



M R D Foot *Memories of an SOE Historian* Pen & Sword Military, 2009 £19.99

Those of us lucky enough to have been present at the A.G.M. heard after lunch a fascinating talk by the author of this book on Special Forces. Lucid, forceful and delivered with brio it was a remarkable performance from a man in his ninetieth year. His autobiography repays close reading as it covers the story of a remarkable life. For readers of *Mars & Clio* the key chapters are those that deal with his war service and then a chapter entitled ‘Reflections on S.O.E.’ However, I would suggest that the whole book is a fascinating story of a man’s journey towards fulfillment. It reads exactly like he speaks: quickly, short sentences and with no punches pulled. He remembers vivid details and these spice up what could otherwise be dull accounts of academia.

Like other Wykehamists he owes his life to the fact that he learned German while principally studying classics, and so was directed towards intelligence service. He was initially commissioned in the Royal Engineers, then the Royal Artillery, in a searchlight battery, and it was not until 1942 that he moved to Combined Operations just after the Dieppe fiasco. Late in 1943 he became intelligence officer for the S.A.S. brigade and flew into France in August 1944 to look for a specific German officer who had been brutally interrogating S.A.S. prisoners. Within days he was captured, and his life was probably saved by a German sergeant who collected Allied insignia and cut off his S.A.S. wings, allowing him to pose as an airborne artillery officer. Captured members of the S.A.S. were normally shot out of hand by the Germans. He escaped four times, and finally had his neck broken while evading recapture. He was exchanged for a German naval officer and once he had recovered returned to England, carrying his own medical file which opened with the words “May pull through”. His final job while actually on sick leave was to estimate likely casualties that would be incurred in an Allied invasion of mainland Japan, and he calculated 600,000 Allied and 900,000 Japanese dead. He has always viewed bumper stickers proclaiming “No more Hiroshimas” as rather odd.

Returning to Oxford Foot completed his degree and remained there teaching on a part time basis while also working in London and anywhere else that would pay, and gradually started to produce published work, principally the first two volumes of the Gladstone Diaries. It was not until the 1960s that he first came to full scale, as opposed to academic, public notice when he published what is probably his most famous book *S.O.E. in France*. The struggle to write it is graphically portrayed: the refusal to allow him, at first, to meet any of its agents, and the threat to veto any application he might make to join the Special Forces Club and so meet old agents. He tells the marvelous story of how the compositor said how much he had enjoyed setting Foot’s volume compared to his previous job: the London telephone directory! It was an immense success, selling ten thousand copies in three months. I suspect that all BCMH authors would be jealous of those figures; but he never received any royalties for it. Further teaching at Manchester led to him becoming a freelance author, and if I look to my right I see a line of volumes of impeccable pedigree, rounded off by a *festschrift*.

Probably the most useful chapter is entitled “Reflections on S.O.E.” which is in effect a fifteen page summary of our wartime secret services. It is an overview that many will turn to regularly when we seek to understand the relationship, for example, between S.O.E., M.I.9,



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Page 2 / 2

S.I.S., and P.W.E. Any reader who already knows what all those acronyms stand for will still learn plenty.

There are still things that I wish he would tell us and which he keeps to his closely guarded chest. Will he write the definitive account of the Prosper network, now that we more or less know everything? What about Dericourt? Again, will he write a definitive account for posterity? There have always appeared to me to be unanswered questions about the Venlo Episode in October 1939: were S.I.S. really that incompetent? I would have loved to have heard more about a hero of mine, Tony Banks, who was Foot's best man at his last wedding. However, we must be grateful for what we do have: a memoir that fascinates intrigues and stimulates, and is highly recommended to all members.

Robin Brodhurst

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