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Mr X meets the Desert Fox

The two men in the dinghy could hear the sound of a powerful engine drumming towards them across the waves.

"Maybe it's a Catalina flying boat, coming to rescue us," said George Lane, with a chuckle. His companion, Roy Wooldridge, wasn't amused. "It's a German patrol boat," he replied grimly. "They must have spotted us."

They were less than a mile off the Normandy coast, and the grey light of dawn was enough to make them easily visible from the shore.

"Throw all the kit overboard!" ordered Lane, quickly ditching their cameras and other reconnaissance equipment into the sea. "Let's hide our revolvers. If they think we're just shipwrecked sailors we might be able to overpower them and steal a ride home on their boat."

They stood up in the dinghy and waved their arms as the launch came closer. But, instead of pulling up alongside as Lane had hoped, the boat circled them. There had been reports of British commando raids along the beach the night before and the crew was suspicious of these castaways in their navy dinghy. A squad of soldiers ran to the prow of the launch and cocked their Schmeisser sub-machine guns, ready to fire.

Lane and Wooldridge glanced at one another, then dropped their guns into the Channel and raised their hands in surrender. Even the debonair Lane had a heavy heart. Their immediate future looked pretty grim;

although they'd been captured in their army battledress and should be treated as ordinary POWs, the Germans would want to know what they were up to, floating so close to the Atlantic Wall. They would certainly be questioned, perhaps tortured, then shot as spies. But, as it turned out, Lane would cheat the firing squad and have one of the strangest encounters of the Second World War.

George Lane was a commando officer, but you wouldn't have found his name listed on any official army document. Officially, Lane didn't exist. He was part of a secret unit of men who had taken on new identities, false names and family histories. Lane was a member of X-troop.

Ever since the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, they had carried out a systematic persecution of Jews, Romanies, and others they considered racially inferior, and refugees had begun fleeing the country. But, once war raged across Europe, the occupied nations found themselves scrutinized and categorized too. Fearing for their lives, thousands fled to neutral countries, or to Allied nations, especially Britain. Wanting to strike back at the Germans, many of these refugees tried to enlist in Allied armies, often in the face of official suspicion - sometimes even ridicule.

One senior commander who was receptive to the idea of establishing an 'alien' unit in the British forces was Lord Louis Mountbatten. He recognized the value of recruiting fighters with inside knowledge of occupied territories and fluency in the languages. (Mountbatten might have been influenced by the fate

of his German-born father, Prince Louis Battenberg, who had been forced to resign from his post as First Sea Lord during the First World War, because of anti-German prejudice.)

In the spring of 1942, Mountbatten set up a new commando, No.10. They were known as Inter-Allied Commando, and like most commando units were composed of 10 troops, each with around 50 men. The troops contained Frenchman, Poles, Dutchmen and a host of other nationalities. But 10 Commando's strangest troop was made up of Jewish volunteers from Germany itself, or countries where German was the second language. Churchill described them as 'unknown warriors' and decided to call them X-troop, after the algebraic symbol for an unknown quantity.

The men of X-troop were expected to prove their loyalty to the Allied cause by taking on some of its most dangerous operations. In the middle of May 1944, Lane had been called to a secret meeting in Dover to discuss a covert mission to the Normandy beaches. He was ordered to lead a small group of engineers - known as *sappers* - onto the shore, and search for a new type of mine or explosive. British Intelligence suspected the Germans were installing this new weapon, following a freak incident a few weeks earlier. Bomber Command had made a daytime raid on some gun emplacements around Houlgate, a small town at the eastern end of *Sword Beach.* One of their planes dropped a bomb short into the surf, and the crew noticed that the blast had set off a chain-reaction

of explosions all along the beach. Bombers often carried cameras to record their raids, and when photos of the explosion were shown to Mountbatten's scientific advisor, Professor J. D. Bernal, he was shocked by what he saw.

For months, the Allies had been monitoring, probing and testing German defensive lines in Normandy, until they believed they had identified every possible threat to the invasion. Their research had been exhaustive. In 1942, the British Admiralty had asked the public to send in photos, postcards and tourist brochures of the French coast. Hundreds of thousands of images poured in, and had to be sifted through by cartographers.

