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The Nazi Hunters

Written by Damien Lewis

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THE NAZI HUNTERS

The Ultra-Secret SAS Unit and the Quest for Hitler's War Criminals

Damien Lewis

Quercus

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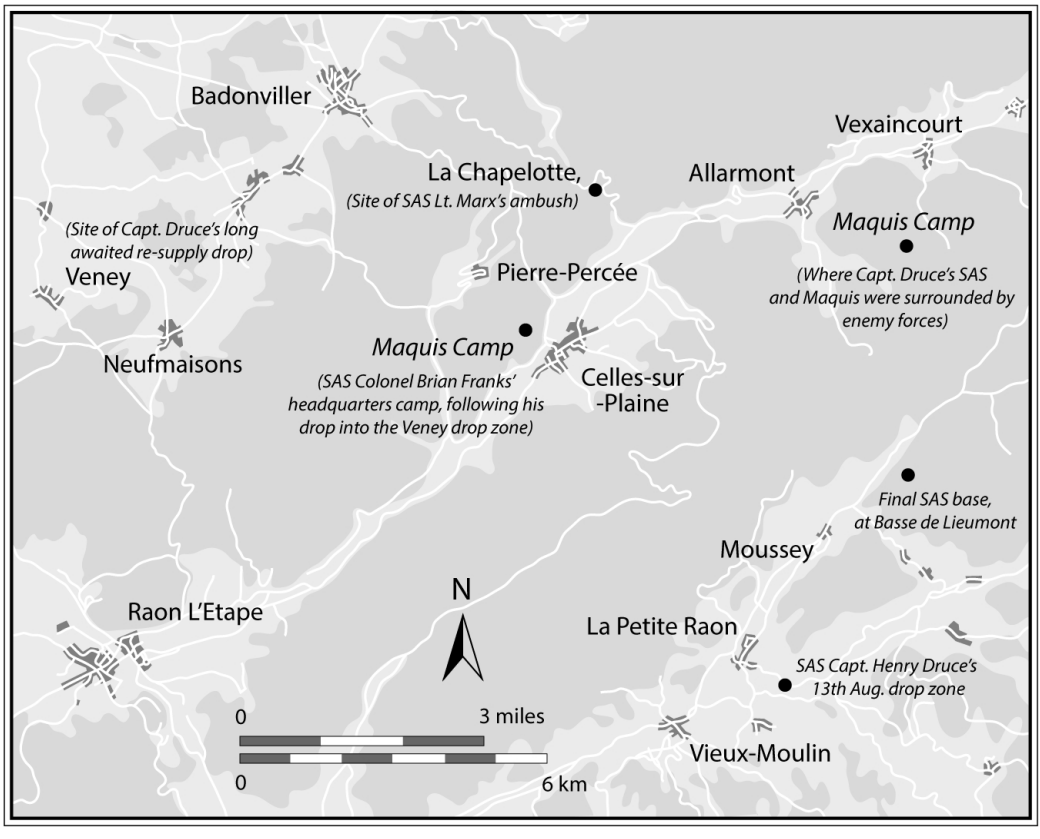
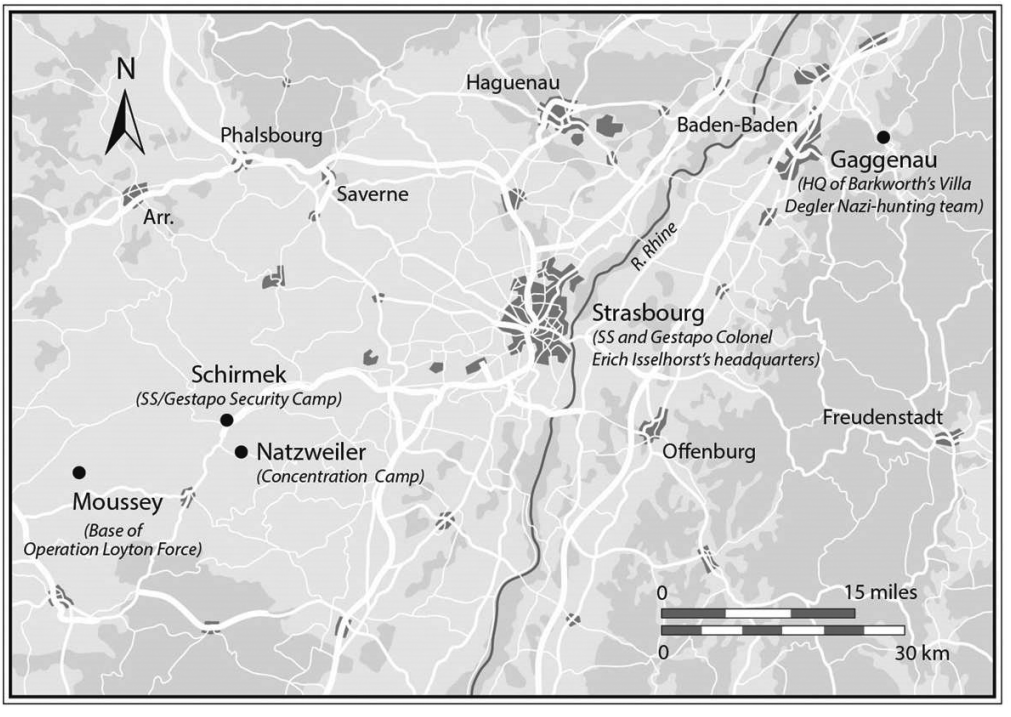


