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**From Failure to Success: A Re-Evaluation
of the Special Operations Executive's
Achievements in France, 1940-1941**

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History Undergraduate Dissertation 2013

From Failure to Success: A Re-Evaluation of the Special Operations Executive's Achievements in France, 1940-1941

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Introduction

“Set Europe ablaze” was the order given by Churchill in July 1940 that indicated the birth of Britain’s secret organisation, the Special Operations Executive (SOE).¹ Designed to ‘inspire, control and assist the nationals of oppressed countries,’² SOE was an institution constructed to co-ordinate acts of defiance and sabotage against the Nazis across Europe.³ ‘F Section’ was immediately established as the main organisational body for British subversion in France. Other SOE sections also operated in the country, such as the EU/P which worked with the Poles and RF with the Free French. But F Section became intrinsically connected with the formation and expansion of the Resistance, and in doing so established itself as one of the most important departments acting in France.

During its existence, the performance of F Section was constantly being scrutinised by its military and political opponents. Parliamentary member Dame Irene Ward referred to the organisation derisively as ‘amateurish’⁴ while Buckmaster (head of F Section from July 1941) recorded ‘being asked by inquisitive generals about the usefulness of our organisation and the efficiency of its staff.’⁵ Yet contemporaries were not the only ones to question the legitimacy of the organisation. Indeed, the history of SOE has been ‘the object of allegations or counter allegations about its worth and efficiency’ and historians have all too often measured the successes and failures of covert operations by the extent to which sabotage stalled the German advances.⁶ West suggested that ‘it must be open to considerable doubt

¹ Churchill, cited in A. Funk, ‘Churchill, Eisenhower, and the French Resistance’, *Military Affairs*, Vol. 45, No. 1, (1981), 30

² H. Dalton, cited in D. Stafford, ‘The Detonator Concept: British Strategy, SOE and European Resistance after the Fall of France’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (1975), 199

³ M.R.D Foot, *SOE in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France 1940-1944*, (London, 1966), xvii

⁴ I. Ward, cited in P. Howarth, *Undercover: The Men and Women of the Special Operations Executive*, (London, 1980), 162

⁵ M. Buckmaster, *They Fought Alone*, (London, 1959), 21

⁶ D. Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance, 1940-1945: A Survey of the Special Operations Executive*, (London, 1980), 4

whether unconventional warfare...practiced by SOE, played any part in shortening the war,'⁷ while Stafford argued that 'secret armies in Europe were no longer seen as carrying the key to victory.'⁸ Conversely, Wheeler argued that SOE 'was quite simply a failure,' though he also acknowledged that it was an important 'phenomenon' at the time.⁹

More specifically it has been argued that between 1940 and 1941 F Section largely failed to achieve anything in terms of covert action and as Foot claimed, 'wasted its time in arid and intricate disputes about what it ought to do.'¹⁰ West suggested that 'SOE had little to boast of in the summer of 1941'¹¹ and operational disasters meant that 'by mid-1942 F Section was virtually back to square one, with hardly any assets left in the field.'¹² In terms of sabotage, Mangold argued that although subversion was becoming more frequent, it 'did not yet constitute a serious danger for the Germans.'¹³ Equally Richelson questioned whether SOE activities in 1941 had any immediate effects.¹⁴

Historians have looked to explain why SOE was unable to carry out secret missions in France in this early period, despite enjoying greater successes after 1941. Howarth suggested that SOE's activities were seriously hindered in 1940-41 because of the shortage of airplanes,¹⁵ while West argued that the lack of counter-intelligence and the lapses in security– as well as 'sheer ineptitude'– put F Section at a disadvantage.¹⁶ A number of external factors also contributed to greater success after 1941 that lay beyond SOE's control:- Kedward for instance, argued that the loss of Vichy identity in 1942 (following the German occupation of

⁷ N. West, *Secret War: The Story of SOE, Britain's Wartime Sabotage Organisation*, (London, 1992), 319

⁸ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*, 50

⁹ M. Wheeler, 'The SOE Phenomenon', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (1981), 514

¹⁰ Foot, *SOE in France*, 148. Beevor also shares a similar outlook in J. Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections 1940-1945*, (London 1981), 152

¹¹ West, *Secret War*, 44

¹² West, *Secret War*, 53

¹³ P. Mangold, *Britain and the Defeated French: From Occupation to Liberation, 1940-1944*, (London, 2012), 101

¹⁴ J. Richelson, *A Century of Spies: Intelligence in the Twentieth Century*, (Oxford, 1995), 147

¹⁵ Howarth, *Undercover*, 25

¹⁶ West, *Secret War*, 138-156

the Southern Zone and the implementation of the Service du Travail Obligatoire) provoked widespread dissent and allowed for the mobilisation of resistance networks.¹⁷

Indeed, 1942 was seen as a significant turning point in the war. Militarily, it was a determining year on both fronts: in the East the Russians were proving to be unbreakable opponents, whilst in the West Americans had landed in North Africa, thereby changing the grand strategy of the war.¹⁸ Meanwhile Moulin's return to France (from London) in 1942 represented a formal link between the Free French, Charles de Gaulle and the clandestine activities organised in London, which allowed for a greater degree of organisation and coherency in the Resistance movement.¹⁹ So as the war progressed after 1942, it was easier for SOE to create ties with, on one hand, the ever-expanding Resistance in France, and, on the other, with the Americans and Russians who were now supplying them extra personnel, aircrafts, money and arms.

Although emphasis on F Section's successes has concentrated on the period after 1941, academics have not completely denounced the first two years of its existence as a complete waste of time and resources. Beevor recognised that F Section had learned many lessons and that it was even 'beginning to establish the nucleus of an organisation in several areas.'²⁰ Foot also admitted that trial and error before 1942 had provided SOE 'with some hard and necessary insights into the practical troubles of arming any large body of resisters.'²¹ The first completed act of sabotage, Operation JOSEPHINE B (which destroyed 6 transformers at

¹⁷ H.R. Kedward, 'The Maquis and the Culture of the Outlaw,' in R.Austin, R.Kedward (eds), *Vichy France and the Resistance: Culture and Ideology*, (Totowa, 1985), 236

¹⁸ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*, 50

¹⁹ H.R Kedward, *Occupied France, Collaboration and Resistance 1940-1944*, (Oxford, 1985), 58

²⁰ Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections*, 152

²¹ M.R.D. Foot, *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive 1940-1946*, (London, 1984), 218

the power stations in Pessac in June), does feature predominantly as a major success for the Section in 1941.²²

Still scholarship on this time period remains narrow and limited. Chronological narratives of individuals and operations help to explain the development of events, but they fall short of providing any detailed analyses of F Section's contribution to either the Resistance or the broader war endeavour in the early years of the war. For example, Foot suggested that the efforts in 1940-1941 had 'not quite been in vain,' but his subsequent commentary of what was 'done and undone' is so preoccupied with logistical arrangements and details of the personnel, that the long and short term consequences of the activities become unheeded.²³ Quite simply, missions that achieved anything other than sabotage, or similar active forms of resistance against the enemy, appear to lack significant detail or sustained analysis in scholarly work.

