

PRESS CUTTINGS

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OBITUARIES

Michael Lees

MICHAEL LEES, who has died aged 70, distinguished himself as a Special Operations Executive officer in Yugoslavia in the Second World War and latterly became an outspoken champion of the Serbian cause.

Following his wartime service as a British liaison officer attached to the Mihailovich Royalist Chetnik movement — with which he carried out extensive railway sabotage — Lees waged a vociferous campaign to keep attention focused on Britain's lamentable abandonment of Mihailovich in favour of Tito.

He subsequently accumulated evidence of the wartime suppression of his and other officers' despatches about the right-wing leader from Yugoslavia, and put his case strenuously in a book, *The Rape of Serbia: The British Role in Tito's Grab for Power 1943-1944* (1990).

Lees's passionate protection of the Serbian interest made him a natural choice as a television pundit. In a recent BBC2 *Timewatch* programme on Tito, he insisted that the Marshal did not worry about German reprisals against civilians.

He countered charges that Mihailovich was a Nazi collaborator, with evidence that Tito's Partisans sought a deal with the Germans for a free hand to attack the Chetniks in Serbia; in return, he claimed, they received help in resisting Allied landings in Yugoslavia.

Lees also expressed his views in a number of trenchant letters to this newspaper. "None of the Yugoslav peoples wanted Communism," he wrote, "least of all the individualist Serbs. It was forced upon them in a civil war by Josip Broz Tito — a Croat."

It was typical of Lees that he always pronounced the latter word to rhyme with "goat".

A grandson of Sir Elliott Lees, 1st Bt. MP, of South Lytchet Manor, Dorset, Michael Lees was born on May 17 1921. His sister Dolores ("Dodo") Bennett, who died last year, also had an adventurous war: she was twice awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Young Michael was educated at Ampleforth and followed his father into the Dorset Yeomanry. At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 he was drafted to India, where he wangled his way into the Parachute Brigade.

He went on to serve in Egypt, and one day early in 1943 was in the bar at the Shepherds Hotel in Cairo, when he heard a drunken staff officer talking of the activities of "the twee cap boys" to a girl friend.

Lees duly made his way to "MO4" — as SOE in Cairo was then known — and talked his way into the Yugoslav section. Briefed by Major Basil Davidson — "a good enough imitation of a regular soldier" — he was dropped into Yugoslavia carrying a brown-paper-covered volume of Serbo-Croat grammar.

When in late 1944 Roy Farran asked Charles Mackintosh, then commanding Special Forces in Florence, to sound out British liaison officers in the Parma, Reggio and Modena areas on his proposal to drop in some 50 SAS men, the



Lees: Mihailovich man

only positive response came from Reggio where the "wild man" Lees reigned.

Lees' pooh-poohed objections that SAS intervention would invite German retribution. He concentrated instead on the advantages of a lift for Partisan morale, and signalled: "Come on in."

At their first encounter "this dynamic, mountainous man" impressed Farran greatly. "Mike Lees arrived on a big brown mare," he recalled. "He was a huge man with excited, urgent eyes. In all the time I knew him he was never one to waste a minute."

Lees's first words were: "Have lots of targets for you." He then dismounted and led Farran along an icy track to his base at Secchio. On arrival they were welcomed by Lees's personal bodyguard of selected Partisans — big, brawny men who called themselves the "Goufa Nera" or "Black Bats".

After drinking copious quantities of grappa with the local Italian Partisan leader, Farran and his men were fully accepted, and negotiations were rounded off with Partisan songs. Lees sang his own marching song, too, which Farran recalled turned on a cow "kicking Nelly in the belly in the barn".

Farran would later stress that he had no reservations about Lees's value. He rated him "the best Partisan liaison officer in the whole of Italy".

But, as with his earlier exploits in Yugoslavia, Lees's activities in Italy involved him in controversy. He was criticised for turning a blind eye to orders that he postpone the Villa Rossi operation in Albinea — a message he did not receive — and for acting irresponsibly.

As Lees insisted forever after, he would have welcomed such an order because he was "ill at the time and in bad shape to march and to fight". Malaria, contracted in Yugoslavia two years before, had returned.

Possibly this matter contributed to the extraordinary decision not to award Lees with a DSO, or even an MC. Nor was he promoted from captain to major.

The attack on the German HQ, originated by Lees and led by Farran, must rate as one of the most ambitious and finely tuned operations carried out by resistance forces. One hundred men raided an HQ guarded by 300 troops.

Lees had no illusions but that, other than a 20-strong SAS component, his force was a "motley lot" of Russian deserters, some French, a Spaniard, a Yugoslav and Italian Partisans.

Nevertheless Lees's preliminary reconnaissance, according to Farran, was of such a high standard that the success of the operation was scarcely in doubt.

On that March night in 1945, as Lees rushed the villa accommodating two German generals and their staff, who were controlling the whole front from Bologna to the coast, the air rang out not only with the sound of machine-gun fire but also the skirl of pipes.

Despite Lees's protestations that it might bring complications, Farran had enlisted a piper, insisting that the effect on German morale of hearing the pipes 50 miles behind the lines would far outweigh any disadvantages.

Once inside the villa, Lees was attacked by a German soldier. He pressed his Sten gun into the man's stomach and killed him, then raced up the stairs, in the hope of finding the generals.

Hit again, Lees fell, and recalled, "I moved my hand down and clutched something that came away. It was a red beret drenched in blood and I pushed the dead body of its owner aside."

Inspired by the pipes, which were still playing, Lees roused himself and managed to crawl to a door. He was helped out of the villa just before it went up in flames. Italian Partisans and two SAS men dragged Lees to a farm barn, where he discovered he had been wounded in several places.

Then began an agonising journey. He was eventually lifted out by a captured Fieseler Storch, after a 30-mile drive through enemy checkpoints in an ambulance accompanied by an Italian Partisan doctor dressed in German uniform.

After the war Lees went into business; in 1950 he joined a firm which operated in Argentina and East Africa. Twenty years later his wartime injuries caught up with him and he returned to Dorset. Thereafter he divided his time between there and Co Cork, where he farmed.

In 1949 Lees was made a freeman of the city by the Reggio Emilia council; and in 1985 he was jointly honoured with Farran by the council of Albinea. In that same year he published his first book about his experiences, *Special Operations Executed*.

Last autumn Lees and his wife — the former Gwen Johnson, whom he had married in 1944 when she was an SOE FANY officer in Italy — visited the beleaguered Serbian enclave of Krajina, whose foreign minister had translated *The Rape of Serbia* for publication there. He had two daughters.

The announcement of Lees's death described him as "a devoted friend of Serbia".