Special Duties Squadrons

Within Haverhill Cemetery lay seven men who flew with 138 (Special Duties) Squadron. But what was the role of these clandestine squadrons?



Flight 419, Flight 1419, 318 Squadron, 161 Squadron, 148 Squadron (Mediterranean), 357 Squadron (Far East)

The first RAF special duties formation was Flight 419, officially formed on 21 August 1940, operating out of the fighter base at RAF North Weald and comprising two Lysanders. By September, three Whitleys and another Lysander had been added to the flight. The first clandestine flight was flown by Wing Commander Andrew Geddes, who took an SIS agent to a field near Tours France on the night of 3 September 1940, flying a Lysander.

In September 419 Flight was bombed out of North Weald and moved to Stradishall. Administrative control switched to 3 Group Bomber Command, which provided administrative support to all Special Duties squadrons until the end of the war. In February 1941 Flight 419 had its designation changed to No. 1419 Flight RAF to eliminate the confusion that had developed with No. 419 Squadron RAF. The flight was moved to Newmarket on 22 May 1941, and in September to Stapleford Tawney until October, when it was moved back to Stradishall.

No. 138 Squadron was a mixed aircraft squadron, formed on 25 August 1941 from No.1419 (Special Duties) Flight. It was the first squadron of the Royal Air Force Special Duty Service. At first, it carried out a mix of supply drop and actual landings in occupied Europe using Whitleys with the Lysanders from B Flight 138 doing the pick-ups.

In February 1942 the squadron split, with its Lysanders and a number of its Whitleys and Halifaxes combining with the King's Flight to form 161 Squadron. After the split the majority of supply drops and agent drops were still handled by 138 Squadron. 161 Squadron did all of the pick-ups of personnel, and also would land agents who lacked the training to parachute in or were physically unable to do so.

The squadron moved to RAF Tempsford in April 1942, which remained its home base for the duration of the war. When on operations during the full moon period the A Flight would move forward to RAF Tangmere. Tangmere is on the coast near Chichester, 100 miles south of Tempsford. The move extended the reach of A Flight's Lysanders into Europe.

A number of Polish pilots operated in 138 Squadron and in July 1943 the Polish pilots in 138 were formed into their own unit, Flight 301.

138 squadron's insignia was of a sword cutting through a rope bind, with the motto "For Freedom".

161 squadron's insignia was of a released shackle, with the motto "Liberate".

In addition there were Special Duties Squadrons based in the Mediterranean and the Far East.

In 1943, No. 148 (Special Duties) Squadron was created for operations in the Mediterranean. The unit was formed with the conversion of 148 Squadron to 148 (Special Duties) Squadron. The squadron was sent to Algiers to support an SOE unit, which was known as Interservice Signals Unit 6. The unit's Halifaxes dropped supplies to partisans in southern France, Italy and the Balkans.

In 1944 No. 357 (Special Duties) Squadron began operations in the Far East, flying Liberators, Dakotas, Lysanders and Catalina Flying Boats in support of SOE's Force 136 in Burma and other resistance groups in Thailand and Malaya. 357 (Special Duties) Squadron dropped more supplies by unit weight in the Far East than any other RAF unit dropped in weight of bombs.

The work of the Special Duties Squadrons

These squadrons dropped supplies and agents for the SIS (Special Intelligence Service) and the SOE (Special Operations Executive) to Axis occupied territory. In 1941 they also facilitated Operation Pickaxe, in which the RAF dropped more than 20 Soviet agents into Western Europe by parachute.

Based initially at RAF Stradishall, in March 1942 the squadron moved to its permanent home at the clandestine airbase at RAF Tempsford, mainly due to it being closer to where the agents were based.

From October 1941 there served several all-Polish volunteer crews. Between 1 April 1943 and November 1943 the squadron included Polish Special Duties Flight, as C Flight. It carried out this role until March 1945 when it was reassigned to Bomber Command, operating under No. 3 Group. It was disbanded on 1 September 1950.

