

Anthony Charles 'Tony' Simonds OBE
Lieutenant Colonel, Royal Berkshire Regiment
Born 21st November 1909, Arborfield, Berkshire.
Died 7th January 1999, Stevenage, Hertfordshire.



At the outbreak of war in 1939



Simonds in Ethiopia in 1941 as part of Wingate's Gideon Force
Newspaper cutting from 1941

Father: Major Charles Francis Simonds (1878-1916)
Mother: Evelyn Julia Simonds (née Hickman) (1883-1971)

Tony Simonds was the eldest son of Charles & Evelyn Simonds, of Redlands House, Redlands Rd., Reading, from the banking branch of the Simonds family.

Tony was educated at Wellington College and after National Service in The Territorials and a period farming in North Devon, went on to become a career officer, commissioned 2nd Lt. 2nd Battalion, Royal Berkshire Regiment in August 1931. In 1938 during the Palestine campaign, he seems to have enjoyed his time whenever he was on leave, hunting with the Baghdad Hounds. He rode the winner of the Jubilee Cup in Palestine in 1935.

In 1940 Tony joined Orde Wingate on one of the first missions by the new SOE. They took the Emperor Haille Selassie with them on a mission to start a rebellion in Abyssinia and restore him to power.

In January 1949 he was appointed Officer of the Royal Order of King George I.

He first married Eirwen Helen Llewellyn-Jones on the 23rd September 1944 in Cairo, Egypt whilst stationed there. They had 2 daughters and were separated in 1969. In 1978 he married Barbara Ayre in Cyprus.

Tony's obituary was published on 26th January 1999 in The Independent:

"Tony Simonds played an important part behind the scenes in the Second World War in the Near Eastern theatre.

His had long been a leading family in Berkshire - the Reading brewers were his cousins and he was fond of saying, "There is no such thing as bad beer". From school at Wellington he went to farm in north Devon and after service as a Territorial was commissioned into the Royal Berkshire Regiment in 1931.

By 1936 he was serving on the intelligence staff in Palestine, then a British mandate. He caught the attention of the Commander-in-Chief, General (later Earl) Wavell, who already thought another world war likely. If it should break out he earmarked three officers for special duty: Orde Wingate, who was operating the Special Night Squads in co-operation with militant Jews; Dudley Clarke, like Wingate a gunner; and Simonds. Simonds was able to provide Wingate with information and targets, and was one of the few officers with whom that notoriously awkward character was able to get on.

Simonds read T.E. Lawrence's Seven Pillars of Wisdom when it was published in 1935 and amused himself on a long leave by riding several of Lawrence's camel rides; from which he emerged with admiration for the man, but the certainty that the book was as much novel as solid history.

In the autumn of 1940 Simonds and Wingate worked together to prepare a supplementary invasion of Abyssinia (as Ethiopia was then called), from the west, based on Khartoum and mounted on camels; they supplemented the more formal invasion forces attacking from the north and the south-east. They were controlled by a staff in Cairo called MO4, under whom Lawrence also had once worked. MO4 was absorbed into the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the secret service for subverting and sabotaging the axis war effort.

Wingate named his expedition Gideon Force. It carried with it a political trump, the exiled emperor Haile Selassie, whom it helped to replace on his throne in Addis Ababa. Simonds operated independently on its left wing, with some startling guerrilla successes; bluffing his way past superior Italian forces who were bewildered by his hit-and-run tactics and his ingenuity at creating makeshift weapons.

SOE learned important lessons from what happened to Gideon Force, whose work pre-figured several of SOE's attempts to raise underground armies in occupied Europe and to supply them by air. Lectures on how successful the largely African force had been, were soon suspended after complaints from the South African government, which was uneasy at the spreading of stories about the defeat of white men by black.

Simonds was next tasked, on his recovery from six months' hard living in the East African bush, with the forming of SOE's section for work into Greece; from which he was called away in the autumn of 1941 to form N Section of A Force: phrases that meant nothing to a chance hearer. A Force was Dudley Clarke's deception service, which worked with enormous success to confuse the enemy; its N

Section provided some cover for it by training troops of all arms in methods of escape and evasion. This was part of MI9, the escape service.

Moreover, Simonds set himself to organise escape lines across occupied Eastern Europe. Here he had invaluable help from friends he had made while helping the special night squads. He came to an understanding with the Jewish Agency: they offered him facilities in his field, on the understanding that for every escaper the force brought out a Jew could come as well. He thus assisted over 3,000 Allied escaped prisoners of war and shot down airmen to get back. Several of the agents he sent forward into Hungary and Romania to help form these lines fell into the hands of hostile police and came to horrible ends; Hannah Szenes the poet among them. Others were more fortunate and survived; long after the war Simonds was warmly welcomed whenever he visited Israel.

He also had agents operating in small boats across the Aegean, based in a cove at Cesme near Smyrna to which the local Turkish authorities were persuaded to shut their eyes. These parties too helped swell the numbers of escapers; and when the Allies moved into Italy, Simonds operated up the Adriatic coast with a fleet of small boats cutting out parties of escapers who managed to get down to the shore.

He was seven times mentioned in despatches but his habit of speaking his mind did not endear him to higher authorities and his only British decoration was an OBE. (Wingate is said to have put him in for a DSO at the end of the Abyssinia campaign; at that stage in the war a recommendation from Wingate was itself a black mark.)

When the war was over he helped investigate some claims of peculation (then endemic in the near East), spent a year at the infant Middle East centre for Arab Studies at Shemlan, outside Beirut and was for four years deputy commander of the military mission to Saudi Arabia. A year as assistant military attaché in Cairo convinced him it was time he retired; and in 1952 he went to Cyprus to grow flowers for a living.

He became one of the leaders of the Ancient Britons, as a friendly archaeologist nicknamed the British residents who stayed in Cyprus after it became independent; but he had bad luck. When the Turks invaded in 1974 they napalmed his house; he lost all his furniture, silver and papers. He rewrote a book he had just finished; that too was destroyed in a fire. He rewrote his memoirs for a third time; those, more fortunately, are deposited in the Imperial War Museum.”

Tony Simonds was a large, burly, handsome man with a cheerful outgoing manner, always direct in speech and a stout friend to those he trusted. He fell ill and returned to England to die in the autumn of 1998.

Anthony Charles Simonds, guerrilla leader and escape line organiser: born Arborfield, Berkshire 21 November 1909; MBE 1938, OBE 1943; married 1944 Eirwen Llewellyn Jones (two daughters; marriage dissolved 1969), 1978 Barbara Ayre; died Stevenage, Hertfordshire 7 January 1999.

His typed memoir is called ‘Pieces of War’ and is held in the ‘Simonds Papers’ at the Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, Ref; 08/46/1, IWMD