

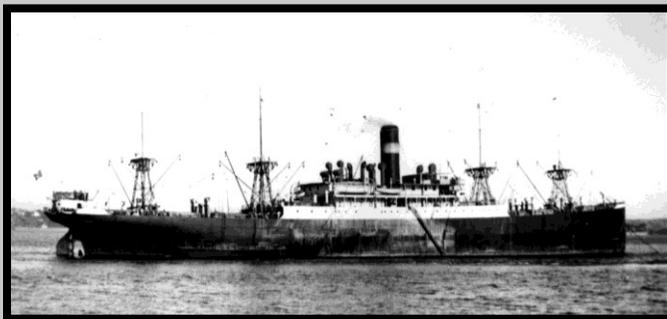
A Sea-going Postmaster

By Geoff Walker

During WW2, in July 1940, Winston Churchill directed that a top-secret, clandestine organization, be set up to plan and execute, unusual and special operations against the Axis powers. This establishment was later to be known as "**The Special Operations Executive**" (SOE). Few people knew of the SOE's existence at the time. Those who were involved in it or worked with it, were sometimes referred to as the "**Baker Street Irregulars**", after the location of its London headquarters. It was also known as "**Churchill's Secret Army**" or the "**Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare**". Its purpose was to conduct espionage, sabotage, and reconnaissance, initially in occupied Europe (later, extended to occupied Southeast Asia) against the Axis powers, and to aid local resistance movements. However, its scope of operation exceeded these boundaries from time to time, operating anywhere, as, and when required.

SOE operated in all theatres occupied or attacked by the Axis forces, except where demarcation lines were agreed upon between Britain's principal Allies (the United States and the Soviet Union). It also made use of neutral territory on occasion or made plans and preparations in case neutral countries were invaded by the Axis. The organization, although highly classified, directly employed or controlled more than 13,000 people, about 3,200 of whom were women and operated under the broadest terms of engagement.

During 1941, the British Admiralty started receiving reports that German submarines were using the rivers in Vichy French controlled Africa as a base for refueling. SOE maintained a presence in West Africa, from where it could monitor the Vichy French, Spanish, and Portuguese territories, with the intention of identifying and hindering any activities that threatened Britain's colonial possessions or indeed, posed any threat towards Britain's war effort. While secret SOE commandos were searching for the German submarine bases, SOE agents had discovered three vessels in the port of **Santa Isabel** on the Spanish island of **Fernando Po**, about 19 nautical miles off the coast of Africa, near the borders of Nigeria and Guinea. The three ships were identified as the Italian merchant vessel **Duchessa d'Aosta**, the large German tug **Likomba**, and a diesel-powered barge **Bibundi**. The **Duchessa d'Aosta** was equipped with a working radio, which was considered a threat, with the potential to provide details of Allied shipping movements, particularly to Axis submarines operating off the West coast of Africa.



The Italian cargo Liner **Duchessa d'Aosta**, 7,872 GRT, built in 1921 by Stabilimento Tecnico Triestino for Lloyd Triestino. British forces captured her in 1941 and she was transferred to the Ministry of War Transport (MoWT) as **Empire Yukon**. Later she was transferred to the Canadian Government in 1946 and renamed **Petconnie** in 1947. She returned to Italian

ownership in 1951 as **Liu O** and was scrapped at La Spezia in 1952. (Unknown copyright)

During his visits to the island, SOE agent **Leonard Guise** kept the ships under constant surveillance, and in August 1941 submitted a plan to seize **Likomba** and disable the freighter **Duchessa d'Aosta**. Approval for the military operation in a neutral port was only given by the Admiralty on 20 November 1941, and planning proceeded, with the formation of a small raiding force which would consist of 32 men, four SOE agents, 11 commandos from the SSRF (small scale raiding force) and 17 men recruited from the local population to crew the two tugs, the **Vulcan** and **Nuneaton**, which had been provided by the British Governor of Nigeria.

Initially, the British Foreign Office was not in favor of the operation, and neither was the British Embassy in Madrid, which had concerns about the possible reactions of the Spanish government. The delay caused the final go ahead, eventually supported by the Foreign Office, not being given until 6 January 1942, on the grounds that whilst suspicion of British involvement in the raid was inevitable, what counted was the avoidance of any tangible proof. As a safeguard the Admiralty also dispatched **HMS Violet**, a Flower-class corvette, to intercept the vessels at sea, which would provide the cover story that they had been intercepted while trying to make their escape home to Europe. Hence the operation was launched under the codename of "**Operation Postmaster**"



A beautiful presentation of **HMS Violet (K35)**, the Flower Class Frigate dispatched by the British Admiralty to act as a ploy in "**Operation Postmaster**", to make it appear as if the "stolen" Axis vessels had been captured at sea, rather than from a neutral Port Commissioned in 1941 she served in the RN until 1947, when sold to commercial interests by the Admiralty.

The details of the raid were kept secret even from the British Chiefs of Staff, who were only informed on 18 January 1942, with the story that **Duchessa d'Aosta** had been intercepted 230 nautical miles offshore and was

being taken to Lagos.

