

Maj. Tommy Macpherson, the “Kilted Killer” who tackled a Panzer division on his own! As a touch of class, would ride around the enemy country side in a black French car with a British flag attached to it

War Articles

Mar 3, 2015 [Jack Beckett](#), Guest Author



*One of his most incredible exploits may be rushing a retreating German headquarters, under fire, in an ambulance and, in full Celtic regalia, convincing Gen. Botho Henning Elster to surrender 23,000 men and 1,000 vehicles to the Allied forces he pretended to have under his command.*

*“The clincher was when I told him that I was in contact with London by radio and could at any time call up the [Royal Air Force] to blow his people out of sight,” he writes in his autobiography, “In truth, the only thing I could whistle up was Dixie, but he had no way of knowing that.”*

- Served as an officer in the No.11 Scottish Commandoes in WW2
- In 1941, during a daring four man raid to capture Erwin Rommel in North Africa, he was captured by the enemy.
- In a span of 2 years, he escaped a total of 7 times till finally making it back to the UK.
- Days after his return, he was ordered by Winston Churchill himself to “Set Europe ablaze”
- He parachuted behind enemy lines in France and began a long campaign of destruction alongside the French resistance.
- Virtually every single night, he would either kill Germans or destroy their supplies and communications.
- On one occasion when a German staff car was approaching a level crossing Macpherson booby-trapped the barrier arm so it crashed down on the vehicle, decapitating the local commandant and his driver
- He single handedly captured 23,000 men and 1,000 vehicles in one night by simply convincing a German General that he was in command of the Allied forces in the area.
- As a touch of class, he would ride around the enemy country side in a black French car with a British flag attached to it. The Germans placed a 300,000 franc bounty on his head
- He then went to Italy and pretty much did all of the above again.
- Wounded numerous times and awarded the Military Cross for his actions
- One of the most decorated soldier in history

With three Military Crosses, three Croix de guerre, a Légion d'honneur, and a papal knighthood for his heroics during the Second World War, Sir Tommy Macpherson is the most decorated living soldier of the British Army.

Yet for 65 years the Highlander's story has remained untold. Few know how, aged 21, he persuaded 23,000 SS soldiers of the feared Das Reich tank column to surrender, or how Tommy almost single-handedly stopped Tito's Yugoslavia annexing the whole of northeast Italy. Still a schoolboy when war broke out, Tommy quickly matured into a legendary commando. Twice captured, he escaped both times, marching through hundreds of miles of German-held territory to get home. With a dizzyingly diverse cast of characters,

including Winston Churchill, Field Marshal Montgomery, and Charles de Gaulle, [Behind Enemy Lines](#) is an astonishing story of how an ordinary boy came to achieve truly extraordinary feats when war came calling.

Tommy Macpherson was an exceptional warrior-hero, acknowledged by experts as one of the bravest, most determined and resourceful British soldiers of WW II

The undercover British officer crept silently through the bushes, his tartan kilt a bizarre form of dress for a man who did not want to be conspicuous. Then he stopped to take in the awesome might of the enemy. Through the gloom, he could make out the 15,000 battle-scarred men and 200 machines of the cruellest and most feared of all the SS forces in war-torn France in the summer of 1944.

Parked up for the night, their tanks, half-tracks and heavy guns stretched as far as his eyes could see. How could he and the tiny band of amateurish French Resistance fighters he commanded possibly take on these professional killers? Yet that, come what may, was his mission. The notorious Das Reich panzer division was on its way from southern France to Normandy to help repel the Allied armies that had landed there on D-Day.

If they made the 450-mile journey in time, they could well be the difference between victory and defeat — which is why scores of Resistance units like this had been mobilised to slow their progress by whatever means they could . . . and at whatever cost. That cost was already terrible. In towns and villages of the Lot and Limousin regions, the bodies of partisans swung from lampposts and telegraph poles as the SS soldiers — veterans of barbaric battles on the Russian front — ruthlessly took revenge on anyone who got in their way.

Jimmy Storie, George Dove, Sir Tommy MacPherson MC, Len Mitchell, Reg Harmer DCM  
No.11 Commando. Photo courtesy of [Peter Jennings](#).

This do-or-die sabotage halted the SS in its tracks

And now they had reached the patch of 23-year-old Major Tommy Macpherson — a fresh-faced former Fettes schoolboy, athlete and aesthete and, before the war intervened, a man destined for the dreaming spires of Oxford rather than this bleak French backwater where there was every chance of his being killed. Macpherson was an exceptional warrior-hero, acknowledged by experts as one of the bravest, most determined and resourceful British soldiers of World War II. Today, at 90, he is Britain's most decorated former soldier.

