

Small report for Uta by Tony Page about his visit in Bisingen on Sunday -
September 6, 2015_____!

Well, where did it all begin?

I am 57 years of age, British and my mother was a history teacher. As I grew up - of course in a world before the Internet existed - questions were answered by my being given a book and told to 'look it up'. This I enjoyed immensely and I learned how to undertake basic research. To my parents' horror, I was obsessed with motorcycles, British motorcycles. I saved up my money earned by doing after-school and weekend jobs and, at age 16, bought a 750cc Norton. My parents were absolutely horrified, convinced I would meet an untimely end. I did well at school and opted to join the military - I enlisted in the Royal Marine Commandos. The Royal Marines are part of the Royal Navy so I fully expected to 'travel the world'. Instead, initially anyway, I spent a year in Northern Ireland! This was a dangerous time (late 1970s) and was very, very hard. After Northern Ireland I spent some time in Oman and whilst there trained with various groups of UK Special Forces. One of these soldiers recommended I apply for a posting with 'BRIXMIS' in Germany. I had never heard of BRIXMIS but followed it up and discovered that there was a small group of British military personnel based in the GDR (East Germany.)



The British Commanders'-in-Chief Mission to the Soviet Forces in Germany (BRIXMIS) was a military liaison mission which operated in the GDR throughout the Cold War. It existed from 1946, shortly after the end of the Second World War, until the eve of the reunification of Germany in 1990. It was created by an agreement to exchange military missions, the stated object of BRIXMIS - and the Soviet equivalent in the British Zone: SOXMIS - was 'to maintain Liaison between the Staff of the two Commanders-in-Chief and their Military Governments in the Zones'.

What this actually meant was that a staff of up to a maximum of 31 British soldiers were based in the Mission House in Potsdam and had passes allowing freedom of travel and movement (except for certain restricted areas) throughout the GDR. We wore our British military uniforms, and drove around in clearly marked identifiable vehicles - Range Rovers, Mercedes G-Wagons and Opel Senators. We were unarmed and had no radios; instead we carried notebooks and pencils, tape recorders and Leica cameras. Each 'Tour' lasted eleven months and although never openly stated, this liaison role also presented an ideal opportunity for the gathering of military intelligence through reconnaissance and surveillance and the occasional 'borrowing' of military materiel. This opportunity was fully exploited by both sides. BRIXMIS was ideally placed to 'test the temperature' of Soviet intentions from its

privileged position behind the Iron Curtain. However, and perhaps more importantly, it offered a channel for communication between West and East via its secondary but significant role of liaison - the initial reason for its establishment.

I did three such Tours.

Part of our job was to try and discover what was being stored in the various former WW2 bunkers and underground factories close to the Inner German Border, plus the large former tunnel systems dotted around East Germany. To do this we would lay in wait for the supply trains and vehicle convoys, photograph them and list the details of what was being taken underground.

I was fascinated by these underground sites and was surprised at how many of them there were. I spent my free time researching the histories of such places and quickly learned that the Nazis had used forced labourers to build these installations. My amateur research all went into an ever-growing notebook (remember, this was the early 1980s so no Internet) and my map of Germany (both East and West) was covered with pins denoting 'sites of interest'. My three BRIXMIS Tours were not concurrent; in between each Tour I was assigned to other world-wide operations, including the Falklands Conflict.

During my time in the Falklands in 1982 I operated with SAS (Special Air Service – UK Special Forces) soldiers. I became friendly with two such soldiers who, after the conflict was over, invited me to their Hereford base (HQ). Whilst there I saw photos depicting SAS soldiers marching in a parade 'somewhere in France'. I was intrigued, as SAS soldiers are very secretive and *never* march in parades. My questions were answered in much the same way as my mother - I was told to 'look it up'. But how? SAS operations are covert (secret) and are simply never discussed, even to Royal Marines! However, I did 'look it up' and discovered that back in 1944 (August to October) a small unit of British SAS Commandos were parachuted into the Vosges Mountains near a tiny village called Moussey in the Rabodeau Valley to attack German convoys heading north west after D-Day. The Germans quickly became aware of their presence and conducted large scale operations to locate and destroy the SAS unit.

The SAS's aggressive patrolling, sabotage attacks and firefights convinced the Germans that they were up against a much larger force than there actually was. The Germans, unable to locate the SAS base, were aware that they could not be operating without the assistance of the local population and to gain information about the location of the SAS camp, all the male residents of Moussey between the ages of 16 and 60, a total of 210 men, were arrested. After being interrogated they were transported to Natzweiler-Struthof Concentration Camp, from which only 70 returned after the war.

