

3 » SOE: SOUTHERN FRANCE

Few of the British and French agents parachuted into France fired a shot in anger during the battles of June 1944. Their names will seldom recur during the story of the Das Reich's march through their sectors. But to understand what Resistance was on D-Day, and how it came to be what it was, it is essential to know something of the men and women who made it possible. For thousands of *résistants* taking up their Sten guns and their gammon bombs and embarking upon open warfare, D-Day was a beginning. But for the agents of SOE and De Gaulle's BCRA, it was the flowering of four years' labour, the end of the most difficult and nerve-racking period of Resistance. The British agent George Hiller exulted in the sense of release that D-Day brought: 'The beauty of life, the joys of spring, the stream of men and cars, the relief of being armed.'

Hiller was French Section's officer in the Lot, the region dominated by high limestone plateaux thick with scrub oak and sheep grazing that lies between the Dordogne and the Tarn, on the Das Reich division's direct route north. With his twenty-one-year-old wireless operator, Cyril Watney, he had been parachuted into France in January 1944 to make contact with a socialist Resistance organization named the Groupes Vény. Its tentacles were reported to extend through southern France from Marseille and Toulouse to the Lot and Limoges. Hiller's business was first to assess their potential, then to organize and arm the *réseaux* – the networks – in the Lot.

He was born in Paris, the son of an English father and French mother, educated at *lycées* in Paris and London, then at Exeter

College, Oxford. He had planned a career as a diplomat when the war intervened. Like a significant number of future French Section recruits, in 1939 he was a near-pacifist, and he joined the medical corps because he disliked the idea of killing people. Only in 1942 did he modify his opinions sufficiently to pass through Sandhurst and become an army officer. Then SOE's recruiters found him. He told his parents that he was being posted to the Middle East, but on the night of 7 January 1944, at the age of twenty-eight, this highly intelligent, sensitive, rather reserved young man landed near Quatre Routes high in the hills of the Lot to begin his career as a secret agent.

Like most F Section officers, Hiller and Watney suffered a severe shock of disorientation and bewilderment when they landed. Only moments after the reception committee had greeted them, the two Englishmen were appalled to see the headlights of a car approaching up the road. They flung themselves into a ditch as it passed, then were bemused to see the little group of *résistants* still standing nonchalantly by the roadside in its headlights. Sten guns under their arms. The two Englishmen agreed that there was a wide gulf between security as taught at their tradecraft school at Beaulieu and as practised in France. From the dropping zone they were driven to Quatre Routes. They spent their first nights in a creamery at the edge of the little village, until Watney was moved to a safe house from which he could transmit, and Hiller began his travels among the *résistants* of the Lot.

Like many men who found themselves behind enemy lines in World War II, Hiller was profoundly moved by his experience in the spring and summer of 1944. In the timescale of those days, Liberation still seemed far away and the German command of France still appeared unshakable. Many Frenchmen and women – especially among the business and official classes – had long since come to terms with their Occupiers, and feared and hated the Resistance as communist bandits who threatened the peace and stability of their communities. By no means all the girls who slept with the men of the Das Reich and others of the occupying army

did so for money. Since the end of World War I, France had been a bitterly divided and fragmented society. 'Her position', Sir Denis Brogan has written, 'was unique. She was a victor, but she had in many ways the psychology of a defeated nation.' Many, perhaps most, French bourgeois in the 1930s feared fascism, far less than communism. Peasants were profoundly embittered by the ceaseless betrayals of their politicians. Their distaste for authority extended from contempt for Paris to hatred of their local landlords and parish priests. Religion was a waning influence in much of southern France by the 1940s. Most peasants, phlegmatically ploughing the fields and driving the oxen on their meagre farms, seemed to have set themselves apart from the war – indifferent both to the Allies and the Germans, concerned only with the crops and the seasons.

Yet beyond all these people, an utterly dedicated minority risked their lives, their families, everything they possessed to further the cause of Resistance. These were the men and women, whom he had never met before, to whom Hiller entrusted his own life. He was deeply moved by the strength of the bond created by the relationship between the hidiers and the hidden. There was no common denominator among the *résistants*, except perhaps that their leaders in the Lot and the Dordogne seemed to come chiefly from the professional and small business classes, and were politically of the Left.

Jean and Marie Verlhac, already in their forties during the Occupation, were legendary *résistants*. Of fifty *parachutages* in their region, Jean organized the reception of nineteen. His wife Marie, a teacher who had been active for years in the trade union movement, was one of the brains and principal driving forces behind the growth of Resistance in the Lot. It was at their house that within days of his arrival Hiller prepared the charges for a local *résistant* to lay at the Ratier airscrew factory in Figeac, one of F Section's most successful acts of sabotage of the war. In the weeks that followed, Hiller was passed on from the hands of the Verlhacs to those of other men and women who sheltered him as

he travelled through the region, meeting contacts and assessing the prospect of building upon them.

He spent many nights at the home of Georges Bru, a teacher in the little town of St Céré, a blunt, stocky figure with a genius for organizing and providing the unexpected. Late on those icy winter nights, Hiller would watch Bru come home blue with cold, his body wrapped with newspapers under his coat, after riding for hours around the region on his little moped on the business of the *réseau*. Despite an endless procession of clandestine visitors, his wife kept a spotless home, in which she seemed to be eternally cooking for her unexpected guests. Hiller watched fascinated as their two children did their homework at one end of the kitchen table, while the other was littered with explosives and Sten gun magazines. Sometimes the children cycled through the streets to look out for Germans or *miliciens*. It was uncanny how young they learned the reflexes of secrecy. One night, at the home of another schoolteacher in Figeac, named Odette Bach, Hiller was sitting in the kitchen when there was a knock at the front door. Pierrette, the Bachs's five-year-old daughter, opened it to find a *gendarme* outside. He demanded whether anyone was at home. The child shook her head and replied unhesitatingly, '*Non, Monsieur.*' The *gendarme* departed. Hiller breathed again. Even thirty-five years later, Pierrette could not explain how she had known that she must lie except to shrug: '*Il y avait un ambiance . . .*' And she was still enough of a child to enjoy herself immensely one day when Hiller took her to the circus.

He marvelled at all these people, conscious of their fear, of all that they risked. The Bachs always seemed to him to be making a great effort to conceal their nervousness, yet their flat was known locally as 'the stray dogs' home' because Odette would never turn away a fugitive from Vichy or the Germans. Odette and Hiller talked for hours about their common pacifist backgrounds. Then it would be time for her to leave to go to her class. It was difficult to come to terms with the relative normalcy of life: taxes were paid, people were married and baptized, the peasants continued

their simple lives sleeping on mattresses filled with maize, working in the fields in their blue smocks and black hats, shaving once a week on Sunday, baking bread in great wheels two feet across. Yet amidst all this, for Hiller and the *résistants* there was unceasing danger, the extra layer of clandestinity to add to all the practical difficulties of finding enough food to eat, renewing the endless permits for every aspect of daily life, and queueing for the simplest commodities.

