

13-08-2023

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Captain Lionel LEE



Lionel Lee was born in Hackney, London E9 on 24 June 1917, the son of Abraham and Esther (née Tribich) Levy (also recorded as Levey) of 2 Fremont Street, King Edward Road. He had an older sister, Pearl and an older brother, Asher. Family records show a presence in north and east London, though Asher was born in Plymouth, Devon where his father had been a tailor. but no other details of his early life or education are known. By the time he joined the British Army the family name had changed to Lee (his father became Alfred Lee) and he was married, to Lilian (née Raiment) with a home address of 10 Nightingale Road, Lower Clapton, London E5¹ and he was studying to become a language teacher, presumably having a complete command of French.

Though his SOE personal file holds few details, Lee had undergone training for a commission in the Royal Armoured Corps (RAC), with 103 OCTU at Perham Down, Wiltshire. He was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in May 1942 with the service number 235209. It is noted on his file that he had also served in the Field Security Police, but it is not clear if this was before OCTU, or if he briefly transferred afterwards, before volunteering for F Section and being taken on strength into the Special Operations Executive (SOE) from 20 June 1942.

Lee was first sent, as a student member of Party 27Q, to STS 5, F Section's Preliminary School at 'Wanborough Manor' near Guildford in Surrey, arriving in June 1942.

The group did parachute training at STS 51, Dunham House and Fulshaw Hall (and using RAF Ringway), on 6 August 1942

¹ His SOE personal file wrongly records Clapham, rather than Clapton.

Lee continued satisfactorily in his training, being promoted Captain on 23 November 1942. Selected to become a radio operator, he attended STS 52, Thame Park in Oxfordshire where, in early January 1943, Lieutenant Stebbing-Allen of the instructing staff reported on Lee's performance and conduct:

'The security of this student is good. It seems that he has a good appreciation of the importance which security is to play in his future life, and while being a good mixer, has the ability of remaining inconspicuous and unobtrusive. In the vicinity of the school he is quiet, somewhat reserved and careful in his conversation.'

Lee was to be seconded to SOE's AMF Section, created at their MASSINGHAM mission at the Club des Pins, on the coast 20 kilometres west of Algiers, following the Allies' successful invasion of French north Africa in November 1942. He was given the codename MECHANIC, the field name *René* and a false identity as René Lionel Guiraud and was flown to Algiers under the orders of Capitaine Gurnet of SOE's RF Section, awaiting despatch on the mission which was to be into enemy-occupied Corsica.¹ He was to serve as radio operator to an operation to replace a Free French mission, SARMENT, under the command of Godefroy 'Fred' Scamaroni, an agent of the French BCRA, but which had been compromised. Its members had either been arrested or gone into hiding and Paulin Colonna d'Istria, a former Commandant in the Gendarmerie in Algeria, (field name *Cesari*) was to take over.

Lee, Colonna d'Istria and three other men were landed on 18 February 1943 by *HM Submarine Trident*, captained by Lieutenant P. E. Newstead, in OPERATION LEG on the east coast of Corsica at the mouth of the River Travo (Pointe du Trave). Colonna d'Istria's mission involved taking over earlier attempts to unite the Corsican resistance. It was hoped he would be seen as an 'independent' working for the British and therefore better able to win the confidence of the disparate resistance groups on the island, some of whom were suspicious of General de Gaulle. Coming from Algeria, Colonna d'Istria and Lee were also more likely to be seen as linked to Algiers-based General Giraud, it not being until June 1943 that de Gaulle arrived in Algeria from London to assert his authority.

The landing of the agents proved relatively straightforward. Newstead brought the *Trident* close to the river estuary before launching an inflatable rubber dinghy containing five men since, in addition to Lee and Colonna d'Istria the submarine had brought Jean Baptiste Aquaviva who was act as *adjoint* to Colonna d'Istria and to be the resistance leader in the northwest region of Corsica, François Chiappe, a bodyguard and courier, and a radio operator for a separate resistance group on the island. They were shown the way to the beach in silence by a Folboat canoe crewed by two members of a Special Boat Section team that was also aboard the *Trident*. But it was a noisy reception party that awaited them. Two other agents were departing after their earlier mission (codenamed PEARL HARBOR) had been compromised and as the beach was reached, a babble of chat greeted the new arrivals. The situation was made all the more frustrating when Lee and Colonna d'Istria were told that a beautiful young woman of the maquis had been waiting to embrace and welcome them to Corsica, but she had gone home an hour earlier.

