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IN DENIED AREAS:
LESSONS FROM THE BRITISH SPECIAL OPERATIONS EXECUTIVE AND JEDBURGHS

BY MAJOR MARK THOMAS AND BENJAMIN JENSEN, PHD

On the cover:

The mission of the Jedburgh teams was to supplement existing British Special Operations Executive circuits, to assist in organizing and arming the resistance, arrange supply drops, procure intelligence, provide liaison between the Allies and the Resistance, and to take part in sabotage operations. Source: Office of Strategic Services (Photo taken from Operation Jedburgh Remembrance, video, Sergeant First Class Tim Beery, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe)

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"SURPRISE, KILL, AND VANISH"

—Motto of the Jedburgh teams

Introduction

If it is true that "if it can be seen, it can be killed," then survival in the future operating environment will be harder than ever.[1] This environment will be saturated by multi-domain sensors feeding artificial intelligence-enabled command nodes that deliver near instantaneous precision fires.[2] For an advantage in future fights, Russia and The People's Republic of China continue to invest in mass surveillance and signals intelligence (SIGINT). In response, the U.S. military has developed new operating concepts, such as the Marine Expeditionary Advanced Operating Bases and Air Force Future Operating Concept, which stress dispersion and concealment.[3] As these operating concepts are validated, questions remain on how vulnerable units will be when asked to operate independently while surrounded by the enemy's sensors.

While it may seem counterintuitive, some tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) to increase survival in future denied areas can be found in the past. For example, the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) Section F and interallied Jedburghs of World War II successfully operated behind enemy lines in Nazi-occupied France. Section F agents infiltrated into France in 1941 to initiate contact with the French Resistance without any established doctrine; through trial and error, they established TTPs for surviving while surrounded by enemies. These lessons were taught to the Jedburgh teams, who infiltrated deep into France to support the allied invasion of Normandy in 1944. The Jedburghs of World War II provide a historical example of how a unit can successfully operate in a denied area, analogous to a modern police state, through proper preparation of the environment (PE) and communications security; these lessons still apply to surviving in the sensor-dominated battlefield of the future.

The first section analyzes the operating environment of Nazi-occupied France to establish it as a denied area saturated with human and technical sensors. The following section introduces both Section F and the Jedburghs, which were uniquely designed to operate in this area. The third and fourth sections demonstrate how Section F and the Jedburghs conducted PE and communications security (COMSEC) to enhance their survivability. These two sections demonstrate how Section F trial and error led to refined survival TTPs for the Jedburghs as supported by their compared casualty rates. While Section F suffered high casualty rates, the Jedburghs had remarkably low casualty rates because they benefited from Section F lessons learned, which are still applicable today. The practical PE and COMSEC TTPs used by the Jedburghs provide a successful and proven platform for units training to operate in future denied areas.

The Problem: Nazi-Occupied France

After a stunning six-week victory over the French army in 1940, Germany quickly transformed France into an authoritarian police state. Northern France was directly occupied by the Nazis while southern Vichy France was under strict German control.[4] In both areas, the Nazis quickly established a surveillance state by increasing German police, co-opting French police, restricting civil liberties, and monitoring civilian messaging.[5] A combination of specialized police, pro-state militia, and military units worked together to suppress any resistance. The French "Section des Affaires Politiques" was formed in 1941 specifically to arrest growing resistance groups known as the *Maquis*.[6] French pro-Nazi militias, such as the *Milice*, reported on French resistance and were the most despised of all. Milice officers would often join Maquis groups, posing as eager patriots while acting as double agents for the Nazis.[7] Any uncooperative French supporting the resistance was still of use to the police once they were captured and tortured until they gave up their comrades.[8] The German secret police, the Gestapo, and military police also established headquarters throughout France to better direct internal security.[9] German conventional forces stationed in France and the low countries varied throughout the occupation and reached 61 divisions totaling over 800,000 soldiers by 1944.[10] Although these units were primarily focused on external threats, they also assisted the police in larger-scale operations against the Maquis.[11] German army radio intercept companies and police radar stations employed sophisticated direction-finding (DF) equipment capable of locating unauthorized radio transmissions within 10 minutes.[12] This combination of regular and specialized security units enforced brutal and efficient control over the population.

