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FUTURE

SPECIAL FORCES

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bookazine series





CONTENTS



RISE OF THE SUPER SOLDIER

10 The birth of the SAS
Discover how the first-ever special forces unit was moulded in the sweltering deserts of North Africa during WWII

18 Churchill's cut-throats
Determined to strike back at Nazi Germany, Winston Churchill ordered the creation of a lethal guerrilla force

26 Origins of the Navy SEALs
Forged on the beaches of Normandy, America's finest soldiers have since played a key role in numerous conflicts

33 Navy SEAL training
Former Navy SEAL Rick Kaiser explains what it takes to make it in this unique fighting force

34 Britain's first commandos
Meet the shadowy strike force that paid dearly for sabotaging the Nazi war machine





EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
With former SAS sniper Billy Billingham
104









STRIKING FROM THE SHADOWS

44 20 toughest commando missions
From WWII to the War on Terror, dive into the missions that have made the commandos

56 The Universal Soldier
A retired lieutenant colonel discusses serving in four armies, navigating Viet Cong minefields and patrolling the seething streets of Northern Ireland during the Troubles

68 H-47 Chinook
Take to the skies in an iconic chopper that has proved crucial to many top-secret operations

74 Operation Nimrod
In April 1980 six terrorists seized control of the Iranian embassy in London. Only one team could save the hostages

86 The SAS raid on Pebble Island
If Britain was to retake the Falklands, the Argentinian air force needed to be eliminated. Up stepped the SAS

BRAVO AND BEYOND

92 The demise of Bravo Two Zero
Dropped deep inside enemy territory, this SAS unit was doomed from the start. But what really happened?

98 Delta Force
Uncover the training, weapons and missions that have shaped America's formidable anti-terrorist squad

104 Billy Billingham exclusive
We talk to the former SAS sniper about jungle warfare, catching war criminals and serving in the Regiment

110 The hunt for Osama Bin Laden
Inside the daring raid to bring the world's most-wanted terrorist to justice

118 Special forces around the world
From China to South Africa, meet some of the world's elite troops and find out what it takes to join them

124 The future of war
Get to grips with the technologies set to revolutionise special ops, counterterrorism and inter-state conflicts

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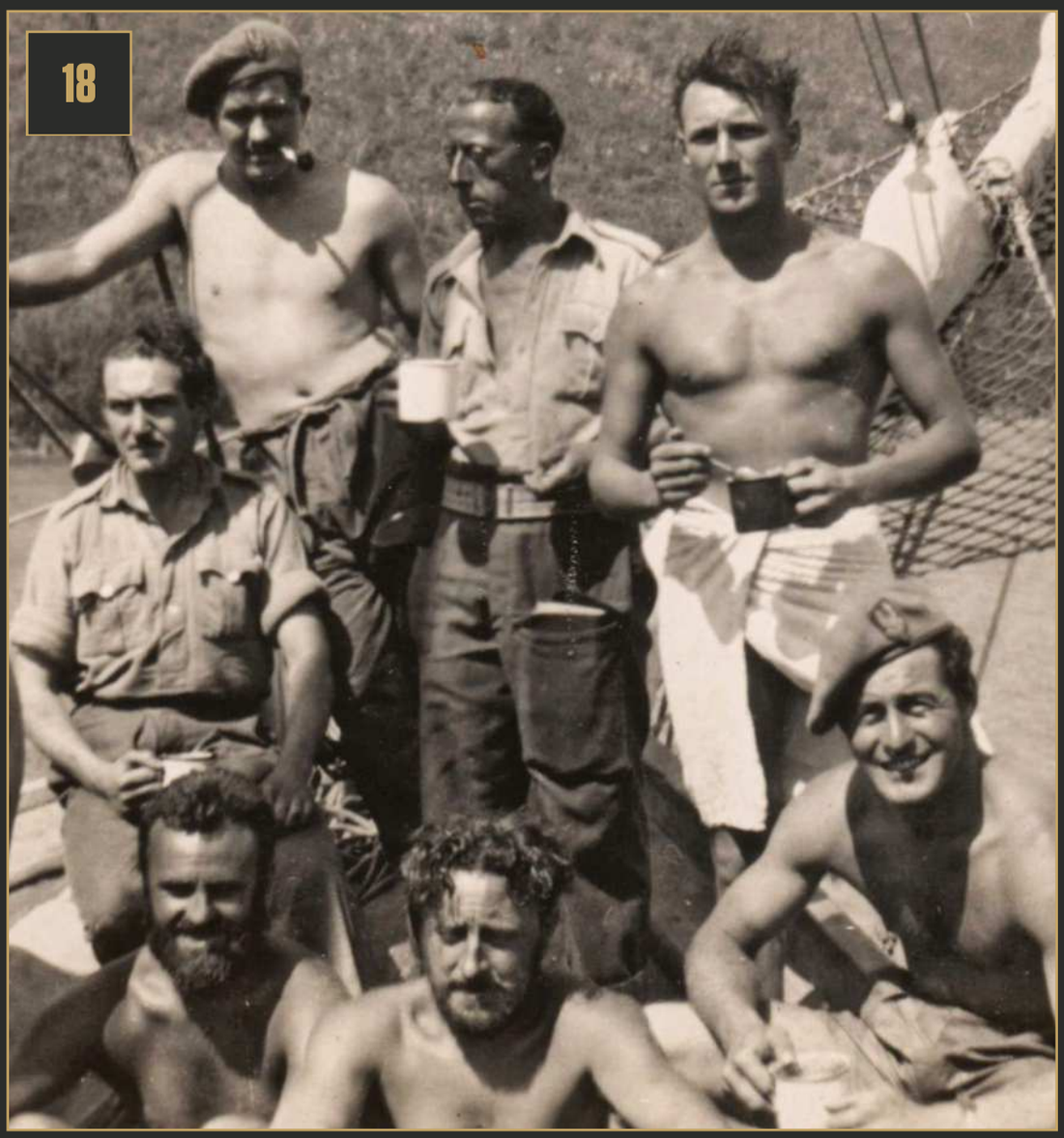
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THE BIRTH OF THE SAS

IN THE WASTELAND OF NORTH AFRICA, BRITAIN'S LONG-RANGE DESERT GROUP TOOK THE FIGHT TO THE AXIS FORCES ALONGSIDE A FLEDGLING SPECIAL FORCES UNIT

Ralph Bagnold was as unlikely a special forces commander as anyone could imagine. His war had been the Great War, when as a junior signals officer he had survived the carnage of the Western Front. When WWII began in September 1939, Bagnold was 43 and earning a comfortable living as a scientist and writer.

Recalled to the colours four years after he had retired from the army, Major Bagnold was posted to Officer Commanding, East Africa Signals, and dispatched on a troopship to Kenya. But he never arrived. In early October, Bagnold's vessel, RMS Franconia, collided with a merchant cruiser in the Mediterranean. He and the rest of his troop transferred to another vessel and sailed to Port Said in Egypt to await the first available ship to Kenya.

Bagnold was delighted. Egypt was a country he knew well, better in fact than nearly any other Briton. He had spent most of the 1920s in Egypt with his regiment, entranced by the culture and the vast desert that stretched west into Libya. In 1927, he made his first foray into the Libyan Desert, leading a small band of explorers in a fleet of Model T Fords. More expeditions followed, penetrating further into the desert's brutal interior. Bagnold's fascination was as much motivated by science as by exploration, and he began studying the terrain, leading him to publish the acclaimed *The Physics of Blown Sand and Desert Dunes* in 1939.

Back in Egypt, Bagnold took the train from Port Said to Cairo to look up old friends. He dined with one such acquaintance in the restaurant of the exclusive Shepheard's Hotel, where he was spotted by the gossip columnist of *The Egyptian Gazette* newspaper. A few days later, the word was out that Bagnold was back in town, and within a matter of days he was summoned to the office of General Archibald Wavell, General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of Middle East Command.

Wavell pumped Bagnold for information on the accessibility of the Libyan Desert – the general was increasingly concerned by



intelligence reports that the Italians had as many as 250,000 men in 15 divisions under Marshal Rodolfo Graziani. So impressed was he by what Bagnold told him that Wavell arranged for his permanent transfer to North Africa.

BAGNOLD'S VISION BROUGHT TO LIFE

Bagnold was sent to Mersa Matruh – 135 miles west of Cairo – where he discovered that the most up-to-date map the British forces possessed of Libya dated from 1915. He was similarly appalled by the indifference of senior officers to the threat posed by the Italians. They believed the enemy would make a full-frontal attack on Mersa Matruh, which they would easily repel, but Bagnold suspected the Italians – some of whom he had encountered during his expeditions of the 1920s – would launch surprise attacks on British positions in Egypt from further south.

Bagnold's idea was to form a small reconnaissance force to patrol the 700-mile frontier with Libya. This was rejected, as it was when he submitted it again in January 1940, and the following month Bagnold was posted as a military advisor to Turkey, presumably to give Middle East Headquarters (MEHQ) in Cairo some peace.

But Bagnold simply would not give up, and after Italy declared war on Britain on 10 June 1940, he tried for a third time to convince the top brass of the merit of his idea, explaining in an additional paragraph that there would be three patrols: "Every vehicle of which, with a crew of three and a machine gun, was to carry its own supplies of food and water for three weeks, and its own petrol for 2,500 miles of travel across average soft desert surface… [each] patrol to carry a wireless set, navigating and other equipment, medical stores, spare parts and further tools."

This time Bagnold entrusted his friend Brigadier Dick Baker to ensure the proposal was put directly into the hands of Wavell. Baker obliged, and within four days of receiving Bagnold's proposition Wavell had authorised him to form the new unit, provisionally entitled the Long-Range Patrol (LRP).

Wavell was a hard taskmaster, however, giving Bagnold just six weeks to make his vision a reality. Men, equipment, rations, weapons, vehicles… it was a formidable challenge but one that Bagnold rose to. First, he searched for the soldiers; he tracked down most of his old companions from his exploration days, and while one or two were unable to secure a release from their military duty, Bagnold was soon joined in Cairo by Bill Kennedy-Shaw and Pat Clayton, who by 1940 had accumulated nearly 20 years of experience with the Egyptian Survey Department. Also recruited to the new unit was captain Teddy Mitford, a relative of the infamous sisters and a desert explorer in his own right during the late 1930s.



LRDG soldiers had to dress to stay cool in the heat of the desert

While Clayton, Mitford and Kennedy-Shaw started to hunt down the necessary equipment, Bagnold flew to Palestine on 29 June to see Lieutenant General Thomas Blamey, commander of the Australian Corps. Bagnold requested permission to recruit 80 Australian soldiers, explaining that in his view Australians would be the Allied soldiers most likely to adapt quickest to the task of desert reconnaissance. Blamey, acting on the orders of his government, refused Bagnold's request, so Bagnold instead turned to the New Zealand forces in Egypt.

This time he met with success, and 80 officers, non-commissioned officers and men from the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry Regiment and Machine Gun Battalion promptly volunteered to be part of the LRP. Bagnold took an instant shine to the Kiwis, saying, "They made an impressive party by English standards. Tougher and more weather-beaten in looks, a sturdy basis of sheep-farmers, leavened by technicians, property owners and professional men, and including a few Maoris. Shrewd, dry-humoured, curious of every new thing and quietly thrilled when I told them what we were to do."

July was spent assembling the vehicles and equipment needed for the missions ahead and training the New Zealanders in the rudiments of desert motoring and navigation. Kennedy-Shaw, appointed the unit's intelligence officer, told the Kiwis that the Libyan Desert measured 1,200 miles by 1,000 – or put another way, it was approximately the size of India.

This enormous region was bordered by the Nile River in the east and the Mediterranean Sea in the north. In the south, which was a limestone landscape compared to the sandstone in the north, the desert extended as far as the Tibesti Mountains, while the political frontier with Tunisia and Algeria marked its western limits.

THE UNIT PROVES ITS WORTH

By the first week of August 1940, the unit was ready for its first patrol and the honour of leading it fell to 44-year-old Captain Pat

AT WAR WITH BAGNOLD

In January 1941 Bagnold recruited his first eight members into the newly formed Yeomanry 'Y' Patrol, nicknaming them his 'Blue-Eyed Boys'

Lance corporal Stuart Carr, nicknamed 'Lofty' because he stood at six foot five inches, joined the Long-Range Desert Group in January 1941 from the North Staffordshire Yeomanry, then based in Palestine. Recruited by Ralph Bagnold on account of his superb orienteering skills, Carr became one of the unit's top navigators.

Despite the fact that Ralph Bagnold was a senior officer old enough to be Carr's father, the 20-year-old lance corporal hit it off with the LRDG's commanding officer from the start.

"The bond I formed with Bagnold was spontaneous; we just got on together," reflects Carr, now 94 and the last surviving member of the original Y Patrol. "He liked my callowness. Once we were having a discussion about whether navigation was art or science, and I said it's the art of getting lost scientifically. He liked that."

Carr, reared in the West Country, as was Bagnold, was a natural at navigation and swiftly rose to become one of the LRDG's three First Navigators. In the early summer of 1941 he frequently drove Bagnold from Cairo to the town of Kharga to a series of meetings with local headmen who passed on crucial information on enemy movements.

"Bagnold and I used to muse a lot," says Carr. "He told me that when you're faced with a problem, you begin by discarding the first three solutions and then you start thinking of ways to solve the problem.

"You do that because the first three solutions will always be anticipated [by the enemy] but not those ones when you've been thinking hard."

Describing Bagnold as "a mystic," Carr remembers that his commander also taught him that washing with sand in the desert was more effective than cleaning with water because the former takes the grease off the skin better in the sticky conditions.

EQUIPMENT OF THE LRDG

Given just six weeks to raise his unit, Bagnold assembled a fleet of vehicles as well as maps, rations, compasses, weapons and wirelesses



CHEVROLET

Bagnold chose the 30-cwt Chevrolet as the LRDG's vehicle because, in his words, it was "fast, simple and easy to handle". In July 1940 he was loaned 19 by the Egyptian Government while General Motors in Alexandria supplied a further 14. The Chevrolet in this photo is a radio truck (the rod antenna is on the right), while the rear gunner is behind a Boys anti-tank rifle and the front gunner has his Lewis gun raised. Lofty Carr recalled that, "The Chev was a wonderful vehicle, very tough, with the chassis specially shortened for us so we could get over obstacles such as rocks."

An LRDG member tracks his position

THEODOLITE

Bagnold obtained his theodolites from the Cairo Survey Department in June 1940. LRDG navigators would make a note of bearings and mileage as they drove across the desert during the day, and when the patrol stopped at dusk for the night they would take a snap shot of the stars with the theodolite to confirm the position.



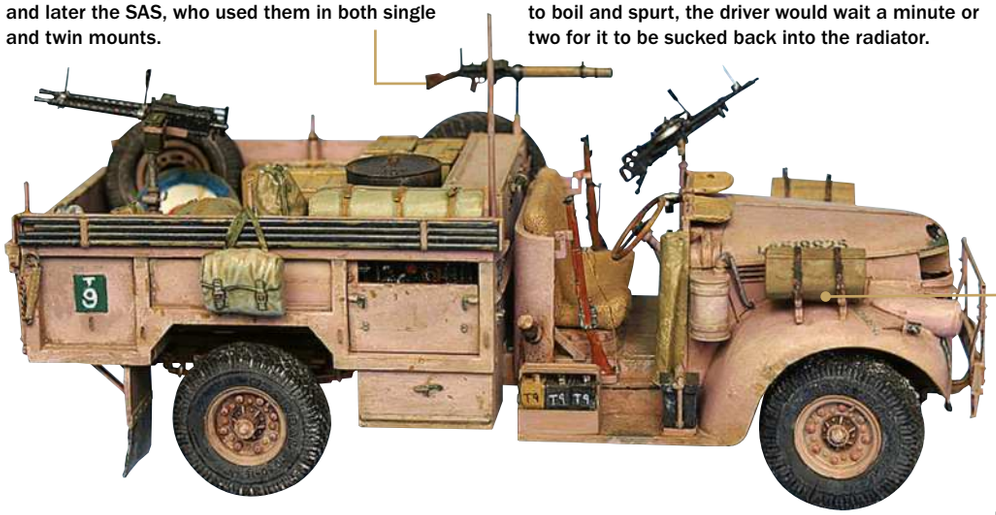
The low-friction locking design on the Vickers K proved resistant to jams from sand

VICKERS K

The gas-operated Vickers K machine gun could fire up to 1,200 .303 rounds a minute and had been designed originally for the RAF. When it began to be phased out and replaced by the Browning the Vickers gun was distributed to the troops of the British Army and became a favourite with the LRDG and later the SAS, who used them in both single and twin mounts.

WATER CONDENSER

Bagnold had discovered in the 1920s that water was lost when radiators boiled over and blew water off through the overflow. His solution was to replace the free overflow pipe by leading the water into a can half full of water on the side of the vehicle where it would condense. When the water began to boil and spurt, the driver would wait a minute or two for it to be sucked back into the radiator.



Clayton. He and his small hand-picked party of seven left Cairo in two Chevrolet trucks. Crossing the border into Libya, they continued on to Siwa Oasis, where Alexander the Great had led his army in 332 BCE. "The little patrol of two cars then struck due west, exploring, and made the unwelcome discovery of a large strip of sand sea between the frontier and the Jalo-Kufra road," wrote Clayton in his subsequent report. "The Chevrolet clutches began to smell a bit by the time we got across, but the evening saw us near the Kufra track."

