

SAS Operation Galia 1944-5

This story is from the preliminary report on Operation Galia. It tells how 33 men from A Troop, 3 Squadron, 2nd Special Air Service Regiment (SAS) created such havoc behind the German lines that 6,000 German soldiers were diverted to eradicate this thorn in their sides. One of these men was Harry Shanley, pictured below.



The place Italy, the date December 1944. The Allied advance was held up again on the push north. The 92 US Infantry Division was being continually harassed by the German 148 Infantry Division and eventually gave ground.

2 SAS who had just returned to England from France were asked to provide help. They were asked to simulate the deployment of elements of 2nd Independent Parachute Brigade, who had been moved to Greece, followed by harassing attacks on the supply lines of the German 148 Division.

A Troop, 3 Squadron, 2 SAS parachuted into the area north of Spezia in daylight (in order that the jump be observed by the Germans) on 27th December 1944. Their tasks, harass the enemy rear in the following priority, Spezia-Parma, Spezia-Genoa and the Aulla-Reggio roads.

The Troop order of battle (“orbat”) was an HQ of 8 and 5 sticks of 4-6 men each under the command of an Officer or Sergeant. On the 28th December 3 of the sticks moved out to take up positions in the area of the main roads whilst the remainder set about hiding the stores and establishing liaison with the partisans. Wireless communication was impossible at this stage due to the mountains.



On the 29th Capt Walker-Brown (OC) and a party moved position. They took with them the 3 inch mortar and 35 HE bombs. Contact was made with the partisans and on the 30th they ambushed the Spezia - Genoa road, in the process destroying 3 vehicles and setting a fourth on fire. This attracted heavy 20 mm cannon from an armoured vehicle in response and the party withdrew leaving behind 4 enemy dead and a number wounded. New Year's day 1945 and the party attacked the German and Fascist units in Borgetto di Vara. 34 mortar bombs were fired from a range of 1100 yards with direct hits on a number of houses occupied by enemy troops. Two lorries approaching Borgetto and having stopped on hearing the mortar fire, were destroyed by bren gunners who had moved forward till within range. During this attack a party of partisans, 14 strong, had been placed under the command of the SAS. Their task was to stop any enemy leaving Borgetto to the south, a task they failed to do as the entire garrison withdrew and did not return for 24 hours. The object of this attack was threefold:



1. To make the presence of the SAS known to the enemy in the shortest possible time.
2. To create uneasiness among the garrison troops on the Spezia-Genoa road and cause them to be reinforced.
3. To stop enemy movement on that road.

After this attack the party returned to Rossano for re-supply. Still no radio contact!



On the 3rd January one of the sticks moved to the area of Valeriano and at last communication was made. A request for re-supply was made. Bad news one of the other sticks was reported to have been captured in Montebello. They were taken by a party of Brigata Nera, dressed in civilian clothes, who interrogated, tortured and finally shot the Italian guide who was helping the stick.

Meanwhile Troop HQ was awaiting the re-supply but the weather conditions were extremely bad. A message was received from

base indicating that the aircraft could not fly to DZ Huntsville (The original DZ near Rossano). A reply was sent stating that it was the only DZ possible for the following reasons:

1. Easiest DZ for getting supplies to detached sticks as it was located in the centre of the Troop's operational area.
2. Any enemy attacks against the SAS would have to come through country under partisan observation, whose warning system was made use of.

January 4th, weather conditions were now very severe. It was extremely cold and there was deep snow on the ground. Icy conditions and the snow on the mountain tracks made movement very difficult and tedious.

Whilst waiting for the re-supply drop, one of the sticks mined the road near Valeriano and that night a German truck was destroyed killing 12 and wounding 8. Another stick was in position on the Spezia-Genoa road and here it attacked an enemy staff car killing a high placed official and three other officers. There was talk about 125 million Lira being on board.

Despite the many requests made to base for the drop to be made at "Huntsville" the reply kept coming back that the drop would take place on "Halifax" an extra five hours away! There was now heavy snow on the ground and the passage of mules over the mountains was impossible. Signals were put out on Huntsville anyway and two sticks made their way to Halifax.