The Germans were seldom seen outside the big towns. Occasionally a black Citroën would race down the road, and the village postmistress would telephone her counterpart a few kilometres away to warn her that Germans were on the way. Only Germans or agents of Vichy or the local doctor had access to petrol-driven cars. Perhaps twice a year, a village might suffer the passage of one of the notorious German punitive columns sent into the countryside wherever Resistance activity became conspicuous. The Dordogne suffered terribly from the attentions of Division B in 1943, and the Corrèze and Creuse from those of the Jesser column. That year 40,000 French men and women were arrested under suspicion of Resistance activities, and many of them had been deported to Germany, never to return. The risks for a British agent in the Lot or the Dordogne were less great than in Paris or Lyon. But the tension and fear, the certain knowledge of the price of capture, never altogether faded even in the happiest and most romantic moments of their secret lives. In notes for an uncompleted memoir of his experience with Resistance, Hiller scribbled long afterwards: 'Explain how very ordinary people can do it . . . Many people were lifted out of their little lives, to be dropped down again afterwards . . . Show the mixture of tension and light fantastic . . . The extraordinary brotherhood, the immense enjoyment of being together, among ourselves, like children.'

Hiller likened his first weeks in France to learning to ride a bicycle – there was 'a quality of strangeness and uncertainty, everyone working in a fog'. He was dismayed by the lack of force

displayed by some of the senior leaders of Resistance in the region, but conscious of his own lack of authority. His only influence sprang from his ability to conjure up money and arms. 'We were working on a number of uncertain variables: The weather. The amount available for the drop. The lack of information about what was going on around us . . . The sense of isolation from London. The poor security.' He found himself frustrated by the immense effort and time that had to be wasted upon petty personal logistics – finding safe houses for Watney and his transmitter; getting a *gazogène* charcoal-burning car for travel; passing messages and receiving answers even over short distances when he was constantly on the move. It took weeks to lose the screaming self-consciousness that afflicted him in a public place: 'As I walked down the muddy high street with the debonair Jean at my side, I felt that everyone down to the dogs was staring at me. Loudspeakers were shouting: "Look at the Englishman, freshly arrived, there in the grey check suit with the brand-new beret!"'

Soon after his arrival, one of the Groupes Vény's colonels took him northwards to Limoges, the great grey metropolis of china manufacture, to talk to its local supporters. It was the first of many such trips: 'Limoges was a dangerous town – small enough for most people to know each other, yet large enough for strangers to pass unobserved. And Limoges was plentifully supplied with Gestapo agents, not all of them natives of the town.' Taillaux was the Groupes Vény's principal contact in Limoges,

... a very cautious man, thoroughly drilled in clandestine work, he carried even into his discussions the habit of keeping negotiations on various subjects separate, and of telling no one more than they needed to know . . .

The Taillaux, like all people who continued to lead legal lives, were continually on the alert. If the German or French police wanted to arrest them, they had only to come and pick them up. They were well-known local figures leading busy working lives, yet somehow into these they had to fit in their

clandestine work and meetings. And yet like many thousands of others, they carried on, because as normal citizens they were able to do things that would no longer be possible if they went underground.

Hiller and the colonel slept at the railway station, inconspicuous among hundreds of other stranded wartime travellers and the incessant clanking of rolling stock through the night. The Englishman dozed, gazing at the colonel asleep beside him: 'This old man with his patched-up body could have chosen to live on his pension in his flat in Nice, yet here he was with his worn shoes and his battered overcoat, sleeping in railway waiting-rooms and dodging the Germans. Luckily, he looked a harmless enough figure as he slept with his head near the red rosette of the Legion of Honour . . .'

As the weeks went by, Hiller's admiration for the *résistants* did not diminish, but he began to perceive that their networks were far less powerful than London had supposed: 'I had been there long enough for my initial optimism to have worn off. The whole organization was much weaker than I had imagined.' As they built up the clandestine arms dumps with the fruits of the *parachutages*, he became conscious that there was no precise plan as to how they were to be used: 'It was all rather vague, but then so were our ideas of what would happen after D-Day.'

Many of the *résistants* were simply not by temperament warlike people. They were men and women of great moral courage who sought to do whatever they could to oppose the Germans. But neither by background nor inclination were they killers. 'It was not, on the whole, a heroic area,' wrote Hiller. By this, of course, he did not seek to diminish the courage of local *résistants*, but to describe the difficulty of rousing the sleepy, rustic communities of the Lot to violent action. Hiller wrote later that he regretted wasting so much time on the movement's internal quarrels and jealousies. Perhaps he should have 'started fewer schemes and followed them through; should have been more concrete; [adopted]

a more aggressive policy, more firmness and ruthlessness'. He was too hard on himself. He did not know that his were the fortunes and difficulties of most Allied agents all over France.

Hiller also encountered the universal difficulty in handling the *maquis* – the groups of young *résistants* who lived entirely outside the law in the woods and hills. Most were young evaders from the STO, and some were more enthusiastic about avoiding forced labour than about taking part in positive action against the Germans. In the Lot, the most active and numerous *maquis* were those of the communist FTP, to whom many of the wilder spirits defected, tiring of the AS policy of patience until D-Day. Hiller wrote:

Organizing the *maquis* was difficult. Getting boys together in twos and threes; stealing camping equipment from government stocks; buying food. Getting a lorry made available for hasty flight. Large and regular supplies of tobacco were essential if morale was to remain good. The boys were often slovenly, and few had done military service. They wanted immediate raids. They had no amusements. Occasionally, on a very rare night, there might be an operation, yet every night in the moon period we were out on the dropping ground. The boys were pathetically grateful when they were given a small job in the outside world. Once a drunk and bored boy simply emptied his pistol into the air.

After a while, we got used to it all. We lived with the moon and the weather. Hopelessly and impatiently waiting during the non-moon periods, then full of hope at the beginning of the new moon, when the weather prospects would be earnestly discussed. The precious days would pass, and there would be no BBC messages for us. Sometimes the weather was obviously bad, sometimes it was fine and we had to tell everybody that the weather was bad over London . . . At other times, there would be a great many messages, although none for us. We were envious of others, and wondered if we were not being forgotten . . . We never managed to become indiffer-

ent to the moon periods, but we forgot all about hard and fast plans and just tackled things as they came. But I sometimes thought how nice it would be for a change to have to deal with a situation in which all the factors were readily ascertainable, and predictable in their development.

The Groupes Vény's strength in the Lot had grown from twelve in January 1941 to forty-eight in January 1942, 401 in July 1943 with eighty-five *maquis*, and 623 in January 1944 with 346 *maquisards*. It achieved a peak in July 1944 of 156 AS and 2,037 *maquisards* after the great D-Day mobilization. To the Frenchmen with whom he worked, Hiller was the very image of an English gentleman of *L'Intelligence Service*, to which all France was convinced that every British agent belonged. He became much liked and respected in his area. While many agents had no contact whatever with neighbouring circuits, in the late spring of 1944 he began to work increasingly closely with his neighbours in the Dordogne and Corrèze. When he wrote of his assignment's extraordinary combination of tension and 'the light fantastic', he must have been thinking of such moments as Soleil's banquet in the heart of the Dordogne.

