

Histoire et Mémoire. **Moussey Le Mont 6 juin 2010**

Photocopie intégrale de l'article du Lt colonel Keith EDLIN publié dans le journal du SAS « *Mars and Minerva* »

*Merci Keith de me l'avoir envoyée (et d'abord d'avoir écrit ce vibrant reportage !)*

*La première copie publiée ici, faite par Len OWENS et reçue La Poste le 12 janvier, est conservée et se trouve à la suite*

## CELEBRATIONS AT MOUSSEY – 6<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2010

Early this year I received an invitation to attend a celebration at Moussey in France from Christian Massel, who belongs to the St.Dié branch of the Union Nationale des Parachutistes. Christian was always my point of contact for events at Moussey when I was Secretary of the Regimental Association. For those who do not know, the St.Dié Branch of the UNP look after the SAS Memorial in the Donan Forest above Moussey and always turn out to meet us when we visit. The invitation was concerning a large parachute drop onto the SAS wartime DZ by members of the 13<sup>ème</sup> Régiment des dragons parachutistes, who are based at Deiuze, just south of Metz, this was to be followed by a parade in the Moussey Churchyard and a march through the town. This Regiment is part of the French Special Forces and they wanted to do something at Moussey before they were relocated to South West France to join other elements of their Special Forces Brigade. Interestingly, 13<sup>ème</sup> RDP had a liaison with the SAS some years ago and I can remember doing some sort of exercise with them when I was RSM of 23. They chose the 6<sup>th</sup> June to conduct this event for a number of reasons, not only to celebrate D-Day, but also Operation LOYTON and as a farewell on their pending departure from the area. Given their commitments it was also one of the few days available to them.

On receipt of the invitation I contacted Len Owens (Sergeant Len Owens MM, Phantom Signal Squadron, 2<sup>nd</sup> SAS), who had also received the invitation, and he told me that he would be attending with some of his family. Len has kept close contact with Moussey and has raised a memorial to Phantom Signals at the National Arboretum. I think he is the sole surviving member of Operation LOYTON still alive?

I had already decided that I would go, but managed to get together a small party, consisting of myself, Cyril Wheeler (ex 2<sup>nd</sup> SAS), W [redacted] and my friend Bob Higgins. We set off on 4<sup>th</sup> June and stayed overnight just south of Metz, with the intention the following day of finding the area of the DZ where Cyril Wheeler had dropped on Operation PISTOL in September 1944. We were up bright and early the next morning and travelled some 70kms, roughly South East of Metz, to Hazembourg, where Cyril's patrol had landed by parachute. After locating the DZ area we then followed the route taken by his patrol and, unbeknown to Cyril, decided we would try to find the farm where he and others of his patrol had hidden in the hay loft, whilst the Germans were below and in the farmyard. He had told us how the Germans had been roasting a pig and the aroma of the cooking had got too much for them. Together with another member of the Patrol, a Pole, who spoke fluent German, they descended from the hay loft and kicked in the door to the barn where the Germans were cooking the pig and held them at gunpoint. They told the startled Germans that they would be spared if they gave the patrol 10 minutes to get clear, to which they agreed, and Cyril and his patrol made off as fast as they could with a generous helping of the pork. They must have looked pretty frightening as the Germans kept their word!

We followed carefully the details written in the operational report and found what we suspected could be the farm. Leaving Cyril and Bob in the car, Wes and I went to investigate and eventually found the farmer, a pleasant man, who told us that the farm had been worked by his cousin during the war and that it had not changed from those times. On explaining who we were, he told



us that a German veteran had visited about 10 years previously and had told him that he had been based at the farm during the war. Further questions convinced us that this was the correct location. With this, we brought Cyril round and on entering the farmyard; he let out a delighted cry and told us that this was the farm. He pointed to the barn across the yard and told us that this was the door they had kicked in and where they had held the Germans at gunpoint. I think we were all very pleased with this result and it made our day to see his pleasure at finding the farm.



