

Major-General  
Count Albert-Marie  
Edmond Guérisse  
GC, KBE,  
DSO



# HERO *of the* MONTH

By Lord Ashcroft

Belgian Major-General Albert Guérisse organised escape routes for Allied pilots under the alias of Patrick O'Leary. In 1968, he revisited Dachau, where he was imprisoned TED WEST/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY

Major-General Count Albert-Marie Edmond Guérisse enjoyed an extraordinary military career operating with great courage behind enemy lines and, when eventually captured, showed equal bravery to resist torture for months on end. He was one of the many operatives acting for Britain during World War Two to benefit from the fact that he was fluent in French, while serving in German-occupied France.

Albert-Marie was born in Brussels, Belgium, on April 5, 1911. Little is known about his early life but he read medicine at Brussels University before joining a Belgian cavalry regiment as a medical captain in 1940, just a few months into the war. He took part in the 18-day campaign that May that resulted in the German occupation of his homeland. Guérisse's resourcefulness matched his gallantry and he successfully managed to escape to England via Dunkirk.

He was soon commissioned into the Royal Navy under a pseudonym: Lieutenant Commander Patrick Albert O'Leary. The aim was that he would operate in France as a secret agent using a

French-Canadian identity. Guérisse readily embraced his new and dangerous role and was initially tasked with landing agents in southern France. He served in HMS *Fidelity*, a converted French trawler, which was responsible for a series of clandestine operations in the Mediterranean.

In April 1941, after landing at Collioure – just north of the French-Spanish border – Guérisse became involved in an abortive mission to save Polish officers trapped in France. As he tried to make his own way back to his ship, he was captured by Vichy French police and imprisoned near Nîmes. In prison, another secret agent, Captain Ian Garrow of the Seaforth Highlanders, was able to make contact.

### Running the line

While being transferred to another gaol, Guérisse, ever resourceful, escaped. One of his first stop-offs was a hospice, where he was aided by nuns. After that, he devoted his time to remaining in France and helping to organise an escape route for Allied POWs and evading airmen.

However, such a group already existed and Guérisse was able to link up with Garrow and the escape organisation under

the auspices of MI9. Garrow had already been tasked with operating the escape line and Guérisse was only too happy to help.

At this point, Guérisse changed his name to 'Joseph Cartier' and threw himself into his new role. A network of safe houses and routes was set up and the operation expanded hugely under his guidance. When Garrow was arrested, Guérisse took over the leadership of the operation and the escape route became known as the 'Pat' or the 'O'Leary' Line.

To inspire confidence and to keep up the pressure for everyone to work at full capacity, Guérisse made frequent trips between the Dutch border and southern France. He personally escorted many escapees and, whenever a mission was particularly dangerous, he would insist on undertaking it himself.

In December 1942, Guérisse and his team helped Garrow escape from Mauzac prison. Garrow then made his way to Toulouse, where he was aided by the French Resistance, before being guided across the Pyrenees mountains into neutral Spain and to the British Consulate in Barcelona. Garrow returned to England in February 1943.

*“Guérisse personally escorted many escapees and, whenever a mission was particularly dangerous, he would insist on undertaking it himself”*

Konzentrationslager *Natzweiler*  
Gefangenen-Eigentumsverwaltung

Häftl.-Nr. *14590*  
*100152 34795*

Effekten-Verzeichnis

Ar-den *Engländer* -Häftling *O'Leary Patrick*  
geb. am *5.3.10* zu *Quebec* Eingel. am: **23. Juni 1944**

Hut/Mütze	<i>11</i> Binder	Füllhalter	
<i>1</i> Paar Schuhe/Stiefel	<i>1</i> Halstuch/Schal	Schlüssel	
<i>3</i> „ Strümpfe	Paar Handschuhe	Feuerzeug	
„ Gamaschen	Arbeitsanzug	Rasierzeug	
<i>1</i> Mantel, Sommer/Winter	<i>3</i> Handtuch	Aktentasche	Wertsachen:
<i>1</i> Rock Kittel	Manschetten-Knöpfe	Koffer	
<i>1</i> Hose	<i>1</i> Briefftasche m. Papier.	Paket	
<i>1</i> Weste	Inv.-Vers.-Karte	Verschiedenes:	Taschenuhr, gelb/weiß mit Kette, gelb/weiß
<i>1</i> Pullover Strickw.	Arbeitsbuch	<i>3 Bücher</i>	Armbanduhr, gelb/weiß m. Lederband/Metallband
<i>4</i> Hemd	Wehrpass	<i>1 P. Hausschuhe</i>	Ehe-, Siegel-Ring, gelb/weiß mit Stein
<i>3</i> Unterhose	Ausschlusschein	<i>9 6. Tücher</i>	
Kragen	Drehbleistift		

erkenne vorstehende Eintragungen als richtig an: *P. A. O'Leary* K. L. *3. Juli 1944*  
(Unterschrift des Häftlings) den **3. Juli 1944**