SAS Operation Loyton - Mission Area



SAS Nazi Hunters - Immediate Area of Operations

Preface

The suggestion for this book came from out of the blue.

I happened to meet up with a Special Air Service (SAS) soldier who had risen to some degree of rank and influence at 'the Regiment', as it is known. That soldier – I'll call him 'Steve'; he asked for his real name not to be used, as is the wont of SAS operators – and I had become friends over the writing of several books.

I had just published *Churchill's Secret Warriors*, the story of the wild Danish Viking warrior Anders Lassen – the only member of the British SAS ever to win the Victoria Cross – and his band of Special Forces desperadoes, those who had taken Churchill's 1940 edict to 'set Europe aflame' and made it a reality, spreading chaos and terror behind the German lines and breaking just about every rule of war.

I gave Steve a copy of *Churchill's Secret Warriors*, and mentioned that I was hopeful that a film might be made based upon the book.

Steve glanced around the restaurant – we'd met at BAFTA, the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, for it seemed like a fitting venue for our breakfast chat – and, typically, he cracked a joke.

'So, do you get to mix with the rich and famous? Do you get

to meet – who's that woman who plays Lara Croft, in *Tomb Raider*? – yeah, Angelina Jolie?'

Steve remarked that *Churchill's Secret Warriors* should make a fantastic basis for a film. Only two veterans of the Regiment are honoured by having their statues at the SAS's Hereford base. One is David Stirling, the founder of the SAS. The other is Anders Lassen. Steve reckoned a film telling of Lassen and his band of brothers' exploits was long overdue. The story deserved as wide an exposure as possible.

For a moment he studied the cover of *Churchill's Secret Warriors*, turning it over in his massive, gnarled hands. At six-foot-three and wide as a barn door, he wasn't your average BAFTA visitor, and I could see him getting the odd, surreptitious look from those enjoying their eggs Benedict and espresso.

He glanced at me – level gaze, face all serious for a second. 'You know, there's another SAS tale from the Second World War that needs to be told. Never has been. There's a danger it never will be.'

'Go on,' I prompted. 'I'm listening.'

'You ever heard of Op Loyton? Most haven't. But to those of us who have it's known as the SAS's Arnhem. In late '44 an SAS force parachuted into the Vosges Mountains to arm and raise the French Resistance and spread havoc behind enemy lines. Unfortunately, they landed amongst an entire German Panzer division. Bad timing, bad intelligence. Ran out of food, ammo, explosives, weaponry, not to mention anywhere to run. Hence: the SAS's Arnhem.

'Eventually, they found sanctuary of sorts in a French village called Moussey. When the Germans realized they

couldn't kill or capture all the SAS, they rounded up the Moussey villagers and carted them off to the concentration camps. But you know the most amazing thing? Not a villager talked. No Moussey villager ever revealed the location of the SAS base or gave them away.

'For weeks the German military combed the surrounding forests and mountains, and over time they captured dozens of our guys. Handed them over to the Gestapo and SS, at which point they disappeared in the *Nacht und Nebel* – the night and the fog. And that's when the story really starts to get interesting . . .'