After bidding the farmer farewell, we continued on our way to our Hotel at St.Dié, visiting a number of sites where there are Memorials to those killed on the Independent Operation that took place north of Operation LOYTON. It was a very interesting and enjoyable day. The information that Wes has compiled on SAS wartime casualties was invaluable during our travels and he deserves every credit for the time and effort he has put into this excellent project. After our arrival at our Hotel we just had time to freshen up before our friends from the UNP came to collect us to take us to dinner. We then spent a very pleasant evening with Len Owens and his family, another contact from Moussey, Gerard Villemin, the Mayor of Le Mont and the members of the UNP.

The day of the 6<sup>th</sup> June was a glorious day and we were collected promptly at our Hotel by Daniel Vogt of the UNP. Our first port of call was the Mairie at Le Mont, where we attended a ceremony at which Madame Maryvonne Arnoux-Bau, the Mayor of Le Mont, presented commemorative certificates to some French wartime veterans from the village. These certificates had been produced by the French Government to honour all wartime veterans. We were made most welcome by the Lady Mayor and following speeches and a Vin d'Honneur, we then drove a short distance to the SAS wartime DZ in the hills above Le Mont. We were greeted there by the sight of hundreds of people, who had gathered to watch the parachute drop. The local farmer had cut the grass on the DZ and we sat on the hillside to wait for the drop to take place. A shelter had been erected for our two wartime veterans and they were treated with great reverence and hospitality. After an initial pass to drop a streamer, the aircraft made three passes dropping static line parachutists. It was a wonderful sight to see the parachutes in the air and our thoughts turned to how it must have been almost 66 years before, trying to imagine not only the feelings of those Frenchmen who were receiving the parachutists, but also those of the SAS who were dropping into the unknown. Our thoughts were also for those who had died in the weeks that followed that drop, often in terrible circumstances, but we also remembered the courage and dignity which they had shown right to the end.

There were a few mishaps in the drop with some parachutists landing in the trees and up on the hillside, almost amongst us. The final drop was of five free-fallers, the first to come in was flying the French flag and he landed accurately on the cross, with the others following in succession. The last parachutist was a tandem and was flying the Union Jack. All of the parachutist gathered on the DZ and knelt down with the French flag and Union Jack held up together, side by side. It was a truly wonderful occasion. This spectacle was just a prelude to the events of the afternoon, when we paraded in the Churchyard at Moussey. There was a French Military Band in attendance from the 1er Régiment de Tirailleurs, who are based at Épinal. This is an excellent Military band, which is notable for its distinct style of Algerian uniform. Not only were they smart and well turned out, but they played superbly. In the churchyard, the contingent from 13<sup>ème</sup> RDP were lined up in three ranks facing the SAS graves, bayonets fixed and with their Regimental Colours in front, alongside each grave stood a member of the UNP. There were numerous other French standards at one side and our small group stood opposite them. The Commanding Officer of the 13<sup>ème</sup> RDP marched on and inspected his troops, coming over afterwards to present both Cyril Wheeler and Len Owens with a magnificent Regimental Banner. I think they were



totally surprised and lost for words. There followed a dignified ceremony with wreaths being laid. A French Bugler played the Last Post and standards were lowered for the silence.



As is normal form at Moussey, after the ceremony in the Churchyard we formed up on the road with the band in the lead, followed by the contingent from 13<sup>ème</sup> RDP, then our small group with the UNP, then the French standards and after this the remainder of the people and representatives. It was the largest parade I have seen at Moussey in the time I have been going there. The parade then marched through the town, stopping at the First World War Memorial by the Mairie. It was here that the CO of 13<sup>ème</sup> RDP presented medals to some of his soldiers and wreaths were laid. Bob Higgins, who is the Royal British Legion County Chairman for Buckinghamshire, laid a Poppy wreath on behalf of the Royal British Legion. It was then on again through the town to the Memorial to the Deportees, where there were speeches and we laid wreaths. The distance from the Churchyard to this Memorial is quite a long way, but Cyril Wheeler, at 95 years of age, marched all the way. It all finished with a Vin d'Honneur at the Mairie. At this point I made a presentation of a framed photograph of David Stirling and Georges Bergé to the CO of 13<sup>ème</sup> RDP, on behalf of our small SAS delegation. It was a really marvellous occasion and afterwards we all reflected that we would not have missed it for anything.

