Prologue

At two minutes past ten on the evening of 13 August 1943, a single British aircraft – a four-engined Halifax bomber – took off from a desert airfield in Allied-occupied Algeria. At the controls was a Canadian, Alfred Ruttledge, a 29-year-old flight lieutenant with a reputation as a fine pilot, who now set a solitary course across the Mediterranean for enemy territory. Cap Matifou, the last of North Africa, was passed ten minutes later. Menorca was skirted at half past eleven. The Îles d'Hyères, off the south coast of France, were reached at one in the morning. Then the Halifax was over Italy.

At two o'clock, Ruttledge and his crew picked up in the moonlight a river junction north of Alessandria. Turning for the hills and peaks north of Milan, taking care to stay out of range of the city's anti-aircraft guns, they took a fresh bearing as they recognised Lodi. The Halifax finally reached its target at half past two on the morning of 14 August, when it arrived, growling and low, over Lake Como.

Hidden, fjord-like, in the foothills of the Italian Alps, Lake Como is one of the most striking stretches of water in Europe. Lush wooded slopes drop steeply to the shore. Ochre-roofed villages and villas dot the edge. For centuries it has inspired artists, writers, composers and poets, from Virgil and Pliny to Verdi and Byron. 'A more charming path was scarce ever travelled than we had along the lake of Como,' the poet William Wordsworth wrote to his sister in 1790, recalling hillsides of 'large sweeping woods of chestnut spotted with villages, some clinging from the summits of the advancing rocks, and others hiding themselves within their recesses. Nor was the surface of the lake less interesting than its shores; part of it glowing with

the richest green and gold the reflexion of the illuminated woods, and part shaded with a soft blue tint . . . At the lake of Como my mind ran thro a thousand dreams of happiness which might be enjoyed upon its banks.'[1]

With the dark mass of Wordsworth's summits looming uncomfortably on either side, Ruttledge ran the Halifax down the length of the lake, turned, and returned. Then, as the crew's subsequent sortie report records, 'at 0248 hrs, [on a] bearing [of] 240° [and from a height of] 2,000 ft,' a man parachuted from the aircraft straight into the water.[2]

Nestling on Como's banks is the little medieval commune of Carate Urio. It was from here that a baker, Fulvio Borghi, heard the Halifax appear and, in the moonlight, saw the parachute snap open. Borghi hurried to the village's cobbled quay. With him were three other local men – Giovanni Abate, who had also heard the plane, Emilio Rusconi and Domenico Taroni – and a soldier on sick leave by the name of Morandotti. Taking the oars of a rowing boat, they pushed out onto the lake. Finally they made out in the gloom a figure paddling a small rubber dinghy. They shouted at him to stop. '*Amico*!' ('Friend!') he shouted back, still paddling.[3]

According to one account of what happened next, the rowers fired a warning shot. The figure stopped paddling. An awkward standoff ensued. The man in the dinghy boldly demanded to know if those shouting and shooting at him were fishermen. When they failed to respond, he put his question again. This time he sounded annoyed. Yes, they said eventually, they were indeed fishermen. And who was he? An Italian, the man replied: an airman who had bailed out of an Italian aircraft. He scrambled aboard their boat and together they made for the shore.[4]

By the time the rowers returned to the quay, the sun was up and a crowd had gathered. One little girl among them was Emilio Rusconi's daughter. Sixty-seven years later she recalled the excitement of that curious morning and how, gathered on the road that still overlooks the quay, she and the other children had

peered down at the parachutist as he was led to someone's home to warm up.[5]

Before long he was under guard in the commune offices, his compromising kit having quickly betrayed his claim to be an Italian airman. Beneath a rubber diving suit he wore civilian clothes. Strapped to his leg was a watertight bag, inside which, so the Italian authorities would record, were 'thousands of Italian lire in L.1000 notes, identity cards and permits, driving licences, and military discharge papers, all perfectly forged, as well as spare parts for a wireless set and cryptographic negatives, all carefully concealed in boxes, [plus] a book entitled *Italia mia* by Giovanni Papini.'[6] Closer inspection of his belongings was to reveal more rolls of money and some photographic negatives concealed in two hollowed-out torch batteries, a wireless aerial disguised as a washing line, and the crystal for a wireless set hidden in the handle of a shaving brush. Pages 185 to 188 of *Italia mia* were sealed together; when they were sliced open, more negatives were found.