Backed by effective security forces, the German Military Government of France, also known as the Military Administration in France or *Militärverwaltung in Frankreich*, severely limited French civil liberties. Soon after Paris was occupied, foreigners were quickly registered and supervised.[13] Natural-born French citizens were also required to carry identification papers that could be checked at random, and a strict curfew was put in place.[14] Laws could be passed by decree without any French input, and the court system was completely pliable to the Nazis.[15] French media was censored to guard against any remotely anti-Nazi sentiment, and even listening to foreign broadcasts was punishable by death.[16] To ensure no anti-Nazi sentiments were shared between people, the authorities also opened about 350,000 letters in the mail each week.[17]

The population suffered significantly. Around half of the Jewish people living in France were systemically rounded up and sent to concentration camps, and over 700,000 young Frenchmen were forcibly recruited into the Reich's war industries.[18] Mass arrests, large-scale reprisals, and summary executions were not uncommon. Altogether, over 30,000 French civilians were executed without any due process by the end of the war.[19] Even if French civilians hated the Nazis, actively aiding the resistance or even not reporting on their activities had deadly consequences for them

A French stamp issued in 1994 to commemorate the anniversary of the Maquis Resistance. (Photo: Adobe Photostock)

and their families. France's new sprawling security apparatus created a black box where the Allies were unable to effectively gather information or generate combat power from the Maquis with their existing capabilities.

The Answer: SOE and Jedburghs

After the German Blitzkrieg expelled the British Army from the continent and forced France to surrender in 1940, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had limited options to regain the strategic initiative. The German military had an army that was three times the size of the British army, and it was threatening to invade.[20] To help counter the hostile German threat away from the home islands, the British fell back on a tradition of enabling resistance forces against a common enemy.[21] Classic examples of the British enabling foreign, irregular formations include fighting Napoleon alongside Spanish guerrillas and T.E. Lawrence coordinating with the Bedouins against the Ottoman Empire in World War I. However, in those cases, the British were able to establish a secure base and employ field armies to directly support their irregular partners. The powerful German army, a submarine threat, and internal security meant this was not immediately possible in occupied France after the summer of 1940. A new and unconventional organization was needed.

The SOE, tasked by Churchill in 1940 to "set Europe ablaze," established Section F to enable the French Resistance to disrupt the Nazi war machine.[22] Section F agents were task organized into groups of three consisting of an officer in command, a radio operator, and an executive officer in charge of supply.[23] These agents would infiltrate into France and organize the Maquis into resistance networks referred to as circuits. SOE Section F recruits came from a broad background, including military and civilians, most of whom had some existing ties to France.[24] Although these early agents were undoubtedly courageous, they were also inexperienced, and there was no doctrine on how to conduct these types of operations. Of roughly 400 Section F agents (the exact number is unknown) who infiltrated into France, 91 were killed while 25 were captured and later escaped—placing their total casualty rate at approximately 25 percent.[25] It should be noted that while many casualties were preventable, some were not. Operating behind enemy lines is inherently dangerous. Figure 1 shows that out of 55 Section F circuits established between May 1941 and January 1944, only 21 would survive until June 6, 1944—D-Day. As SOE casualties mounted, lessons were quickly learned and disseminated to a new American organization: the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS).

Leading up to World War II, the U.S. had no organization directly tasked to gather intelligence and coordinate with resistance groups. President Franklin D. Roosevelt realized this strategic shortfall and created the Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) on June 13, 1941, which was the forerunner to modern U.S. Special Operations and the Central Intelligence Agency.[26] Early in the war, the OSS provided limited support to resistance movements in smaller theaters in North Africa, the Balkans, and Nordic countries, but its biggest contribution would be in the liberation of France.[27]

As preparations began for an invasion into France in 1943, the OSS French section and the SOE combined to form Special Forces Headquarters (SFHQ) under the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), which led Operation OVERLORD.[28] One of SFHQ's main contributions to SHAEF was the Jedburgh teams, who were tasked to infiltrate deep behind German lines and coordinate the Maquis. The Jedburghs were task organized similarly to the SOE Section F teams, with of an officer in charge, an executive officer, and a radio operator.[29] These combined teams had a mixture of French, British, and American soldiers specially assessed, selected, and trained for this mission. Aside from being fluent in French, Jedburgh team members were assessed on their ability to stay calm under pressure, act independently, and work with people of different backgrounds.[30] After passing assessment and selection, the Jedburghs trained on a wide variety of military tasks and learned how to survive in denied areas surrounded by the enemy. This training was directly informed by the mistakes and lessons learned from the early Section F agents.[31]

Once the Jedburghs infiltrated into France, right after D-Day, their training inspired by their SOE forerunners proved effective. Of the 273 Jedburghs who parachuted into France, 17 were killed,

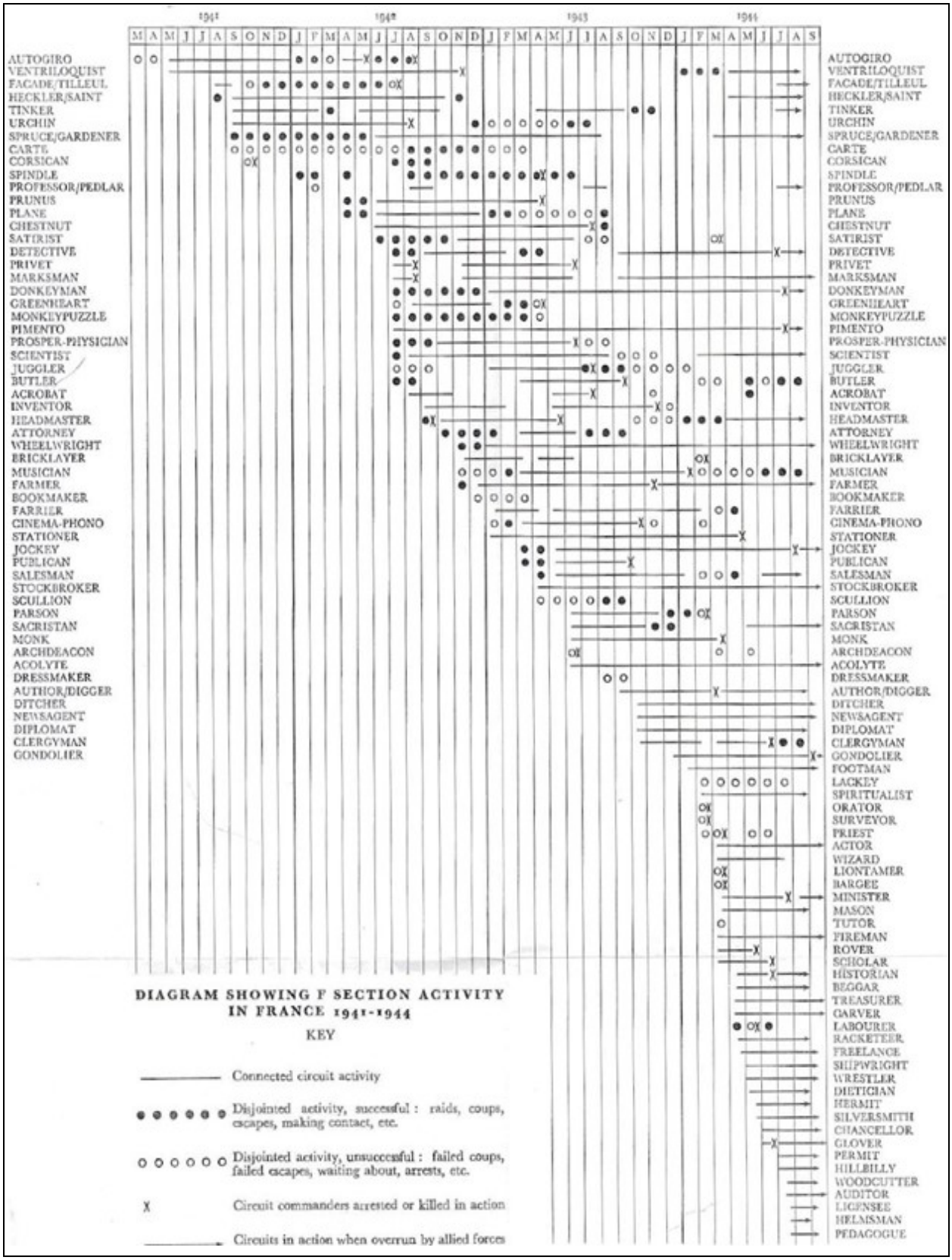

Figure 1. Summary of British Special Operations Executive French circuits. Source: M.R.D. Foot, *SOE in France* (Her Majesty's Stationary Service, 1966), Appendix H.

and two were captured and later rescued for a casualty rate of 7 percent—less than one third of the Section F casualty rate.[32] Aside from simply surviving behind enemy lines, the Jedburghs also proved incredibly effective at disrupting German forces.