This thesis looks to analyse the achievements of the department in relation to the early resistance movements in France. More specifically it will explore the ways in which F Section's agents created initial resistance circuits in the early phases of the Occupation as a marker of the SOE's accomplishments. In doing so it will problematize the narrative that suggests that F Section was largely unsuccessful in its operations in 1940 and 1941. By examining what was actually accomplished in this period and by looking at the departments wider achievements, it will also be exploring new contexts through which F Section's performance is traditionally examined. Indeed Howarth argued that SOE's efforts in France should be judged primarily by using military criteria,²⁴ while Wylie hoped to assess the

²² See Richelson, *A Century of Spies*, 147; Foot, *SOE in France*, 158-159; M. Ruby, *F Section, SOE: The Story of the Buckmaster Network*, (London, 1985), 11.

²³ Foot, *SOE in France*, 161

²⁴ Howarth, *Undercover*, 160

SOE's performance within the context of Britain's broader political and military effort between 1940 and 1945.²⁵ By examining F Section through a new lens, this thesis is seeking to examine the history of the SOE within its social context rather than from a purely military perspective.

Despite the important ties between SOE and the French Resistance, the secret organisation rarely features in Resistance scholarship. When Kedward looked at the ideas and motivations for resistance in the Southern Zone, he only made a handful of references to SOE activity or interaction.²⁶ Similarly, Jackson, in his attempt to explain how the Resistance was 'invented' in the early period of the Occupation, completely ignores the role of SOE (or any of F Section's original agents for that matter):- in fact it does not even appear as a term used in the index.²⁷ The absence of SOE narratives within Resistance writing is perhaps explained by Cobb who suggested that London remained ambivalent and uncertain about the true influence of the Resistance.²⁸ His book focuses principally on the impact of de Gaulle, the Free French and French morale, and like Kedward, he ascertained that the Resistance originated from within France- from French roots and ideologies.²⁹

The few attempts to explore the SOE's role in France have usually been overwhelmed by stories of the conflicting relationship between de Gaulle and the leaders at F Section headquarters. Beevor argued that 'SOE was inevitably an object of intense dislike and suspicion to de Gaulle'³⁰ while Stafford said that 'SOE was accused by de Gaulle and the

²⁵ N. Wylie, 'Introduction: Special Operations Executive – New Approaches and Perspectives,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.20, No.1, (1980), 2

²⁶ See R. Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France: A Study of Ideas and Motivations in the Southern Zone 1940-1942*, (Oxford, 1978)

²⁷ J. Jackson, *The Dark Years 1940-1944*, (Oxford, 2001), 406. The SOE also does not appear in the index of M. Dank, *The French Against the French: Collaboration and Resistance*, (Philadelphia, 1974)

²⁸ M. Cobb, *The Resistance: The French Fight Against the Nazis*, (London, 2009), 5

²⁹ See Kedward, *Resistance in Vichy France*

³⁰ Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections*, 148

Free French of encroaching upon their sphere of influence and activity.’³¹ Obviously this political controversy is crucial to this period, and it would be wrong to dismiss Franco-British tensions so quickly. However there is a need to look more closely at the interaction between the British and the French on the ground in order to appreciate the original structures that F Section’s agents created to support the Resistance in France. This thesis will contend with the idea that the Resistance was a distinctly French inspired movement and show that the British, through the early activities of SOE, did actually shape and direct the Resistance for some French people in 1940-1941.

A large amount of official documentary material has recently been made available at the National Archives, allowing the researcher access to a diverse selection of primary sources that have previously been kept secret. Situation Reports and Weekly Progress Reports concerning F Section’s activity in the field provide factual accounts of operations and planning, whilst correspondence between the department and the High Command offers insight into the aims and objectives of British policy during the war. Nevertheless, the completeness of this body of sources is questionable. A fire in Baker Street in 1946 destroyed a large number of documents while the surviving files ‘have been subjected to a steady process of attrition’ and many vanished during large clearances of the offices.³² Most of the documents are now in typescript as any information obtained via the wireless transmitters or handwritten sources from the field have been summarised and replaced in the form of reports. The secondary nature of these sources is problematic as authors remain largely anonymous and it is impossible to determine exactly who the documents are addressed to. Nevertheless, as an official secret agency, the documents held at the National Archives are the only official

³¹ Stafford, *Britain and European Resistance*, 55

³² Foot, *SOE in France*, 449

papers that exist about the SOE, and explicit records of British policy are not available anywhere else.

While the archival material helps to answer the questions involving F Section's aims and operations, the selected memoirs of British agent Benjamin Cowburn and Philippe de Vomécourt serve to offer insight into the personal interactions between SOE agents and the French resisters. Cowburn was parachuted into France in September 1941 and de Vomécourt, although living in France at the time of occupation, was one of the first French organisers employed directly by SOE in 1941. These sources have their own inadequacies and bias. Such personal documents are limited in that they only present one viewpoint of what happened; individual narratives cannot universally represent the experiences of all SOE agents and their encounters with the French people during the war. Moreover the published memoirs face the problem of being selective and sometimes factually inaccurate. As Seaman has argued, 'personal accounts continue to appear courtesy of the British public's fascination with secret agents' which often means that recollections are embellished and dramatized in order to sell more copies.³³ But as long as one bears in mind that the context of the memoirs is as important as their content, it is possible to treat these sources with great care and efficiency. Despite these issues concerning the reliability of secret agent memoirs, both texts unfailingly point to a social aspect of history that official documents cannot engage with. The importance of personal recollections about the primary state of resistance and the role of SOE is paramount to this investigation.

This thesis will begin by addressing the historical question of F Section's performance in 1940-1941. Chapter one will build a basic picture of F Section's failures and difficulties in

³³ M. Seaman, 'A Glass Half Full – Some Thoughts on the Evolution of the Study of the Special Operations Executive,' *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.20, No.1, (2005), 32

the early years of the war before offering an alternative perspective on how SOE's performance can be judged. In re-defining the way by which SOE's achievements and success can be perceived, this chapter frames the subsequent analysis of the department's accomplishments. The Second chapter will address what was learned by the Section through its agents' first experiences in France and will examine what could be understood about the Resistance. It will demonstrate the way in which the operatives created initial resistance circuits of its own and emphasise the SOE's contribution to the development and expansion of the Resistance movement. Chapter three will identify what was actually accomplished by F Section's agents and their recruits in 1940-1941. Rather than focusing on the achievements involving direct, covert action, this chapter will consider the logistical structures that were established during the agents' original reconnaissance's abroad to provide hard evidence of its accomplishments.