Eventually every cove, stretch of sand and beach-hut was mapped, then cross-referenced with aerial photographs of the region to construct accurate charts of the whole Normandy area. Admiralty staff consulted an array of scientists to explain the geological structure of the beaches and coastland. They sought out the most detailed written records available, discovering to their amazement that the work of Caesar's Roman surveyors during the invasion of Gaul was still useful. They even took sand samples, to establish whether or not the beaches could bear the weight of tanks. Major Logan Scott-Bowden and his 'midget-submarine' team made several trips to collect these samples. They became old hands at dodging German patrols as they scraped away at the dunes. Every model of mine and beach obstacle had been carefully examined and the Allies were sure they'd

unearthed all the secrets of the German defensive capabilities. But the bomber photographs suggested otherwise. Perhaps the Germans had developed a mine that was detonated by vibration or magnetic attraction? If so, the invasion's landing craft might be at a greater risk than expected. The Allies had to know if such a device was buried on the Normandy beaches, so they sent X-troop to investigate. The expedition was known as *Operation Tarbrush*.

Lane could hardly have been a more exotic character. He was Hungarian by birth and his real name was Lanyi Gyorgy. Like all members of X-troop, he had taken a name that sounded English, but was similar to his own and easy to remember. If any X-troop commando was captured by the *Gestapo*, he would have to pretend to be a British soldier or risk identification, deportation and murder in a concentration camp. Lane spoke good English, but with a strong, lilting accent that baffled his superiors. They decided he should call himself a Welshman, in the hope that this would trick any interrogators.

Dashing and physically fit, Lane had been a water polo player for his country before the war broke out. He was already in England in 1939, studying at University, before dabbling in journalism. In 1943, he married Miriam Rothschild, a member of the British banking dynasty. His connections helped him enlist in the army and, on the strength of his abilities, he was rapidly promoted, until he won the right to wear the much-coveted green beret of a commando.

Eight *Tarbrush* raids were planned for the nights of May 15-18. The men were rushed across the Channel in a roaring MTB, a Motor Torpedo Boat. While the navy waited a few miles offshore, two commandos and two sappers took a *dory* - a small, powered boat - to within a few hundred yards of the beach, and made the last approach in silence, paddling a dinghy onto the sands.

The men had no idea what they were looking for - other than the fact it could be a mine. Normandy was littered with mines. Rommel had ordered his troops to lay over six million of them, all along the length of the Atlantic Wall. The defenders had a sinister variety to choose from. *Teller mines* were battlefield anti-tank charges that lay scattered all over the beaches; *S-mines*, or 'Bouncing Betties', as the troops called them, flew up a few feet before exploding, to cause maximum suffering to infantry; other mines had trip-wires, delayed fuses, and pressure catches. They came in a bewildering range of sizes and destructive capabilities.

Lane went ashore on May 15 and helped the sappers scan the beach with their metal detectors. All he found was a Teller mine that had been strapped to a stake, buried below the high-tide mark. He decided to recall his men and take it back to the scientists.

When he dropped the mine on the table back at base, the bomb experts were furious.

"You could have blown us all to pieces," they screeched. "It's unstable. Been underwater so long it's all corroded."

It was not a good start to the mission. Lane

returned on May 16, but a storm blew up and it was too rough to go ashore. On May 17 he went back for a third and final attempt, but his luck was about to turn sour.

Lane paddled in with his three-man team at around one in the morning and helped them unload their mine detectors. There was no need for him to leave the dinghy, as the sappers were carrying out the search, but Lane decided to join them in the reconnaissance patrol. He had an infrared camera with him, and was hoping to take some pictures of an anti-tank beach obstacle codenamed *Element C*.

When the party reached the dunes, the officers - Lane and Wooldridge - ordered the other men to drop back to the dinghy and stand guard, saying they'd return before three.

Only moments after the officers had stepped into the darkness, one of the men waiting by the dinghy saw a brilliant red flash among the dunes. There was a shout in German, then a terrible scream. Suddenly, a *star shell* flare exploded and the whole beach was flooded with light. The men hid the dinghy in the dunes, then ran to the water and swam out to their dory. Bullets were whizzing over their heads as they got its engine running and surged towards the MTB.

Lane and Wooldridge were still out on their moonlit ramble while all this was happening, and heard nothing of the beachside fracas. The first they knew of any trouble was when they doubled back to

the dinghy and found it missing. Glancing along the beach, Lane spotted a German patrol. He hugged the sand, but the patrol must have noticed some movement. They immediately opened fire with their *Gewehr 41* assault rifles. In all the confusion, another patrol along the beach began returning fire. Lane and Wooldridge found themselves caught between two battling enemy groups. After a few minutes of keeping their heads down, they crept into the dunes and waited until their stretch of the beach was deserted.

