and known to have a large following but, as a dedicated socialist, suspected of supporting the communist element of the Resistance that was planning to seize power in France after the liberation.

V?ni was eventually located and, moving his radio from place to place in a requisitioned van to avoid detection, Watney called for airdrops of weapons to arm his followers, Hiller having extracted a guarantee that they would support de Gaulle — a promise later honoured more in the word than the deed (V?ni's group made little attempt to interfere with the move north of the 2nd SS Panzer Das Reich Division to Normandy after the Allied invasion in June.)

In July Hiller was wounded during an encounter with the enemy and taken prisoner. Watney took over command of the circuit and carried out a daring and successful action to rescue his chief, breaking through a German road block with a handful of Resistance volunteers.

After Hiller had been evacuated to a hospital under Resistance control, Watney organised an attack on a German supply column passing through the Lot. He was later awarded the Military Cross for these actions.

During Hiller's absence in hospital, he managed to hold the various Resistance groups in the vicinity together, among other ventures arranging for acts of sabotage farther south, around Toulouse, for which he was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Cyril Arthur Watney was born in 1922 in Calais where his father was engaged in the lace business. The family moved to Nottingham in the depression of the early Thirties, and

Watney went to school there before going to Cambridge to take a degree in electric and magnetic sciences.

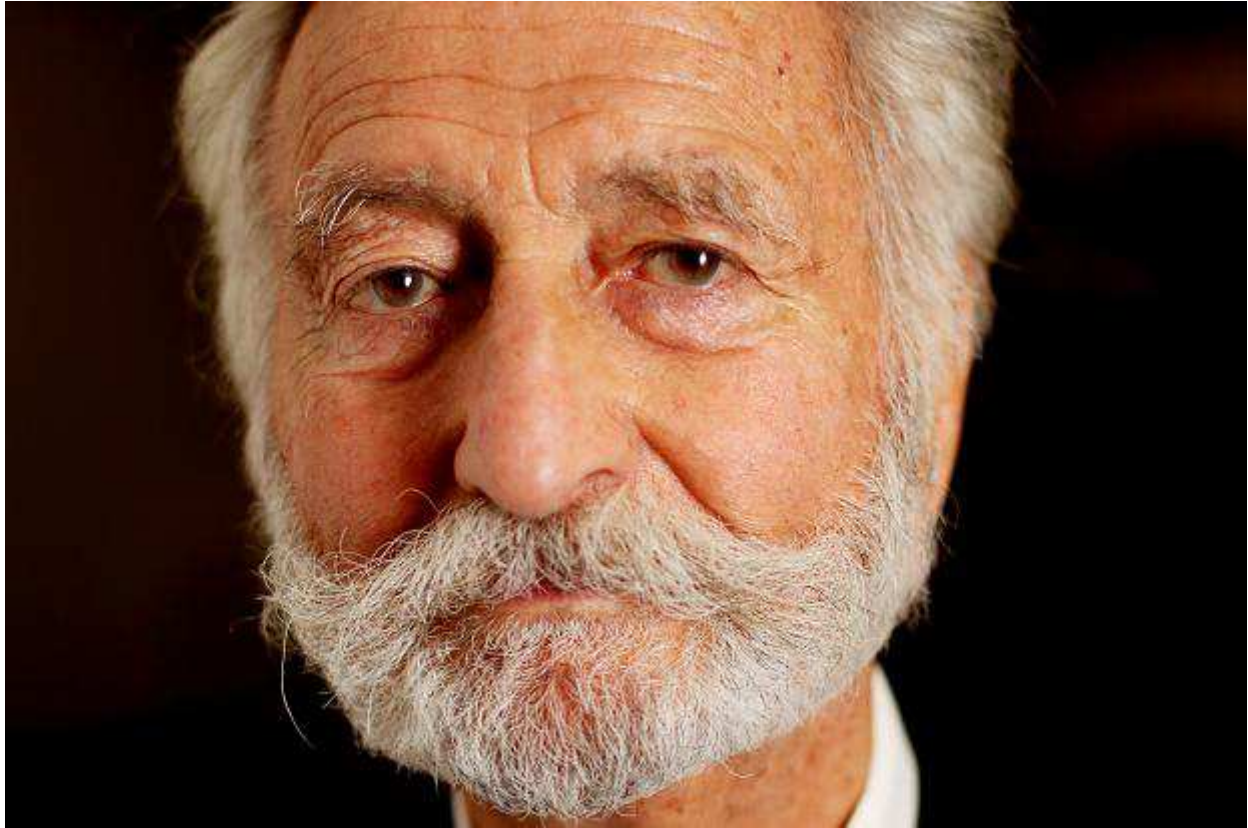
After demobilisation in 1945 he worked as an interpreter for Whitbread Brewers and later in the same capacity in Canada for the Canadian Government.

He was twice married and is survived by his second wife, Peggy (n?e Vaughan), a stepson and stepdaughter from his first marriage and two stepsons from his second.

