

# “Loire Rendezvous”

by Philip E. West

## SIGNATURES

*Philip West is recognised as one of the world's finest aviation artists. Collectors of his original oil paintings span the globe, many waiting patiently for his next breathtaking canvas to appear. Self taught, Philip has won many accolades for his paintings, not the least of which was the prestigious Duane Whitney Award for Excellence at the 1997 American Society of Aviation Artists Exhibition.*

**Air Chief Marshal Sir Lewis Hodges, KCB, CBE, DSO, DFC** joined the RAF in 1937 as a Cranwell Cadet and at the outbreak of war served with 76 and 49 Squadrons flying Hampdens. One of his fellow pilots at Scampton was Guy Gibson, later of “Dambusters” fame. Having crash-landed in Occupied France in September 1940, he succeeded in evading capture and, with the help of Nancy Wake’s escape route, returned via Spain. From 1942-4 he flew Halifaxes, Hudsons and Lysanders on many hazardous SOE operations into France and other occupied countries, and for a period commanded the Squadron. He later flew similar missions with Liberators and Dakotas into Japanese Occupied Territories as commander of 357 Squadron. At one period he served in Bomber Command working as Operations Officer with ACM Arthur Harris at his HQ in High Wycombe, during the height of the bomber campaign.

**Flight Lieutenant Peter Arkell, OBE, USAF Medal Of Distinction**, joined the RAFVR in 1940 and was sent by convoy to Canada and then to Arizona for pilot training. In 1942 he was posted to 26 Squadron at Gatwick where he flew Mustangs and Spitfires on low level intruder raids and coastline photography. In 1944 he joined 161 SD (Special Duties) Squadron at Tempsford and in a double Lysander operation saw the second aircraft shot down killing the pilot and the two returning agents. Peter was then transferred with six Lysanders to India, and then flew on to Burma to 357 Squadron. Here he continued to fly dangerous Lysander operations behind the Japanese lines supplying Force 136. On his thirty-fifth mission in August 1945 he attempted to land in the mountains during a monsoon and was seriously injured. The local Burmese mountain people took good care of him and both he and his passenger were rescued by another Lysander.

**Flight Lieutenant Murray Anderson, DFC\*, US Air Medal**, flew Spitfires with No 1 PRU then moved to No 4 PRU in Algiers before returning to England and joining 542 PR Squadron at Benson. While here he brought back pictures of the “Prince Eugene” in Kiel Harbour. Having trained on Lysanders in late 1940 he was happy to move to 161 SD Squadron at Tempsford in 1943, to be re-united with his favourite aircraft. Among other difficult operations, he flew six double Lysander missions, all except one with his friend, Leslie Whittaker, who had moved from PR work with him and who was killed during an operation in May 1944. Andy’s navigational skill was obvious and on one triple operation he was able to recognise where an accompanying ‘lost’ pilot was from his description of the ground below and return him to the correct course to the pickup. He is also remembered for his records of sentimental French songs and his performances on the bagpipes. In June 1944 he transferred to 2<sup>nd</sup> TAF to fly Mustangs after D-Day.

**Flight Lieutenant R G (Bob) Large, DFC, Legion d’Honneur**, learned to fly in Scotland in 1940 and in 1941 joined 616 Squadron as part of the Tangmere Wing, commanded by the famous legless pilot Wing Commander Douglas Bader. The Squadron flew Fighter and Bomber sweeps over Northern France. The remains of Bob’s Spitfire lie at the bottom of the sea ten miles off Hythe (where he now lives) after being bounced by eighty plus ME 109Gs over the English Channel. Having learned of the activities of 161 SD Squadron he was interviewed by the CO, Wing Commander Lewis Hodges, and joined the Lysander Flight. He then flew many important missions into occupied France in single, double and a memorable treble pickup when his excuse for being late at the rendezvous was that he had had a haircut “in the firm’s time” because “it grew in the firm’s time”! After D-Day he returned to Fighter Command and later flew Meteors. (Bob’s dog, Patrick, became the first dog in the Allied Forces to fly in a jet which took place in a Meteor 3 on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1946 and is now recorded in the Guinness Book of Records!)

**Flying Officer J A (Tommy) Thomas** began his flying career at RAF Llandow as Winch Operator on target towing duties with Fairy Battles and Lysanders. He remustered to Aircrew duties as Air Gunner and qualified at Dalcross in March 1943. He then joined a Halifax crew. Following his posting to RAF Tempsford he flew a number of operations as Rear Gunner over Occupied France in Halifaxes and Hudsons. Because of his early experience with towing winches he was detached to 161 "A" Flight Lysanders for mail pick up (MPU) duties as Winch Operator on G-George. His training saved him and his pilot, Bob Large, when he reacted instantly to free a tow wire, which had fouled the elevators on their Lysander during a low practice run. He flew with thirty-one different pilots.