Lane had a signal lamp and he flashed a message out to sea, hoping the MTB was lingering in the Channel. But the crew had already waited for the dory to return to shore and search for the officers, without success. The MTB was back in British waters, and there was only one hour left before dawn.

Pacing around, trying to think of a plan, Lane stumbled across the dinghy. The two men pushed it out beyond the breakers, hoping a current would carry them to some safe port. But in the morning they heard the rumble of the German motor launch approaching them. Under arrest and racing towards the shore, Lane wondered if his wartime adventures were finally over.

Once the prisoners reached the quayside, they were separated and locked in cold, underground cells without food or water. The first German interrogator walked into Lane's cell and asked politely: "You do know we're going to shoot you, don't you?"

It was hardly an encouraging start to the interview. Amazingly, Lane's Welsh cover story was believed and

he concentrated all his energies on not reacting to the German he overheard - despite his fluency in the tongue. When the questioner fetched an interpreter, Lane had to go through the rigmarole of pretending he couldn't understand a word said between his captors.

Although he had removed the distinctive commando patches on his battledress, the Germans had carefully examined his clothes and could see the stitch marks.

"We know you are a member of the special forces," an officer said with a sneer. "And we have orders to shoot all captured commando saboteurs."

Thinking quickly, Lane explained that he wasn't a saboteur. He made up a story about being on a troop ship that had sunk in the Channel. The officer scoffed at this idea but was clearly intrigued. Instead of handing him over to *Gestapo* agents, he told Lane he would remain a prisoner of the *Wehrmacht*, the regular German army.

The interrogation went on for most of the day, with Lane sticking to his cover story. He was hungry and thirsty but his captors didn't maltreat him, despite being exasperated by his denials. Late in the afternoon, a man in a doctor's gown entered the room. Lane wondered if he was in for a new kind of treatment - he'd heard that crude, chemical 'truth serums' were used by some Nazi interrogators. But to his relief, the man only bound his wrists and blindfolded him.

The doctor must have been nervous or inexperienced, because he tied the blindfold too

tightly. It was so taut across Lane's nose he could see down the gaps around his cheekbones. He was led out to a waiting staff car, where he saw Wooldridge sitting in the back. Lane was helped into the passenger seat and pretended to fall sleep. With his head tilted back, he could study the route the car took and keep a track of the French road signs they passed. It would be vital to know his location in the event of any escape attempt. The last sign Lane read before the car turned through some gates and started up a long drive was *La Petite Roche-Guyon*.

The two men were bundled out of the car and untied. When Lane's blindfold was removed he saw they were standing before a great castle, built into the side of a cliff. There was a forest all around, and trees thrusting out from the rock face, on a level with the castle ramparts.

Lane tried to exchange a few words with his fellow captive but the guards ordered the men to be silent and took them off to separate cells. The castle's prison facilities were luxurious compared to the earlier, damp dungeon, and Lane was even offered a cup of tea. When he was left alone for a few minutes, he checked his cell door and discovered it was unlocked. Stepping into the corridor, Lane came face to face with a huge Alsatian hound. He quickly changed his mind about making a run for it and went back to his cup of tea.

His next visitor was a high-ranking officer who spoke perfect English. He shook Lane's hand and asked how he was feeling. On hearing that Lane hadn't

eaten for days, he called for some chicken sandwiches, much to the prisoner's delight.

"Now, if I were to introduce you to somebody I respect," the officer purred, "could I count on you to behave like an officer and a gentleman?"

Lane replied that he always acted like a gentleman, since he was one. He was immediately given soap and water to tidy himself up; the officer even provided him with a nail file.

He was led through a series of rooms until he reached a vast and opulently decorated ballroom. At the far end of the room, a slim man in a general's uniform was mulling over some papers. Lane had studied photographs of the German High Command and recognized the man at once. It was the master of the Atlantic Wall himself, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the legendary *Desert Fox*.

Lane was expecting Rommel to unnerve him by making his prisoner walk the length of the enormous room, but instead, the German master-strategist crossed over to meet his guest.

