



1940-1945: Brittany, a privileged field of action for special forces

military-Earth thinking notebook

le Chef d'escadron (R) Erwan COTARD

Published on 11/07/2020

Histoire & stratégie

From 1940, but especially in preparation for the Allied landings of 1944, the whole of Brittany was the field of action of commandos and resistance fighters in two complementary but sometimes difficult to reconcile fields: that of intelligence, which requires discretion and permanence, and that of the helping hand, spectacular and ephemeral. The author gives us a very interesting panorama of this period in this region, and concludes with a very interesting RETEX.

During the Second World War, Brittany was quickly considered a privileged terrain for unconventional Allied action, whether for raid-type actions or for special forces actions close to guerrilla warfare. The evidence of the interest of its geographical situation (close to Great Britain), its important seafront, its countryside, its hedged farmland, its towns often well placed on maritime or rail logistics routes, or the presence of major German settlements [1], easily explain this attraction. The collection of intelligence was thus logically very intensive, and this from 1940 onwards, but often more in a clandestine framework than really linked to the action of special forces. In order to better understand our subject, we must first of all make a useful reminder of the difference between clandestine action (rather the prerogative of the Allied secret services, in civilian clothes and under assumed identity) and clandestine action (rather the prerogative of the Allied secret services, in civilian clothes and under assumed identity): the Gaullist BCRA[2] for example) and work of Special Forces in uniform, even if the distinction has often had to be rather theoretical in the field [3] ... We will not talk either about units on the border between SF and conventional forces such as the American Rangers. The latter, after having distinguished themselves at the Pointe du Hoc in Normandy, operated in particular during the fighting around Brest in a role closer to the light infantry.

As for the rest of the French territory - particularly Normandy - we can quite clearly distinguish two major periods around the year 1944, with a key event in 1942.

1940-1944 between intelligence and offensive actions, a difficult balance to find

After the Germans took the peninsula in mid-June 1940, what should have become the "Breton reduction" was to become a first-rate breeding ground for clandestine actions. The example of Nantes is particularly edifying even if this pattern of spontaneous resistance, from the very beginning of the occupation, made up of isolated individuals or small groups, was of course reproduced in other towns. It was on 19 June 1940, just after General de Gaulle's famous appeal, that German troops entered the city. In and around Nantes, 45,000 French prisoners of war were interned in various camps until their transfer to Germany in January 1941. It is on this basis that in July a first intelligence network [4] is built and the first isolated acts of resistance appear. On 20 October 1941, the city's Feldkommandant, Lieutenant-Colonel Hotz, was shot dead in the city centre by communist resistance fighters from the Paris region. The following day, in reprisal, 43 hostages were shot: 27 near Châteaubriant and 16 in Nantes, while five Nantes resistance fighters suffered the same fate at Mont-Valérien, in Suresnes. In the months that followed, new attacks took place and other hostages were executed. At the beginning of 1942, attacks against collaborators and Germans as well as communication cuts developed, as in the rest of Brittany. The repression continues to grow and a total of more than 500 Nantes residents are on the list of hostages in German hands until the liberation of the city. . It is an action/repression scheme which unfortunately will become common in occupied France with, as a corollary, the debate between supporters of direct action (sabotage, elimination) and followers of strategic intelligence or organisers of escape routes. .

On the Allied side, the same questions agitated the staffs, which swung between secret intelligence missions, rather pushed by the British secret services, and the "helping hands", defended in particular by the famous Combined Operations Directorate commanded by Lord Mountbatten. Yet the raids and the clandestine action had totally opposite objectives. While the raids were intended to be spectacular in order to put the occupying troops in a wearying posture of permanent alert, the services acting in civilian clothes sought the utmost discretion over their activities, often considering their work area as a private preserve. .

However, a major operation would require perfect coordination between strategic intelligence and direct action: Operation Wagon'.

