

A little piece of History

Captain R G (Ron) Taylor

In the report of our formal functions we mentioned that we were pleased to welcome the sons of one of our Past Master's, R G Taylor Esq, who had had a fascinating involvement with SOE during WWII and is pictured below both as he was in 1944/5 and as our Master in 1985/86. His exploits as part of SOE during World War II were recently recognised by Brighton and Hove Council when they awarded him Blue Plaque status in a ceremony that was attended by our Middle Warden, Mike Parrett.



Ron was born in Brighton in 1916. After attending Varndean Grammar School, he obtained an external University of London BSc(Eng) degree at Brighton Technical College, and joined AE Watson as structural designer. During the War, Ron served in the Royal Engineers, rising from Sapper to Captain. He worked on the original Bailey Bridge at the Military Engineering Experimental Establishment, and in 1943 joined the Special Operations Executive. In 1944, Ron parachuted into occupied North-east Italy, and spent five months blowing up trains with the partisans. After the war, he was in public works with the Allied Military Government in Trieste until 1946, when he rejoined AE Watson as technical manager. Ron spent a short period as a lecturer at his old college, and in 1948 joined Costain John Brown Ltd. There followed a period with Tubewrights Ltd as a development engineer, then Ron went to Stewarts & Lloyds, later part of British Steel Tubes Division. He had a major hand in developing and establishing structural engineering with tubes and hollow sections, notably the Boeing 747 hangar at Heathrow airport. Ron left British Steel at the age of 59, and set up his own practice as a consulting engineer. Ron was a member of the Council of the Institution of Structural Engineers, and a Visiting Professor in the Department of Civil Engineering at Surrey University. He was Master Constructor 1985/86 and he continued to work into his eighties, passing away in 2002 at the age of 86.

Thirty years ago, in April 1987, Ron took part in a special conference held under the auspices of the University of Bolgna, at which he described some of his SOE work during WWII. The mission he was on was arranged to drop into an existing mission in Friuli with the special duty of carrying out acts of subversive activity and sabotage in the zone. The mission consisted of Lieutenant Ronald Taylor, Lieutenant R. David Godwin and Corporal Mickie Trent (Gyurie). Corporal Trent, a Hungarian by birth, could speak twelve different languages reasonably fluently.

His paper to the conference said "The drop took place on 13 August 1944. The landing ground was sited at the summit of Mount Joannis and although the line of fires was locally shielded by the uneven terrain their glow could be seen for miles. It was quite certain therefore that everyone, including the enemy, knew what was happening. The flight was in an unarmed Dakota aircraft on a perfect night and the pilot dropped us all within a few metres of the fires. My arrival was greeted with enthusiasm by an Italian partisan who kissed me on both cheeks. I was glad it was dark — that had never happened to me before!

At first light, we descended to Canebola where we became objects of interest and curiosity. Arms, ammunition and plastic explosives were dropped at the same time.

Lieutenant Godwin spoke fluent Spanish and was able to communicate reasonably well with the partisans whereas my initial effort at instruction in the use of explosives was largely by sign language. This did not hinder our efforts and to assure our HQ of our safe arrival several kilometres of high tension pylons were cut down in the first week throwing a large area of Friuli into darkness, as, in our ignorance, we had cut the weak link in the electricity supply grid.

We then set about the formal training of saboteurs. Training courses lasting three or four days were held in village schools or in the open at various centres in the zone. After that the successful students would be given a job to do and having passed the test were entitled to wear with pride the appropriate badge. We received a message from our HQ stating that "From this day onwards the RAF will keep the Brenner Pass closed to through traffic. Kindly do the same to yours." Such an order could not have been more appropriate to the disruption of the Pontebba line which at that time carried enormous quantities of supplies to the front and, additionally, was the route by which much war-booty was to leave Italy. Partisans were trained, in complete darkness, to place prepared charges on the railway lines in a matter of seconds. The first attempt failed when the explosive cut a hole in the web of the rail and a troop train passed safely over it. There are probably a few hundred Germans alive today who do not realise how lucky they were. No mistakes occurred after that and the number of disruptions was so great that instead of reporting each one as it happened we sent in a weekly summary of sabotage. Apart from the railway line, other targets were hit, on occasion, by reporting them to the RAF as suitable targets for fighter bombers. So intensive were these activities in the area of Reana that the railway line was fully patrolled by the enemy between strong points at regular intervals but without success. The areas around any derailed trains were planted with delayed action time-pencil explosives which, on detonating, in the following days caused all the Todt labour force to down tools. By those means the line could be kept closed for longer periods.

The enemy began patrolling the front line of our zone with irregular but increasing force, using Cossacks, one detachment of which based themselves at Nimis. This was a hindrance to road communications by our newly acquired fleet of motorcycles and it was decided to remove the nuisance. We possessed no heavy equipment but had a few Italian mortars and a wide variety of automatic weapons, most of which were supplied by almost nightly drops on the landing ground at Mount Joannis. Hand-made 'grenades' (old cigarette tins filled with plastic explosive) were made. After some five days of intense activity the final assault took place and the Cossacks surrendered.

