

OBSERVER

Secret life of the Sussex

UNTIL recently, visitors to Paris could have stumbled on a clue to one of the best-kept secrets of World War Two. In the rue Tournefort was a small bar, Le Café du Réseau Sussex, owned by Mme Andree Goubillon, now in her 80s. After the war, it was renamed after one of MI6's most secret operations, 'Sussex', for which it was the Paris base.

This operation was conceived during 1943, when the Allies needed every bit of information about the enemy's movements as they planned the D-Day landings. Most of the intelligence-gathering networks, including the Special Operations Executive (SOE) and French Intelligence, had been infiltrated, and although the Allies had cracked the German codes and forced the enemy to communicate by wireless by destroying the telephone system, there was always the possibility that the Germans would change ciphers just before the invasion.

By 1943 all Allied intelligence networks had been cracked, so a new one, secret till now, was set up. PATRICIA CLEVELAND-PECK met survivors.

It was decided to create an entirely separate network, using agents new to undercover work. Another innovation was to be the use of the 'phonie' or 'S-phonie', a special telephone through which an operator could communicate with a plane hovering 10,000 feet above.

The original initiative was tripartite. Kenneth Cohen of British SIS (Secret Intelligence Service), and Francis Pickens Miller of American OSS (Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA), were joined by Gilbert Renault, known as Colonel Remy, who found French-speaking recruits.

The agents were to watch some 50 strategic points in an area behind the Channel from Finistère to Belgium, reporting

on troop movements, rail and motor routes used by the enemy, etc.

Remy went to North Africa to recruit among the French who had escaped from occupied France. Others came from Spain. All had to pass a rigorous check by British Intelligence at the Victoria School Intelligence Centre in London before moving on to special training at St Albans.

Guy Wingate, now retired in Hampshire, was made a staff officer for 'Sussex' because he spoke perfect French. He was born in Paris, where his father owned an interior decorating firm, and after studying architecture, he joined the British Army at the outbreak of war. He was part of the British Expeditionary Force in 1939-40 and was evacuated

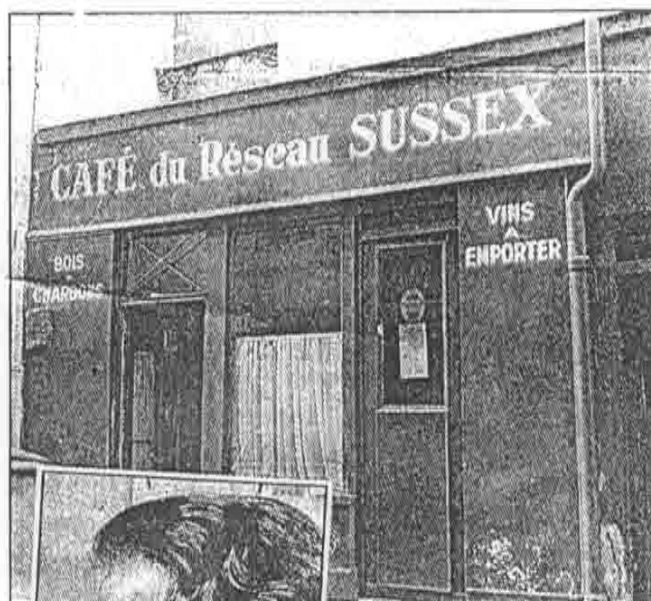
from France at Dunkirk.

Of the Sussex unit, Guy Wingate says: "There were about 150 Frenchmen and women under the command of our skipper, the late Colonel Malcolm Henderson, in St Albans. The administrative headquarters was in a house called Glenalmond (now an old people's home)."

The recruits lived at Praewood, just up the road, and most of the field training took place in its grounds. This included unarmed combat, gun handling, and grenade-throwing. "I remember going to pick up the grenades which hadn't gone off," says Guy wryly. "We couldn't afford to waste them."

Night map-reading was also learnt, to the alarm of the locals at first, who thought the young people roaring around on motor bikes were German spies. But relations between the local population and Sussex were good, even when hordes of Frenchmen invaded the pubs, the Fighting Cocks and the White Hart. A couple of them even married local girls.