Since 1939, the [Battle of the Atlantic](#) had mobilized many naval units in the [North Atlantic](#) around the security of British supply lines. From its first sortie, in 1941, the battleship Bismarck proved to be an unbearable threat to these logistical flows, sinking several Allied ships, including the British battleship HMS Hood. Later, the Allies managed to sink the German battleship before it reached the port of Brest, but at the cost of a strong mobilization of maritime forces. After this alert, the Allies feared that her [sister-ship](#), the battleship Tirpitz, stationed in Norway, would be sent into the Atlantic. In this context, the port of Saint-Nazaire was of particular importance. Indeed, the Joubert form is the only dock - on the entire Atlantic coast - in which the Tirpitz can come to repair (built in the nearby shipyard of Penhoët, it had originally been set up for the liner Normandie). Thus, Winston Churchill imagines that by neutralizing this refit hold, the [Kriegsmarine](#) will not risk sending the Tirpitz to the [Atlantic](#). At the beginning of 1942, [he](#) therefore decided to entrust the neutralisation of the Joubert form to combined operations.

The only problem - but it was a major one - was that the port of Saint-Nazaire was the Breton port best fortified by the Germans after the roadstead of Brest. The Combined Operations plan was therefore based on the effect of surprise: A flotilla of shallow-draft

patrol boats is to penetrate the Loire estuary at night and at high speed, while the German defences will be distracted by an air raid led by the [Royal Air Force](#). A boat loaded with explosives will be brought to the Joubert form box lock, and [teams of](#) commandos will disembark from this vessel along with launches to attack and destroy 24 different targets to optimize the raid. The forces will then be evacuated by sea from the port and, a few hours later, the ship brought against the lock will explode. At the end of the planning phase, the fleet consisted of a destroyer, 16 launches, a gunboat and a [torpedo launch](#).

The destroyer was the HMS Campbeltown, an obsolete ship given up by the US Navy at the beginning of the war. As a disappointment of the operation, some modifications were made to make it look like a German destroyer. She was stripped of many equipment to reduce her draught to the maximum, the armament and crew were also reduced (75 men commanded by Lieutenant Commander Beatie). The explosive charge consisted of 24 depth charges placed in steel and concrete tanks. The ship had to sink the caisson and then be scuttled in order to prevent it from moving before it exploded.

In the end, the Joubert form, the main objective of Operation Chariot, was unusable and would remain so until the end of the war. This raid is considered to be one of the most daring ever carried out by commandos, and has entered into the legend of the British units that took part in it (8 Victoria Crosses, 37 Distinguished Service Order and 166 Military Crosses awarded...) [9]. Out of 600 men, 169 British were killed, half of them in the destruction of launches in the extraction phase. 215 British were taken prisoner, mainly during the German sweep of the city, five escaped and returned via Gibraltar. A total of 227 men managed to return to the United Kingdom.

Subsequently, no such spectacular raids were ever carried out in the area. On the other hand, many raids were planned but rarely carried out. An interesting exception was Operation Fahrenheit, which targeted the Plouhezec semaphore in Northern Brittany on the night of 11-12 November 1942. It was planned for early September 1942 and executed in November, after approval of the executive committee of combined operations. Benefiting from a total surprise effect, the Small Scale Raiding Force commando based itself on information obtained thanks to young Frenchmen in London and used a torpedo launch as a vector to approach the coast and carry out its mission: to carry out a reconnaissance, take prisoners and attack the semaphore station. There was total confusion on the German side, and the local command was unable to determine whether the attack had been carried out by French "terrorists" or a commando.

However, the success of this small raid thwarted the tactics used by the British secret service, which was adept at discretion. In early December 1942 they contacted the Combined Operations Directorate to ask it to cancel all help in an area west of the Cherbourg Peninsula; 15 small raids were planned for that month in this area! Lord Mountbatten tried to defend his cause in high places, but in vain. The British Chiefs of Staff endorsed the request of the Secret Service on 4 January 1943, the Combined Operations Directorate complied with this request, and only major strategic raids such as Pontiff, Coffeepot, Coughtdrop were studied - but never executed. Brittany was once again becoming a platform for intelligence, at least until D Day.

