

# SAPLING 7

**By Jon Cole**



**Badge of RAF 148 Squadron**

Late on 19th October 1943, a Halifax bomber of the RAF's 148 Squadron set off from its base at Tobra in Libya on the operation code-named 'SAPLING 7'. The aim of the operation – for a squadron that came to be known as the 'Balkan Air Force' – was to drop supplies and personnel to support British special forces and resistance groups in Albania.

This document is an attempt to piece together - from public, Internet sources alone - what can be determined about this ill-fated mission. It was written in three days just after its author's brief hospitalisation for a fever, during which he realised, feverishly perhaps, that this was a piece of work which he could and should do, in memory of the courage of all of those involved, whether in the aircraft or on the ground.

The author does not claim to be a professional historian: not every statement will have evidence, or a reference. Much is a matter of conjecture. There is some mystery about this operation, through the fog of war, and in a time and place of rapid and diverse movement as the Allies made inroads into southern Italy and towards the Balkans.

The author, however, does have a particular motive for writing this: his uncle was a member of the crew.

## ***Background***

This was an RAF mission to support the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) in Albania. It takes its name from that of one of the four teams of SOE special-forces personnel which were launched on the same day of August 1943 in two Halifax aircraft from Derna in Libya. The other teams were code-named Sculptor, Sconce, and Stepmother. Leader of the SAPLING team was Major Gerry Field.

In September 1943 Italy surrendered to the Allies. Previously it had been Italy which had taken possession of Albania, not altogether successfully, but now German forces were obliged to move in and did so with typically rugged efficiency.

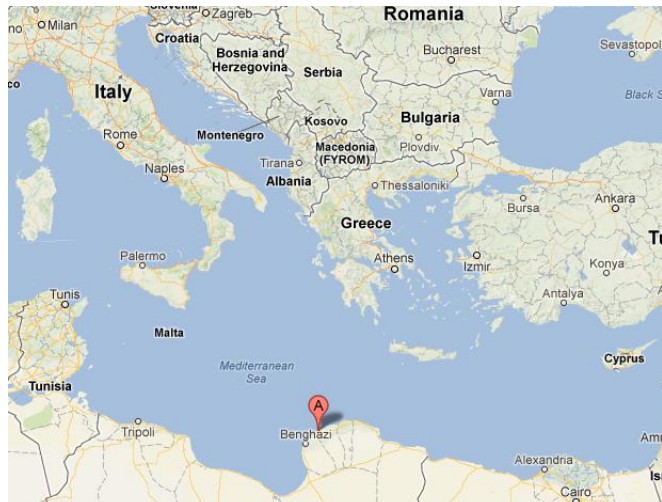
Together, the SOE teams - attached to mixed bands of Communist irregulars, Italian deserters, and Bulgarian stragglers - harried the occupying German forces by setting ambushes and organising raids on local enemy garrisons. Although none of the actions by itself led to any general collapse of the occupation, the Germans were obliged to waste precious resources at a critical time by strengthening an area which (despite Churchill's particular interest in it) had virtually no strategic value.

These teams needed supplies, of matériel and other provisions, and this was one purpose of the SAPLING 7 operation, a supply drop. It had a second purpose, to deliver by parachute two more SOE personnel into the area.

## ***Point of departure***

This was Tocrá, which lies on Libya's north coast close to Benghazi and with Egypt not far to the east. 148 Squadron moved to Tocrá in September 1943. Three Internet sources insist that Tocrá is in Italy, a probable confusion with Torca on Italy's Sorrento coast.

Anglo-American forces landed on the Italian mainland in September 1943, and by the end of October 1943 the British 8<sup>th</sup> Army had reached Brindisi in the south-east and the American 5<sup>th</sup> Army controlled Naples, but the Anglo-American landings at Anzio (to the south of Rome) did not take place until January 1944. If Tocrá had been the base for special-forces operations it is likely they would have been American rather than British. Only at the end of January 1944 did 148 Squadron move to Italy, to Foggia.



## ***The Aircraft***

Powered by four Rolls Royce Merlin engines, the Halifax Mark II heavy bomber had a maximum speed of around 270 mph, an initial climb of 750 feet per minute, a ceiling of around 22,800 feet, and a maximum range fully bomb-loaded of 1,100 miles, which would be extended to around 1,800 miles for lighter loads. The return distance from Tocrá to the target in Albania is roughly 1,200 miles, well within that range.



