

Room

XIII

Sir Royston Thomas KCB

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The memoirs of Sir Royston Thomas KCB

Edited by David Meadows

With a Foreword by Sir Charles West KG

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FOREWORD

As executor of the estate of the late Sir Royston Thomas, I was most surprised to come across a locked trunk containing several volumes of handwritten diaries. As I read them, I realised what a valuable historical document they were. For over two decades, the extraordinary story of Sir Royston and Room XIII has been shrouded in secrecy. Finally, with the publication of these journals, that story can be told, by the man most qualified to tell it, Sir Royston himself.

I feel privileged to have known Sir Royston, a man of tremendous intellect and vision, who figured so largely in the lives of my uncle* in World War Two and my great-uncle in the First World War. It is my honour to present these edited volumes to the nation, in order to finally make public Sir Royston's vast contribution to the British war effort.

Sir Charles West KG, Hampshire, January 1968

* Who will appear briefly in these memoirs.

PREFACE

I leave these memoirs sealed, with instructions that they be opened only in the event of my death. At this time, the events I have detailed herein are classified by the highest levels of national security. My conscience dictates, however, that it is in the national interest that the true story of War Office Room XIII be told, and that the efforts of the brave men and women who worked for it be recognised.

The reader will soon realise that I was not personally present for many of the events I describe here, Although all of these events were reported to me first hand, the reporters were unreliable at best, often wilfully so. Accordingly I may have taken some artistic liberties in specific scene descriptions and recounting of dialogue, however I believe I remain true to the spirit of events, taking into account my personal knowledge of the personalities and motivations of those involved. I hope the reader will forgive any narrative embellishments I may have deliberately or inadvertently introduced.

Royston Thomas KCB

INTRODUCTION

At the outbreak of the Second World War, in my capacity as a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee* I proposed that the War Office create a specific division for the control of unconventional intelligence assets. When I said ‘unconventional intelligence assets’, I was thinking of my work during the Great War alongside the commando team known then as the Four Feathers†. These four brave men were responsible for a string of special missions behind enemy lines, and I was privileged enough to assist in the planning of some of them. I envisaged forming similar teams during the current crisis, though at the time I had little inkling of what kind of men (and women) I would eventually recruit.

Taking up my suggestion, the JIC formed War Office Room XIII—literally the number of the room we occupied on the second floor of the War Office in Whitehall—and appointed me its leader. It is not a position I had sought, but one I welcomed, as I had definite ideas for how this organisation should function.

In the first few months of the war, we accomplished little. I had a small staff: a civilian secretary, the late Miss Potts; a pair of young intelligence analysts from the Foreign Office; a naval Lieutenant released from active duty due to injury; two women of the Auxiliary Territorial Service; and a Polish serviceman, Corporal Savijj, whose talents were frankly wasted as a War Office stores-man. With these resources I could plan operations but had no capacity to carry them out. It was, in all honesty, disheartening to see our recommendations to the JIC and the army brass overlooked again and again.

It was towards the end of May 1940, as the German army pressed our forces back towards the channel, that a number of elements came together in my mind to form a plan; a plan which found a sudden urgent purpose, and which led to Room XIII finally finding its unique and unconventional place in the war effort.

It began with, of all things, an American moving picture character going by the name of Rick Rocket‡. In what we all, at the time, took to be a publicity stunt, Rick Rocket was featured in newsreels as if he were a real person, fighting spies

* The senior intelligence assessment body of the United Kingdom during World War II. Sir Royston participated in the activities of the JIC from its founding in 1936 through to his retirement from the Civil Service at the end of the war.

† This was the second group to go by that name. The original Four Feathers served under Kitchener in Africa around the turn of the century.

‡ The name Rick Rocket is a trademark of the Atlantis Picture Corporation.

and gangsters with his outlandish gadgets. I would have thought little of the matter were it not for the subsequent appearance in the British Isles of a man who called himself Lionheart, and possessed equally outlandish physical abilities. These were but the first of many, and in conversation with an old family friend, the unconventional historical scholar Michelle Étoile*, I learnt more about the nature of these extraordinary men (and women), and I began to form an idea of how I might put them to use.

I had made tentative approaches to Lionheart in 1940 and ignited his interest in leading a commando team of others like himself. Before these plans could advance further, however, Lionheart fell on the beaches of Dunkirk†.

He was not the only man in the picture, however. I had identified five other potential 'super-human' operatives. And as luck would have it, at the end of May 1940 all five were easy to contact as all five were prisoners of His Majesty's Government.