The Jedburghs enabled the French Resistance to destroy over 800 strategic targets and aid in the capture of over 20,000 Germans.[33] The relatively low casualties compared to the significant damage caused, intelligence gathered, and flank areas secured made the Jedburgh operation an incredible economy of force mission. The SHAEF assessed that the French Resistance, assisted by the Jedburghs, delayed Germans from counterattacking the Normandy beachhead by a critical four weeks.[34] In a memorandum to SFHQ, Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower stated:

> *I consider that the disruption of enemy rail communications, the harassing of German road moves and the continual and increasing strain placed on the German war economy and internal security services throughout occupied Europe by the organized forces of resistance, played a very considerable part in our complete and final victory.*[35]

The Jedburghs, taught by the SOE, established the foundation for modern special operations by demonstrating how a small force of highly trained soldiers can work by, with, and through an existing resistance to support common military objectives. Aside from just lineage, SOF and others in the military can still draw upon timeless lessons from the Jedburghs on how to operate successfully in denied areas.

Preparation of the Environment

Successful preparation of the environment allowed the Jedburgh teams to safely infiltrate into France and integrate with the French Resistance. Critical PE tasks included establishing contact with resistance groups, assessing their capabilities, and facilitating link up for follow-on special forces.[36] Common throughout these tasks was the requirement to assess who can be trusted.

Section F took the lead in assessing the various groups making up the Maquis starting in March 1941, when the first Section F agent parachuted into central France.[37] Assessing someone's motives isn't always straightforward, and Section F didn't codify a secure method of vetting resistance members until November 1943.[38] Section F agents were encouraged to recruit people for specific jobs, initiate them slowly into the group by conducting a series of tasks, be wary of eager members who approached them out of the blue, and even discourage potential recruits in order to find those clearly committed.[39] These instructions may seem like common sense, but they took time to precisely standardize, and agents had to balance the need for security with the pressure to get results. Mistakes were made

Every team had at least one officer and a radioman, but team sizes varied from two to four men. Source: Office of Strategic Services. (Photo still retrieved from Operation Jedburgh Remembrance, video, Sergeant First Class Tim Beery, U.S. Special Operations Command Europe)

One of the most famous Jedburghs was William “Berkshire” Colby, who would later become Director of the CIA. Colby (shown standing) leading OSS Jedburgh Team as they prepare for mission. (Photo: “Surprise, Kill, Vanish: The Legend of the Jedburghs,” Central Intelligence Agency, News and Stories, 2015)

early on but improved in time to train the Jedburghs.[40]

A tragic omission in the SOE doctrine was the need to reassess resistance members multiple times. There appears to be an assumption that once a resistance member was recruited, they could always be trusted.[41] The toll of Nazi double agents who infiltrated the Section F circuits was devastating. Of the 116 Section F casualties, 48 (approximately 40 percent) were directly caused by German double agents.[42] The 1943 SOE syllabus also specified the importance of compartmentalization and cutouts so that the compromise of one resistance member would not disintegrate the entire circuit.[43] Sadly, these measures were not readily practiced early on.

Once resistance members could be assessed, vetted, and ultimately recruited, they had to be trained in a variety of paramilitary tasks; perhaps the most important of these was the reception of follow-on forces.

Twenty-three Section F agents (approximately 20 percent) were killed or captured after a comrade was arrested and forced to betray the circuit.[44] The importance of trust and compartmentalization was passed onto the Jedburghs, who primarily had direct contact with a vetted nucleus of resistance leadership.[45] Although a few Jedburgh teams had to relocate due to arrested resistance members or double agents, they were all able to escape capture.[46] Section F had successfully created trusted, compartmentalized leadership nodes for the Jedburghs to link up with.