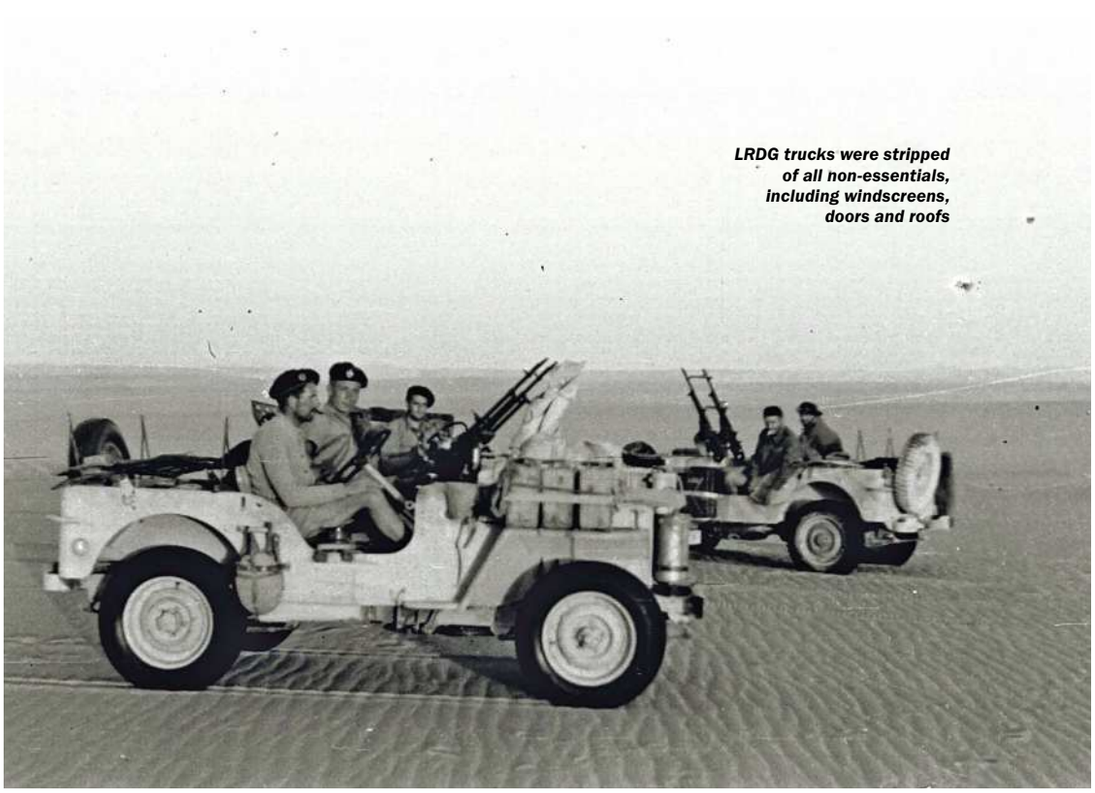
They laid up here for three days, taking great care to conceal their presence from the Italians as they observed the track for signs of activity. They returned to Cairo on 19 August, having covered 1,600 miles of the barren desert in 13 days.

Clayton and Bagnold reported their findings to General Wavell, who, having heard an account of the unit's first patrol, "made up his mind then and there to give us his strongest backing". A week later, Wavell inspected the LRP and told them he had informed the War Office they "were ready to take the field".

Bagnold split the LRP into three patrols, assigning to each a letter of no particular significance. Captain Teddy Mitford commanded W Patrol; captains Pat Clayton and Bruce Ballantyne (a New Zealander) were the officers in charge of T Patrol; and Captain Don Steele, a New Zealand farmer from Takapu, led R Patrol. Each patrol consisted of 25 other ranks transported in ten 30-cwt Chevrolet trucks and a light 15-cwt pilot car. They carried rations and equipment to sustain them over 1,500 miles, and for armament each patrol possessed a 3.7mm Bofors gun, four Boys AT (anti-tank) rifles and 15 Lewis guns.

For the next two months the LRP reconnoitred large swathes of central Libya, often enduring daytime temperatures in excess of 49 degrees Celsius as they probed for any signs of Italian troop movements.

On 19 September, Mitford's patrol encountered two Italian six-ton lorries and opened fire, giving the aristocratic Englishman the honour of blooding the LRP in battle. In truth, it wasn't much of a battle; the Italians, stunned to meet the enemy so far west, quickly waved a white flag. The prisoners were brought back to Cairo, along with 2,500 gallons of petrol and a bag of official mail.



LRDG trucks were stripped of all non-essentials, including windscreens, doors and roofs

"IN TRUTH IT WASN'T MUCH OF A BATTLE; THE ITALIANS, STUNNED TO MEET THE ENEMY SO FAR WEST, QUICKLY WAVED A WHITE FLAG"

General Wavell was delighted, not just with the official mail that contained important intelligence but with the LRP's work throughout the autumn of 1940. Bagnold capitalised on the praise with a request to expand the unit, suggesting to Wavell that with more men he could strike fear into the Italians by launching a series of hit-and-run attacks across a wide region of Libya. On 22 November, Bagnold was promoted to acting lieutenant colonel and given permission to form two new patrols and reconstitute the Long-Range Patrol as the Long-Range Desert Group (LRDG).

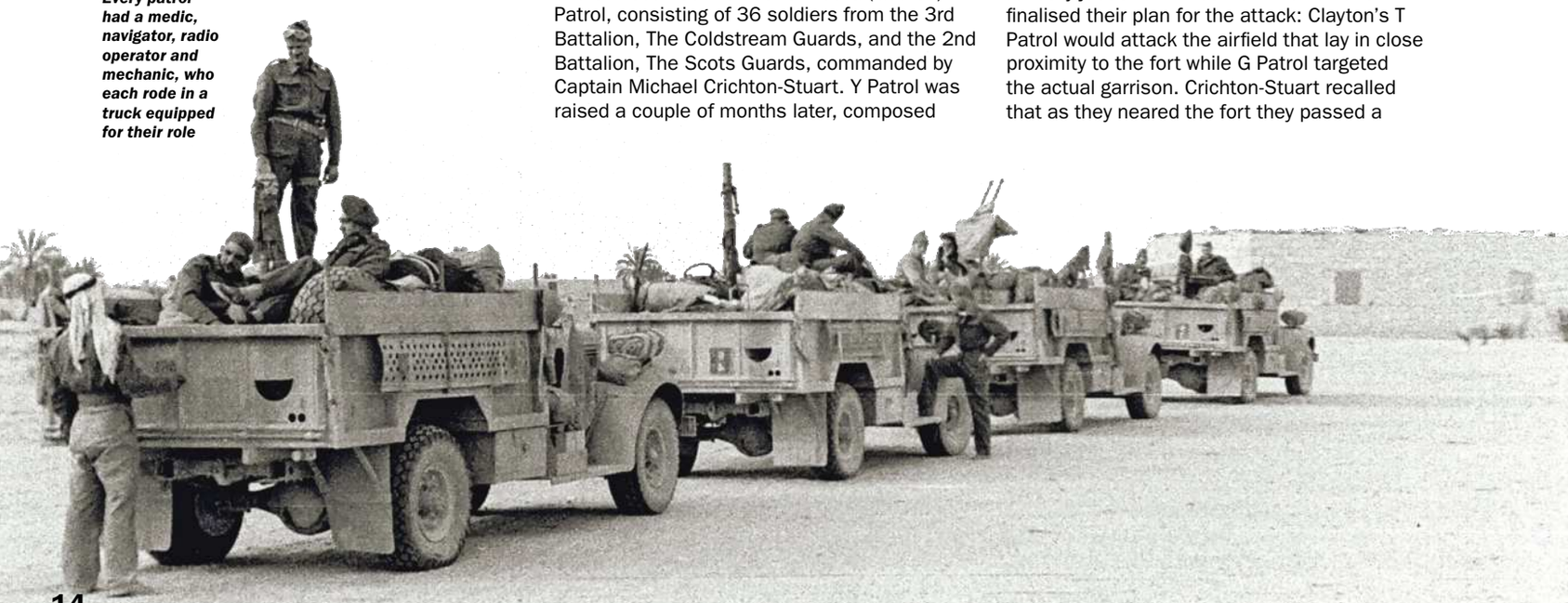
For his new recruits Bagnold turned to the British Army and what he considered the cream: the Guards and the Yeomanry Divisions. By the end of December he had formed G (Guards) Patrol, consisting of 36 soldiers from the 3rd Battalion, The Coldstream Guards, and the 2nd Battalion, The Scots Guards, commanded by Captain Michael Crichton-Stuart. Y Patrol was raised a couple of months later, composed of men from, among others, the Yorkshire Hussars, the North Somerset Yeomanry and the Staffordshire Yeomanry. For their inaugural operation, however, G Patrol was placed under the command of Pat Clayton, whose T Patrol would offer support.

A SUCCESSFUL FIRST MISSION

Their target was Murzuk, a well-defended Italian fort in southwestern Libya nestled among palm trees with an airfield close by. The fort was approximately 1,000 miles to the west of Cairo as the crow flies, and reaching it entailed a gruelling journey that lasted for a fortnight. There were 76 raiders in all travelling in 23 vehicles, including nine members of the Free French who had been seconded to the operation in return for flying up additional supplies from their base in Chad.

The raiding party stopped for lunch on 11 January just a few miles from Murzuk and finalised their plan for the attack: Clayton's T Patrol would attack the airfield that lay in close proximity to the fort while G Patrol targeted the actual garrison. Crichton-Stuart recalled that as they neared the fort they passed a

Every patrol had a medic, navigator, radio operator and mechanic, who each rode in a truck equipped for their role

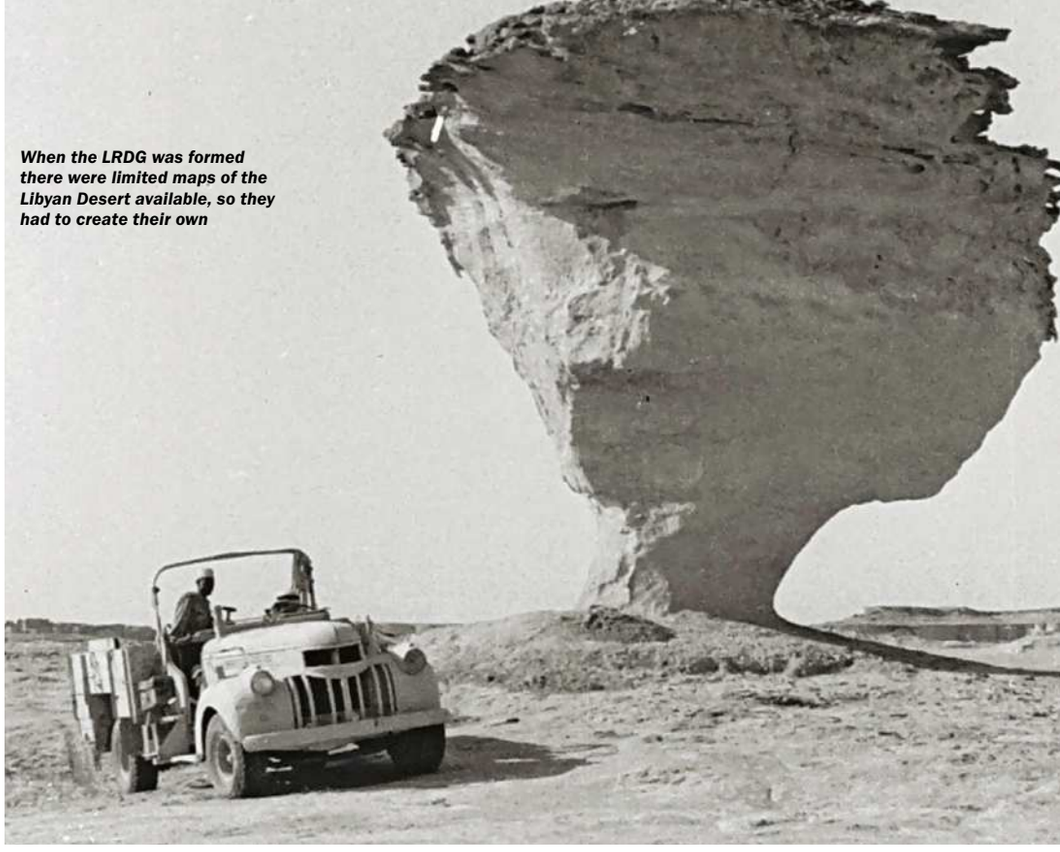


lone cyclist: “This gentleman, who proved to be the postmaster, was added to the party with his bicycle. As the convoy approached the fort, above the main central tower of which the Italian flag flew proudly, the guard turned out. We were rather sorry for them, but they probably never knew what hit them.”

Opening fire 150 yards from the fort’s main gates, the LRDG force split, with the six trucks of Clayton’s patrol heading towards the airstrip. The terrain was up and down, and the LRDG made use of its undulations to destroy a number of pillboxes scattered about, including an anti-aircraft pit.

Clayton, in the vanguard of the assault, circled a hangar and as he turned the corner ran straight into a concealed machine gun nest. The Free French officer was shot dead but Clayton soon silenced the enemy position, and by the time his patrol withdrew they had been responsible for the destruction of three light bombers, a sizeable fuel dump and killed or captured all of the 20 guards.

Meanwhile, G Patrol had subjected the fort to a withering mortar barrage, and after a brief fire fight, the garrison surrendered. Clayton selected two prisoners to bring back to Cairo for interrogation and the rest were left in the shattered remnants of the fort to await the arrival of reinforcements once it was realised that the fort’s communications were now down.



When the LRDG was formed there were limited maps of the Libyan Desert available, so they had to create their own



LRDG officers take a break from the Sun

THE NAZIS PUSH BACK

Following the Allied advance across Libya in the winter of 1940–41, Adolf Hitler had despatched General Erwin Rommel and the Deutsches Afrika Korps to reinforce their Italian allies. The Nazi leader had initially been reluctant to get involved in North Africa, but Admiral Erich Raeder, head of the German navy, warned that if the British maintained their iron grip on the Mediterranean it would seriously jeopardise his plans for conquest in Eastern Europe.

Rommel wasted little time in attacking the British, launching an offensive on 2 April that ultimately pushed his enemy out of Libya and back into Egypt, right where they had been in 1940. The British managed to hold on to only a couple of footholds in Libya – in the port of Tobruk and 500 miles south in the Oasis of Kufra. On 9 April, Bagnold and most of the LRDG were sent to garrison Kufra to pass a summer of tedious inactivity that frayed Bagnold’s usually equitable temper. He was also beginning to feel the strain of command, oppressed by the heat and the constant scuttling forth between Cairo and Kufra, and so on 1 August he handed over command of the LRDG to Lieutenant Colonel Guy Prendergast.

Prendergast had explored the Libyan Desert with Bagnold in the 1920s but had remained in the Royal Tank Regiment. Dour, laconic and precise, Prendergast kept his emotions well hidden behind a cool exterior as he did his eyes behind a pair of circular sunglasses. Not to be underestimated, he was innovative, open-minded and an absolutely brilliant administrator.

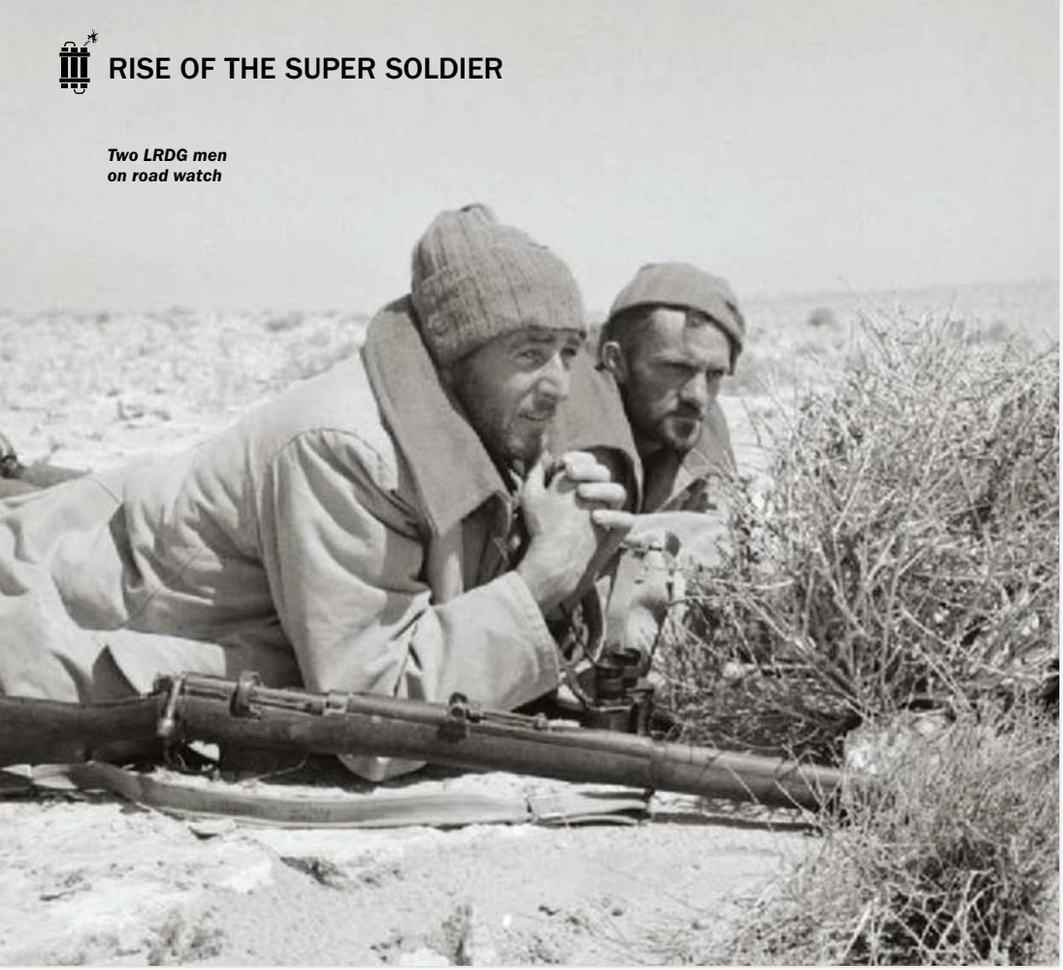
His first challenge as the LRDG’s new commander was to organise five reconnaissance patrols for a new large-scale Allied offensive (codenamed Operation Crusader) on 18 November. The aim of the offensive, planned by General Claude Auchinleck, the successor to the sacked General Wavell, was to retake eastern Libya and its airfields, thereby enabling the RAF to increase its supplies to Malta.

THE SAS ARRIVE

The LRDG’s role was the reporting of enemy movements, alerting Auchinleck as to what Rommel might be planning in response. But they had an additional responsibility: to collect 55 British paratroopers after they’d attacked enemy airfields at Gazala and Tmimi.

This small unit had been raised four months earlier by a charismatic young officer called David Stirling and had been designated L Detachment Special Air Service (SAS) Brigade. Stirling had convinced MEHQ that the enemy was vulnerable to attack along the line of its coastal communications and various aerodromes and supply dumps by small units of airborne troops hitting a series of objectives. Stirling and his men parachuted into Libya on the night of 17 November into what one war correspondent described as “the most spectacular thunderstorm within local memory”. Many of the SAS raiders were injured on landing; others were captured in the hours that followed. The 21 storm-ravaged survivors were eventually rescued by the LRDG and driven to safety, among them a bitterly disappointed Stirling, no doubt worried for the future of the fledgling SAS.

It was Lieutenant Colonel Prendergast who resuscitated the SAS. Receiving an order in



Two LRDG men on road watch

late November from MEHQ instructing the LRDG to launch a series of raids against Axis airfields to coincide with a secondary Eighth Army offensive, he signalled, "As LRDG not trained for demolitions, suggest pct [parachutists] used for blowing 'dromes'." Prendergast also suggested it would be practical for the LRDG to transport the SAS in their trucks.

On 8 December, an LRDG patrol of 19 Rhodesian soldiers and commanded by Captain Charles 'Gus' Holliman left Jalo Oasis to take two SAS raiding parties (one led by Stirling, the other by his second-in-command Blair 'Paddy' Mayne) to the airfields at Tamet and Sirte, 350 miles to the northwest. Holliman's navigator was an Englishman, Mike Sadler, who had emigrated to Rhodesia in 1937.

The raiding party made good progress in the first two days but then hit a wide expanse of rocky, broken ground, covering just 20 miles in three painstaking hours on the morning of 11 December. Soon, however, the going underfoot became the least of their problems.

"Suddenly we heard the drone of a Ghibli (the Caproni Ca.309, a reconnaissance aircraft)," recalled Cecil 'Jacko' Jackson, one of the Rhodesian LRDG soldiers. "Not having room to manoeuvre in the rough terrain, Holliman ordered us all to fire on his command. The plane was low, and when all five Lewis guns opened up, he veered off and his bombs missed."

The Ghibli broke off the fight but the British knew the pilot would have already been on the radio. It was only a matter of minutes before fighter aircraft appeared overhead. "We doubled back to a patch of scrub we had passed earlier," said Jackson, who, along with his comrades, made frantic efforts to camouflage their vehicles with netting. "We had just hidden ourselves when three aircraft came over us and strafed the scrub."

It was obvious to the Italians where the enemy were hiding, but they were firing blind all the same, tattooing the ground with machine-gun fire without being able to see their targets. It was a terrifying experience for the LRDG and SAS men cowering among the patchy cover, utterly helpless. All they could do was remain motionless, fighting the natural impulse to run from the fire. "I was lying face down near some scrub and heard and felt something thudding into the ground around me," remembered Jackson. He didn't flinch. Only when the drone of the aircraft grew so faint as to be barely audible did he and his comrades get to their feet. Jackson looked down, blanching at "bullet holes [that] had made a neat curve round the imprint of my head and shoulders in the sand".

Remarkably, the strafing caused no damage and the patrol moved off, reaching the outskirts of the targets without further incident. The plan was for Stirling and Sergeant Jimmy Brough to attack Sirte airfield while Paddy Mayne and the rest of the SAS hit Tamet. They left the following night, leaving the LRDG at the rendezvous in Wadi Tamet. At about 11.15 p.m., the silence was shattered by a thunderous roar three miles away. "We saw the explosions and got quite excited, the adrenaline pumping through us," recalled Sadler. "The SAS were similarly excited when they arrived back at the RV. We buzzed them home and on the way they talked us through the raid, discussing what could be improved next time."

Though Stirling had drawn a blank at Sirte, Mayne had blown up 24 aircraft at Tamet. More successful co-operation between the LRDG and the SAS ensued with a five-man raiding party led by Lieutenant Bill Fraser destroying 37 aircraft on Agedabia airfield. Mayne returned to Tamet at the end of December, laying waste to 27 planes that had recently arrived to replace the ones he'd accounted for a couple of weeks earlier.

Stirling and the SAS continued to rely on the LRDG as their 'Libyan Taxi Service' for the first six months of 1942, and he also looked to them for guidance in nurturing his embryonic SAS. "We passed on our knowledge to the SAS and they were very grateful to receive it," recalled Jim Patch, who joined the LRDG in 1941. "David Stirling was a frequent visitor and he would chat and absorb things. He took advice, man to man, he didn't just stick with the officers, he went round to the men."

In the first six months of 1942, the SAS, thanks in no small measure to the LRDG, had destroyed 143 aircraft. As Stirling noted, "By the end of June, L Detachment had raided all the more important German and Italian aerodromes within 300 miles of the forward area at least. Methods of defence were beginning to improve and although the advantage still lay with L Detachment, the time had come to alter our own methods."

For the rest of the war in North Africa the SAS operated largely independently, using their own jeeps obtained in Cairo and their own navigators, now trained by the LRDG. While the SAS conducted numerous hit-and-run raids against airfields and – following the El Alamein offensive – retreating Axis transport columns, the LRDG reverted to its original role.

It was one that they fulfilled with extraordinary diligence and endurance, often keeping enemy positions under observation for days at a time and radioing back the vital intelligence to Cairo. With the desert war all but won, General Bernard Montgomery, commander of the Eighth Army, conveyed his thanks for the LRDG's magnificent work in a letter to Prendergast dated 2 April 1943, praising "the excellent work done by your patrols" in reconnoitring the country.

In 1984, David Stirling expressed his thanks to the LRDG in an address to an audience gathered for the opening of the refurbished SAS base in Hereford, named Stirling Lines in honour of the regiment's founder. "In those early days we came to owe the Long-Range Desert Group a deep debt of gratitude," said Stirling. "The LRDG were the supreme professionals of the desert and they were unstinting in their help."

"CLAYTON SOON SILENCED THE ENEMY POSITION, AND BY THE TIME HIS PATROL WITHDREW THEY HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DESTRUCTION OF THREE LIGHT BOMBERS, A SIZEABLE FUEL DUMP AND KILLED OR CAPTURED ALL OF THE 20 GUARDS"

SAS LONG-RANGE PATROL VEHICLE

THE REGIMENT'S MOST-ICONIC 4X4 WAS USED FOR NEARLY 20 YEARS AND HAD A VERY DISTINCTIVE COLOUR...

THE 'PINK PANTHER'
You can bet that the SAS Mobility Troop didn't paint their long-range vehicles this colour to give the boys a laugh. For dawn and dusk missions, it proved excellent camouflage against the rising and setting Sun.

WEAPONS
The Vickers and .30-calibre machine guns were eventually replaced with more modern weaponry like the GPMG, which could be mounted at various points. A wire-guided anti-tank missile could even be attached.

LARGER ENGINE
While the standard Land Rover Series IIA had a 2.25-litre diesel engine, the pinkies had the larger, 2.6-litre, six-cylinder petrol engine that was introduced in 1967. This made it a faster and more-capable beast.



4-speed manual transmission

Leaf-spring suspension

SERIES IIA 90 LAND ROVER

UK, 1967–1985
Engine size 2.6 litre
Top speed 55mph
Weight 3 tons
Crew One driver and two passengers
Modifications Doors, windscreen and canopy removed. Four fuel tanks (100 gallons). Custom paintwork. 9x16 tyres. Extra weapons.



More modern models were fitted with multiple weapons

LONG WHEELBASE
A 109-inch wheelbase (the distance between the centre of the front and rear wheels) meant that the SAS pinkies were able to carry more gear. They were capable of supporting longer-range missions than the SAS Series I Land Rovers before them.

ROBUST BUILD
As well as being Land Rover's most iconic vehicle, the Series IIA is considered its most robust. It could weather the worst that Mother Nature threw at it and its parts were easily replaced. This is one reason the SAS used them for nearly 20 years.

"THE SERIES IIA COULD WEATHER THE WORST THAT MOTHER NATURE THREW AT IT AND ITS PARTS WERE EASILY REPLACED"



Hank Hancock (back row, far right) was a talented photographer and artist who recorded the SBS's exploits on film and in sketches

CHURCHILL'S CUT-THROATS

WHILE ITS SISTER UNIT WREAKED HAVOC IN NORTH AFRICA, THE FLEDGLING SPECIAL BOAT SQUADRON WORKED TO BREAK THE AXIS GRIP ON THE AEGEAN

WORDS: GAVIN MORTIMER

In the early summer of 1944, Simon Wingfield-Digby, the Conservative member of parliament for West Dorset, posed a question in the House of Commons to Winston Churchill. "Is it true, Mr Prime Minister," he enquired, "that there is a body of men out in the Aegean Islands, fighting under the Union flag, that are nothing short of being a band of murderous, renegade cut-throats?"

Churchill did not appreciate the question. "If you do not take your seat and keep quiet," he snapped, "I will send you out to join them." Churchill's tart response would have come as no surprise. He was, after all, indirectly responsible for the 'cut-throats' that Wingfield-Digby spoke of. In reality, they were the Special Boat Squadron, an elite unit whose origins stretched back to the early summer of 1940 when Churchill had called for Britain to raise its own commando unit, or 'storm troops', to hit back at the Germans. One of the first to answer the call was Roger Courtney, a prewar adventurer and explorer who had once canoed down the White Nile.

Courtney suggested forming a small unit of seaborne raiders who would approach enemy targets using 'folboats', folding canoes made of wood and canvas that had been popularised in the 1930s for those of an adventurous bent.

After proving the effectiveness of his idea with a successful mock attack on a Royal Naval ship, Courtney was granted permission to launch a Folboat Troop in July 1940, and just six months later the unit was posted to North Africa. On 21 June 1941, the section achieved their first successful operation when two commandos landed by canoe on the west coast of Italy and blew a train off a coastal railway line.

It was a triumph for the unit, whose name was soon changed to the Special Boat Section, but Courtney wasn't able to savour his success for long; he was invalided to England in poor health. The section might have withered and died had its activities not come to the attention of Captain David Stirling. The young Guards Officer had only recently formed his own special force – the Special Air Service (SAS) – but their inaugural parachute operation had ended in failure (in November 1941) and Stirling was on the lookout for innovative news ways to attack the enemy.

He incorporated the Special Boat Section into the SAS, and throughout the summer of



"WE WERE TO BE TERRORISTS... OUR JOB WAS TO TERRORISE THE GERMANS"

1942 they reconnoitred Syrian and Lebanese beaches, raided Cretan airfields and, in one audacious attack on Rhodes in September, destroyed a dozen enemy aircraft.

In the same month as the Rhodes operation Stirling was authorised to expand the SAS into a regiment. He raised four squadrons – A, B, C and D, with the latter a specialist amphibious unit – but Stirling never got the chance to oversee this expansion. He was captured in January 1943 and the SAS was plunged into what one officer called "chaos".

Middle East Headquarters in Cairo decided to carve up the SAS, sending the French soldiers of C Squadron to Britain for further training and despatching A and B squadrons to Palestine to begin preparing for the invasion of Sicily. As for D Squadron, they were renamed the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) and placed under the command of George Jellicoe.

By the end of April 1943, the SBS had a strength of 13 officers and 118 other ranks. Many of the men were ex-Guardsmen, including Dick Holmes, a Londoner, and his great pal Doug Wright, a farm labourer before the war who, like Holmes, stood well over six foot tall. Among the officers was Captain David Sutherland, who had gone from Eton into the Black Watch, and a 22-year-old Danish lieutenant called Anders Lassen. Tall, blond and handsome, Lassen already had a Military Cross to his name and a reputation for quick, cold efficiency. Holmes was impressed by Lassen's "ability to transform himself into a killing machine, to perform the task with a panache that earned him the reputation of a killer of Germans par excellence".

"YOU WERE TAKEN A MILE OUT TO SEA IN A MOTOR DORY AND THEN YOU JUMPED INTO THE WATER IN FULL KIT AND SWAM BACK TO SHORE"

One of the handful of signallers in the SBS was John Waterman. He recalls how that April and May were spent preparing for operations, undertaking arduous route marches and PT drills, but also more specialised tuition. "We trained in all sorts of weapons, including captured weapons," he said. "We also were taught how to use plastic explosives and then we did our sea training. You were taken a mile out to sea in a motor dory and then you jumped into water in full kit and swam back to shore."

The inaugural SBS operation ended in disaster when a raid on Sardinia in early July failed due to a combination of sickness – the SBS base in Algiers was rife with Malaria – and treachery. The unit's Italian-American guide turned out to have more allegiance to Italy than America, and once on Sardinia he alerted the Italian forces to the presence of the British.

In the same week that the Sardinia operation went awry David Sutherland and 12 men landed on Crete. Establishing his headquarters close to the landing beach, Sutherland sent B Patrol, under the command of Ken Lamonby and consisting of Lance Corporal Dick Holmes and two other men, to attack an airfield near the island's capital city of Heraklion. Meanwhile, C Patrol, led by Lassen, were to target the airfield at Kastelli.

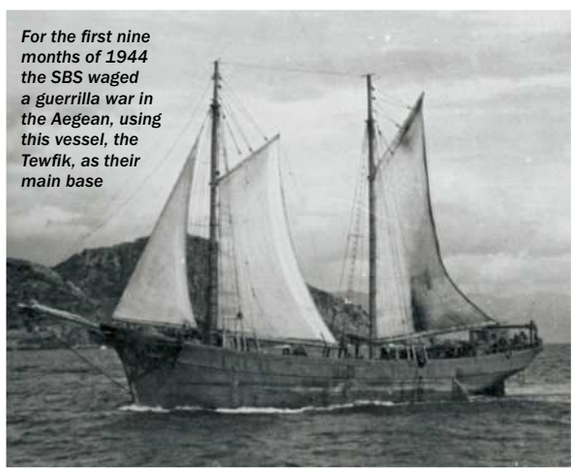
For most of the men on the raid this was their first experience of guerrilla warfare, and Holmes recalled his "heart pounding like shit" as they headed inland from the beach, each man carrying about 80 pounds over rough and rocky terrain. "Our rucksacks were these big Italian packs," recalled Holmes. "They had no framework and so we put a groundsheet between our clothes and the pack otherwise they chafed the skin."

The unit's D-Day came on 4 July, and Lassen's patrol infiltrated their target undetected. Cretan resistance fighters had informed the SBS officer that there were eight Stuka dive-bombers on the eastern side of Kastelli airfield and five Junkers 88 bombers and a couple of fighters on the western side.

The four raiders carried Lewes bombs (named after Jock Lewes, an SAS officer killed in December 1941), which were stodgy lumps weighing just a pound and consisting of plastic explosive and thermite rolled in motor car oil.

THE HUNTING GROUND OF THE SBS

ALTHOUGH CAPTURING THE AEGEAN ISLANDS SEEMED AN UNIMPORTANT FOLLY TO MOST, CHURCHILL WAS CONVINCED THAT TAKING CONTROL OF THEM WOULD UNDERMINE HITLER AND THE AXIS FORCES IN THE REGION



For the first nine months of 1944 the SBS waged a guerrilla war in the Aegean, using this vessel, the Tewfik, as their main base

Lassen and his men were busy planting bombs on the Junkers when they were challenged by an Italian sentry. Shots were fired and in seconds the airfield was swarming with guards. But it was dark, the Italians were nervous, and when Lassen threw a couple of grenades pandemonium ensued. The SBS dispersed their remaining bombs on a variety of targets before withdrawing unscathed. At the same time approximately 15 miles north, Dick Holmes was approaching his target through some olive trees. It was no longer an airfield, which had been found to be inactive, but a large petrol dump encircled by an earthen wall.

The other three men of B Patrol were dealing with an adjacent bomb dump, leaving Holmes to creep along the dozens of drums of valuable fuel, placing charges at regular intervals. Suddenly he saw no more than 30 yards away a German guard and his dog. "The sentry was about to continue his patrol," wrote Holmes in his report, "when a second guard with a dog came past the dump and the pair began a lengthy conversation." The presence of the guards caused the other SBS raiders to abort their attack on the bomb dump.

Praying that none of the two-hour fuses would go off prematurely, Holmes hid among the barrels of oil as the two Germans gossiped, occasionally telling their dogs to stop whining. "To my apprehensive ears the dogs seemed very restless, as if they knew I was hiding just a short distance away," recalled Holmes. "But neither guard picked up on their dogs' agitation, and after half an hour the Germans moved away from the dump."

