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Resistance Fete Rejoins 200 Who 'Killed and Vanished'

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PARIS, May 31 — Their names are Mike and Elmer and Nigel and Pierre. They are retired insurance salesmen and farmers and real estate salesmen. Forty years ago, some were in German-occupied France and others were parachuted in just after the Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6.

They were underground agents known as Jedburghs, whose strategy was "surprise, kill, vanish."

But it is hard to imagine a more peaceful group than the 200 or so Jedburghs who gathered Wednesday night at the Hotel George V to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their operations in support of the French Resistance in the German Army's rear areas.

Many of the Jedburghs have lived their postwar lives at quiet jobs in small towns, but not all of them. The master of ceremonies Wednesday night was William E. Colby, a former Director of Central Intelligence. And at the head table sat Jacques Chaban-Delmas, the youngest general in the French Resistance and later Prime Minister of France.

Group Was Formed in '44

The Jedburghs originated early in 1944, when the American Office of Strategic Services and the British Special Operations Executive established a joint enterprise to be known as Special Force Headquarters, which was to organize all underground resistance in France in support of the invasion.

The program called for large-scale paramilitary activity, the maximum delivery of arms and supplies to the French and a major attack on the Germans on and after D-day. Thereafter, the Resistance was to raid German communications, ambush troops and convoys and prevent the demolition of key installations when the Germans withdrew.

To integrate Free French activities with the Allied operations, several three-man teams, called Jedburghs, were to be trained and parachuted in uniform into France, Belgium and the Netherlands to direct and coordinate the operations of the resistance forces in those countries.

Jedburghs? No two men could agree on the origin of the name. One thought it derived from a Scottish castle. Another was sure it had its origin in a forgotten commando-type operation in the Boer War.

The members were chosen carefully. Elmer Esch, a farm boy from Iowa, remembers that he was headed for duty at a camp for German prisoners of war when he was tapped for a special service. He did not know what it was, but "anything sounded better than that assignment," he said. So he was shipped to Milton Hall, an Elizabethan mansion 100 miles north of London, where he joined 240 other volunteers, most of them American and British but also including French, Belgian and Dutch.

At Milton Hall, they practiced silent killing in sunken gardens, dropped in training harnesses onto quiet lawns, fired demolition charges on the golf course and practiced the Morse code on hand-powered wireless sets. It was all, as they said in those days, "very hush, hush."

It also was very intensive. Their parachute training concluded with a night drop after three days. At Fort Benning, Ga., where American paratroopers had been trained, troops did not do a jump until they had six weeks of training.

Putting together three-man teams that would work effectively was a problem. Ultimately, it was decided that teams that formed by mutual consent were likely to be more efficient. So an Englishman and an American or a Frenchman and an American would, in their words, decide to become "engaged" and ultimately "married." A radio operator, usually an enlisted man, would be added, and the group would be given its code name, Harvard or Ammonia or Ronald.

Led Hit-and-Run Attacks

In May 1944, the first Jedburgh teams were sent to North Africa to be dropped behind the German lines in southern France. Six more teams were dropped in Brittany in June. From there, they radioed intelligence about German troop movements to the Allies in the Normandy beachhead.

By the end of August, after the Allies had broken out of the beachhead, all the remaining teams had been dropped into France, Belgium and the Netherlands. About them, they gathered Resistance fighters and led them in hit-and-run attacks and in the destruction of German depots.

They were not without honor. Of the 82 Americans who participated, 53 received the Distinguished Service

Cross, the Croix de Guerre, the Legion of Merit, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star or the Purple Heart. Their British, French and other colleagues were similarly honored.

On Wednesday night, they sat in the resplendent Salle de Paix in the hotel, all of them older but with a few exceptions remarkably trim. Their wives said they had never known about that episode of their husbands' lives until a few years ago, when reports of the Jedburghs' operations began to leak out.

Their operations did not end with the end of the war in Europe. Some were shipped to China and Burma for the last actions of the Pacific War. A few moved from the O.S.S. to the Central Intelligence Agency, and one or two — they were growing old now — operated in Vietnam.

Tonight, they participated in a ceremony at the Resistance Monument at Mont Valérien outside Paris. And on Friday night, they will relight the flame at the Arc de Triomphe.

At the dinner Wednesday night, the stories, in no way diminished by time, passed back and forth across the dinner tables:

"Remember those Brittany fishermen?"

"The Germans were more scared than I was, which is saying something"

"Met an Englishman who was on my team. Hadn't seen him for 40 years. Fine guy. Never knew he was a lord."

As a guest left the hotel, the doorman asked who the old fellows were. Told, he shrugged his shoulders. It was not his war.