At first, it had been decided to parachute the teams into the occupied zone 'blind', i.e. with



Café Réseau, Paris base for 'Sussex', and Mme Goubillon, its proprietor.

no sort of reception or any safe house to stay in. Remy, who had run his own Resistance network, rejected this as too dangerous. He proposed that some of his own agents, who were 'burning to get back to France', should go ahead, on a mission to be known as 'Pathfinder', to prepare the ground. One of these agents was Jeannette Guyot, who, with Jacques Saubestre, Paul Binet and Georges Lasalle, was parachuted into occupied France in the bitterly cold early months of 1944. In a letter to Remy she describes her arrival.

"I landed pretty heavily as the wind was strong, got rid of my gear and found myself in bright moonlight. I waited a while and suddenly saw a man arrive. "All right, old chap?" he whispered and then looking at me closely he added, "Oh sorry, this is the first time a woman's dropped in on us."

Jeannette made her way to Paris to look for safe houses. She had a friend whose husband had been taken prisoner: the young Andree Goubillon, who owned a café in the 5th arrondissement. Jeannette went there.

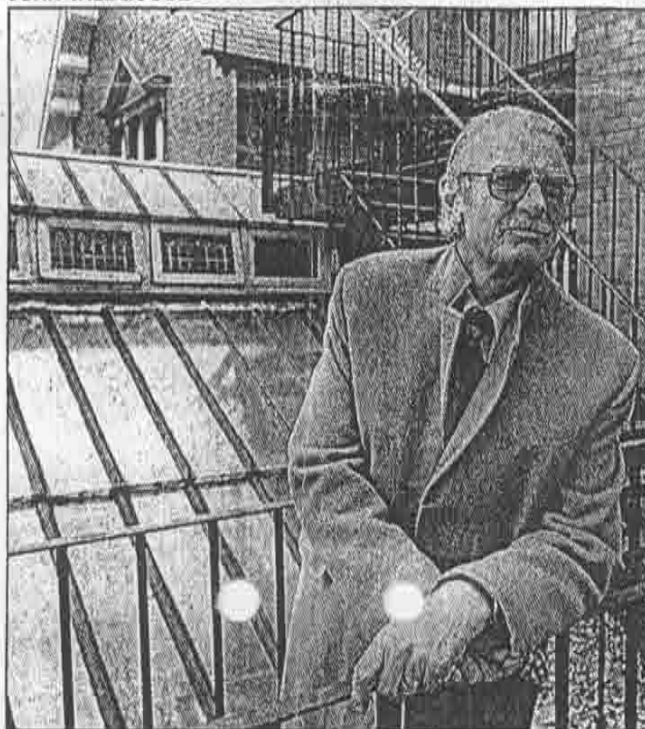
"I remember she came into the bar," Mme Goubillon told me in her Paris flat. "I knew she did this sort of work, and when she asked me, I agreed without the slightest hesitation. Although there was a Gestapo post just down the road I knew I wanted to do it. I was not afraid."

And so began the dangerous job of sheltering the Sussex teams. The young agents who turned up at the café would say, "Bonjour ma tante, comment va mon oncle?" (Hello auntie, how is uncle?) and show Mme Goubillon a snapshot of a baby. This baby, known as 'Mic-Mac', was one of Colonel Remy's children.

One day, seven men and a cache of arms were hidden in the tiny cellar when a German soldier came in. "If he had been any trouble," says Mme Goubillon, "I would have knocked him on the head and pushed him down the well; but all he wanted was a glass of white wine and a chat about his wife and children."

She had to feed her extended family in the near-starvation of Paris. "People were good. They knew something was going on, no questions asked, and supplied

JOHN WILDGOOSE



Guy Wingate at the former Sussex Operations HQ in St Albans and (inset) in 1943.

me with extras here and there."