The missions they were performing were kept secret. This sometimes proved a challenge. On one occasion in 1942, poor weather resulted in a Whitley flight having to return without dropping its agents. On the return trip the plane crashed along the English coast, killing all aboard. Among the dead were five SOE agents dressed as civilians. It was explained to the public that they were members of the press along to observe the results of a bombing raid. When a local newspaper pressed further, asking why so many press members were aboard the flight, the Army Special Investigation Branch made a visit to the paper, and the story was laid to rest.

Pilot training

The special duties squadrons had to recruit and train pilots for their command. Being a secret organisation, recruitment was a problem. Some pilots were drawn to the special duties squadrons by personal contacts.

All of them had an "Above Average" pilot rating. Many had also qualified as navigators. Self-reliance in navigation was an important quality for the special duties pilots. Many judged it a more essential skill for a successful SD pilot than piloting the aircraft itself. A pilot had to fly in the dark of night over enemy occupied territory, frequently in weather that grounded other squadrons, and navigate by himself to a small dark field in the middle of an occupied country. The aircraft observed strict wireless silence over hostile territory, and reached their target fields by navigation alone. Pilots had to be self-reliant, capable of thinking and acting on their own to deal with conditions and obstacles such as bad weather, low cloud and fog, boggy landing fields, or possible enemy action.

It took about a month for a pilot to complete the training and for the commanding officer to determine if the pilot would be able to do the job. Training required the pilot to be extremely comfortable with the layout of the aircraft's controls. He had to learn how to work out a course to his target and back. The course set was made up of a string of pinpoints, navigational terrain features which were identifiable and whose location was sure. The course was a 50 mile wide corridor designed to avoid German flak emplacements. On his trip the pilot flew from pinpoint to pinpoint, staying in the corridor defined until he reached the target area. He would practice this by flying by navigation alone over England by day, without making use of the radio to ask for a homing bearing, flying from navigation point to navigation point. The flights would be repeated at night. Next they practiced night time landings and take offs from a grass field. This training was done at "RAF Somersham", a "dummy" airfield near RAF Tempsford initially used as a decoy during the Blitz. It was later put to use by the RAF and the SOE for training of agent operators and Lysander pilots, as the rough field approximated a typical landing ground in occupied France.

The final test for a pilot was to navigate through a corridor free of flak to a pinpoint target in France south of Saumur. The target was described to the pilot as a light. When the pilot arrived over the target he found a brilliantly lit rectangle. It was in fact a prison camp, whose bright lighting of the fence wire made it a "pinpoint" of uniquely brilliant quality. When the pilot returned and reported on this astonishing target he confirmed he had made it there and was made operational.

Operations

1. **Parachute drops of supplies**

Supply delivery was the primary undertaking of the Special Duties squadrons. A great deal of equipment was needed to support the resistance forces and the needs increased as numbers in the resistance increased. In May 1941 an Air Ministry staff officer estimated that to supply 45,000 resistance fighters in the field would require 2,000 sorties a year. Arms, ammunition, plastic explosives, radio sets, bicycles for transportation, bicycle tyres, food, clothing and medical supplies were needed as well as specialties such as radio crystals, printer's ink, and in Norway, skis and sleds.

The bulk of supplies to the resistance in France were transported to them by 138 Squadron, with the B Flight of 161 Squadron doing agent and supply drops as well. Both squadrons depended on moonlight for visibility over the landing fields and drop zones. To receive the supplies a ground operator would wait at a designated field. When the aircraft was heard overhead, the ground operator would flash a prearranged Morse code letter. The supply aircraft would flash a corresponding letter using its "downward identification light". The team on the ground would light the field, using five lights placed in an "X" pattern to mark the drop target.[16] The aircraft came over the field at just 400 to 500 feet reducing speed to just above stalling to minimize scatter and damage to the cargo. The ground operator was responsible for the movement of the supplies to places of concealment.