Steve went on to explain how at the end of the war over thirty Operation Loyton men were listed as missing in action. The then commander of 2 SAS, Colonel Brian Franks, refused to let matters rest there. He promised the families that he would find out what had happened to the missing: he also felt the Regiment owed it to the villagers of Moussey – from where so many had been taken, never to return – to do likewise.

Moussey sits within a densely forested, high-walled valley, one which became known as 'the vale of tears', and with good reason. Across its length, approaching one thousand villagers had been carted off by the Gestapo to suffer what was at the time an unknown fate. As far as Colonel Franks was concerned, the SAS owed it to all the missing to trace their whereabouts, to track down their oppressors and to see justice done.

The trouble was, the SAS was about to be disbanded. After the war Winston Churchill had been voted out of power, the minds of a war-weary British public turning towards peace, and the days of what had often been accused of being a private

army of maverick rule-breakers looked numbered. By October 1945 the SAS Regiment had lost the battle for survival. It was formally disbanded, or so the official version of history says.

But the reality was somewhat different. In truth, even as the SAS veterans were returned to their units for demobilization, a small cadre of hand-picked officers and men was sent into Germany to trace the Op Loyton and Moussey missing and to hunt down their killers. These men – who wore the SAS beret and the winged-dagger cap badge – were formed into covert manhunting units, becoming known as 'the Secret Hunters'.

In short, the Secret Hunters refused to accept that the war was over, waging their own private battle to track down some of the most brutal of the Nazi war criminals.

The operations of the Secret Hunters were totally deniable and off-the-books. So covert were their activities that few within the SAS even knew of their existence. They were run from an office in London's Eaton Square, with direct radio communications to and from the field, and with the full backing of Winston Churchill, whose power and influence post-war was still manifest, despite his defeat in the 1945 general election.

Their operations were orchestrated by a Russian prince who had fought with the Special Forces during the war, and who had a deeply personal reason for wanting to see the Nazi killers brought to justice. Under Prince Yuri 'Yurka' Galitzine's sleight of hand a budget was wheedled out of the War Office for a unit that never officially existed.

Under his and Colonel Franks' guidance, the Secret Hunters tracked the Nazi war criminals from Italy to Norway, and from

western France across Germany and into the Russian zones. They employed every means necessary and proved wildly successful in hunting down the killers, but in doing so they antagonized the hidebound British military and the wider Allied establishment mightily.

The manhunting operations of the Secret Hunters also served to fulfil another vital purpose, as far as the Regiment was concerned. Operating well into 1948, they managed to keep the Regiment alive long enough for Colonel Franks to found 21 SAS Artists Rifles – the Territorial Army unit which would eventually form the basis of the SAS proper, when it was reconstituted in the 1950s.

As Steve pointed out, the Regiment still commemorates the Moussey deportations to the concentration camps, and the hundreds who never returned..The SAS dead are buried alongside Moussey's own victims in the village churchyard – a place of homage for those who have vowed never to forget the sacrifice so given. Steve figured this was a piece of vital, living history and a book well worth the writing, not to mention a story whose telling was long overdue.

I'd heard something about the SAS Nazi hunters before. One or two other Special Forces friends of mine had mentioned their activities. I'd long been fascinated by the story, but the trouble was: how would one go about telling it? Their activities had been so shrouded in secrecy that little documentation was likely to exist, and I doubted if there were any survivors from their small number.

But a couple of weeks later a very special parcel arrived in the post. It consisted of the largest and heaviest 'book' I have ever had the

pleasure to peruse: a special edition of the official SAS war diary from the Second World War. The war diary made a brief and typically understated mention of the activities of the SAS Nazi hunters. Despite its brevity, it did constitute the first official acknowledgement I had ever seen that the unit had indeed existed.

The Secret Hunters were commanded by SAS veteran Major Eric 'Bill' Barkworth, a man of iron principle, unbreakable spirit and a maverick single-mindedness almost without compare. Barkworth would prove himself to be a fantastically gifted investigator, detective, interrogator . . . and a manhunter extraordinaire.

The SAS war diary records: 'In May 1945 [Colonel] Franks received a report that the bodies of British soldiers had been found in Gaggenau, in Germany, and sent his Intelligence Officer, Major E.A. Barkworth, to investigate. The Barkworth unit set up base . . . and began their hunt. In October 1945, the SAS was disbanded. Franks came to an unofficial arrangement with one individual from the War Office and the unit continued. It operated totally openly, as if it was official. The unit ended its hunt in 1948, three years after the SAS was disbanded.'