Soleil was a ferocious, semi-literate, twenty-three-year-old communist, originally from Avignon and more recently from the darker corners of Marseille. His real name was René Cousteille. 'Fearless and unscrupulous, a born leader, small, dark, twitching with energy', in Hiller's words, the little tough had formed a *maquis* on the south side of the Dordogne river, close to the marvellous golden hilltop village of Belvès. From his camps, he ruled a great swath of the region. He had forced every inhabitant of the neighbouring hamlets to conceal some of his petrol and oil reserves, according to Hiller to ensure that all of them would suffer if any was indiscreet. In the spring of 1944, a young Englishman named Peter Lake – 'Jean-Pierre' of F Section – toured Soleil's *maquis* in miserable discomfort on the pillion of a 'moto', holding weapon training classes for an eager audience. Jean-Pierre

was not happy with the young bandits. He sensed that the slightest misplaced word could cause him to disappear rapidly and painfully. Soleil had already threatened to kill his SOE colleague, 'Commandant Jack', if he cut off supplies of arms. His *maquis* was feared and detested throughout most of the surrounding countryside for the ruthless killing of any man suspected of collaboration, and Soleil's orders to his men to seize whatever they needed from whoever possessed it. But Commandant Jack respected Soleil's courage and toughness, and armed his men because he believed that they would excel where it mattered – in fighting the Germans. The *maquis* prospered, and one night Hiller found himself solemnly invited by the young killer to a formal banquet, with after-dinner entertainment in the form of a lecture on small arms by Jean-Pierre.

The castle chosen by Soleil's nineteen-year-old deputy, the Baron, was a fine example of late eighteenth-century Gothic, hidden away in a wood on the banks of the Dordogne. As we approached, we were repeatedly challenged, and we found that detachments of Spaniards armed with numerous Bren guns guarded all the approaches. Their French was poor, and they did their job so conscientiously that we were glad to get inside the castle. There we found the village leaders, some fifty fat, middle-aged men, dressed in their Sunday best. Jean-Pierre fussed around like a good lecturer making sure that all the exhibits were ready. Against a background of tapestries and wrought iron stood a U-shaped table covered with linen and flowers and candelabra and fine porcelain. In front of each plate was a menu bearing the badge of the Groupe Soleil, a flaming sun and an inscription recording the occasion. The Baron, once he had been duly congratulated, explained that he had had great difficulty in finding a competent sign writer. For the rest, he merely told the butler and his wife, who lived there permanently, that the castle was requisitioned for the night, and there would be so many guests. They in turn prepared everything as if it were a formal peacetime dinner

party. The service was perfect, and the butler and his staff impassive. But we could not help trying to guess from the fleeting expressions on his face what was going on in his mind as he leaned forward to pour the wine. He was probably scandalized at the way these ruffians had invaded the house, to which they would never have been invited before the war. He was probably frightened, too, that the dinner might end with a surprise raid by the Germans. Then, as the dinner went on, he seemed to thaw as he listened to the quiet conversation of these people who all appeared too young or too old to be terrorists. In the end, he was listening with interest to the panegyric on the Sten.

The inaugural lecture began very late. Some of us, in fact, thought that it would never take place after so many speeches and toasts. But we had counted without Jean-Pierre's determination, or the surprising resilience of the village's leaders, who had taken the banquet in their stride. Not only was the lecture a great success, but when we went off to bed in the small hours, Jean-Pierre and the fat men were still busy arguing about some of the finer points of the Bren gun.

Jean-Pierre – Peter Lake – was a twenty-nine-year-old diplomat's son who had been a merchant banker in West Africa when the war began, and took part in an early SOE operation in that area before being transferred to French Section and parachuted near Limeuil on Easter Sunday 1944. His French was very poor, but by that stage F was not dropping secret agents, but paramilitary instructors. A more serious deficiency in all F's training, however, was that in the interests of remaining apolitical they gave agents no briefing whatever on the intricacies of local Resistance politics, and many of them were confused and bewildered to discover the byzantine complications in the field. Lake was taken from his landing ground to the home of a carpenter named Charles Brouillet – '*Le bolshévik*', as he was known locally – in the enchanting village of Siorac-en-Périgord. It was a picaresque introduction to Resistance, eating a splendid 4 am breakfast with the

recklessly confident *résistants*. 'Ha, ha, mon cher Jean-Pierre', said Brouillet happily. 'Siorac a deux mille habitants, et sur ces deux mille habitants, il y a deux mille *résistants*!' He confided that many of their arms were stored in the roof of the church: 'Tu vois, à l'église, c'est sous la protection du bon Dieu!'

Yet in catching the genuine, extraordinary romance of secret survival and the preparations for war in one of the most beautiful regions of all France, it is essential never to forget its darker face. Those whom Soleil's men threatened or robbed hated him as bitterly as the Germans. Each of those at that exotic banquet could never entirely erase from his mind the fear of betrayal, the knowledge that capture meant certain imprisonment and torture, concluded only by an appallingly lonely death. So much sentiment has been expended upon British agents and *résistants* killed by the Germans that it is sometimes forgotten that the Germans were perfectly entitled by the laws of war to shoot them. It was the fact that execution was invariably accompanied by such ghastly cruelty that made their fate seem so intolerable. Commandant Jack had only succeeded to responsibility for the eastern Dordogne and Corrèze in March, after the capture in Brive-la-Gaillarde and dispatch to Buchenwald of his commanding officer, one of SOE's greatest agents, Harry Peulevé.

Commandant Jack – officially Nestor – was a big, robust, handsome, compulsively adventurous twenty-two-year-old who was assumed by all the *maquis* to be a British officer. In reality, he was the Frenchman Jacques Poirier, who concealed his nationality until the moment of Liberation to safeguard the lives of his family. He was one of those fortunate spirits blessed with the ability to inspire laughter and affection wherever he went. It was Poirier who, with Peulevé, armed most of the *maquisards* of the Corrèze and Dordogne who met the Das Reich division after 6 June.

Poirier had reached SOE after an odyssey remarkable even by Baker Street standards. He had been destined for a career in the air force, following his father, until the war intervened and the family retreated into the Unoccupied Zone near Nice.

Young Jacques was running small errands for the local Resistance when he encountered Harry Peulevé, making a painful escape to England after being badly injured parachuting into France as one of SOE's wireless operators. Poirier formed an immediate intense admiration for the Englishman, and offered to go with him across the Pyrenees. After many adventures, the two men reached Gibraltar and Peulevé was at once flown back to England. Poirier had to wait rather longer for transport. When at last he arrived in Bristol, to his intense fury he was detained for five days for screening. He was then taken to London as a prisoner, before being handed over to SOE.

He never remembered asking to go back to France – he always took it for granted, just as he assumed and insisted that it would be with Peulevé, French Section put him through the usual training courses under the name of Peters. He had some cheerful evenings in London, some of them with Violette Szabo. Then, one night late in 1943, he found himself at Tempsford airfield, being handed the customary gold cigarette case as a parting present from Buckmaster, *en route* to join Peulevé in the Corrèze.