Chapter 1

Situation and Weekly Progress Reports provide the most telling evidence of F Section's activity such as training, recruitment and planning; but it is the disappointments and the problems of this early period that truly characterise these reports. They highlight the many difficulties in setting 'Europe ablaze,' one of the greatest being finding the right opportunity to land agents into French territory. In July 1941 it was reported that 'sea landings are restricted to the Mediterranean' due to unfortunate conditions and darkness on the North and West coast.³⁴ Meanwhile bad weather and poor visibility were responsible for holding up air drops on a number of occasions which meant that missions had to be postponed until the following full moon period.³⁵ The continual delay of both supplies and personnel was exacerbated further by various forms of German and Vichy penetration. In December 1941 two parachutes containing provisions and three French prefixes (communication codes) were handed over to the enemy after being dropped 13 kilometres from the selected landing point.³⁶ Similarly during November at least five of the personnel in unoccupied France were interrogated by the police which resulted in a 'considerable part' of the organisation to be 'blown.'³⁷

The statistics all confirm that F Section's early operations were largely unsuccessful, and this is certainly one of the ways of quantifying SOE's performance. Beevor calculated that only 23 per cent (415) out of 1784 agents operated in France between 1941 and 1943 while only

³⁴ Kew: The National Archives (hereafter TNA): HS8/217, Weekly Progress Reports (hereafter WPR), 16 Jul.1941

³⁵ See TNA: HS8/217, WPR and TNA: HS8/218, WPR. In particular an evacuation by Lysander to be abandoned. (13 Aug. 1941) and none of the operations planned for October ('i.e a flight to drop four men, 2 containers and 2 wireless sets, and a second flight to drop three men and two containers') were possible due to weather conditions. (8 Oct.1941)

³⁶ TNA: HS6/416, 'D/RF to E/C,' 2 Jan.1942, 00142

³⁷ TNA: HS8/218, WPR, 12 Nov.1941

ten per cent (750) of successful sorties were flown in the first three years.³⁸ By October 1941 F Section had only placed 32 men in the field and by November had just one functioning wireless operator in the country.³⁹ Using Beevor's calculations one can see that just one per cent of the total agents were operating in France by October 1941. The situation was even bleaker considering that by the end of the year one third of the agents were imprisoned and a large number of the rest were in hiding.⁴⁰ In terms of transport, there was only one Lysander pick up during the whole in year in comparison to a total of 54 in 1942.⁴¹ It is unsurprising that historians have argued that F Section was considerably underachieving judging by the number of agents successfully placed in France by the end of the year.

The problems and difficulties faced by F Section were not only limited to operations in the field: indeed the archives reveal conflicts and antagonisms between the department and the War Office. There is no doubt that such tensions would have seriously hindered the performance of an organisation still in its infancy. Cobb argued that competition between SOE, MI5 and MI6 was a source of 'continuous tension,' and as previously suggested, relations between de Gaulle and London were similarly tenuous.⁴² However it was a diversity in interests between SOE and its military counterparts that was more detrimental to F Section's achievements at its outset. In May 1941 a conversation between SOE and the Future Operations Planning Section (FOPS) revealed that FOPS was considering 'scrapping their ideas for long-term, large-scale development of Secret Armies in conquered territories.'⁴³ Instead it was thought that 'air superiority can be decisive without any military operations at all.' On the other hand, a separate paper suggested that until military operation

³⁸ Beevor, *SOE: Recollections and Reflections*, 162

³⁹ See TNA, HS8/218, WPR, 8 Oct.1941 and TNA, HS8/218, WPR, 12 Nov.1941

⁴⁰ Foot, *SOE in France*, 161

⁴¹ West, *Secret War*, 57

⁴² Cobb, *The Resistance*, 91

⁴³ TNA: HS8/272, 'General Policy for Subversive Operations,' 30 May.1941

took place, attacks by saboteurs would have little effect upon the enemy.⁴⁴ Certainly insufficient knowledge, little experience and poor confidence in subversive activities and resistance underlined these tentative recommendations and inclined the authorities to propose more familiar methods of warfare. However, it was a lack of assertiveness and decisive planning that resulted in a slow and faltering start for F Section in 1940-1941. Buckmaster said himself that 'F Section suffered considerably from the lack of a clear directive.'⁴⁵

The achievements of SOE are also often judged according to whether operations accomplished the aims and objectives prescribed by the High Command. In early 1941 a threefold strategy was envisaged for SOE activity in occupied territories: 'subversive propaganda; sabotage and other subversive activities and the organisation of secret armies.'⁴⁶ In addition it was estimated that by October 1942 F Section's organisers should have been able to muster approximately 3000 men for covert activity and a total of 24,000 men for secret armies.⁴⁷ While these figures were wholly unsubstantiated, headquarters set a precedent for action and revealed the expected potential of F Section's capabilities. Nonetheless by the end of 1941 F Section was clearly failing to meet its objectives. In terms of sabotage, the failure of Operation SAVANNA to blow up vehicles carrying German personnel revealed the necessity for up-to-date intelligence, as the said vehicles were no longer in operation by the time the agents arrived.⁴⁸ Operation BARTER, launched in September against the Mérignac airfield, was aborted because the wireless transmitter was damaged during landing.⁴⁹ Meanwhile Cowburn's reconnaissance to sabotage oil industries

⁴⁴ TNA: HS8/272, 'Comments on M's Paper, "A Study of Requirements for the Organisation of Insurrection in German Occupied Territories,"' 6 Jun.1941

⁴⁵ TNA: HS7/121, 'History of F Section by Colonel Buckmaster,' undated, pp.2

⁴⁶ TNA: HS8/272, 'Summary,' undated

⁴⁷ TNA: HS8/272, 'Summary,' undated

⁴⁸ TNA: HS6/345, 'SAVANNA and JOSEPHINE B,'00018, 9 Oct.1941

⁴⁹ Foot, *SOE in France*, 167

completely failed as he was unable to blow up any of his targets.⁵⁰ By September 1941, the Weekly Progress Reports could only note five acts of sabotage or ‘interferences’ in France; the extent to which were described as ‘general disorganisation’ and ‘slowing down of production.’⁵¹ As for building a secret army, F Section had little to show for its efforts. For instance, in April it was reported that there was ‘still widespread apathy and disillusionment in France’⁵² and in May it was claimed that, ‘no secret army organisation exists in France at all.’⁵³

By the end of 1941 F Section had clearly failed to ‘set Europe ablaze.’ Even contemporaries expressed dissatisfaction towards the lack of progress made since September 1940. Sir Frank Nelson, chief of the organisation, not only referred to the work in France as a ‘failure’ but also recorded that ‘a tardy release of personnel from fighting forces, poor air connections and restrictions to diplomatic facilities’ slowed the SOE’s overall development.⁵⁴ Although his report was written in the early months of 1941 (and still much more was to be done that year), the exposure of the SOE’s shortfalls and problems characterised this period of the organisations history. Nevertheless, as a new institution still in its first year of origin, it was necessary for SOE to evaluate its own performance. It needed to judge its contribution to the broader war effort and identify problems, in order to improve its service in occupied countries. The tendency for contemporaries and historians to primarily focus on the areas of F Section’s activities that needed development has meant that the conclusions drawn about the department’s performance are largely damning.

⁵⁰ B. Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger, Allied Spycraft in Occupied France*, (Yorkshire, 2009), 99

⁵¹ TNA, HS8/218, WPR, 10 Sept.1941

⁵² TNA: HS8/272, ‘Notes on the Organisation of Sabotage,’ 11 Apr.1941

⁵³ TNA: HS8/272, ‘A Study of Requirements for the Organisation of Insurrection in German Occupied Territories,’ 21 May.1941

⁵⁴ TNA: HS8/272, ‘Survey of Activities,’ 22 Feb.1941

It is too simplistic to suggest that unsuccessful operations, disorganisation and contemporary criticism outweighed what was actually achieved and learned between 1940 and 1941. A more accurate way to identify what F Section actually accomplished is to examine its activities in relation to the more immediate, short term aims. F Section's earliest agents were expected to take on an organisational role among the French and 'encourage' sabotage as opposed to carrying it out themselves.⁵⁵ Jebb (Assistant Minister of SOE) acknowledged that the policy for active sabotage would be 'limited' until the networks in the field were fully established and so it is unsurprising that there are not more reports acclaiming successful incidents of sabotage.⁵⁶