(Walter Parish)

In the interim, SOE agent **Richard Lippett** had obtained employment with the shipping company John Holt & Co (Liverpool), which had business offices on the island. Having taken up the post he started to prepare for the raid. He became aware that the crew of **Duchessa d'Aosta** were in the habit of accepting invitations to parties ashore and had held their own party aboard ship on 6 January 1942. Under the guise of a party-goer **Lippett** managed to gain information about the readiness of the ship for sea, crew numbers, and the watch arrangements.

The raiding team left Lagos in their two tugs on the morning of 11 January 1942, and while en route they practiced lowering Folbots (collapsible boats) and boarding ships at sea. They approached Santa Isabel harbor and at 23:15 and 23:30 hours on 14 January 1942; both tugs were in position about a cable outside of the harbor limits. Onshore, **Lippett** had arranged for the officers from **Duchessa d'Aosta** to be invited to a dinner party, to which 12 Italian officers as well as two German officers from **Likomba** attended.

The boarding parties assembled on the decks of the two tugs as they entered the harbor. **Vulcan**, with **March-Phillips** and his second in command **Appleyard** on board, headed for **Duchessa d'Aosta**. As they

approached, a few men could be seen on the after deck of the merchant vessel, but they seemed to take no notice of the tug other than to shine a torch in its direction. At the same time, Folboats under the command of **Hayes** from **Nuneaton**, were being paddled towards **Likomba** and **Burundi**, which were moored together, hipped up to each other. Challenged by a watchman on **Burundi**, they persuaded him with their reply that it was the ship's captain coming back on board. The men from the canoes boarded **Burundi** and the two-man crew on watch jumped overboard. After planting explosive charges on the anchor chain, the commandos guided **Nuneaton** alongside **Likomba** to take her and the **Burundi** in tow.

As soon as they were ready, the charges were detonated, and **Nuneaton** started to tow **Likomba** out of the harbor. Eleven men from **Vulcan** had managed to board **Duchessa d'Aosta**, one group planting charges on the anchor chains, another searched below decks collecting prisoners. Once the anchor chains had been severed by the explosive devices which had been set, **Vulcan** commenced towing **Duchessa d'Aosta** out of the harbor. The explosions had alerted the population of the town, who started to gather on the pier, but no attempts were made to stop the ships from leaving, believing the explosions to have been caused by an Allied air attack, with only the anti-aircraft guns putting up any kind of resistance. The port's heavy armaments remained silent. From entering the harbor to leaving with the ships under tow, the operation had taken 30 minutes, without any losses to the raiding parties.

Once at sea on 15 January 1942, **March-Phillipps** established a routine of watches and placed guards on the 29 prisoners they had captured. During the evening they started to have trouble with the tugs' engines and the tow ropes to the captured vessels. The next day **Vulcan** reached the location for the rendezvous and was "captured" at sea by **HMS Violet**. The **Nuneaton**, suffering from engine trouble, managed to contact the Nigerian collier **Ilorin** by semaphore, which in turn contacted Lagos, and a ship was dispatched to tow them into port.

In the aftermath of the operation, **Duchess d'Aosta** was sailed to Greenock and then managed by Canadian Pacific as the **Empire Yukon** for the Ministry of War Transport (MoWT), whilst the **Limkomba** was managed by the Elder Dempster Lines, who renamed it **Malakel** in 1947, and then sold it to Liberian interests in 1948.

As predicted the Spanish Government was furious with the UK for having violated its neutrality. In a statement they described the raid as an "intolerable attack on Spanish sovereignty, no Spaniard can fail to be roused by this act of piracy committed in defiance of every right and within water under our jurisdiction".

After the raid **March-Phillipps** was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, **Hayes** was awarded the Military Cross, and Appleyard a Bar to his Military Cross. **Lippett** and **Guise** were each appointed Member of the Order of the British Empire. **March-Phillips** was killed in September 1942 whilst engaged in "Operation Aquatint". Another commando, and the only professional sailor on the raid, Private **Anders Lassen**, was the first man to board **Duchessa d'Aosta**. For conspicuous efficiency in getting the ship under way, **Lassen** was given a commission in the field, and the immediate award of the Military Cross. **Lassen** later joined the Special Air Service, he was awarded two bars to his MC and promoted to major before receiving a posthumous Victoria Cross in Italy in 1945.

"Operation Postmaster", paved the way for future SOE operations. "Operation Creek" (also known as "Operation Longshanks") was a similar covert military operation undertaken by the Special Operations Executive in WW2 on 9 March 1943. It involved a nighttime attack by members of the Calcutta Light

Horse and the Calcutta Scottish (part time territorial units based in India) against the Nazi German merchant ship, the **Ehrenfels**, which had been transmitting information to U-boats from Mormugao Harbor in neutral Portugal's west Indian territory of Goa. The attack was successfully carried out, and three Axis merchant vessels, the **Ehrenfels**, **Braunfels** and the **Drachenfels**, were sunk, immediately stopping the transmissions of Allied shipping movements in the Indian Ocean, to the U-boats.

End

Bibliography: SOE WW2 archives, Codenames, Various Public Domain sources on the operations made by the SOE during WW2, Walter Parish

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