**Halifax Mk II heavy bomber**

### ***The Crew***

For this mission in Halifax HR674 the RAF crew were:

Flight Lieutenant William Ross Forester (pilot)  
 Flight Sergeant James Clement Cole  
 Flight Sergeant Harold Williams (air gunner)  
 Flying Officer Peter Raymond Flyte  
 Flying Officer Francis Jack Hunter (bomb aimer)  
 Flying Officer Edmond Frank Myers  
 Sergeant Peter Twiddy



**Inside a Halifax**

From the sources, it is not clear how other roles (navigator, engineer, wireless operator) were distributed. There is some evidence that Fl/O Flyte was the navigator. They carried with them, though, two other individuals -

Captain Alfred Careless, Royal Armoured Corps, attached to the Special Operations Executive (SOE)

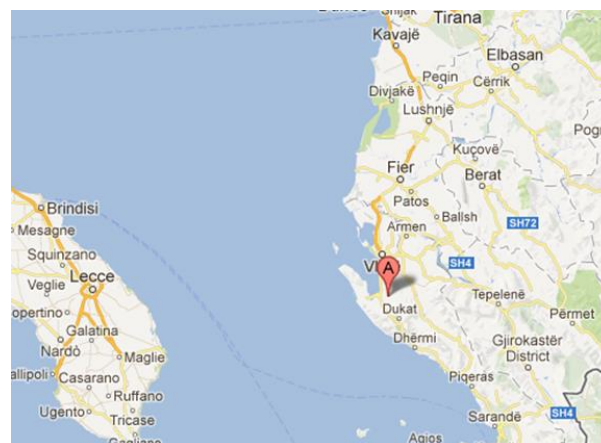
Signalman David William Rockingham, Royal Corps of Signals, attached to the SOE.

The presence of SOE personnel highlights the special-forces nature of the mission. Supplies to SOE officers on the ground would be dropped by an aircraft with SOE personnel on board. It is unlikely that the SOE Signalman would have acted as wireless operator if he were to be dropped later into the target area, unless perhaps if there were to be ground-to-air communication in the process of the supply drop.

### ***The Drop Zone***

In the hills above the harbour town of Vlore, on the Adriatic coast of southern Albania and opposite the toe of Italy, lies the village of Tragjas. This was bandit country. The village was abandoned in 1944, burnt-out, but for a time in 1943 it served as a base of SOE operations.

Behind and around Tragjas the terrain is mountainous, with many rivers and streams. SOE personnel had established themselves in this village, but in October



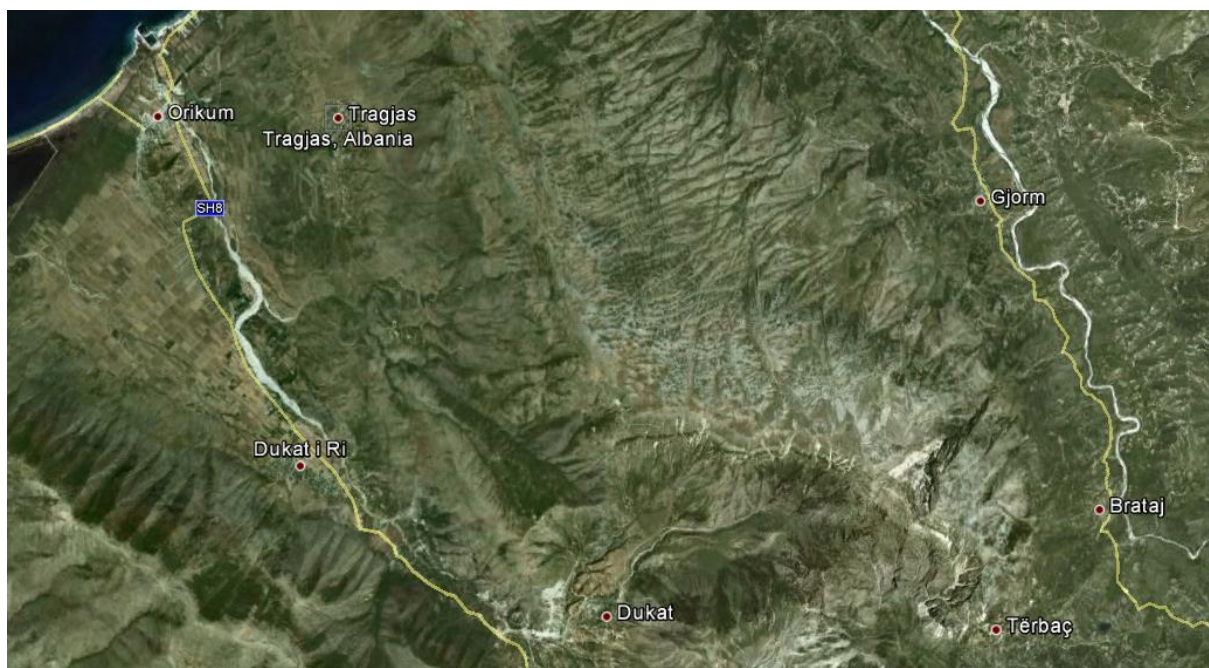


1943, frustrated by the ineffectiveness of the partisans, they withdrew to the bare mountainside above it. Flat ground in the area seemed suitable for supply drops. It is not clear from the sources, though (but may be more clear in SOE records), which drop zone was selected for SAPLING 7. But can we use other information to estimate where that drop zone may have been? This is a satellite view of the general area:



What might have been the angle of approach? That, would be a matter of geography but also of other risks, such as the locations of German batteries, whether along the coast or inland. And, there would be considerations of access, to get supplies in and out, and of people: if resistance personnel lived in a community, the zone might be fairly close to home, so that their absence would be short-lived and less liable to be noticed.

For now, just notice the strip of brownish ground above the village of Dukat:





There is a clue in a briefing made by the pilot, William Forester, to his commanding officer. It seems that he was aware of the physical dangers of operating over this drop zone, and gave his CO a sketch map of it. In describing his exit strategy, Forester made a statement which in context is chilling -

*'Climb quickly, left handed or else'.*

### **The Crash Site**

As we know, it was the 'or else' that happened. We have evidence of where that happened, the crash site.

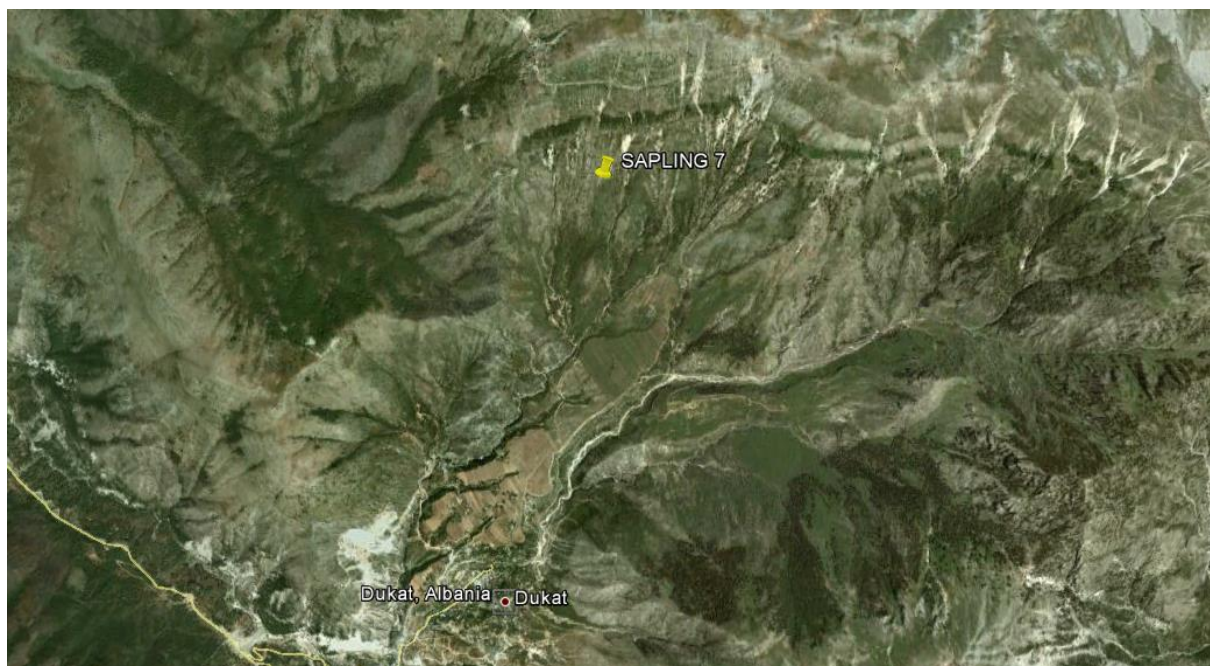
A later report from the reception party stated that the aircraft appeared to 'catch fire' in the air and then to strike a hillside at position 40°16 North, 19°34 East near Dukat about 16 miles south-south-east of Vlore.

