

## World War II - SAS Operation Speedwell September 1943

The allied invasion of mainland Italy commenced on 3 September 1943. Operation Speedwell (which began four days later on 7 September) was designed to disrupt transportation of military supplies from the Po valley to the German front lines at Salerno, Calabria and Taranto. It was a high-risk operation that met with only limited success.

The SAS soldiers who took part were:

W/Sgt William Foster

Corporal James Shortall

Captain Patrick Dudgeon MC

Gunner Bernard Brunt

Lance-corporal Harold Gordon "Tanky" Challenor (16 March 1922 - 28 August 2008)

Lieutenant Thomas "Tojo" Wedderburn

All six men were to be dropped by parachute near the remote village of Borgo val di Taro located in the Apennines north of La Spezia. They ended up at Barbarasco where they were helped by Pietro Massimo Petriccioli - a local resident.

Foster and Shortall were captured and (illegally) executed by German firing squad at Ponsano Magra (located a few miles North West of Sarzana) in September 1943. Dudgeon and Brunt underwent a similar fate at the Cisa Pass. The executions are recorded on monuments that have been erected at the two locations.



Lieutenant Wedderburn (nicknamed "Tojo" for his short stature and thick glasses) & Lance-corporal Challenor (nicknamed "Tanky" after losing his commando beret in North Africa and borrowing a replacement from the Tank Corps) moved across mountainous terrain by night until on the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> September

1943 they found their first objective, a tunnel on the La Spezia-Bologna line north of Pontremoli. As they finished placing their charges, they heard a train approaching on the "down" line and had to sprint for their lives out of the tunnel. Moments after the first explosion, a second train rattled into the tunnel on the "up" line. Both trains were derailed and destroyed amid an almighty cacophony of torn metal and splintered wood, and the line was completely blocked.

On 18<sup>th</sup> September 1943 they derailed a third train, this time south of Villafranca. Having no further explosives the pair then set off southwards in the hope of finding the Allied lines. They walked for 300 miles until they reached L'Aquila, some 80 miles north of Cassino, where the Allied advance had stalled. Here a peasant matriarch, Mama Eliseio, took them in. Wedderburn was captured on 27<sup>th</sup> December 1943 and spent the rest of the war in captivity. Challenor continued southwards alone and was eventually captured north of Chieti from where he was taken to l'Aquila PoW camp. Having been told he was about to be executed he resolved to escape and simply walked out of the

camp disguised as a washerwoman, returning to the Eliseio family farm where he stayed, severely weakened by malaria and pneumonia, until April 1944. He then continued his journey southwards, and 5th April 1944 was again captured while attempting to pass through enemy lines. On the 7th April he escaped once more (in bare feet) and eventually managed to reach allied lines.

In later service, Challoner began to show a propensity for violence towards prisoners. In describing an occasion when he was in charge of some captive Gestapo officers, he recalled that "[o]ne of them made the mistake of smiling at me. The gaze I returned had him backing away. Then I took them out one by one and exercised them with some stiff fisticuffs." He was already showing signs of delusions at this stage of his career. Challenor eventually reached the rank of company quartermaster sergeant before completing his military service in 1947.

After the war he joined the Metropolitan Police, spending much of his career in CID. In 1963, he was charged with corruption offences and was subsequently found to have been suffering from mental health problems and deemed not to be fit to stand trial. He was sent to a secure hospital, and on his release, he joined the firm of solicitors that had defended him. A public enquiry was held into his actions and why his superiors had not noticed his health problems.

## **Personal Notes**

### ***Ponzano Magra***

On 1st March 2009 Julie and I attempted to find the monument commemorating the deaths of W/Sgt William Foster and Corporal James Shortall. This proved to be more difficult than we had expected. After wandering around for some time we asked directions of a lady and gentleman out for an afternoon stroll but they were unable to help. Suddenly the lady broke off our conversation and flagged down a passing car containing an elderly gentleman and his grandson. This second gentleman knew where the monument was and kindly led us to it. We then discovered that he had himself witnessed the execution of the SAS servicemen as a child – he'd been collecting pine cones (for fire lighting purposes) with his brother when across the valley he had seen members of a German Panzer Division arrive in a motorcade, set up a machine gun, lead two prisoners out and shoot them. He said that he had been a youth member of the Fascist Republic, but had rejected fascism at the close of hostilities. Before parting we were shown the exact spot that the execution took place (a small clearing to the left about 100m up the valley from the monument).

