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**STANLEY MITCHELL: THE MINING  
EXPERIENCES OF A CORNISHMAN IN  
SERRA DA ESTRELA 1922-1945**

Rosemary Walters

Stanley Mitchell was born in Truro, Cornwall, England, the son of John and Ellen Mitchell in 1895. Having enlisted in the DCLI in 1914 he served in India and Palestine until he was demobbed in 1919.

Following in his grandfather's and father's footsteps he decided on a career in mining and enrolled on a course as a mining engineer at Camborne School of Mines at Easter 1919 which he completed in July 1922.

He secured a position as surveyor and assayer with the Beralt Tin and Wolfram Company at Panasqueira. He was met by the mine manager at Guarda station and after a four hour journey arrived at the perimeter of the mine on the edge of a deep gorge some 160 ft across. The only link to the other side was by means of an aerial transporter on cables and drawn across by hand winch.

The mine covered 12 square miles and employed some 2000 besides the British manager, underground boss, accountant and their families.

Life for Stanley was full and varied. Besides his usual work, he designed and built a church and also carried out first aid in cases of accidents at the mine. The nearest doctor was 25 miles away with the journey taking two hours due to the bad roads

and the delay at the river gorge. He found it necessary to obtain surgical instruments, syringes, morphine and even performed a foot amputation. There was a prevalence of silicosis at the time and more than 100 men died but by 1930 it had all but disappeared.

He had many hobbies which occupied his free time and he continued to paint and to do pressed metal work. He built a crystal set and gave the work force their first film show.

In 1924 a new mine was bought some 20 miles across the mountain and this entailed a nine-hour walk from one mine to the other sometimes under extreme hot or cold temperatures. He was offered the managership of this new mine with 200 men in 1925 and erected a dressing plant

In 1927 he became general manager of the main mine and during this time he built a reinforced concrete single span bridge over the gorge although travelling from mine to mine to mill by overhead bucket he found exciting until he found himself stranded 350ft above the river for half an hour!

In 1931 when he returned to Portugal after home leave, he terminated his contract at Panasqueira and decided to carry out some prospecting in an area 20 miles west of the other mine where he staked a claim for tin. This area was Gois, mainly an agricultural area with no mining tradition, so finding labour was difficult. The mine was 2500ft above sea level and an hour and a half's hard walk up the mountain. The price of tin was economical so Stanley built a blast furnace for smelting the ore and started production.

It was a hard life running the furnace six days a week with no experienced staff. A good supply of tin metal was produced for the canning industry.

By 1931 the price of tin had slumped so when a position was offered as a shareholder and consulting engineer at a paper factory at Ponte de Sotam, he accepted hoping to ride the tide until the tin price improved rather than lose the money he had pumped into the mine. In order not to forfeit his rights to his concessions he maintained men at work on development work preparing for better days and at the same time modernising the paper mill. This mill supplied paper to the British Embassy for propaganda work including an order for 30 tons at the time of the invasion of North Africa.

In April 1937 with a few men with no mining experience plus some from the previous mine, he started up leading to eventually employing 1200 men apart from women, girls and boys washing alluvials. The price of tin dropped but wolfram was beginning to recover and so the men were transferred to the latter lodes. From here the ore was transferred by bullock, a 4-hour journey to his house. Without experienced staff Stanley made a washing jig and dressed the ore himself until he erected a power-driven magnetic separator. Production increased and he exported wolfram and some tin to a firm A.H.Watson of Liverpool.

At the outbreak of war Stanley found himself on leave in England with his wife and young daughter. The following day he went to his old regiment to rejoin but was not accepted through his age and was advised to return to Portugal as soon as possible to continue to produce tin and wolfram as they would be war products. The family returned to Portugal in October 1939 getting mixed up with the first evacuation of Paris.

He continued to export to Watsons until August 1940 and it was at this time that he was requested by the British Embassy to contact three Britons at a Coimbra hotel. At this interview he was informed that the British Government had formed the United Kingdom Commercial Corporation with a view to preventing minerals in Portugal from getting into enemy hands. Stanley proposed that his output be taken over directly including buying up nationally owned concessions and claims. This latter proposal was turned down, sadly, as earlier he had been offered a mine for £10,000 which the Germans bought for £260,000 to act as a centre for black market minerals.

The ore from the mine was duly delivered to the UKCC in Porto until January 1941 when production showed signs of a decrease, later found to be due to theft by his own miners, who in turn were being incited by the pro-German mayor of Gois to steal the mineral and sell it to the Germans. Within a short time life became unbearable. In spite of most Portuguese being pro-British historically and commercially, the very man in the most important position in the area was not. He informed Stanley that while the Germans were paying £1000 per ton in Porto, his men had to work for the British for a paltry £100 per ton. With 700 and 800 men at work this presented a colossal problem, it was out of the question to close the mines as this would cause anarchy and mass pilfering.

The Civil Governor of Coimbra was a director of the paper mill, a previous Mayor of Gois and also pro-British, whom Stanley met with a proposal; that the current mayor, a Government nominee, should be replaced by the Civil Governor and should that take place he would build a hospital for the community. In spite of persecution by the ousted mayor the take over was successful.