The village of Dukat is surrounded by precipitate mountain terrain, of which this photo gives some idea. To the north, a strip of relatively flat land leads through a valley north-east into a bowl in the mountains. The view from above of the valley and its mountains resembles the profile of a champagne cork.

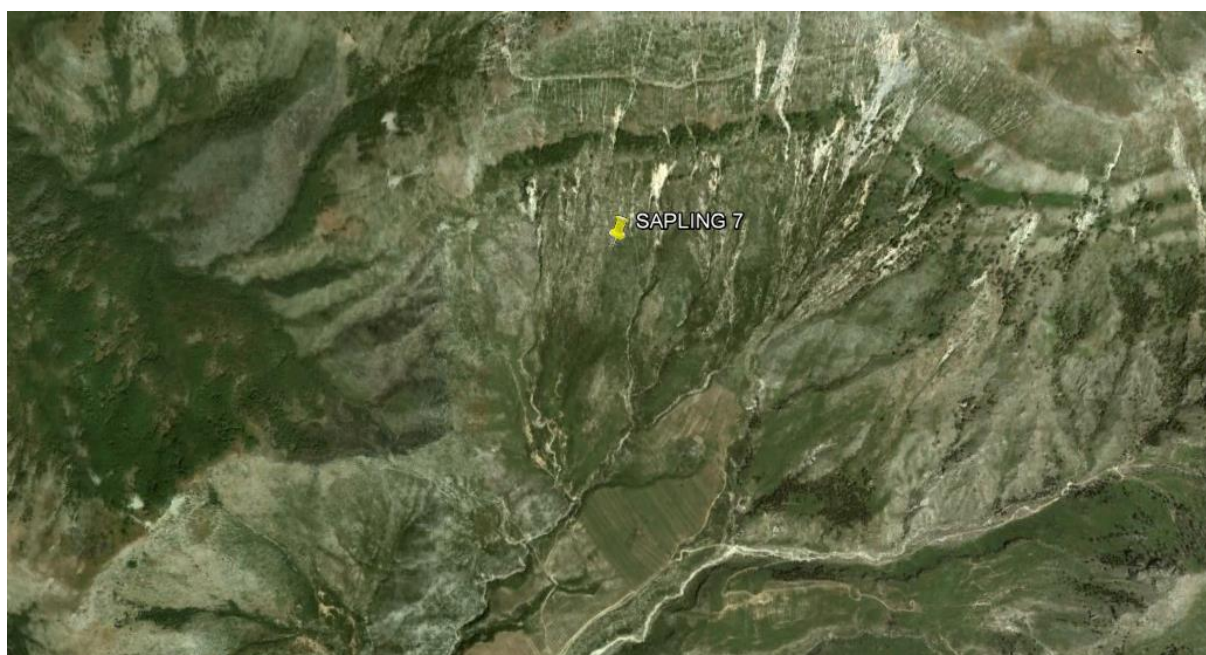


The satellite view below is of that 'champagne cork', plus two significant features:

- a marker of the centre of the location given by the reception party as the crash site. Without further detail, that could be roughly half a kilometre either way
- a staircase-like depression in the mountains to the north-west of the valley.



This closer view may make that 'staircase', on the upper left, more clear:



An aircraft approaching from the south-west into that valley, not too far from the village of Dukat, and not excessively far from the SOE base above Tragjas, would have an exit route up that staircase, to the left, the direction indicated by the pilot, William Forester. Miss that, for whatever reason, and you hit the mountain.

That, is one possible scenario. It could well be proved wrong by further evidence from SOE and other records, but from Internet sources alone it looks feasible. For whatever reason, the pilot missed the only relatively safe way out of the 'champagne cork'.