The day after we met again at the Mairie in Moussey, where two young men from the area had assembled a collection of SAS artefacts recovered from the area. It was an excellent display for which they deserve every credit. They hope to establish a more permanent display in the future. Both Len and Cyril entertained us all with their recollections of using some of the items on display. The remainder of the day was spent visiting the memorials and various sites connected with Operation LOYTON, the Memorial in the Donan Forest, Le Harchelot, Barodet, La Grande Fosse and others. High in the hills around Moussey there are still many signs of the activity that took place there in September 1944. Len Owens had also been to these areas and left his tribute to those comrades that were lost and whom he knew so well. We all met finally at a Hunters Shelter deep in the forest, where Gerard Villemin provided a picnic and some splendid wine

We were received everywhere with great friendship and hospitality, especially from the members of the UNP. Our thanks go to them, especially Christian, Daniel and John as well as to Gerard Villemin and also the Mayor of Le Mont and Moussey, who all put in a great deal of effort to make this grand occasion such a success. It was also a great pleasure to meet Len Owens and his family. Finally, my thanks go to my travelling companions for their pleasant and convivial company.

Overall it was a most enjoyable and interesting visit and it was a privilege to be there in the presence of Len Owens, the sole surviving member of Operation LOYTON and also Cyril Wheeler, who I believe is probably the only surviving member of Operation PISTOL. Both of them were lucid in their recollections and remembered very clearly the events of all those years ago. Given their age, they endured long days, but were always in good humour and were a fine example to us all.

**KEITH EDLIN**

DEAR GERRARD  
 THIS IS A REPORT FROM THE JOURNAL OF THE SAS  
 "MARS + MINERVA" WHICH MENTIONS YOU  
 IN CONNECTION WITH OUR VISIT TO MOUSSEY  
 TO WATCH THE PARACHUTE DROP BY THE  
 "DRAGONS" FRENCH PARASHUTE BATTALION.  
 A VERY ENJOYABLE OCCASION THANKS TO YOU  
 ALL. I THINK YOU WILL FIND IT INTERESTING.  
 VERY BEST WISHES TO ALL.  
 BEN ANNIE  
 LEN.

By Keith Edlin

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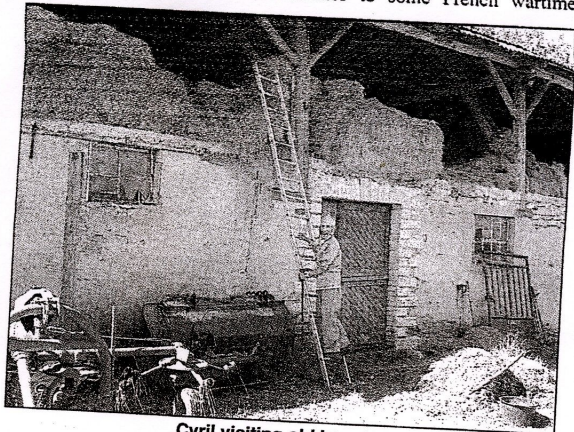
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Cyril visiting old haunts.

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I AM SENDING 3 COPIES IN THE HOPE  
THAT YOU CAN FORWARD THEM ON AS I DO  
NOT HAVE THEIR POSTAL ADDRESSES.

THEY ARE:

1. MAYOR LE MAYOR MARCELLE ARMOUR-BAU  
OF LEMONT

2. ERIC CHOFFEL AND MAXENCE LEMOIRE  
WHO HAVE A SMALL MUSEUM FOR THE SAS  
NEAR TO THEIR SCHOOL IN MOUSSEY.

MANY APOLOGIES AND THANKS.

worked alongside the Regiment in the Middle East whilst serving in the RAF. He used his influence at the Malaysian High Commission and so the presentation was initiated.

minute. John Simcock came up trumps at every problem.

Now, who is organising a coach load to visit Brigadier Alwi? Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle!