

"Two Unlikely Soldiers go to their Deaths: The SOE Mission of Frank Pickersgill and Ken Macalister"

A presentation by Professor Jonathan Vance (Department of History, University of Western Ontario).

Professor Vance is the author of *Unlikely Soldiers: How Two Canadians Fought the Secret War against Nazi Occupation* (Harper Collins Canada, 2008), the only book-length study of the Pickersgill/Macalister story. Professor Vance completed his Ph.D. in History from York University in 1993 and currently holds a Canada Research Chair at the University of Western Ontario. He is a member of the Royal Society of Canada and the author of several prize-winning books, including:

- *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning and the First World War* (1997)
- *High Flight: Aviation and the Canadian Imagination* (2002)
- *Building Canada: People and Projects that Shaped the Nation* (2006)

The following is a synopsis of his talk to the Ottawa Roundtable.

Professor Vance told the story of two young Canadians, Ken Macalister and Frank Pickersgill who became agents of Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE), an undercover unit. These two individuals are described as amateurs who found themselves up against professionals.

Ken McCalister was more interested in football and all things non-academic. He got a scholarship to go to University of Toronto where he found his niche and enjoyed learning. He was interested in the rise of Nazism in Germany; however, it was an intellectual problem, which he didn't see as his responsibility to fight (at least not at first).

Frank Pickersgill was from rural town in Manitoba. He studied at the University of Manitoba and went to Paris after attending the University of Toronto. He was interested in the communist movements, and like Ken, he studied Nazism but from an intellectual approach.

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When Ken visited France, he married a French woman and developed a tremendous love for France. He was horrified that his wife and in-laws were living under the occupation. Frank also became a lover of France, however, unlike Ken, he did not escape France before the German occupation. He was arrested and placed in an internment camp. Frank remained in the camp for 18 months before he was able to escape. He too was devastated by the knowledge that his friends were under the occupation and wanted to do something, even though it was not entirely clear what he could do in the war. As a child Frank had a serious infection, which destroyed his sense of balance and, therefore, he was not fit for a combat role. Nevertheless, both men who were enormously gifted academically wanted to take on a role to free their loved ones in France.

Special Operations Executive (SOE) was established as an undercover unit that would use sabotage and subversion to bring down the Nazi regime from within. SOE didn't actually train and use spies. Their mandate was to send in resistance organizers who would then recruit local resistance fighters. Sabotage and subversion tactics were used and their job was to wait for the right moment to activate their resistance cells. SOE was divided into various sections based on countries. F Section (France) relied on people who were amateurs and who spoke the local language.

In 1942, Ken and Frank were sent for agent training. Their training included security training in order to pass effectively as a Frenchman. After the men finished their training program, they were given a rough outline of their assignments, which was to take charge of a small resistance cell near an important rail junction. However, the Physicians Network (SOE network coordinated by Major Francis Alfred Suttill) had been infiltrated by the Nazi security, even before Frank and Ken entered France. Shortly after Ken and Frank arrived in France, they were both arrested on their way to Paris and sent to Buchenwald concentration camp where they died.

In the post-war years, a major preoccupation in the security circles was trying to determine what exactly went wrong with the Physicians Network. Professor Vance noted that it is unfair to say that F section didn't pay enough attention to detail; however, their biggest mistakes were made in radio security. The headquarters in England ignored the checks and balances by accepting radio messages without proper security codes.

During the Q & A session, Professor Vance was asked how he would qualify success when considering both the Physician Network and other missions. He explained that Physician was largely a failure, however on another level, it is obvious that it tied up an enormous amount of

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resources from the Germans. The most successful cells faded away after the war, whereas a lot of research has been done on the failed missions. Professor Vance was able to write about Ken and Frank because a lot was written about F Section and its failures.

Professor Vance was asked to characterize the organizational relationship between MI5 and SOE. He explained that there was very little cooperation between SIS, MI5, and SOE because nobody liked SOE. There was also very little contact between the sections of SOE. This lack of cooperation and communication contributed to the organizational failure of SOE's F Section.