

OPERATION TABARIN: BRITAIN'S SECRET WARTIME EXPEDITION TO ANTARCTICA.

Stephen Haddelsey (with Alan Carroll). 2014. The History Press/Spellmount: The Mill, Port Stroud, Gloucestershire. 256 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-07-524-9356-3. £18.99.

The British government expedition to Antarctica, code named 'Operation Tabarin', during World War 2 has, until recently, received very little detailed examination, but has been the subject of significant, (and it turns out, intentional) misinformation. The misinformation, generated by the government as a cover story, was that Tabarin was a secret military operation intent on monitoring the activities of German and Japanese surface and submarine raiders. The lack of attention to this enterprise is very surprising given that hindsight shows Tabarin to have had a far greater and more long lasting impact than any other British activity in Antarctica. From it has stemmed 70 years of continuous British presence, on which is based the internationally acknowledged British leadership in Antarctic science, policy and diplomacy (see Dudeney and Walton 2012).

Two recent publications have put a whole new perspective on what Tabarin was actually about, and how it was carried out. Dudeney and Walton (2011) have made a detailed analysis of previously unexplored material in The National Archives to provide the policy context, which has demonstrated that the operation had nothing to do with fighting the war, was not a military operation (the staff were employed and paid by the Colonial Office), but everything to do with establishing a permanent presence to support the British territorial claim against Argentine and, to a lesser extent, Chilean claims. Haddelsey (with Carroll) has built upon, and reinforced this new appreciation, with his book that describes, in the words of the participants, how the operation was carried out in practice. This well crafted narrative history makes fascinating reading, whilst providing an invaluable record of the start of permanent British presence in Antarctica. It is a long overdue tribute to the men who took part. As the book makes clear they were not accorded the accolades that had in the past attended the return of British explorers when they arrived home in 1946, and for some of them, the disappointment stayed throughout their lives. Without being an excuse, it is noteworthy that the Colonial Office had no effective organisation in place to support the mission at the time. It was organised part-time by a relatively junior civil servant in the Mediterranean Section with no support except for the advice of an *ad hoc* trio of external volunteers (Mackintosh, Wordie and Roberts), whilst day-to-day operational command and control was exercised by the field commander, answerable to the Governor of the Falklands, hardly an inspired management model!

Haddelsey has made wide use of his access to personal accounts and diaries, plus interviews with the few members of the expedition still alive, to weave a historical narrative that brings alive the trials and tribulations, and also the wonder and excitement, of wintering in Antarctica. With two significant exceptions it appears to be well researched with a comprehensive bibliography. There are some fine contemporary photographs, plus diagrams and maps of the sledge journeys undertaken. As a result this is a book that will be influential as an historical reference as well as being an absorbing read.

However, there are a couple of significant flaws that require comment. The first is the unsubstantiated claim that in some way Tabarin, or at least the cover story for it, might itself have been a cover story to help protect the secret that Britain was breaking the German Enigma codes. No evidence whatever is provided to back this claim up. On the contrary, the book points out that there is no reference to it in the record of the War Cabinet at which policy for Antarctica was decided. Nor, it may be added, is there any in the supporting papers for that cabinet meeting or in the handwritten notes of the meeting made by Lawrence Burgis, acting as Cabinet Secretary at that meeting. The second issue is the claim that Port Lockroy played an important role during the Cold War as some sort of test bed for communication systems for nuclear submarines. Here the discussion suggests that the deployment of American whistler recording equipment as part of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) was somehow the prelude to a military communications development when in fact it was noteworthy as the start of a major scientific investigation of the magnetosphere. Sadly the technical description of whistler science is garbled and there is again no documentary evidence for the speculation. The suggestion that in some way it would be feasible to 'send and receive signals which mimicked the characteristics of whistlers' (page 222) as a means of communication, is absurd. Both this notion and the invocation of Enigma fall into the realm of unsubstantiated speculation, whilst in the case of the Lockroy radio experiments the real importance and excitement of the basic research work is ignored.

There are a couple of minor errors to be noted. Haggard did not reach the opinion in his letter of 5 January 1904 that the South Orkneys were unlikely to be of any use whatsoever to Great Britain. He merely reported to Lord Lansdown (Foreign Secretary) that Bruce had yet to form an opinion one way or another on the subject. And later in the book, once the news of Tabarin was made public on 24 April 1944 in the *Times*, it was not the Permanent Secretary at the Foreign Office, Sir Alex Cadogan, who responded to Churchill's querulous memo, but the Foreign Secretary Sir Anthony Eden, though no doubt Cadogan would have had a hand in drafting the response.

Overall this is a valuable and timely addition to the history of Antarctica, and one that will further help to give the lie to the myths that have surrounded Tabarin, since it will reach a much wider audience than is likely for the Dudeney and Walton paper (Dudeney and Walton 2011). It is unfortunate then that the dust wrapper harks back to the Tabarin myth, and also highlights the supposed importance of Lockroy for the Cold War, rather than emphasising the real legacy of Tabarin in establishing science as a parallel justification to sovereignty for permanently occupying stations in Antarctica. (John R. Dudeney, 10 Church Lane, Wilburton, Cambridgeshire CB6 3RQ, UK (j.dudeney@btinternet.com)).

References

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