His story is one of remarkable daring and danger, outstanding even in the annals of that unique generation, as he fought his very special war, almost entirely behind enemy lines.

He did indeed go up to Oxford after the war, gaining a first-class degree. Today, he remains president of the

Oxford and Cambridge athletics club, having retired from his career as a successful businessman: he was variously a director of the National Coal Board and High Sheriff of Greater London.

But inevitably nothing in his later life had quite the drama of the extraordinary exploits he undertook in his one-man war against the Nazis. Recruited into the Army straight from the sixth form, he was picked to be in the newly-formed elite band of Commandos, and earmarked for specialist training to carry out clandestine raids on enemy territory.

And so began an extraordinary series of escapades in which he relied solely on his own cunning, bravery and initiative to stay alive. In North Africa in 1941, he slipped ashore from a submarine on a reconnaissance mission. But his sortie went disastrously wrong when the sub that was supposed to collect him did not arrive, and he was forced to trek for days on foot across the desert towards his own lines, sabotaging enemy installations as he went, only to be captured by Italian troops.

Held in a prisoner-of-war camp in Italy, he made several attempts to escape but was caught each time. He was handed over to the Germans and interrogated by the Gestapo before ending up in a remote camp on the far eastern borders of Germany. He slipped away from there wearing a French uniform, made it to the Baltic coast and stowed away on a ship to neutral Sweden.

His flamboyance made him a legend in France

On his return home in November 1943, he could have been forgiven for seeking a quiet life after two years at the sharp end. Dodging bullets and Nazi forces, he had already endured and survived more danger and hardship than almost any other soldier. But his unrivalled experience of clandestine operations was vital to the war effort. He was needed for the Special Operations Executive, to parachute into France and gee-up the reluctant foot soldiers of the French Resistance in the aftermath of D-Day.

At Churchill's behest, he was to arm them, train them and lead them in a guerrilla war against the occupying Germans. In the dead of night and accompanied by a French army officer and an English radio operator, he dropped into south-central France on June 8, 1944 — two days after the Allies stormed the Normandy beaches. He was in his Highlander's battledress, kilt and all — and deliberately so. He was meant to be visible, his undisguised presence a symbol for any wavering Frenchmen that liberation was at hand if only they took the battle to the Boche.

His attire caused consternation. He heard an excited young Resistance fighter babbling to another that a French officer had landed 'and he's brought his wife!' The lad had never seen a man in a kilt before.

The unit Macpherson joined was a joke, despite all the assurances he had been given back in England that the maquis was a dedicated fighting force. Here in the forests and mountains of the Massif Central it had just eight members, four of them mere boys, a few guns and a single, clapped-out lorry for transport. In four years, they had never mounted any sort of operation to trouble the occupying Germans.

He brought them a machine gun, grenades and plastic explosives, but did they have the savvy and the guts

to use them? He found out soon enough when, just days later, the Das Reich SS column hove into his sights.

It was do-or-die moment — and dying seemed the more likely outcome. He decided that engaging them directly would be suicidal and pointless. But ingenious, cleverly-planted booby traps might do the trick of slowing them down. Through the night, he and his men felled trees to block the road ahead of the convoy and laid their only anti-tank mine, strapping plastic explosives to it for extra oomph. Grenades dangled from overhanging branches — primed to fall and explode.

Communists and Nazis alike put a price on his head

Primitive though these measures were, they was surprisingly effective. In the morning, the Germans had to bring up heavy equipment to move the tree trunks. Minutes ticked away. Then a tank hit the mine and slewed across the road. More delay. Finally, Macpherson and his men sprayed troop carriers with their Sten guns and then dashed away into the trees — classic hit-and-run tactics. Hiding at a distance, they heard shouts and screams as the grenades did their job. Eventually and inevitably, the SS column moved on, but precious hours had been won. With similar small victories the length of France, it took Das Reich more than a fortnight to complete what should have been a three-day journey, by which time the Allied hold on Normandy was secure.

So, too, was Macpherson's hold on his new friends. With this success under his belt, his status was assured and streams of newly-emboldened volunteers arrived to join him. Now they began to fight back in earnest. German supply lorries were hijacked for food, railway lines and road bridges blown up, steam engines wrecked, enemy petrol dumps drained (though not blown up for fear of civilian casualties). The major encouraged children to scatter nails in the street to puncture the tyres of German trucks.