Supplies were usually parachuted in using cylindrical containers to protect the loads. C-type metal containers were 6 feet long and could weigh up to 250 pounds. This container could be used to carry longer loads such as rifles. The Poles developed an alternative that was the same size overall, but could be broken down into five smaller sections to make it easier to carry away and conceal. Packages delivered, on the other hand, seldom weighed more than 100 pounds. 20% of the drop missions were aborted, because either the reception committee was not there or the weather was too poor to find the drop field. High value items, such as forged documents and money, were often transported in with an agent.

2. **Parachute drops of agents**

The majority of agents arrived by parachute drop. This was not a gentle daytime float from altitude. They were dropped at night over a reception field at 500 to 600 feet, just high enough for the parachute to open a few seconds before the agent hit the ground. Some 1,500 agents were dropped into France, and many of these did several drops. The aircrews generically called the agents "Joes", and for the most part did not get to know them. If the aircraft was a little too low it made for a rough landing, and a number of agents were injured. Over the course of the war six agents were killed from failed drops, the result of either the aircraft being too low or the chute failing to open. Agent drop operations were almost always carried out when there was some moonlight, though occasionally "blind drops" were completed to empty fields in the dark period. There was not always a reception committee on the ground and while this had security advantages, there was always the risk of injury in the parachute landings.

3. **Pick-up flights**

Pick-up operations were initially handled by the Lysander flight in 138 Squadron. After the split to form 161 Squadron the pick-ups were handled by 161's A Flight. Each planned pick-up operation was given an operational name, and the name was used until the mission had been completed.

By 1942 a routine had developed for putting together an operation. A resistance group would request a pick-up, choose a landing ground and provide a detailed description and map reference to London. The field would be photographed by the RAF's Photographic Reconnaissance Unit to allow the pilot to study the appearance of the proposed field.

If picking up from France a pilot would drop down to 500 feet over the channel to get under German radar. Crossing the French coastline was one of the more dangerous aspects of the trip, as German forces and anti-aircraft guns were present over much of the coastline opposite England. Cabourg was the favoured spot to cross into France, as it avoided heavy anti-aircraft guns to the northeast at Le Havre and German army forces to the southwest at Caen.

From Tangmere to Cabourg was about an hour's flight in a Lysander. Flying the single engine airplane over the cold waters of the English Channel at night was a test itself. As the pilot approached the French coastline he would climb to 8,000 feet to get above the light flak found there, then drop down to 2,000 to 1,500 feet while flying across France for ease in reading the landmarks. When the pilot got close to the target there would be a near pinpoint. Identifying it, he could make a calculation based on course direction and time of flight for when he would be over the field. As the aircraft approached the field the agent laying on the operation would signal a prearranged code letter in Morse.

Operating his signal key, the pilot would flash back the agreed to Morse letter response via the plane's downward light. With the correct exchange of signals the operator and his men would light a flare path.

With the correct code letters exchanged the pilot would fly a circuit over the field and then bring the aircraft down to land often on less than 150 yards. The Lysander's landing lights would be switched on just before landing so the pilot might be able to see obstructions. A quick turn around was essential and the change over of passengers and load was usually completed in under three minutes.

The Lysander pilots faced a number of dangers but besides flak the most dangerous were poor weather and mud caked fields.

Being caught on the ground and subjected to interrogations by the Gestapo must have always been on the minds of the pilots as they orbited over a field and touched down. If an aircraft became stuck, they destroyed it, and the pilot had to look for other means to get home. In France this meant a long trek through the escape lines to southern France, over the Pyrenees and into Spain with hopes of reaching the British consulate and a flight home.

By the end of 1941, 138 Squadron had moved 37 agents to France while picking up 5. 55% of their missions failed due to either bad weather or failure to make contact with the reception operator.

Over the course of 1942, the two SD squadrons, 138 Squadron and 161 Squadron, had ferried to France 23 tons of supplies and 155 agents, while picking up 19. 1943 saw the SD squadrons fly 625 sorties, deliver 589 tons of supplies and carry 102 agents to France while taking out 223.