The short term objectives also revealed the aim to foster British support in France. Agents were instructed to maintain morale and promote the belief that the Allies would soon win the war.⁵⁷ Rather than simply measuring the performance of F Section according to the overarching objectives (committing acts of sabotage and raising a secret army), there is a need to look at the more immediate aims to prepare and organise willing participants on the ground. As Jebb told the Prime Minister, 'this is slow and unspectacular work, but of the greatest importance in the long run.'⁵⁸

It can also be argued that, although the term 'resistance' does not feature predominantly in the aims and objectives of the early sorties, the activity of SOE agents shaped and directed the idea of resistance for French individuals and groups. Bourne-Paterson drew attention to this in 1946 in his specially commissioned history of 'British Circuits in France.' He wrote that the early system 'grew up of smaller, more compact circuits with definite limited

⁵⁵ TNA: HS8/272, 'Organisation of Sabotage,' 11 Apr.1941

⁵⁶ TNA: HS8/272, 'S.O.2 Policy,' 9 Sept.1941

⁵⁷ TNA: HS8/272, 'Organisation of Sabotage,' 11 Apr.1941

⁵⁸ TNA: HS8/272, 'Jebb to Churchill,' 13 Jun.1941

objectives...organisers were sent to France with the wide and potentially all-embracing mission of “organising resistance,” which explains why the achievements of SOE in 1941 are more difficult to quantify.⁵⁹ While this document provides secondary information, the Major’s perspective is a credible primary source. He made a vital link between the activity of F Section and the early growth of anti-German groups- something which was not wholly recognised by contemporary military and political authorities, or by historians. The tendency to judge the SOE’s performance by its overall contribution to the war often leads to counting the number of sabotaged trains and exploded factories. However a narrower focus that looks primarily at F Section’s interaction with the Resistance offers more opportunity to identify what was actually achieved by SOE and its French recruits in 1940-1941.

Furthermore the original information that was gathered by F Section in its early years of existence cannot be overlooked. Although SOE Chiefs were very careful not to define the organisation as an intelligence service (its role was not to report on military movements or strategy), the information that was collected in 1940-1941 about the situation in France not only improved the effectiveness of future operations but it also ensured that the agents could operate relatively safely in foreign territory.⁶⁰ Early missions to France also provided SOE with an opportunity to establish reliable lines of communication and transport. What Foot described as ‘trial and error’ can be regarded as a different kind of covert activity undertaken by F Section’s agents.⁶¹ They were not so much engaging with the enemy but creating the foundations for an extensive clandestine network across the whole of France.

⁵⁹ TNA: HS7/122, ‘British Circuits in France 1941-1944 by Major R.A Bourne-Paterson,’ 1946, pp.iii

⁶⁰ Bourne-Paterson made it clear that F Section circuits were ‘not “Intelligence” circuits.’ (TNA: HS7/122, ‘British Circuits in France,’ pp.iii)

⁶¹ Foot, *SOE*, 218

In order to fully ascertain the department's successes in this early period, an awareness of both primary and secondary tasks is necessary. For example the primary objective for Operation BARTER was to organise sabotage on the Mérignac aerodrome however the agents were also instructed to provide information on 'places in which men or material may be dropped...as well as all useful information relating to future operations.'⁶² Operation JOSEPHINE B was praised for its successful execution of its primary task (destruction of the transformers at Pessac) but was also noted for bringing back important information and laying the foundations 'for the wide development of similar operations.'⁶³ The intelligence and information gained by completing secondary tasks, as well as the unobtrusive covert action carried out in the field, was invaluable for the greater operational success achieved by the Section in the years to come.

There is no doubt that F Section experienced a number of failures, difficulties and problems in its early existence. Unsuccessful operations were not the only hindrances to the organisations development:- competition for resources and indecisive planning resulted in a slow and complicated start for the department. Clearly F Section was failing to meet its objectives. In the grand scheme of the war it achieved relatively little, especially in comparison to the accomplishments of 1942, 1943 and 1944. Nonetheless it is unmerited to assess F Section's performance so simply. A consideration of the short term, immediate aims is valuable in establishing how F Section's early agents contributed to the existence of early resistance groups. Moreover the physical achievements of the department should not only be judged by its success in sabotage and subversion. The acquisition of information about the social and political situation in France provided valuable intelligence for future operations

⁶² TNA: HS6/418, 'Operation order BARTER,' 31 Aug.1941, 00003

⁶³ TNA: HS6/345, 'SAVANNA and JOSEPHINE B,' 9 Oct.1941, 00019

and enabled F Section to establish safe structures and procedures that would continue for the rest of the war.

Chapter 2

F Section's first experiences of clandestine activity certainly taught its agents practical lessons in how best to prepare for missions and survive as secret operatives in foreign territory. However reports from 1940-1941 also show that SOE was collating a large amount of information about the general situation in France. In particular, the morale of the French people and their attitudes towards the enemy were of great significance and helped to paint a picture of the state and form of the early Resistance. This chapter will identify what was learned specifically about the Resistance in France and will explain how F Section's agents went about organising and creating anti-German groups of its own.

Despite being short term aims, it must be remembered that sourcing information and organising clandestine groups were not always primary objectives. Some of the most important foundation work was carried out by the members of the SAVANNA team. They were forced to abort their original task of sabotage and instead diverted their efforts to finding potential leaders for resistance groups.⁶⁴ These agents were not all as untrained or novice as West suggested.⁶⁵ In fact 3 members of the team were awarded with military medals for their initiative and resourcefulness after failing their initial operation.⁶⁶ Le Tac was actually unable to evacuate from France with the rest of his team in April 1941 and remained for a further five months. During this time he was 'working entirely alone without direction or support' yet succeeded in 'collecting information and laying the foundations of patriot organisations' in the Brittany region.⁶⁷ In fact, following their return from Operation JOSEPHINE B (and having previously been involved in the SAVANNA mission), Forman and Le Tac compiled an

⁶⁴ TNA: HS6/345, 'SAVANNA and JOSEPHINE B, 00018

⁶⁵ West, *Secret War*, 136

⁶⁶ Adjutant Forman, Sergeant Le Tac and Captain Bergé were all awarded military medals, see TNA: HS6/345, 'Recommendation for Military Medal,' undated, 00023-000234, 00026, 00038-00039

⁶⁷ TNA: HS6/345, 'Recommendation for Military Medal,' 00026

extensive document of their observations and recommendations about the situation in France and this report is one of the principle sources used to investigate the state the of Resistance in this early period.