### ***Too low and too late***

At this point, we should introduce evidence which gives a new light on the events of that night of 19/20<sup>th</sup> October 1943. It comes from a book by Roderick Bailey published in 2009.<sup>1</sup> Its value here is that it records the reminiscences – and often the words – of SOE officers who were members of that reception party. Most relevant here, is this:

'Sixty years later Austin DeAth still remembered the scream of the engines as the Halifax, coming in too low, tried, too late, to clear the mountain.'

There was an obvious reason to come in low, to keep supplies together and undamaged in the drop. In France, SOE agents and equipment were regularly dropped from an altitude of only 400 feet. For this operation it must have been a matter of balance: go in low and that is good for the drop, but bad for your chances of climbing out of that valley; go in higher and your chances of survival are better but the reason you are there, the reason why you have flown from one continent to another, disappears in a tangled mess of crates and damaged equipment scattered over the valley floor.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Wildest Province: SOE in the Land of the Eagle*, Roderick Bailey, 2009. Relevant excerpts from this book have been quoted by others on the Internet.

That valley floor may have had something to do with the pilot's estimation of his altitude. Its elevation rises about 150 metres from the point of entry to the foot of the staircase. Coming in at a fair speed, in the dark over sparsely-inhabited countryside, it would be easy to set an altitude at the beginning of the supply-drop run which was reasonable but which at the point of the turn was fatally low.

And then, only an expert in the terrain could give the judgment of what 'too low' was. A SOE officer on the ground would be that expert, but – even if there were wireless communication between the aircraft and the ground, for which there is as far as I know no evidence – he would perhaps not have the time or opportunity to influence the judgment of the pilot above him and events as they happened, all too quickly.

But 'too late'? That is true with hindsight. But the pilot had none of today's technology to help him; the manoeuvre he was attempting after what – for all we know – had been an already perilous flight, in a large and heavy aircraft,<sup>2</sup> would be difficult enough for a light aircraft today. The air-flow and other local conditions inside a shape as unusual as the champagne cork could be unpredictable and unsettling. And, he had little more than a kilometre of open ground over which to do the job and get out. It was a dangerous mission, as the pilot had indicated to his commanding officer, and it took the utmost courage to undertake it at all.

There is also the note in the reception party's report that the aircraft 'caught fire' before it crashed. This implies that it was not already on fire as it began its run, and that something may have happened at a critical point in that run. Lacking further evidence, we can only guess that – if this report is correct, and there were no other potential light-source (a glint of moonlight perhaps) – either there flared up a fire already started (for example, by a hit from a coastal battery) but previously invisible to the reception party, or something new and devastating occurred. What could that be? This can be only guesswork. There may have been an onboard accident, perhaps in the process of attempting to drop supplies, or maybe the sudden upward manoeuvre put an intolerable strain on the aircraft's structure, particularly on the engines which were remembered by Austin DeAth as 'screaming'. If fire there was, then that would be yet another distraction for the pilot at his most critical moment.

### ***The Aftermath***

The head-on crash into a mountain-side must have been entirely devastating. If there were already fire on board, then one can imagine its effect on an aircraft with fuel left for the return journey and supplies on board which would include munitions and explosives.

It was quick, and there were no survivors.

Debris must have littered the mountain-side. Major Field – according to his own statement in Bailey's book – 'went down' to bury the dead. This might imply that he came from some higher point, perhaps across from Tragjas, or more likely that the debris and the dead had fallen some way down the mountain.

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<sup>2</sup> I have no note of whether supplies were actually dropped, though there is evidence that they were not, from the partisans later grumbling that their supplies had been lost. So, one might conclude that the pilot had aborted the drop (perhaps for a second attempt) and was now attempting an already dangerous manoeuvre with a heavily-laden aircraft. But there could be an effect either way. Either the aircraft was still too heavy to make the leftward and upward dogleg turn, or losing its load could give it a 'bounce' which would affect its behaviour, in this case fatally.

Precisely when Field 'went down' is unclear from Internet sources. One can imagine that – on the spectacular failure of such a mission, maybe resulting in a fireball which would have been seen for miles – the reception party may have scattered, only to return when it was safe to do so. When he did find himself in a position to bury the dead, he also found that the partisans proved more interested in looting and 'only an Italian officer and 2 wop soldiers and 2 old men helped me'.

It is important to note, however, that he did bury *at the site* at least some of the remains that he found.