The team brought one-and-a-half million francs, distributed among themselves for security, and four radio sets, two for Lee's personal use, one for another radio operator, Pierre Luigi, who had already been on the island for a month, and one for an additional radio operator who was to be trained and set up locally by Lee. Two of the sets proved to have been damaged in transit when a torpedo had broken loose aboard the *Trident* and they had to be replaced by an

additional two sets later parachuted in at Lee's request. The arms brought in included 150 Sten guns, four Bren guns, 200 grenades and a stock of explosive and incendiary devices. As the outgoing party was embarked on the submarine, the arms and material were hidden in scrub nearby and the four new arrivals were then taken to a safe house about four kilometres away. The cache was recovered a few days later and the team then took a train to Bastia, alighting at a small station before the town in order to continue by bus and thereby avoid the potential identity and luggage checks at Bastia's main railway station.

In Bastia Colonna d'Istria contacted Pierre Luigi, a radio operator who had already been on the island for a month, but who had not made contact with Algiers for some time. Lee could find nothing wrong with Luigi's radio set and came to the conclusion that he had not made enough effort to transmit and had instead prefer to stay in Bastia, where transmissions were nevertheless made more difficult due to high buildings, instead of going into the mountains. Lee subsequently issued Luigi with a new set and relocated him elsewhere where radio reception was better.

After a few days in Bastia, Lee, Colonna d'Istria and Aquaviva left for Corscia, the latter's native village which was north of Calacuccia in the Haute-Corse *département*. The journey there gave evidence of the dangers present on the island when, at Francardo railway station, an Italian army control searched all luggage. Fortunately, the radio sets had be left in Bastia until the team were settled at their new location, but Lee nevertheless had several incriminating documents and material with him. These he had placed between layers of his clothing and fortunately the Italian Sergeant conducting the search gave only a perfunctory inspection of the contents of Lee's suitcase.

The village of Corscia was to become Lee's base for the next two and a half months, working for Aquaviva who was to head resistance in the northwest region for Colonna d'Istria. The latter spent much of his time touring and bringing together the different resistance factions, returning to Corscia in order to personally deliver messages to Lee to transmit back to Algiers. Lee had been given lodgings in the village in a house where the landlady knew of his true role and he was given a cover story in case of questioning. He was not able to transmit from the house, however, as there were Italians living next door and patrols of the Italian Army frequently came to the village. Lee therefore set up a transmitting post in the mountains nearby.

In his time based in Corscia, Lee left the area only twice: to contact the radio operator Pierre Luigi at Sertène; and to establish a new, additional radio operator, a local recruit called Cavanaggio whom Lee trained and installed in the basement of a cafe in Ajaccio, keeping in touch by courier.

Lee's work in his first month in Corscia prioritised the identification of a DZ in the mountains and the radioing of requests for supplies to be dropped there. He personally supervised the first drop in May when the aircraft failed to spot the reception party's torches on the first night and on the following night returned to release its 12 containers to soon, some three kilometres from the DZ. To compound the error, the parachutes of four containers failed to open and a fifth container caught fire and exploded on landing.ⁱⁱ Worse still, one container was found the next day by a local woman who alerted a French colonel of fascist sympathies, he in turn reported the find to the police at Lozzi.

This incident, together with information (forcibly extracted from arrests made among the earlier SARMENT mission's members) of Colonna d'Istria and his team, spurred the enemy

into action. On the night of 4 June 1943, some 40 Italian soldiers arrived in Corscia at 11:30 p.m. and began searching a number of houses. As the village's properties were all close together, Lee had no chance of escaping the enemy's cordon, but by great good fortune, his landlady's house was not searched, while houses directly opposite and behind suffered the Italians' attention. The frustrated enemy left empty-handed at about 1 a.m. and Lee, appreciating he had been lucky, took to the mountains to sleep there for the next few nights as a precaution.

His decision was proved sound when, two days later, the Italians returned just before dawn and, clearly better informed, went straight to Lee's lodgings in Corscia, finding his clothes and equipment which they seized. They arrested Lee's landlady, but fortunately her cover story held and she was later released. Lee only learned of these events from some local women as he was coming down from the mountains later the same morning. Retracing his steps, he returned to the mountains above the village and took refuge with some shepherds in their hut.