During the initial years of the war the French people were seen to be disorganised and unprepared and it was evident that Britain needed to come to the country's aid. By October 1940, three months after the Armistice, it was reported that the French 'lack direction and have not done more than begin to recover from the shock of defeat and betrayal.'⁶⁸ By the summer of 1941, the situation had not improved. Even though de Gaulle had 'a strong nucleus of sympathisers' his followers complained of having no definite instruction or leadership.⁶⁹ Informal resistance organisations were also 'hampered and frustrated' by the lack of communication from British forces⁷⁰ and so it was believed that British liaison with the resisting groups was 'universally desired.'⁷¹

Therefore some of the most important intelligence that was obtained by F Section in 1941 was information regarding existing resistance groups that operated independently across France. The largest by far was the *Liberté* group which functioned in the unoccupied zone with the aim to 'help by every means possible the victory of Great Britain and the liberation of France.'⁷² It was reported that the paramilitary part of the force recruited approximately 7000-8000 men however they were still awaiting means of communication and arms from Great Britain.⁷³ Other groups were seen to be less organised and prepared. Although the *Actualité* organisation could supposedly call upon a total of 30,000 men, indiscretions and

⁶⁸ TNA: HS6/593, 'Situation in France by P.Willert,' 9 Oct.1940, 00062

⁶⁹ TNA: HS6/593, 'Report on France,' 23 Jun.1941, 00023

⁷⁰ TNA: HS6/593, 'Memorandum from France by S.Biggs,' 30 Sept.1941, 00015

⁷¹ TNA: HS6/593, 'Report on France,' 00019

⁷² TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Adjutant Forman and Sergeant Le Tac on their Mission in France 6 May – 12 August 1941,' 5 Sept.1941,' 00039

⁷³ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00039

contradictory leadership meant that its reliability was questionable and it remained largely inactive.⁷⁴ Elsewhere in the occupied zone, the organisations outside of Paris were much more sporadic and widespread and were often limited by the large number of hamlets and villages, particularly across the Brittany region.⁷⁵ However without the strength of proper leadership, these small groups of individuals often did more damage than good. Forman and Le Tac suggested that even the smallest acts of sabotage were often wasted efforts as they had no military value and threatened to jeopardise the secrecy of their group.⁷⁶ Quite simply F Section learned, as historians have later identified, that the early resistance groups in France were often nameless, unspecialised, unstructured and merely bound by a mutual aversion towards the armistice, the Germans and sometimes even the Vichy Government.⁷⁷ This obviously reinforced the necessity for Britain to come to the aid of the French people.

Nonetheless SOE was careful not to incorporate existing organisations into its own structure as it had no desire to become involved in broader, national, political movements. Forman located a small organisation in Lyon which he believed to have substantial potential for orchestrating subversive action. However he advised that F Section should just ‘provide them with a means of direct communication to London and technical advice on demolitions’ rather than involving themselves directly, as the clandestine anti-German newspaper that the group published was closely affiliated with the *Libération Nationale*.⁷⁸ This is not to say that F Section played no part in directing the action of this organisation. Despite an obvious lack of visible assistance from the British, movements such as the one in Lyon still received instruction from SOE about how best to conduct covert activity against the enemy. For a number of the original resistance groups that grew from within France, F Section’s agents

⁷⁴ TNA: HS6/347, ‘Report of Forman and Le Tac,’ 00040-00041

⁷⁵ TNA: HS6/347, ‘Report of Forman and Le Tac,’ 00043

⁷⁶ TNA: HS6/347, ‘Report of Forman and Le Tac,’ 00043

⁷⁷ See Dank, *The French Against the French*, 121-122

⁷⁸ TNA: HS6/347, ‘Resume of F.L.1’s Activities,’ 00027

provided direction and assurance to prompt widespread disruption. In doing so, the SOE played a part in transforming often ineffectual and unorganised resistance units into a more coherent and powerful weapon against the enemy by simply showing the French people how to resist. At the same time F Section avoided entangling itself in national and political ideologies but still benefited from the several thousand followers that made up these organisations, and advised them according to its own objectives and policies.

It also emerged that the British would actually benefit from providing support to French organisations. Forman and Le Tac indicated that there was ‘a great potential source of power (within France) which would be even more powerful if directed and organised by General Headquarters...capable of completely changing the course of the war.’⁷⁹ Contrary to the belief of Britain’s war chiefs (and even Cobb), F Section’s agents were beginning to realise the necessity of resistance during their early reconnaissance’s in France; not only to win the war, but to facilitate the expansion and effectiveness of their own activities. In his memoirs, de Vomécourt noted that ‘the agents from London...would have been helpless without the never-failing help and courage of the ordinary people’ and this was a vital lesson for F Section to have learned in 1941.⁸⁰ The calls for British assistance therefore, were not primarily asking for arms, money and resources as it has previously been emphasised.⁸¹ Rather organisation, leadership and preparation served to mutually benefit the Resistance, Britain’s war effort and the development of SOE.

Although F Section’s agents largely distanced themselves from the broader internal political movements, the operatives did not refrain from publicising the belief that Britain and the Allies would soon win the war. The agents themselves made explicit attempts to maintain

⁷⁹ TNA: HS6/347, ‘Report of Forman and Le Tac,’ 00039

⁸⁰ P. de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day: France in Arms 1940-1945*, (London, 1961), 40

⁸¹ Cobb, *The Resistance*, 5

morale in a country so devastated and torn apart by German intervention. Cowburn recalled being asked about England on a number of occasions and he would tell his French recruits that 'the British were full of beans and would in due course beat the Germans.'⁸² He also told them of the Battle of Britain and commented that the English people were 'mobilised and determined too.'⁸³ Interestingly French attitudes towards the British were predominantly positive. Despite the tragedy at Mers-el-Kebri and the fiasco at Dakar, official reports judged that '95 per cent of French people in occupied France and 80 per cent of those in the Free Zone sympathised with Great Britain.'⁸⁴ According to Cowburn, 'most Frenchmen...lived in hope that England...would win the final battle' and the prestige of Churchill could be seen throughout France.⁸⁵ Fortunately for F Section the jealousies and political conflicts that occurred between the London and de Gaulle did not appear to filter down to the lower echelons. De Vomécourt recalled that 'a man's nationality did not matter...so long as he was working for the allies and the common cause;' the French people needed help and 'it mattered little whence it came.'⁸⁶ Such favourable conditions enabled F Section's agents to engage and interact with the French population without encountering anti-British sentiments or hostile relationships. This enabled them to organise resistance circuits of their own.

The recruitment of resisters for the involvement in British-led action was a particular problem for the SOE in France. Cowburn specifically remembered that finding men 'able to hold their tongues' was especially difficult and considering that the extent of collaboration with the enemy was largely unknown, F Section's operatives had to act cautiously.⁸⁷ Agents often found themselves working independently in order to minimize the risk of detection.

⁸² Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 20,

⁸³ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 20, 46

⁸⁴ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00080

⁸⁵ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 22-23, 42

⁸⁶ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 104

⁸⁷ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 43

However this was also beneficial for operatives who were beginning to establish their own clandestine circuits. Individuals would confidentially call upon personal friends or relatives to ask for their help and assistance. Forman contacted 'an old friend' and together they approached their former colleagues with a view to using them as organisers.⁸⁸ Cowburn too began by asking his friends in Paris if they knew of any good, reliable men living in a provincial town who would be able to muster a local force.⁸⁹ While this was a good method for accessing a large number of people, F Section's agents were still reliant upon 'second-hand recommendations and hearsay.'⁹⁰ Yet there were few other ways in which SOE could mobilise networks on the ground in these early phases of the war. The fact that the early resistance groups formed by the organisation comprised of a small number of trustworthy, local and self-contained men, isolated from all other similar groups, meant that the risk of exposure was more controllable. More importantly, between the agent and his circuit ran a reliable line of communication through a trusted friend or relative who often took control of organising and maintaining the group. In the event of an agent being captured by the enemy, (as was the case for a large number of F Section operatives by the end of 1941) his network would remain safe and secure.