1944Brittany at the heart of special airborne operations by Jedburgh and SAS teams

The announcement of the Normandy landings opened a period of total war for Brittany, marked by the actions of the Resistance, the battles of Saint-Marcel and Saffre, then a ruthless phase of repression that will gradually end with the arrival of the Americans. Immersed in a region of hedged farmland difficult to apprehend, protected by a

population that provided them with hiding places, food and information, the maquisards multiplied sabotage and ambushes against isolated enemies. They will be assisted and more or less disciplined in their actions by two types of allied special forces detachments: Jedburgh teams and French SAS paratroopers.

For a long time covered by secrecy, the Jedburghs were teams of three men specially trained and parachuted into the enemy zone, mainly to prepare for D-Day. The U.S. OSS[10] and the British SOE[11] finally gave access to copies of the teams' reports: the literature is now abundant on the subject and gives us some keys to their engagement in France.

Whether their arrival is planned or not (the hazards of the drops...), the Jedburghs are generally very well received, if not too well: their uniforms are a sign of enormous hope and the drops sometimes turn into not very discreet crowd baths. Apart from the reception of the population, who do not hesitate to accommodate them and to establish a link with the Resistance, the reception of the maquis is very contrasted. Sometimes the networks were decapitated by German forces, often the movements ignored each other or, worse still, clashed with each other. Truly armed and disciplined groups (led by a real leader, often a former French army officer, ex-active or reservist) are rare. The advice was given to the Jedburghs to intervene as little as possible in the internal dissensions of the local movements but, faced with a non-existent or overly deficient command, they were sometimes forced to take command themselves. Thus, in Loire-Inférieure [12], where the Resistance had just been completely disorganized by the Gestapo, Captain Jedburgh Erard ended up accepting the position of departmental military delegate. In spite of their heterogeneity (young people resistant to the STO, former soldiers, new volunteers...), almost everywhere the maquis developed in enthusiasm and the will to finally fight the occupier. As a counterpart to this accelerated development, their "logistical weight" became very important. The Jedburghs will benefit, in this context, from a great prestige (fluctuating, it is true, according to the parachute drops they manage to trigger).

On 20 June, about fifteen teams were parachuted. Two landed in Brittany with the first parachute elements of Commander Bourgoin, who was to command all the operations in liaison with the armies landed in Normandy and thus protect the right flank of the landing. The others are distributed on the major traffic routes of France, with the mission to enforce the sabotage plans planned to harass and hold the enemy forces and, if possible, prevent them from arriving on the Norman front [13].

13]The SAS/Jedburgh combination would give a spectacular boost to this campaign of harassment.

During the night of 5-6 June 1944, four SAS sticks of nine men were parachuted into Brittany. Lieutenants Marienne and Deplante, dropped in the moors of Lanvaux, had the mission to prepare the Dingson base near Saint-Marcel (Morbihan). The Marienne stick is attacked shortly after its arrival on the ground: the radio team is captured while Corporal Émile Bouetard is killed by the enemy. He is the first French (and allied) soldier to die in Operation Overlord. At the same time, two other sticks are parachuted near Locarn in the Côtes-du-Nord region to prepare the setting up of the Samwest base. In Loire-Inférieure, the railway line between Redon and Châteaubriant was cut by the French paratroopers "Pierre 408" of the SAS. During the night of 7 to 8 June, as part of the Cooney-Parties mission, 18 sabotage groups of 3 to 5 men were scattered over Brittany in order to cut the communication routes before reaching the base on which they depended. Of particular note is the action of a stick against a tunnel on the Paris-Brest line, as it illustrates the complementarity between clandestine action and shock teams. The successful blocking

of the Corbinière tunnel, near Messac, was based on information provided by a BCRA team that had previously, for nearly six months, identified the vulnerabilities of the line.

Beginning on the night of June 9-10, SAS were parachuted in as reinforcements at the two bases Samwest and Dingson, which were growing in size. The first one was quickly identified and dismantled by the enemy.