Lee subsequently learnt that a young Italian from the village had informed the enemy of Corscia's resistance activity and the same informer also brought about the arrest of Aquaviva who had gone to Bastia to meet Colonna d'Istria. Badly beaten and subjected to a pretence firing squad, Aquaviva nevertheless survived his imprisonment and was released after the Italian armistice.

While Aquaviva was undergoing his brutal interrogation at the hands of OVRA (*Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo* - the efficient Italian secret police) Lee decided that he could not risk staying any longer with the shepherds. Their hut was relatively close to the DZ that was now 'blown', but more importantly the shepherds proved themselves far too prone to gossip and Lee's whereabouts had soon become known to people in Corscia. He therefore, with two or three men from Aquaviva's local recruits, transferred his radio set and his base to the far side of the river Golo from Corscia in a hideout in the maquis scrub. He later concluded that the local men had helped him only because they feared enemy reprisals against Corscia and were therefore keen that Lee distanced himself from the village.

From his new location, Lee radioed news of the enemy's actions, and the arrest of Aquaviva, to Algiers. He reported that he had had no recent news of Colonna d'Istria, but he was subsequently informed that his commanding officer had returned to Algiers having experienced an unexpected sequence of events at the reception of a delivery of supplies by *HM Submarine Sybil*.

The *Sybil*, commanded by Lieutenant E. J. D. Turner, had arrived off a designated beach on the south-eastern coast of Corsica on the night of 4 June 1943, the same night that Lee was fortunate not to be caught by the Italian soldiers searching Corscia. Aboard the submarine, Lieutenant Laming of SOE's naval section had arranged to meet Colonna d'Istria to discuss the current situation and the latter boarded the submarine while the arms and stores were ferried to the reception party on the beach. As Colonna d'Istria was about to disembark, however, the alarm was raised ashore and Italian forces started firing out to sea. Lieutenant Turner had no alternative but to take the *Sybil* out to safety and although he returned to the pinpoint the following night in an effort to re-land Colonna d'Istria, there was no response from the shore and he was obliged to take his visitor back to Algiers.

The unexpected return of Colonna d'Istria to Algiers on 14 June 1943ⁱⁱⁱ served to exacerbate a developing row. Despite the success of the mission, General de Gaulle, who had arrived in Algiers in June, was furious when he learnt of Colonna d'Istria and Lee having been inserted without any involvement or liaison with his own intelligence service, the BCRA. The earlier SEA URCHIN mission to Corsica, which Lee had originally been meant to join, was very much a Gaullist operation, with support from F Section. But by the time de Gaulle reached Algeria in June, Colonna d'Istria had succeeded in achieving a respectable level of cooperation among the various resistance groups under his non-political leadership and reporting to the British and SOE. To add to de Gaulle's anger, however, Colonna d'Istria had recognised the communist-led *Front National* as the major resistance organisation in Corsica.

The consequence of Colonna d'Istria's unplanned absence was that Lee had to take over his leadership role and it also became all the more important that he maintain contact with Algiers. He was hampered, however, by his radio set having suffered from some fairly rough treatment in the mountains. With only one small screwdriver to effect repairs, Lee experienced increasing difficulty in making contact, but although he got through only once every ten days on average, he never failed to maintain the link. To add to his problems, Lee had broken his watch and though he fashioned a type of sundial, he was unable to accurately tell the time and his adherence to the schedule for his transmissions was consequently compromised.

Although Colonna d'Istria returned to Corsica, by the Free French submarine *Casabianca*, on 3 July 1943, he did so to tragic developments. Both Chiappe and Luigi had been arrested and Lee had been obliged to lie low in the mountains from early June, feeling disillusioned with his companions who were showing little inclination for action. He distanced himself from them for a while by returning to the shepherds' hut, but concluded that he was wasting his time and should make efforts to himself directly contact the various resistance groups in order that he could help them by radioing for arms and supply drops. The newly-returned Colonna d'Istria approved Lee's plans, as did Algiers, and they were to be helped by the fact that Colonna d'Istria had been accompanied by another large delivery of arms, among 250 tons that were delivered in total to the island.