At 1.10 a.m., Holmes' bombs exploded, causing him to perform "a little dance on the Cretan hillside". The next morning, a local informed the raiders that flaming streams of petrol had cascaded through the earthen walls and engulfed the adjacent bomb dump, blowing it sky high.

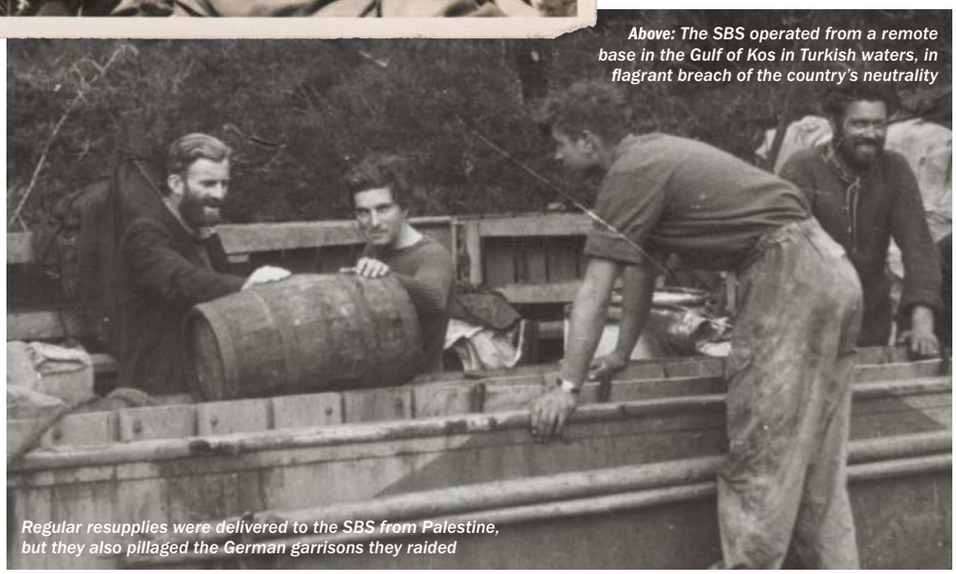
Days after the attack, *The Egyptian Mail* newspaper boasted of a "'Smash and Grab' Land Raid on a Crete Airfield." The SBS had even escaped from the island with a couple of prisoners from a German patrol they'd encountered on their way back to the beach. Back in Cairo, the British treated their prisoners to dinner at Groppi's, one of the city's most celebrated restaurants. Holmes (awarded a Military Medal for his part in the raid) recalled that after three weeks on Crete the SBS were bearded, dirty and unkempt, but the stares they received as they strode into Groppi's "were nothing compared to the stares accorded the two Germans".

The collapse of Benito Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy had significant ramifications for the SBS and the islands of the Aegean, hitherto an unimportant backwater in the European Theatre. The islands – to the north the Sporades, the Cyclades in the west and the Dodecanese in the east – now became of strategic importance. Most had been



When they weren't raiding islands the men of the SBS had time to relax and enjoy their surroundings





Above: The SBS operated from a remote base in the Gulf of Kos in Turkish waters, in flagrant breach of the country's neutrality

Regular resupplies were delivered to the SBS from Palestine, but they also pillaged the German garrisons they raided

'ANDY' LASSEN'S VICTORIA CROSS

THE ONLY MEMBER OF BRITAIN'S SPECIAL FORCES TO BE AWARDED THE VC WAS A DANISH OFFICER WHO RECEIVED THE HONOUR POSTHUMOUSLY

On the night of 8/9 April 1945, Anders Lassen led a ten-strong SBS patrol to attack a series of German machine-gun emplacements on the eastern shore of Lake Comacchio.

The lake, a natural obstacle to the progress of the Allied advance north through Italy, was well defended by the Germans on the north shore, and the SBS task was to eliminate the smaller force on the east, while also causing a diversion to distract from the main assault.

Two local fishermen guided the SBS across the lake in wooden fishing boats, and once ashore the Dane led his men along a road that ran parallel to the water. They soon encountered the first machine-gun nest, and although that was successfully subdued, more enemy fire was poured down the road.

Two SBS men were killed, another wounded, and the attack was in danger of faltering. Seizing the initiative, Lassen charged forward, zigzagging up the road, throwing grenades and firing bursts from his Tommy gun. One, two, three German positions were destroyed, but then Lassen was mortally wounded.

His parents were presented their son's Victoria Cross by King George VI in December 1945, the citation praising their son's "high sense of devotion to duty and… magnificent courage".

***Below:** After being wounded, Lassen refused to be evacuated as he said it would endanger further lives*



"LASSEN CHARGED FORWARD, ZIGZAGGING UP THE ROAD, THROWING GRENADES AND FIRING BURSTS FROM HIS TOMMY GUN"

garrisoned by Italians, and following the Armistice of Cassibile in September 1943, the British moved to take over the islands, some of which contained airstrips from where they could attack the Balkans Peninsula.

Hitler, for his part, had no intention of letting the British move in. "Abandonment of the islands would create the most unfavourable impression [among our allies]," declared the Führer. "To avoid such a blow to our prestige, we may even have to accept the loss of our troops and material."

For the next year, Germany and Britain fought a bloody war for the possession of the sun-drenched islands that had been enticing pleasure-seekers for more than 2,000 years. Now Kos, Leros, Samos, Naxos, Santorini and Symi all became the scene of some brutal engagements. "We were to be terrorists… Our job was to terrorise the Germans," recalled Dick Holmes. British forces, the SBS among them, had been forced to withdraw from the Aegean in the autumn of 1943, when the Germans launched a major assault to retake the islands. In early 1944, Jellicoe was instructed to hit back, fighting the guerrilla war for which his men had been trained.

First, the SBS were to focus their attacks on shipping and harbour installations so as to reduce the enemy's capability to move quickly from island to island; then they were to launch hit-and-run raids on the islands themselves, first in the Dodecanese and then moving further afield to the western Cyclades and the Sporades in the north. As one officer said, they were to act as "legitimised pirates".

The SBS headed northwest to a remote bay on the west coast of Turkey aboard several motor launches and a 180-ton schooner, Tewfik, which John Waterman recalled had a reputation of being temperamental. "They would have a hell of a job getting it going sometimes," he said. "So Lassen would use an explosive charge. He would open a sort of hatch, take some explosive, prime it and drop it in and then screw the thing back up, and it would get the engine going."

Once anchored in the isolated bay, with the Turks turning a blind eye to the flagrant violation of their official neutrality, the SBS began to terrorise. One patrol landed on Symi and killed ten Germans; another wrecked the cable stations on Lisso and Archi; one raiding party

"ONCE ANCHORED IN THE ISOLATED BAY, WITH THE TURKS TURNING A BLIND EYE TO THE FLAGRANT VIOLATION OF THEIR OFFICIAL NEUTRALITY, THE SBS BEGAN TO TERRORISE"



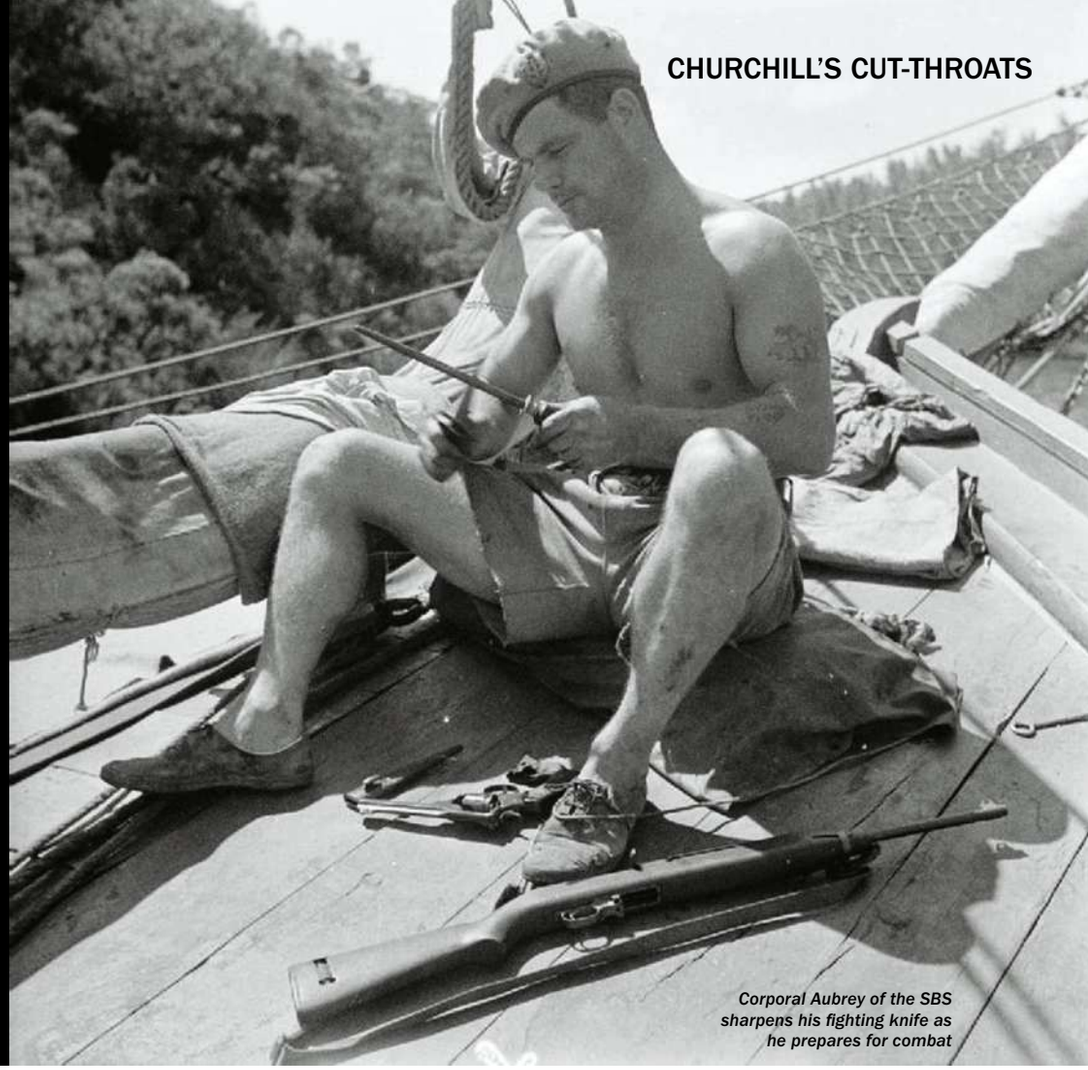
It was Churchill's vision to take control of the Greek islands with a small party of highly trained men

DISBANDED

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT DISBANDED THE SBS IN 1945 BECAUSE IT ENVISAGED A WORLD OF PEACE WITHOUT THE NEED FOR SPECIAL FORCES

The Aegean had been the ideal theatre for the SBS, allowing them to wage a guerrilla war in which courage went hand in hand with initiative and daring. The operations that followed were less successful, although they had the honour of being the first British soldiers to liberate the Greek city of Salonika in October 1944. In Greece and Yugoslavia, they became increasingly caught up in the incipient civil wars, and by the spring of 1945 opportunities to engage the enemy were restricted to small raids against Adriatic islands off the Croatian coast. The SBS were preparing to deploy to the Far East when the US brought the war to an end with its two atomic bombs, and in October 1945 the SBS was officially disbanded.

"THE SBS WERE PREPARING TO DEPLOY TO THE FAR EAST WHEN THE US BROUGHT THE WAR TO AN END WITH ITS TWO ATOMIC BOMBS"



Corporal Aubrey of the SBS sharpens his fighting knife as he prepares for combat



intercepted three enemy vessels and sent them and their crew to the bottom of the Aegean.

In the early hours of 23 April 1944, Lassen and 18 men came ashore on Santorini and made for the main German garrison. One of the raiders recalled that "Lassen's motto on prisoners that night seemed to be 'don't take any'." They entered the garrison unseen, and once inside, the killing began.

The SBS moved methodically through the building in pairs, one man throwing in a grenade, the next raking the room with machine-gun fire from the side of the door. "That was the only time I was in action side by side with Lassen and it's one of the reasons I'm trying to forget the war," recalled Sergeant Jack Nicholson years later. "It's no fun throwing grenades into rooms and shooting sleeping men. That garrison could have been captured."

While Lassen was wiping out the garrison on Santorini, Lieutenant Kingsley Clarke was sent on a tour of the islands with instructions from David Sutherland to spread alarm and despondency at every opportunity. With him went some of the most experienced men in the squadron, including Dick Holmes, Doug Wright and Duggie Pomford.

First they hit Kos, destroying the island's telegraph station and killing a number of Germans. They then set sail for Amorgos, 15 miles east, having learned that approximately 30 Germans had recently left the island for Santorini – they were despatched to help hunt for Lassen and his men, who had already escaped. "We were armed to the teeth, bearded and a pretty frightening sight," recalled Holmes. There were ten Germans still on the island and the SBS were told by locals that they were billeted in the village school.

The SBS launched their attack on the school with a single grenade. Then Doug Wright opened up with his Bren from a roof overlooking the building. "I fired ten Bren gun magazines loaded with a good mixture of ball, tracer and incendiary and armour piercing [ammunition]," he remembered, "raking all the windows and doors of the building."

Immediately Wright ceased firing Pomford dashed forward, throwing a grenade through a window and then firing a quick burst from his Tommy gun. Clarke called on the Germans to surrender. Instead they chose to burst out of the building, guns blazing as if they were Wild West bandits fleeing a botched bank raid. Two of the ten escaped in the darkness; the rest were killed. "It wasn't possible to take many prisoners," reflected Wright, who was awarded the Military Medal for his part in the attack.

Attacking the islands was the easy part for the SBS. It was the voyage back to their hideout in Turkey that was fraught with danger. Returning from Amorgos, the engine blew on their wooden fishing boat, so they reverted to sail. "On a couple of occasions German aircraft came in low to investigate us," recalled Holmes. "Fortunately some of the boys had taken to wearing the German peaked caps and we carried a lot of German weapons so that fooled the pilots. It was pretty nerve-wracking."

At the end of May, S Squadron received orders to return to Palestine. Sutherland, who, not wishing to miss out on the action, had led



An SBS patrol completes its tour of the Acropolis during their posting to Athens in the late autumn of 1944

a raid against the island of Lesbos, totted up the squadron's scorecard in the previous two months: three caïques (local wooden fishing boats used by both sides) captured and 12 sunk or damaged; three wireless stations destroyed and 11 more captured; three cable stations destroyed and dozens of enemy soldiers killed or captured. In addition, 25 tons of much-needed food had been distributed to the malnourished inhabitants of the islands.

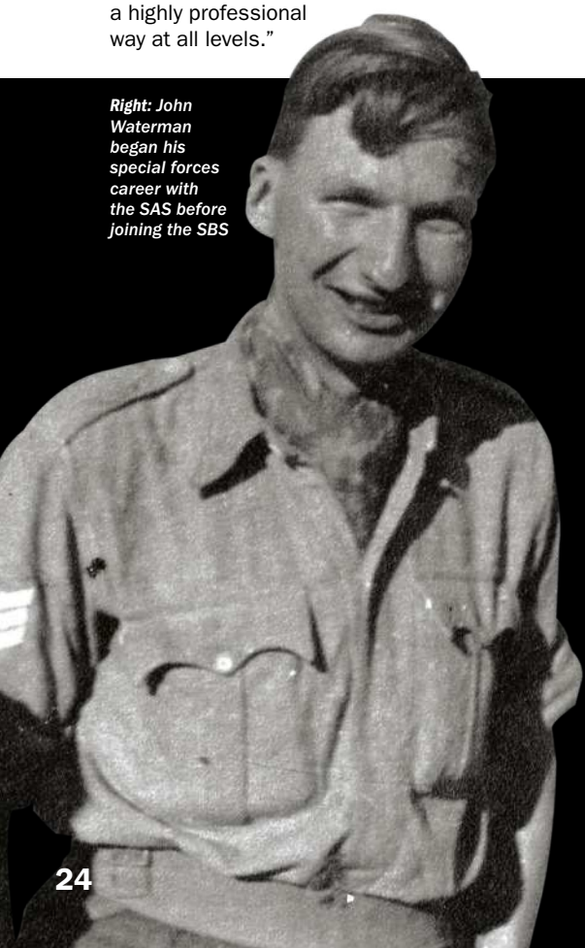
"I reflected as we sailed quietly south back to Beirut [in Lebanon] how special these officers and men were," recalled Sutherland. "The operations were well planned and carried out in a highly professional way at all levels."

Donald Grant, an American war correspondent who had accompanied the SBS on one raid to see first-hand their skill in guerrilla warfare, subsequently recounted the experience in a radio broadcast on 22 May 1944. Having described a typical raid, he concluded, "There is considerable variation in uniform, but all are dirty, greasy and torn. About the only common garment to all Raiding Force men is a strangely hooded jacket, which makes them appear to be a band of Robin Hood's merry men, stepped out of a story book, complete with knives slung at their belts."

Such melodramatic broadcasts alarmed not only the Germans but also one or two Britons – like Simon Wingfield-Digby, the Conservative MP who simply couldn't comprehend what was required to defeat a military machine as savage as the Nazis'. Churchill, fortunately, wasn't so naive, and it was thanks to his 'cut-throats' that in May 1944 the Germans drafted in another 4,000 troops to garrison the Aegean Islands at a time when their resources were already desperately thin.