At the same time, F Section's agents had few instructions on whom to approach for resistance work and they certainly did not judge recruits on their political views. Forman's original circuit in the Toulouse region was thought to have comprised several socialist elements; however the desirability of its political ideology was surpassed by the primary interest in solving the German problem.⁹¹ Similarly Cowburn 'disregarded pre-war political views' and

⁸⁸ TNA: HS6/347, 'Resume of F.L.1's Activities,' 00025

⁸⁹ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 43-44

⁹⁰ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 42

⁹¹ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00042

found that even 'a former anti-British pacifist...could make a splendid recruit.'⁹² F Section took an apolitical approach to organising clandestine groups and although in the later years of the war there was a tendency to separate SOE's 'British' forces from de Gaulle's 'French' movements, F Section's agents offered their support to those who were dedicated to action. The lack of political bias in the British personnel sent to establish these circuits enabled Frenchmen to participate in the Resistance regardless of their political and social backgrounds.

As F Section began to identify a body of Resistance in France, it also became more attuned to popular willingness to resist. In particular, SOE agents recognised that there was a fundamental difference between the attitudes of the working classes and the elite. While the lower echelons displayed 'high morale' towards an Allied victory, it was considered that the ruling classes were more inclined to be Petainist 'since they believe him to be responsible for destroying the Communist menace.'⁹³ Moreover the supporters of Vichy tended to have 'business and banking interests,' which meant for 'simple material reasons,' their lives 'depended on a German victory.'⁹⁴ Meanwhile the middle and professional classes were deemed to be 'fanatically anti-German' and the 'spirit of resistance' was most likely to be found among ex-servicemen and those within the teaching profession.⁹⁵ It was for this reason that Forman approached the academic professors at the University of Toulouse and also targeted ex-naval workers and the students of a cavalry school in Paris to organise the initial anti-German cells in France.⁹⁶ Similarly, in Chateauroux, he located a willing man who was also the president of several local farmers associations while other prominent organisers included tradesmen, hotel owners and newspaper editors who often controlled small circuits

⁹² Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 40

⁹³ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00082-00083

⁹⁴ TNA: HS6/593, 'Situation in France,' 00062

⁹⁵ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00082

⁹⁶ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00042-00044

in isolated areas.⁹⁷ ⁹⁸ The best organisers were those who already appeared to have a considerable influence and authority within certain institutions and regions. On the other hand, it was the lower class's Communist propensities that made them fit for the Resistance⁹⁹ and it was recommended that SOE directed its actions 'towards the people rather than the upper classes' since the force of any movement would come from below.¹⁰⁰ That being said, F Section's reports showed the air of the time. If they failed to grasp the complexities of the period, they nonetheless understood the political situation. France had just come out of ten years of political turbulence between fascists and communists and so betting on the working classes to rebel was thus a viable strategy.

This chapter has identified how and why F Section engaged with the early Resistance in France and measured the extent to which it involved itself in the existing resistance organisations and how it established new anti-German groups. Through obtaining information about the differences in French attitudes and the morale in France, SOE realised that it must focus its attention on the Resistance in order to achieve its primary aims of sabotage and subversion. Such information was also essential in influencing the way in which the agents interacted and formed circuits of its own. The need to operate independently and apolitically ensured that F Section's agents set up small, localised and self-contained units that were bound by a mutual aversion towards the Germans rather than by ideology.

⁹⁷ TNA: HS6/347, 'Resume of F.L.I's Activities,' 00026

⁹⁸ See TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00045; TNA: HS6/593, 'Report on France,' 00021

⁹⁹ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00082

¹⁰⁰ TNA: HS6/593, 'Memorandum from France,' 00013-00014

Chapter 3

Having examined the ways in which F Section's agents engaged and interacted with the Resistance in France, this chapter will look at what was actually accomplished by F Section and its early recruits. In doing so this section will draw on ideas about the type of resistance that the French people were initially involved in across France. Before looking at the actual activities on the ground, it is first important to identify the ways in which the department succeeded in developing more efficient methods to prepare its operatives for work in the field.

Historians have seriously overlooked the fact that the newly established SOE was hugely successful in identifying methods to secretly transport people to and from France for the purpose of covert action. The triumph of parachuting untrained British agents into occupied territory, during the hours of darkness, when 'no-one knew just what to expect,' must be considered an achievement.¹⁰¹ The fact that F Section successfully dropped a total of 37 men into France within its first year of existence should not go unnoticed especially considering the lack of air support or recruits at the department's disposal in 1941.¹⁰² Despite being the only Lysander operation of the year, the first pick up/drop off was another significant accomplishment for the section as it proved that the British could land aircrafts on French territory unbeknown to the Germans.¹⁰³ This method ensured both the safe departure and arrival of F Section's agents to and from Britain and did not often attract too much attention. Meanwhile F Section liaised with the admiralty to devise more effective ways to land agents in France by boat. Following the partial evacuation of the operatives involved in the JOSEPHINE B and SAVANNA missions, and having realised the difficulties in landing agents

¹⁰¹ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 16

¹⁰² Foot, *SOE in France*, 473

¹⁰³ The operation was successfully carried out on the 4 Sept 1941 (TNA: HS8/218, WPR, 10 Sept.1941)

during high seas, it was discovered that more sea worthy canoes were available to carry men ashore and back.¹⁰⁴ Additionally SOE learned that its agents could carry 'faked up' naval pay books so that if they were on board an HM ship at a time of disaster, they could stand a good chance of being treated as a prisoner of war.¹⁰⁵

The early operations to France also taught SOE more effective ways to keep the identities of its personnel secret. Cowburn recalled that agents were expected to 'pass as average Frenchmen' which meant that they had to have an accurate knowledge of the French formalities and ways of life in order to blend in unnoticed with the local people.¹⁰⁶ From as early as January 1941, F Section was accumulating a store of French civilian clothing and as more agents gained experience in the field, the department could supply more specific garments.¹⁰⁷ As a result, agents were issued with 'well-worn dirty overalls as distinct from brand new ones,'¹⁰⁸ shirts were of dark colours for when the agents were in hiding and the parachutists were given shoes with thicker soles to accommodate for rough landings.¹⁰⁹ Even the smallest details were taken into consideration such as removing identifiable shirt-maker marks so that the clothing was not seen to have been manufactured in England.¹¹⁰ Later in the war, stores of clothing and equipment were sourced from the continent rather than from local companies.¹¹¹

Cowburn discovered that the best method by which to travel around the towns and villages was by bicycle. He recalled that a man riding a bike at any hour was 'far less conspicuous

¹⁰⁴ TNA: HS6/347, 'Evacuation of JOSEPHINE party by Canoe,' 9 May.1941, 00139

¹⁰⁵ TNA: HS6/416, 'Capt. Piquet Wicks to Lt. Holdsworth, undated, 00131

¹⁰⁶ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 42

¹⁰⁷ TNA: HS8/216, WPR, 30 Jan.1941

¹⁰⁸ TNA: HS6/416, 'Report from the Field,' undated, 00155

¹⁰⁹ TNA: HS6/347, 'Resume of F.L.1's Activities,' 6 Sept.1941, 00058

¹¹⁰ TNA: HS6/416, 'Lt. Holdsworth to Capt. Piquet Wicks,' 18 Oct.1941, 00220

¹¹¹ TNA: HS6/416, 'Holdsworth to Piquet Wicks,' 00220

than a pedestrian, as he made little noise and remained in sight for a much shorter time.’¹¹² Moreover if questioned ‘a cyclist could have claimed to have ridden from any spot, however distant’ which benefitted F Section’s movements around the local areas.¹¹³ The agents undertaking operation JOSEPHINE B used bicycles to travel to and from the transformer station and remained undetected. In fact, it was noticed that all the searchlights were looking for aeroplanes on the night of the destruction and did not suspect the operation to have been carried out on the ground.¹¹⁴ Indeed, very few local people were seen to be walking or travelling by car and thus the bicycle was a valuable and unsuspecting mode of transport for the foreign agents.