Für die Richtigkeit:  
Gefangenen-Eigentumsverwaltung:  
*M. Scharführer*

Bemerkungen:

The list of Guérisse's personal effects (as Patrick O'Leary) while a prisoner at Natzweiler Concentration Camp AROlsen ARCHIVES

HERO OF THE MONTH

Garrow, like Guérisse, had enjoyed an incredible war. In June 1940, at the time of the Dunkirk evacuation, he and four of his men had been cut off. Stuck behind enemy lines, they decided to head south and try to get back to Britain via Spain. They eventually walked some 700 miles to Marseilles, which at that point was not under German control. Realising there were hundreds of other escapees, Garrow decided to set up a help line so that Allied servicemen could "live and fight another day".

**Scarlet Pimpernel**

To many, Guérisse was 'the Scarlet Pimpernel' of World War Two. However, the expansion of operations brought an increased risk of betrayal. In March 1943, the 'line' was betrayed by a double agent and Guérisse and others were arrested. Time and again he was subjected to inhumane treatment and relentless torture.

Incredibly, he survived these horrors and was freed from his fourth and final concentration at Dachau – where he had been sentenced to death – along with all the other inmates at the end of the war. Guérisse was awarded the GC under his pseudonym O'Leary on November 5, 1946. The final words to his lengthy citation provided a telling insight into the selfless nature of this fearless and remarkable man:

"In March 1943, [Guérisse] was betrayed to the Gestapo by a member of his group. Arrested, he was put to many forms of torture in an attempt to make him reveal the names, whereabouts and duties of the other members. He was put in a refrigerator for four hours, he was beaten continually, but never did he disclose information which could be of profit to the enemy. After more ferocious experiments the Germans gave him up as hopeless and sent him to a concentration camp where he was once again a victim of torture. He was a prisoner in Mauthausen, Natzweiler, Neubremm and finally Dachau. He nearly lost his life in the Neubremm quarries, when he was beaten insensible.

"Throughout his time in prison, Lieutenant Commander O'Leary's courage never faltered. Numbers of prisoners have given evidence that his moral and physical influence and support saved their lives.

"On his liberation from Dachau, Lieutenant Commander O'Leary refused to leave the camp, where he had been made 'president' of all the prisoners (including some thousands of Russians),

until he had ensured that all possible steps had been taken to ease the lot of his fellows. He was then given the opportunity to return to his family, but he insisted on proceeding to France, to trace the surviving members of his organisation, and to help them in any way he could.

"From the time of inception to the end of the war, Lieutenant Commander O'Leary's group was responsible for the rescue and successful return of over 600 British and American officers and men. It is now known that over 250 owe their safety directly to Lieutenant Commander O'Leary, whose fortitude and determination matched every task and risk."

Guérisse was also credited with "setting up" an organisation that helped Allied POWs and others – although some experts in the field of clandestine operations consider this inaccurate as it did not do full justice to the work of Garrow, who had already established an escape line before Guérisse joined the team. Guérisse never claimed to be an official Special Operations Executive or MI9 agent, but he happily worked with both.

Two documents detailing the repatriation of Guérisse/O'Leary from Dachau in 1945 AROLSEN ARCHIVES

2819  
VIP

INQUIRIES - MORE SERVED

NAME O'LEARY, PATRICK ALBERT (Corded ✓) Det'ty BRITISH  
(Lt. Comdr - BRITISH MILITARY INTELLIGENCE AGENT)

ADDRESS DACHAU LOCATION \_\_\_\_\_

SOURCE AND DATE G-2 SHAEF, 5 MAY 45, ARCHD.

ACK. Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

REQUEST DISPATCH BY AIR TO PARIS

ACTION DATE (46 2050)

INQUIRY FORWARDED TO 6 ARMY GROUP PER - 5-89178 DATE 5 MAY 45

REPORT RECEIVED FROM: 7 ARMY CPX-19117 DATE 17 May 45

REPORT FORWARDED TO \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_

INQUIRY COMPLETED (DATE) \_\_\_\_\_ INITIALS \_\_\_\_\_

NOTES: \_\_\_\_\_  
left Dachau about 5 May 45  
PARIS 20/5/45

REAR/G/438. SECRET 90

G-5 Div,  
Displaced Persons Branch,  
Supreme H.Q. A.E.F. Main.

Subject : DACHAU Concentration Camp.

Reference telephone conversation this morning, SMITH - MACCALLAN.

- It is confirmed that this H.Q. is most anxious to have the following persons (believed to be in DACHAU concentration camp) brought to PARIS forthwith.
  - 2819 Lt.-Col. Patrick Albert O'LEARY
  - 2896 Thomas Gilmore GROGME (perhaps posing as P/O George GOODWIN)
  - 2818 STOREHOUSE
  - 2817 SHEPHERD
- These persons are British agents who worked for departments of the British Military Intelligence. The last named two are S.O.E. agents.
- All four will be accommodated and appropriately disposed of by this H.Q. on arrival in PARIS.
- It is confirmed that these four ex-PWs should report to Major D.R. DARLING, at the Grand Hotel du Palais Royale, 4, rue de Valois, PARIS, Telephone No. GUT 9647.
- It will be appreciated if this H.Q. can be informed immediately of their arrival.