In October 2010 we were invited to an evening meal at Calice and there met Brian Lett for the first time. (Brian is the son of Gordon Lett, author of "Rossano – an adventure of the Italian Resistance"). He claims that he has met many individuals who claim that they witnessed the executions of Foster and Shortall. In reality, few if any of them actually did – an example of the subconscious desire of human beings to be acknowledged as witnesses of recorded history, and the tendency to subvert memory or distort reality accordingly. For another example of this syndrome see "Rossano" pp242-243.

These days, few people realise that "Largo XXI Settembre 1943" street in Ponzano Magra was named in honour of Foster and Shortall – an example of how once significant local events are so easily forgotten with passage of time.

### ***Cisa Pass***

The Monument to Patrick Dudgeon and Bernard Brunt is difficult to find. On coming down from the Cisa Pass towards Pontremoli take the first left (signposted Gravagna) – a road encountered after about 0.8miles. Proceed another 0.8miles and the monument may be seen on the right. The condemned men were escorted along a path which winds its way down through woodland from the Cisa Pass to join the Strada Provinciale di Gravagna at a location east of the Monument.

## Memorials to those executed

### *Ponzano Magra*



Location of  
Monument:

N44.14246  
E009.94427

Altitude: 48m



### *Cisa Pass*



Location of  
Monument:

N44.46948  
E009.93143

Altitude: 987m



### *Photos of Participants in raid*

Lance-corporal  
Harold Gordon  
"Tanky" Challenor



Captain Patrick  
Laurence Dudgeon



## ***Biographical Details of Servicemen Illegally Executed***

### **Bernard Oliver Brunt**

Unit: 2 SAS Rank: Gunner Number: 1800118  
Date of Death: 3rd October 1943 Age: 21  
Gravesite: Florence War Cemetery, Italy IX.H.9

#### ***Additional Information***

Parent unit: Royal Artillery  
Born: Rotherham, Yorkshire, son of Bernard and Frances Adalla Brunt, Rotherham  
Op.Speedwell - POW 2.10.1943 - executed next day, Italy

### **Patrick Laurence Dudgeon**

Unit: 2 SAS Rank: Captain Number: 131676  
Date of Death: 3rd October 1943 Age: 23  
Gravesite: Florence War Cemetery, Italy IX.H.8

#### ***Additional Information***

Parent unit: Royal Corps of Signals  
Born: Egypt, son of Lt-Col Christopher Robson, OBE.MC and Alice Mary  
(nee Pumphrey) Dudgeon, Headley, Hampshire  
Educated: Oundle School 1934-1938  
Former 62 Commando (SSRF) Awarded M.C. (London Gazette 28.1.1943 as Lt R.C.S.)  
Op.Speedwell - POW 2.10.1943 - executed next day, Italy

### **William Johnstone Foster**

Unit: 2 SAS Rank: Sergeant Number: 829582  
Date of Death: 30th September 1943 Age: 28  
Gravesite: Staglieno Cemetery, Genoa, Italy: Joint grave III.C.31

#### ***Additional Information***

Parent unit: Royal Artillery  
Born: Cumberland, son of John and Rose Ada Foster, Workington, Cumberland  
With 6 Commando until 1943  
Op.Speedwell - POW about 25.9.1943 - executed Italy

### **James Patrick Shortall**

Unit: 2 SAS Rank: Corporal Number: 6464231  
Date of Death: 30th September 1943 Age: 24  
Gravesite: Staglieno Cemetery, Genoa, Italy: Joint grave III.C.31

#### ***Additional Information***

Parent unit: Royal Fusiliers (City of London Regiment)  
Born: Republic of Ireland, Resided London NW  
Op.Speedwell - POW about 25.9.1943 - executed Italy