By the end of 1941, F Section had also organised reliable forging offices in London and across France.¹¹⁵ In October it was reported that SOE was in possession of enough identity cards and other additional documents such as driving licenses, ration cards and clothing cards that it could create a ‘pool’ from which it could ‘select specific models for each operation.’¹¹⁶ The accuracy of these forgeries was an achievement for F Section as it ensured that agents would be able to provide the correct documentation if questioned by the Vichy police or the Germans.¹¹⁷ The information gathered by F Section’s early agents created a reliable picture of French life and although this was important for the preparation of missions, it was also essential for preventing suspicion and maintaining the secrecy that the agents required for their survival.

¹¹² Cowburn *No Cloak No Dagger*, 16

¹¹³ Cowburn *No Cloak No Dagger*, 17

¹¹⁴ TNA: HS6/374, ‘Report of Operation JOSEPHINE B,’ undated, 00102

¹¹⁵ Forman noted that F Section had access to two secret offices capable of producing forged papers in both zones. (TNA: HS6/347, ‘Resume of F.L.I’s Activities,’ 00070)

¹¹⁶ TNA: HS6/416, ‘D/RF to MPO,’ 6 Oct.1941, 00252

¹¹⁷ Cowburn recalled being asked for his identity papers a number of times during his first operation in France, without being questioned (See Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 26, 31-32, 91)

Within France, F Section's agents utilised their earliest recruits to help build the foundations of a clandestine network which must be considered a big achievement for the department in 1940-1941. The evident lack of successful sabotage by the British personnel in the early phases of the war implies that their original circuits were unable to achieve much in the way of covert action either. Writing about his first operation in 1941, Cowburn stated that 'it was to be long time before my friends and I were able to become really active' and the aim for most operations to be carried out by the local teams was a long time coming.¹¹⁸ Yet, as it has already been discussed, the achievements of the operatives and their recruits should not be solely determined by their subversive activities. As Davies suggested, the Resistance was 'plural,' and in fact 'resistance' took a number of different forms for the French people involved.¹¹⁹

Of the organisations that F Section's agents created through their own initiative, the main resistance work that was carried out was largely to prepare for, and assist in future SOE operations. Men were needed for receiving supplies, preparing landing grounds and serve as reception committees for incoming parachutists.¹²⁰ In Mimizan, Forman had recruited a number of peasants who organised hide-outs for materials and personnel, and who had a landing ground at their disposal. In Castets the group had two lorries for the use of SOE and in the Paris region, there were a number of chateaux's able to facilitate materials and arms.¹²¹ Elsewhere, particularly in places such as Brittany where the cells were widely dispersed, the organisations were instructed to obtain information about the position and movements of the Germans in their respective areas.¹²² Fishermen were also particularly useful for transporting personnel and supplies from larger vessels at sea to the mainland. In fact in September 1941,

¹¹⁸ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 50

¹¹⁹ P.Davies, *France and the Second World War: Occupation, Collaboration and Resistance*, (Oxon, 2006), 49

¹²⁰ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 41

¹²¹ TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00044

¹²² TNA: HS6/347, 'Report of Forman and Le Tac,' 00045

arrangements were made with local fishermen to retrieve both their lobster pots and F Section's sea-tight containers along the Breton coast ¹²³

The first drop of arms to Philippe de Vomécourt in June 1941 was an important achievement for F Section and held even greater significance for the French recruits who assisted the operation. Although the dropping of arms determined that vital supplies and stores could be received on ground, the event did more than just prove what SOE was capable of. The fact that Britain was seen to be attempting to arm the French was considered a turning point in the Resistance. De Vomécourt considered the arms as 'tools for real work' and wrote that 'plans could now be translated into action' which marked 'the Resistance moving into a second phase.'¹²⁴ Although there were cases when the stores or items ended up in the hands of the enemy (as previously mentioned), this first successful operation proved that arms could be retrieved by the Resisters, and symbolised that the birth and survival of the French Resistance was tied to British operations.

Many of F Section's earliest recruits on the ground were simply involved in a number of logistical transport and communication processes. For the French people working along the escape routes or providing safe houses, resistance did not take the form of active sabotage or subversion. De Vomécourt mentioned the difference in those willing to commit a crime against the Germans and those who simply wanted to help troops, refugees and operatives travel back to their own country.¹²⁵ As early as February 1941, F Section had made significant progress by locating two safe houses able to facilitate both men and materials.¹²⁶

¹²³ TNA: HS6/416, 'Holdsworth to Sporburg,' 16 Sept.1941, 00278

¹²⁴ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 48

¹²⁵ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 52

¹²⁶ TNA: HS8/216, WPR, 27 Feb.1941

A route across the Spanish-Portuguese border had also been successfully tested.¹²⁷ By May, F Section was soon reporting on the safe arrival of its agents in France and was encouraged by the fact that their 'arrangements regarding safe addresses and contacts had turned out according to plan.'¹²⁸ In September the Section had obtained full details as to how to cross the demarcation line¹²⁹ and in October 1941 Cowburn discovered a willing train driver who let him travel between the zones hidden under the cavity of a water-tank of the locomotive.¹³⁰ 1941 also witnessed the growth of the 'Pat O'leary organisation' which was, according to de Vomécourt, 'the most organised and most remarkable' escape route established.¹³¹ Initially created by SOE agent Ian Garrow, the countrywide network had links with safe houses in Paris, Lyon, Toulouse and Marseilles and was maintained entirely by French resisters.¹³² Although the line was infiltrated in 1943, the creation of more formalised methods of escape during the early years of the war was certainly an achievement and set the premise for similar systems to take hold.

The development of reliable communication systems was another organisational feat for F Section's agents and its sympathisers. Ruby recalled that 'equipment and communications for our early operations had sadly proved inadequate' and to a large extent the SOE's initial operations were marred by problems with wireless transmitters and indecipherable messages.¹³³ Nonetheless other means of contact were more successful and F Section established a number of methods to ensure that its agents could communicate between themselves and remain connected with London, which largely relied on the help of the

¹²⁷ TNA: HS8/216, WPR, 27 Feb.1941

¹²⁸ TNA: HS8/217, WPR, 21 May.1941

¹²⁹ TNA: HS8/218, WPR, 17 Sept.1941

¹³⁰ Cowburn, *No Cloak No Dagger*, 58-60, 115

¹³¹ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 52

¹³² de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 52

¹³³ Ruby, *F Section*, 118-119. See also Leo Marks' memoir *Between Silk and Cyanide*. His book provides an interesting perspective on the problems of indecipherable messages and communication codes however he was not recruited by SOE until 1942 which is unfortunately out of this thesis' time period.

