

LORD ASHCROFT'S "HERO OF THE MONTH"

Major Tony Greville-Bell DSO



BELOW: Preparations underway for Operation *Avalanche* - the main landings of the invasion of mainland Italy at Salerno which began on 3 September 1943 - as Allied troops embark at Sicily. It was in support of the invasion that Anthony Greville-Bell and his SAS were inserted behind enemy lines in Italy. (US NATIONAL ARCHIVES)

THE GREAT thing about Major Tony," said one SAS corporal, "is that he doesn't get you killed unless he absolutely has to". This was the affectionate Second World War tribute to Major Anthony Greville-Bell from one of his men of the officer who - despite being injured parachuting into northern Italy - had led a highly successful SAS sabotage team for seventy-three days behind enemy lines before a 250-mile trek back to the Allied forces.

Anthony Greville-Bell was born in Sydney, Australia, on 7 March 1920, the son of Captain W.E.G. Bell, and was educated at Blundell's School in Tiverton, Devon. After enlisting, he was commissioned into the Royal Artillery. Perhaps the best tribute to the courage and commitment of Greville-Bell

during his military career was written by Lieutenant Colonel William "Bill" Stirling, who formed 2 SAS.

In his assessment, Stirling made reference to Greville-Bell's part in Operation *Speedwell*, which took place from September to November 1943. The aim had been to target the main troop-carrying railway lines - Prato-Bologna, Florence-Bologna and Bologna-Genoa-La Spezia. Greville-Bell was to be in one of the "sticks" - small groups of men parachuted into different areas. In his stick, there were seven men; he was second-in-command, but he had to take over command when his commanding officer went missing, presumed killed or captured.

Stirling said: "Tony took part in operations in Africa, various enemy-occupied islands, and Sicily, but distinguished himself most noticeably on a classic SAS operation against the

railways in northern Italy, which was a true strategic operation in that it probably did, as was intended, alter or at least affect the course of the war.

"The Germans were holding their Armoured Reserve, consisting of four divisions, well to the north while they waited to see where the Allies would make their expected amphibious landings. Owing to a shortage of petrol and spare tank tracks they were relying on the excellent Italian railway system to get them quickly south to wherever the landings took place. Between Bologna and Florence there are only three north-south railway lines, one on each coast and the third in the centre. SAS parties were dropped in all three areas to attack these lines and deny their use to the enemy, which they did very successfully, during the weeks following the landings at Salerno.



BELOW: US troops coming ashore at Salerno in September 1943. (US NAVAL HISTORICAL CENTER)

BELOW RIGHT: A Sherman tank loaded with infantry passes through Salerno, 10 September 1943.

"As a result, by the time that the enemy Armoured Reserve began to arrive on the battlefield by road, the Allied forces were already well established and were able to defeat them in detail. General Alexander has since remarked that, had the enemy armour arrived punctually and in force, the outcome of the Salerno landings must have been in the gravest doubt.

"Tony commanded the party on the central sector. He was badly injured on the drop, but continued to lead his party and destroyed three trains, completely putting the railway out of action for nineteen days. After pausing for



Tony Greville-Bell survived a daring operation behind enemy lines in Italy, but his Army career and his personal life were never conventional. As **Lord Ashcroft** recounts in the latest of his "Hero of the Month" series, Greville-Bell was a maverick better suited to war than peace.

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a few weeks in the Tuscan mountains to raise and train an army of Italian partisans – ‘The guerrillas,’ he wrote later in his report, ‘were not all that good, but the Chianti was excellent’ – he continued south, and had the satisfaction of seeing ‘while trying to cross the road south of Florence, an apparently endless column of tanks heading for the battle, mostly on their tracks. It must have been depressing for their commander to know that with an effective track mileage of only 250 miles, they had a journey of more than 300 miles in front of them.’

“Suffering badly from near starvation and very severe weather conditions in the Apennine mountains, Tony finally led his party safely through the enemy lines and rejoined his unit, a journey of some three hundred miles.”

The mission to Italy was not without its casualties. The fate of Greville-Bell's senior officer, Captain P.H. Pinckney, who disappeared on the night that they parachuted into the country, has never been fully established. It is not inconceivable that he was captured and shot as per Hitler's *Nacht und Nebel* decree – the “night and fog” order, issued in December 1941, which led to the kidnapping and disappearance of political activists and other German “enemies” found in the occupied territories. It is estimated that around a hundred SAS personnel who fell into enemy hands during the Second World War were shot – in breach of all conventions – even though they were attired in official regimental uniform.



