

OPERATIONS UNDERTAKEN BY 2ND SAS REGIMENT WHILE BASED AT WIVENHOE PARK:

Operation Titanic

This was a deception operation carried out in France on the night before D-Day. Hundreds of dummy parachutists dolls, nicknamed "Ruperts" were dropped behind enemy lines to confuse the Germans.

In addition 2nd SAS, based at Wivenhoe Park, provided twelve men under the command of Captain Frederick James Fowles (Chick) and Lieutenant Norman Harry Poole to also parachute into occupied France.

This elite team were the first to set foot on French soil on June 6, 1944, landing at 12.10am. Their mission was so deadly it was codenamed Operation Titanic as they were considered unlikely to return.

Their job was to confuse the enemy - After landing these teams were to locate and open fire on the German forces, allowing some to escape in the hope they would report the parachute drops.

After three weeks, the team were eventually captured by the Germans. Trooper Merryweather received the Military Medal for his part in the operation.

Operation Wallace Hardy

Members of 2nd SAS were dropped into occupied France (Loire Valley region and Burgundy) in July 1944 and fought to stop German reinforcements reaching Normandy. Over 60 soldiers were dropped behind enemy lines with armoured jeeps. They linked up with the French Resistance and were involved in a number of battles with retreating German forces.

Operation Tombola

Also took part in Operation Tombola – attack on HQ of German mountain corp in Italy. The attack was carried out to the sound of a Scottish piper, wearing a kilt to identify the operation as British – so that reprisals would not be carried out against the local population.

Rob the SAS Dog

Below is an extract from a press article on the internet. Major Tom Burt, who was Quartermaster of the SAS at Wivenhoe Park, was the handler for Rob and I believe that after the war he may have become a resident of Wivenhoe. He is buried in the town cemetery and there is also a commemorative bench:

Rob, the parachuting SAS dog, was said to have saved the lives of countless commandos by alerting them, Lassie-style, to oncoming danger deep behind enemy lines

But the reality of his military career, for which he was decorated for gallantry and given pride of place at the Imperial War Museum in London, may have been much more mundane.

According to one of the last remaining officers from his regiment, Rob's heroic exploits were made up: Rob, he said, did little more than wag his tail and cheer up ground staff

According to his citation, Rob, officially known as War Dog No 471/322, was said to have taken part in 20 parachute jumps in raids in Italy and North Africa during the Second World War. Once on the ground, he was said to have acted as a sentry while the troops slept, waking them by licking their cheeks at the sign of any danger.

But his much celebrated reputation, which earned him the Dickin Medal for Gallantry, the animal version of the Victoria Cross, was debunked by an officer from the SAS base in Wivenhoe Park, Essex.

Prof Quentin Hughes, a former training officer who was awarded the Military Cross and Bar for a raid and subsequent escape in Italy, revealed the ruse in his autobiographical account of the SAS, Who Cares Who Wins?.

Far from doing 20 parachute drops, he said, Rob did little more than act as a companion for Tom Burt, the quartermaster for 2nd SAS.

His reputation was concocted when Rob's owners, who had lent him to the Army Veterinary and Remount Services to help the war effort, wrote asking for him back.

Burt was upset at the prospect of losing the dog, so he and Prof Hughes contrived to keep him by telling the family he was indispensable, and exaggerating his exploits.

They even had Rob sent on a flight to carry out a parachute jump but it was too windy to allow him to leave the aeroplane.

Nevertheless a letter was sent out and his owners unexpectedly informed the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals of his bravery. The charity awarded the dog a medal in January 1945.

The award, along with an oil painting and model of the collie, complete with parachute, are a highlight of The Animals' War exhibition at the museum.

Prof Hughes, who died in 2004, became an architect and academic, teaching in Malta and Liverpool. His friend of more than 30 years, Prof Simon Pepper, of the University of Liverpool, said the story was an anecdote in Prof Hughes's autobiography.

He said: "If he was still alive he would be laughing like hell to see this. He would say: 'Why didn't they talk to me? I could've saved them the embarrassment'."

The Imperial War Museum said the information was taken "in good faith" from the PDSA citation.

A spokesman said the new information was only from "one source", but the museum would be interested to hear any more evidence.

A PDSA spokesman said it also had taken the information in good faith and, as most of those who gave it were now dead, it would be hard to check.

He said: "The PDSA Dickin Medal remains the highest honour an animal can receive for service with the Armed Forces or Civil Defence units.

"It has been made on only 60 occasions. PDSA would be happy to share its 'Rob archive' with those who wish to view it."