

Lieutenant Peter Johnsen

Chef de l'équipe du F Phantom parachutée près de Veney le 1er septembre 1944

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La 2ème photo (debout en uniforme) provient de sa famille

Obituaries

Peter Johnsen

Officer who worked in sabotage behind enemy lines with Phantom and the SAS, and helped to res

PETER JOHNSEN, who died on June 4 aged 79, served throughout the second half of the War in Northern Europe with Phantom and the SAS, operating behind the lines in Occupied France.

In his first operation on D-Day + 2, Johnsen was parachuted into France, just south of Rennes, with his patrol from Phantom and 30 men from 2 SAS. Their mission was to report on German troop movements, mostly reinforcements being rushed up to the Allied bridgehead. They operated unobserved for nearly a fortnight, calling in a squadron of Typhoons to attack and destroy trains and road convoys.

Ordered east towards Le Mans to link up with another squadron of SAS (commanded by the Colditz veteran Major Airey Neave), they were denied a drop of jeeps, so they commandeered civilian vehicles. They made their way across northern France, successfully linking up with Neave's force just as the main German force was pulling out of Le Mans.

Johnsen and a small group then made an unauthorised dash for Paris before being called back to rescue some 100 British PoWs who had escaped and were in hiding in the area. For his part in these operations, Lt Johnsen was mentioned in dispatches.

In August 1944, 120 men from 2 SAS, including Johnsen, were parachuted by night into the Vosges mountains to arm and organise the French resistance and create as much diversionary activity as possible behind the German lines. For three months they hid in the thick forests, blowing up roads, railways and other strategic installations. By October, they were being chased by two German divisions, including one crack SS armoured division which thought it was dealing with a far superior force.

The force could not have survived without the assis-

tance of the inhabitants of Moussey and the surrounding area who, until the British came, had led a largely unaltered existence despite a strong German presence. Nevertheless, they often hid and fed small parties of the SAS along with three servicewomen (one British and two French) working with SOE.

Finally the Gestapo rounded up all the French civilian men from Moussey and the surrounding area in the main square of the town, offering an amnesty if they disclosed the whereabouts of the British. Not a man moved. As a result, 220 Frenchmen were marched off to concentration camps; 140 never returned. The area is still known today as the Valley of the Widows.

In October the SAS unit split up into small groups of three or four, and were ordered to head westwards in the direction of the Allied lines some 200 miles distant. Johnsen led one group consisting of himself, Pte Bannerman and Pte Johnston.

Almost within sight of the American lines, they were ambushed by a German patrol. As they split and ran, all three were hit; only Johnsen survived, though he was wounded in an arm and a leg.

Johnsen completed one further operation, with 1 SAS in early 1945, codenamed Operation Howard and led by Lt-Col Paddy Mayne. This force of 50, mounted in jeeps with twin Vickers machine guns in the front and .5 Browning guns in the back, was sent in to an area opposite 4th Canadian Armoured Division, which found itself outgunned by the opposing Tiger Tanks of the German army. The job of the SAS was to disrupt enemy supply lines.

At his demob in October 1946, Johnsen was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm Leaf.

Peter Bowater Johnsen was born on October 12 1923 at Balcombe House, West Sus-



Johnsen: he never trusted Maxwell after seeing him cheat a man out of 10 shillings at cards

sex, the fifth of eight children of Capt "Billy" Johnsen DFC and May Bowater. Peter's father was a scion of a Norwegian family which, like the Hambros and the Salvesens, had been attracted by business opportunities in Britain and her colonies in the early 19th century.

As land and forestry owners, the Johnsens established increasingly strong trading links with paper and pulp manufacturers in Scotland and the north of England. In 1885, Johnsen & Jorgensen became established in the City of London, eventually, as Johnsen, Jorgensen & Wettre (JJ & W Ltd), supplying much of Fleet Street with its newsprint.

Much later, it gave Peter Johnsen great satisfaction that the company had never accepted any business from Robert Maxwell, from whom he said he instinctively recoiled after seeing him

cheat someone out of 10 shillings in a game of cards.