Having made the necessary contacts, Lee picked a reception committee of six trusted men and radioed details of a DZ for a drop on the night of 20 August. By an extraordinary stroke of fate, two other groups had made arrangements for drops on the same night and all three DZs were roughly in the same geographical area. As a result, Lee received a drop of 16 containers from the first aircraft to arrive over the area, but made no attempt to contact the second aircraft which was suspected of being an enemy aircraft following the first RAF aircraft. The 16 containers nevertheless held a welcome supply of weapons and material and Lee arrange for it all to be spirited away and hidden in caves.

When the Italian armistice was announced on 8 September 1943 Lee continued to be instrumental in Colonna d'Istria's organisation of 12,000 armed men and the SOE team succeeded in persuading elements of the Italian forces in and around Bastia to join the resistance uprising against the withdrawing German forces. On 11 September orders were received from General Giraud's headquarters in Algiers (it had been agreed that all operations on the island would now be coordinated by the French high command in Algiers) that the SOE-led forces should deploy to defend Ajaccio and two days later French troops began to arrive there to reclaim their island. There was another flurry of action when the Germans seized Bastia and cleared their line of withdrawal along the coastal road from Bonifacio to Porto-Vecchio and for several days they were harried by skirmishes with the local patriots, the Italian forces

who had chosen to fight alongside them and by demolitions carried out with SOE-supplied explosives. The German commander on the island had nevertheless received orders on 13 September to withdraw his forces from Corsica and by 3 October 1943 all fighting on the island was over.

It was not until 18 November 1943 that Lee arrived in the UK, presumably via Algiers though his SOE personal file holds no details. He was fully debriefed on 6 December 1943, it being noted that from his arrival on Corsica by submarine on the 18 February 1943, he had sent 70 messages and received 60 in return, never once losing contact with Algiers. **In recognition of this achievement, Lee was awarded a justly deserved Military Cross, gazetted on 9th December 1943.**

Despite what must have been an exhausting and demanding mission of nine months, Lee volunteered to continue to serve in the field for F Section. In preparation, he commenced a course at STS 40, Howbury Hall, near Waterend in Bedfordshire in early January 1944, but for some reason had to abruptly leave it. He returned on the 9th of the same month, worked hard and completed the training on 20 January 1944. His reports read: maintenance and operation of S-phone – ‘Qualified...has worked hard and done well’; maintenance and operation of Eureka beacon: ‘Excellent pass.....He showed a keen interest’; reception committee work: ‘has worked with keenness and should prove very useful in this work in the field. The officer commanding STS 40 concluded with the remark ‘strongly recommended’.

For his second mission Lee was again selected to support an important and senior SOE agent – Captain (soon to be promoted Major) France Antelme (BRICKLAYER /*Renaud*), one of F Section’s most experienced officers. Ensign Madeleine Damerment (DANCER/*Solange*) was to be the courier of the three-strong team and Lee would be the radio operator, retaining his code name MECHANIC, but taking the new field name *Thibaud* and a different false identity of Jacques Lionel Heriat. His radio traffic was to be codenamed DAKS.

Antelme was to create a new BRICKLAYER circuit in the Brittany area, and a number of mobile groups south of Paris and preferably in the Seine-et-Oise *département*. OPERATION PHONO 4 saw the three agents dropped by parachute from a Halifax piloted by Pilot Officer Caldwell of 161 Squadron from RAF Tempsford on the night of 29 February/1 March 1944, some 30 kilometres east of Chartres near the village of Sainville (28). The operation had, however, been arranged by the Germans as part of their *Funkspiel* using the captured set of Noor Inayat-Khan (NURSE/*Madeleine*) of the PHONO circuit. Lee, Madeleine and Antelme were therefore immediately arrested as they landed.

The Germans, highly pleased to have caught Antelme in particular (it was known he was an important agent and one that they had been searching for in the summer of 1943) nevertheless wanted to protect the fact that one of their own operators was transmitting using Noor’s set and codes. To explain away the lack of any personal messages from Antelme, they succeeded in establishing radio contact, supposedly transmitted by Lee, after a few days’ silence to say that a container, dropped at the same time as the three agents, had fractured Antelme’s skull on landing and that he was receiving medical treatment. Even details of the physician supposedly involved, a Doctor Marre in Orléans, were given and SOE headquarters unsuspectingly replied with not only a message of sympathy, but also congratulations on the fact that Antelme had been awarded the military OBE. The enemy tried to continue the *Funkspiel* with a message on

2 May 1944, again supposedly from Lee, that Antelme had died from his injury. But another message on 4 May was noted to have Lee's special security check incorrectly used and London at last decided that the BRICKLAYER team was compromised.