Cyril A. Watney, MC, SOE veteran, was born on September 29, 1922. He died on January 23, 2009, aged 86

The Times : 07 May 2011

France ends decades of denial over role of British forces in resistance



Charles Bremner Valencay France
Last updated May 7 2011 12:01AM

The last time Robert Maloubier met Leonard Ratcliffe, it was in the latter's RAF Hudson bomber, when the Englishman had arrived to fly Maloubier out of a French field under the noses of the occupying Germans.

Yesterday, after 67 years, the Frenchman and the Wing Commander embraced as they were reunited at a remembrance of Winston Churchill's secret war in France.

The deeds of the men and women of the French section of the Special Operations Executive (SOE) are part of British wartime legend, but are only now being recognised in France.

The ceremony was at the SOE monument at Valençay, central France, where Georges Bégue, the first agent, was dropped 70 years ago to the day. The occasion was part of a FrancoBritish effort to end the ignorance that stemmed from a French desire, under Charles de Gaulle, to underplay the British contribution to the resistance.

Princess Anne was on hand as "Bob" Maloubier, 88, one of only three living F-Section SOE agents, told a crowd that included special forces veterans and ex-resistance members of the night in February 1944, when the former leader of the clandestine 161 Squadron spirited him

and nine other agents out of a field near Angers, on the Loire. “He was one of those crazy pilots, landing with just four torch lights marking the field,” he said.

“Then I found him again last night, and we fell into each other’s arms. If we had to do it again, I would trust my life with him now,” he said. Wing Commander Ratcliffe, 91, who flew Lysanders, Halifaxes and other blackpainted aircraft into French fields by moonlight, recalled the extra tension that night because the local resistance chief was believed to be a double agent for the Nazis. “There was suspicion about his loyalty, but I trusted him. He was never proved guilty,” Wing Commander Ratcliffe told *The Times*.

He had been delighted to find the flamboyant Mr Maloubier, who went on to have a long career in French special operations and, later, become a writer. “He suddenly found out I was still alive, apparently,” said Wing Commander Ratcliffe. Mr Maloubier said that the last time he saw the Englishman, he had been leaning from the cockpit yelling at his passengers to get aboard before the Germans arrived.

The 1944 flight was part of Operation Knacker, one of the many run by Maurice Buckmaster, the SOE chief, from his Baker Street headquarters after Churchill set up the organisation to “set Europe ablaze”.

Among the 104 agents who were killed in France, Mr Maloubier singled out his “comrade” Violette Szabo, a young Anglo-Frenchwoman who was tortured and killed after emptying her Sten gun against the SS Das Reich regiment in 1945. “She was a very brave woman. She fought to the last bullet,” Mr Maloubier said of Szabo, whose story was told in the 1958 film *Carve Her Name with Pride*.

Mr Maloubier, who was a master saboteur and won the DSO as a British army captain, recalled his time with the “Baker Street irregulars”, as the SOE were nicknamed, as a wonderful experience. “They were the most beautiful years of our lives — provided you survived them, of course.”

Speaking under chestnut trees, amid birdsong and spring sunshine, Claude Doucet, the Mayor of Valençay, voiced French gratitude for the SOE. “We owe you so much. Thank you. Merci,” he said, before bugles sounded Last Post at the memorial, which was opened in 1991. The sacrifices by the French, British and international agents of F Section have now been publicised in France with the release of a French translation of the official history, written after the war by Michael R. D. Foot.

Trying to set the record straight is Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, 94, who served as propaganda chief at De Gaulle’s Free French headquarters in London during the occupation.

“The general always wanted to make out that France liberated itself. For 30 years the story held that nothing was dictated from outside,” Mr Crémieux-Brilhac told *The Times*. “We always like to say that two motors drove the victory, the resistance and the Free French forces, but there was a third motor — the British in the form of the SOE and the RAF.”

In the 1960s, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office intervened to block a French translation of Mr Foot’s book to avoid offending De Gaulle, said Mr Crémieux-Brilhac, who attended the ceremony. The author, now in his 90s, was also present yesterday. Mr Crémieux-Brilhac recalled witnessing the tense relations between De Gaulle’s own special operations unit and

the British-run F Section. The British supervised all movements of agents in and out of France. “De Gaulle wanted to run everything that was action in France but he understood very quickly that it was not possible,” he said.

He recalled the daring of the officers. “There was George Langelaan, who once told me how you could derail a train by putting a coat rolled up into a ball on a rail.” He also picked out George Starr, saying he ran the most successful resistance network, with a battalion of well-armed insurgents based in the Armagnac region.

Some veterans are still angered by the post-war French attitude. Noreen Riols, 84, a British-based SOE officer, welcomed the new recognition. “It’s about time,” she said, as the British and French veterans were entertained at Valençay’s sumptuous old Chateau. Ms Riols joined Mr Maloubier in reading the list of dead and then reciting in English and French the Laurence Binyon poem *For the Fallen*.

David Harrison, a historian and SOE expert, said: “It’s long overdue. Every French museum about the resistance you go into, you think: ‘It’s all very fine — but who brought you that Sten gun, who brought you the explosives and told you to blow up that bridge?’”

The political tensions during and after the war were not felt by the agents, said Mr Maloubier. “We didn’t even know that there was any tension. We belonged to the same military. We hung around the same Soho restaurants, some in French some in British uniforms. There was no dissent. We were brothers in arms.”