"We didn't do anything that affected the war in any great way," reflected Dick Holmes. "But I think we slowed them down in the Aegean and we also tied up quite a few thousand of their troops when they would have been better deployed in Russia or France, and we were doing that with only a few dozen men of our own. So we felt we were doing something necessary."

Images: Getty; Textures.com; Thinkstock



***Right:** John Waterman began his special forces career with the SAS before joining the SBS*

JOHN WATERMAN

AN SBS SIGNALLER FROM 1943–45, WATERMAN IS ONE OF THE LAST REMAINING VETERANS OF THE ELITE UNIT

A Kentish man, Waterman joined the SAS in 1942 and transferred to the SBS shortly after, serving with them until their disbandment in October 1945. He saw action in the Aegean campaign, the Balkans and Italy, and a few years after the war he emigrated to Canada, where he still lives.

"I joined the Special Boat Squadron when it was formed in 1943 as one of the unit's four signallers and I worked closely with Major George Jellicoe, our CO. In early 1944, the SBS assembled a small force working in the Aegean islands from a base on a remote stretch of Turkish coastline. The Germans had kicked us out of the likes of Leros and Samos the previous autumn, so our role was to cause as much trouble as possible on the Dodecanese islands. Our base was a large wooden schooner, and from there we sailed into the Aegean in small wooden fishing boats to attack the islands. A lot of the time I was on the schooner, maintaining radio communication with Jellicoe in Palestine, but I went on one raid to Nisyros. The sole Italian on the island was on the side of the Germans, but the moment he saw us landing he took to the hills.

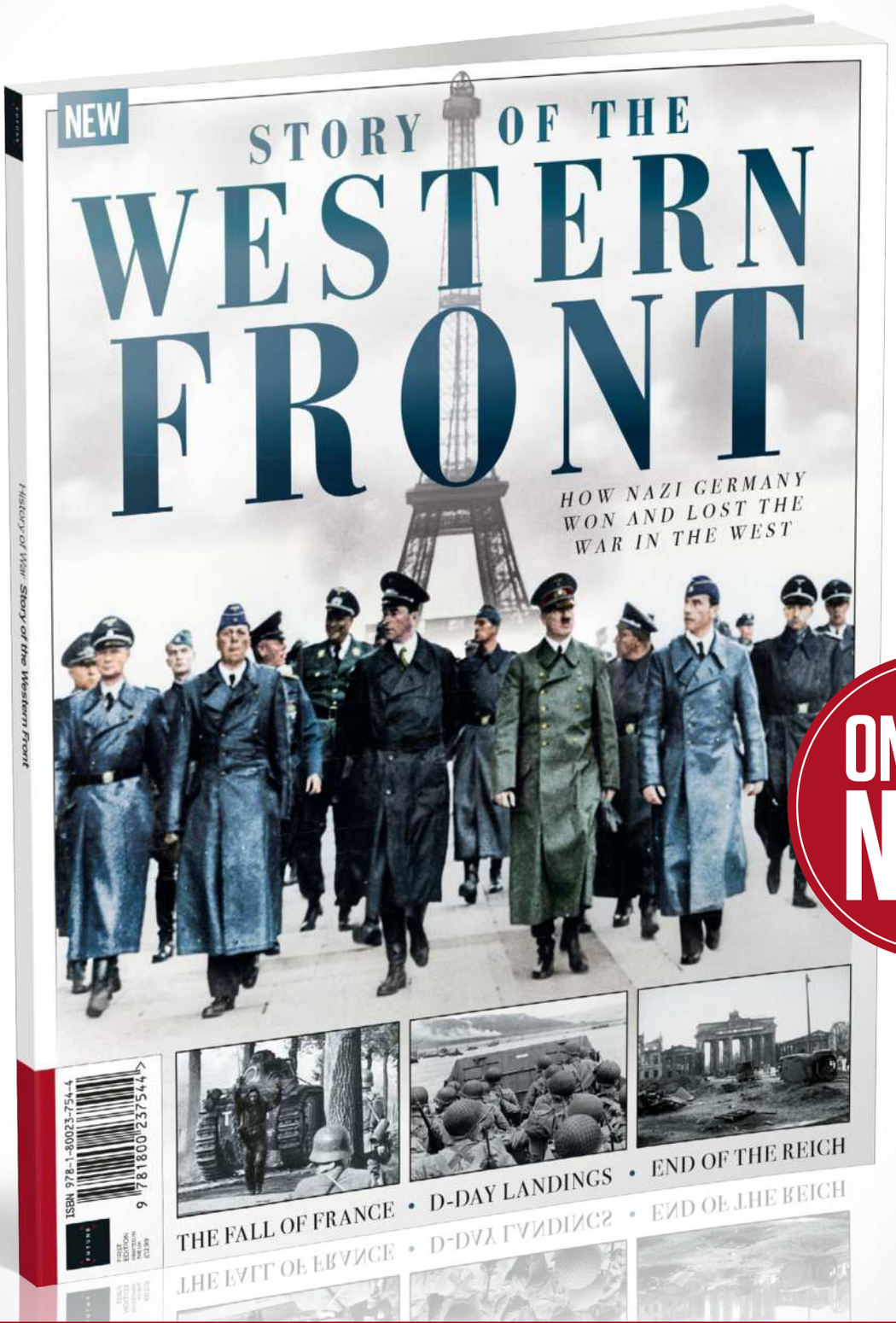
"Not all the islands were garrisoned by Germans but on the ones that were, we would raid their billet and destroy any communications we found. By the summer of 1944 the Germans had reinforced the islands in the Aegean with thousands more troops at a time they could ill afford to.

"From the Aegean we moved into Greece, in the van of the invasion force, and we liberated the port of Patras in the south of the country before chasing the Germans as far as Lamia, before returning to Athens. In the spring of 1945 we started to raid the islands off the coast of Croatia, crushing the last German resistance.

"Reflecting on my years in the SBS, I did feel I was among exceptional soldiers. We had a confidence in our own ability and we were expected to display initiative and have an independence of thought that wasn't that common in the British Army of the time."

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ORIGINS OF THE NAVY SEALS

THIS LEGENDARY OUTFIT HAS AN ILLUSTRIOUS HISTORY DATING BACK TO THE ELITE DIVERS WHO CLEARED MINES ON THE D-DAY BEACHES

WORDS: LEIGH NEVILLE

From the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan to the rescuing of aid workers in Somalia, the SEALs typify the cutting edge of modern special operations. Their very name hints at their capabilities (SEa, Air and Land), with operators capable of covertly inserting by parachute, ground vehicle, small boat or sub. They are best known as a direct action force, rescuing hostages and capturing or killing 'high-value targets'. However, this role has evolved over a storied history dating back to WWII.

The earliest descendants of the modern-day SEALs were Navy divers trained to conduct some of the most dangerous missions of the war. They were taught to swim onto a hostile beach, conduct reconnaissance for an amphibious landing or place demolition charges on anti-tank obstacles and then escape – sometimes to be picked up by a submarine – all undetected by the enemy.

Many of these missions are still carried out by the SEALs of today – a beach reconnaissance and hydrographic (underwater) survey, for example, is an important mission for all SEAL Teams. SEALs are also still taught to be expert divers, with a third of the famous Basic Underwater Demolitions/SEAL (BUD/S) School devoted to the art. In fact, the SEALs

"THE EARLIEST DESCENDANTS OF THE MODERN-DAY SEALS WERE NAVY DIVERS TRAINED TO CONDUCT SOME OF THE MOST DANGEROUS MISSIONS OF THE WAR"

owe much of their existence to the pioneers of the Naval Combat Demolitions Units (NCDU) and the Underwater Demolitions Teams (UDTs) who supported both the Normandy landings and the 'island hopping' campaigns in the Pacific.

This concept of sailors trained to destroy sea mines, unexploded bombs and enemy beach defences can largely be traced back to one impressive individual, Lieutenant Commander Draper Kauffman. The son of an admiral, the younger Kauffman joined the US Navy in 1929, attending the prestigious US Naval Academy. He was plagued with poor eyesight and, despite graduating from the Academy and his well-connected family ties, he was not offered an officer's commission in the US Navy.

Instead, Kauffman's colourful career began in the Merchant Navy, followed by his service as a volunteer ambulance-man in France



The surviving men of the Naval Combat Demolitions Units on Omaha Beach, Normandy, 6 June 1944



A 1950s era UDT frogman wearing an aqualung astride a US Navy submarine – a common method of transport towards a target

with the French Army, a year before America even entered WWII. The Germans even briefly captured him before he enlisted in the Royal Navy Reserve upon his release and became a bomb disposal officer during the Blitz.

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, Kauffman returned to the United States and joined the Naval Reserve. He was rushed to Hawaii to defuse a Japanese bomb – the first time such a feat had been successfully attempted – earning him the Navy Cross. As America prepared for war, Kauffman was tasked with establishing a classified bomb disposal school for the Navy, which would be known as the US Naval Bomb and Mine Disposal School.

In 1943, Kauffman established the Naval Combat Demolition Unit (NCDU), whose first training class was made up of graduates of his school and Navy construction engineers known as Seabees. This new unit was based at Fort Pierce in Florida, described by former SEAL Dick Couch as "a mosquito-infested mangrove swamp". Kauffman based much of the syllabus on the Amphibious Scouts and Raiders School that trained Army and Navy reconnaissance teams, including what would later become known as Hell Week.

The surviving candidates from Kauffman's first NCDU course, just over 30 sailors, became the cadre for the first four NCDUs to be established in the Atlantic theatre. Reflecting some of the unique esprit de corps that would come to epitomise the SEALs many years later, these units were given colourful nicknames including 'Kaine's Killers', 'Heidemen's Hurricanes' and 'Jeter's Mosquitoes'.

At the same time a similar unit, the Underwater Demolition Teams (UDTs), was being established for service in the Pacific theatre. The UDTs differed from the NCDU in their greater emphasis on combat diving – the NCDU sailors typically landed at night in rubber boats to rig explosives on enemy defences rather than swimming into their objective.

The UDTs were formed after the disastrous landings at Tarawa. A previously uncharted submerged reef caused landing craft to run aground, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Marines. The first UDT unit was formed in the wake of these losses. UDT sailors would go on to serve in every major landing operation in the Pacific, ensuring that the tragedy at Tarawa was never repeated. UDTs were typically the 'first in'. On Guam, the UDTs erected a humorous sign to greet the arriving soldiers; "Marines, welcome to Guam Beach, open courtesy of UDT!"

Kauffman himself was posted to the Pacific in early 1944 as commander of UDT Team Five. Not surprisingly he led from the front, including during a daring daylight beach reconnaissance under heavy Japanese fire on the island of Saipan, courageous action for which he was awarded his second Navy Cross. He went on to command his UDT Team during operations in support of Marine landings on Tinian Island, Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

"ON GUAM, THE UDTS ERECTED A HUMOROUS SIGN TO GREET THE ARRIVING SOLDIERS; "MARINES, WELCOME TO GUAM BEACH, OPEN COURTESY OF UDT!"

Meanwhile in Europe, the original NCDU teams were preparing for the 'Day of Days', the D-Day landings in occupied France. Renamed Demolitions Gap Assault Teams, the men trained extensively in the demolition of a new type of enemy obstacle that reconnaissance showed had been heavily sown along the Normandy coastline. These obstacles needed to be overcome to allow tanks and other armoured vehicles to land to support the waves of infantry who would be landing on the beaches.

The so-called 'Belgian Gate' was a three-ton anti-tank obstacle that proved particularly difficult to destroy. Tests on captured examples showed that blowing them up simply spread the obstruction. They needed a precise application of explosives to ensure the structure essentially collapsed upon itself. Along with the Belgian Gates, the Germans had erected wooden



The UDT use four tons of tetrytol to clear a path through a reef in the Pacific theatre, 1944

***Left, top:** A UDT frogman trains in preparation for the Normandy landings, attaching a demolitions charge to a hedgehog anti-tank obstacle*

***Left, bottom:** The infamous Belgian Gate used by the Germans at Normandy. This example was used for training and has been wired with explosives*

stakes with Teller mines attached and placed thousands more traditional 'hedgehog' anti-tank obstacles. Each of these obstacles would have to be dealt with by the NCDU teams before tanks could be landed.

On 6 June 1944, some 34 NCDU teams, each comprised of nine NCDU sailors and five US Army combat engineers, landed on Omaha and Utah beaches. Their mission was to destroy the underwater obstacles the Germans had placed to hinder landing craft, including the dreaded Belgian Gates. The NCDUs were supposed to arrive in the second wave after the infantry had secured a beachhead, but many landed alongside the infantry in the first wave.

On Omaha Beach, famously portrayed in the film *Saving Private Ryan*, the NCDU operators lost more than half of their number as casualties – 31 were killed and 60 badly wounded. Each sailor carried 20 two-pound explosive charges known as a 'Hanensen Pack'. Their job was made more difficult as infantrymen took cover from the deadly German fire behind the Belgian Gates that the Navy men had wired for demolition, preventing their destruction.

On Utah, fate was somewhat kinder and only four sailors were killed by an unfortunately placed German artillery shell. They became the only US Navy unit to be awarded a Unit Commendation while the sailors at Omaha received the Presidential Unit Citation. The NCDUs also served during the invasion of southern France in August 1944, conducting beach reconnaissance and the destruction of German fortifications. After this, the unit was disbanded and its sailors reassigned to the UDTs in the Pacific.

Along with the NCDUs and UDTs, a third unit was established that would later feature in the evolution of the SEALs – the Maritime Unit of the secretive Office of Strategic Service (OSS). The Maritime Unit were focused primarily on the covert infiltration of OSS agents into enemy territory and maritime sabotage; swimming into enemy harbours and attaching limpet mines to shipping before slipping beneath the surface.

As for the originator, Lieutenant Commander Kauffman, he finally received a commission into the regular Navy in 1946. Today he is recognised as the 'father of the SEALs' and an equally important figure in the history of bomb disposal. He eventually completed a 30-year Navy career to retire as a Rear Admiral in 1973. Two Explosive Ordnance Disposal schools now bear his name.

Most of the special warfare units didn't survive the war and were disbanded – only four UDT units continued to run. These were based at Coronado in California and Little Creek, Virginia, both of which would famously become the future bases of the SEALs. In 1950, another significant milestone to the eventual formation of the SEALs was reached with the training of the first UDT divers in parachuting.

A UDT detachment was deployed to Korea soon after the outbreak of hostilities in June 1950. A month later that same detachment conducted the first special operation of the war, a mission to destroy a train line and tunnel used for North Korean troop movements. After approaching the tracks, the UDTs were spotted and withdrew under fire after a fierce encounter with enemy troops. One of the UDT operators was wounded, becoming the first US Navy casualty of the war.

The divers brought a unique capability to UN forces and were constantly deployed on operations. A number of UDT personnel were detached for service with the CIA, the start of a relationship with the intelligence agency that would ultimately culminate in the CIA's use of a SEAL team to kill terrorist leader Osama bin Laden some 60 years later. The UDTs, including veterans of the OSS Maritime Unit, assisted in clandestinely infiltrating CIA operatives on secret missions in the north.

In one of the most famous operations of the war, sailors from UDT Team Three destroyed a major North Korean dock at Hungnam, a port city on the northeast Korean coast, with a reported 20 tons of explosives a day before Christmas 1950. A Navy ship used its five-inch guns to hold off responding Chinese troops until the divers managed to plant the charges and escape by sea. The result was the largest non-nuclear explosion since WWII. A member

WELCOME TO HELL WEEK

SEAL TRAINING GETS NO TOUGHER THAN HELL WEEK: 5.5 DAYS OF EXTREME PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CHALLENGES TESTING CANDIDATES TO THEIR LIMITS

Taking sailors and turning them into SEALs, the gruelling BUD/S (or Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL selection) course is regarded as one of the toughest in the world. Hell Week is a five and a half day test of a SEAL candidate's mental and physical toughness. Many mistakenly believe that Hell Week is the culmination of BUD/S, but it actually takes place in the third of the seven-week Phase One of the course. It's designed to weed out those who will not make the grade and be awarded the SEAL trident.

Statistically, three-quarters of SEAL trainees fail Hell Week, deciding to ring the famous brass ship's bell that signifies that they can no longer continue, typically from injury and exhaustion. It was developed by the 'father of the SEALs', the late Rear Admiral Draper Kauffman, who based it on a similar programme conducted by the Amphibious Scouts and Raiders School. Kauffman modified their eight-week course, compressing it into a single week. He christened it Motivation Week before settling on Hell Week, as it is known today.

Kauffman also incorporated ideas from British Commando training, famously including the so-called 'Log PT', where sailors were forced to complete their physical training while carrying a telegraph pole over their heads. He also ensured that officers and sailors conducted this training side by side, an egalitarian tradition that continues today.

The original Hell Week routinely saw 60 to 70 per cent of their number 'wash-out' before the survivors began equally intensive training in beach reconnaissance, diving, demolitions, and underwater surveying. Kauffman felt that he needed to ensure his men could face the challenges that operating in enemy-held territory would present. Indeed, new recruits were dropped some five miles out to sea and told to swim back.

One of the participants on the original Hell Week, Lieutenant James Cahill, remembered, "During this week, if we were lucky, we could expect approximately five hours of sleep each night. In between this sack time, we would be running, swimming, crawling through swamps, climbing over obstacles, or dodging explosives." Cahill added that during Hell Week the acronym UDT stood for "Unusually Damn Tough". In Cahill's class, only 60 from 165 men made it through.