By the end of the war, 138 Squadron had flown more than 2,500 sorties, dropped 29,000 containers, 10,000 packages and 995 Joes (agents) into occupied Europe, while losing 70 aircraft. Over half of these missions were in Handley Page Halifax bombers, modified to provide a parachute hatch called the "Joe hole." As the war was coming to a close 138 Squadron was converted into a regular line unit on 9 March 1945.

A Pilot and an Agent - The following gives an indication of the type of work completed by the Special Duties squadrons.



The Pilot

F/O Albert John Oettle DFC was a pilot with 1419 Flight and then 138 Squadron. He was educated at Brighton College joining the RAF in 1937 and receiving his commission in the same year. He was promoted to F/O on 12th May 1940, and to F/Lt on 12th May 1941.

He was posted to 51 Squadron during which time he was awarded the DFC (Gazetted on 22nd October 1940). After 51 Squadron he was firstly posted to 1419 Flight. On 11 April 1941 he sustained injuries in an accident in Whitley T4165. Two of the crew were killed and four injured.

By the time he had recovered from these injuries 1419 Flight had become138 Squadron and he was posted there. He returned to flying duties less than two days before his death. On 30 October 1941 he was piloting Whitley Mk V Z9223 with LAC Walter John Lee, RAF and Sgt Hugh Francis Rochford, RNZAF on board for a routine flight from RAF Stradishall. While returning to base the aircraft stalled short of the runway on approach to landing and crashed. All three men were killed.

F/Lt Albert Oettle DFC is buried in Hove Churchyard, Sussex but has a special memorial as his grave position *is lost. He was twenty five years old.*

The Agent



As a Sgt in the RAF in 1940, Philip Schneidau had been driver and interpreter to Air Marshal 'Ugly' Barratt, the AOC in C, British Air Forces in France. After the fall of France, at the age of 37, he was commissioned as a Pilot Officer.

He was half French but opted for British nationality when he was 21. Before that he had played international hockey for France.

He became a member of SIS (Secret Intelligence Service). There are at least two photographs of him in the book, Agents by Moonlight. One in which he has changed his appearance slightly so as not to be recognised while in France (being a former international hockey player) and one in uniform.

F/Lt Oettle dropped him into France on two occasions, the first being on 9 October 1940 with 1419 Flight.

After spending almost a fortnight in France Philip Schneidau was picked up on 20 October at Montigny sur Loing by a Lysander flown by F/Lt. W.R. Farley. On the night of his planned pick-up, heavy wind and rain resulted in all RAF operations being cancelled. Knowing Schneidau would be waiting for him, Farley convinced his CO to let him attempt the pick up. After taking off in a storm, the weather cleared over France. Farley located Schneidau's field, landed and made the pick-up. On the way out a German sentry put a bullet into Farley's plane, which entered the cockpit, passed between Farley's legs and struck the compass, destroying it.

As the two men began their flight back the storm worked up into a south-westerly gale, pushing them north and east. With rain and wind pouring into the open rear cockpit, the wireless set became inoperable and Schneidau was soaked through and increasingly cold. Making their way north through the storm, the two had no reference points to guide them and soon had no idea if they were over England, the North Sea or northern Germany. The pair flew on through the night, hoping for a break in the sky. Six hours later they were running out of fuel, still with no idea of where they were, when a small break in the cloud gave them a glimpse of a

small plateau at the top of steep cliffs lining a rugged coastline. With no other option available they dropped down to make a landing and crashed through a group of anti-glider posts. They had crashed six miles north of RAF Oban in Scotland, 600 miles north of Farley's home base.

The two men were spotted by a pair of Scottish guardsmen who took them into their senior officer at the RAF coastal command base at Oban as suspected spies. The station commander inquired who they were and what they were doing there. Farley limited his answer to his name and service number. Schneidau said they had been doing a special recce over the Atlantic, but he that was unable to give his name. Finding these answers unsatisfactory, the base commander confined them. Meanwhile, Farley's commanding officer had been searching for them, looking for signs of a wreck along the cliffs of the coast of England. He was informed that a Lysander had crashed in northern Scotland, but dismissed the wreck as being too far away. When he was told the pilot's name was Farley, he realized his man had made it back.

