

Lieutenant Eugène Francis **LEVENE**

(born Eugène Francis **FELINQUE**)

Brookwood Memorial to the Missing 1939-45 - panel 2, column 2.



Photos – Nigel Felangue

Eugène Levene was born Eugène Francis Felinque, in Liège, Belgium on 14 June 1912, the only son of Belgian parents Eugène Felinque and Marie-Louise Felinque (née Marquet). His parents separated when he was six years old and his mother, Marie-Louise Felinque, later married an Englishman, David Levene and both she and her son then took his surname and British nationality.

From the age of 7, Eugène attended the Collège Saint-Servais, a Jesuit school, in Liège, but he was unsettled in his teens and when still only 15 years old he ran away to sea and worked his passage on a tramp steamer to Port Melbourne, Australia. On arrival, he travelled around the state of Victoria before taking a job on a sheep station in the bush. His mother eventually traced him there and persuaded him to return to Europe which he did, and gained his matriculation at the Collège Saint-Servais in 1928. Joining the family in London, for a while his wanderlust was assuaged by trips to Spain, as a King's Scout, in 1929 and 1930. But taking advantage of his adopted nationality he then sought further adventure by joining the British Army, enlisting as Private Eugène Levene in 1930 with the service number 5435364 and joining the 2nd Battalion, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry (DCLI). He spent eight years in the regiment, he served in his battalion's Machine Gun Company at one point and excelled at rifle shooting, being selected to compete in the King's Prize, the prestigious 100-yard shooting competition at Bisley in Surrey. His service included garrison duties in Gibraltar from 1932 to 1935, from where it seems he visited Spain on a number of occasions, developing some ability with the spoken language and putting to use his talent as an artist. His artistic skills also including the making of brass vases and plates.

Levene returned with his battalion to England in 1935 and then specialised in telecommunications, leaving behind infantry duties and becoming a switchboard operator. In 1935 he married a young English telephonist, Isobel Norman and in 1936 they had a daughter, Jacqueline, while Levene was serving at Deepcut Barracks in Surrey. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, Levene made clear his sympathies for the Republican cause. An intriguing account, told to the family by Vera Atkins and supported by an unusual photograph of Levene in the company of Spanish soldiers, suggests that he was, at some point, involved in 'observer' or 'intelligence gathering' activities during this period. Atkins believed that this may have been for Britain's SIS, since she recalled that Lawrence Grand of SIS's Section D later recommended Levene to SOE, but no record remains of such involvement.

Deciding to use his skills in civilian life, Levene left the Army in 1938 to work as a Continental Trunk Operator with London Telecommunications of the GPO in London. But as war loomed, he was recalled to the colours in August 1939 and rejoined the 2nd Battalion, DCLI. He remained only a month with his old regiment before his switchboard skills saw him transferred to the Royal Corps of Signals in September and he was immediately sent to France with the British Expeditionary Force. He served at BEF headquarters in Arras and was there on

10th May 1940 when the Germans invaded France. Five weeks later he was evacuated to England on 18 June 1940, four days before France capitulated. Back in Britain, Levene took a basic W/T course and from September 1940 he spent 15 months with 4 Command Signals, part of Western Command, Home Forces. While there, his son, Nigel, was born in December, 1940, the family home then being in West Hampstead, London.

Levene continued to receive good reports and, having reached the rank of Sergeant, he applied for a commission in September 1941. In November 1941 he was passed with a Grade A rating by an Army Selection Board and although his preference was to transfer to the Royal Tank Regiment, he was instead posted to the Royal Artillery. He briefly joined the 50th Anti-Tank Training Regiment in January 1942 before being sent for his officer training with 122 Officer Commission Training Regiment of the Royal Artillery. Upon completing his training he received his commission as a Second Lieutenant, with the new service number 235918, and joined the 4th Reserve Anti-Tank Regiment. After only seven weeks, however, he was posted to another headquarters job, as a Publications Officer with Eastern Command, based in Colchester. Arriving there in August 1942, Levene found himself as far as ever from the active service that he sought. In October 1942 he therefore volunteered for SOE and was accepted for assessment and training by French Section the following month.