P.S. MacCallan  
Major G.S.  
for Lt.-Col. G.S.

I.S.9 (W.E.A.) Rear H.Q.  
c/o G-2 Div, O.I. Sub-Div,  
S.H.A.E.F. Main,  
B.L.A.  
Tel. S.H.A.E.F. Main, Ext. 2104.

5 May 1945.

Copies to : D.D.M.I. (FW), M.I.9  
O.C. I.S.9 (W.E.A.) Adv. H.Q.  
Major D.R. DARLING, I.S.9 (A.B.)

G-5 DIVISION  
MAIN  
Date: 26/5/45  
No: 29647/25411

5/5/45



Guérisse received his GC from King George VI in an investiture at Buckingham Palace on November 19, 1946, just two weeks after his decoration was formally announced.

Brigadier Sir John 'Jackie' Smyth, the VC recipient and author, described Guérisse as "a most fabulous character, who was in turn soldier, doctor and secret agent. Just as truth is said to be stranger than fiction so the exploits which won him the George Cross are more hair-raising than any of the Scarlet Pimpernel."

### 'Cold' courage

Awards were bestowed on Guérisse thick and fast. As well as being the recipient of the GC and Distinguished Service Order from Britain, his other decorations included the Légion d'Honneur and the Croix de Guerre from France, the Polish Krzyż Wojskowy (Military Cross), the Medal of Freedom with Gold Palm from the United States and the Order of Leopold from his native Belgium.

Those who had helped Guérisse were also decorated, including Garrow, who was awarded the DSO; Lieutenant Thomas Groome, from the Intelligence Corps, who was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire; and Louis Nouveau, who was awarded the George Medal.

It should never be forgotten, of course, that women played a key role too as secret agents. Three of these courageous agents, Violette Szabo, Odette Samson and Noor Inyat Khan, were all decorated with the GC. All three were brutally tortured after capture and only Samson survived the war.

Guérisse was not the first, nor last, secret agent who found it difficult to adapt to a peacetime job after such an extraordinary wartime role. However, he rejoined the Belgian Army under his own name in

SOE extraordinaires: Guérisse (third left) with Odette Sansom (to his left) and Captain Peter Churchill (her left) outside Buckingham Palace after receiving their awards from King George VI in 1946. The children are Samson's three daughters  
ALAMY



Major Albert Guérisse with the Belgian United Nations Contingent in Korea, 1953 PATRICK GUÉRISSE

1946 and, the following year, married a British woman, Sylvia Cooper-Smith, who, after bearing him a son called Patrick, predeceased him.

In April 1951, Guérisse served in Korea as a medical officer and at one time was attached to the British 29th Brigade. Typically, he was decorated for saving the life of a Belgian soldier. Later he was in charge of medical services for the Belgian Armed Forces and for NATO personnel in Belgium. His remarkable career came to an end in 1970 when he retired with the rank of major general. He was appointed to an honorary knighthood in 1979.

Guérisse died in Waterloo, Belgium, on March 26, 1989, aged 77. By then, he is believed to have amassed some 35 decorations. Before his death, his numerous awards earned him the unofficial title of the "most decorated man alive".

*"Before Guérisse's death, his numerous awards earned him the unofficial title of the 'most decorated man alive'"*

In *One Step Further: Those whose gallantry was rewarded with the George Cross*, Marion Hebblethwaite wrote: "But what of the man himself? He combined the gentleness and calm of the doctor with the ruthlessness of the secret agent, but he was also a charming friend and colleague. He held strong beliefs, had immense qualities of leadership and loyalty and finally courage in the face of extreme adversity."

I do not own the Guérisse medal group, but I researched his remarkable life while writing *George Cross Heroes*. My respect for his gallantry has no bounds as he repeatedly carried out what I like to call "cold courage" in that he knew he was constantly endangering his own life by taking huge risks to help others.

It is incredible that the actions of just one man resulted in hundreds of lives saved. His bravery must never be forgotten. **BW**

## GEORGE CROSS HEROES



Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His third book on gallantry *George Cross Heroes* was published in hardback in 2010 and is now available in paperback. For more information, visit [georgecrossheroes.com](http://georgecrossheroes.com). Lord Ashcroft's VC and GC collection is on public

display at the Imperial War Museum, London. For more information, visit [iwm.org.uk/heroes](http://iwm.org.uk/heroes) and details about his VC collection may be found at [lordashcroftmedals.com](http://lordashcroftmedals.com). For more information on Lord Ashcroft's work, visit [lordashcroft.com](http://lordashcroft.com). Follow him on X (previously, Twitter): @LordAshcroft

