

The raid that angered Hitler

Commando raids on the Channel Islands during the German Occupation have become popular with publishers and readers alike, as **Nick Le Messurier** found when he was given the chance to review the two latest releases to hit the shelves. He talks to author Eric Lee about his research for one

IN OCTOBER 1942, Sark had already been occupied by the Germans for two years when British commandos launched a surprise raid on the island. In operations terms it was a small affair – a German prisoner was taken, a few enemy soldiers killed and all the commandos returned home to England safely.

But the raid had repercussions more serious than anyone could have forecast. It led to Hitler imposing his Commando Order, which ruled that any Allied commandos caught in occupied territory would not be treated as prisoners of war but would be shot.

The raid is the subject of a new book, *Operation Basalt*, published last month and written by historian Eric Lee, who drew on extensive archive research and interviews with survivors.

For the first part of the war Sark's population, most of whom stayed on the island, had managed to tread a careful line with their enemy occupiers. As in Guernsey and the other islands, the people were short of food. Hunger, boredom and not knowing what was going on in the outside world were other enemies with which they had to deal.

In 1942, however, deportations from the islands were ordered by the German government in retaliation for the deportation by Britain of German civilians from Iran.

The deportees from Sark included the Seigneur, Robert Hathaway, husband of Sibyl Hathaway, the Dame of Sark, who considered it her duty to keep the island population safe throughout the occupation, remaining courteous to but distant from the occupiers.

Into this situation came the commando raid on Sark, Operation Basalt. Churchill had wanted the islands, the only part of the British Isles to be occupied, to be liberated, or at least life for the Germans made as difficult as possible. Operation Basalt fell into this latter category.

The raid was led by Major Geoffrey Appleyard, one of the founders of the British Small Scale Raiding Force (SSFR) and included Anders Lassen, a Danish commando hero. James Bond creator Ian Fleming was also involved at the SSFR planning stage.

The raid's purpose was to capture a German prisoner or prisoners to take back for interrogation and to deal a blow to the occupiers by shooting up some of their soldiers.

Once they landed in Sark, the commandos were helped by 40-year-old widow Frances Pittard, who



(Picture courtesy of the Channel Island Occupation Society)

lived on her own in the big house at La Jaspellerie. Raiding a nearby house, they captured a number of German soldiers and in the hours that followed, some of these were shot when they tried to escape. Hitler's Commando Order came in response to their deaths.

The commandos managed to get one prisoner away on the fast torpedo boat sent to pick them up and the raid was hailed as a great success. The prisoner was able to give important information.

Eric Lee's book looks at the context of the raid, the detail of exactly what happened on that night of confusion and danger, and the repercussions which followed. His interest in the event was sparked off by a visit to Sark a few years ago, when he heard about the raid.

'I had long been interested in military history and was already the author of one book on the Vietnam War,' he says. 'Operation Basalt intrigued me. Was the raid a success or failure? Why did Churchill order it? Did the British army carry out a war crime, as the Germans claimed?'

'In the end, I wanted to tell this story of enormous heroism on the part of Major Appleyard, the ferocious Dane Anders Lassen and the other commandos – and that of the brave Mrs Pittard, who risked everything to help them.'

◆ **Operation Basalt, The British Raid on Sark and Hitler's Commando Order, by Eric Lee is published by The History Press, priced £17.99.**

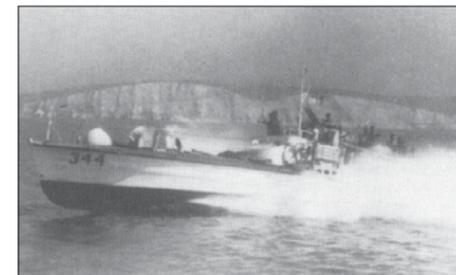


Commando raid leader Major Geoffrey Appleyard.



Top: German soldiers enjoying the sunshine. They were as surprised as anyone when the British Commandos attacked them on the night of 3 and 4 October 1942.

Inset: Mrs Frances Pittard, who lived at La Jaspellerie House, in a remote park of Sark.



The Naval motor torpedo boat that carried the members of Operation Basalt.

The Last Raid

Review by Nick Le Messurier

THERE seems to be a renewed interest, among publishers especially, in the Channel Islands during the German Occupation and especially the commando raids organised in those five years. The latest book, Will Fowler's *The Last Raid*, covers every raid on the islands by British Commandos. They were often examples of great bravery by young men; some, like the attack on Sark, were successful, others were failures.

Interestingly, the book touches on a very different raid, launched from Jersey on the French port of Granville by a German force in early 1945, months after the islands had been cut off from the French mainland following the D-Day landings.

The German raid, which the author says was launched partly to hit back at the Allies, partly to find out what was going on and improve morale, and partly to free German prisoners of war, would probably be regarded by the Germans as a success, even though it could have no bearing on the Allied campaign in France.

The German force killed nine Allied service personnel, wounded 30 and, probably most important of all for them, released 67 prisoners of war and took them back to Jersey.

It is believed by the author that this is the first time this raid has been recounted in



detail in an English publication. Most of the raids discussed in the book are those by Allied forces. Some, like the one involving Hubert Nicolle and James Symes, already well known to islanders. What makes this book different is the operational detail of these raids that Will is able to provide.

The raids are put into their historical wartime context. One in particular, Operation Basalt on Sark, had implications far beyond those envisaged.

Hitler was so incensed by it that he issued his infamous 'Commando Order', which said that 'from now on, all men operating against German troops in so-called Commando raids in Europe and Africa, are to be annihilated to the last man... to be carried out whether they be soldiers in uniform, or saboteurs, with or without arms...'

As an appendix, *The Last Raid* includes this order as well as Hitler's 1941 Fortification Order giving the green light to the building of the huge concrete fortifications that still watch over our landscape.

The Last Raid also claims to be an account of life under the German Occupation; for most island readers this has been covered in more detail before. The book's strength is in the research detail of the raids, put together in the author's very readable style.

◆ **The Last Raid, the Commandos, Channel Islands and final Nazi raid, by Will Fowler –The History Press, £20.**

WIN A COPY

We have a copy of *Operation Basalt* to give away. For your chance to win, simply answer the following question correctly:

What was the name of Mrs Pittard's house?

Call our competition hotline on 240241 or email competitions@guernseypress.com and tell us your answer, name and daytime telephone number.

Deadline for entries is 5pm on Friday 13 May.

No cash or prize alternative is offered.



Operation Basalt author Eric Lee.