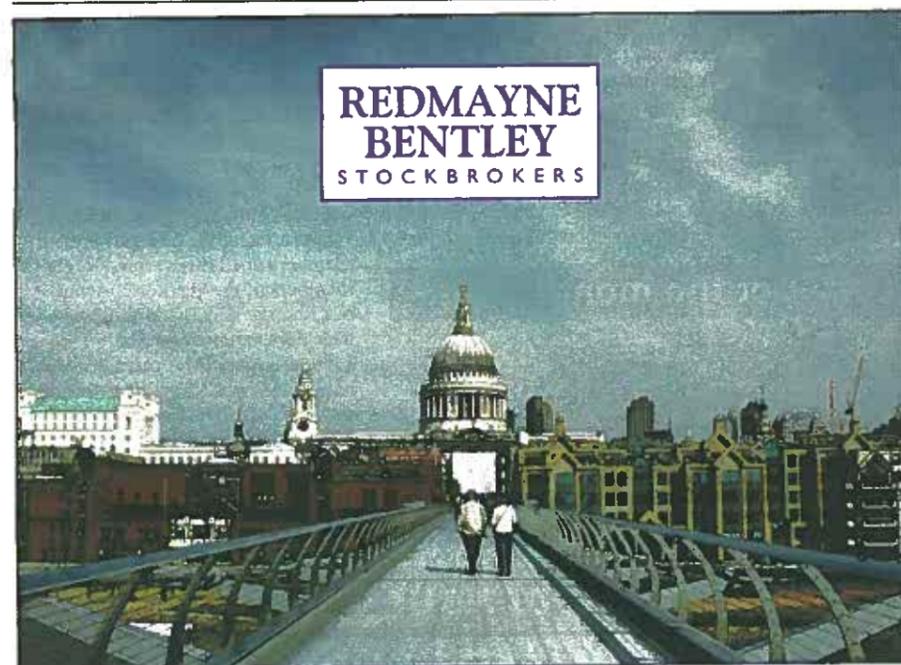


# Behind enemy lines: agent tells how he helped the Resistance to take the fight to the Germans

Major John Harper was parachuted into France as an agent of the Special Operations Executive in 1944 to help train the Resistance in the Auvergne to target the German invaders. He tells **SIMON WATKINSON** of his experiences



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IT IS difficult for anyone now to imagine the horrors of life in Occupied France in the 1940s. Food shortages, betrayal and unspeakable atrocities were everyday occurrences 70 years ago.

This was the France that members of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), or Churchill's Secret Army, parachuted into to join up with and help organise the French Resistance (Maquis).

The first SOE agent landed in May 1941, less than a year after General de Gaulle broadcast his call on the BBC for the French to resist the German forces.

Georges Bégue was the first of more than 1,400 agents to take the war directly to the Germans.

Three years later, SOE agent Major John Farmer parachuted into the Auvergne, landing near Cosne d'Allier with his courier, Nancy Wake, who would later become the Gestapo's most wanted person and the most decorated servicewoman in the Second World War.

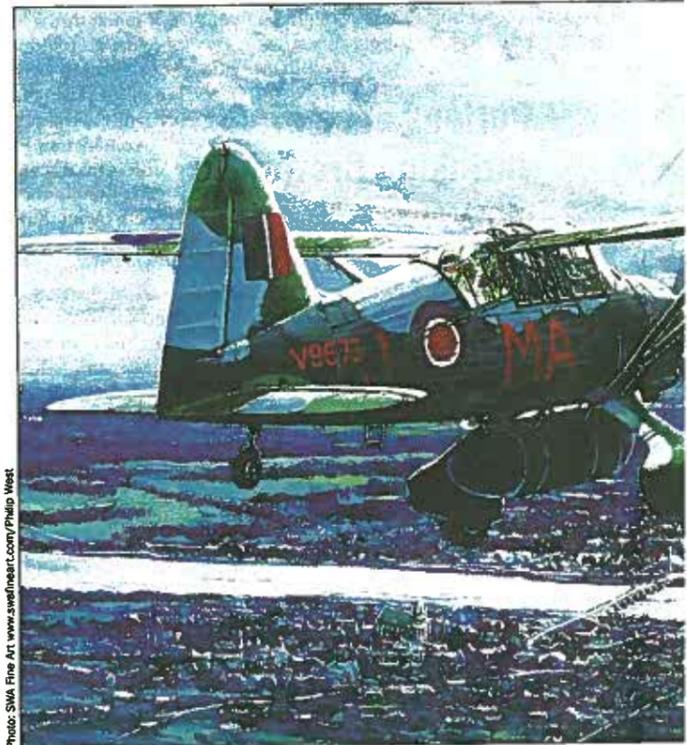
Now living in Ain, near Geneva and the Swiss border with his wife, Frances, Major Farmer received the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre avec Palmes for his exploits.

Born in Kensington, London, in January, 1917, most of his childhood was spent overseas. "My widowed mother had found that the then strong pound went further in continental Europe than in England, so I was educated in Germany, Switzerland and Belgium before attending Beaumont Jesuit College in Windsor, Berkshire, at the age of 14," he said.

His fluency in French and German would prove invaluable during his stint with SOE.

#### Where did you serve before joining SOE?

I was assigned to an anti-aircraft unit with the British Expeditionary Force on the Maginot Line, near Metz, in 1939. Then, from 1940 to 1943, I was stationed in Yorkshire with the Royal



Tiny Lysander aircraft were used to fly in supplies and SOE agents to the French. This painting, by Philip West, carries the signature of Nancy Wake in a limited edition.

Artillery, again on an anti-aircraft battery.

But this was quite boring with long periods of nothing to do. I yearned for some excitement and was more than relieved when I saw an advert for those with languages who wanted to apply to do something different.

Major Farmer was sent to join the newly organised Jedburghs in Peterborough, who were a secret army being put through punishing training to be sent in to France to work training up the Resistance.

While in training he was poached to join the SOE by its chief, Maurice Buckmaster, with the aim of going to France on sabotage and spying operations.

Now codenamed Hubert, he was parachuted into the Auvergne with Nancy Wake (codename Hélène), on the night of April 29, 1944.

#### How did the mission start?

Well, everything went wrong initially. As our radio operator had been so badly tortured on a previous mission,

he couldn't parachute in and was flown in by Lysander 15 days late without him, we were useless as nobody really knew who we were what we were meant to be doing.

The day after landing we met up with fellow SOE agent Maurice Southgate, who was in touch with the Resistance chief in the area and had asked London for help.

We were to go into Montluçon to get the feel of life in occupied territory, but Maurice told us he was too busy that day and would see us the next day. Unfortunately, the Gestapo captured him and he was sent to concentration camp in Germany.

Thankfully, we were warned of arrest and we left our safe house 02.00 the next day.

On arriving in a quieter area around Chaudes-Aigues, we contacted the local Resistance chief, who also didn't know what to do with us and so sent us to a small village called Lieutades. We stayed here until our radio operator – Denis Rake (codename Roland) – arrived. My role was to organise what

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PHOTO: SWA Fine Art www.swafineart.com/Philip West