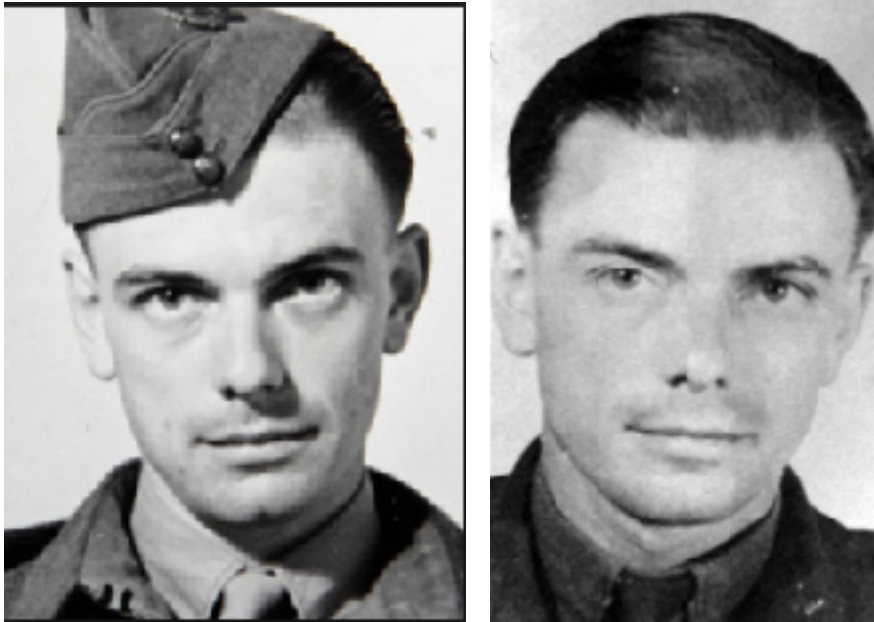


Peter Lake: veteran of the SOE and former member of the Consular Service



At a perilously low point in the war for Britain — January 1942 — Peter Lake was the vice-consul on the Spanish island of Fernando P? (now Bioko) in the Gulf of Guinea, when an opportunity for a positive publicity coup came his way. He was already working with the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and saw his chance when the 7,000-ton Italian liner *Duchessa d’Aosta* unexpectedly put into the island’s harbour accompanied by a German tug and lighter. Being Axis-owned, the vessels were legitimate targets, but Spain’s neutrality was a sensitive issue, not least as the British Ministry of Economic Warfare was seeking ways to restrict supplies of Spanish wolfram to German factories.

Recognising that a violent takeover of the ships was out of the question, even had he the wherewithal to hand, Lake began the discreet distribution of funds ashore to attract the crews into town on a chosen night while arranging, through SOE channels, for two small craft to make the 400-mile voyage from Lagos to bring boarding parties to overcome the skeleton crews. A little further largess ensured that the harbour lights would go out at the critical moment.

The craft, carrying 34 — half of them trained SOE operators and the rest Civil Service volunteers from Lagos — entered Fernando P? harbour on time, overcame and locked up the skeleton crews without violence and sailed the liner and her attendant vessels quietly away into the African night. Once on the high seas, they were ostentatiously arrested by the corvette HMS Violet and carried off as valuable prize captures. The publicity brought some cheer in England during a grim winter in which Rommel advance to Gazala and Singapore surrendered. Lake remained aside from events and there were no diplomatic repercussions from General Franco's administration in Madrid.

Peter Ivan Lake had been chosen for the Fernando P? assignment as he was a fluent Spanish speaker, having been brought up on Majorca where his father, Ivan Lake, was the British Consul at Palma. Educated at Clifton and St John's College, Oxford, where he read modern languages, he was working with the Standard Bank of West Africa in Accra on the outbreak of war in Europe.

Determined to enlist, he made his way overland to the Mediterranean, then home by sea to arrive as the troops evacuated from Dunkirk were flooding through the South Coast ports. Told to await call-up, he worked for some months on a farm until directed into the Intelligence Corps, where his languages could be put to use. From there, it was a relatively short step into SOE. The organisation's Baker Street headquarters having decided that opportunity for a second coup in Fernando P? was unlikely, recalled him to prepare for more hazardous duties in German-occupied France. He was dropped by parachute into the Corrèze in April 1944 to join the SOE "Author" circuit in the countryside north of the Dordogne.

In the previous summer SOE had established contact with a group of the French Resistance around Tulle led by the French novelist and politician Andr? Malraux. This appeared such a promising prospect, as Malraux's group was anxious to receive arms by parachute, that the Author circuit was formed by SOE's Major "Harry" Peulev? in September. Unfortunately the Gestapo caught Peulev?, in company with

Malraux's brother Roland, while he was operating the circuit's radio in a house near Brive in March 1944. The circuit was taken over by his assistant Jacques Poirier and renamed Digger, while Lake and a second SOE agent, Ralph Beauclerk, were dropped on April 9 to help him.

They faced formidable difficulties. Although they would not have been informed of even the approximate date of the forecast Allied landings in northern France, Lake and Beauclerk knew they were imminent. Therefore time was against their getting the local Resistance groups armed and organised to begin acts of sabotage in co-ordination with the invasion.

The local Resistance groups included a good many Spanish veterans of the Civil War likely to harbour left-wing sympathies. Arguably, this aligned them with the communist FTP (Francs-tireurs et partisans), suspected of being less interested in sabotage against the occupation forces and their lines of communication than in acquiring weapons with which to seize political power after the Germans had withdrawn or been driven out.

Finally, the countryside of the upper Dordogne was already in a ferment of anticipation of the Allied invasion, which allowed the German Abwehr to insert informers into the disparate Resistance groups with the aim of eliminating SOE agents and preventing the supply of weapons by parachute. This required the three men to keep changing location to limit the risks of betrayal.

Despite these difficulties, all the groups were armed and ready for operations by early June. Lake's group in particular proved adept at guerrilla warfare. As soon as they received the coded signal from London, the lateral railway line through Périgueux and Coutras to Bordeaux was kept under constant attack and denied to the enemy's use until after the withdrawal. Lake was awarded the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre for his preparatory work and direction of the local Resistance in support of

the Allied invasion. He was later appointed to the Legion of Honour in recognition of his wartime service to France.

On demobilisation he applied to join the Consular Service and was accepted for a cadetship in Mozambique. His acceptance for a full career in the service was not long in coming, and he served subsequently in Madagascar, Paris, Iceland, Aleppo and finally as British Consul in Venice. After his retirement in 1975 he worked with the Cambridge Wild Life Trust and developed his hobby of book-binding.

He married Kathleen (Kay) Sheffield in 1944. She survives him with two sons and a daughter.

Peter I. Lake, MC, veteran of the SOE and former member of the Consular Service, was born on January 30, 1915. He died on June 26, 2009, aged 94