During this time the minerals were piling up and when summoned to the Embassy it was with enormous relief that he was informed that the British government was adopting a new policy of paying £650 per ton and in confidence that it was willing to pay £30,000 for wolfram in the black market to keep it out of enemy hands, also that they wished him to carry out secret work for the Ministry of Economic Warfare in various parts of the country and over to the Spanish border. This was carried out at night when most of the black market was most active.

It was a punishing schedule, seven days a week, agents had to be found to try and buy back any ore from his own miners which they may have stolen or to traverse the mountains to buy contraband for sale for whoever paid the highest price. These agents would return to the separator in the early hours for inspection and payment. Storing the mineral was a problem so even the potato store in the cellar came into use, the access to it hidden under the weighing machine and a false wall behind the office during police raids. Separators were springing up everywhere of which Stanley controlled 23.

Mobility also was an issue. To this end Stanley was able to secure a taxi driver's licence and cap to enable him to continue to use his Morris.

By now many became involved in this wolfram racket, including doctors and lawyers all out to make easy money. Racketeers dealing in spurious ore and adulteration with Ilminite and Blende made separation difficult.

The applications for new mines were sprouting everywhere for which the Mining Department had to mark out the new mines

and issue permits. They were so numerous the authorities were unable to cope so anyone who took out a claim got a transit document. The selling of these also became a racket. During this period large fortunes were made but many were ruined by the sudden tax levy on excess war profits on the apparent output of their mines which in fact produced nothing. Some lost everything including inherited estates and were even imprisoned for not paying their taxes.

In Stanley's case he received a demand for £4600 as excess war profits which the UKCC paid, stating that if British owned mines did not pay their individual taxes, the British Government would have to pay the total, plus any ore bought on the black market, the tax of which had already been paid by the dealers. [In this way they avoided paying another £1,500,000 for 1941 in Excess War Profits Tax]

Many became involved in racketeering, stealing and fraud and Stanley found himself a victim of this having to resort to the courts. Even his own men did not consider it wrong to steal from him and selling it to his agents for five times the mine price but knowing all the while that the ore would go into British hands. Knowing that this situation could not continue the Embassy agreed to an increase in price, £1000 less than the black market which at that time stood at approximately £7300.

Although he was forced to pay this inflated price on the black market, he was able reduce it to £950 with ore from his own mine.

During the summer of 1941 while on a black market job at Figueira da Foz he came across the 18 crew of the m.v. *Wellington Star* who were brought ashore after being torpedoed. They were in a poor state, were put up at a hotel, kitted out with clothing and handed over to the British Consul next day and taken to Porto.

Many planes at this time came down in Portugal for want of petrol or breakdown and having been looked after by the population the airmen were taken to Aveiro where fishing boats would take them to British craft outside territorial waters.

Protecting the mines had been difficult as a claim was only valid for two years, work had to start within six months and application made for a full concession. A decision was made to stake buffer claims around his own to prevent any German agent staking a claim on his borders. This prevented stolen ore from his mine being taken into other claims.

It was during this period that Stanley was targeted by the Gestapo with threats on five nights in succession on their Portuguese broadcasts from Hamburg.

It was a critical time and sometimes it was necessary to force the black market price and let the Germans have some wolfram in spite of the protests of pro-British agents but because of the shortage of money the reasoning was that the Germans would have got the whole of the country's output, some 400 tons per month.

In 1942 a National Minerals Commission was formed and stabilised the price at £810 per ton after which all mineral had to be handed to it. Neutral ore was shared out either to the British or Germans after payment of £400 export duty per ton but in Stanley's case this was doubled for the privilege of working for the British government. This price control was difficult and stressful making black market dealing even more secretive. This control continued until 1943 and in June 1944 the Portuguese Government under pressure from Britain and America closed down all mining in the country when there was no possibility of a German invasion.

The hospital in Gois was built and named Casa de Caridade Rosamaria and opened on Sept 1941 with the British Government donating the surgical instruments. The event was celebrated by a show in the town's theatre. The Ordem de Benemerência was bestowed on Stanley and he was made a 'son' of Gois with an avenue named after him. The hospital today has expanded and is run by the Santa Casa da Misericórdia.

With the restrictive output of Stanley's mine 350 tons wolfram and over 40 tons tin were offered to the British war effort.

In May 1945, with his wife and two daughters Stanley Mitchell left Portugal to settle once more in Cornwall. He involved himself in Blood Transfusion Service, local politics and his hobbies of painting and etching.

Due to his failing health the family returned to Portugal to settle in Oeiras where Stanley died in 1957. He is buried in the British Cemetery, Lisbon.

*Rosemary Walters is Stanley Mitchell's elder daughter, born in Ponte de Sotam, Gois in 1937. She was educated first at Truro High School and later at St Julian's School, Carcavelos. She came back to live near Truro upon her marriage. The article was based on a talk Stanley Mitchell gave at Truro School for Boys during his Chairmanship of the Old Boys' Association. This article has been a joint effort with Mrs Walters' sister Elizabeth Vegter-Mitchell who was born in Coimbra in 1941, educated at the same schools as above and lived in Ghana, Zambia, Guyana and Holland upon her marriage.*



*Woman panning run of mine ore  
Minas de Gois*