***Above right:** A BUD/S class clearing a mud obstacle course during Hell Week*

***Right:** During Hell Week a bell is always within reach, should a student decide he no longer wishes to continue the process*

of the UDTs remembered, “We didn’t leave the Red Commies a damn thing but toothpicks and more than likely we got a bunch of them.” Another lamented, “Since that day fireworks displays have been ruined for me.”

After Korea, the UDTs also took on a new, previously unimagined role. As NASA began to ‘reach for the stars’ and send astronauts into space, the UDTs were assigned the task of both training those astronauts in maritime survival and were later deployed to recover the astronauts and spacecraft after ‘splashdown’ in the ocean. During every Mercury, Gemini and Apollo space mission Navy UDTs conducted the recovery operation.

Increasingly, the United States recognised that the Cold War would not be fought on a conventional battlefield but rather by proxy using guerrilla and insurgent forces in small-scale ‘brush wars’ across Africa, South and Central America and Asia. President John F. Kennedy became a strong proponent for the concept of special operations units that were trained in unconventional and clandestine warfare.

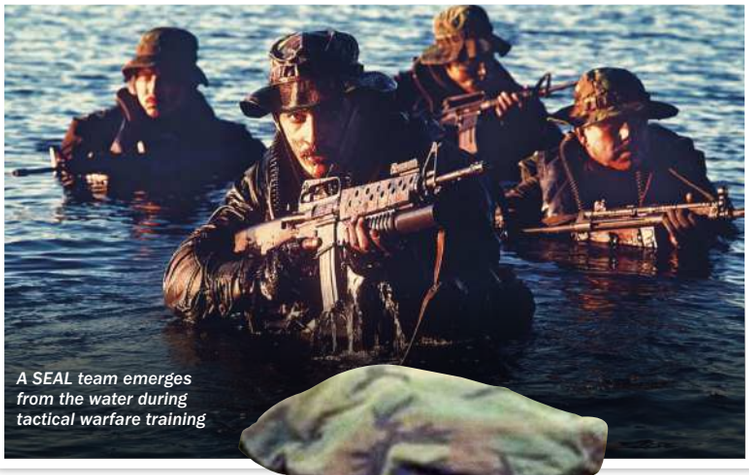
“PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY BECAME A STRONG PROPONENT FOR THE CONCEPT OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNITS THAT WERE TRAINED IN UNCONVENTIONAL AND CLANDESTINE WARFARE”

In 1961 the President announced, “I am directing the Secretary of Defense to expand rapidly and substantially, in co-operation with our allies, the orientation of existing forces for the conduct of non-nuclear war, paramilitary operations, and sub-limited or unconventional wars.” The Navy was already assessing the capabilities of the UDTs and Marine Force Recon units to conduct what was called ‘naval guerrilla warfare’.

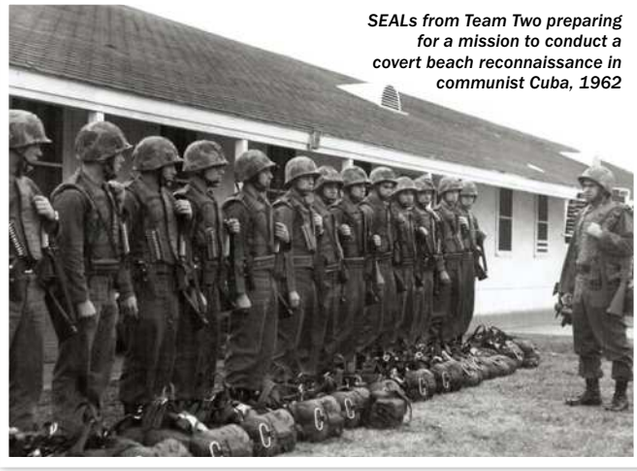
In response to President Kennedy’s decree, two new, highly classified special operations units would be raised and co-located alongside the UDTs at Coronado and Little Creek. These Sea, Air and Land Teams would become known by their acronym: SEALs. The SEALs would concentrate on littoral commando operations – short-duration raids and ambushes – along with operations alongside local forces, while the UDTs remained dedicated to their demolition and beach reconnaissance role.

SEAL Team One and SEAL Team Two were officially established in January 1962 with their original members (known as ‘plank holders’ in SEAL jargon) drawn from the UDTs. One of these first SEALs, Roy Boehm, was briefly the subject of a Navy investigation for buying weapons and equipment for the new units outside of the normal channels. The investigation was quashed under the order of President Kennedy himself.

The new SEAL units were based heavily on the wartime experiences of the earlier NCDUs, UDTs and the OSS Maritime Unit. From the former came reconnaissance and demolitions, while the SEALs developed much of their combat diving expertise from the UDTs. The



A SEAL team emerges from the water during tactical warfare training



SEALs from Team Two preparing for a mission to conduct a covert beach reconnaissance in communist Cuba, 1962



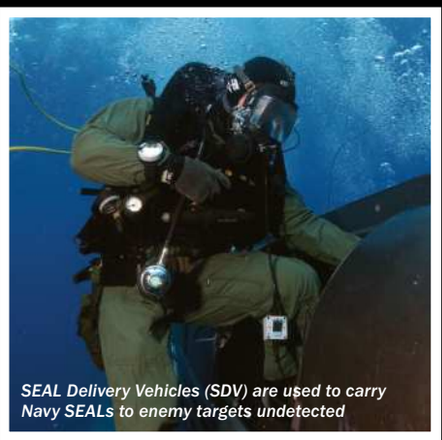
A SEAL in the Rung Sat Special Zone wearing the famous SEAL tiger stripes and the SEAL-only Stoner LMG

SCUBA PIONEERS

FROM THEIR EARLIEST INCEPTION, THE SEALS HAVE BEEN CALLED UPON TO CARRY OUT SABOTAGE AND INFILTRATION OPERATIONS UNDERWATER

The early UDTs swam using only snorkels and fins, but these were soon augmented by some of the first examples of SCUBA gear, including the aqualung, an open-circuit diving system. After the war, divers began to use far more advanced equipment, such as oxygen rebreathers, which eliminated the telltale oxygen bubbles emitted from the aqualung.

In Korea, the UDTs also pioneered the use of dry suits in combat diving operations to combat freezing water temperatures. All UDTs also carried a dive knife, although these were typically used as cutting tools rather than offensively. When carrying weapons, guns were sealed in plastic against the water.



SEAL Delivery Vehicles (SDV) are used to carry Navy SEALs to enemy targets undetected

"AFTER THE WAR, THE DIVERS BEGAN TO USE FAR MORE ADVANCED EQUIPMENT"



Illustration: Jean-Michel Girard, The Art Agency

Maritime Unit provided the skills of covert infiltration by submarine and small boat. These skills were enhanced with further free-fall and static-line parachute training including High-Altitude Low-Opening (HALO) techniques.

Prospective SEALs would have to complete the 18-week UDT course before attempting a six-week SEAL Basic Indoctrination course that taught small-unit tactics and land warfare. Although many believe the SEALs' first missions were in Vietnam, in fact a mixed team of SEALs and UDTs deployed to Cuba, where they conducted beach reconnaissance missions in advance of a proposed American invasion in the wake of the Bay of Pigs debacle.

This first SEAL operational mission almost ended in failure after the SEALs and their recovery submarine failed to link up. The SEALs and UDTs decided to follow their back-up plan and swim for Key West, but thankfully, just as they set off, the submarine surfaced and they were saved from a long swim. The fledgling SEALs also successfully infiltrated and extracted a CIA agent onto (and then from) the island to take photographs of Soviet missiles.

The first SEALs to deploy to Vietnam were as small teams of advisors to the South Vietnamese Navy and Marines. The SEALs also struck up their old friendship with the CIA that dated back to OSS days. Soon individual SEALs were being detached to the Agency to conduct covert operations, including working with the controversial Phung Huong, or Phoenix Program. Phoenix was designed to capture or eliminate key Viet Cong personnel including tax collectors and quartermasters.

By 1965, 12- to 16-man SEAL platoons from SEAL Teams One and Two deployed to South Vietnam to begin six-month tours of duty. Their missions would include reconnaissance, ambushing and intelligence gathering under Operation Game Warden, a wider Navy mission to interdict Viet Cong troop movements and supply lines. SEALs would often infiltrate into a Viet Cong base area to call in Navy Seawolf helicopter gunships to destroy supply caches. Other SEALs were deployed under Operation Market Time to intercept boats smuggling Viet Cong supplies.

The SEALs deployed with their own boats from the Mobile Support Teams (MSTs). These teams were responsible for infiltrating and extracting the SEALs from a target area by a range of specialist SEAL boats including the barge-like Heavy SEAL Support Craft, which bristled with machine guns and grenade launchers. The SEALs also began perfecting helicopter-borne operations, including the use of the 'STABO rig', which enabled up to four SEALs to be extracted by a helicopter winch.

"THEY WERE EQUALLY FEARED AND RESPECTED BY THEIR PRIMARILY VIET CONG GUERRILLA OPPONENTS. THEY ALSO MADE AN IMPACT FAR BEYOND THEIR SIZE, RECORDING 600 CONFIRMED ENEMY DEATHS AND AS MANY AS 300 UNCONFIRMED"

The Navy men also began a tradition of using unconventional weapons and equipment. Instead of issue fatigues, they wore the distinctive 'tiger stripe' camouflage pattern and often favoured denim jeans and sneakers. Their weapons soon included the distinctive Stoner light machine gun, a suppressed pistol known as the 'Hush Puppy' (named after its original role of eradicating guard dogs) and experimental grenade launchers and fully automatic shotguns.

In the Mekong Delta, the Vietnamese christened the SEALs 'the men with green faces' on account of the camouflage face cream the SEALs used to break up the outline and shine of their faces. They were equally feared and respected by their primarily Viet Cong guerrilla opponents. They also made an impact far beyond their numbers, recording 600 confirmed enemy deaths and as many as 300 unconfirmed, impressive considering there were only as many as five or six SEAL platoons operating in South Vietnam at any one time.

The SEALs also fought with another clandestine organisation, the innocuously named Military Assistance Command, Vietnam – Studies and Observations Group, or MACV-SOG. They planned and executed covert reconnaissance missions deep into North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, where the guerrillas maintained safe havens. SEALs were also attached to a unique joint American and South Vietnamese commando unit sponsored by the CIA called the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, or PRUs.

SEALs served in Vietnam until 1971, when the last SEAL platoon departed, although individual SEAL advisers remained with the PRUs until early 1973. During seven years of combat operations in South East Asia, the SEAL Teams lost 46 operators killed in action. Platoons routinely suffered a quarter of their number wounded. Teams One and Two were awarded a record number of decorations, including two Navy Crosses, 42 Silver Stars, 402 Bronze Stars, three Presidential Unit Citations and three Medals of Honor.

In the aftermath of Vietnam, the SEALs were reduced in numbers, but, by the turn of the century and the dawn of the War on Terror, it eventually expanded to its current size of ten SEAL Teams, along with a classified eleventh; the famous SEAL Team Six, or Naval Special Warfare Development Group.

The SEALs' compatriots in the UDTs became the Swimmer Delivery and Special Boat Teams in 1984, specialising in both submersibles and small boats. All, undoubtedly, owe their existence to Kauffman and his Naval Combat Demolition Unit.

FURTHER READING

- **America's First Frogman: The Draper Kauffman Story** By Elizabeth Kauffman Bush
- **SEAL! From Vietnam's Phoenix Program to Central America's Drug Wars** By Lieutenant Commander Mike Walsh and Greg Walker
- **The Sheriff of Ramadi** by Dick Couch
- **Brave Men – Dark Waters** by Orr Kelly

POW RESCUE 1970

NAVY SEALS FROM TEAM ONE RESCUED SOUTH VIETNAMESE PRISONERS FROM VIET CONG PRISON CAGES ON THE CUA LON RIVER

Rescue missions to recover prisoners of war are rare. Conducting such a mission relies upon a perfect storm of accurate intelligence, surgical firepower and a strong dose of luck. Whiskey Platoon of SEAL Team One managed such a feat in November 1970, just hours after the far more famous but far less successful Son Tây rescue attempt in North Vietnam. The SEAL mission became one of the only successful rescues of Allied personnel since the famous Cabanatuan raid in 1945 in which US Army Rangers rescued more than 500 prisoners from certain execution by their Japanese captors.

The SEALs of Detachment Golf of Whiskey Platoon had received intelligence from a friendly fisherman that was later confirmed by a local village chief about a number of South Vietnamese soldiers being held by the Viet Cong.

The Team's commander decided on a covert approach to the target area. His SEALs, accompanied by locally recruited Kit Carson scouts (VC and PAVN defectors) and a Vietnamese interpreter, would infiltrate into the general area by patrol boat before transferring to sampans that would offer a virtually silent approach to the prison camp. A SEAL quick-reaction force in a helicopter stood by up-river ready to pounce should the mission go wrong.

The raiders included seven SEALs armed with a mix of Stoner and customised M60 light machine guns, M16 assault rifles mounting M203 grenade launchers and shortened CAR-15 carbines. The Kit Carson scouts carried AK-47s and would lead the team into the prison – in the darkness the distinctive shape of the AK might give them an edge as the Viet Cong decided if the new arrivals were friend or foe.

The SEALs headed out after dark, and after some initial confusion about the location of the camp, they managed to swap over to the sampans. As they silently approached, a man's cough alerted them to an unseen sentry in a crude hut on the bank. The SEALs quickly captured the Viet Cong, who soon began to spill the beans on the location of both other sentries and the prisoners. Amending their plan based on this latest intelligence, the SEALs left their sampans and crept into the camp, illuminated only by a single cooking fire.

Disaster struck when a flare gun carried by the SEAL commander for signalling the patrol boats fell from his grasp, clattering to the ground and raising the alarm. Several of the sentries opened fire in surprise, sending the POWs diving for the ground in their bamboo prison cages. The SEALs delivered a massive amount of return fire that saw the surviving Viet Cong choose discretion over valour, escaping into the surrounding jungle.

The prison camp was quickly secured and the SEALs split into two elements – one manning a defensive perimeter should unexpected Viet Cong reinforcements arrive while the others began to cut the locks from the POWs' cages. The SEALs had rescued 19 South Vietnamese POWs, some of which had been held for a number of years. The SEALs fired their flare gun and the patrol boats headed in to pick them up. Overhead Seawolf UH-1B gunships arrived to escort the patrol boats back to base after one of the only successful POW rescues of the Vietnam War.

The official Navy after action report notes, "In an area 15 kilometres (nine miles) east-southeast of New Nam Can, the SEALs and PFs freed 19 South Vietnamese POWs after carrying on a running fire fight with 18 VC guards. The aggressiveness of the SEALs and PFs was clearly exhibited in this team operation. Two VC were also captured along with numerous documents in the raid. Worthy of note is the fact that this was the first in-country operation for Whiskey Platoon and its supporting unit, MST Det Charlie."

"CONDUCTING SUCH A MISSION RELIES UPON A PERFECT STORM OF ACCURATE INTELLIGENCE, SURGICAL FIREPOWER AND A STRONG DOSE OF LUCK"



***Above:** SEAL Team One pose with their Stoner and M60 machine guns (and cigar!) prior to a mission*



***Above:** Rescued POWs are seated in the foreground while the SEALs and Kit Carson scouts stand in the background*

Images: Alamy, Getty, Thinkstock, Navy SEAL Museum, Textures.com, US Navy

NAVY SEAL TRAINING

RICK KAISER TALKS US THROUGH THE GRUELLING NAVY SEAL BUD/S TRAINING AND HIS 22 YEARS OF SPECIAL FORCES EXPERIENCE

Richard 'Rick' Kaiser joined the US Navy at the age of 17 and was assigned to SEAL Team Two in 1980. He went on to be assigned to an Assault Squadron in 1985 and was selected for the Enlisted Education Advancement Program (EEAP). He was awarded a Silver Star for Valor at the Battle of Mogadishu (Black Hawk Down), where he served as sniper, before retiring from active duty in August 2000. Kaiser is now the Chief Operating Officer of the Navy SEAL Museum.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO JOIN UP?

I joined the Navy in September 1979 after reading a pamphlet in the recruiters' office about SEALs called "Men with Green Faces."

DESCRIBE THE WHOLE TRAINING PROCEDURE TO US

BUD/S Basic Underwater Demolition SEAL training is six months long and was held in Coronado, California. It was divided into three sections.
1. Basic Conditioning/Hell Week
2. Dive Training
3. Land Warfare.

IS IT MORE PHYSICALLY DIFFICULT OR MENTALLY STRENUOUS?

50/50. The daily grind was mentally tough each day but none of your mental toughness counted in the end if you could not perform the myriad of physical activities that were planned each day. The mental part came at night or while eating a meal. Knowing what was coming next was sometimes as hard to deal with.

WERE THERE ANY TIMES YOU WANTED OUT?

Once, on the third day of Hell Week. With no sleep and at the midnight meal (you ate four times a day to keep your energy up) I finally felt warm, somewhat dry and relaxed. I started feeling sorry for myself and thinking about quitting. The instructors, thank God, saw the class falling asleep and put us all in the cold water for an extended period of time and I snapped out of it.

WHAT IS THE TOUGHEST OF ALL THE PHASES IN BUD/S?

The initial training and conditioning of the first phase. The instructors really tried to weed out the weak. In their words, "I would rather have you quit here in training than in combat."

DID ANYONE IN YOUR GROUP ACHIEVE THE 'HONOR MAN' STATUS FOR INSPIRING YOUR CLASSMATES?

Yes, his name was Brad Young. He was later fired for stealing a camera from the Danish Frogmen. No different than anyone else except better scores on runs, swims and perhaps liked more by the instructors.

WHAT WERE YOUR SPECIALIST ROLES?

