

# Operation Harling: Destruction of the Gorgopotamos Rail Bridge, 1942

By Peter D. Pawelek

## Europe Ablaze

By the autumn of 1942, two years had passed since Churchill gave his famous order to Hugh Dalton's Special Operations Executive (SOE) to "set Europe ablaze". Two long years of cultivating agents and training them in the harsh climate of the Scottish highlands; Two long years of making painstakingly tentative incursions into occupied Europe to establish networks and link with local Resistance factions and their leaders. In that time, SOE had established an infrastructure to launch sabotage and subversion missions in Axis-occupied countries ranging from Norway, France, the Low Countries to the Balkans, Middle East and even in far-flung Asian countries like Burma and Malaysia.



**Hugh Dalton, Minister of Economic Warfare in 1940. Churchill appointed him to create SOE in order to 'set Europe ablaze'.**

Given that, by 1942 SOE had yet to pull off a grand success that would get them noticed by the brass in Whitehall. Such recognition was not craved merely for prestige, either. It was crucial to SOE's survival since they had to continually struggle with rival organizations like the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) for critical materiel such as airplanes, boats and wireless transmitters (W/T's). From its start, SIS resented the 'amateurish' nature of SOE which recruited 'non-professional' types including academics and businessmen as agents. Furthermore, SOE's mandate was to facilitate sabotage and subversion missions in Axis-occupied territories and this was anathema to SIS who engaged in quiet clandestine intelligence gathering operations. The brash and noisy nature of SOE operations, which always threatened to blow the cover of the more furtive SIS agents, inevitably caught the attention of Axis counterintelligence forces.

## Greek Entanglement

After the invasion of Greece by the Italians in October, 1940, and then the Germans in April, 1941, the Greek monarchy fled to England where it established itself as a government-in-exile. Although the British were keen to re-establish King George II to the Greek throne after the war, the major Resistance forces in occupied Greece in 1942 were either Communist or Republican. The National People's Liberation Army (ELAS) and its political wing, the National Liberation Front (EAM) grew out of the Greek Communist Party (KKE) and was actively engaging in Resistance operations across the Greek countryside under the harsh leadership of Aris Veloukhiotis, a ruthless Revolutionary who would just as soon shoot anyone he perceived as an Axis collaborator. His penchant for summary executions even extended to his own forces and he was known to have shot down one of his soldiers merely on the suspicion that he was going to defect to another resistance group.



**Aris Veloukhiotis (left), and Napoleon Zervas (right).**

Meanwhile, a Republican resistance force known as The National Republican Greek League (EDES) was also engaging in its own resistance operations under the aegis of the more affable and popular leader Napoleon Zervas. As expected, EAM/ELAS and EDES mixed like olive oil and ouzo, and often found themselves at each other's throats when they weren't fighting the Italians and Germans.

## Operation Harling

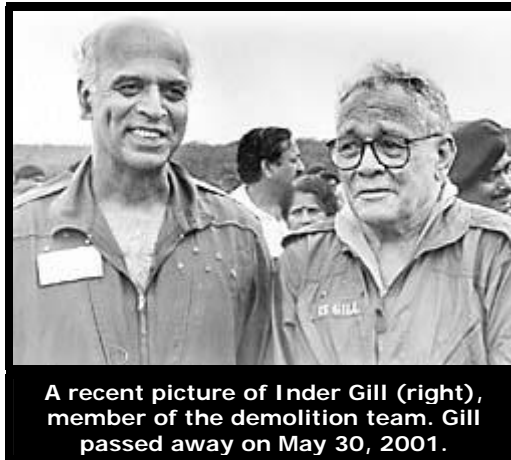
It was in this confused and fractious environment that SOE was to score its first big success: the destruction of one of the three viaduct rail bridges linking Salonika to Piraeus, the port of Athens. These bridges were a vital link supplying Rommel's forces in North Africa, accommodating as many as 48 German supply trains per day. In September of 1942, General Alexander requested that SOE sabotage this supply route in anticipation of the second battle of El Alamein. SOE was given three weeks to accomplish this mission; they did it in five, which in itself was a miracle given the harsh territory, the Axis occupying forces, and the hotheaded andartes (the Greek word for Resistance Fighters) that they had to deal with.

In mid-September of 1942, a twelve-man force of SOE agents was assembled in Cairo which was to be parachuted into Greece in three groups of four, each group trained to act independently of the others should the need arise. The commander of Harling Force was Colonel Eddie Myers from the Royal Engineers. Christopher 'Monty' Woodhouse, a young SOE agent who distinguished himself by helping to establish resistance forces behind enemy lines in Greece and Crete in 1941, was to be second-in-command of the operation.



**Christopher 'Monty' Woodhouse. Second-in-Command of Harling Force, whose task was to locate Napoleon Zervas.**

The rest of the twelve was an odd assortment of individuals that included Themistocles Marinos, the only native Greek in the outfit, and Inderjit Singh Gill, a half-Sikh and half-Scottish sapper and explosives expert who is widely believed to have been the inspiration for the character of Lt. Kip, the Sikh explosives expert, in Michael Ondaatje's novel "The English Patient".



At this time, SOE relied on a single intelligence source from within Greece. Codenamed "Prometheus II", this source was a Greek navy captain to whom the SOE had managed to smuggle a W/T set in 1941 and had since been transmitting vital intelligence information to Cairo (Prometheus II had actually received the W/T set from Prometheus, the code name for a Greek Republican Army Officer, Col. Evripidhis Bakirtzis, who had been recruited by SOE and has the distinction of being SOE's first paratrooper into occupied Greece). Prior to Harling Force's airdrop, Prometheus II transmitted information indicating that the rail viaducts were indeed a viable target given the enemy troop dispositions.

On the evening of September 28th, 1942, Harling Force departed Cairo in three B-24 Liberators that four hours later airdropped them into the heart of Greece under a cloak of total darkness. The drops did not proceed without a certain degree of confusion. With Prometheus II, Myers had arranged for the local resistance fighters to lay out a signal consisting of bonfires arranged in a cross formation. On the evening of the 28th, no such signal was observed. Two of the three groups (Myers' group and Woodhouse's group) made the drop anyway, with the third Liberator returning to Cairo to make their drop on a subsequent evening. In addition to the agents, metal cylinders containing weapons and explosives (including essentially all of the plastic explosives available to SOE Cairo at the time) were dropped on the evening of the 28th.

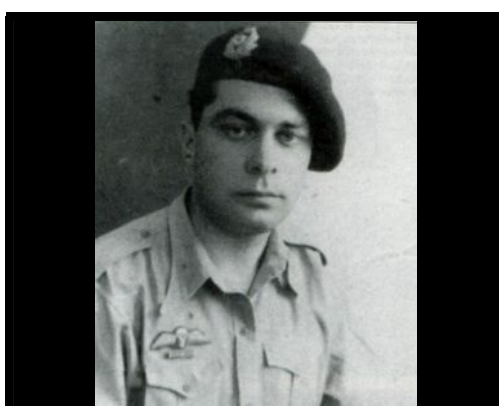
## Making Contact

It took very little time for Myers' and Woodhouse's groups to link up with the local andartes. Woodhouse's group was tasked to make contact with Napoleon Zervas, leader of EDES resistance faction. Due to an incomplete intelligence report, the team had landed quite far from Zervas' headquarters and it took them about a week of hiking across the harsh Greek countryside, with the assistance of local villagers, before they were able to find him. Woodhouse and Zervas hit it off from the start. Woodhouse brought a large sum of cash to help arm and train EDES. This quite impressed Zervas who had a reputation for being a gambler and loved the finer things in life, unlike his dour ELAS counterpart.



**Napoleon Zervas (left) and an unidentified EDES soldier.**

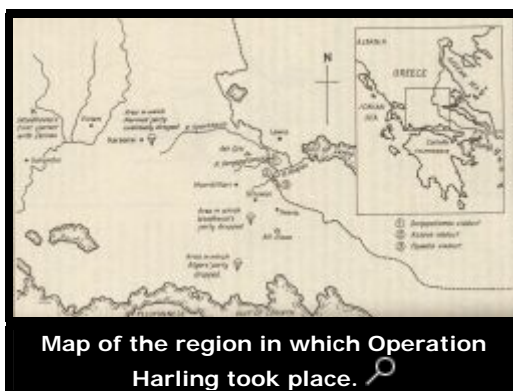
In the meantime, the third group under Themistocles Marinos returned to make a blind jump three weeks after Myers's and Woodhouse's groups had made theirs. This group quickly made contact with Aris Veloukhiotis, leader of the rival resistance faction, ELAS. Unlike Woodhouse's meeting with Zervas, Marinos' group did not get as warm a reception. Whereas Zervas was easy-going and helpful, Veloukhiotis was suspicious Marinos' group and their motives. In fact, they were almost summarily executed on the order of Veloukhiotis for being spies of the King-In-Exile. It was only by grace of the intervention of the local villagers, who had recognized Marinos' team for what they were, that Veloukhiotis had spared the agents' lives.



**Themistocles Marinos, leader of the third paradrop group and the only native Greek member of Harling Force.**

After the three teams of Harling Force had regrouped and some of the confusion had abated, a meeting between Harling Force, EDES and ELAS was quickly arranged. Zervas and Veloukhiotis regarded each other warily but were essentially forced to co-operate due to pressures from the local inhabitants of the area (whose 'hearts and minds' each group was trying to win over), and the refusal of each leader to let the other hog all the glory.

