

CHAPTER TWO

Resistance Caching Strategy

Early in their existence, working members of the Resistance discovered that the best weapons cachers were farmers and ex-smugglers, not necessarily in that order. The detection technology of the times was such that it was very difficult for the enemy to locate a well-placed, well-hidden cache.

However, the Nazis sometimes displayed some rudimentary cleverness as they went about their business. In an account told by an English officer (who saw no correlation between free and unencumbered ownership of firearms and effective general resistance to tyranny), a retired French colonel had about twenty hunting rifles in his personal collection stored in a chateau outside of town. All were duly registered at local police headquarters as required by law. Had the Gestapo waited until he started distributing the rifles, they might have made some real trouble for the old war-horse and located several members of the local Resistance in the process. However, a sharp-eyed German sergeant noticed the list and drove immediate-

ly out to the farm to confiscate the weapons.

As the Brit tells the tale, the German experienced some difficulty gaining entrance into the colonel's gun room. By the time he did, a fourteen-year-old grandson had pulled all of the bolts from the weapons and thrown them in the lake. (It was lost on the English soldier that the Germans already had plenty of weapons and were not confiscating the rifles for their own use, but to keep them from the French. Therefore, in spite of the outcome, the German purpose was served as a result of the sergeant's drive to the country.)

The Englishman's account concludes with the philosophical deduction that while men are indeed killed as easily as deer with hunting rifles, the English government could not have resupplied the rifle owners with nonstandard ammunition for their weapons even if the bolts had not been thrown in the lake, so neither side gained an advantage as a result of the private ownership of weapons.

In fact, private ownership of weapons was not, insofar as one can determine from contemporary sources, much of a factor in the conduct of the Resistance. Apparently a very few illegal, unregistered pistols were held by the Communists in their various city cells, but they were not of much impact. At the outset of hostilities, all of these went immediately into individual caches. They came out piecemeal for specific purposes or were, as was generally true, augmented by English supply drops. The few shotguns farmers may have owned were too few and ineffective to be much of a military factor.

One would think that with millions of men of the French army under arms before its general collapse, along with the debacle at Dunkirk, that hundreds of thousands of unregistered, untagged weapons would have been floating around France. Apparently, this was not the case. One account does relate that an obscure

French corporal wished to distribute military supplies to the general population immediately after Dunkirk but was thwarted in his efforts by a small-town mayor. (Perhaps, as often happens today, his honor wanted mainly to avoid problems and keep the city running smoothly, even if under a dictatorship.)

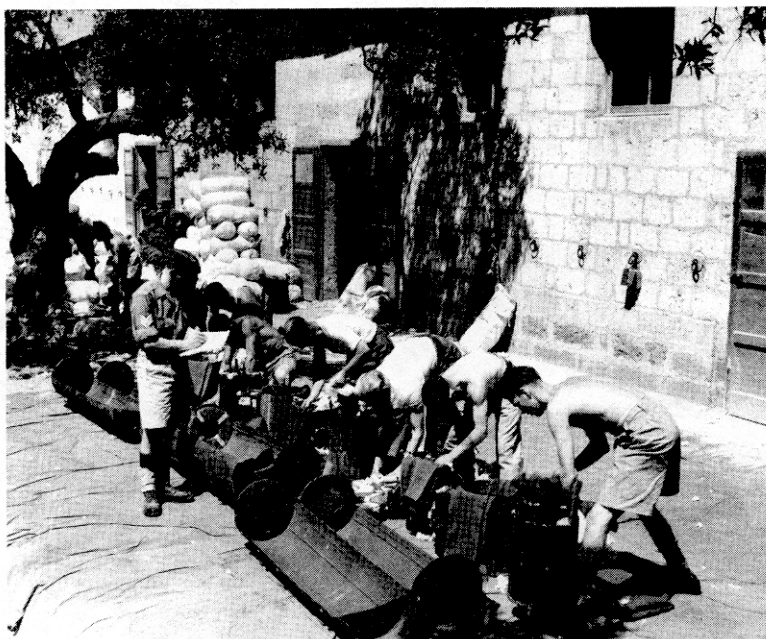
The majority of weapons utilized by the Resistance



British Sten guns along with extra magazines are packed into cache tubes for delivery to the Resistance. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London, England.)

came from England and were shipped covered with molten Cosmoline and wrapped in heavy paper. Ammo was sent in hermetically sealed cases. After some trial and error, explosives were delivered in sealed aluminum cans or dipped in a waterproof coating and wrapped in paper. (C-4 is very stable, even without a package to protect it.)

On the other hand, storage technology was so primitive that the Resistance spent a great deal of time finding locations where storage was feasible without deterioration of the weapons, ammunition, and explosives. Resistance cachers found it was best and easiest if they removed the portion of supplies they needed for



Small arms, ammunition, and clothing are packed into cache tubes, which are then packed three each into drop tubes. A master sergeant records what goes where. (Photo courtesy of Imperial War Museum, London, England.)

immediate action from the aluminum cylinders and resealed the remainder intact for burial. Supplies sent to them were packed so meticulously that they found repacking was only possible if at least 20 percent of the goods was removed.

Resistance members used petroleum-based sealant to reseat the aluminum tubes before they went into

the ground. This method was only modestly successful. Brand new military supplies shipped in their sturdy original wrapping or coating lasted reasonably well in short-term caches. (Short-term for the Resistance was from one to three months.) Underwater caches were tried off the coast of Brittany with only limited success. At least one container leaked, ruining all of the contents very quickly. After the war, the Allies estimated that only a few tons of materiel came in over the beaches (as compared to thousands of tons in Vietnam).