Combat swimmer, lead diver, breacher, sniper, sniper instructor, training chief, operations officer and military free-fall instructor.

HOW HAS THE FORCE CHANGED SINCE YOU BEGAN?

SEALs today must be much more technology-savvy individuals. Gone are the days of the sniper pair going in to make the one shot. Now a good SEAL on a radio or computer can do so much more.

WHAT WAS YOUR TOUGHEST MISSION?

Training missions are always tougher than the real thing. Practice for a particular operation usually meant much more pain.

WHAT WEAPONRY DID YOU USE?

My primary weapon was an M4 or HHK 416 and secondary was a Sig Sauer P226. My sniper rifle was a 300 Winchester Magnum.

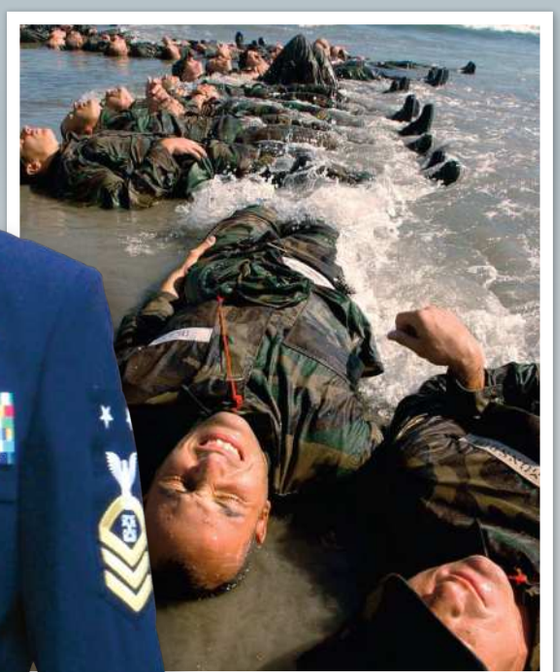
WHAT WAS YOUR RELATIONSHIP LIKE WITH OTHER SPECIAL FORCES?

I had the pleasure of serving with both the SBS and the SAS. SEALs are naturally closer to the SBS than the SAS due to our water backgrounds. I have many friends in both services and have had many a beer at the pub.

WHAT HAVE YOU TAKEN AWAY FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

Trust no one but your teammates and families. Don't fight thinking there is some kind of moral purpose or high ground because history has a way of changing as time goes on.





The instructors test the candidates to their limits, especially during Hell Week

"TRAINING MISSIONS ARE ALWAYS TOUGHER THAN THE REAL THING. PRACTICE FOR A PARTICULAR OPERATION USUALLY MEANT MUCH MORE PAIN"

BRITAIN'S FIRST COMMANDOS

THE COMMANDOS WERE A NEW UNIT CREATED TO 'BUTCHER' THE NAZIS AT CHURCHILL'S DEMAND, BUT IT TOOK TIME TO TURN THEM INTO KILLERS

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER

On the evening of 24 April 1940 a Royal Navy submarine departed Rosyth in Scotland bound for Norway on what was codenamed 'Operation Knife'. On board HMS Truant were seven men described by the vessel's captain, Lieutenant Commander Christopher Hutchinson, as "a bunch of cut-throats", armed with plastic explosives and a variety of "ghastly looking" weapons.

The seven were led by a Scots Guards officer named Bryan Mayfield and included Peter Kemp, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and Bill Stirling, a former Guards officer and one of the wealthiest landowners in Scotland.

15 days earlier, on 9 April, Germany had invaded Norway, occupying the capital Oslo as well as the cities of Bergen, Trondheim and Narvik. The Norwegians, assisted by a hastily assembled British Expeditionary Force, had offered spirited resistance, and the seven men in the Truant were on their way to Sognefjord, north of the western city of Bergen, to embark upon a sabotage campaign against German lines of communications.

Eight hours after its departure from Scotland the Truant was rocked by a powerful explosion after hitting a mine. The damage caused by the mine was bad enough for Hutchinson to abort the mission and return to Rosyth.

The Admiralty promised the seven men that a second attempt would be made to transport them to Norway, but it might take a day or two to provide a replacement submarine. In the meantime Stirling invited his comrades to stay at his lavish estate at Keir, close to the town of Dunblane. They were soon informed that Operation Knife had been cancelled because of the collapse of Allied resistance in Norway. So what were they to do now?

To a degree, they were relieved that the operation hadn't materialised: they had military training but there was a world of difference between guerrilla fighting and what one learned at the Guards' depot. Stirling took the initiative. "It was Stirling's idea that the six of us, reinforced by a few selected officers and NCOs, should form the nucleus of a new training school," said Kemp. "We should begin with cadre courses for junior officers from different units of the army. Mayfield was to be commandant, Stirling chief instructor."

Stirling and Mayfield travelled to London in the first week of May 1940 and presented their idea to the War Office to establish a training centre in Scotland where soldiers could be schooled in the art of guerrilla fighting.



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***Left:** Soldier from No. 3 Commando armed with a 'Tommy gun', at Largs in Scotland, 2 May 1942*



Men of No. 4 Army Commando advancing towards Ouistreham, 6 June 1944

© Getty

Gavin Mortimer is a best-selling author, TV consultant and expert on special forces units of World War II. His books include *The First Eagles, The SBS In World War II: An Illustrated History,* and *The SAS In World War II*



Commandos were given intensive training in hand-to-hand combat and guerrilla warfare

"ON BOARD HMS TRUANT WERE SEVEN MEN DESCRIBED BY THE VESSEL'S CAPTAIN, LIEUTENANT COMMANDER CHRISTOPHER HUTCHINSON, AS 'A BUNCH OF CUT-THROATS', ARMED WITH PLASTIC EXPLOSIVES AND A VARIETY OF 'GHASTLY LOOKING' WEAPONS"

© Getty

ACTION NOT APPEASEMENT

Their timing could not have been better. On 10 May Winston Churchill replaced Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister. Britain now had a leader known for his boldness and pugnacity, a man determined to fight back against the Nazis by any means possible.

On 3 June Stirling and Mayfield were released from the Scots Guards with permission to establish the Commando Special Training Centre at Lochailort in the northwest of Scotland. There to greet them upon their arrival was Simon Fraser, 15th Lord Lovat, Stirling's cousin, who owned the land around Lochailort.

Fraser was appointed senior instructor in fieldcraft, one of a team of experts recruited to Lochailort. Others included mountaineers, explorers, an Olympic shooting gold medallist in Cyril Mackworth Praed, and two former Shanghai policemen, William Fairbairn and Eric Sykes, who taught students the art of close-quarter combat.

Also in the first week of June, Churchill issued a memorandum to his chiefs of staff instructing them to establish Britain's first special forces: "We have always set our faces against this idea but… enterprises must be prepared, with specially trained troops, who can develop a reign of terror down these coasts, first of all on the 'butcher and bolt' policy, but later on, or perhaps as soon as we are organised, we should surprise Calais or Boulogne, kill or capture the Hun garrison."

Churchill's thinking was in line with Lieutenant Colonel Dudley Clarke's, the Military Assistant to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir John Dill. Clarke had spent some of his childhood in South Africa and was an admirer of the Boer commandos, who had fought so bravely and innovatively against the British in the war of 1899–1902. It was Clarke who suggested calling this new force 'commandos'.

Men volunteered for a variety of reasons. Bernard Davis, from the ranks of the Royal Artillery, was still smarting from the humiliation he had suffered in France and Belgium the previous month. "We had been back from Dunkirk about one month… and we were fed up," he recalled. "We had no weapons to speak off, we were just doing routine marching and swimming. And one day a smart young officer from the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry arrived."

The officer explained the role of the commandos and then asked for volunteers. Davis was one of about 20 who became part of D Troop, No. 4 Commando. "For a lot of us it was a desire to get our own back for the defeat we had suffered in Belgium," he said.

There were initially 12 Commando units, each one comprised of eight assault Troops, a heavy weapons Troop and a signals Troop (about 600 men and 40 officers). On 17 July Admiral Sir Roger Keyes was appointed Director of Combined Operations and his son, Geoffrey, was one of the first recruits to the commandos.

John Price of the Royal Warwicks, who had been evacuated from Dunkirk, volunteered for the commandos without knowing anything about their purpose. "We were reassembled (after Dunkirk) at Hereford and there was a notice for volunteers for special duties, but it did not specify what it was for," he said. "To be honest I wanted to get out of that unit. I felt it was like a flock of sheep being led to the slaughter."

There was also the lure of extra pay: 13 and fourpence for officers and six and eightpence for the men.

Price became a member of A Troop No. 4 Commando, based in Weymouth. "We spent most of the time on the beaches, getting fit, and we gradually worked up doing longer marches, and we got bicycles and went on long bicycle tours," he said.

Throughout July and August the threat of a German invasion was Britain's main concern. "We were to be the first line of defence and we used to sleep down on Portland beach every night with hand grenades," remembered Price.

FAILURE AND FRUSTRATION

Once the prospect of a German invasion had receded by the early autumn the commandos were sent north to Scotland to broaden their training. Many of the officers and senior NCOs passed in small parties through the Special Training Centre at Lochailort while the men were billeted across the country: No. 4 Commando was in Troon, for example, No. 2 in Ayr, No. 3 and No. 8 in Largs and Nos 1 and 9 in Irvine.

"We used to go away in troops," recalled Price. "We would go mountaineering in North

"FOR A LOT OF US IT WAS A DESIRE TO GET OUR OWN BACK FOR THE DEFEAT WE HAD SUFFERED IN BELGIUM"



© Getty

Wales, cliff climbing in Cornwall, potholing in Derbyshire, and doing exercises up the West coast on and off ships."

A significant event occurred on 30 October 1940 when the commandos were reorganised into the Special Service Brigade and, somewhat thoughtlessly, abbreviated to the SS Brigade. There were five battalions within the Brigade, each composed of two Commando units. No. 3 (A Company) and No. 8 (B Company) became 4 SS Battalion, and this was one of three earmarked for Operation Workshop, along with 2 and 3 Battalions, under the overall command of Lieutenant Colonel Bob Laycock.

The object of the mission was to capture the Italian island of Pantelleria in the Mediterranean, but after weeks of hard training and rehearsals Workshop was cancelled. "Despondency was the order of the day," wrote Laycock, although Major Alan Smallman of 4 SS Battalion was relieved at the outcome. "It would have been a disaster because we were not ready for an operation on that scale," he recalled. "Up until that time the only raids had been small-scale raids across the channel: a not particularly successful raid on Guernsey and a lot of training exercises. But Roger Keyes, being the type of sailor he was, was determined to let the commandos see blood. Fortunately the chiefs of staff saw the lights before the blood and the operation fell through."

To recompense the men for all their hard work, Keyes sent the commandos on a fortnight's leave; when they returned they



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***Above:** Lieutenant Dennis O'Flaherty, middle, was shot in the mouth and lost an eye during the fighting in Vaagso. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his courage*

An oil factory burns in the aftermath of the Vaagso raid as commandos look on from a nearby pier



© Getty

discovered that the Special Service Battalions had been dropped and the Commando Units restored. Three of them – Nos 7, 8 and 11 – were designated Force Z and on the night of 31 January sailed for North Africa. Among their number were several men who would go on to find fame fighting in other units: David Stirling, Blair Mayne and Bill Fraser in the SAS; David Sutherland, Roger Courtney and George Jellicoe in the SBS; and Geoffrey Keyes and Tommy MacPherson, who took part in the 'Rommel Raid' of November 1941, the former receiving a posthumous Victoria Cross.

Meanwhile, recalled Smallman, "No. 3 Commando went back to Largs… and I became adjutant just about the time when we were lined up to take the Azores. That was an operation [codenamed 'Brisk'] that again did not come off."

The cancellation of Workshop and Brisk, coupled with the unsuccessful raid on Guernsey the previous July, when the commandos had failed to find a single German, further eroded morale. Spirits were just as low among the commandos who disembarked in the Middle East in March 1941. As the novelist Evelyn Waugh – a member of No. 8 Commando – recorded in his diary shortly after arriving in Egypt, "The feelings of the Bde [Brigade] were well summed up by an inscription found on the troop decks of Glengyle. 'Never in the history of human endeavour have so few been so buggered about by so many.'"

BRIEF BUT BLOODY

In the same month that Waugh was tickled by the wit of one of his commando comrades Smallman and the men of No. 3 Commando were "delighted" to be briefed about an imminent raid on the Lofoten Islands in the north of Norway. Almost a year earlier the islands had been seized by the Germans, and the herring- and cod-oil factories in the ports of Stamsund, Henningsvaer, Svolvaer and Brettesnes were now supplying the Nazis with this precious commodity. No. 3 and No. 4 Commando were tasked with landing on the islands, destroying the factories, capturing Quislings and Nazis, and bringing back to Britain those locals wishing to enlist in the Norwegian forces exiled in London.

"NEVER IN THE HISTORY OF HUMAN ENDEAVOUR HAVE SO FEW BEEN SO BUGGERED ABOUT BY SO MANY"

Not long before dawn on 4 March 1941 two infantry landing ships and their escort of five Royal Naval destroyers spotted the lights of the Lofoten Islands in the distance. "When we arrived in the [Vest] fjord… we found the fishing fleet coming out from Lofoten towards us, so we sailed towards them to be greeted by lots of waving from the Norwegians when they realised what was going on," recalled Smallman.

Price and his comrades in No. 4 Commando made for the ports of Svolvaer and Brettesnes. "We got into the landing craft from the mother ship and sailed into Svolvaer, and all was quiet," he remembered. "We were wondering when somebody was going to open up and do something about it, but we pulled up alongside the quay and one or two Norwegians said 'good morning' to us."

Price said that with no enemy in sight the commandos had "to go looking for them". What Germans they found were asleep and when roused they meekly assembled in the fish market. "The whole raid, which was supposed to take until about one o'clock, was done by about nine o'clock in the morning or just after," recalled Price. "So I spent the rest of the time fraternising with the locals."

Bernard Davis of No. 4 Commando said the most action he experienced during the raid was when he and some of his pals had a 'finders keepers' squabble over an enemy radio discovered in one ship.

Smallman and No. 3 Commando had also achieved total surprise upon landing at the ports of Stamsund and Henningsvaer. What Germans they rounded up were "technical experts", either overseeing the production of the oil that would be shipped to U-boat bases, or engineers in the process of constructing an airfield to speed up the delivery to the submarines that were causing such damage to Allied shipping in the North Atlantic. "We were there for about three or four hours and Norwegians were rushing down to the quayside, clammering to come with us," said Smallman. "Originally we had said we wouldn't bring any girls away but finally we brought quite a bevvy of girls who wanted to be nurses."

While the commandos socialised with the locals, a party of Royal Engineers set about destroying 11 factories, an electric-light plant and approximately 800,000 gallons of oil. Five ships of a maximum tonnage of 18,900 were sent to the bottom of the sea, and 225 prisoners were brought back to Britain.

The response to the raid was rapturous. Price recalled that Sir Roger Keyes greeted the commandos upon their return, and "he was highly delighted". So, too, was Churchill and the King of Norway, Haakon VII, who came



The rear-facing view from a Bomber Command Bristol Blenheim Mark IV, which took part in the raid on Vaagso

to Scotland to offer their congratulations and watch the commandos go through their paces in training.

But the morale and the momentum fostered by the raid on the Lofoten Islands dissipated over the months that followed. In April a commando attack was launched on Boulogne but one landing craft was lost in the rough seas and the raid was aborted. They tried again a few days later, "but it was not a successful raid," said Davis. "One of the objects of the exercise was to capture the German radar installations, but we couldn't find them… we got soaking wet and nearly froze to death; that was the closest we got to being killed."

BLOODED AT VAAGSO

The commandos received fresh impetus on 29 October 1941 when Keyes was succeeded as Director of Combined Operations by Captain Lord Louis Mountbatten. He changed the point of attack from France back to Norway, a coastline less vigorously defended and where opportunities for a morale-boosting raid were more plentiful. Vaagso, on the southwest coast, and the nearby island of Maaloy, were chosen as the targets.

The raiding party of 51 officers and 525 other ranks comprised No. 3 and No. 2 Commando, as well as a contingent from the Norwegian Royal Army. And to ensure maximum publicity Mountbatten attached a film crew of Harry Watt, a civilian film director, and Lieutenant Harry Rignold, Official Cinematographer to the War Office.

The pair embarked in the landing craft with the rest of the commandos just as dawn broke on 27 December 1941 and headed up the Vaags Fjord. Overhead RAF Blenheim bombers dropped smoke bombs on Vaagso. "We could see the anti-aircraft guns on the top of these cliffs shooting at the RAF," said Watt. "The RAF were bombing the island on which were a large number of very big guns… it was very frightening to realise that if anybody saw us those guns could be turned down on us and our open boats. What was tremendously British was from one of the boats a man started playing the bagpipes."

The only casualties suffered by the commandos as they neared the shoreline were from the RAF. "One of the Blenheims unfortunately was hit as it was flying in to drop its smoke canisters, and one of the canisters landed on our landing craft," recalled Smallman. "The phosphorus ignited and we had a number of casualties in the landing craft."

On landing the raiders split into five groups and followed their prearranged instructions. Watt and Rignold attached themselves to Group Two, whose orders were to attack the town of South Vaagso and destroy a number of military and economic objectives, including a fish-oil factory and a power station. "There was some very severe fighting as we fought our way up through the town, though as adjutant I was more or less out of the fighting," said Smallman. "They had to fight their way more or less building by building and we did have some casualties. We lost two extremely good officers."