Ten days later, he wrote: 'The partisans have stolen half my kit ... When SAPLING 7 crashed they stood about and would not help me to dig graves ... joking and grumbling that their material was lost and that there were no parachutes for them to buy ...'<sup>3</sup>

Why were there no parachutes? There could be several answers to that:

- *There were no parachutes in the first place.* This is most unlikely, not only as ludicrously unsafe practice but also because there were two SOE personnel on board who were – in the second half of the mission – to be dropped to join the SAPLING SOE team. This can be assumed from Bailey's remark that these two were 'both set to work with Field.' In terrain such as this, without space to land the aircraft, how else were they to arrive if not by parachute?
- The parachutes had been picked up by the partisans before Field 'went down', and their grumbling was only play-acting. Possible.
- *They had already been used.* The author has indulged in much feverish speculation about this, but there is no evidence for it;
- *The crash was so devastating that not even a parachute survived, at least in 'buyable' condition.*

The last option is most likely, in the author's opinion (though, from reading the literature, he could be easily convinced of the second). This was an obliterating, head-on crash, with effects which those who have seen what happens to aircraft in head-on collisions, such as those of 9/11, might imagine.

But, graves were dug and dead were buried. Of the 9 bodies, however, only three were identified, presumably again due to the violence of the crash. These were the bodies of RAF Flight Sergeant Williams, and the two SOE men, Captain Careless and Signalman Rockingham.

That the SOE personnel were still on board at the time of the crash is evidence that the crash occurred during only the first part of the mission, before they could themselves be dropped to join the SOE team. So, where would the aircraft be heading next? If it had succeeded in climbing the staircase out of the 'champagne cork' valley, then it would be heading directly north-west, for the angle of that staircase tends in that direction. Directly to the north-west lies the village of Tragjas and the SOE base, and it would be in that area that the SOE personnel would be parachuted in. This is further evidence that the valley above Dukat was the intended drop zone.

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<sup>3</sup> The 'to buy' is odd. Would the partisans hope to buy parachutes – useful material – from the SOE? Or does it mean that they would hope to use their sale of the parachutes to buy something else? Meanwhile, this statement supports the idea that the aircraft crashed fully loaded.



But why were only these three bodies identified? The answer, probably, is that this was due to their locations in the aircraft. Williams, as air gunner, would be well back from the front of the aircraft, and the other two were passengers, presumably seated in the body of the aircraft. In other words, all three were probably away from the front, and it would be the rest of the RAF crew who bore the brunt of a head-on crash.

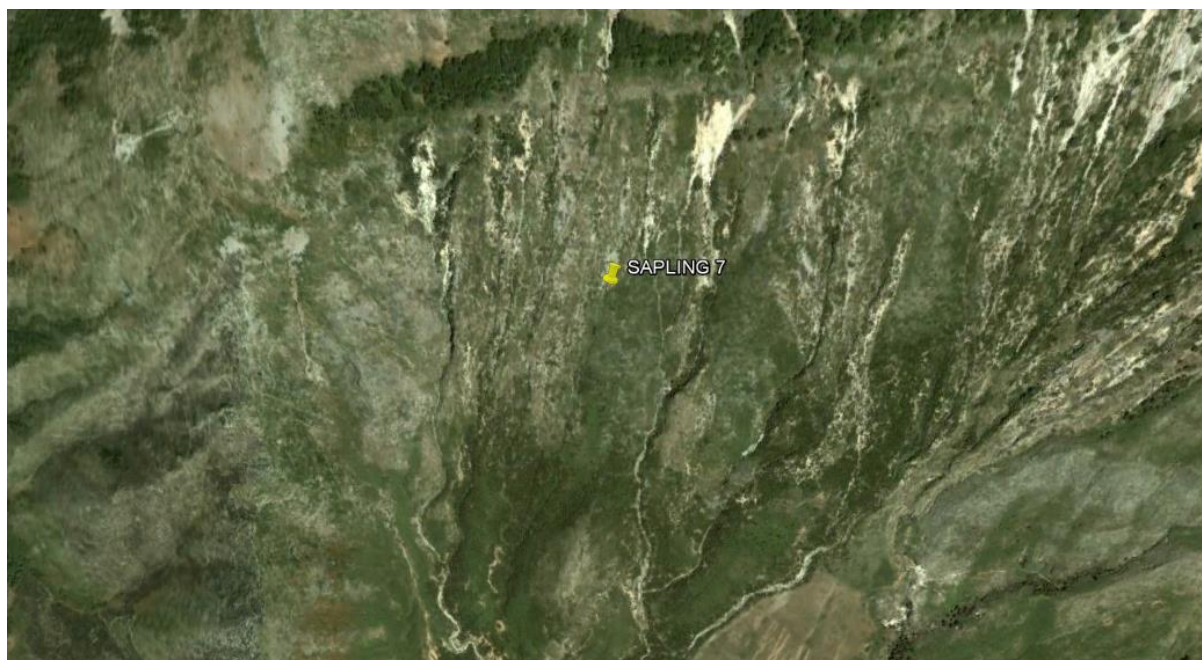
The remains of the three identified men were eventually buried in the Memorial Cemetery in the capital of Albania, Tirana. The other members of the crew are remembered in the Alamein Memorial, Egypt.