A Jedburgh team parachuted into the Saint-Marcel area, along with the SAS [14]. [14] Many parachute drops took place between 6 and 18 June, five per night on average. On 17 June, 30 parachute drops were reportedly carried out... which, combined with the enthusiastic reception of the population, did not allow for a discreet deployment. The head of the 2th RCP in command of the whole system, Commandant Bourgoïn [15], then spoke of a real "kermesse". Every night, FFI groups - some of which had travelled more than 100 km - arrived at the La Nouette farm, at the centre of the operation, to be armed and equipped. With more than 3,000 FFIs mobilised, the base effectively ended up attracting the attention of the German forces, especially as the groups of maquisards, who left armed, attacked the isolated Germans they encountered. Although the Germans had been weakened by the departure of many units for the Norman front, the neighbouring garrisons mounted an attack on the FFI base. A fierce fight began: Jedburgh officers took part in it at the head of FFI companies, alongside 200 to 250 SAS and with sporadic support from the US Air Force (ground support missions of P47 Thunderboltfighter-bombers). After a day of fighting (the outcome is uncertain, but the Germans lost at least 50 men), the reinforced German units finally broke through the last line of defence. The village of Saint-Marcel was looted and destroyed by the Germans and their auxiliaries. On order, SAS and FFI dispersed into small groups, while abandoning a large part of the equipment. Until the end of July, they were hunted down by strong columns, supported by eastern troops on horseback, and other auxiliaries, notably militiamen, who dealt them very hard blows. The Germans shot their victims at Port-Louis and at Fort Penthièvre [16], multiplied the tortures and summary executions, and were relentless in their attacks on the isolated farmers who had given the paratroopers an unreserved welcome. But they were no longer safe anywhere and soon had to take refuge in the coastal pockets encircled by the Allies. Notably by the FFI battalions reorganised with the help of the Jedburghs, armed and supplied by them until General de Larminat took command of this Atlantic army.

In the meantime, SHAEF has taken into account the negative feedback from setting up a mobilization center like the one in Saint-Marcel, which resulted in the gathering of large numbers of troops in a vulnerable area. The instructions will now emphasize guerrilla warfare in small, highly mobile groups, avoiding combat with superior forces and dropping out after the surprise effect. Tactics that will be implemented by the remaining Jedburgh teams. Thus one team managed, with the help of the inhabitants, to escape the search for the Loire-Inférieure. Despite the loss of its radio set, it will resume its activity there in liaison with the FFI of the Nantes region until the arrival of the Americans at the beginning of August. Another team having joined the department of the Côtes-du-Nord will have to use as a means of pressure the allocation of parachuted weapons in order to settle the differences between groups of resistance fighters...

At the beginning of July 1944, 5,000 men were organised and supervised, supplied (the money brought from London made it possible to avoid overruns) and able to support the Allies. The teams that were to be parachuted in July-August would follow the same *modus operandi*, even if they probably arrived too late to be as effective as the teams dropped earlier in the Côtes-du-Nord and Finistère. On 2 August, the agreed message will trigger the insurrection of nearly 21,000 Breton FFIs, allowing the German troops to be blocked on the spot. Sometimes entire garrisons agree to surrender, and towns like

Quimper are liberated by this action alone. When, at the beginning of August, the tanks of the 6^{ème} When American DBs arrived in the Loudéac region, the Jedburghs acted as liaison agents between themselves and the FFI: the latter provided guides, ensured security, imposed the surrender of discouraged German garrisons or the desertion of foreign auxiliary elements [17].

The Americans declared that "the FFI had accomplished in the sector the work of their own infantry; without the Jedburghs, the work would perhaps have been accomplished, but certainly less quickly, less easily and probably with more severe losses.

Conclusions/Education

A visit to Saint-Nazaire, the site of Operation Chariot, or to Saint-Marcel, is a must in order to better understand the historical dimension of Allied Special Forces action in the region between 1942 and 1944. But we can try to identify "in the room" and with the usual precautions some links between these operations and more current problems.