Poirier reached the soil of France to find that his dropping aircraft had ejected him more than 100 miles from the rendez-vous. He walked for some hours to reach a station, survived asking for a ticket in English, and fell asleep on the train to wake up surrounded by a compartment full of Germans. They mercifully ignored him, and within a few hours he found himself in the substantial town of Brive-la-Gaillarde, deserted in Sunday silence. He could think of no less conspicuous refuge than a church, and sat through four masses before slipping discreetly out of the town to a nearby hillside for the night. The next morning, he found Peulevé.

In the months that followed, Poirier and his commanding officer travelled ceaselessly through the eastern Dordogne and Corrèze, meeting the men of the AS and the FTP, arranging *parachutages* and holding weapon training classes. Roger Beauclerk – ‘Casimir’ – was parachuted to act as Poirier’s wireless operator,

and settled down to the usual nerve-racking, monotonous existence. The operators suffered terribly from boredom between transmissions, unable to wander because of their schedules, moved constantly from safe house to safe house to avoid the risk of German direction-finding, and thus never able to relax amidst established relationships. They had too much time to think, and too few of the compensations of the agents. Many found the strain intolerable unless, like Cyril Watney, they were blessed with unshakeable patience and good nature.

In March 1944 Poirier slipped away for a few days to visit his mother, now living in the foothills of the Pyrenees. By the merest chance, one night he was sitting in the kitchen listening with half an ear to the BBC *messages personnels* – which it was wildly unlikely would bear any special signal for him – when he caught an electrifying phrase: ‘*Attention à Nestor! Message important pour Nestor! Ne retournez pas chez vous! Jean est tres malade!*’ Peulevé and his wireless operator Roland Malraux had been arrested – by terrible ill luck, denounced by a neighbour as suspected Jewish black marketeers. George Hiller heard the news, and with immense effort and ingenuity managed to have the warning broadcast to Poirier. Jacques took the train to Martel, high in the Lot, and sought out the Verlhacs who were astounded to see him, because they believed that he had already been taken by the Germans.

Contrary to popular belief, it is never expected that an agent will tell his captors nothing. The most critical achievement that is expected of him is silence for forty-eight hours, until warnings can be circulated and men take to hiding. Then he can begin to reveal small things, odd names and places. Eventually, under extreme duress, it is recognized that he may begin to talk of more vital matters. Peulevé revealed nothing important under torture in Fresnes prison, or later in Buchenwald. But the Germans had a description of Poirier. He vanished into hiding while they combed every possible contact point in Corrèze and east Dordogne for him.

Roland Malraux’s brother André said that the region was

obviously too hot to hold Poirier for the time being. He suggested a cooling-off period, in Paris. This young, still impressionable ex-student found himself hiding in the flat of André Gide, with its window looking out on the courtyard of Laval's Interior Ministry. He walked by the Seine between Malraux and Albert Camus. To his lifelong regret, he never remembered a word of what either man said.

Of all the extraordinary figures who held the stage in the Resistance of Dordogne and Corrèze in the summer of 1944, none surpassed André Malraux. Young men like Poirier, Hiller, Lake – so worldly about so much in their secret lives – found themselves awed and fascinated by this mountebank of genius who thrust himself upon them. He was already a legend – the author of *La Condition Humaine*, exotic traveller, film-maker, commander in Spain of the Republican fighter squadron he himself had raised, *Malraux-le-rouge* who had his uniforms tailored by Lanvin.

Yet his record as a *résistant* from 1940 to 1944 had not been impressive. After serving with a French tank unit in the débâcle of 1940, he retired to the Côte d'Azur to work – though he wrote nothing of merit – and to reflect, in circumstances of sybaritic ease by the standards of the world in those days. In September 1941, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir cycled the length of France to appeal for his support in Resistance. 'They lunched on chicken Maryland, exquisitely prepared and served. Malraux heard Sartre out very courteously, but said that for the time being at any rate, action of any sort would be quite useless. He was relying on Russian tanks and American planes to win the war.' Later, when the *Combat résistants* also approached him, he asked simply: 'Have you arms? No? Have you money? No? Then it's not serious . . .' Towards the end of 1943, he moved with his mistress Clara to a comfortable little château on the Dordogne. Still he showed no urge to have any part of Resistance.

Yet when his brother Roland was captured – his other brother Claude was also working for SOE – Malraux presented himself to the Resistance of Dordogne and Corrèze, quite without

humility, as a man ready to take command. He was forty-two. It is a remarkable tribute to his force of personality that 'Colonel Berger', as he styled himself after the hero of one of his novels, quickly persuaded Poirier, Hiller and others to treat him as an equal in their counsels. He began to travel with them around the region, addressing *maquisards* and attending conferences. He created the notion of a joint Anglo-French (and later, with the coming of OSS agents, American) council to bring together the Resistance groups of the region, with himself at its head. Malraux had left behind the mood of 1941, when he wrote that 'a German defeat would be a victory for the Anglo-Saxons, who will colonize the world and probably France . . .' But he was still Red enough to give the clenched fist salute. Chain-smoking English cigarettes from *parachutages* (a status symbol among *maquisards*), he would talk off-handedly yet at breakneck speed about 'old man Churchill', 'that chap De Gaulle', Chinese art, the acoustics of a château dining-room, 'occasionally interjecting "Your turn now!", which it was as well not to take too literally as an invitation to reply'. When later captured, he claimed to have declared himself to the Germans as 'the military chief of this region . . . I have nothing to confess. I have been your opponent since the day of the Armistice.' He also convinced himself that his captors were of the notorious Das Reich Division, although by then they were a month gone from the department.

The FTP regarded Malraux with withering scorn and took no notice whatever of his opinions, and even the AS had their reservations about him. But Malraux visibly enjoyed the confidence of the F Section officers, and encouraged the *résistants* to believe that he himself was an SOE-trained officer with important influence on *parachutages* and weapons and money supplies. By the summer of 1944, he had become a familiar figure to the *résistants* of the region.

Asked many years later about the lack of substance in Malraux's claims and achievements as a *résistant*, Jacques Poirier paused for a moment. Then he said: 'There are a few people born

in every century who are important not for what they do, but for what they say. Malraux was one of those.' All of them were mesmerized by his obsessive fluency, the torrent of ideas that flooded over their heads in conversation. Visiting the camps of bored young *maquisards* in the torrid heat of the summer woods, Poirier knew how to talk pragmatically to their leaders. But he watched fascinated as Malraux leaped on to the roof of a *gazogène* and harangued the guerillas about the glory of France, the dignity of struggle, the nobility of sacrifice. It was irresistible, and it brought tears to their eyes. Poirier quoted a favourite word of Malraux's – *un farfelu*, a compulsive activist who is also half-crazy. Malraux had for years been obsessed with the story of Lawrence of Arabia, and had himself always been a compulsive role-player. There is no doubt that while other Frenchmen in the woods of the Corrèze in 1944 thought of the next *parachutage*, the next cigarette, Malraux saw himself acting out a great heroic drama.