Once resistance members could be assessed, vetted, and ultimately recruited, they had to be trained in a variety of paramilitary tasks; perhaps the most important of these was the reception of follow-on forces. Section F trained their circuits on how to properly prepare a drop zone, emphasizing site location, markings for the aircrew, and security. The Maquis were instructed to gather supplies immediately, destroy any evidence of the drop, and have a trusted safe house within one mile of the drop zone.[47]

Infiltration is typically the most dangerous phase of an operation, and it surely was for Section F: 14 Section-F agents (approximately 12 percent) were captured immediately upon dropping into France.[48] Almost all were forced to go in "blind," without a reception committee waiting for them.[49] Even worse, one of the officers in charge of coordinating these infiltrations, Henri Dericourt, turned out to be a double agent. Dericourt was a French pilot who was quickly recruited into the SOE with insufficient vetting.[50] He was tasked to organize air infiltrations into central France and provided information to the Gestapo on each drop. Sometimes agents were simply followed afterward, other times they were arrested as soon as they landed.[51] Before agents got suspicious enough to detain him, Dericourt was directly involved in the collapse of the PROSPER circuit and the

Prior to boarding a 'Carpetbagger' B-24 Liberator drop aircraft, Jedburgh teams suit up in England, August 1944. (Photo: Office of Strategic Services)

deaths of four Section F agents.[52] Dericourt's betrayal offers a cautionary tale of the deadly ramifications of insufficient vetting and lax infiltration planning.

Fortunately, Section F agents were able to determine which Maquis members could be trusted, and they organized reception committees in time for the Jedburgh infiltrations in June 1944. Almost all Jedburgh teams were received by Section F-organized resistance circuits.[53] Of the 91 Jedburgh teams that parachuted into France, only one was compromised during infiltration. Team Jacob dropped into Eastern France on August 17, 1944, during a massive German sweeping operation of the area.[54] The SOE Section F agents successfully prepared the environment for the Jedburghs by painstakingly validating resistance groups to receive them. After successful infiltration and link up, the Jedburghs then had to communicate back to SFHQ to truly be effective.

Communications Security

Each Jedburgh team practiced nontechnical communications security to coordinate their actions while avoiding detection. The Jedburghs limited their exposure while transmitting and relied on nontechnical encryption to exchange messages to avoid Nazi SIGINT teams. Again, the Jedburghs benefited from the harsh lessons learned from early Section F missteps. Of the 116 Section F casualties, 12 (approximately 10 percent) were compromised by Nazi DF teams. Once a transmitter and agent were captured, they were routinely forced to continue sending messages by the Gestapo to compromise other circuits.[55] By 1944, transmitting equipment and TTPs had adapted in time to train the Jedburghs.[56]

As the institutional experience of the SOE matured, Section F prioritized unpredictability. In 1941, SOE Section F

agents transmitted and received traffic from a fixed site and would even sleep right next to their radios.[57] By 1944, Section F favored rotating between multiple hidden sites to exchange message traffic. Transmitting and receiving were done at separate sites with the equipment cached there, allowing agents to move around without compromising equipment. Sentries were posted outside each site to provide early warning.[58] Rather than having agents pass traffic at separate individual times, SOE headquarters discovered it was more effective to transmit and receive traffic in "bursts" at set intervals. This approach seems counterintuitive, but the massive signal traffic flooded DF sensors so the Nazis could not triangulate a single location.[59] To further frustrate Nazi SIGINT teams, Section F developed increasingly efficient nontechnical encryption methods.

By 1944, Section F had developed efficient nontechnical encryption to protect message traffic and verify agents were not compromised. Part of the reason agents slept next to their radios early on was because receiving and encrypting messages through Morse code could take an entire day.[60] A longer transmission, receiving, and deciphering window made it easier for DF teams to find the agent. In 1943, the SOE developed the one-time pad to increase brevity and encryption.[61] Each pad was a piece of silk that had a unique alphanumeric code that could only be decrypted by a corresponding one-time pad on the other end. After a successful transmission, the agents would burn their pads.[62] In the contemporary example in Figure 2, the "keyword" would be on the silk pad to be burned after each message. This meant that even if the Nazis captured the pads, they couldn't tell what message was passed or use them to decrypt future messages.