Sent to STS 5 at Wanborough Manor, near Guildford, Surrey in December 1942, Levene successfully passed Preliminary School and was cleared to continue to his Group A paramilitary training. He went to STS 23a, Meoble Lodge, Morar in Scotland, but he injured his shoulder during physical training and was obliged to take sick leave until 9 January 1943. When fit, he resumed his paramilitary training in mid February 1943 at Meoble Lodge and also at STS 24a, Inverie House, Knoydart.

Progressing to his parachute training at STS 51 in Cheshire, Levene was accompanied by only one other successful trainee from Party 27W and they therefore joined a group of Belgians and one Free French candidate. No record remains of Levene's attendance at a Group B Finishing School at Beaulieu.

On completion of his training, Levene's first mission was as part of a sabotage party charged with carrying out a *coup de main* operation, SCULLION, against the synthetic petrol plant at Les Thélots, some 5 kilometres to the north of Autun (71) and 85 kilometres south-west of Dijon. Mining the Autun oil shale field that extended some 30 kilometres, the factory was extracting several thousand tons of oil each year – essential to the enemy's war effort – and putting it out of commission was considered vital. He was selected to join the operation by Lieutenant (later Captain) Hugh Dormer.

For the operation, Levene was given the codename LAWYER, the field name Jacquot and a false identity of Eugène Francis Nizet and joined Dormer (officer commanding the party); George Demand also of Belgian parentage; Jean Larcher, one of two Mauritian brothers to join F Section; William "Barry" Knight and Jack Hayes, a sabotage specialist who had already once parachuted into France as part of the CORSICAN operation.

The drop was made on the night of 18/19 April 1943 from a Halifax aircraft flown by Flight Lieutenant Gebik and his Polish crew of 138 Squadron.

At an altitude of just 500 all five men exited the aircraft safely, but Levene landed awkwardly, badly twisting an ankle, and Larcher's parachute did not fully deploy with the result that he descended too rapidly and landed heavily on his back, injuring his spine.

In assessing the situation, Dormer immediately concluded that Larcher and Levene could play no further part in the operation and he therefore escorted them to the road they would need to take and saw them off on their slow and painful way to Paris, some 290 kilometres distant. Fortunately, both the injured men spoke fluent French and were able to successfully make their way to the capital from where the SOE-sponsored 'VIC' escape organisation took over and passed them south, via Lyon and Perpignan, to the Pyrenees where they were guided across the frontier into neutral Spain. The journey was protracted, the two evaders were in France

for a month and it took another three weeks in Spain and Portugal before they returned to England, Levene arriving on 12 June 1943.

Back in France the SCULLION mission failed when the four remaining men, led by Dormer, found the Autun shale site too well-guarded and they, too, evaded back to Britain.

Despite the disappointment of his first mission, Levene was keen to volunteer for a second operation in the field, and although Dormer went back to Autun with a SCULLION 2 group in August 1943, Levene was deemed suitable for longer-term clandestine duties. His orders were to return to Paris, report to another 'letterbox' (safe house) there and then to join Paul Frager's expanding DONKEYMAN circuit as an arms instructor, based in the Yonne *département*. He retained the codename LAWYER, a slightly-amended false identity of Eugène André Nizet, and received a new field name as *Boniface*. This time, a parachute landing was not risked and instead he returned to France with five other agents on the night of 15/16 November 1943 in a Hudson aircraft of 161 Squadron, piloted by Wing Commander Hodges, commanding officer of the squadron, from RAF Tempsford.

The operation, codenamed CONJUROR, was organised by the double agent Henri Déricourt on the ACHILLE landing ground, nine kilometres north-east of Angers. Unbeknown at the time, Déricourt had made the operation known to the Germans who therefore had two of their Paris-based Bonny-Lafont criminal gang waiting to tail the incoming agents. Levene enjoyed temporary good fortune when, along with two others of the incoming agents bound for other circuits (Haim Gerson, an agent of SOE's DF (Escape) Section, and Commandant Henri Fille-Lambie of the BCRA), he made his own individual way to his destination. The three other agents, Lieutenants André Maugenet and Paul Pardi and Captain James Menzies (formerly Jean Mennesson), all took the same train to Paris, were tailed by the two Bonny-Lafont men and were arrested on arrival at the Gare Montparnasse.