Some *maquisards* joked about his unsoldierly appearance – a certain physical clumsiness, one eye chronically weeping, Basque beret tilted, the constant sniffing. Poirier admitted that it was difficult to concentrate Malraux's attention on practical military problems. The SOE officer would urge: 'André, we must discuss the blowing of that bridge.' But Malraux would say: 'No, tonight I think I would prefer to hear Casimir play the piano.' And in the château that was now their headquarters, in the failing summer evening light Malraux would sit lost in thought, gazing at the ceiling, while their wireless operator played his brilliant repertoire of classical music surrounded by a little group of half-naked, half-literate *maquisards* lying beside their weapons.

But Malraux's personal courage was beyond question. One day, he and Poirier were driving together down a road when they were hailed by a *maquisard* who warned them of German vehicles ahead. Neither man wished to be the first to suggest turning back. Poirier drove nervously but defiantly onwards, until inevitably they rounded a bend to meet a German tank. Poirier desperately swung

the car in a screaming turn. Malraux seized the small automatic pistol from his belt and absurdly – yet to Poirier, also nobly – stood up and emptied it at the tank. Miraculously they escaped to tell the tale, although later that summer Malraux was less fortunate. He was with George Hiller in a car that ran headlong into a German column. Malraux was slightly injured and captured. Hiller was terribly wounded and was rescued, close to death, by Cyril Watney and a group of *maquisards*. He was operated upon under the most primitive circumstances in an abandoned presbytery high in the hills of the Lot, and narrowly survived. Malraux was delivered unscathed from imprisonment at the liberation of Toulouse, not without incurring the scepticism of some *résistants* who inquired acidly how he had ‘conned’ the Germans out of a firing squad.

That April with Poirier in Paris, Malraux had been as flamboyant as ever. He took him to dine at Prunier, relishing his immediate recognition by the head waiter. He introduced the young Frenchman to Camus as a British officer. Poirier began to be infected by the other man’s style. One morning, walking up the Champs-Élysées, he saw a huge German shepherd dog in the window of a pet shop, and knew instantly that he had to possess it. Ten minutes later and 10,000 francs of SOE’s money the poorer, he was leading it past the Arc de Triomphe when he met Malraux. Even the *farfelu*’s sense of discretion was appalled: ‘Jack, you’re crazy – you’re in Paris to *hide*.’ But Poirier would not be parted from the dog. He arranged for it to be taken down to the Dordogne, and all through that wild summer of 1944, Dick the dog rode with him on the wing of his car, trotted behind him through the camps in the woods, and slept in his room at the château where, with increasing confidence in their own power, the *maquisards* made their headquarters.

‘I was always a château type at heart,’ said Poirier wryly. In the weeks before D-Day, he and a band of Soleil’s *maquisards* took over the lovely Château le Poujade, set high on a hill above Urval, overlooking the great river and its irregular patchwork of fields

and vineyards in the distance. Only once were they disturbed by the Germans. Early one morning, a *maquisard* guard burst in to report that a German column led by armoured cars was crawling up the long, narrow road towards the château. Hastily they seized their weapons and took up position covering the approaches, conscious that their situation was desperate. But to their astonishment, halfway up the hill the Germans halted, paused, and then turned their vehicles and drove away. It seemed almost certain that they had seen the *maquisards'* movements. Yet by that phase, the Occupiers had become less than enthusiastic about meeting them head on, in battle. A large part of the contempt with which crack units such as the Das Reich regarded local garrison troops stemmed from the tacit enthusiasm of most security regiments for a policy of 'live and let live' with the Resistance. To German fighting units and to the zealots of the Gestapo, local German commanders often appeared absurdly anxious to placate French opinion, and contemptibly preoccupied with shipping produce and loot back to the Reich.

Poirier survived a dozen narrow escapes that spring. *Maquisards* in their camps in the woods were comparatively safe except in action. It was organizers and couriers, who were compelled to travel, who constantly risked capture. Meetings of any kind were a deadly risk: in November 1943, eleven local Resistance chiefs had been captured at a single conference in Montpazier.

There was a delicate balance to be struck between the need for speed and that for security. To walk or cycle was safer, but much too slow for the huge area Poirier had to cover. He generally employed *gazogènes*, which were designed by a Brive engineer, Maurice Arnhouil, who was one of the *maquis'* most enthusiastic – although also least discreet – supporters. Even the *gazos* were maddeningly sluggish, often needing to be pushed uphill by the combined efforts of every passenger except the driver. Once, stopped at a German roadblock, Poirier fed all his incriminating papers into the charcoal burner under the pretext of filling it with fuel. Although the Germans seldom now ventured far from main

roads and towns unless in punitive columns, as the aggressiveness of the Resistance increased, so did the enemy's nervousness and ferocity. 'From February 1944 onwards,' said Poirier, 'it became highly dangerous for anyone to fall into the hands of the German Army.' Racing through the sunlit hills, among the chickens scratching in the dust, the enchanting creeper-clad villages, it was easy to forget the terrible nature of their war. But when Poirier's friend and comrade Raymond Maréchal was seized by the Germans, they forced his hands into the charcoal furnace of a *gazogène* and held him against the burner until he died. They burned a hotel which they searched in vain for Poirier a few hours after he left it, on an inexplicable impulse, at 5 am one day.

The romantic aura surrounding Resistance, together with Poirier's gift for laughter, made it easy for him to attract girls but only very rarely did he sleep with those who were deeply involved in Resistance and utterly secure, 'more or less for health reasons, you know'. George Starr, his F Section counterpart further west, had no sexual relationship with any woman during his two years in Gascony, because he considered the security risk too great.

It is only human nature that, after the war, these men forgot the months of chronic tension, the habit that dogged Poirier for months after the Liberation of watching his back everywhere that he walked. They remembered the absurd moments. An excited *résistant* who had been a French air force pilot came to Poirier one day and reported that he had found an abandoned and forgotten Maubussin light aircraft at the nearby Belvès flying club. One extraordinary spring day, the two men took off in the aircraft and circled over Périgueux, hurling out propaganda leaflets. They returned to Belvès with the exulting pilot leapfrogging the Dordogne bridges. The terrified Poirier demanded to get out, and was duly landed. The pilot took off again and made a dramatic swoop upon the river bridge. Poirier heard the terrible noise of the crash, and raced miserably to the scene to drag out the pilot's body. Instead, he found the nonchalant young man

sitting on the bridge, smoking a cigarette and surveying the ruins of the aircraft: 'The Dordogne air force had made its first and last sortie.'

All the months that he had been in England and with Peulevé, Poirier had assumed that his father Robert, another dashing spirit who became a racing driver for a time after leaving the air force, was somewhere working for Resistance. But the two had no contact until one day Poirier was informed that he was to meet a man at the *bloc-gazo* works in Brive whom local *résistants* thought could be helpful. To his utter astonishment, he walked into the room to find himself face to face with his father. His first thought was to mutter urgently: 'Say nothing about our relationship!' He had concealed his real French identity very closely, even from Malraux. The two talked earnestly. Poirier's last words that night, before they went to bed, were: 'Father, if you stay to work with me, you must accept that I am the boss.' The next morning his father's first words were '*Bonjour, mon capitain.*' For the rest of the war Robert Poirier acted as secretary and administrative assistant to his son, without either man betraying a hint of the relationship to their colleagues.