At about this moment the captive declared in fluent Tuscan-accented Italian that he was Lieutenant Richard Norris, a British officer of the Parachute Regiment. Later that day he and his kit were put in a truck and driven along the lake to Como town, the journey apparently preceded by his first beating, this one at the hands of a plume-helmeted officer of the elite Bersaglieri who, unhappy with the prisoner's answers, hit him twice in the face. Incarcerated in Como, Norris was soon under the scrutiny of Italian counter-espionage officers. 'An enemy parachutist has been captured,' read a report that evening to the Italian Army's Chief of Staff and the War Ministry in Rome; 'of British nationality, [he] is wearing civilian clothes and speaks perfect Italian. He is now being interrogated.'[7]

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Richard Norris's real name was Richard Dallimore-Mallaby. Known to friends as Dick Mallaby, he was a British secret agent. A

head-and-shoulders photograph pinned to a declassified file shows a fresh-faced, good-looking young man with straight blond hair combed back. Details in other documents add blue eyes, weight eleven stone, almost six feet in height, permanent scars on his right elbow, shins and right cheekbone, a heart tattoo on his left forearm, and an age: when plucked from Lake Como he was twenty-four. Plenty of papers testify to his courage and coolness. '[E]veryone is very impressed with him,' wrote a colleague at headquarters as Mallaby was preparing to jump into Italy. 'He is a very likeable fellow . . . unassuming and well disciplined.'[8] Mallaby 'at no time showed any signs whatsoever of nerves' recorded the officer who saw him off at the airfield; 'given the necessary amount of luck, I consider he will do a first-class job'.[9]

Dick Mallaby was a member of a secret British organisation called the Special Operations Executive, the principal Allied force engaged in encouraging resistance inside Italy since Benito Mussolini, the country's dictator, had declared war on Britain and France in 1940. Today, the public image of SOE is dominated by the work of its agents in Nazi-occupied France, a picture itself distorted by exaggerated claims as to their effectiveness and by a book market unbalanced by stories of the thirty-odd women that it trained and sent in. In fact, from humble beginnings, SOE became active in every theatre of war, dispatching thousands of trained operatives – of dozens of nationalities and almost all of them men – to harass enemy garrisons, attack important installations, and encourage, arm and fight beside movements as diverse as communist partisans in the Balkans and headhunting tribes in Borneo. What follows is the first full account of SOE's clandestine endeavours at striking at Italy between June 1940, when the Italians entered the Second World War on the side of Nazi Germany, and September 1943, when they finally signed an armistice with the Allies.

Commissioned by the Cabinet Office, this is an official history, the sixth about SOE to be published. The series began

in 1966 with the publication of M. R. D. Foot's *SOE in France*.[10] Foot's commission was partly a response to public and private calls for clarity about SOE's French operations, which were fast becoming shrouded in controversy and myth. Partly it was born from an official desire to correct foreign impressions of Britain's contribution to wartime resistance movements. In time, ongoing concern for accuracy saw more commissions. Official histories of SOE's work in the Far East and Scandinavia appeared in the 1980s.[11] A fourth volume, dealing with operations in the Low Countries, was published in 2001.[12]

An early case for an official history of SOE's work in Italy was made in Whitehall in 1969. When asked to explore the pros and cons of further volumes to follow Foot's, a Foreign Office mandarin, Dame Barbara Salt, herself once a member of SOE, argued that several grounds existed that made Italy worthy of formal attention. One was that it offered an opportunity to highlight unique challenges that SOE had met when getting to grips with Mussolini. Another was that it could permit recognition of the post-armistice exploits of British personnel who had fought side-by-side with Italian partisans in German-occupied Italy.[13] An official history was eventually commissioned, but acknowledgement of the fundamental differences between SOE's early work against Fascist Italy and its later role with the partisans saw a decision taken later to divide it into two. The fifth official SOE history, David Stafford's study of SOE activities in German-occupied Italy between 1943 and 1945, was published in 2011.[14]