Just a few, carefully chosen words, accompanied by four photographs of the SAS at Moussey, paying their respects at the village war memorial – but official recognition nonetheless that the SAS Nazi hunters had existed.

Even this was extraordinary, considering the accepted version of history has it that the SAS was disbanded in 1945 and only reformed again in the fifties to carry out anti-insurgent operations in Asia. For example, Philip Warner's 1971 official history of the SAS mentions the 1945

disbandment of the SAS, and observes that 'that was that', until their official 1950s reformation. Acclaimed as 'the first complete official history of the SAS Regiment', this has become the accepted version of what happened.

Such a venture as the SAS Nazi hunters, involving a few dozen carefully chosen men – and even they being instructed never to talk about their work, and to keep written records to an absolute minimum – would, I suspected, be notoriously difficult to research. Fragmentary evidence would have to be painstakingly pieced together – rather as the Secret Hunters themselves had had to painstakingly build their case files on the most wanted of the Nazi war criminals.

So began a research odyssey that took me into some of the darkest of places, revealing the horrors visited upon captured Special Forces operators and commandos by a group of senior Nazis who must have known by then that the war was lost. But it was also a story of the incredible bravery and heroism demonstrated by British and Allied Special Forces operators, not to mention the French Resistance and the ordinary villagers who fought alongside them. There was even the occasional 'good German' who risked his life to try to do what was right.

In time the story took me to north-eastern France, to Moussey itself, and to a dark and brooding concentration camp that sits deep within the highland forests some 9 miles to the east of the village. It took me to the National Archives in Kew, and to the few surviving files concerning the activities of the SAS Nazi hunters, most of which are stamped with a 'destroy by' date, but which have miraculously managed to survive the predations of those who might wish to censor history.

It took me to the private papers, filed at the Imperial War Museum, of Prince Yurka Galitzine and others – those amongst the Secret Hunters who never believed that their work should remain untold and unrecorded – who had opted (against orders, and against those governmental 'gagging' contracts that they had signed) to lodge their papers somewhere they might eventually be rediscovered. Those individuals took considerable risks in refusing to let the truth be hidden, and for that they deserve our admiration and our gratitude.

From the archives of the Imperial War Museum – to whom I'm grateful for enabling such materials to be kept safe for posterity – the trail took me to a few of those survivors of SAS operations in World War Two who are thankfully still with us. And finally, I came to the most unexpected, not to mention shocking, of revelations, ones concealed within a group of CIA files held at the American National Archives, in Washington DC. In September 2007 the CIA was forced, under the 1999 Nazi War Crimes Disclosure Act, to release some 50,000 pages of records documenting relations between the Agency and prominent Nazis in the years following the Second World War.

By the end of the war, Hitler's Germany was no longer the principal enemy of the 'free world'; Stalin's Russia had taken on that mantle. Barely had the last shots been fired when the Allies began rounding up senior Nazis with experience of fighting against or spying on the Russians, in order to shelter and recruit them. They were brought into various covert intelligence outfits – the foremost of which was the Gehlen Organization, run at first by US Army Intelligence, but effectively from 1948 onwards by the CIA.

Those recently declassified CIA files revealed that, in several instances involving senior Nazis with intimate knowledge of operating against the Russians, the justice so resolutely sought by the SAS Nazi hunters may in truth have been denied them.

This, therefore, is a story that delves into secret worlds within secret worlds, peeling away layer upon layer of intrigue and subterfuge. To reach a core of inalienable truth has remained challenging, but at the very least the opportunity of telling the story of Operation Loyton, the Moussey deportations and massacres, and the activities of the Secret Hunters that followed has been a huge and much-cherished privilege.

Some may ask whether it is important that the memory of such horrors and the hunt for the perpetrators is kept alive, some seventy years after the events unfolded? Is it not raking over old coals? I don't believe so. It is vitally important that we remember the heroism and the sacrifice, and the terrible war crimes and crimes against humanity, so that those dark transgressions may never be repeated.

I am sure there is more to tell about this hidden and compelling chapter of history, and I look forward to whatever revelations may result from the publishing of this book.

But first, let me take you to a lone British warplane flying into occupied France in the late summer of 1944.