> **Jedburgh teams successfully implemented the nontechnical COMSEC measures inherited from their SOE Section F instructors. Not a single Jedburgh team member was compromised from Nazi DF teams.**

The only way for the Germans to break this system was to capture a Jedburgh and force him to transmit on their behalf. To protect against this threat, the SOE and later the Jedburghs developed security checks for each message. Jedburgh teams were required to provide a memorized, nonsensical response to a password.[63] For example, if prompted with, "How is the weather there?" they would respond, "My car is out of gas." To further prove they were uncompromised, Jedburghs included a security number and date and then omitted specific letters in the messages. If they were compromised, they were instructed to add a specific, innocuous word in the traffic.[64] Early Section F agents may have been too lax about COMSEC, but SFHQ were not taking any chances. For example, in their post-mission report, Jedburgh Team George complained that their numerous requests for resupply were ignored because they did not include the proper security checks.[65] In

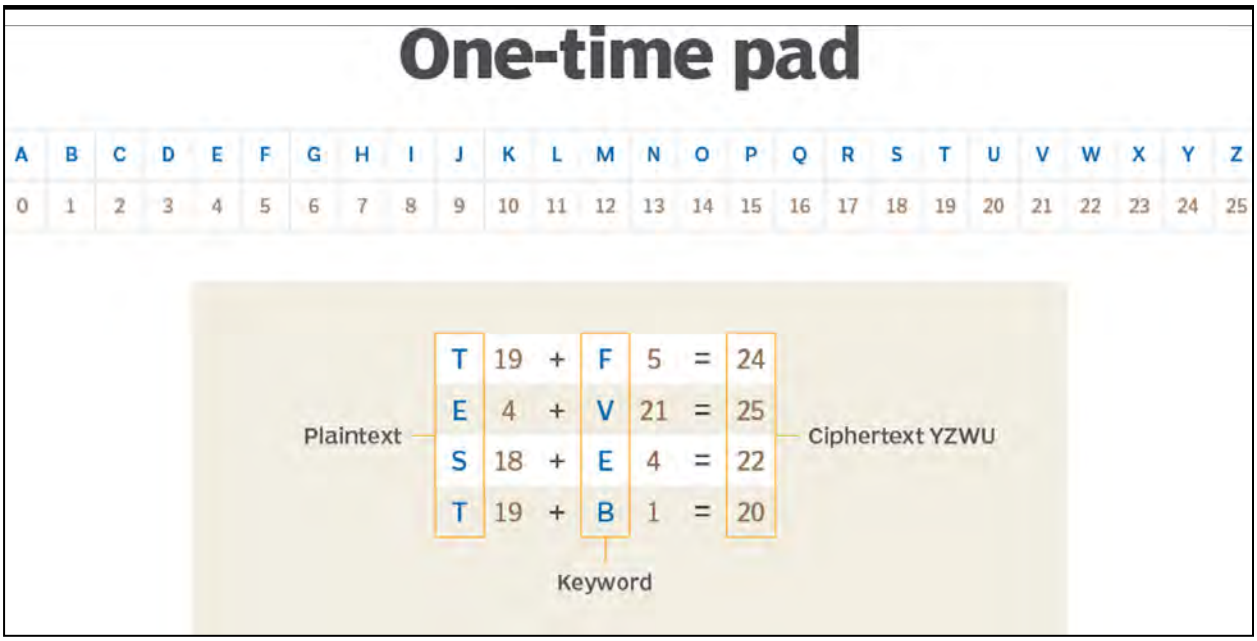

Figure 2. Contemporary One-Time Pad Example. Source: Andrew Froelich, "Definition: One-Time Pad" (January 2022).

defense of SFHQ, they were simply following security protocols informed by early Section F agents.

Jedburgh teams successfully implemented the nontechnical COMSEC measures inherited from their SOE Section F instructors. Not a single Jedburgh team member was compromised from Nazi DF teams. However, all three members of Jedburgh Team Augustus were executed when caught at a German checkpoint with their radio equipment.[66] It is easy to second-guess Team Augustus's decision to travel through a checkpoint at all, especially with compromising equipment, but security protocols are sometimes at odds with speed and operational requirements. Nevertheless, Team Augustus would have been advised to cache their transmitter before risking travelling on the roads.

While the SOE and OSS embraced nontechnical encryption, the Nazis placed all their confidence in their Enigma encryption–decryption device, which the British Ultra project compromised by early 1940.[67] Many Allied leaders credited breaking the Enigma machine as a key contribution to their victory over the Germans.[68] After breaking the Enigma, the Allies could track submarines to protect their convoys crossing the Atlantic.[69] The renowned army commander, George S. Patton even planned his Army's movements based on Nazi-intercepted signals.[70] The German espionage networks fared no better. Ultra codebreakers intercepted message traffic between German spies in Britain and their headquarters as early as December 1940.[71] British counterintelligence, MI5, used Ultra SIGINT to capture German spies and turn them into effective British double agents.[72] The German blind faith in their technical encryption serves as a warning for sound COMSEC.