Charles Haversham

Haversham, 16 years old‡, the son of a Naval officer, was at boarding school in London while his father was posted in the Far East. By all accounts, Haversham didn't take the news of the war's outbreak well. At some point, he got it into his head that the best way to ensure his father's safe return was for he, Charles, to bring about the end of the war as quickly as possible. This would have been an idle fantasy for any other schoolboy, but Charles had the super-human ability to move objects with his mind. He 'escaped' his boarding school and made his way to the East India Dock in London, with the intention of boarding a transport to France and directly engage the German army with his power.

His plan was thwarted by the police§, who apprehended him at the docks and incarcerated him on charges of suspected sabotage, espionage, and theft from a naval dockyard.

And that is where young Haversham came to my attention.

Yvette D'Evreux

Mlle. D'Evreux was a civilian pilot of some considerable skill, who had seen combat in the Far East. Following the Nazi invasion of France, she had found her way to England, where she had made a considerable nuisance of herself at the Air Ministry, demanding that she be assigned to a combat squadron so that she could usefully join the fight to liberate her homeland. Naturally, as a woman, she was refused.

* The phrase 'old family friend' needs to be examined. There is evidence that Sir Royston knew an adult woman by the name of Michelle Étoile as far back as the First World War; however, the Michelle Étoile who appears in these memoirs is described as a woman of approximately 30, which would make her a child during the first war. Sir Royston does not explain this apparent discrepancy, and records dealing with the life of Michelle Étoile are oddly difficult to find.

† Other evidence suggests this may not be true; however, at the time, Sir Royston may have believed it to be true.

‡ Haversham's birth certificate shows that he was born in 1926, making him 14 years old at the time of the events Sir Royston is describing. The error may be due to a genuine failure of Sir Royston's memory on the matter, or it may be that he is deliberately misrepresenting Haversham's age to hide the fact that he was sending children into active combat.

§ The police record lists the arresting officer as Inspector Harry Gates of Scotland Yard.

Eventually, presumably through sheer, irrational frustration, or possibly out of a belief that she could prove herself, she broke into an RAF base and was caught in the act of stealing a Spitfire*.

She may have served the remainder of the war in prison, but for one matter that had come to my attention: she possessed the power of flight herself, a power that made her eligible for the team I planned to assemble.

James Lang

James Lang was arrested while trying to break into the Tower of London, waving a rapier and ranting about a secret mission for the 'Queen'. Assessed as being criminally insane, rather than merely criminal, he was confined to an asylum for further study in lieu of criminal charges being filed.

Lang appears to sincerely believe he is an Elizabethan alchemist somehow transported to the 20th century. While I personally found this hard to swallow, Miss Étoile seemed to give his story some credence. Regardless of the true facts of the matter, his loyalty to the crown (albeit an older monarch) appeared beyond reproach, and he possessed a particular set of abilities that I could use.

Mr. Punch

Of all the individuals I was considering, Punch (also known variously as 'Suffolk Punch' and 'The Lord of Misrule'; real name uncertain) was the only one who I could justifiably call an unrepentant criminal. Well known to the police, he had contacts with any number of unsavoury underworld characters and a string of arrest warrants to his name for crimes ranging from petty theft to assault and battery. It was with extreme misgivings that I approached him, but his extreme physical prowess was sorely needed to balance the team, and I had hopes that putting him among comrades of more virtuous character would mitigate his criminal tendencies.

Jack Davies

Sometimes known as 'Black Jack Davy' or 'Gypsy Davy', Davies was a scoundrel and confidence trickster who preyed on wealthy and lonely women. He was apprehended by the Hampshire constabulary while fleeing, semi-clothed but carrying a quantity of purloined jewellery, from the bedroom of a lady (who for propriety's sake I shall not name) whose husband unexpectedly returned home early. He was in a police cell awaiting trial when I contacted him. Davy had few morals but had skills I felt essential to the team, including the power of mesmerism.

These, then, were the five individuals I had my agents contact with a simple offer: join the war effort in exchange for a release from gaol and a full parole for any past crimes. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, all five accepted my offer. And with the events of the war moving so swiftly, it was not a moment too soon. For, on the very first day the five were assembled and first introduced to me and to each other, I was forced to throw them into a vital and seemingly impossible mission. The date was June 6th 1940, and a new era of extraordinary covert warfare was about to begin.

* Sir Royston is mistaken here. RAF records list the aircraft in question as a Hawker Hurricane.