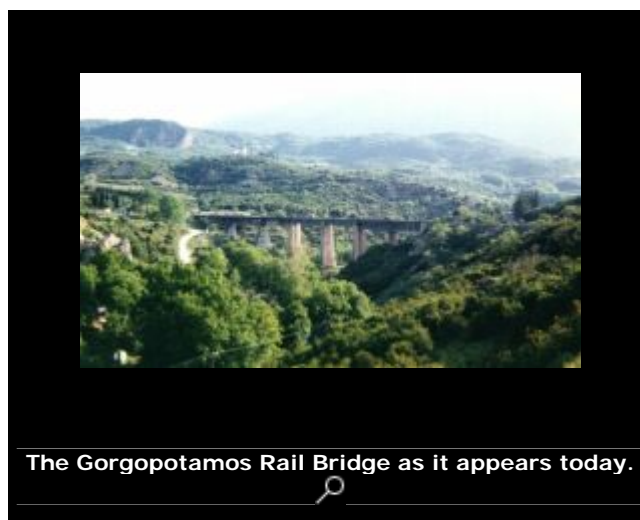
Reconnaissance of the three viaducts had been performed by Myers and it was decided that the Gorgopotamos viaduct would be the target of choice. Myers and Woodhouse embarked on a crash course to train the EDES and ELAS troops on the use of the British weapons that they had brought with them, including the Sten Gun, a lightweight and rugged submachine that was popular with SOE agents.



On the morning of November 23rd, almost two months since they had landed in Greece, Harling Force along with their EDES and ELAS allies, in total a force of about 150 men, headed off for Gorgopotamos viaduct.

## The Plan

In order to blow the viaduct, Myers, Zervas, and Veloukhiotis decided to split their force into seven groups. Two groups would attack the Italian garrison positions at the north and south ends of the bridge: the northern group comprised about 25 EDES soldiers while the southern group comprised about 70 ELAS soldiers.



A third group, comprising SOE agents only, travelled along the southern rail line from the bridge and cut telephone lines, destroyed rail tracks and waited to attack any Italian reinforcements that might arrive. Similarly, a fourth group of SOE agents under Marinos travelled along the northern rail line to prevent any Italians to reinforce the bridge from the nearby town of Lamia. A fifth group was to prevent reinforcements to arrive from a nearby road bridge.

The sixth group was tasked with actually demolishing the bridge and consisted of SOE demolitions experts Tom Barnes, a New Zealander, Inder Gill, and three Commandos: John Cook, Denys Hamson and Nat Barker. Finally, the seventh group was the command centre consisting of Myers, Woodhouse, Veloukhiotis and Zervas, who took up their position on the northern ridge of the gorge within sight of where the demolition squad was to place their explosives.

## The Attack

At 2300 hours, the EDES and ELAS groups attacked the northern and southern ends of the bridge simultaneously and a fierce firefight ensued. Echoed by the gorge, the roar of the firefight was quite deafening, with crackling of Sten Guns and Thomson submachine guns intermingling with the return fire of Italian machine guns situated in pillboxes. After about an hour, the southern end of the bridge was secured and the demolition team exploited this opening to rush down to place their explosives along the girders of the bridge. Meanwhile, the firefight along the northern end of the bridge continued, and the demolition squad had to contend with EDES grenades being dropped near them while they were working. Hamson, who was able to speak Greek, screamed up at the EDES fighters on the bridge: "Dungdogs! Whoresons, may I do unnameable things to your dead ancestors. Haven't I told you who we were? We have a ton of explosives with us, fools that you are!" No more grenades were dropped on the demolition team after that and they hastily finished placing their explosives.



As the firefight raged on, Barnes blew on a whistle indicated he was about to blow the fuses. Within minutes a massive explosion erupted, sending several bridge spans crashing into the river gorge. Bolstered by this success, the northern group finally routed the Italians. A trainload of Italians was arriving from the town of Lamia to the north, but it was ambushed by Marinos' group before they could reach the gorge. At 0230, the signal was given to withdraw and Harling Force along with their EDES and ELAS allies dissolved into the nearby wilderness.



## Aftermath

Given the fierce firefight, the attacking force only incurred light casualties during this operation. The Italian garrison, numbering about 80 soldiers, suffered about 30 casualties. The bridge itself was out of commission for six weeks, and the Germans took over the garrison from that point onwards. The success of Operation Harling marked the first time that SOE was able to orchestrate such a strategically significant operation in concert with local resistance forces.

Winston Churchill was highly pleased with the results of the attack, and SOE's fortunes were secured for future operations throughout Europe and Asia. In the words of Woodhouse, "It showed for the first time in occupied Europe that guerillas, with the support of Allied officers, could carry out a major tactical operation co-ordinated with Allied strategic plans. It stimulated ambitious plans for developing resistance, primarily in Greece, but also elsewhere."

### *Reading List*

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