One of her Sussex 'boys' is William Bechtel, now 93 and living in Les Invalides. Ex-Legionnaire and veteran of Bir-Hakeim, he was one of the first to be parachuted into France.

Installed in Rouen, where he had managed to recruit several sub-agents, M Bechtel received a request to relay exact information on troop movements for 48 hours from the night of 5 August 1944. He found a bicycle and set off after a long convoy of German vehicles moving towards Rouen.

With the cheek of a devil, he hung on to the back of one of the lorries as it climbed a hill. "One of the NCOs shouted, "los, los," (get off, get off) remembers M Bechtel, "but I replied "Ich bin Elsasser" (I am from Alsace) and got into conversation with them. I was just congratulating myself that the tow they were giving me would help me to transmit to London in good time when . . ."

The wheel of the bike caught in a shell crater and M Bechtel and the bike parted company violently. "The pain was terrible,

but I knew that if the Germans searched me they would find all sorts of papers. The lorry I'd been hanging on to was slowing down to see how I was. There was nothing for it: I got up and walked a few yards, waving to the soldiers and saying "Es geht, kein Problem", and to my relief they drove off."

Luckily M Bechtel was found by a sympathiser, who took him to a discreet clinic. He had fractured the neck of a femur. In spite of this, Bechtel reorganised his network so that sub-agents called on him daily, and not once did he fail to get his message through to London punctually. After the RAF loosed 150 rockets on German vehicles, destroying General von Kluge's Seventh Army, he was able to signal London from his bed on a fifth floor: "Apart from me and my equipment, there's not a military objective left in Rouen."

Constant danger

All the agents in the Sussex network were in constant and very real danger. The most tragic incident involved six young agents, including 22-year-old Evelyne Clopet. Guy Wingate



remembers her as a 'blonde cheerful girl admired by all'. The Germans were in retreat, and Resistance workers had procured a German lorry for these three Sussex teams.

On 9 August 1944, this lorry was stopped by some fleeing German soldiers, who, astonished to see it driven by civilians, demanded the occupants' papers. The false papers were in order, but none of the recruits spoke German.

The soldiers began to suspect that they had stolen the lorry, and got them out at gunpoint. Even then they might have got away with it if the soldiers had not searched the lorry, but arms and transmitters were found. The agents were told to get back into the lorry and the Germans drove them at top speed towards Vendôme. During the journey two of the agents managed to tear up papers and throw them out of the window, and on arrival one ran away, but the others were taken by the Feldgendarmen and tortured.

Evelyne was seen by a woman employee unconscious on the ground with a rifle bruise on her forehead, her legs scoured by a whip. None of them gave anything away, and at 1.30 in the morning they were taken to a quarry near the Paris road and

Most missions, however, were successful. If the main purpose of the operation was as an insurance against a last-minute cipher change by the enemy, some very real information was relayed too. The Sussex team at Evreux relayed Field Marshal Rommel's movements from La Roche Guyon which resulted in an RAF raid within minutes. Sussex teams also gave confirmation of the precise V1 rocket sites in Northern France.

Guy Wingate sailed into Normandy in a fishing boat just before the invasion as part of a sub-detachment sent to recover the agents, who stood the risk of being taken for collaborators, a rôle they sometimes played.

Wingate also went with Remy to Brittany, to boost the morale of the local Maquis and to create a commando group to assist at the liberation of Paris. This he remembers vividly. "I came in with Leclerc himself. We went from building to building near the Arc de Triomphe, clearing Germans out. When we got to the Hotel Majestic some high-ranking officers tried to escape down the metro but we chased them and took them prisoner between Bossière and Kleber stations.

"I'll never forget how General Stuinagel's suite at the Hotel Raphael smelled of jack-boot leather!"

It was at this euphoric time that members of the Sussex network got together and renamed Mme Goubillon's café and redecorated it with members' photographs.

They held regular reunions in Paris, at the café, until it closed two years ago. Now that those of the 150 original agents who are left are getting old, it seems a good moment, 45 years after the scheme's formation, to break the silence this side of the Channel and celebrate the bravery of all connected with the Sussex Network.