- Harassment operations with troops on the ground as opposed to strategic intelligence. The first often had as a corollary reprisals on the allied populations (precisely because they were not considered neutral by the occupier). Limiting the footprint on the ground to strategic intelligence alone may seem less implied for the population, but depending on the circumstances, the population may be the best protection for the sensors. On the other hand, if it is in view of action, strategic intelligence will trigger a strike with a potential impact on the population - the 1944 bombings being much less targeted than the use of Predator or Predator UAVs. It should also be noted that targeting operations involving only a small number of individuals who are kept discreet do not have the same psychological impact as operations such as the "coup de main" where one demonstrates one's determination by a physical engagement on the ground, which is necessarily spectacular in nature.

In spite of the sacrifices made, Operation Chariot here offers an interesting "cost effectiveness" compared to the massive bombings that will follow (and which will wipe the city off the map for a very questionable result).

- Jedburgh type teams: RETEX all the more difficult as they were parachuted in very variable conditions and had to face very different situations. However, these teams lost a total of eight killed, eight wounded and two prisoners in combat [19] (including Brittany). To be put in relation with the dangerousness of the action zones [20] and the enemy's balance sheet... Having succeeded, in liaison with other special units, in a veHaving succeeded, in liaison with other special units, in a real mass raising, one can imagine that with greater means and more time, they could easily have mobilized much larger numbers of troops and thus increase the possibilities of action.

We can see the incredible leverage effect of small mobile groups, highly motivated, armed but able to refuse to fight. However, the ability to trigger and amplify local actions clearly depends on the ability to demonstrate the link with the base concretely and quickly (parachuting weapons, money,...). To be put into perspective with the 2001 American campaign in Afghanistan (special forces relying on the Northern Alliance... and all the logistics of the American army in the background).

In 1944, most of the troops raised in France were then transferred fairly quickly (not without difficulty) to a regular army or, at least in the short term, to reconnaissance units.

- Difficulty in getting the secret services (clandestine action) and special forces, with different agendas, to work together. These combined actions can nevertheless be extremely effective with a minimum of coordination (despite the multiplicity of players involved, the overall assessment was very positive, as shown by the distribution of missions concerning the Corbinière tunnel). The interface with the regular troops is also to be underlined (one would speak of "deconfliction" nowadays).

Importance of special forces liaison elements within the various allied headquarters and of FS/conventional forces interoperability (as well as exchange channels with clandestine action [21]).

- Immersion in the local population facilitated by a buoyant context (allied landing) and the systematic presence of a local cadre per team, when not the full detachments are national (SAS). The political neutrality of the detachments proved to be a great advantage in the face of the dissensions animating the Resistance, even if certain detachments could be used as instruments.

Detachments capable of linking up with the local population (language skills and presence of nationals), but with a sufficiently neutral position.

Epilogue

One can sometimes get the impression that the period 1940-1945 was limited for the French to the Normandy landings and the liberation of Paris. However, the campaign in Brittany, selected for this article, as well as Operation Dragoon in Provence, the Alsace campaign and the liberation of the Atlantic pockets, to name but a few, are also rich in lessons. They deserve a more important place in our reflections, beyond the theme of special operations alone. Notice to organizers of staff rides!

1) The U-Boot bases of Brest, Lorient and Saint-Nazaire, to name only the most obvious locations, but also airports such as Rennes. In total, German troops in the peninsula total about 150,000 men ranging from paratroopers to Russian auxiliaries.

2) Central Intelligence and Action Office, commanded by the famous Colonel Passy, the ancestor of the post-war SDECE - himself the precursor of the current DGSE. See "General de Gaulle's secret services - The BCRA 1940-1944", by Sébastien Albertelli, published in 2009 by Editions Perrin.

