

## Title: **The Last of the Cockleshell Heroes**

Author: William Sparks with Michael Munn

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Review: John Kirk-Anderson

Operation Frankton, the story of the Cockleshell Heroes, is well known.

In December 1942, five two-man folding kayaks, or cockleshells, were launched from a submarine off the coast of German-occupied France. Three crews were quickly lost but the remaining four men paddled up the River Gironde to place limpet mines on German ships in Bordeaux Harbour.

Of the ten British Commandos who paddled away from the submarine, only two survived. The leader, Major Blondie Hasler and his co-paddler, Marine Bill Sparks, escaped overland to Spain.

This story was first told in a film in 1955, followed by *Cockleshell Heroes*, written by C. E. Lucas Phillips. The story was largely Hasler's, and told in dashing style. These men were heroes, and 1950s Britain needed all the heroes it could get.

There the story would have ended, but for the reduction in a war veteran's pension.

In 1988 former Marine, William Sparks, was forced by financial difficulties to put his Distinguished Service Medal up for auction. His prized medal had been presented to him by King George VI for his part in Operation Frankton, and its auction thrust the last survivor of the Cockleshell Heroes into the limelight.

One result of the renewed interest in the raid was the publication of this book.

*The Last of the Cockleshell Heroes*, written by William Sparks, tells the story of the operation in a different style to the previous book. The facts are the same, but the story is told from a very different viewpoint. Sparks recounts the hardships and humour of training, and the desperate moments of the mission, during which he shared a kayak cockpit with Major Hasler. The slow, nerve-wracking escape through occupied France is told honestly, and when despair creeps in, it is not hidden behind a stiff upper lip.

The difference in the two men's station in life was illustrated in a tense moment soon after the raid. Hiding in a Frenchman's house, the pair were expecting to be betrayed:

There was a load knock at the door. We looked at each other in horror.

"Germans!" I said.

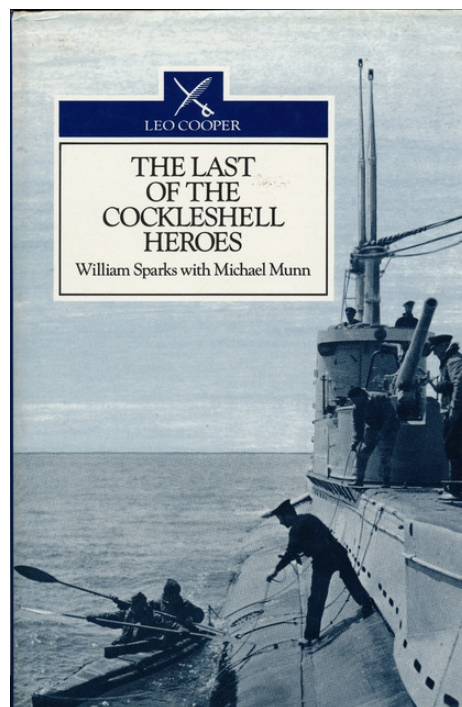
"Go and see." Blondie said.

"Why me?"

"Because I'm a Major."

Bill Sparks' respect for his commander is clear. It was largely Hasler's determination that ensured the success of the raid and his fluent French which assisted their escape.

The raid nearly did not happen. After exchanging torpedoes with a German U-boat, their submarine was unable to launch the kayaks due to rough seas. On the following night the sixth boat was holed



preventing it from being launched. They struck a tide race, something new to them all except Major Hasler. Two men were lost in the rough seas, eventually swimming ashore where they were captured, tortured and executed.

The next tide race capsized another boat and the two paddlers were towed close inshore before they were left to their fate. "The orders had been plain: no man's jeopardy should put the mission in vain." Sparks recounts. One body was washed ashore, the other was never found. A third boat was almost discovered by a sentry, separated from the group and later holed. The crew were captured and shot.

After many close calls, including nearly being attacked by a line of fence posts - in the dusk they looked like advancing German soldiers - the two remaining crews placed limpet mines on several moored ships. Hasler and Sparks were alongside a frigate, placing a mine below the water line, when a sentry shone his torch down onto their backs. Waiting for a bullet, Sparks released his magnetic clamp, allowing the camouflaged kayak to drift away. The sentry followed their progress along the hull with his torch, his hobnail boots ringing loudly. The kayak drifted under the flare of the bow, out of the sentry's view, where it stopped again. Remarkably, the German lost interest and wandered away, and the rattled commandos planted another mine, to teach him a lesson.

Re-joining the other boat, they escaped downriver before sinking their craft and heading off into the unknown where the other crew were soon captured and shot.

This book brought into sharp focus the harsh realities of this operation. The commandos, while very well led, were trained only to the minimum standard required to complete the attack. Their survival and escape were not a priority. The escape plan was weak, with their only hope being to stumble into contact with the French Resistance for help. The tough calls that had to be made to complete the mission are well described. When Hasler ordered that two freezing members of his party were to be left to attempt to swim ashore, he knew they were going to die. He sobbed as he paddled away into the darkness.

After the war Sparks fought, unsuccessfully, for medals to be presented posthumously to his comrades who died. He did manage to get a monument built at the barracks of the Royal Marines Special Boat Squadron, which was unveiled in 1983.

The medal won by the last of the Cockleshell Heroes was auctioned at Sotheby's for 31,000 pounds.