

## Bygones

# Even now, veteran of SOE's secret war says: 'Things were done that will never be told'

The Special Operations Executive fought a secret war to help the Allies to victory. In search of answers **Andy Smart** caught up with his former French teacher, Alan Yates, himself an SOE veteran

MYSTERY has always surrounded the shadowy Special Operations Executive which played a key role in victory in the Second World War.

The brainchild of Winston Churchill, its brief was to work undercover, behind the lines, using sabotage and subversion to disrupt the enemy war machine, initially with the brief to "set Europe ablaze" but going on to affect every theatre of operations.

But, 70 years on, I was hoping to uncover some of its secrets when I met ex-SOE officer Alan Yates.

Now 96, the former Head of Languages at the Minster School where he struggled to teach me French in the early 1960s, Alan Yates lives quietly in a Southwell care home.

Yet despite his advanced years, the memory and intellect lurking behind an open, welcoming face is remarkable. I couldn't wait to hear stirring tales of great derring-do.

Before we got to the main subject, he demonstrated his amazing recall by quickly running through the form register for his first year at the grammar school.

That was in 1936. He could recall every boy, and even their nicknames.

I had high hopes for a detailed report on the activities of SOE in the Far East where Alan Yates was posted after the fall of Singapore.

A gifted linguist, particularly in French and German, he was the perfect recruit for the SOE and his first two years were spent working at a top secret signals station at Woodhouse Eaves near Loughborough, where intercepted messages were passed on to the codebreakers at Bletchley Park.

Now a museum, Bletchley Park preserves the story of Britain's code geniuses.

Among items on file are



**Discretion maintained:** Alan "Chocker" Yates now and, above right, as a young officer with the shadowy Special Operations Executive during the Second World War.

Alan Yates' notebooks from those early war years.

When the Japanese started pouring through the Far East, Mr Yates was given a commission and put on a ship heading for India.

"We were weeks at sea, zig-zagging across the Indian Ocean in appalling conditions," he recalled.

He was eventually posted to Force 136, the Far East section of SOE - a unit of around 50 men which trained locals to carry out clandestine sabotage and spying operations against the Japanese.

"Most of the time I was based in the filthiest, smelliest suburb of Calcutta," said Mr Yates, "but I was given three jobs - in China, Manipur (on the India/Burma border) and in the north west corner of Burma."

My ears pricked up. I was poised for the dark secrets of SOE. Alas, no.

"They were projects which I will never discuss," he said.

"Things were done in some of them that will never be told."

"Our main enemy was the Japanese and we covered our

main target of Burma, but also did work in French Indo-China, Siam and occupied China.

"I stayed with Force 136 for the rest of the war."

History records that operations around Manipur, which helped prevent the Japanese from taking the state capital Imphal, were crucial to Allied victory.

In China, SOE engaged in covert trading of goods and currencies, making a staggering £77 million profit to fund POW repatriation and, more interestingly, to buy local influence in the post-war period.

And in Burma SOE built up indigenous resistance organisations and guerrilla armies to harass the Japanese.

Frustratingly, Alan Yates politely refused to reveal his part in these cloak and dagger schemes.

But it is clear he was occasionally in or beyond the front line.

"On one occasion, I found out how totally illogical fear was," he said.

He was eating dinner in a bamboo hut somewhere in the Chin hills of Burma when it was attacked by Ja-



panese bombers.

"We flung ourselves to the floor of this thin, bamboo hut with no protection from the shrapnel.

"We looked like coconuts in a shy and just burst out laughing, we thought it was so funny - yet we could not have been in a more dangerous position. We laughed our heads off.

"The next day, the alarm went again and long before the siren had ceased to wail, I jumped into the bottom of a slit trench.

"I could hardly have found a safer place ... but I was scared stiff."

Variously known as the Baker Street Irregulars, after the location of its London headquarters, Churchill's Secret Army or The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare, the SOE was closed down after the war and most of its operatives returned to civilian life.

Lancashire-born Alan Yates came home to Southwell to marry Elizabeth Marjorie Merryweather and together they raised three boys, Michael, John and Peter.

Marjorie died in January. They had been married for nearly 65 years.

Alan Yates has never left his beloved Southwell and spent his career at the Minster School, teaching there until retirement in 1978.

He is remembered by colleagues and former pupils alike with affection. We knew him as 'Chocker' Yates, but he cannot explain why.

"Before I left for war duty I was known as Sonny, because I looked younger than some of the pupils.

"After the war my nickname changed to Chocker but no one knows why ... and neither do I."

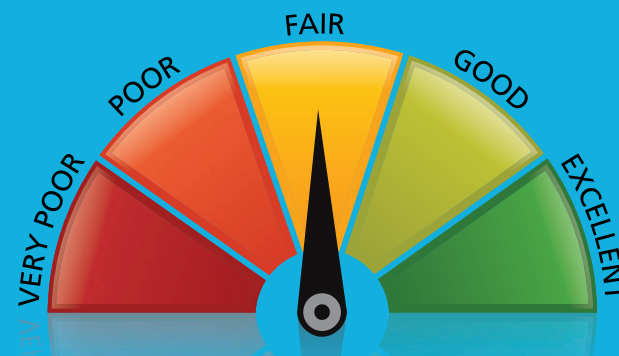


**The French teacher:** Alan Yates, centre, with a party of boys from Southwell Minster Grammar School on a visit to Paris in the early 1950s.

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