As he toured the *maquis*, Poirier was indifferent to the political allegiances of each camp. Unlike some SOE officers, who would arm only those who would accept a measure of direction, and above all those who were not communist, Poirier cared only about how energetically they seemed likely to fight Germans. He overlooked the banditry by which some *maquis* existed, unless it appeared to threaten their security. Indeed, he was appalled one day to visit a *maquis* of Spaniards high in the hills – there were thousands of refugees from the Civil War all over southern France – and found them attempting literally to live off the land. They seemed to exist chiefly on nuts and wild plants. They were desperately hungry and passionately eager to fight fascists. At the end of the war, Poirier was deeply moved when their commander said to him: 'And now, *mon commandant*, will you ask Baker Street to begin their *parachutages* to us in Spain?' He loved the Spaniards,

and went so far as to relay their doomed request to London, deadpan.

‘For a long time, those who had least were the best *résistants*,’ said Poirier. The poor and the radical, those whom respectable citizens dismissed as troublemakers and drifters, sowed the seeds of Resistance. If there was a hierarchy of courage, those who came to Resistance in 1942 or 1943 – above all, before the great flood of recruits after D-Day – were at its summit. It may seem cynical or trite to remark that it is easier to abandon a workman’s flat or a peasant cottage than a *château*, in order to become a *maquisard*, but it proved overwhelmingly true. Those who possessed most had most to lose from German revenge. Many of the aristocrats who owned the *châteaux* of the Dordogne detested and feared the Resistance. Many of the bourgeoisie, deeply frightened by the Popular Front government of 1936, the 1½ million votes cast for the communists, the coming of such revolutionary spectres as paid holidays for workers, feared the *maquisards* as the harbingers of revolution. And indeed many *maquisards* themselves – not all of them communists – regarded Resistance as a revolutionary act, the spur to radical change in their society: ‘After the war, it will all be different . . .’ In French bourgeois terms, as Poirier remarked wryly, Robin Hood had been a dangerous bolshevik. Many small businessmen passionately believed that the experience of the 1930s had shown democracy to be a failure in France, a path to anarchy. German occupation was perfectly acceptable if it produced social and economic stability. Anti-semitism had always been deeply rooted in French society. Hatred of the British remained very strong among a significant number of Frenchmen throughout World War II, especially in French naval circles after the destruction of their fleet at Mers-El-Kebir. Beyond even those who were ideologically sympathetic to the Germans – a significant minority – a much larger number profited financially from coming to terms with the Occupation – the contractors, the black marketeers. Great landowners with estates held in their families for generations were passionately committed to preserving them,

even at some small moral cost. Unjust as it may seem, those among the aristocracy, the professionals, the bourgeois, the factory owners and the officials who supported Resistance must be awarded greater moral credit than their humbler countrymen, because they were few, and because they acted against the spirit and inclination of their class.

One of the most remarkable of these *résistants* was Poirier's professional neighbour in the Dordogne, known throughout the countryside as 'Edgar', but in reality Baron Philippe de Gunzbourg. The de Gunzbourgs were a Russian Jewish family, bankers and landowners who acquired a Hessian title and moved to Paris in the early years of the century. Philippe's grandfather achieved an enormous coup by taking a founding interest along with the Rothschilds in the Dutch Shell company. His father consolidated the fortune by marrying an immensely rich bourgeois wife. Philippe himself, born in 1904, grew up rich, spoilt and essentially rootless, torn between his French and Jewish loyalties. There was a procession of family tragedies: his brother died, a sister was killed in a riding accident in England. Philippe was destined for Eton, but after a family change of heart went to a Paris *lycée*, and later spent a few terms at Oxford. In his early twenties he married a *demi-mondaine* twenty years older than himself, an absurd alliance which was quickly terminated. He explored all the traditional extravagances of rich, reckless young men, flying aircraft and racing cars between bursts of high living. He married a second time, more happily, a French Jewish girl with whom he went on a prolonged round-the-world honeymoon and had four children. Then he began to lead a more settled existence, with a Paris house and a large ugly mansion which he bought in the Lot-et-Garonne because he felt a growing sympathy for the countryside and its peasants.

But as he approached forty, he felt no closer to achieving an identity. The most consistent strand in his life was his feeling for England. He had been reared by an English nanny, taken constantly to England on visits, bought all his clothes in London, and

had been taught by his father 'to believe that England, and the British Empire, were the greatest institutions in the world'. He was living in the Lot-et-Garonne – in the Unoccupied Zone – when the Germans swept across France, and the rest of his family prudently fled to America. One of their English nannies remained defiantly at their Paris house throughout the war on the grounds that she had to protect the family's possessions, and twice defied arrest and interrogation by the *milice*. In the south, the de Gunzbourgs listened reverently to the BBC each night, and shared the house with 'the living embodiment of the British Empire', their own nanny Alice Joyce who regarded all Germans with withering scorn, and throughout the war declined to speak any tongue but her own.

As the months passed, de Gunzbourg reflected more and more deeply about his own position. He became convinced that he must play some active role in the struggle against the Germans and Vichy. He contacted like-minded friends in Toulouse, and one day in September 1942 one of them telephoned and asked him to come down: 'There's somebody here that I think you should meet.' In the back room of a scruffy little bar in Toulouse, he was introduced to an intensely English young man lolling back in his chair who asked him simply: 'Why do you want to help?'

'Because for me, England is the only country in the world,' said de Gunzbourg, 'above all the only one fighting the Germans.' He talked of his own horror of the French elite – the politicians, the magistrates, the generals. Two weeks later, he heard that he had been successfully 'checked out' by the Englishman, one of SOE's early agents in the region, Maurice Pertschuk, 'Eugène'. De Gunzbourg entered the secret war, carrying messages and seeking out recruits. Eugène began to visit de Gunzbourg's home. He loved to eat Yorkshire pudding made by Nanny, and beyond this it became rapidly apparent that the young Englishman was obsessed with de Gunzbourg's beautiful wife, Antoinette. The Frenchman was less disturbed by this than by the agent's reckless lack of security. They began to hear stories of the leaders of the *réseau*

sharing noisy tables at the best black market restaurants in Toulouse, of Pertschuk's wireless operator living with his girlfriend in a château outside the city. It was an operational style which could lead to only one conclusion: Pertschuk, his wireless operator and several of their key colleagues were betrayed, captured, and killed in a German concentration camp.

De Gunzbourg survived, but he was now a fugitive. He dispatched his wife and children to safety in Switzerland, and began a life that was to continue until the Liberation as a gypsy without a home, without possessions, whose only life was that of Resistance. This playboy who before the war had driven only the fastest cars that money could buy began to travel south-west France by bicycle, covering 15,000 miles before the war was over. In the first months of 1943, he could achieve little amidst the wreckage of Pertschuk's circuit. But one evening in May, in the house of a little railway worker in Agen, he met French Section's new agent in Gascony. This was a man of utterly different stamp from Pertschuk, the extraordinary George Starr, 'Hilaire', who by the Liberation controlled a vast sweep of Gascony. A chunky former mining engineer from north Staffordshire whose false teeth gave him a permanent twisted grin, Starr inspired immediate confidence despite his atrocious French accent.