As for each of its predecessors, the brief for what follows was to produce a fluent account that discerns, as far as possible, the facts, warts and all, of what SOE had done and had tried to do. With a view to accessibility, I have tried to tell the story with a modern readership in mind. Principal among the primary sources are SOE's own files and additional British military and government records, most of which are open today at the National Archives at Kew. These sources have been complemented by the memories of

men and women who witnessed or took part in some of the events related here. Seventy years on, very few were still around to share their testimonies directly with me; some, though, told their stories to the Imperial War Museum, or deposited penned accounts in the museum's archives, or wrote or spoke to Christopher Woods, a British diplomat-turned-historian who began researching SOE's Italian operations in the late 1980s and whose own Italian background began in 1944, when, as a young SOE officer, he parachuted into northern Italy to work with the partisans.[15]

Most of SOE's official histories have made scant use of foreign records. Here, however, I have sought to produce a rounded account by drawing upon declassified files from a series of overseas archives. Records of the counter-espionage branch of Italy's wartime military intelligence service, the Servizio Informazioni Militare (SIM), proved especially rewarding.[16] Also of considerable value were the files of SOE's American equivalent, the Office of Strategic Services, and those of the FBI.

Another unique feature of this book – focused, as it is, on the underground war waged within Italy's borders as opposed to that fought in Italian-conquered lands – is that this is the first in-depth account of SOE's efforts to cause trouble inside an enemy country as opposed to an enemy-occupied one.[17] As such, it may be read as a study of the dangers and obstacles that foreign agencies can encounter when trying to encourage domestic resistance to secure, if unpopular, authoritarian regimes. Conventional Allied forces may have found themselves better disciplined, led, motivated and equipped when meeting their Italian adversaries on the battlefield, but clandestine penetration of Fascist Italy proved a formidable proposition. When SOE began that task in 1940, the cautious policies of pre-war British governments meant that it had few foundations on which to build. Overconfident and impatient as it tried to forge ahead, it could also be careless with the slim resources that it had to hand. It could be uncaring, too. Often it felt hamstrung by the conflicting priorities of policy-

makers reluctant to provide the backing that it felt was necessary for success, and its alliance with its similarly secret cousin, MI6, Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, was uneasy. But its greatest difficulties stemmed from the reluctance of many Italians, both inside and outside Italy, to engage in resistance, coupled with the efficiency of Mussolini's regime in crushing and dispersing most organised opposition.

'The [overall] aim of SOE work in Italy', recorded one of its senior officers in 1942, 'is to assist the [Allied] armed forces to bring about the defeat or withdrawal from the war of this weak link in the Axis in a shorter time and with fewer casualties.'[18] A weak link on the battlefield, certainly. But Italy was fundamentally different to almost every other country where the Allies tried to encourage resistance. True, the Fascists had intimidated or defrauded large sections of the electorate and, in 1940, burdened Italy with a costly and ill-starred war that it was poorly equipped to fight. But this did not mean that its population was very inclined to confront those in charge. Nor did it mean that the Italian people were especially pro-Allied. The officer running SOE's Italian desk at the end of the war would remark ruefully that it had been very wrong to believe, as the British had believed at the beginning, 'that because Fascism was not universally popular in Italy, anti-Fascists would betray their country to its enemies'.[19] Once Italy had thrown off Fascism and become German-occupied, that changed. Italian units of a new co-belligerent army started fighting alongside the Allies. Behind the German lines, countless Italian civilians assisted thousands of Allied ex-prisoners on the run. SOE itself would dispatch dozens of elite teams to work hand-in-hand with Italian partisans: the subject of David Stafford's book. But before that break it struggled along with very little knowledge of local conditions and found few Italians who were ready and able to help it.