SOE Section F, first tasked to link up with the Maquis in 1940, established fundamental survival TTPs for the Jedburghs infiltrating into the same areas in June 1944. The Jedburghs survived in denied areas through proper preparation of the battlefield to build vetted resistance networks and nontechnical communications security practices. Their relatively low casualty rate of 7 percent (compared to Section F's casualty rate of 25 percent) proves the efficacy of these TTPs and the dangers of not following them. Table 1 classifies the mechanism for each casualty.

Comparing casualty rates of units, especially unique ones, is never straightforward. One could argue that occupied France prior to the Jedburghs arriving after D-Day was inherently more dangerous, meaning the Jedburghs would have survived at higher rates regardless of which TTPs they inherited. This counterargument breaks down upon further analysis. If anything, France was an even more dangerous place in the summer of 1944. As the Nazis realized their homeland was now threatened, they brutally stepped up their repression of the resistance.[73] Recall that Jedburgh Team Jacob was captured while infiltrating into a massive German army counterinsurgency sweeping operation. Aside from improving casualty rates, these TTPs pass the common-sense test when thinking about survivability. For this reason, PE and nontechnical COMSEC similar to

Table 1. SOE Section F Agents and Jedburghs Killed in Action

Mechanism	SOE Section F (approximately 400 agents)	Jedburghs (273 soldiers)
Signal intelligence	12	
Double agent	48 (12 set up for capture on infiltration)	
Given up by prisoner of war	23	
Reported on by civilian	10	
Infiltration – parachutes failed		2
Infiltration – bad intelligence	2	3 (Team Jacob)
Killed in battle	4	9
Captured at German checkpoint	4	3 (Team Augustus)
Found in German searches	11	1
Illness or accident	2	1
Total	**116**	**19**
Casualty Rate	**Approximately 25 percent**	**7 percent**

Source: Section F data from Martin Mace and John Grehan, Unearthing Churchill's Secret Army: *The Official List of SOE Casualties and Their Stories (*Pen & Sword Military, 2012).; Jedburgh data from Lt. Col (Ret.) Will Irwin, *The Jedburghs: The Secret History of the Allied Special Forces* (PublicAffairs, 2005).

what the Jedburghs employed are still taught in places like the Special Forces Qualification Course. However, these skills have likely atrophied after 20 years of fighting nonpeer adversaries.

Conclusion

The security practices learned from Section F and implemented by the Jedburghs are still practical today, and possibly more so. As mass surveillance becomes more ubiquitous, units must sharpen their skills for developing trusted human infrastructure and protecting their communications. Units must continuously assess and reassess partners working alongside forward-deployed forces. Soldiers with language skills and regional expertise, like the Jedburghs, are critical for thorough assessment. Even conventional forces not directly tasked with setting up resistance networks still typically rely on foreign labor for their logistical support, which provides a vector for foreign intelligence. For COMSEC, units should avoid single static communications sites, limit their time transmitting and receiving, consider the use of mass bursts to overwhelm sensors, and employ their own nontechnical encryption. The only way to make these survival practices stick is to codify and routinely train them against sophisticated opposing forces. These practices take time and can be frustrating when they come at the expense of speed. However, the Section F casualties from 1941 to 1944 prove the risks of complacency are high.

The unofficial Special Force wing unit patch was worn by the Jedburghs. This insignia was also worn by some Operational Group Teams in France. Source: Office of Strategic Services.

Acronym List

COMSEC - communications security

DF - direction finding

MI5 - Directorate of Military Intelligence, Section 5

OSS - Office of Strategic Studies

PE - preparation of the environment

SFHQ - Special Forces headquarters

SHAEF - Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force

SIGINT - surveillance and signals intelligence

SOE - The British Special Operations Executive, also Special Operations Enterprise

TTP - tactics, techniques, and procedures

Notes

1 "If it can be seen, it can be hit, if it can be hit, it can be killed" was a maxim of the Army's 1980's AirLand Battle Concept, *AirLand Battle-Future: Doctrine for the 1990's and Beyond* (Washington, D.C.: Association of the United States Army, 1990),

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