Source: <http://www.specialforcesroh.com/browse.php>





## Cemetery Details

<b>Cemetery:</b>	FLORENCE WAR CEMETERY
<b>Country:</b>	Italy
<b>Locality:</b>	unspecified
<b>Visiting Information:</b>	The cemetery is permanently open and may be visited anytime. Wheelchair access to the site is possible, but may be by alternative entrance. For further information regarding wheelchair access, please contact our Enquiries Section on telephone number 01628 507200.
<b>Location Information:</b>	If travelling by road, from the A1 Rome to Milan exit at Firenze Sud and continue over the River Arno to the first set of traffic lights. Turn right onto SS67, direction Forli, and continue for 3.2 kilometres to the village of Girone. The Cemetery is signposted and can be found on the right hand side. If travelling by public transport, from Florence Central Station (S. Maria Novella), take the bus line 14A to the terminal at Girone. Florence War Cemetery is in Via Aretina, approximately 100 metres from the terminal.
<b>Historical Information:</b>	On 3 September 1943 the Allies invaded the Italian mainland, the invasion coinciding with an armistice made with the Italians who then re-entered the war on the Allied side. Following the fall of Rome to the Allies in June 1944, the German retreat became ordered and successive stands were made on a series of defensive positions known as the Trasimene, Arezzo, Arno and Gothic Lines. Florence, which was taken by the Allied forces on 13 August 1944, was the centre of the Arno line and the point from which the attack on the German Gothic Line defences in the Apennines was launched. The site for the war cemetery was selected in November 1944 for burials from the hospitals established in and around Florence but the greater part of those buried here lost their lives in the fighting in this area from July to September 1944. After the war, 83 graves were moved into the cemetery from nearby Arrow Route Cemetery, when it proved impossible to acquire the site in perpetuity. Most of these burials were from the fighting in the Apennines during the winter of 1944-1945. Florence War Cemetery now contains 1,632 Commonwealth burials of the Second World War.
<b>No. of Identified Casualties:</b>	1620

**This figure includes Foreign and Non-World War graves in CWGC care**

[Cemetery Reports](#)

[Cemetery Plans](#)

[Cemetery Photos](#)

[Search Page](#)

[Home](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Useful Links](#) | [Debt of Honour](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Credits](#)



## Cemetery Details

<b>Cemetery:</b>	STAGLIENO CEMETERY, GENOA
<b>Country:</b>	Italy
<b>Locality:</b>	unspecified
<b>Visiting Information:</b>	This cemetery is steeply terraced with numerous steps. It is necessary to climb the stairway to reach the CWGC Plots, which are on separate terraced levels connected by stairs. The 1914-18 Plots I and II are on Terraces 3 and 4, the 1939-1945 Plot (now known as Plot III) is on Terrace 6. (see layout plan). This cemetery is in the control of the communal authorities who reserve the right to close it at anytime without notice. The location or design of this site makes wheelchair access impossible. For further information regarding wheelchair access, please contact our enquiries department on telephone number 01628 634221.
<b>Location Information:</b>	Exit at the A12 autostrada at Genova East and follow the signs for the direction of Genova. The road leads down a steep hill through several tunnels. At the bottom of the hill turn right and follow the road for a short distance alongside the riverbed. Take the first bridge to the left and cross to the opposite side of the river and turn left. Due to the one-way traffic system it is now necessary to cross the river again. Take the first bridge to the left, then turn left at the opposite bank. Take the first right just past a very small bus depot. A large Italian communal cemetery is visible on the right. Parking is available outside the communal cemetery. Walk through the large entrance gate into the communal cemetery and follow the road straight ahead. Signs for 'British Cemetery' are seen on the right after approximately 300 metres.
<b>Historical Information:</b>	The Italians entered the war on the Allied side, declaring war on Austria, in May 1915. Commonwealth forces were at the Italian front between November 1917 and November 1918, and rest camps and medical units were established at various locations in northern Italy behind the front, some of them remaining until 1919. From November 1917 to the end of the war, Genoa was a base for commonwealth forces and the 11th General, and 38th and 51st Stationary Hospitals, were posted in the city. Staglieno Cemetery contains 230 Commonwealth burials of the First World War. There are also 122 Second World War graves, most of them garrison burials, others brought in from the surrounding country.
<b>No. of Identified Casualties:</b>	355

**This figure includes Foreign and Non-World War graves in CWGC care**

[Cemetery Reports](#)

[Cemetery Plans](#)

[Cemetery Photos](#)

[Search Page](#)

[Home](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Useful Links](#) | [Debt of Honour](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Credits](#)