Although it may help to shed some light on why so few of Mussolini's enemies in Italy came to be harnessed effectively

to the Allies' fight against him, this is not a study of the Italian anti-Fascist Resistance. Rather, it is an account of how a foreign organisation, with scant resources and little experience, attempted to grapple with its task of targeting an enemy country by covert means. With conventional Allied forces never close to landing on Italian soil until well into 1943, SOE was confined to doing this from the edges, groping its way in the dark. On foot and by parachute and submarine, a small but select band of agents was sent in to work secret wireless sets and seek out underground contacts. Explosives and other subversive stores were smuggled over the border from neutral Switzerland. For a time, SOE hoped to ignite a revolt in Sardinia that might spread to the mainland and bring Fascism down. In Sicily it wanted to work with the Mafia. In 1943, when the then Allied commander in the Mediterranean, General Dwight Eisenhower, landed two armies in Sicily, a dangerously exposed SOE team went ashore to search for more sympathisers beyond the frontline. One scheme long-hidden in the files saw steps taken to send a man to assassinate Mussolini.

Taking these operations in turn, showing how SOE sought to go about its task, what follows seeks also to illuminate the agents who were prepared to go clandestinely into Italy in spite of the obvious risks. It was a level of commitment to the Allied war effort and the anti-Fascist cause that deserves recognition and, for some, proved fatal. Dispatched in ones and twos, all of these agents risked brutal treatment and the harshest penalty if caught. Half were killed. The deaths were lonely and squalid. Official histories of SOE operations in other countries have had much larger casts of agents; here, the fact that only a handful went into Italy allows their lives and fates to be explored and documented in some depth, although the first-hand stories of some are inevitably muted or missing. For those who never came back, training assessments written by British instructors and observers can provide glimpses of an agent's personality and motivations, but these are the opinion of foreigners who could be partial, brusque

and prejudiced. Bursts of fraught testimony can sometimes be found among reports drawn up of Italian interrogations, but these are the statements of men who were facing a firing squad.

SOE's war on Mussolini's Italy was a desperate business. Errors were made. The obstacles were immense. The difficulties included enemy intelligence officers skilled and experienced in counter-subversion, complemented by varying degrees of ignorance and naïveté on the part of the British, and reveal an important world of Italian accomplishment and British inferiority that a modern audience may find entirely unfamiliar. When significant success was had by SOE, it resulted more by accident and from clever quick-thinking than from any established anti-Fascist activity or carefully laid plan. The supreme instance of this – an episode that Barbara Salt would later highlight as further cause to record SOE's contribution to the war against Italy – was the remarkable solo role that Dick Mallaby was destined to perform in the events that led to the Italian surrender in September 1943. Events, wrote Dwight Eisenhower in his memoirs, 'that, if encountered in the fictional world, would have been scorned as incredible melodrama'.[20]

1

'Useless wishful thinking'

July 1937. An MI6 officer calling himself Mr Constable is waiting by the ticket barrier at London's Waterloo Station. A train draws in, and the final passenger to disembark is a tall, blond, blue-eyed man of twenty-nine years of age. From the barrier the pair leave the station and cross the Thames to the Strand Palace Hotel. They exchange pleasantries – they have not met before – and then talk of more serious matters. Speaking fluent English with a pronounced Italian accent, the young man explains that he holds a British passport, has an English wife, and is a prominent member of an underground organisation of Italian anti-Fascists. He tells Mr Constable that he wants money from the British to help spread anti-Fascist propaganda inside Italy.[1]

The young man's name was Max Salvadori. Probably he was the most outstanding Italian asset within easy reach of British Intelligence in the years running up to Italy's entry into the Second World War. Destined to leave an indelible mark on the history of Italian anti-Fascism, he was a toughened and dedicated activist whose hard-won knowledge and experience of underground work gave him rare insight into the ways, means and difficulties of opposing the Fascist regime from within. Later, while attached to SOE as a commissioned officer in the British Army, he would take part in the invasion of Sicily, land on the mainland at Salerno and Anzio, be wounded by a landmine on the banks of the Garigliano, parachute into the German-occupied north, work closely with some of the most senior members of the Italian resistance, rise to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and be decorated by the British with the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross. 'This officer was in constant danger of capture in civilian