

Warrant Officer Keith Killby

Pacifist who served as an SAS medical orderly and became a passionate champion of federalism

WARRANT OFFICER KEITH KILLBY, who has died aged 102, refused to carry arms yet served in action as an ambulance and medical orderly in the desert with the Special Air Service during the Second World War before being captured and escaping in Italy.

As a conscientious objector who in 1942 wrote a booklet, *Peace - What Then?*, he was a pacifist devoted to the passionate advocacy of federalism as a prevention of further conflict in Europe. After the war ended he became organising secretary for a conference of federalists in Luxembourg, then toured Britain and Germany, speaking about federal union to Rotary clubs and Germans in British POW camps.

In 1948 he was a delegate to the first meeting of the Congress of Europe, led by Winston Churchill, who was still keenly supporting the idea as Leader of the Opposition. But even at breakfast afterwards he noticed that British delegates were already complaining about the Europeans' demands for federation.

"Britain may have been bombed and suffered blackouts and strict rationing but has never suffered occupation," he told them. "Occupation by enemy is by far the worst of war, for one never knows whom to trust and on whose side one's neighbour might be."

In the early 1950s, Soviet sabre-rattling interrupted his speaking programme when he was called up again for a month of military retraining. This threatened him with more trouble since the Royal Army Medical Corps by then carried arms. But Killby wrote to a member of the government he knew and was assured by an officer with a Victoria Cross that he could still serve without a weapon. Knowing the military mind he nevertheless asked for a chit to show at his next posting.

The great-great-grandson of a Smithfield butcher, James Keith Killby was born at Sydenham in



Killby in wartime: in later life he helped Italian families who had sheltered Allied troops at great risk to themselves

was sent to Lancing, where he shone in shooting with the Officer Training Corps, then entered the family firm, starting work each day at 2.30am. On his 21st birthday he used his savings of £100 to buy a passage to New Zealand to learn the meat trade. For two years he worked on farms in the backblocks, rounding up cattle on horseback and killing and dressing sheep, while attending meat markets and enjoying the gentle colours of the hills.

It was on his voyage back to Britain that Killby's pacifism crystallised, although he admitted to himself that if he needed to defend his life or that of a patient, he would pick up a rifle. Nevertheless, within days of arriving he tried to join up as a non-combatant, only to be told by a recruiting sergeant (the only abuse he ever received) that a butcher was not much use to the Medical Corps but might drive a meat lorry around London. At first he filled his days at home gardening

after seeing troops from Dunkirk disembarking from a train, he felt ashamed.

On being called up he went to 150th Field Ambulance Unit with 50th Division, and was dispatched to North Africa. Tall, well-educated and experienced in the world, he soon clashed with authority. The first time was when he failed to put all his kit into bags because his size 12 boots could not fit into them. On another occasion he pointed out that he could not go out on patrol in no man's land and obey another order at the same time; he was placed under close arrest, fined a week's pay, then sent off on patrol two hours later.

After being captured at the Battle of Knightsbridge in Libya, he was allowed to join a German surgical team under fire because he was learning to speak the language. When the Germans disappeared overnight, he hitchhiked to Tobruk, then was transferred to Alexandria, where he learnt Greek until the unit was broken up.

Several comrades volunteered for the SAS, thinking it involved ambulance work rather than some of the toughest soldiering. Most transferred to safer billets, but Killby remained, learning to parachute before being sent to the Special Boat Service, which took him by submarine to Sardinia.

He was soon captured and sent to Servigliano prison camp, where he began organising talks. When the Italian armistice was declared in 1943, prisoners were told to remain where they were until the Allies reached them, but there was justified suspicion that the Germans would arrive first.

The following day many prisoners and guards departed, avoiding roads, keeping to wooded slopes and moving on every night while sheltering with peasant families who risked severe reprisals if discovered. Over the course of the next three months, Killby fell into German hands several times - once when his British boots gave him away.

VII-A at Moosburg in Bavaria, where he gave his first talk on European federation and played Eliza Doolittle in a radio play performed behind curtains. He also noticed how Commonwealth prisoners shared their Red Cross parcels with Russians, who received none. Finally, he ended up in Stalag VIII-B Lamsdorf camp in Silesia.

After a month at home on double food rations, Killby was sent to look after American casualties at Netley Hospital in Hampshire, then after outlining the talks he had run in prison camps he secured a transfer to the Education Corps. Promoted sergeant, he played host to the Ballet Rambert, organised an exhibition of Arts Council paintings - though he placed one picture upside-down - and ran a series of lectures on farming.

On being demobbed as a warrant officer, he contracted a brief marriage and became full-time secretary of the Federal Union, which advocated the merging of national sovereignties. In 1954, he resigned to restart the family wholesale business when meat rationing ended, with financial aid from his friend, the composer Sir Adrian Bolt.

Once the business was back on its feet, he began to holiday in Italy, where he decided to help the families who had hidden and fed thousands of Allied troops on the run. In 1989, Killby founded at his own expense the Monte San Martino Trust, named after the village near Macerata where he had been first sheltered. In gratitude to the impoverished farmers who had taken in the escapers it offered bursaries to study at language schools in Oxford and London for a month, with special attention for those whose relations had aided escapers.

Appointed OBE in 2001 and given the Italian title Cavaliere Ufficiale in 2002, he collected more than 100 accounts of POWs who had been on the run, including his own, in *In Combat, Unarmed* (2013).

Keith Killby, born June 15 1916, died