

OBITUARIES

COLONEL ANTHONY SIMONDS

Colonel Anthony Simonds, OBE, MI9 officer, died on January 7 aged 89. He was born on November 21, 1909.

Anthony Simonds, who served under Orde Wingate in Palestine and Ethiopia, later did his best to repair one of the stupidest British blunders of the Second World War and organised the rescue of hundreds of prisoners of war in Italy. He was mentioned seven times in dispatches and Wingate put him up for a DSO for what he did in Ethiopia. But Wingate had enemies in GHQ Cairo, and Simonds was not the only member of his team not to get the recognition he deserved.

By the summer of 1943, when Mussolini was deposed, Simonds was a lieutenant-colonel in command of the Balkans and Middle East section of MI9, the secret escape and evasion service. Behind barbed wire in various Italian camps were almost 80,000 Allied prisoners, the majority British and Commonwealth soldiers captured by Axis forces in North Africa. When Marshal Badoglio formally surrendered on September 8, five days after the British had landed in the toe of Italy, their guards simply walked away.

This should have been the cue for hundreds of escape parties to make their way towards the Allied lines. Instead, in most of the camps the senior British officers ordered the PoWs to stay put and await rescue. They did this because they had been told to do so by MI9's headquarters in London in coded messages picked up on the camps'

clandestine radios. The historian and former intelligence officer M. R. D. Foot has suggested that MI9 was doing the bidding of the tidy-minded Montgomery, who did not want his battlefield cluttered up with ragged bands of escapers.

A few thousand insubordinate souls guessed that the Germans were likely to get to them much faster than the Allies and bolted. Some dithered and still got away. Among the luckier ones was a Captain Balfour of the Scots Guards, an officer privy to the secret MI9 order, who at the last moment hid on a rafter while the Wehrmacht emptied the rest of his camp into trains for Germany.

Balfour got to the little Adriatic port of Termoli, the Eighth Army's most forward position, where Simonds had set up the vanguard of his prisoner rescue operation. For the first time Simonds heard about the astonishing MI9 order from London and realised he would have to act quickly before the Germans rounded all the prisoners up.

Under his command he had what must have been one of the most heterogeneous units the Allies ever put into the field. There were three Italian Navy motor launches whose crews had only recently been exchanging shots with the Royal Navy, 13 Italian fishing boats with mixed RN and Italian crews, two squadrons of SAS, one of them Free French, a company of British paratroopers and a contingent of first generation Italian-Americans on loan from the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the CIA.

His officers included an amateur jockey who had won the Grand National, a London stockbroker, a

newspaper illustrator, a Twining tea taster, a French Communist who had fought Franco, the former Polish Ambassador to Rome, the Prince of Calabria, the son of the Governor-General of the Sudan, a couple of Etonians and a jazz-loving Harvard professor.

Simonds's tactics were simple. Teams of parachutists were dropped near the known sites of PoW camps. They shepherded escapers to the coast. In case they missed the rendezvous or were chased away by German patrols, the SAS parties taught the escapers recognition signals to make out to sea.

Night after night Simonds would crawl along the coast in one of his vessels, searching for waifs and strays. Sometimes boats were lured into traps and blown to pieces. One night Simonds spotted some lights that were too faint and irregular to make out whether they were the right signal. His vessel went as close inshore as it dared and lowered Simonds and three others in a small boat. On the beach were a bunch of men who shouted they were British. "Identify yourselves by whistling *The British Grenadiers*," demanded Simonds. A faint but recognisable rendering came back. It turned out to be an exhausted party of 15 escapers who for the second successive night were making their feeble signals with a candle.

Sometimes Simonds ventured further inland. Once he helped capture a German officer who had been persuaded by one of his Italian-Americans that they were black marketeers with whisky. "Not a correct MI9 operation," Simonds noted in his unpub-



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

lished memoirs, "but great fun!"

Anthony Charles Simonds, the son of an officer killed on the Somme, came from an old and wealthy Berkshire family with interests in banking and brewing. He was educated at Wellington College and in 1931 was commissioned into the Royal Berkshire

Regiment. He was much admired for his boxing skills and reached the army championships four times at featherweight.

His other talents were perhaps more in keeping with his passion for chess, for he soon showed an aptitude for intelligence work. During the Arab uprising in

Palestine in the late 1930s he worked at GHQ Jerusalem and sometimes fed tip-offs to Wingate's Special Night Squads which resulted in deadly ambushes. Complaints from senior officers' wives that young Captain Simonds kept a permanent female companion in his bungalow were dismissed by his immediate superiors on the ground that this "moral turpitude" might be essential to his duties.

In November 1940 he was at Wavell's headquarters in Cairo when Wingate asked him if he would parachute into Italian-occupied Ethiopia, where the British were giving Haile Selassie's guerrillas the little military assistance they could then spare. Simonds, who never made any secret of his fear of parachuting, said he would rather walk, and trekked most of the way from the Sudanese border to the source of the Blue Nile.

For the next six months, with shoulder length-hair and a beard down to his chest, Simonds led a barefoot column of Ethiopians. As part of Wingate's Gideon Force he helped to tie down thousands of Italian troops while conventional British forces attacked from Sudan and Kenya. Woefully equipped by indifferent staff offices in Khartoum, he improvised brilliantly. He convinced the enemy that cigarette tins were landmines, organised the repair of an old muzzle-loading cannon to fire round shot, and turned back an Italian surprise attack by using a flare pistol to transform some dry scrub into a wall of fire. When, towards the end of the campaign, he was ordered, protesting, back to Cairo, the paymaster's department insisted that he was not entitled to field

service allowance, since he had not been in the field at all but merely "behind enemy lines".

From September 1941 until the end of the war he was in charge of all escape and rescue operations in the Balkans. Although Turkey was officially neutral he ran a fleet of armed caiques into the Aegean islands from a port near Izmir. Shortly before the German surrender he was almost killed while flying to Turkey from Cyprus when a German fighter from occupied Rhodes attacked the unarmed RAF transport he was in. To shake off the fighter the pilot, who like all the aircrew had an oxygen mask, took his unpressurised plane as high as he could. Simonds passed out.

In 1952 he left the Army and became a flower-grower in Cyprus where, in 1943, he had married his first wife, Eirwen Llewelyn Jones, with whom he had two daughters before they were divorced in 1969. Simonds remained on the island throughout the 1955-59 Eoka rebellion. But when the Turks invaded Cyprus in 1974 his home in Kyrenia was destroyed. Evacuated by the Royal Navy, he later returned to the island and, with his second wife, Barbara Ayre, set up home in the village of Ayia Anna. In aid of Anglican church funds he ran a secondhand bookshop in the grounds of St Paul's in Nicosia and was often to be seen sitting outside it wearing a Panama hat and a Special Forces Club tie. In 1997, suffering from the onset of Alzheimer's disease, he moved back to Britain.

He is survived by his second wife Barbara and the two daughters from his previous marriage.