In the event, however, Levene's luck had lasted no longer. The Germans were enjoying continuing success in arresting French Section agents and Frager's DONKEYMAN circuit was already seriously compromised to the extent that Levene fell into a trap when he reached the capital. When a man calling himself *Boniface* reached the safe house in Paris (at 45 rue des Acacias, 17^e *arrondissement*, close to the Arc de Triomphe) on 18 November 1943 the owner, a helper of Frager called Maurice Hewitt, was suspicious and sent him away, promising to meet the next day. Instead, Hewitt went straight to Roger Bardet, Frager's lieutenant, who expressed himself to be equally concerned, having received no word to expect the arrival of a *Boniface*. Hewitt therefore did not keep the appointment and went away for a few days. After he returned, on 29 November, *Boniface* called again on the 30th, revealed himself to be an agent of the Germans, and politely arrested Hewitt who was later fortunate to survive deportation to a concentration camp in Germany.

The circumstances surrounding these events have since been the subject of conjecture which has caused Levene's family considerable concern. The book 'Unearthing Churchill's Secret Army' suggests that Hewitt was arrested 'by the Gestapo accompanied by Levene' and 'The only conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Levene, who himself had been betrayed by Henri Déricourt, broke down under interrogation and assisted the Germans'. In giving this claim closer consideration, post-war interrogation of Roger Bardet (subsequently discovered to have himself been a double agent in the pay of Hugo Bleicher of the *Abwehr*) makes it clear that the Germans had replaced Levene with an agent of their own, a relatively common practice used by the enemy, especially if the arrested agent were a newcomer and not yet known to the people designated to receive and help him or her. The Germans' agent was Robert Alesch, an ordained priest from Luxembourg and one of the most highly-paid double agents used by the *Abwehr*. Bleicher, under interrogation by the French authorities, confirmed that it was himself who had arrested Levene, and who had then replaced him with Alesch to carry out the arrest of Hewitt. Oddly, neither arrest is mentioned in Bleicher's own account 'Colonel Henri's Story' of his wartime activities. There can therefore be no 'only conclusion' that Levene talked to his interrogators and betrayed others. On the balance of the available facts, it is instead more than likely that he did not do so and that Hewitt was already known to the Germans through the duplicity of Bardet. Remaining SOE records suggest that the enemy already had the house under observation as a result of

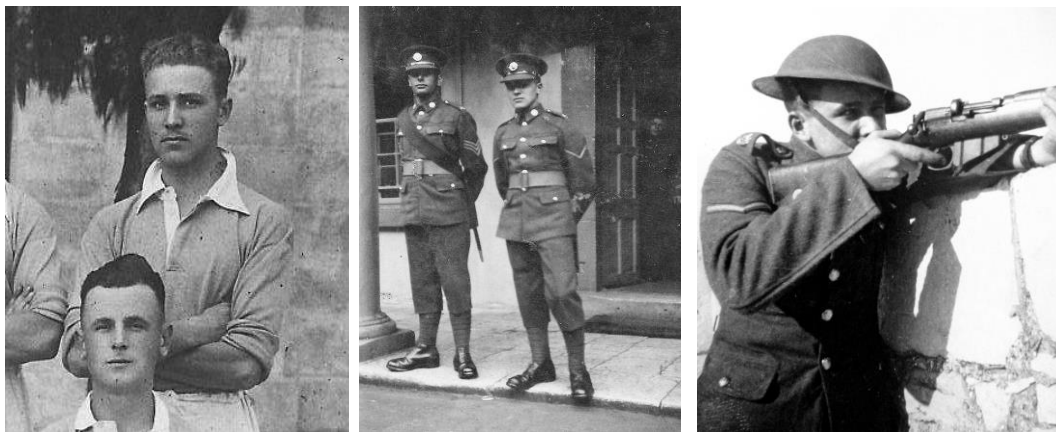
information received earlier and a more plausible explanation is therefore that Levene was arrested as he approached the house, possibly only the same day after landing.

Once arrested, Levene followed a similar path to other captured F Section agents. He was seen in the avenue Foch offices of the SD and Marcel Rousset noted him in the SD's cells at 3 bis place des Etats-Unis in the spring of 1944. He was also reported at Fresnes until, on or around 4 April 1944 Levene was transferred to KZ-Flossenbürg concentration camp in Germany with 14 other French Section agents.