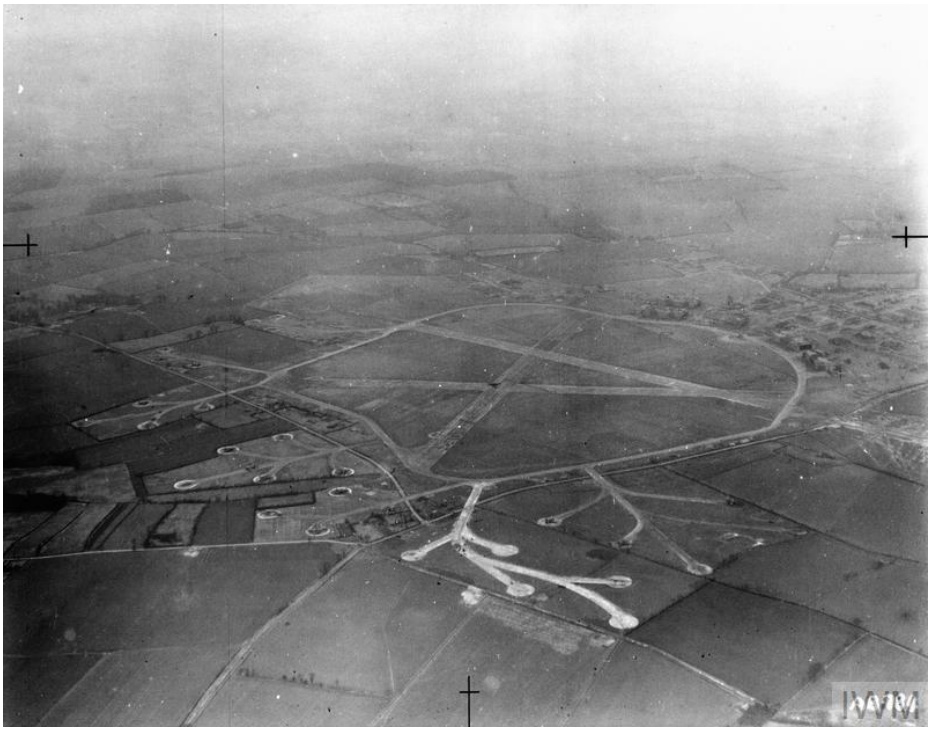
On 10/11 March 1941, F/O Oettle returned Philip Schneidau, to France when he parachuted to a location near his family home in the Forest of Fontainbleau.

After being dropped by F/O Oettle he spent two months in France before being picked up by Squadron Leader Knowles on 11 May.

After his work on the ground in France, he organised the Air & Sea transport of Agents both French & Polish, working at the British Embassy 1944-47 before returning to his pre-war occupation of Chartered Accountant. He died in Cheltenham on 14 Jan 1984 and was survived by his wife, who had been arrested by the Gestapo and tortured, and a son. His father in law was also in the Resistance and survived Buchenwald.

Airfields

RAF Stradishall



The site of RAF Stradishall was selected as an expansion scheme bomber airfield. Located six miles from Haverhill it lay on a bed of clay which was not suitable for heavy aircraft and it became the first airfield scheduled for hardened runways.

The runways were approximately 1000 yards long with hardstandings placed around most of the encircling perimeter track.