Peter was educated at Eton, where his housemaster was Humphrey Lyttelton's father, George. The bohemian side of Lyttelton family life was never far away; Humphrey was often to be heard practising his jazz trumpet in Warre House, and his mother once brought her sick horse into the drawing room to nurse it.

After leaving school, Johnsen was commissioned into the King's Royal Rifle Corps (60th Rifles) and posted to the 7th Battalion, then training for deployment in North Africa. In 1943 he was recruited into Phantom, then stationed at Pembroke Lodge, Richmond Park. Phantom GHQ Liaison Regiment, as it was formally named, had originally been constituted in 1940, when Army Group headquarters found that it needed faster and more accurate information. Young officers were trained to

speed up to the front line, usually on motorcycles, assess the situation and report back – a ploy developed by Napoleon; though Montgomery claimed it as his idea.

Johnsen enjoyed the company of colleagues such as the film star David Niven, the future law lord Nigel Bridge, the champion amateur jump jockey John Hislop, and many other colourful characters who, when back in England, never failed to take advantage of their camp's proximity to London's West End.

After the war, Johnsen initially joined Bowaters, then still a family-run company. But he became ill-at-ease with the autocratic style of his uncle, Sir Eric Bowater, and in 1950 he joined his brothers at JJ & W in their offices at Old Bailey; the three brothers took it in turns to become the nominal chairman.

The brothers successfully managed the transition of the

scue 100 PoWs

company from an old-fashioned family firm into part of a large and growing international public company. Peter Johnsen became a main board director of Ibstock (from 1971 to 1988), helping oversee its development from a large regional brickmaker into a multi-national building products company with operations in Europe and America.

During this period, when the uncertainties engendered by aggressive takeover battles between London Brick and Hanson often seemed to engulf Ibstock too, he enjoyed touring the plants, even at times of industrial unrest, to talk to workers on the shop floor and try and explain what was going on.

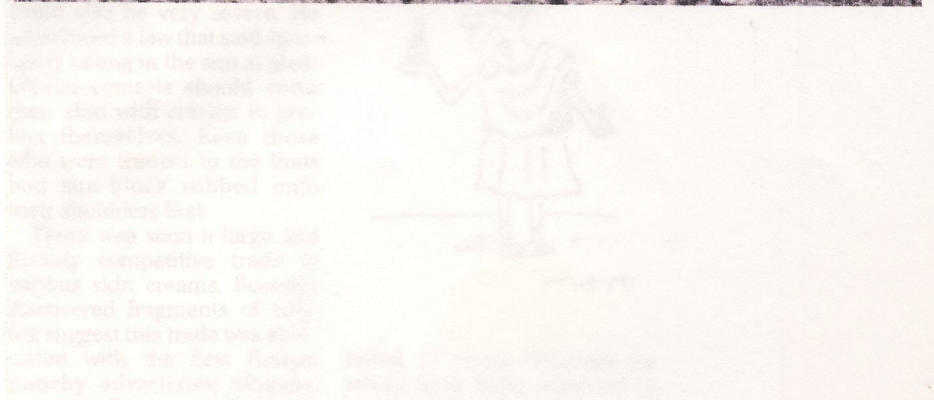
In 1954 he married Nina Raben-Levetzau, granddaughter of the Lensgreve Raben, sometime Foreign Minister and Chancellor at the Danish Court of Christian IX.

In retirement, Peter Johnsen devoted much time to Business in the Community, the charity established by the Prince of Wales. After finally settling at Oddington, in Gloucestershire, he and his wife together established from scratch a spectacular garden within the old walled garden of Oddington House.

In his youth a fine cricketer and tennis player, in later years Johnsen concentrated on golf, winning a trophy in his 77th year. He was also a keen fisherman and shot.

It gave him great pleasure to support the initiative of his former troop sergeant, Joe Owen, to erect a permanent memorial to those members of Phantom and the SAS and their many French Resistance allies who lost their lives during Operation Loyton at the National Arboretum in Staffordshire. This was completed shortly after his death.

Peter Johnsen is survived by his wife; they had four children, one of whom died shortly after childbirth.





Madame Johnsen et ses 3 enfants lors de leur visite d'octobre 2010 à Moussey