

Setting Europe Ablaze

by
Jocelyn Rendall



In the village of Arisaig, on Scotland's west coast, a small monument stands between the row of white-washed houses and the sea. It is easily overlooked if passing through in a car and, at first sight, the design is enigmatic. Then the shape of a falling parachute emerges, the cords scored down the side of a column of polished granite. On the base is inscribed, in English and Czech:

In memory of all the Czech and Slovak soldiers who trained here in 1941-1943 as SOE agents

Beside it, on slabs of the same grey granite, are inscribed the names of 71 soldiers and the codenames of their often fatal missions (silver, tungsten, wolfram, steel . . .).

A single road – the old 'Road to the Isles' – and a railway line connects the town of Fort William with the harbour at Mallaig, where road and line end and journeys continue by ferry to Skye and Knoydart and the Inner Hebrides. This is the district of Morar, famous for its white sandy beaches and glorious views across to the Small Isles of Rum and Eigg and Canna. East of the road, the landscape is as much loch and bog as mountain, with few paths through its rough terrain. On fine days – and the rainfall on the west coast is notorious – the area is stunningly beautiful, but the topography is vital to the story behind the monument.

In July 1940 Winston Churchill gave Hugh Dalton, then Minister of Economic Warfare, the task to 'set Europe ablaze' with a new underground organisation, the Special Operations Executive. As more countries fell to Hitler's armies, the SOE grew in size and in the scope of its guerrilla activities. Its agents infiltrated the occupied countries, supported resistance groups, liaised with

the governments in exile, and carried out highly dangerous acts of espionage and sabotage.

The men and women recruited by the SOE were initially sent to one of the English country houses requisitioned by the War Office for basic training in map reading and endurance. The recruits, many of them civilians, came from various and unlikely backgrounds. (John Goldsmith was a racehorse trainer, Hardy Amies a fashion designer – later dressmaker to the Queen, Christine Granville a Polish countess). Those who passed this first stage were sent to Morar, where the SOE made its HQ in Arisaig House. Access to the area could easily be controlled – even locals had to have passes to move in and out – and the wild country provided an ideal training ground for intensive courses in survival. It was here, in caves and in the hills, that Prince Charles Edward hid in 1746, waiting for a French ship to rescue him after his disastrous defeat at Culloden. No-one betrayed him, despite the £30,000 bounty on his head; 200 years later, no-one betrayed the presence of the SOE.

Agents from Britain, France, Norway and Czechoslovakia trained in Morar. The Czechs were billeted in Traigh House, Camusdaroch Lodge and Garramore House. Among those who stayed in Traigh House were Czech Jan Kubiš and Slovak Jozef Gabčík, who carried out the assassination of SS Obergruppenfuhrer Reinhardt Heydrich in Prague in May 1942. (The men died in a shoot-out in a church where they had taken refuge. Some 5,000 civilians were massacred in the reprisals.)

Other former large houses and sporting lodges were requisitioned in Morar and in even more remote Knoydart on the north shore of Loch Nevis. Inverailort Castle was the centre for commando training, Glasnacardoch Lodge for

Training in Morse code for SOE personnel



foreign weapons training, Swordland Lodge on the shores of Loch Morar for paramilitary naval training. Local people taught skills in handling boats and poaching. Gavin Maxwell (later the author of *Ring of Bright Water*) was a small-arms instructor. Two former members of the Shanghai police taught methods of unarmed combat and silent killing. Disguises, forgery, living with a false identity, wireless communication, using explosives and blowing up railways were also on the curriculum.

Recruits who survived the rigorous regime at Arisaig would be 'finished' at Beaulieu in the New Forest with training in surveillance, personal security and what to expect if caught and interrogated by the Gestapo. More than 3,000 agents from 17 nationalities passed through Beaulieu, destined to be dropped in enemy territory by plane, submarine, boat or parachute, with full knowledge of the high risk of capture. Their courage is astonishing; a great many of their lives ended in torture and execution.

The memorial in Arisaig was carved from Czech granite by Josef Vajce (sculptor of the impressive bronze statue of Tycho Brahe and Johannes Kepler in Prague) and its foundation stone blessed by Pope Benedict XVI on a visit to the Republic. It was unveiled on 11th November 2009 by the Rt. Hon. George Reid, Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament 2003-07, and a delegation from the Czech Republic led by Jan Fulík, Deputy Defence Minister. One of two surviving former Arisaig trainees, Col. Jaroslav Klemeš, read the Remembrance. The funds for the memorial were raised by public subscription organised by the Trustees of Czech Memorial (Scotland) and *Pomník Parašutistům*. On the base are inscribed the words:

Volunteers from the Czechoslovak Independent Brigade trained here as special operations executive agents in 1941-43 to be sent into the territory occupied by Nazis. Many died for the freedom of others. They shall not be forgotten.

Jocelyn Rendall is a freelance historian living in Orkney. She has recently published *Farstraers, Voyages and Homecomings (Errival 978-1-7398-49702)* which draws on letters written by Orcadians who were forced by harsh conditions at home in the 17th-19th centuries to travel across the world in search of a livelihood.

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