On the 9th January at 1530 hours the drop was made on Halifax and the remainder of the Troop made their way from Huntsville. 40 percent of this drop was stolen by the partisans (Communist Liberty and Justice Brigade) from Pieve. This was largely due to the drop being scattered over four square miles of country and it was impossible to prevent pilfering with the number of men available. The 10th was spent trying to recover the stolen equipment from the partisans.

That night the OC with his party gave up the attempt to cross the mountains to ambush the Spezia-Genoa road. The mountain tracks were sheets of solid ice and passage was impossible without making too much noise. The night was spent at Sero. Next day he took a recon party to check the road bridge at Lago for demolition. It was decided to use 300 lbs of PE for the task. Some of the Troop returned to Halifax to prepare the necessary charges whilst the remainder moved into an ambush position about 300 yards from the Fascist building in Borgetto di Vara. They were about to open fire when vehicles were heard moving down the road towards the bridge. As the party at the bridge only had one Bren fire was withheld and the vehicles allowed to approach the main ambush position. There were three vehicles in all, one captured British staff car, with trailer. A 10 ton truck with a large trailer and a third vehicle which turned off in Borgetto. As the remaining two vehicles left Borgetto they were engaged with Bren guns. 32 magazines were fired, both vehicles and trailers were destroyed and 26 enemy killed.

The following day it was reported that Blackshirts were burning houses in the village of Brugnato. This was a reprisal for the ambush, the SAS party had halted in this village the previous day on their way to the ambush position.

Captain Walker-Brown and his party moved off with the 3 inch mortar and brens, taking up positions on the mountain covering the road bridge. By attacking Borgetto twice it was anticipated that the enemy would be forced to take action to prevent in either reinforcing the garrison or employ a larger forces to clear up the area of the SAS. The intention was to prolong the attack as long as possible thus preventing transport from using the Spezia-Genoa road.

Before the first mortar bomb was fired a lone Thunderbolt aircraft dive bombed Borgetto, dropping a bomb which failed to explode. The SAS party then fired three mortar bombs onto the road leading out of Brugnato making the enemy withdraw towards the bridge and the river. This group was engaged with further fire. They took up positions on the far side of the river and returned fire with heavy machine guns. This platoon was mortared and withdrew in disorder along with small groups who were engaged when trying to ford the river.

The mortar was sited for indirect fire and it and the brens fired at intervals into enemy positions in and around the town.

At 1600 hours all ammunition was expended except the reserve and the troop prepared to move. At the same time four Thunderbolts arrived on the scene bombing Brugnato and Borgetto and strafing the road. This had a considerable affect on the enemy who thought the SAS had fighter support at their disposal.

The enemy then brought up a 105mm gun and shelled the hillside heavily. The gunners apparently did not know the mortar position as no fire engaged its position. The SAS party withdrew up the mountain with no casualties.

14th January the weather was bad - no re-supply - but on the 15th a drop arrived including two Vickers. Moved back to Rossano leaving three men with the remainder of the supplies as there were no mules.

The 16/17th January were rest days but on the 18th Capt. Walker-Brown's party moved to Colodo with the intention of carrying out a machine-gun attack, using the newly acquired Vickers's, on the 300 strong German garrison in Vignola. This plan was abandoned due to the approaches being under observation. Alternative plans were also cancelled and they moved on to Arzelato. A party of 20 partisans who wished to join the SAS for an attack placed themselves under command.

At 1900hrs and in total darkness the combined group attacked the Pontremoli - Aulla road. Two Vickers were used firing on fixed lines to a point where the road had a drop of 50 feet to the west and a steep cutting to the east. A single vehicle was engaged which subsequently drove into marching troops who were then also brought under fire. Casualties were unconfirmed but it was known that the Germans had remarked to civilians that there were large numbers of dead on the road. The enemy had returned ineffective fire but sufficient enough to make the partisans disappear rather rapidly.

Just after midnight the party withdrew to Corvette arriving there, extremely tired, at 0700 hours. At first light, some 15 minutes later, German troops in battalion strength were spotted 250 yards away in extended order.