3) For the record, TTA 106, the Joint Glossary, or even the NATO AAP-6 Glossary does not provide a modern definition of Special Forces. Instead, they define "special operations" as military activities conducted by specially designated, organized, trained and equipped forces, using operational techniques and modes of action unusual to conventional forces. These activities are conducted across the full spectrum of military operations, independently of, or in coordination with, conventional force operations to achieve political, military, psychological and economic objectives. Politico-military considerations may require the use of clandestine or covert techniques and the acceptance of a level of physical and political risk not compatible with conventional operations. They implement small and highly specialised modules to either address objectives of high strategic or operational value or to modify a force's environment. Source: CDEF

4) Under the direction of Jean-Baptiste Legeay (who was beheaded in Cologne in February 1943). Similarly, one of the very first clandestine newspapers, "En Captivité", appeared in Nantes in November 1940. It was in Nantes, on 22 January 1941, that Honoré d'Estienne d'Orves, founder of the NEMROD network, was arrested. A few days earlier, he had established the first radio link between France and London from Chantenay.

5) Current headquarters of the 8th RT.

6] General de Gaulle awarded the Croix de la Libération to the city of Nantes, "a heroic city which, since the crime of capitulation, has put up fierce resistance to any form of collaboration with the enemy".

7] One thinks, for example, of the escape network of allied pilots Shelburne at Plouha in the Côtes d'Armor (Côtes-du-Nord at the time), which was described in the book "[7] The escape network of allied pilots Shelburne at Plouha in the Côtes d'Armor (Côtes-du-Nord at the time), which was described in the book "[8]. By the Longest Nights" by Roger Huguen. This French escape network allowed the return to England of 135 Allied airmen and agents.

8] On this subject, see Bob Maloubier's recent book, "[8] The French escape network allowed the return to England of 135 airmen and allied agents. The twisted blows Churchill».

9] The raid having strongly marked the spirits, the famous British naval writer Douglas Reeman (himself a former sailor during the war) invented a sequel to this raid in his novel "...The Destroyers».

10] Office of Strategic Service, headed by William Joseph Donovan, by decision of President Roosevelt in June 1942, with the rank of General. It was the first effort of coordination between the different American services acting in special operations and strategic intelligence. The OSS will not only inspire French literature and cinema (!) but, above all, will give birth after the war to the CIA, Central Intelligence Agency...

[11] Special Operations Executive

12] Current Loire-Atlantique. Similarly, the Côtes d'Armor was called Côtes-du-Nord at the time.

13] In the months of July and August, Jedburgh's parachute drops will multiply: nine in Brittany, six others from the Vendée to the Cher and in the Massif Central departments, about ten in the departments of the Garonne basin, about ten also in the departments of the Rhône and Saône valleys.

14] A second team was dropped at the Samwest base in Duault.

15] Alias "the penguin" since he lost an arm during the fighting in North Africa. This did not prevent him from jumping at the head of the 2nd RCP, formerly Air ^{infantry} Battalion, the "Sky Battalion" immortalized in the eponymous film.

16] Currently managed by the 3rd RIMA of ^{Vannes} and well known to the EOR and EOA who passed through the ESM of Saint-Cyr-Coëtquidan.

17] See Yann Lagadec's article on the subject.

18] William J. Donovan, director of the OSS: "It is now recognized that the success and speed of the Allied armies in the Battle of France are due in large measure to the activity of the French Resistance within France. The Resistance impeded the movement of German reinforcements to the Norman bridgehead and guarded the flanks of the American armies marching to the Seine in the north and to the Vosges Mountains from the south. Entire German divisions were diverted from the front and the enemy was harassed behind its lines. The Resistance constantly provided strategic and tactical intelligence on the enemy situation, avoided destruction of rural installations, isolated and blocked enemy units overrun by the Allied advance".

19] Out of combat, two killed and eleven wounded (often slightly), most of them as a result of faulty airdrops.

20] Their losses were on the whole lower than the average losses suffered by ordinary infantry units. Their doctrine was summarized as follows: the enemy is attacked by surprise, at the point where he is weakest and, when his reaction becomes too effective, the attacker stalls and disappears into the cover. In short, it was the perfect guerrilla tactic.

21] It will be noted, moreover, that the boundary between special and clandestine action was all the more tenuous because the Germans did not guarantee the application of the Geneva Convention to "commandos", even in uniform.

Title : le Chef d'escadron (R) Erwan COTARD

Author (s) : le Chef d'escadron (R) Erwan COTARD

Release date 10/07/2020