French people. Initially the department arranged assistance from the Deuxième Bureau in France to securely transport letters and parcels across the demarcation line.¹³⁴ However by May, SOE had directly recruited its own Frenchmen to gather news and organise lines of communication between the two zones. F Section found that news correspondents were the most effective for this work and in June it was reported that an 'energetic French journalist' had already agreed to serve the organisation.¹³⁵ The establishment of 'letter-boxes' in 1941 was a risky, but effective means of communication between agents. A letter-box was a person with whom an operative could leave a message, letter or parcel to be collected by another agent later when presenting the correct password.¹³⁶ The first scheme to be created by de Vomécourt's network was in a chemist's shop in Chateauroux but it was soon infiltrated in the autumn of 1941.¹³⁷ Still, the quick recruitment of reliable contacts in France meant that the network of letterboxes expanded and included doctors, bakers, butchers and even 'angelic-looking nuns in a convent.'¹³⁸ External means of communication were also developed between representatives in France and London via Lisbon. A number of post-boxes for telegraphic purposes were utilised in the summer of 1941 between France and Portugal and a new sea line opened from Lisbon to Marseilles in July.¹³⁹ Later in the war, as the organisation grew and the necessity for clandestine warfare increased, SOE expanded and modified these original structures that were designed and tested in 1941. In the meantime, the very creation of transport and communication systems formed reliable life-lines for F Section's earliest agents and utilised the large number of French people who were searching for ways to assist passively in the Resistance movement.

¹³⁴ TNA: HS8/216, WPR, 20 Feb.1941

¹³⁵ TNA: HS8/217, WPR, 25 Jun.1941

¹³⁶ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 75

¹³⁷ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 75

¹³⁸ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 75

¹³⁹ See TNA: HS8/217, WPR, 16 Jul.1941, 28 Aug.1941; TNA: HS8/218, WRP, 17 Sept.1941

As a final point, it is important to recognise that F Section's operatives were implementing the short term aims to encourage sabotage and subversion among its recruits. There are no official reports that document any successful attempts by the early circuits to disrupt the German effort but correspondence between SOE High Command and the Foreign Office assured that clandestine methods were being encouraged and disseminated by F Section's agents.¹⁴⁰ It is important to note that the actions were limited to small acts such as bribery, incendiarism, misdirection of transport and interfering with machinery but it was made clear that whatever the action, it should not be directly traceable to Britain or made attributable to an act of sabotage.¹⁴¹ De Vomécourt worked as a railway inspector for the Germans in the Free Zone during 1940-1941 and discovered simple ways of causing delays, losing wagons, and redirecting supplies that were meant to be going to Germany.¹⁴² He recalled dropping 'discreet hints' to his fellow railway workers to prompt them carrying out similar tasks and this he said, 'could be done without any risk to anyone'.¹⁴³ Obviously the scale and effect of such action was not as significant or apparent as later sabotage attempts. Yet the seeds of revolt were sown by F Section's earliest agents in 1941 and played a part in transforming often passive, ineffectual sentiment into physical obtrusion in the later years of the war.

This chapter has focused on the accomplishments of F Section by looking at the different kinds of activities its agents and new recruits were involved in. In fact the SOE must be commended for the way it continually developed more secure ways for its agents and the resisters to operate in France. The early experiences of French life were invaluable for the discovering ways to maintain the organisation's secrecy. The discovery of safe passages across the demarcation line and escape routes out of France were certainly achieved due to an

¹⁴⁰ See TNA: HS6/589, 'Jebb to Foreign Office,' 19 Oct.1941, 00011-00013

¹⁴¹ TNA: HS6/589, 'Jebb to Foreign Office,' 00011

¹⁴² de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 33-35

¹⁴³ de Vomécourt, *Who Lived to See the Day*, 34

element of chance; however it is fair to say that in doing so, F Section identified and cemented a number of trusted systems and reliable recruits to keep its circuits secure. Although the clandestine activity of the earliest resisters was limited, those who associated themselves with SOE were largely involved in activities that expanded and enhanced the organisation itself.

Conclusion

This deeper analysis of SOE in 1940-1941 has found that F Section achieved far more in its first year of establishment than historians have given credit it for. It is fair to say that the organisation suffered considerably during the initial phases of the war, and as a result, scholarship has tended to focus on its inadequate resources, conflicting political relationships and failed sabotage attempts rather than identifying its smaller accomplishments. However this thesis has problematized the traditional narrative and demonstrated that F Section's successes, no matter how discreet or small, created the framework for the SOE's future operations and contributed significantly to the expansion and organisation of the Resistance in France. Moreover, by focusing on the way in which SOE agents organised and interacted with resisters on the ground, this thesis has sought to dispel myths of Franco-British tensions in the fight against the Nazis, and also contend the arguments that suggest resistance originated entirely from French roots.

This thesis began by offering an alternative way by which to judge the performance of F Section. Rather than quantifying the SOE's success in terms of its military contribution and covert action, it is necessary to focus on the ways that F Section's agents inspired, controlled and assisted the oppressed people in France as an essential precursor to its more active clandestine operations. An understanding of the short term aims and an awareness of both primary and secondary tasks, within the context of the Resistance, presented an opportunity to address the more logistical preparations organised by the operatives in the field during their initial missions abroad. By simply altering what can be defined as an achievement or success, it created the chance to specifically identify what F Section accomplished.

The arrangement and deployment of initial transport and communication links served as life-lines for the organisations earliest agents, but also became an expression of resistance for a number of F Section's original French recruits. Those who were involved in operating and maintaining escape routes or letter-boxes may not be considered to have participated as actively as the Frenchmen who were sabotaging factories or derailing trains, yet their contribution to the growth and safety of F Section's networks was paramount. West may have been correct in saying that the organisation had few assets left in the field by the summer of 1941- but only if he was talking about the lack of SOE personnel and the small number of functioning wireless transmitters.¹⁴⁴ The creation and development of logistical structures, and the collation of information regarding living conditions and security controls, was part of a much more extensive and complex clandestine system in France that provided safe bases, reliable contacts and fool-proof resources for resistance organisers as well as SOE agents throughout the war. Without this framework, SOE would not have been able to function in France at all and so F Section should be recognised more profoundly for its early work.

While the origins and activity of the broader Resistance in France is out of the scope of this investigation, a study of the SOE's achievements in France is inevitably entrenched within the wider discourse of Resistance writing. By looking at how F Section's agents worked with the early resisters and how networks of supporters were created by the SOE in 1941, this thesis has contributed to a new epoch in Resistance scholarship which looks less at what the Resistance did, but rather is concerned with the different social environments from which the movement sprung.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ West, *Secret War*, 44

¹⁴⁵ Jackson, *The Dark Years*, 19-20

This study does not simply provide a chronological narrative about the activities of SOE. Rather it has revealed more nuanced connections between the role of the organisation and the wider context of the time. However this thesis should be taken as one part of a much bigger study concerning the SOE's impact during World War Two. As Seaman has identified, 'there are whole areas of the SOE's work that remain unexplored,' and the arguments presented in this thesis are only the tip of the iceberg.¹⁴⁶ Further questions must be asked: did relations between F Section and the French change over time? Were there regional differences in attitudes and approaches? And how did the activity of SOE contribute to resistance movements outside of France? Although these questions fall beyond the scope of this investigation, this thesis has uncovered a new perspective on how to judge the performance of the organisation in France in the early phases of the war, which provides the framework for future analysis concerning success and failure.

¹⁴⁶ M.Seaman, 'A Glass Half Full – Some Thoughts on the Evolution of the Study of the Special Operations Executive', *Intelligence and National Security*, Vol.20, No.1, (2005), 40

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