

of the Household Division should be'. But who was he?

In 1979, when I was Regimental Adjutant, I was telephoned from New York by an American insurance executive who wanted to see me to discover what had happened to a Grenadier POW named Howarth whom he had encountered in 1942, the same year as Colonel Codrington.

Let us start this extraordinary story with the American, Alexander Rotenberg. He had been born in Antwerp and brought up in a comfortable home amidst a happy Jewish family. The German invasion of 1940 changed all that. He could not convince his widowed mother of the dangers ahead. She pointed out that the Germans were being extremely polite to everyone; they even gave up their seats on trams to women and tried to reassure the Belgians that the war was over for them. Rotenberg felt differently and set out alone on a dangerous path to survival.

His adventures included being attacked with other refugees by Messerschmitts, sharing biscuits with a British gunner while under shell fire at Dunkirk, and eventually reaching his uncle and aunt on the Promenade des Anglais, Nice, in Vichy France. Their friends were largely Jewish White Russian emigres. Rotenberg found that tables at parties were laden with caviar and smoked salmon. The conversation was of diamond necklaces and how the Germans could be trusted. 'Why must you come as Cassandra to pronounce nothing but doom? How will you ever get a woman that way?', his aunt demanded, as the green-eyed Magda encouraged him to drink more vodka. Rotenberg felt differently and joined the French Resistance.

In the summer of 1942 he was on a train to Nice after delivering false identification papers in Marseilles when he saw a British soldier in a private compartment guarded by a gendarme while another stood outside. The soldier had a cut on his cheek. Rotenberg, overcome by curiosity, offered a cigarette to the guard. 'Ah merci!', the gendarme replied and confided that the soldier was being taken to a prison fortress in the mountains. Rotenberg guessed that he might have been captured recently at St. Nazaire, in which case he might have useful information which could be reported back on Resistance channels. And so he offered the gendarme two packets of Gauloise if he could speak to the prisoner. The gendarme grasped the cigarettes and after conferring with his colleague agreed.

Rotenberg introduced himself to the soldier in schoolboy English and said he had two brothers in the United States. The soldier replied that he was Lance Corporal Arnold Howarth and had indeed taken part in the raid on St. Nazaire. 'We blew up the bloody dock,' he said, 'stove in a few ships; for that it cost us plenty - rough going'. However, although wounded, he had escaped to the Vichy zone. After a long conversation Rotenberg explained how Howarth could escape to the American Consulate in Nice when the train reached there. But Howarth, not fully trusting Rotenberg, suggested that someone from the American Consulate should visit him in the POW camp where he could pass on most useful information.

On reaching Nice, Rotenberg eventually tracked down Basil MacGowan, the American Vice-Consul, and tried to persuade him to visit Howarth. The American was also suspicious of the nineteen-year old Jew and brusquely told him to return in ten days. Rotenberg had, in turn, some doubts about MacGowan who operated from an obscure house far from the American consulate. Rotenberg's Resistance contact, a former captain in the Dutch Army with the nom de guerre of Quaker, told him that night that he had no business getting involved in high-level escapes. Nevertheless, ten days later Rotenberg reported back to MacGowan to discover if he had any news from Howarth for whom he felt responsible. MacGowan, now immensely friendly, filled Rotenberg with wine and said he had visited Howarth who had reported important information which would be passed on.

The above account might easily have ended there had not Rotenberg decided in 1975 to retrace his footsteps to meet again everyone whom he had encountered before and after his own escape from France. Visiting our Regimental Headquarters to discover Howarth's fate was one of his many ports of call. Undeterred by a letter from my predecessor which said that the Regiment had twenty one Howarths and that no appropriate file could be found. Rotenberg flew in from New York in April 1979 to see me. Fortunately, the file was found that very morning. And so what do we know of Howarth?

He had joined the Grenadiers in Bury in 1939, aged 18. He transferred to No. 2 Commando and took part in the raid on St. Nazaire on the 28th March 1942. In the

DRAFT FEB 1990

⑤

furious fighting that followed when most of the Commandos were either killed or captured he managed to evade the Germans and was befriended by an English-speaking family in St. Nazaire who gave him civilian clothes. He passed the German cordons by accompanying Frenchmen who left the town to work, muttering his only words of French 'Bon Jour' and 'walked a bit sloppy like'. He travelled by train to Bordeaux escaping to the unoccupied Vichy France. Unfortunately, he was captured by French gendarmes several weeks later. He subsequently met Rotenberg on the train, as already related, before being imprisoned in Fort La Revere, Nice, which contained 300 British Army and RAF personnel including a number of officers.

Few of Howarth's personal documents have survived, but one of them is a War Office note dated 31st August 1942 to RHQ Grenadier Guards. It states that he had written a letter from the Fort over four months earlier which had been intercepted by British censors and read: 'I was wounded a little by grenades, just a cut about half an inch below my eye. It will have to be opened again to take some shrapnel out. In my back there are 20-30 pieces. They are leaving them in.'

In the Autumn of 1942 50 POWs, led in part by Howarth, escaped from the Fort. Howarth maintained discipline when a precipitate and indiscriminate rush of men might have wrecked the whole plan. The operation was organized by outside elements which provided trucks, civilian clothing, rations and identity cards. To what extent the American Vice-Consul, alerted by Rotenberg, was involved is not known. He was later interned in Lourdes when the Germans occupied Vichy France.

The POWs eventually arrived safely in Gibraltar in two batches. Howarth was particularly useful there in helping to keep the rest of the party security minded, since public discussion of how they reached Gibraltar might have had disastrous results.

Howarth returned to England in October 1942 where he rejoined No. 2 Commando. He was subsequently wounded in the thigh by shrapnel at Salerno.

Alexander Rotenberg meanwhile, after working with the Resistance, had escaped with the help of a beautiful Italian Contessa over the Alps to Switzerland. His attempt over thirty years later to encounter again those whom he had met in the war were largely successful and are recorded in his moving, recently published book 'Emissaries' which can be obtained from 146A-148 Golders Green Road. London NW11 8HE.

And so what happened to Howarth? In October 1944 he married Irene Nuttall and three days later they went to Buckingham Palace. King George VI chatted to them both after presenting Lance Sergeant Howarth with the British Empire Medal for the gallant part he played in his two escapes. Howarth was also awarded the Croix de Guerre, with palms.

However, this story ends in tragedy. He was in considerable pain. His shrapnel wounds were much more serious than anyone realised. Ten days after the wedding he was admitted to a hospital in Rochdale for an emergency operation. He died the following day and was buried on Remembrance Day, 1944. Irene still lives nearby, was visited by Rotenberg, and steps are now being taken to discover where Howarth's medals might be so that she can have them.

I am glad that a recent letter in The Guards Magazine has led to further recognition being given to this courageous Guardsman.'

The above article appeared in the Winter 1988 edition of The Guards Magazine.