It was just as well they did because of the difficulty of supplying our frontline forces. Most supplies having been dropped overnight were carried by Friulan women across country to the partisans the next morning.



By this time, we had several trained groups working at specific intervals and their nuisance value was such that, inevitably, the enemy had to do something about it. Our intelligence organisation covered most troop movements and the whole of north-east Italy and we learned that a rastrellamento (search) was to take place using Fascist forces and Cossacks supported by Jaegar troops on the way to the main front from Germany with all the necessary armour and weaponry. We therefore decided to turn our zone into a protected area with defence in depth. Roads and bridges were mined, roadblocks built and points of weakness covered. One bridge over the railway was demolished as a south-bound train passed under it, cutting it in a half. The repair train the next day and the mobile railway crane the day after were each derailed in turn causing chaos locally.

Early in August the nearest enemy HQ was at Faedis but this soon moved out in the interests of its own safety and our HQ was moved from Stremis to Forame where we occupied part of the first floor of a house at a bend in the road. Here we took the unusual opportunity of raising and lowering the Union Jack at the appropriate times daily, much to our pleasure and that of our Italian friends.

None of this activity could have been possible without the full support, unstinting assistance and great courage of the Italian partisans and particularly the Friulani — a people which we, the 'Missione Inglese', learned to respect and admire. Surely, they suffered not only in their daily lives but also through the terrifying visits and actions of the Cossacks. No home was safe, no woman or child respected. Anyone known or suspected of supporting our cause would be dealt with in brutal fashion without mercy. Yet not once were we betrayed and we were always made welcome with the richest reception in the poorest homes.

Our stay in Forame came to an abrupt end on 2 October 1944 when, in the afternoon, we were almost surrounded and, in any event, running short of ammunition. God was on our side and the rain poured down turning the early evening into premature darkness and that night a substantial part of the partisan forces and all the English mission crossed the Natisone to the East. We marched for 36 hours in non-stop rain through forests as black as ink — so dark that each man held the tail of the man in front and no-one could see his own feet. Friulan guides must rank with the best in the world — no Indian could have done better.

Ten days later — ten days without radio communications to our HQ — we returned with a nucleus of partisans back over a tiny bridge across the Natisone which was now a raging torrent. Sergeant MacDonnell recovered a battery hidden for us by a local villager under some chestnuts and within 30 seconds had restored communications. Now we had to keep on the move — most trees in our area were deciduous and the first snow had already arrived. Army orders proposed a toning down of activity in anticipation of the final efforts in the next spring. Sabotage was restricted to the occasional but regular derailment of trains and the demolition of existing workshops primed to make machines and parts for the enemy. Not all our plans were successful. One major act of sabotage to destroy a fleet of locomotives, a substation, railway bridges and crossing points, although meticulously planned, and confirmed through special messages by the BBC, failed through poor communication at main army HQ and 40 or so brave men were put at risk. Some were captured and died in the attempt. The English mission was both dismayed and furious at the let-down yet remarkably not once, either then or since, has any partisan expressed hostility over that failure. Sadness, regret, anger, yes, but directed more in sympathy with us than antagonism. Such is the measure of our mutual respect — even now.

With reduced activity and receipt of a most welcome radio- message detailing the line of the Allied Advance in the 'Spring Offensive' we were asked to provide information and intelligence related to that movement.

The response to that request was prompt and efficient. Details of strong points, armaments, bridges and on occasion even the reinforcement and thickness of concrete were provided for a wide area. A town plan of Udine was produced giving every enemy location. All this in addition to reported troop movements continuing through this period.

Winter was biting hard, some partisans were without proper protection and footwear — we managed, remarkably, with normal army issue uniform, including string vests which were not changed for months. New Year's Eve at the end of 1944 was spent in a little mountain hut two metres below snow level on the saddle of a mountain overlooking Cividale, where, to the amazement of those partisans present, we insisted on singing and their joining in the traditional Auld Lang Syne. We felt better after that.

We had lost Mickie Trent reported killed by an enemy patrol while east of the Natisone. It was time for us to return. On 12 January 1945, we started on foot from Friuli via the Osoppo HQ at the malghe (alpine huts) of Porzus towards the east and Slovene 9th Corps. At the malghe I was fortunate to have my frozen foot rescued with no worse than a frostbitten toe through the prompt action and expert knowledge of partisans who had served in mountain warfare with the Alpini in Greece.

Later, after a month's cross-country journey through much fresh snow, some mountains and many hills, mostly uphill it seemed, we arrived at Cmornolj in Yugoslavia and on 18 February 1945 were flown back to our side of the main front line.

My recollection of those days, above all, remind me of a people determined to achieve victory with little regard for their own personal suffering.

Through them we have established bonds of friendship that will endure beyond our lives through sons and daughters who are already carrying on the collaboration established by their English mission.

On odd occasions, in the winter, the tip of my big toe burns and I remember those times as if it were yesterday."