### ***Finally***

The grief of the families of those who lost their lives in this ill-fated mission can only be imagined. A mission such as this will always be perilous. There is the relatively mundane flight for a few hours over water, with the constant drone of Merlin engines, rattles from the wind, creaking of a loaded aircraft, followed by a growing anticipation and watchfulness as the aircraft approaches the coast of the target country, now known to be occupied not by the Italians but recently by the Germans, with a range of defence ahead which would not be entirely predictable.

Then, the geography of the target was difficult and dangerous. In the days before satellites much might be guesswork, however informed by reports from the ground. It may be significant that the pilot could offer to his commanding officer only a 'sketch map'.

This is suggested to be the location where the SAPLING 7 mission met its premature end:



If comfort can be given to those families even now, nearly 70 years later, then it can be only that their loved ones met their end quickly, very quickly.

### ***A personal note***

Flight Sergeant James Clement Cole was my uncle, the eldest of seven children. There has long been some mystery about how or even whether he met his end.

There is little doubt in my mind now that he was buried by Major Field and 'an Italian officer and 2 wop soldiers and 2 old men' on that mountain-side above Dukat in Albania. He was 28 years old.

If so, his view is a pleasant one, and here it is, taken from a point less than a kilometre south-east from the crash site around the rim of the 'champagne cork':



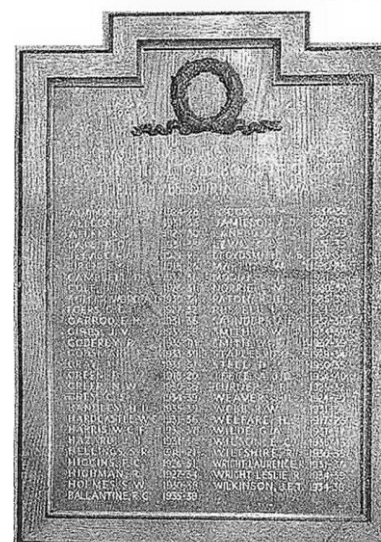
It is a pastoral scene which gives no indication of the trauma which occurred over it. But it is also the sort of countryside for whose peace the Allies fought. Nearly 70 years later, one can only admire the fortitude of those who would set off on dangerous missions such as SAPLING 7 into the territory of a brutal enemy.

James Clement Cole is remembered elsewhere. His name appears on a memorial displayed in his old school - Henry Thornton School, Clapham. This memorial has now disappeared and the nearly unintelligible picture of it here is from a school magazine issued in the summer term of 1951. Its plaque stated:

**IN GRATEFUL AND HONOURED MEMORY  
OF ALL THOSE OLD BOYS WHO LOST  
THEIR LIVES DURING THE WAR**

This is an extract from the magazine:

'The War Memorial plaque which now hangs on the wall of the main corridor at the School was the centrepiece of