The SAS Regiment never forgot this. Nobody had informed the Germans where the SAS were hiding and many villagers took enormous risks to assist and feed the British soldiers. For this, Moussey and nearby villages lost a huge percentage of their menfolk.

The photograph I had seen in the SAS base was of the present day soldiers marching...in Moussey.

I simply had to go there. I needed to see this tiny village that had given so much to further the cause of freedom in the face of extreme risk.

I made the first of what was to be many, many visits to Moussey on my motorcycle and over the years struck up friendships with some of the villagers, a few of whom had experienced the wartime activities involving the SAS. In 2009 I accompanied one of the WW2 SAS soldiers - Len Owens - and his family for what was to be his last visit o Moussey. The villagers arranged a huge welcome for Len and there were parades and displays by the French military. A small group of current SAS soldiers joined us there and great kindness was shown to us all by the villagers.

It was at this time that I met Gerard Villemin, a local Moussey resident whose father was one of those deported for refusing to divulge details of the SAS camp. Gerard had never met his father...

Gerard organises an association dedicated to the memory of those deported from the Rabodeau Valley (see <http://www.resistance-deportation.org/>) and keeps in touch with all those interested via regular postings on the website.





Earlier this year (2015) I read in one of Gerard's updates that it had been discovered that some of the Moussey and Rabodeau Valley deportees had been transferred from KZ Natzweiler-Struthof to various subcamps south of Stuttgart. Apparently a Register (Namen Buch) had been found which listed all the KZ inmates and their fates, including to which subcamp(s) they were sent. Through further basic research and reading I learned a little about the *Unternehmen Wüste* (in English: Operation Desert) - a desperate last-ditch German attempt in the dying days of WW2 to extract much-needed oil from shale rock in the Swabian Hills around the Bisingen area.

Despite my ever-growing note book (now on computer of course) on WW2 underground sites and associated concentration camps, work camps, sub camps etc., I had never heard of this 'Operation Desert'. I needed to know all about it, especially as it concerned the families of Moussey and my French friend Gerard.

I planned a trip, by motorcycle of course, from England over to the 'Operation Desert area' in late August 2015 intending to spend a week exploring and, hopefully, finding some traces of what had happened in the dark days of late 1944 through to May 1945...

As is customary for such trips, it is all in the preparation: Perfect Preparation Prevents Poor Performance. I trawled the Internet for information and began printing out a large amount of material concerning 'Desert', checked through my KZ files and records and finally was ready for The Trip. I marked all the sites I intended to find (not knowing whether there was in fact anything left to be seen) on my large-scale map and consulted my list of KZ locations to see if there were any on my route or close by.

There was: KZ Vaihingen-Enz.

So, fortuitously, on a Sunday afternoon I arrived at the KZ museum at Vaihingen-Enz on my motorcycle to find it open.

The exhibition was extremely interesting for me and the (English speaking) guide Brigitta Isermeyer was so very helpful. She also took me to the tunnel air-raid shelter and the cemetery, neither of which I would have found by myself if the exhibition room had been closed. But luckily it was a Sunday and the exhibition building was open.

After a thorough visit lasting a couple of hours, I showed Brigitta my print outs regarding 'Desert' and she suggested I visit Bisingen and meet Uta Hentsch who, she assured me, would be very pleased to show me around the town and take me to the various 'Desert' sites connected to the last eight months of WW2. She kindly telephoned Uta and we arranged to meet the following day at noon at the KZ cemetery at Bisingen.

The next morning I met Uta and so began a fascinating day in Bisingen.

Uta spent all afternoon patiently explaining the whole doomed project and taking me to all of the sites in Bisingen connected to the last eight months of WW2. I asked questions constantly as we took the circular hillside walk around Bisingen visiting the KZ cemetery, the former concentration camp area itself, site of the oil shale production facility where the smell of the oil still lingered 70 years afterwards. She kindly opened the museum in the town which is impressive and not to be missed.

I should like to say here that I am very grateful indeed to Uta Hentsch, and Brigitta at KZ Vaihingen-Enz, without whom I would not have learnt very much on-site about Operation Desert or found half of the relevant sites. The efforts of people like Uta Hentsch and Brigitta Isermeyer are outstanding; unpaid volunteers all, they are a credit to those who suffered and perished in their thousands at this, a completely crazy and pointless doomed project undertaken by a desperate German High Command in the dying months of WW2.

What I learned from Uta enabled me to continue on my 'Desert' mission and ask the right questions of the right people in further towns and villages connected to 'Desert'. I had my list of locations and later met the Archivist of Ballingen Dr Hans Schimpf-Reinhardt, spending a day in the archives, and then – through him – a day with the irrepressible Immo Opfermann of Shomberg with whom I learned yet more.

Many thanks to all who helped me.



Immo Opfermann with a bottle of the shale oil