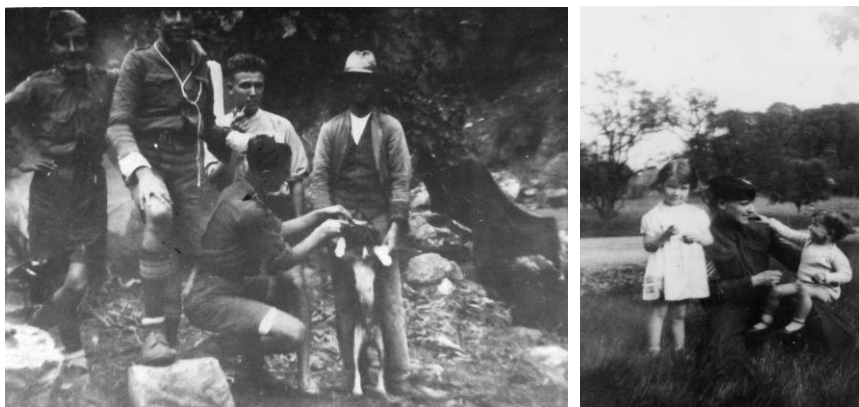
Levene remained in Flossenbürg's *arrestbau* before orders arrived from Berlin, almost a year after his arrival, for the executions of the remaining F Section agents, François Michel and Guy Biéler having already been executed in June and September 1944 respectively, leaving 13 of the original group of 15. On 29 March 1945 these remaining agents, including Levene, were executed by hanging. He was aged 32.

Though he had little opportunity to prove himself in the field, Levene was nevertheless awarded a posthumous Mention in Despatches by the British, recognising his courage in twice volunteering for SOE missions and his successful escape from France under difficult and painful circumstances.

In addition to his listing at the Valençay memorial, Levene is commemorated twice at the site of Flossenbürg. The first is one of several plaques inaugurated by the Association of Polish Veterans to victims at Flossenbürg. The second is a plaque, unveiled in 2007 on a wall adjoining the *arrestbau*'s yard, commemorating the 15 SOE agents executed there. Levene's two children, Jacqueline and Nigel, attended the ceremony.



Above: Levene while serving in Gibraltar with 2 DCLI, 1932-35. Photos – Nigel Felangue.



Above left: the mystery photo of Levene, apparently with at least two Spanish soldiers, probably taken in the 1930s; above right: with his two children in 1942. Photos – Nigel Felangue.



Above: STS 5 Wanborough Manor, Surrey, where Levene underwent assessment and initial training.
Photo – author's coll.



Above left – STS 23 Meoble Lodge and (above right) STS 24A Inverie House in Scotland, Group A paramilitary training schools.
Photos – David Harrison and author's coll.

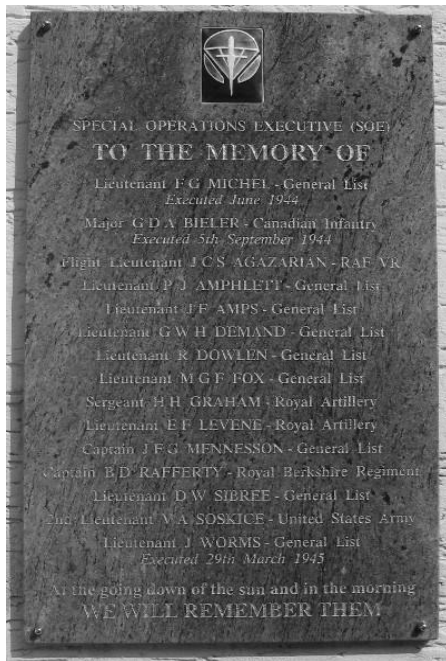


Above left: Captain Hugh Dormer who led the SCULLION operation. Photo – author's coll.
Above right: a Halifax of 138 (Special Duties) Squadron. Levene parachuted from this type with the SCULLION team. For his second mission, Levene was flown into France by Lockheed Hudson aircraft, below. Photos – author's coll.





KZ- Flossenbürg where Levene was held and executed in the *arrestbau* (above right).
Photos – author's coll.



Above left: the SOE memorial plaque at the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp museum. Photo – Guy Wiltfang; and above right: the plaque to 'Levens' and 8 [sic] comrades at Flossenbürg, created by the Association of Polish Veterans. Photos – Nigel Felangue.