De Gunzbourg became his principal organizer in the Dordogne, while the Englishman concentrated his efforts on the Gers and the Landes. He learnt to assemble *plastique* charges, and arranged the first of many major sabotage operations against locomotives at Eymet, Bergerac and other key rail centres on New Year's Eve 1943. He taught dozens of eager little groups of *résistants* the techniques of receiving *parachutages*, lighting bonfires to a prearranged pattern on a receipt of a *message personnel* from the BBC (and by now each night scores of unarmed *résistants* the length of France lit bonfires whenever they heard an aircraft, in the hope of intercepting a silken bounty). Maurice Loupias, 'Bergeret', a local official in Bergerac who became one of the key AS leaders of the region, has vividly described 'a farmhouse with

twenty silent peasants listening in religious silence to Philibert explaining *parachutage* drill, puffing their pipes by the fireplace as he described the method of folding the canopies'. Bergeret called de Gunzbourg 'the principal artisan of our victory'.

De Gunzbourg also believed from what Starr had told him that they could expect parachute landings by Allied troops within days of the main invasion. Whether or not his understanding was correct, in his own mind the importance of seizing and holding a perimeter on D-Day became as dominant as among the *maquisards* of the Vercors. Like most Allied agents, de Gunzbourg found his recruits willing enough to listen to any man who could influence the coming of arms and money. Some were irked by his open devotion to the English – after the invasion, there were some sour jokes about his appearance in British boots. There were still many Frenchmen who wished to keep the British at arm's length. Despite his codename, de Gunzbourg was obviously an aristocrat and a Jew, and there were many *résistants* who loathed both. Some also felt that he was too assertive in giving orders. But it is a remarkable tribute to his dedication and personality that he was able to coordinate Resistance in the western Dordogne so effectively, without training or military experience.

Some regarded the latter as a positive merit: 'We'll follow you because you're less of a "con" than the others,' shrugged one group of peasant recruits, but they added – 'if you start using the *naphthalinés*, we will never go with you!' One of the strongest prejudices among many French *résistants* was that against the 'mothball brigade', former French officers who sought to take belated command of *maquis* now that the tide had turned decisively towards the Allies. The ORA, the Resistance movement founded by former officers, never achieved much support or success, and survived until the Liberation only because the Americans developed an unfounded faith in its future. It is also worth remembering that not all *résistants* in early 1944 were enthralled by De Gaulle, and many did not even know what he looked like. But some did. De Gunzbourg never forgot a *résistant's* wife declar-

ing to him passionately one night, '*Oh, M. Philibert, je suis amoureuse, je suis amoureuse de Général De Gaulle!*'

For all its discomforts and dangers, and the months spent in peasant cottages and workmen's flats without even a passing encounter with a man or woman with whom he might find enough in common to relax socially or mentally, de Gunzbourg enjoyed his war: 'I had thought that I was incapable of doing anything with my life, and I discovered that there was something I could contribute. It gave me a purpose.' He developed great respect for the peasants of south-west France, and above all for their wives, whose discretion and influence were so formidable. By the spring of 1944, de Gunzbourg was in touch with *réseaux* from Bergerac in the west to Sarlat in the east, and south towards Toulouse and Auch. It is a measure of the isolation in which most circuits worked that, although he was sometimes within a few miles of Jacques Poirier, neither man was aware of the other's legitimacy. Each simply heard reports of another alleged agent operating in what he considered his own territory. Starr told de Gunzbourg laconically that if the mysterious 'agent' who was said to be causing difficulties over-reached himself, it might be simplest to have him killed. By the same token, Soleil was enraged to hear that de Gunzbourg was 'poaching', and swore that he would shoot him if they met. The only relevance of these mildly silly exchanges is that they show the fog and confusion in which Resistance existed. Each group was an uncharted island upon an ocean. It was safer so, but it caused much bewilderment.

Over most of the south-west, George Starr had fewer such problems because he was unchallenged overlord, with half a dozen British-trained couriers and instructors, and a much greater degree of control over local Resistance than most of F's agents achieved. He was also an exceptional personality – '*un homme du métier*', de Gunzbourg called him, '*un grand chef, de la classe de Lawrence*'.

Starr was the son of an English mother and American father who owned a circus which travelled the length of Europe. He was

educated at Ardingly public school, and studied mining at London University. He was a cosmopolitan, but he retained the accent and earthy hardiness of northern England. Through the 1930s he travelled Europe as a mining engineer, providing occasional reports to British Intelligence as a sideline. On 10 May 1940 he was down a mine near Liège when the Germans invaded Belgium. He beat a hasty retreat to England through Dunkirk, joined the army, and spent a year as a sergeant commanding the carrier pigeon section of Phantom, the GHQ Reconnaissance Unit based in St James's Park in London. It was there that he received a summons to Selwyn Jepson of SOE, who asked if he would go to France. 'Only if I choose where I go,' said this dour little man. He refused to work in an area where he had friends, and might be recognized. After the usual training in the black arts, one night early in November 1942 he landed by felucca on the Mediterranean coast of France, near Marseille. On the beach to meet him he found his own brother, John, who was already an F Section agent, and who presented him with a ration card and other essential forged paperwork.

George Starr had been ordered to go to Lyon, '... but I didn't like the look of it. The whole situation had the wrong smell about it.' His instincts were correct. The network to which he had been assigned was extensively penetrated by the Germans, and was crumbling rapidly. At the suggestion of Peter Churchill, Starr instead moved west, into the Lot-et-Garonne. These were still the most dangerous days of the Resistance, when agents were compelled to feel their way through France 'by guess and by God'. Each man embarked on a process of exploring initial contacts, as sensitive and dangerous as dismantling an unexploded bomb. An agent's most priceless gift was luck, as again and again he exposed himself to men and women of unproven loyalty. To touch the wrong connection was usually fatal. There were occasional sabotage operations and spasmodic arms drops, but most of the work in 1942-3 was a long, unglamorous struggle to turn a thousand

isolated groups of Frenchmen hostile to the Nazis into a coherent underground movement.

Starr's luck held. He reached Lot-et-Garonne with one contact address, which proved welcoming. He began to meet potential local helpers. His first priority was to gain radio contact with London – he had brought with him only an S-phone, by which he could establish short-range voice communication with an overhead aircraft. With some difficulty, he passed a message to London through another, distant agent, giving a rendezvous. Gerry Morel, F's operations officer, flew in person over the dropping zone and talked to Starr on the S-phone. When he asked for some evidence of identity, the blast of Staffordshire blasphemy satisfied him. Starr got his radio, and soon began to receive arms.