The only definite word of Lee's subsequent movements came in a radio message on 27 June 1944, from the PONCHO set of Henry Diacono (PLAYBOY/*Blaise*). Diacono sent a message from Paul Tessier (COMEDIAN/*Théodore*) who had managed to escape from German captivity and had gone to ground in Paris. Tessier stated that Lee was among those he had seen in prison at 3 bis place des Etats-Unis in March – May 1944. It is likely that Lee then accompanied Antelme who is known to have been in a group of captive agents deported to Germany and who arrived, by lorry, at Rawitsch prison around 18 May 1944.

According to a post-war British Army investigation in 1948, it was believed that in July 1944, after orders were received from Berlin for the execution of the SOE agents at Rawitsch, they were taken in two groups by *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Dr. Wilhelm Scharpwinkel, head of the Breslau Gestapo, from the prison to the KZ Gross-Rosen concentration camp, 100 kilometres to the south west in German Silesia. The camp, together with its 13 sub-camps, held as many as 80,000 inmates and since October 1943 had been under the command of *SS-Sturmbannführer* Johannes Hassebroeck. As special prisoners, the SOE officers transferred from Rawitsch were held in isolation in the *wetterstelle* (weather station) building, slightly apart from the other camp buildings. The first group, believed to total ten, were there only for four or five days when, at dawn on the Sunday morning of either 28 July or 4 August 1944, they were stripped naked and executed by firing squad.

The second group, brought shortly afterwards from Rawitsch, were shot immediately after arrival. Witnesses were later to claim that a Ukrainian named Ivan who worked in the camp's crematorium, extracted gold teeth from four of the victims before their bodies were burned. Fritz Deubel, an inmate of Gross-Rosen, was the sole witness to have identified, from a photograph, Lee as one of the prisoners brought from Rawitsch. The discovery in 2011 of Rawitsch prison documentation in Poznań, by Dutch researchers, casts doubt on some of the above information and instead suggests that British and French SOE agents were transferred to Gross-Rosen, for execution, on 24 June, 9 July and 4 September 1944.

Lee would have been 27 years old if executed in the period 24 June – 4 September 1944 and his body disposed of in the crematorium at Gross-Rosen. Buckmaster later wrote that Lee had played an important role in combat and his summary of him stated:

'An officer of exceptional value. Very brave and he was our best radio operator. He was also an officer with considerable military experience, who set a very good example. His conduct was exemplary: we hold him in the highest esteem'.

In addition to the Military Cross with which he had been decorated in December 1943 for his service in Corsica, Lee was awarded the *Croix de Guerre* by the French authorities in January 1946.

Lee is officially commemorated on the Memorial to the Missing 1939-1945 at Brookwood Military Cemetery in Surrey, panel 1, column 2. As well as his listing at the F Section memorial at Valençay, France, he is also remembered on the French Section memorial at the site of the former Gross-Rosen concentration camp, near Rogoźnica in what is now Poland. He is also

remembered at Lauriston Road Jewish cemetery, Hackney, near where he was born. The memorial there was funded by The Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, led by Jerry Klinger, and was arranged by Martin Sugarman, AJEX Archivist, and the United Synagogue in August 2023.

Sources: Lee's SOE personal file is TNA HS9/905/4, that of Colonna d'Istria is TNA HS9/780/5 and that of Jean Acquaviva is HS9/6/6. Genealogical details were kindly provided by Jen Hilton and Cathie Hewitt.

Paul McCue

Executive Trustee

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August 2023

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ⁱ Corsica had previously been governed by the Vichy French government, but following the Allied invasion of North Africa, Italy had occupied the island from 11 November 1942.

ⁱⁱ In total, 12 DZs were to be urgently identified and radioed to Algeria in order to prove to the resistance that the British could be relied upon. To try to meet the demand, four Halifax aircraft were temporarily deployed to MASSINGHAM from RAF Tempsford and though the first drop was made in May 1943, air supply to Corsica proved difficult due to a combination of the mountainous terrain inland and strong Italian garrison forces in the eastern coastal plain. Consequently, consignments of arms continued to be delivered by a submarine until Lee received a second drop in August 1943.

ⁱⁱⁱ Colonna d'Istria had been obliged to stay aboard the *Sybil* while it completed a patrol.