**Corporal Donald Dunstan** joined the RAFVR in January 1940 and was trained as a Flight Mechanic working on Fairy Battles. He then transferred to 103 Squadron, Bomber Command, on Wellingtons at Newton before joining 419 Canadian Squadron at Mildenhall until their ground force arrived. Following a Fitter 2E course at Filton and Feltwell he joined 161 Squadron at Tempsford on Lysanders. During the "Moon Period" he would often move to the forward base at Tangmere to keep the "Lizzies" airborne. He serviced the aircraft of Wing Commanders Pickard and Hodges and Flight Lieutenant Fowler and Flying Officer McCairns. He was saddened to see Flying Officer McBride depart on an operation only to be tragically lost in a burning aircraft when attempting to land in thick fog on his return.

**Nancy Wake, George Medal, Legion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre, French Resistance Medal, US Medal of Freedom**, was the most decorated servicewoman of WW 2. Shortly after the war began Nancy married a Marseilles businessman, Henri Fiocca and in 1940 served as an ambulance driver at the front before the surrender of France. Nancy then returned south and organised escape routes into Spain for evading Allied airmen. Her flat in Marseilles became a refuge for many escapers. She was arrested by the French police and interrogated. Shortly after, Nancy had to use her own escape route to reach England. Unbeknown to Nancy, her husband was later arrested and executed by the Germans.

She was then trained as an SOE agent, where her natural exuberance and vitality became obvious to her instructors. At the end of February, 1944 Nancy and a companion were dropped into the Auvergne to organise and train a large group of Maquis. She had to organise and distribute weapon and supply drops to her own and adjacent Resistance Groups. At one stage she cycled 400 km in 72 hours across the mountains to re-establish lost radio contact with London. She was involved in a number of dangerous subversive missions during which she earned the everlasting respect of 3500 members of her Maquis.

**Captain George Millar, D.S.O., M.C.** was parachuted secretly into France as an SOE agent on 1 June 1944. He was dropped north of Dijon to organise and train local Resistance groups to harass the enemy in support of the forthcoming D-Day landings in Normandy. In his incredible book, "Maquis", George tells of their many daring exploits, which included the destruction of the giant railway turntables on the important rail junction at Besancon. He also vividly describes his day-to-day survival and the disruptive SOE operations carried out on the German supply lines. George depicts with understanding, the characters of the ordinary men and women of the French Resistance who selflessly served with him to play their heroic part in the final liberation of France. "Emile" and his Maquis are still remembered in the quiet villages of the Ognon Valley.

**Major E H Van Maurik (OBE Mil)** was called up the day before the war began, and after training was commissioned into the Wiltshire Regiment. Later he was sent to North West Scotland where he trained SOE agents (including Peter Churchill) in the use of explosives, sabotage, weaponry and survival. Van then worked with the Air Liaison section at SOE's Baker Street HQ providing the operational instructions for clandestine missions into France. He often accompanied the agents to and from Tangmere for their flights by Lysander to help the Resistance Groups.

As a result of applying for a more active role in SOE's activities, Van was parachuted into France to the Maquis de l'Ain on 6 January, 1944. He then had to visit the groups in the area to assess and report on their strength and ability to support the forthcoming invasion on D-Day. Disguised as a shot down Bomber crew member (Pilot Officer Patterson) he smuggled himself into Switzerland to send his report, following which, the Maquis received a series of arms drops.

At the final victory Van was in charge of the SOE mission, which was sent to trace those agents who had been arrested by the Germans or otherwise had disappeared.

**Lise de Baissac MBE (mil), Legion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre.** With Andree Borell, Lise was one of the first two women SOE agents to be parachuted into France near Blois at Mer-sur-Loire in September 1942. She then tirelessly worked alone to form a reseau based on the flat in Poitiers, which was adjacent to the Gestapo HQ. Her lonely and arduous job was to organise landing grounds for agents and set them on their way. During 1943 she was involved in organising a number of Lysander operations, which brought in thirteen agents before the end of May and for a period she worked with Henri Dericourt. She returned to England by Lysander in August 1943 and later broke her leg when practising a parachute drop with Violette Szabo and Yvonne Baseden. She was taken by Lysander to France in April 1944 to continue her vital work. Lise eventually joined her brother, Claude, in his Scientist reseau training and arming a large number of small resistance groups in preparation for action after D-Day. Both were known to the Gestapo by reputation and had to work and travel with extreme care.