Personal Caches

Really clever caching schemes were developed when individual Resistance members took single weapons to their homes or places of work. These locations were characterized by false ceilings, special compartments between walls, compartments between floor joists in roof alcoves, and other such hiding places.

As a general rule, finding a good place for one's weapons, a few magazines, or some ammunition was not a significant problem. However, early in the war, one particular characteristic of C-4 caused almost insurmountable problems.

The material gave off a particularly strong odor of almonds. It was a distinctive, almost oily smell that permeated any structure in which the explosive was stored, including barns. Later in the war, when manufacturing techniques were improved, the blocks were coated with paraffin and put into small, more airtight containers. Until then, anyone entering a cache house could and would inevitably detect the presence of explosives.

Unless the arms were immediately deployed to the end user, they were cached—without unwrapping or degreasing—in their newly issued condition, and the

ammunition was almost always cached separately. (Separate storage made sense when the weapons were so encrusted with Cosmoline as to be unusable.)

Caches of weapons were maintained in numerous locations throughout the region. The first question asked of suspects by the Gestapo was always, "Where are your weapons hidden?" Resistance members were always careful to know only one or two cache locations. As a rule, one of these was their own personal cache, consisting of a single weapon and some ammunition. In a case of absolute necessity, that cache could be revealed without jeopardizing the supplies of the entire region. (Some Resisters undoubtedly went to the ovens knowing exactly where a cache or two of weapons were hidden, which may account for the surprise discoveries unearthed from time to time today.)

Regional Caches

Larger, regional caches were almost always made in the countryside. Weapons were placed underground at measured distances from a fence or tree in worked ground. Suspicious digging was easier to camouflage in a plowed field. At times, caches were made in ponds, cesspools, and septic tanks; at the bottom of rain barrels; under barn floors; in horse stalls; under haystacks; and wherever else clever farmers could devise to keep the weapons safe from the Gestapo's steely eyes. Later, the survivors claimed that virtually every French farmer who had a mean stallion buried cases of supplies in the horse's stall. German soldiers knew about mean stallions and were content to peek through the panels of the stall as they passed by.

All animal pens were considered good places in which to place caches. A rich, luxurious coating of chicken manure, for instance, provided excellent camouflage for cases containing Piat mortars. Reports were

circulated that rabbit pens and goat mangers were often supported on full ammo cans. Pistols and submachine guns were placed in granaries, wood boxes, outhouses, butter churns, stored farm machinery, manure heaps, or just hung in bags from barn lofts.

Farmers also cached weapons in hollow trees, in root cellars, under garage floors, in hedge rows, in chimneys, in hollow areas in stone walls, under foundations, and underground right in the middle of a road. Cylinders full of weapons were often transported in honey wagons, manure spreaders, loads of firewood, bags of grain, and under false floors or straw placed in wagons used to transport livestock.

In rural areas there were endless opportunities for the clever and alert. Some caches were found but, as a general rule, they were successfully obscured and camouflaged, in spite of the fact that the Germans often brought in sophisticated electronic mine-locating devices in their attempts to find Resistance caches.

In the city it was an entirely different matter. Because of pipes, reinforcing rods, nails, bolts, and other construction materials, the Gestapo's attempts to employ metal detection equipment were generally foiled. On the other hand, city dwellers usually had far less territory over which to spread an arms cache, especially if several cylinders were involved. Places where a cache might be set up were usually fairly obvious to those who had already uncovered one or two or had worked for the team setting them up.

Because most of the Communist cells were in the cities, immediate movement of weapons, both into caches and into the end user's hands in the city, was especially urgent. Agents trained in England were specifically instructed to be mindful of the need for a good, remote, secure drop site, the requirement to move the newly arrived weapons to safe cache sites, and the ability to move the individual items into the cities as

needed. Caching near a bakery or dairy with regular home-delivery routes was especially common.

Some city resisters built compartments in wine and beer barrels, sewer systems, and chimneys, or constructed false backs in clothes wardrobes. Some hid their weapons in coal bins, false ceilings in wood piles or, if it worked out, in unused boilers and water tanks. A favorite trick was to place weapons in factories next to things that looked ominous, such as vats of acid, moving wheels, or moving drive shafts.

Explosives were usually buried around shrubbery, in planter boxes, or wherever a piece of soil was exposed. One Gestapo officer later claimed that if he had sent men around Paris to dig at random at the base of every tree and shrub during the height of the Resistance movement in 1943, they probably would have unearthed enough explosives to sink a British battleship. (Paris has a great number of parks, leading one to believe the claim was not completely without merit.)

Apparently, the most common method of caching weapons and ammo inside buildings in the city was to place them amongst the toilet plumbing or in the roof or attic. In such cases the caches were not large. When large numbers of weapons and explosives were required for a specific occasion, arrangements were made to ship them in from the countryside. After the odd patch of exposed soil within the inner city, the other common caching place was in garbage pails and refuse bins. Contemporary accounts written by French Resistance leaders mention garbage-can caching places with tiring frequency. (There was also a historical lesson in this experience. Today, one of the first evidence gathering procedures of BATF and DEA agents is to sift through a suspect's garbage. Apparently, these people learned at least this one thing from the Gestapo.)

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An estimated 200,000 French men and women were killed in German concentration camps from 1941 through 1944. Of those that were actually involved in the Resistance (in reality, the movement claimed no more than 45,000 active members at any one time during the war, although the number of passive supporters was undoubtedly much higher), the most common violation was for possession and/or use of a weapon, including explosives. Caching was a most important element of the Resistance program, yet once the weapons were out of the cache, there was no practical means by which the carrier's intentions could be camouflaged. Caching itself was not particularly dangerous; carrying had great inherent risk. In that regard, little has changed.