One of the key rules of clandestine life was 'Keep moving'. But Starr broke it successfully when he set up his headquarters in the little corner house by the church in the hamlet of Castelnau-sur-l'Avignon, some twenty-five miles west of the Das Reich Division's cantonment area. Gascony had a deep-rooted tradition of resistance to authority, even from Paris. The peasant smallholders who farmed their tobacco among the gentle hills, living in villages without paved roads or piped water, were intensely hostile to the Germans. Starr's host, the taciturn, moustachioed Roger Laribeau, was mayor of Castelnau. He made Starr, in his cover as Gaston, a retired Belgian mining engineer, deputy mayor. This chiefly gave him access to the immense range of permits needed for the smallest action or movement in Occupied France. The Englishman began to travel the countryside by train, bicycle, and '*peut-peut*' motor bicycle, as far eastwards as Toulouse, west into the coastal forests of the Landes, north to Bergerac. When he met *résistants*, he tried to convey an impression that he merely bore orders from a senior officer, but they knew him always as '*Le Patron*'. He had a strong streak of peasant cunning himself, and the maturity and judgment gained in twenty years of directing mining operations. 'Building a network,' said Starr, 'is like making a ladder. You fix

one rung. You stand on it. You jump on it. If it holds, you build the next one. It takes time. The people who wanted to do it in five minutes got caught. I was bloody lucky.'

Baker Street soon recognized the quality of the circuit Starr was creating – Wheelwright, as they knew it. In August 1943 a thirty-four-year-old WAAF named Annette Cormeau was parachuted to join him as a wireless operator. She was the daughter of a British consular official who had been educated in Europe and was working as a secretary in Brussels in 1937 when she met and married a half-Belgian, half-English accountancy student. They had a daughter in 1938, and she was expecting another baby when a German bomb struck their flat in London in November 1940. Her husband, by then a British soldier, was killed. She herself was badly injured and miscarried. When she recovered, she joined the WAAF, and was serving in the operations room of a bomber station when she was called to London to see Selwyn Jepson.

She was troubled about leaving her daughter, but very eager to play a larger part in the war. She joined a training course with a group of F Section girls, most of whom were later killed by the Germans. They were worked hard. In their free time, 'we used to discuss very feminine things – would we be able to carry off wearing high heels after so long in flat service shoes? We spent a lot of time talking to exiled Frenchmen on the course about conditions in France. We had our pub crawls, and sometimes everybody went haywire, but generally the atmosphere was very serious.' There was a three-week wireless course at Thame Park – 'Station 52' – then the tradecraft course in security at Beaulieu in Hampshire, which Annette found less exacting than she had expected – 'They didn't want to frighten us off.' Every few weeks, she took a train to Bristol to see her five-year-old daughter. One day the little girl came to London, to wave her mother goodbye as she got into a taxi. There were no tears, for no one told her that it would be more than a year before they met again, and that from the taxi Annette was to be transferred to a car for Tempsford, and then France.

Much has been written about the dangers of life as a secret agent – and it must be remembered that, statistically, F Section's men and women fared rather better for casualties in France than a front-line infantry battalion. But little has been said about the tedium and discomfort of living for months in humble surroundings, without personal friends, with only peasant hosts for company. Starr scorned any notion of finding romance in his work, and although it was part of their cover that Annette was his mistress, their relationship was entirely professional. Selwyn Jepson said that when he chose agents, he looked for people who had seen something of the world, discovered their own strengths and limitations, and learned self-reliance. Annette sometimes found the boredom of the tiny hamlet stifling. She helped with the cows and the babies and the housework, and dressed in the same simple peasant clothes. She and Starr were exasperated by a courier once sent from London, a very pretty girl who insisted on wearing high Paris fashion at every opportunity. The most important element in their security was inconspicuousness. Most nights Annette listened to the radio to stay awake until the time came for her own transmitting schedule. She picked up South American stations, and sometimes RAF weather aircraft in the Bay of Biscay. 'Air temperature L-Love', they reported cryptically. She never discovered whether this was hot or cold. Then, at the prearranged moment, she tapped out her own message of 100 or 150 words – fifteen or twenty minutes of transmission time. The set, hidden behind her bed, was powered by six-volt car batteries, because the Germans had an irksome habit of switching off power in rotation to every village when their direction finders picked up a transmission. If there was a break in the morse, they had pinpointed their set.

Unlike Annette, Starr seemed to enjoy the long evenings at the kitchen table, sitting with his head in his hands while the soup pot simmered over the huge fireplace, talking about crops, beasts and wine. Sometimes he lent a hand at the back-breaking business of tending the tobacco fields. He had a bottomless stock

of anecdotes about England and earthy jokes that delighted the villagers. Sometimes, when there was urgent work to be done, he tugged insistently at his beret in tension and excitement. But never, even after the fiercest evening with the villagers and their formidable capacity for Armagnac, did he betray the slightest indiscretion. Starr was a natural secret agent.

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There is just one other Englishman to be mentioned here – of them all, the agent closest to the heart of the Das Reich Division, indeed the only one who had walked and driven past the lagers and vehicle parks of 2nd SS Panzer Division in the months that they lay around Montauban. One night, Germans interrupted a *parachutage*, and he was compelled to spend hours taking refuge in a tree while they talked and searched beneath him. The troops were very probably of the Das Reich. The agent was a twenty-two-year-old veteran named Tony Brooks.

Brooks was an Englishman brought up in Switzerland and living in the Jura at the outbreak of war. Like Jacques Poirier, he became involved in an escape line, in his case in Marseille, and himself walked over the Pyrenees in the autumn of 1941, reached England and offered himself to SOE. In July 1942, just turned twenty, he was given a crash course in French trades unionism and parachuted into France with instructions to explore the creation of a *réseau* based on the railway workers of southern France. He spent the next two years – an extraordinary lifespan for an agent in Occupied territory – establishing a marvellously successful network among the *cheminots* who, all over the country, provided some of the most dedicated recruits for Resistance.

The Germans fought unceasingly and unsuccessfully to stop the railways being used for the transport of fugitives on engines and as centres of sabotage. Every rail yard in France bore signs: 'AVERTISSEMENT: PEINE DE MORT CONTRE LES SABOTEURS. POUR LE PAYS, POUR TA FAMILLE, POUR TON RAVITAILLEMENT, POUR TOI, CHEMINOT, IL FAUT ENGAGER ET GAGNER LA LUTTE CONTRE

LA SABOTAGE.' The rail workers were the most valuable saboteurs of all, because they knew exactly what to hit to achieve most damage without permanently wrecking the railways of France, as opposed to the Allied bombings 'which did more harm than good', as their official historian remarked acidly. They were also exasperated by the extravagant, irrelevant demolitions of the FTP, which destroyed viaducts and installations which would take literally years to rebuild. They believed there was a better way.

Brooks was blessed with a natural sense of security, working with small cells each of which remained unaware of each other's existence. He preserved one refuge for himself in Lyon of which he informed not a single soul. 'So English, so careful,' said a respectful French officer who met him in 1944. Weeks before D-Day, Brooks had established that the key to the movement of heavy armour from southern France by rail was the limited stock of flatcars capable of passing under the nation's bridges laden with tanks. He had pinpointed the whereabouts of most of them. In the days before 6 June, he and some of his enthusiastic *cheminots* spent many hours of many nights working on their axle bearings with abrasive paste supplied from London. They were now incapable of travelling more than a matter of miles before seizing. Like Starr and de Gunzbourg, Brooks had also briefed his saboteurs in great detail about *Plan Vert*. At his safe house in Toulouse in the first days of June 1944, Brooks felt tolerably confident that if German reinforcements were moving north in the wake of D-Day, it was most unlikely that they would be doing so by train.