



OPERATION BASALT – BRITAIN'S COMMANDO RAID ON SARK

To mark the 80th-anniversary commemoration of the 1942 British commando raid on Sark, and after 17 months of planning and a global search for accurate equipment, the re-enactment of Operation Basalt took place in Sark 80 years to the day since the original mission. Author Eric Lee travelled to the island where he was a guest speaker at an event at Stocks Hotel. He recounts the events of the raid...

In June 1940, following the fall of France, Nazi German forces occupied all the Channel Islands, including Sark. These were the only parts of the British Isles occupied by the Wehrmacht. Thousands of German troops were stationed there throughout the war, and the islands were heavily fortified, constituting part of Hitler's 'Atlantic Wall' defences designed to repel an eventual Allied invasion.

British forces withdrew from the islands before the Germans arrived, but Prime Minister Winston Churchill never gave up on them. He ordered a series of commando raids designed to make it clear to the Germans that they were not welcome on British soil and that their occupation was temporary.

The attacks led to increasing numbers of Germans being deployed to guard the islands instead of being used where needed, such as in France.

Another goal of the raids was to capture German soldiers and return them to England for interrogation. The intelligence collected from those prisoners would be vital in planning the Allied invasion of Normandy, which took place on 6 June 1944.

A special commando unit known as the Small Scale Raiding Force (SSRF) was tasked with staging several of these operations.

One of those raids, code-named 'Operation Basalt', took place on the night of 3-4 October 1942. Twelve British commandos arrived at Sark on a specially silenced motor torpedo boat. While one commando waited by their landing craft, the others climbed the cliffs to reach the Hog's Back, the crest of the promontory between Dixcart Bay and Derrible Bay.

They were led by the legendary Danish commando, Anders Lassen, an expert in silent killing and a future recipient of the Victoria Cross. Major Geoffrey Appleyard was the commander of the mission. A contingent from a group known as the 'Irish Commando' led by Captain Phillip Hugh Pinckney also took part in the raid.

They were well-trained and highly motivated but were lacking in high-quality intelligence. The Napoleonic era cannon at the cliff's edge was believed to be a possible German machine gun emplacement. Though it was known that the island was hosting hundreds of German soldiers, the British had no idea where they were based.

To prepare for the raid, the commandos relied upon a tourist guidebook for walkers on Sark (which is still in print today). They also used Appleyard's family home movies, as he had holidayed on the island as a child. The young Geoffrey had loved climbing Sark's cliffs. This turned out to be quite helpful on that October night.

The commandos went in search of German soldiers. Their 'primary target', an isolated home known as Petit Dixcart, proved empty. Eventually, they came upon a house, La Jaspellerie, where they awakened Mrs Frances Pittard, the doctor's widow. Seeing men in uniform with blackened faces, she assumed them to be firefighters and asked if there was a fire. She told them where they could find Germans and gave other valuable intelligence at significant risk to herself. She even gave them chunks of the local bread so they could later analyse this and learn about how civilians survived under



ABOVE L-R: AUTHOR ERIC LEE; SARK'S COASTLINE FROM THE HOGSBACK, WHERE THE COMMANDOS LANDED (THE NAPOLEONIC ERA CANNON WAS THOUGHT TO BE A POSSIBLE GERMAN MACHINE GUN EMPLACEMENT); PETIT DIXCART, THE 'PRIMARY TARGET' FOR THE COMMANDOS; SIBYL HATHAWAY, THE DAME OF SARK; FRANCES PITTARD, WHO PROVIDED INVALUABLE INTELLIGENCE TO THE COMMANDOS.



German rule. From her, they learned about the deportations of civilians to Germany then taking place, which London knew nothing about.

When they came upon the Germans' quarters, Lassen took care of the lone sentry using his commando knife. Inside a hotel annexe, they found several sleeping German engineers, awakened them, bound their hands, and readied them to be taken down to the boat and back to England.

But once the Germans realised that a small group had captured them, most of them decided to fight back, shout and scream, and raise the alarm among the hundreds of heavily-armed troops on the island. In the fight that followed, two more Germans were killed, and one - who was naked - escaped.

Time was running out for the commandos, as their motor torpedo boat needed to get far away from Sark before sunrise.

One of the Germans had stayed quiet and was taken alive. The commandos raced back to shore. That captured German prisoner was the commander of the small team of engineers.

The raid was a tactical success. The captured engineer offered invaluable intelligence about

coastal defences on Sark and across the entire 'Atlantic Wall', including France. Churchill personally summoned Major Appleyard to come to London at once to congratulate him.

But Hitler, learning of the raid, was furious and issued his infamous 'Commando Order'. This was sent to all German commanders on all fronts ordering them to treat any captured Allied commandos as terrorists and to execute them, even if they were caught in uniform. Many Allied commandos lost their lives because of this. The Commando Order was considered a war crime and came up in the Nuremberg tribunal.

None of the six officers involved in the Sark raid survived the war, though some enlisted men did. The last survivor, Cpl James Edgar, lived until 2021. He was 100 years old and living in Australia.

There are several reminders of the raid in the Channel Islands. On Guernsey, the graves of the Germans who died that night on Sark can be found in the Fort George Military Cemetery.

And on Sark itself, there are two reminders of the battle. On the Hog's Back, there is a new memorial, unveiled on the 75th anniversary of the raid in 2017, listing all the names of those

who participated. It was recently updated with more names added.

There is also a tree planted near where the commandos seized their German prisoners. Known as the Cassino Oak, it is marked with a small sign containing this line from a poem by Philip James Bailey: 'We live in deeds, not years'.

And finally, in the island's main cemetery is the modest grave of Mrs Pittard, the doctor's widow who risked everything by helping the commandos. Her grave is just next to the one belonging to the Dame of Sark, Sibyl Hathaway.

Eric Lee is the author of Operation Basalt: The British Raid on Sark and Hitler's Commando Order (The History Press, 2016), the only full-length account of the raid and its aftermath.