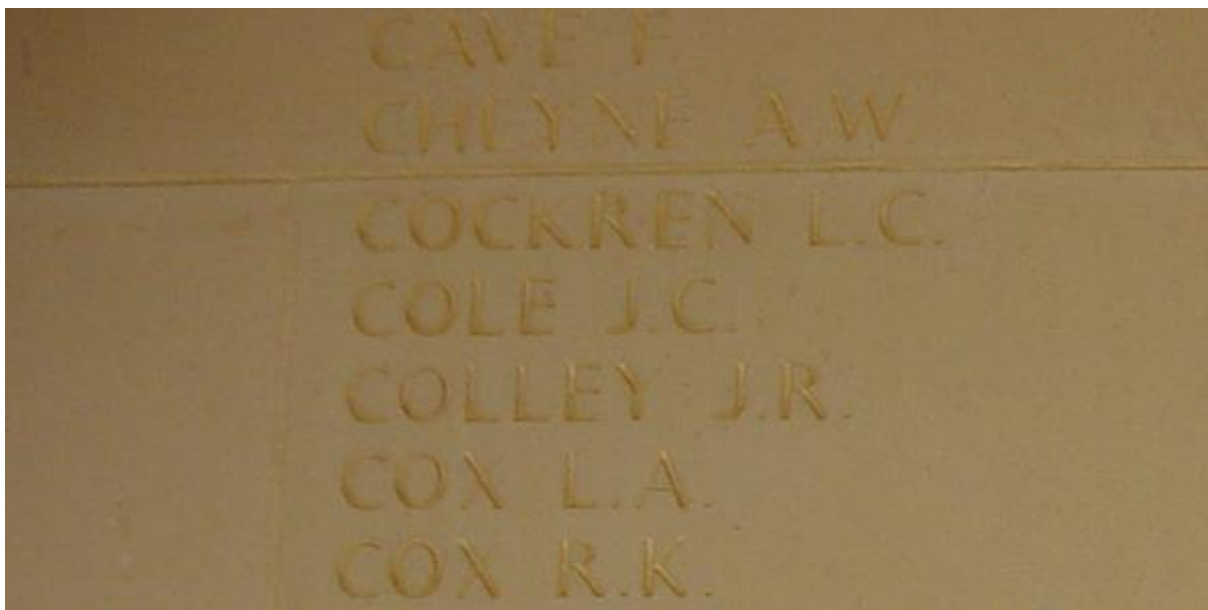


the short ceremony held in the Main Hall on 19th December last [i.e., 1950], attended by the next of kin of many of the fallen and a large number of Old Thorntonians. The plaque, subscribed for by members of the [Old Thorntonian] Association and relatives of the dead, is of plain oak, engraved with the fifty-three names, surmounted by a laurel-wreath in bronze, and was presented on behalf of the Association by Mr. C. E. Jeremy, Vice-President, and accepted on behalf of the School by the Headmaster, Mr. W. D. Evans. Mr. Evans ... said that it would be erected in the main corridor, through which the daily life of the School flowed, and he hoped that the boys would look at it and remember what it meant and what it stood for.'

His formal, military memorial consists of an entry in the register of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission -

Name	Rank	Service Number	Date of Death	Age	Regiment / Service	Service Country	Grave / Memorial Reference	Cemetery / Memorial Name
<b>COLE, JAMES CLEMENT</b>	Flight Sergeant	1263656	20/10/1943	28	Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve	United Kingdom	Column 269.	ALAMEIN MEMORIAL

and an entry on column 269 of the Alamein Memorial, of which this is a photograph:



What I have written in these few feverish days may be wrong in part or in whole, but it is a job which eventually I had to do, and which I have attempted with the few tools at my disposal. Finally there is Peace.





## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Mick McCann of British War Graves for the Alamein Memorial photographs, delivered at lightning speed:

<http://www.britishwargraves.co.uk/>

Roderick Bailey's book, cited above, was especially valuable for the reminiscences of SOE officers themselves, and for historical/political background.

Other information came from:

<http://warandgame.com/2010/10/19/soe-albania/>

<http://ww2total.com/WW2/Weapons/War-Planes/Bomber-Planes/British/Halifax-bomber/Handley-Page-Halifax.htm>

<http://www.specialforcesroh.com/roll-21314.html>

[http://www.hambo.org/lancing/view\\_man.php?id=119](http://www.hambo.org/lancing/view_man.php?id=119)

<http://www.roll-of-honour.com/Surrey/ClaphamHenryThornton.html>

<http://www.ww2talk.com/forum/war-air/35256-148-special-duties-squadron-loss-oct-1943-a.html>

<http://harringtonmuseum.org.uk/Aircraft%20lost%20on%20Allied%20Forces%20Special%20Duty%20Operations.pdf>

<http://ourmanintirana.blogspot.co.uk/2005/11/armistice-day.html>

There is also a Yahoo group whose focus is on the operations of 148 Squadron around this time. And Thank God for Google.