One of his favourite targets was electricity pylons, and he took enormous schoolboy pleasure from blowing up two together. As they crashed, massive sparks flew out, like a giant firework display. To celebrate Bastille Day, he knocked out eight in one exhausting night. In his Cameron Highlanders' tartan, with a Sten gun in his hand, explosives in his pockets and a skean dhu — the traditional Scottish dagger — tucked into his sock, his flamboyance made him a legend in this rugged area of rural France.

Furious and frustrated, the Germans offered a 300,000-franc reward for the capture of this 'bandit masquerading as a Scottish officer', as Wanted posters described him, but he seemed as elusive as the Scarlet Pimpernel and as bulletproof as a tank. Driving round the countryside to muster and train his growing fighting force, he narrowly missed German patrols on the road, or skidded away from road blocks just in time.

Pursued by an enemy patrol one night, his car's fuel tank was hit by bullets, but even then his luck held. They had just enough petrol left to turn into dense woods, dump the car and seek refuge with the nuns in a nearby convent. He was at times able to turn the tables. Returning from a night raid on a railway, he was warned that the road he was on was used regularly by the Germans. Indeed, the local commandant's staff car was expected shortly.

'We were at an unmanned level crossing with a heavy wooden pole that lowered itself across the road when a train was coming. It was a perfect opportunity. I fixed some plastic explosive to the wire holding up the pole

and rigged it with a fuse.' When the open staff car sped into view, he blew the fuse, the pole came down and the car hit it at 50mph, decapitating the commandant and his driver. Then Macpherson's men mowed down the cavalcade's motorcycle escort with Sten guns. All in all, he recalls phlegmatically, 'a satisfactory morning'.

By now, the war was swinging decisively in the Allies' favour and it was time for Macpherson to become ever more brazen in his defiance of the Germans. To impress the locals, he began to fly a Union Jack and the Cross of Lorraine flag of the Free French from his black Citroën.

Then he sat in full uniform at a café in a town square, nonchalantly and openly drinking wine with the mayor, just to show that he could. It was almost an act of bravado too far. Suddenly a German armoured car swung into the square. In the nick of time, Macpherson and his driver leapt into the Citroën and raced away into the hills, chased by the Germans.

With the advantage of the higher ground, they stopped and lobbed a makeshift grenade into the pursuing armoured car, destroying it. Then they laid charges around a bridge over a river and blew that, too. 'It was,' he recalls, 'just another day at the office'.

But his most extraordinary achievements were yet to come.

With Allied forces now advancing into the heart of France from both north and south, the Germans were on the retreat. But would they depart without causing a bloodbath? Subtlety and subterfuge were called for.

With just three companions, Macpherson bluffed one German garrison of 100 soldiers with a mock show of force.

He and his men wrapped wet handkerchiefs inside the metal hand grips of their light Sten guns, so that when fired they made the deafening noise of heavy machine-guns. The garrison, fooled into thinking themselves outgunned, surrendered. Then he went one better when a German column numbering 23,000 men and 1,000 vehicles was heading back to the German border through the last remaining gap between the two advancing Allied armies.

In the Loire valley, a small band of Resistance fighters held a vital river bridge, and a fight to the death — which they had no hope of winning — seemed inevitable. Unless the German general could somehow be persuaded to give up without a fight . . .

At a parlay with the Germans, Macpherson once more bluffed. 'My job was to convince the general that I had a brigade, tanks and artillery waiting on the other side of the river and they could not get through.

'The clincher was when I told him that I was in contact with London by radio and could at any time call up the RAF to blow his people out of sight. In truth, the only thing I could whistle up was Dixie, but he had no way of knowing that.'

The German general bowed to what he was persuaded was the inevitable and surrendered, bringing the liberation of France a large step closer but with no loss of life. Amazingly, Macpherson's war did not end even then. With France freed from the Nazis, he was whisked off to Italy to organise the partisans in their last struggles to evict the Germans.

There he found himself up against a new enemy — communist forces loyal to the Yugoslavian leader, Tito, and intent on annexing parts of Italy. Macpherson's determined opposition succeeded in thwarting these plans, with the result that Tito pronounced a death sentence on the 'interfering major'.

To have had a price put on his head by Nazis and Communists was a rare distinction, and as highly prized as the Military Cross and two bars, the Legion d'Honneur and the Croix de Guerre this most buccaneering of British soldiers was awarded for his extraordinary exploits.

Sir Thomas Macpherson, born October 4 1920, died November 6 2014

■ **Behind Enemy Lines: An Autobiography Of Britain's Most Decorated War Hero** by Sir Tommy MacPherson with Richard Bath, is published by Mainstream at £17.99



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