ABOVE: SAS personnel pictured on parade in October 1943 following the capture, behind enemy lines, of the port of Termoli in Italy. (IWM; E26182)

TOP MIDDLE: The Distinguished Service Order. The citation for Greville-Bell's award notes that “he was an inspiration to the small force under his command”. Interestingly, there is a handwritten note on it stating “No publicity to be given to this citation”. (HMP)

The following extracts are from the official “after-action report” compiled by Greville-Bell. They indicate an example of sheer courage and absolute determination to see the job through, no matter what physical hardships had to be suffered:

“Day 3: Walked again, but was in great pain, and was finished after two miles. Decided to have one more night's rest and if not able to keep up would send Daniels and Tomasso on without me.

“Day 4: Felt better and ribs beginning to knit, so I decided to carry on, though every time I fell there was an unpleasant grating noise.

“Day 5: Head now normal, took over again from Daniels ... Moved south parallel with road and railway, and went on railway to recce point of demolition. Chose tunnel which was unguarded.

“Day 6: Fixed charge 150 yards inside tunnel and retreated up mountain side. At 2205 we heard a fairly fast train approaching from north. It entered the tunnel and set off charge causing the

power lines to short circuit. We were unable to see the results, but judging by the noise, I believe the train to have crashed. No traffic on this line observed during the day. Beginning to get very hungry.

“Day 7: Moved off towards the next line ... Ribs merely hurt now, but not impossibly.

“Day 8: Found some potatoes and tomatoes to eke out our rations. Getting very weak through hunger.

“Day 10: Getting worse through lack of food. Could only make five miles this night.

“Day 12: Failed on this operation. Placed charge on the right-hand lines for southbound train. We were told quite definitely before we left that railway traffic keeps to the right. Train came down on the left line and we blew charge (pull switch) before we could see what happened. One line put out of action temporarily at least.

BELOW: The SAS in action in Italy. This image shows three heavily armed members of 2 SAS during an operation to assist Italian partisans in northern Italy. (IWM; NA25407)



Greville-Bell and Daniels suffered from snow blindness and the former suffered from frostbite because there was a hole in his boot. A week later, Daniels was severely ill with dysentery. However, they reached the German front line on the seventy-third day and passed through safely.

On 21 September 1943, Greville-Bell was awarded the DSO for his outstanding leadership and, in the words of the citation, “unfailing judgment in most difficult circumstances and inspiration to those under his command”.

After recovering from the ordeal of the Italian operations, Greville-Bell was promoted to command a squadron and was posted back to the United Kingdom



with his squadron to train the newly formed French SAS Regiments. He subsequently served on two operations in France immediately prior to, and after the invasion. As a result of two serious wounds and various injuries he was downgraded medically and transferred to Airborne Forces HQ where he served as liaison officer. Later, he was seconded to the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office where he remained for some years.

In 1949, Greville-Bell, a maverick better suited to wartime situations than peacetime ones, formed a squadron of SAS for service in Korea, but they were diverted to Malaya where they formed the nucleus of the now regular regiment of the Special Air Service, 22nd SAS. In fact, at this point, the regiment was called SAS (Malayan Scouts). However, here he blighted his career by committing the “unforgivable sin” of complaining about discipline and other issues – over the head of his CO – to General Harding.

His career slightly stagnated and his final role before leaving the Army was as CO of the Regimental HQ of the SAS

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ABOVE: A 3-inch mortar team of 2 SAS in action in support of partisans in the Alba area of Italy. (IWM; NA25411)

Regiment. Greville-Bell resigned his commission in 1956 after his wife, Diana, was killed in a car accident leaving him to bring up their two young daughters.

His civilian life, like his military one, was full and varied and he spent time in Sri Lanka where his father had worked as a tea planter before the war. Greville-Bell wrote several screenplays, three of which were made into feature films. Yet, by the late 1980s he was working as a commercial sculptor. His musical interests, which began with the flute, led to him eventually forming his own amateur orchestra so that he could play with others. Known as the Learning Orchestra, it began with ten instrumentalists but had reached almost sixty at the time of Greville-Bell's death on 4 March 2008, aged eighty-seven. At the time, he was survived by his fourth wife, Laurance Rogier.

Bill Stirling summed up his character perfectly when he said: “Tony Greville-Bell was the best type of SAS officer. He was serious about his job, enjoyed life and wanted everyone else to enjoy it as much as he did, and above all he took care of his soldiers for whom he had the greatest regard.”

ABOVE: In the Main Square of Bologna, hundreds of Italian Partisans are pictured at a special parade to mark the end of the war and during which they laid down their arms. (PRESS ASSOCIATION IMAGES)

SPECIAL FORCES HEROES

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is a Conservative peer, businessman, philanthropist and author. The story of Greville-Bell's life appears in his book *Special Forces Heroes*. For more information visit:



www.specialforcesheroes.com
Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public display at the IWM, London. For more information visit:
www.iwm.org.uk/heroes. For details about his VC collection, visit www.lordashcroftmedals.com. For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit:
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