The alarm was given and the SAS party succeeded in withdrawing, under mortar and small arms fire without casualties. Unfortunately a lot of equipment, sleeping bags, rations, mules, including the two Vickers, were lost to the enemy.

At first light many towns and villages were attacked simultaneously in a bid to capture the SAS party. Capt. Walker-Brown and his men moved on to Rio being attacked with 75mm gunfire shortly after arrival. The party moved on to Monte Gottero and spent the night ascending the mountain.

At first light on the 21st they crossed the summit (5500 feet) picking up two of another stick and some partisans halfway up. At 2100 hours that night they crossed Monte Groppo. A force of 1200 partisans, from varying bands, were holding Monte Groppo but vanished on hearing that a force of 400 Germans were 1 hour away. The SAS party continued on to Boschetto and were informed that the Germans were still 1 hour away.

22nd January, 0700 hours, the SAS left Boschetto and at 0800 hours a force of 2,000 Germans attacked the town capturing one of the partisan leaders. 1300 hours and the party reached Buzzo joining up with two other sticks. By this time Capt. Walker-Brown's party completed 59 hours continuous marching without rations and rest. The whole group moved into the mountains one hour from Buzzo and had 12 hours rest and food.

Over the next two days there were Germans everywhere and the party moved to Nola some two hours away remaining in a state of stand-to.

On the 27th the area was reported to be clear and the whole troop joined up in Rossano. The 28th & 29th was spent digging up rations, ammunition, a radio set and taking some well earned rest. Radio communications were bad and a blind message was sent asking for a re-supply. The weather over this period was very bad with low cloud and mist, however on the 2nd February at 0830 hours a lone Dakota ran in over the DZ. The aircraft flew around for 90 minutes before seeing the signals. With cloud and mist low on the mountains the pilot succeeded in recognising the DZ and made a of six exceedingly accurate run-ins with little or no safety margin. Two hours later the same aircraft returned and repeated the performance. On this occasion dropping Capt. Milne RAMC from about 350 feet.



On the 3rd and 4th of February the party awaited the arrival of mules for a move to Borseda. During this time Capt. Milne looked over the ailments of the men one who was very sick and unable to move. The doctor advised that he should be instructed to make his own way back through the lines when he had recovered.

On the 5th the troop moved out of Borseda plans were made to ambush the Aulla-Spezia road and attack Padivarma with mortars.

On the evening of 7/8th the Aulla-Spezia ambush destroyed 8 enemy vehicles and inflicted a large number of casualties on a party of German troops and mules bivouacked by the road. Meanwhile the remainder of the troop attacked the Genoa-Spezia road destroying two trucks and immobilising a third. Information received from partisans later indicated that many enemy were killed and wounded.

The Germans were now billeted in houses with civilians instead of requisitioning them for their own use and the mortar attack on Padivarma was cancelled.

On the 10th February it was decided to withdraw slowly back towards the allied lines. The troop was split into two parties with the first party moving off at 1500 and the second two hours later. A decision later was taken to withdraw completely due to the following factors:

1. The Medical Officer advised that the men were exceedingly tired; and
2. It had not been possible to get the mules across the Magra River and as a result the men carried only two days emergency rations in the shape of one tin of bully beef.

On the 12th February they reached Vicchette, picking guides and the next day continued South, a long and tiring trek over very rough country. Rucksacks were dumped and Bren guns left with the partisans. Only carbines and reserve ammunition were carried the last stage of the march was over Monte Altissimo.

The march over Monte Altissimo was arduous and extremely tiring. It was a dark night and the normal track was avoided as it was known to be mined. This meant about 2000 feet had to be climbed on a slope of 1 in 4. The pass at the top of the mountain was reached about 23:30 hours and at the same time an enemy mortar carried out a heavy shoot on several points along the track leading to the enemy. An enemy patrol was avoided and about 1300 hours a trip flare was set off by one of the party. Fortunately it was not covered with defensive fire and we moved on towards the allied lines and safety!

At 0400 hours on the 15th February 1945, many weeks after we first parachuted in, we crossed the forward American platoon positions.

Web source: <http://freespace.virgin.net/j.dingwall/veteran4.htm>