He was an impressive man, even at this late, weary stage in his military career. Rommel had fought for his country in the First World War, and had been awarded the Blue Max, Germany's highest military decoration. He had been a dynamic staff officer during peacetime, then emerged as one of the foremost panzer commanders of the Second World War, leading two divisions in Libya and Egypt - the feared *Afrika Korps*.

Rommel's sly but brilliant tactics earned him his famous nickname and a promotion to the rank of Field Marshal. At 50, he was the youngest German ever to hold the title.

During 1941-42, the Afrika Korps rampaged across the desert sands, almost striking as far as the city of Alexandria in Egypt. But there had been a string of defeats since then, and all that remained of the Afrika Korps panzer formations were piles of rusting scrap lying among the dunes. The glory days of the Desert Fox were long behind him, as he struggled to shore up the army's western fortifications. Though he worked himself into the ground for Germany, many of his army colleagues suspected he thought the war unwinnable. Because he rejected the crazed optimism of the Nazi leaders, his relationship with Hitler was often tense. If not an active participant, Rommel was at least aware of the army plot to remove 'the Fuhrer' that was gaining momentum in early 1944. It would eventually cost the Desert Fox his life.

Lane, Rommel, a few members of his staff and an interpreter sat down at an ornate table.

"So you're one of these gangster commandos?" Rommel began.

Lane countered this by saying he thought the commandos were the best soldiers in the world.

"So you are a commando?" sighed Rommel. "And a saboteur too, I suppose?"

Lane replied that he wouldn't have been invited to the castle if Rommel really thought he was a saboteur.

"You call this an invitation, do you?" Rommel snorted.

"Of course," replied Lane, through the interpreter. "But also a privilege," he added, with a smile.

Rommel hooted with laughter and Lane realized he'd broken the ice with the Field Marshal. They began to chat about Montgomery and his plans for the invasion, like two old friends meeting for a fireside chat. For 20 minutes, Lane managed to sustain a conversation with the man who knew more about the German positions in Normandy than anyone else. All the time he protected his true identity from the Field Marshal's cunning questioning.

"Where will the English attack come?" Rommel finally asked him.

Lane did his best to sound convincing when he answered that the best place for the British to land would be the closest point across the English Channel. Rommel seemed to agree with him and went on to discuss his wider thoughts on the war and the *Wehrmacht*'s occupation of France.

"The French have never been so happy in their lives," Rommel joked. "Their country runs perfectly."

Lane replied that he couldn't comment on this as he'd been blindfolded since arriving in France.

"That was an unnecessary precaution," Rommel snapped at his assistant. "I promise you will be fairly treated for the rest of your incarceration."

With this, Lane was cordially dismissed and returned to his cell, hardly able to believe what had just happened.

Wooldridge was also interviewed by the Field Marshal, but the audience only lasted a few moments. Perhaps he lacked Lane's impudence which seemed to amuse Rommel so much.

In keeping with Rommel's promise, both men were processed by the German authorities as regular POWs and treated well. When Lane finally arrived in his German prison camp towards the end of June, he was obliged to report to the English senior officer, Colonel Euan Miller. Realizing that Miller would never be taken in by his 'Welsh' drawl, Lane admitted to being a commando from X-troop on covert operations. The colonel was impressed by his story of meeting Rommel, and after he'd checked Lane's identity he managed to send a coded message out of the camp to his superiors back in England.

Lane had remembered the road sign he'd passed, close to the entrance to Rommel's HQ. Around July 17, the Field Marshal's staff car was strafed by a *Typhoon* fighter-bomber, and the driver was killed. Rommel was so badly injured in the crash he had to surrender his command. Three months later, he was implicated in a plot to assassinate Hitler, and offered the choice of committing suicide or standing trial for high treason. If convicted, his family would be ruined and disgraced, and all his financial assets would be seized. To safeguard his loved ones, he killed himself by swallowing a cyanide capsule.

There is no documentary evidence to prove whether the air strike on Rommel was a result of the information Lane provided to Miller, or simply a

stroke of good luck for the Allies. But his meeting with the Field Marshal remains one of the most fascinating encounters of the war.

Lane was awarded the Military Cross for his services to X-troop. As for the mystery mines and *Operation Tarbrush*, army scientists decided the explosions along the beach must have been caused by unstable Teller mines. Perhaps they got the clue thanks to the rusty relic Lane had brought them, despite having trembled in horror at the time.