**Yvonne Baseden, MBE (mil), Legion d'Honneur (avec palme), Croix de Guerre.** Codenamed "Odette" when in the field, twenty one year old Yvonne trained with Violette Szabo and Didi Nearne. After a previously aborted flight to her region she was eventually dropped on 18 March 1944 in south west France, near Auch as a wireless operator with "Lucien" and then had to find her own way across France via Marseilles to her reseau (Scholar), north of Dijon, a dangerous four day journey. After receiving a huge arms drop for the Maquis of the Jura from 36 B-17s which took two days to complete, she and seven of her comrades gathered at a cheese store outside Dole for a celebratory lunch. Unfortunately the group was betrayed and the leader "Lucien" died and Yvonne was captured in the subsequent raid on the store. She was immediately sent to Ravensbruck Concentration Camp and was one of the only three women SOE agents to survive that terrible ordeal suffered by a total of 15 women agents.

**Francis Cammearts, DSO, Legion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre, US Medal of Freedom.** Francis was one of the outstanding figures of the French Resistance. In March 1943 he was taken near to Compiègne in a Lysander flown by Hugh Verity to take over from Peter Churchill. Through hard endeavour and tight security (he never stayed more than four nights in one place) by late summer 1944 he had formed the largest and most effective resistance group based in SE France containing about 10,000 men. In July 1944 he was joined by SOE courier Christine Granville, with whom he escaped from the slaughter of the Maquis army on the Vercors and who later saved his life by engineering his escape from Digne prison. After the Allied landings in southern France the resistance groups, which Cammearts had built up, held open the whole of the route from Cannes to Grenoble for the advancing armies. An advance expected to take ten weeks took ten days. Francis insists that the real heroes of the Resistance were the people who fed and sheltered the SOE agents, putting their families at terrible risk. He had a bearing and accent, which were noticeably English, and he was widely and affectionately known as "le grand diable anglais".

**Georges Molle. Legion d'Honneur (avec deux palmes et étoile), Croix de Guerre, Medaille de la Resistance Francaise, Medaille de Combattants Volontaires, King's Medal for Courage.** Georges worked as George Millar's aide in the Doubs. His local knowledge and influence were invaluable in organising the local Maquis group and carrying out their exploits. Together they organised and trained groups, which damaged rail communications on an important route from Germany after D-Day. Because of his exploits and reputation he and George Millar were continuously hunted by the Gestapo. At one time the two hid in the local chateau and made their escape using the village sewer. Most of his activities were centred on his house in the small village of Vieilley, in which he still lives, and the other little villages of the Ognon valley.

**Andre Gillet. President of the Association Nationale des Anciens Combattants de la Resistance (ANACR) section of Provins.** Monsieur Gillet escaped from forced labour (STO) in Germany, returned home and joined the Guerin-Buckmaster Resistance Group in his home town, Donnemarie-Dontilly. In July 1944 his group led by Capitaine Pierre Mulsant organised the landing bringing Marie-Madeleine Fourcade to commence her work in the area. "When Marie-Madeleine Fourcade's plane landed, I was on guard duty with my comrade Henri Hochand. We were on top of the hill of the Ralloy watching the road leading to Bray-sur-Seine. The aircraft landed near Monsieur Jonchery's farm (nowadays known as Bourbitou) near Donnemarie-en-Montois. After hearing the signal agreed, we met all together on the farm where we had a friendship party." As the Allies approached after the invasion the men were rounded up and imprisoned in the school because the town was a centre of resistance. Andre then had to ask his mother (who was unaware of his resistance activities) to return to their house, find his arms, grenades, ammunition and other weapons and dispose

of them down the “cabinet sous terre”! He later retrieved a rifle which he had taken from the back seat of a German army vehicle in 1940 and which he used throughout the war.

**Raymond Cassas.** Founder of the Museum of the Resistance at Blois and co-author of “The History of Resistance in Loir-et-Cher”, of which he was an active member.

**Michael Duru. President of the Museum Trust and former member of the Loir-et-Cher Resistance Group.** Organised the field for the treble Lysander pick-up, which involved Bob Large.

**Colonel Pierre Thomas. Vice President of the Museum Trust.** Army officer who became a member of the Loir-et-Cher Resistance Group and then continued his career after the war.

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*Books related to the subject of SOE.*

Verity, Hugh, **WE LANDED BY MOONLIGHT** (Crecy Books) The definitive book about Lysander operations into occupied France.

Clark, Freddie, **AGENTS BY MOONLIGHT** (Tempus)  
Tells the secret story of RAF Tempsford.

Howarth, Patrick, **UNDERCOVER** (Phoenix Press) Comprehensive review of all SOE operations and the people involved.

Fitzsimons, Peter, **NANCY WAKE** (HarperCollins)  
The story of an outstanding Agent.

Millar, George, **MAQUIS** (2nd edition Pan 1956)  
Clear, vivid picture of life of an SOE organiser in the field.

**WEB SITES**

The excellent website [www.64-baker-street.org](http://www.64-baker-street.org) provides information and links to SOE.

[www.fany.org.uk](http://www.fany.org.uk)

The First Aid Nursing Yeomanry  
(Princess Royal's Volunteer Corps)