RAF Tempsford



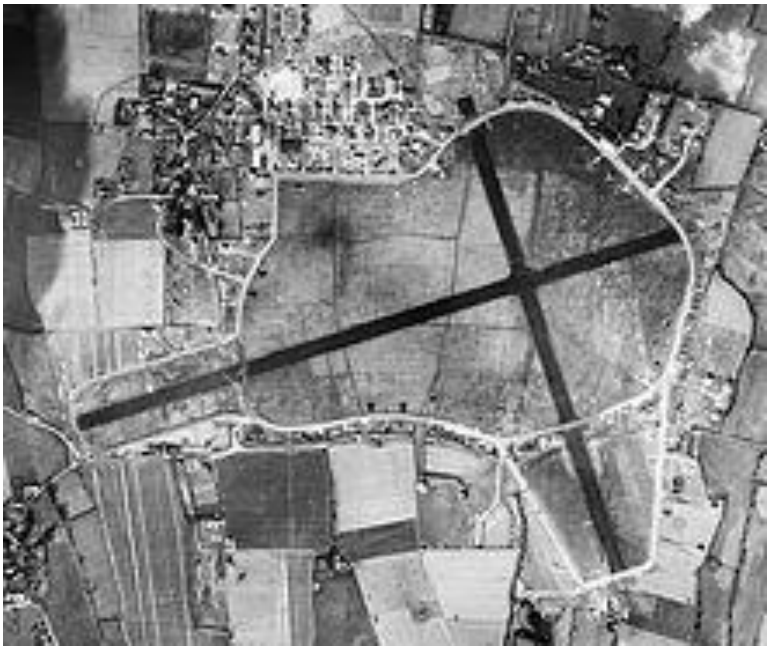
The airfield at Tempsford was located in a relatively remote part of the Bedfordshire countryside. It was built on the land of the Gibraltar Farm, which was situated across a low bog. The airfield was developed in 1940 under the specifications of an "A" class airfield, though it was kept clandestine.

The locals knew there was an RAF station down a little side-road marked “This road is closed to the public”, but they knew little else. Since the flights were all undertaken at night, the local farmers saw very little of the aircraft that operated out of Tempsford.

Built over a bog, this became telling later when fog proved a recurring significant hazard to landing aircraft.

The airfield lay largely dormant until the arrival of the Special Duty squadrons in 1942. 138 Squadron moved to Tempsford on11 March 1942. 161 Squadron followed on 10 April 1942. The first covert supply mission flown from Tempsford was carried out by 138 Squadron in the March moon period to a drop zone in northern France, 18 March 1942.

RAF Tangmere



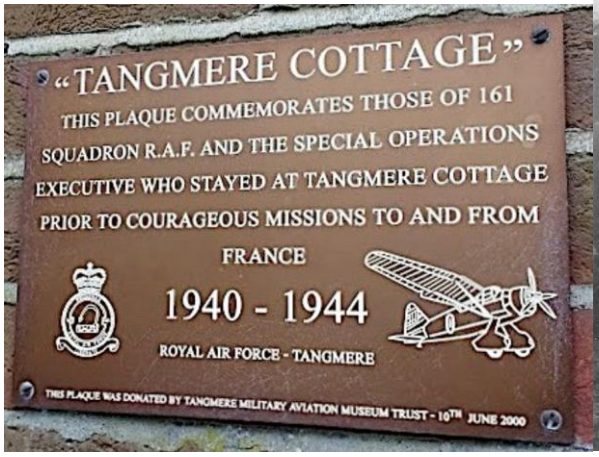
RAF Tangmere was 100 miles south of RAF Tempsford, on the south coast near Chichester. It was primarily a fighter squadron base, but during the moon periods the Lysanders and their ground crews would come down to Tangmere. This placed them closer to the target field and allowed the Lysanders to extend their range over France.

For much of its wartime life two Spitfire squadrons were based at Tangmere which meant the airfield attracted the attention of the Luftwaffe.

When at Tangmere the Lysanders were parked off by themselves.

The pilots were billeted and did their flight planning at a local home known as the Tangmere Cottage. The cottage was partially hidden from view by large hedges that had been allowed to grow up.

Situated opposite the main entrance to the base, Tangmere Cottage was also used by the SOE to do final checks on the outgoing agents, and to give returning agents a meal prior to taking them to London for debriefing. During the day the Lysander pilots would cross the field and take meals at the normal RAF officer's mess.





The 161 pilots would fly from Tangmere for the fortnight of the "moon period", which was a week before and a week after the full moon. The cover story for the Lysanders given to the RAF squadrons stationed at Tangmere was that the planes were used to do "photographic reconnaissance by night, using special flash flares". The torpedo like extra fuel cylinder slung in-between the wheels of the undercarriage was said to contain special night time cameras.