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A British Bren gunner pictured during the raid on Vaagso

Captain Herbert Forrester was killed as he led a charge on the German HQ, and the death of Captain John Giles was witnessed by Watt at a farmhouse.

"There was a magnificent young British officer who had been a light heavyweight champion of the Territorial Army, and he went to the door and it was pretty well suspected that there were Germans inside," said Watt. "He kicked the door open but he didn't jump to the side at the same time… and a burst of machine gunfire came from inside, right across his chest, and he fell dead."

The fiercest resistance came in the northern part of the town, where the Germans sniped at the commandos from the windows of warehouses and factories. "It was while I was organising the job of burning down the warehouse, as opposed to rushing it, that I suddenly saw Lieutenant O'Flaherty and Trooper Sherington dash into the building by the front door," recalled Captain Peter Young. "They were both armed with Tommy guns… I felt I had to go too. I was at the bottom of the stairs leading to the second floor when I heard two shots and both O'Flaherty and Sherington fell."

Both men survived their wounds and, as they were dragged to safety, their comrades threw a bucket of petrol into the room where the sniper was concealed, followed by a firebomb.

By early afternoon, South Vaagso was in British hands, as was Maaloy Island, after a short sharp fight in which Captain Martin Linge, commander of the Norwegian Royal Army force, was killed at the head of his men.



© Getty

Above: A wounded commando is helped by comrades during the raid on Vaagso

"THEIR COMRADES THREW A BUCKET OF PETROL INTO THE ROOM WHERE THE SNIPER WAS CONCEALED, FOLLOWED BY A FIREBOMB"

Just how many casualties the commandos had suffered became apparent to Smallman when they arrived back at Largs by train to be greeted by scores of wives who had been living with their husbands in private accommodation. "When the train drew into Largs we were met by quite a number of wives anxious to know what had happened to their husbands," said Smallman. "And I had the sad task, as did one or two other people, of explaining to wives whose husbands had been wounded, and one wife in particular, whose husband had been killed, what had happened."

Nonetheless, the raid had been a success, destroying a wireless station, four coast-defence guns, one anti-aircraft gun, a tank, nine ships and several factories. More than 150 of the enemy were killed and a further 98 taken into captivity. "Everybody was so utterly exhausted there was no celebration," recalled Watt, who with his cameraman had captured the intensity of the fighting. "There was a feeling the raid had been a success but it had paid pretty heavily. It was a prestige raid more than anything. Militarily it was not worth much at all, but from publicity and prestige it was worth it."

In the days that followed the British press lauded its lion-hearted commandos, with photos of the raid and heart-warming stories from some of the 77 Norwegians rescued from Vaagso. "None of us," Harald Hansen told reporters, "will ever forget how the commandos came and gave us our freedom and new hope for the future."

British commandos on the look out for snipers among the ruins of Osnabrück, April 1945



© Alamy



CAP
Because they were tasked with pulling off hit-and-run attacks, commandos were not equipped with the standard British helmet. Instead they wore a woollen cap comforter.

DENISON SMOCK
This coverall jacket was issued to all commandos and provided both camouflage and protection against the wind.

SUPPLIES
Commandos had to rely on mobility and speed when attacking enemy positions, so they only carried a small amount of supplies, including ammunition.

SHOULDER PATCH
Known as a tactical recognition badge, the shoulder patch of a commando featured an anchor with a machine gun laid across its middle and an eagle hovering above it. This badge enabled the quick recognition of a commando unit in battle.

THOMPSON MACHINE GUN
Commandos favoured the American-made Thompson machine gun on raiding missions. Its firing rate varied between 600 and 1,500 rounds per minute depending on the model and it weighed around 9.9lb.

TOGGLE ROPE
A toggle rope was carried by all ranks. Tied together, a number of toggle ropes could create one long enough to scale up walls, cliff faces and a number of other obstacles encountered in the field.

BOOTS
Lightweight, rubber-soled boots enabled commandos to move around silently and avoid alerting enemy soldiers to their presence.

ANATOMY OF A COMMANDO

BRITISH COMMANDOS PROVED INVALUABLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE AXIS POWERS

The commandos were formed at the request of Prime Minister Winston Churchill in order to carry out raids, sabotage strategically vital positions behind enemy lines and inflict as many casualties as possible on the unsuspecting Axis armies.

These specially trained troops were separated into distinct units, each with specialised skill sets, from parachuting to intelligence gathering – there was even a canoe unit that could be deployed to attack enemy shipping. They all proved their worth in WWII.

STRIKING FROM THE SHADOWS

44 20 toughest commando missions

From WWII to the War on Terror, dive into the missions that have made the commandos

56 The Universal Soldier

A retired lieutenant colonel discusses serving in four armies, navigating Viet Cong minefields and patrolling the seething streets of Northern Ireland during the Troubles

68 H-47 Chinook

Take to the skies in an iconic chopper that has proved crucial to many top-secret operations

74 Operation Nimrod

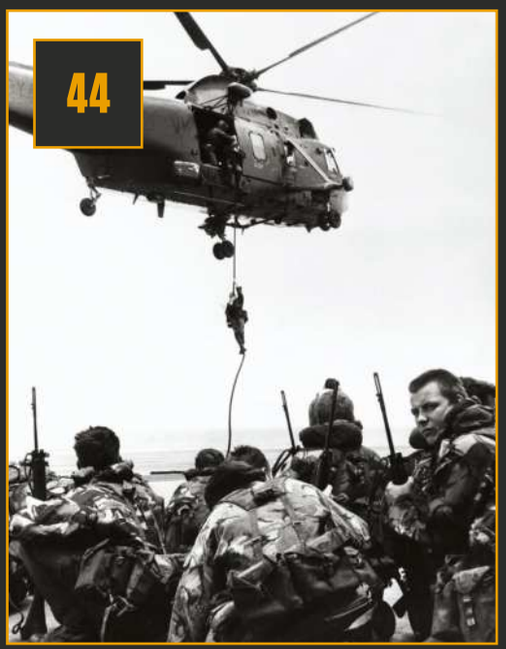
In April 1980 six terrorists seized control of the Iranian embassy in London. Only one team could save the hostages

86 The SAS raid on Pebble Island

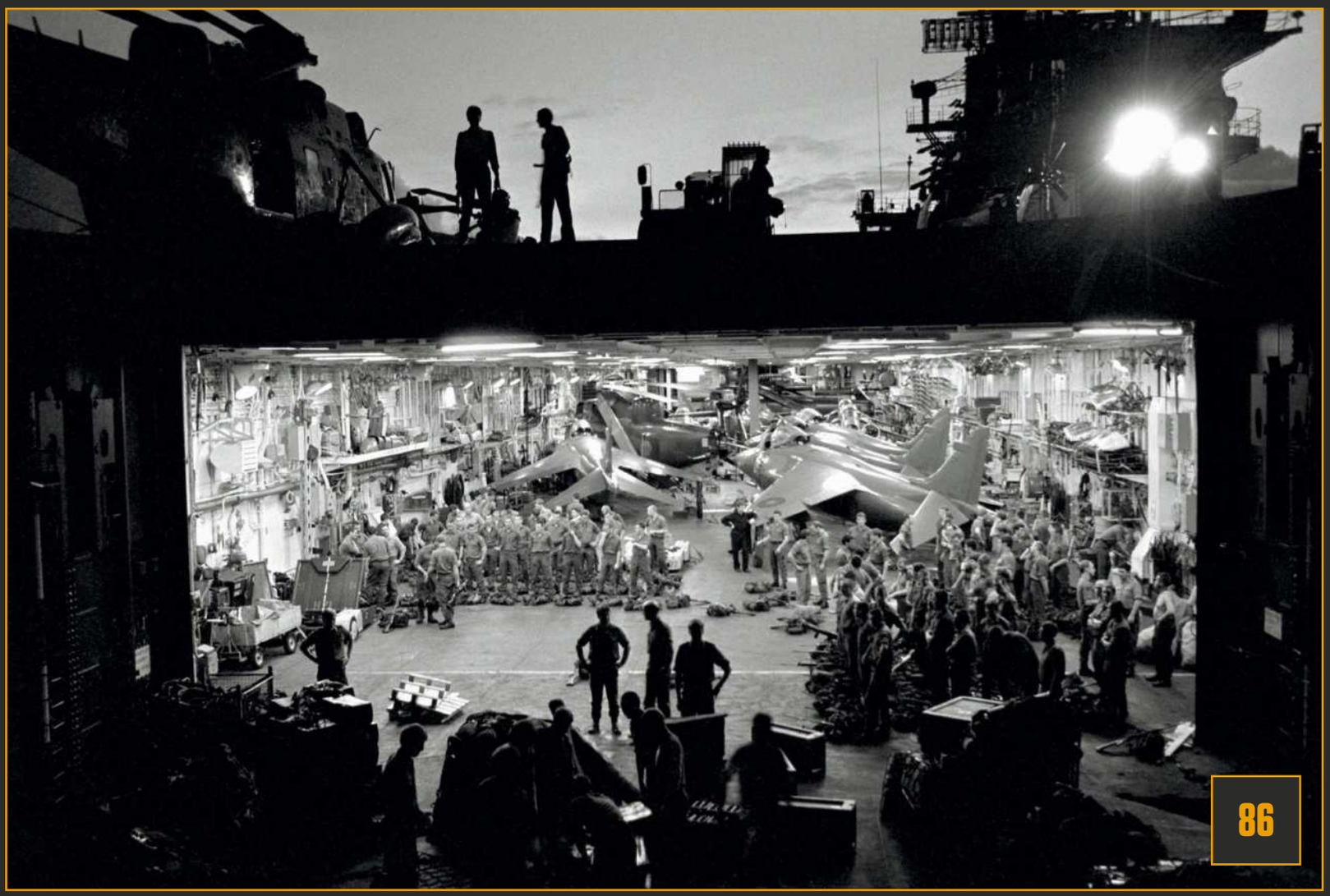
If Britain was to retake the Falklands, the Argentinian air force needed to be eliminated. Up stepped the SAS










86


74

20 TOUGHEST COMMANDO MISSIONS

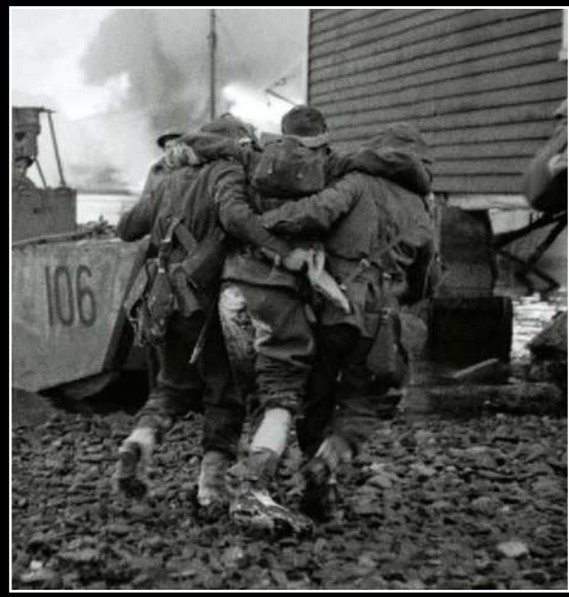
WORDS: JACK GRIFFITHS

DISCOVER THE MOST DARING & DESTRUCTIVE OPERATIONS OF THE DEADLIEST ELITE FORCE



It's 1940 and Britain has just weathered the first waves of the blitzkrieg storm. After the evacuation of Dunkirk, Churchill and his war cabinet have some respite to decide what is the best way to retaliate against the Third Reich. They make the decision to form an elite force that will be better than the best the Wehrmacht has to offer. The result is the creation of the British Commando regiment.

The commandos would become an instrumental part of the Allied fighting force during the war. Men were recruited from all over Britain to take part in what was simply called 'service of a hazardous nature'. From D-Day to the Far East, the specialised units would become the scourge of the Axis forces. Despite initially having little training, these shock troops proved so effective that Hitler authorised the 'Kommandobefehl' (Commando Order), stating that German soldiers should eliminate any Allied special forces soldier on sight. This went directly against the original Geneva Convention and demonstrated just how these soldiers got under the skin of the Nazi hierarchy. Their job done, the British Commandos were disbanded after the war, but their role and skill set has lived on in the Royal Marines.



1 THE ST NAZAIRE RAID

28 MARCH 1942

1ST, 2ND, 3RD, 4TH, 5TH, 9TH AND 12TH COMMANDOS

The daring operation that punched a hole in the Third Reich's critically important dry dock

One of the finest acts of courage in the whole of WWII, the raid on St Nazaire was a true gamble. The best way to hurt the Kriegsmarine was to strike its dockyards, so the port became a key target for the British in what would be known as Operation Chariot.

The tricky part of the attack was reaching the harbour, as it was not exposed to open sea, so the commandos would have to navigate an five-mile estuary as well as avoid a multitude of German anti-aircraft flak guns. Even worse, they could not use the tactic of blanket bombing due to the high number of civilians in the surrounding area, and naval support would not be available due to the narrow estuary.

Under the command of Lord Louis Mountbatten, the decision was taken to pack the destroyer HMS Campbeltown full of explosives and ram its full bulk into the dock while commandos from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 9th and 12th units rode alongside the vessel in small motor launches.

Despite having the cover of night and taking a variety of precautionary measures, the Germans were alerted, meaning only a few of the motor launches made it to the docks. Once ashore, the commandos and demolition squads rushed into the submarine pens to arm explosives. The main objectives were:

- Completely destroy the two caissons of the Normandie Dockyard.
- Demolish as many of the dockyard facilities as possible.
- Break down the lock gates.

"THE TRICKY PART OF THE ATTACK WAS REACHING THE HARBOUR, AS IT WAS NOT EXPOSED TO OPEN SEA"

1 AT THE HARBOUR WALLS

Approaching the port from the Loire estuary, 16 motor launches carry 621 commandos past the sea walls and into St Nazaire. Among the commandos are demolition squads with the sole intent of destroying as much of the dock as possible before extraction.

2 HMS CAMPBELTOWN

Filled with four tons of explosives, the destroyer is disguised as a German Möve torpedo boat and successfully ghosts past the coastal defences. In the early hours of the morning, the alarm is finally raised and Commander Mecke orders all of the port's gun emplacements to open fire.

3 RACE TO THE DOCK

The British vessels respond as a crossfire ensues. Many of the motor launches are lost to the defences, but Campbeltown is the worst hit as shells pound its sides and machine-gun fire rakes its deck. It smashes into the dock at 1.34 a.m.

4 BOMBING RUN

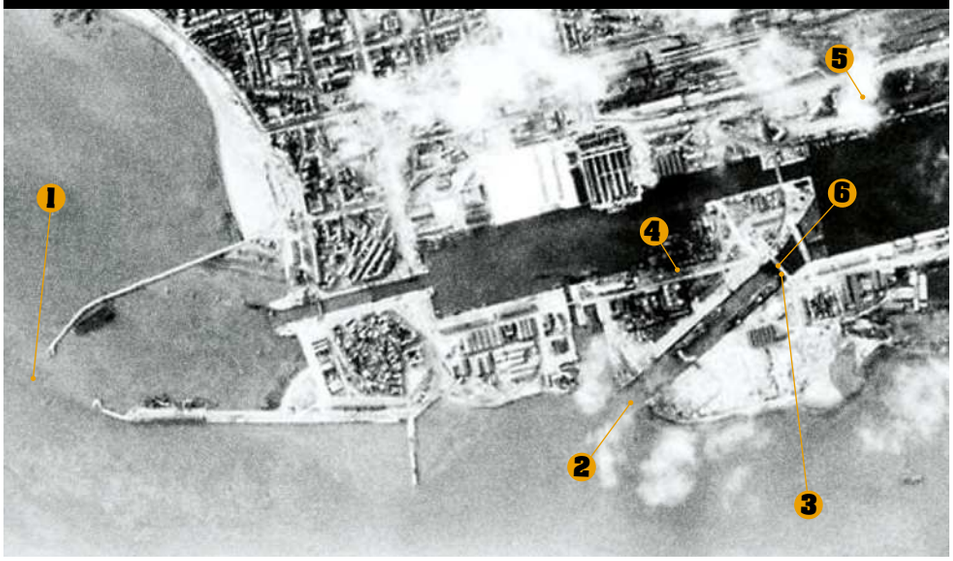
Led by Commander Ryder, the commandos and demolition squads land on the quayside. The German resistance is fierce as the British troops get to work. The primary target, the pump house, is found by a squad of four sergeants, who promptly demolish it.

5 BREAKOUT

With the Germans regrouping, the commandos are in trouble. As many objectives as possible have been completed, so the commandos decide to fight their way out of the town. The British record many losses, but by first light most have escaped with their lives and the raid is over.

6 DETONATION

The next day, Campbeltown explodes, killing more than 400 German soldiers and reducing the dock gates to rubble. 59 commandos have been killed or are missing, with another 109 captured. Five Victoria Crosses will be awarded.





Above: HMS Campbeltown after it ploughed into the dock. The fuses didn't detonate until the next day, but the Germans couldn't haul the behemoth off the gate

THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC

The longest continuous campaign of the war, the battle for the Atlantic raged from 1939 until 1945. Hitler knew that Britain depended on its overseas allies for supplies and arms, so cutting this off would significantly restrict Churchill's options. German U-boat wolf packs were deadly in the conflict, launching at a rapid rate off the newly acquired coastal ports in Vichy France. At first the Kriegsmarine dominated, but the tide began to turn in 1941 as the Allies managed to get on top of the U-boat threat. As the Germans retreated to Fortress Europe, it was time for the Allies to go for the jugular and hit the Axis ships where they were most vulnerable: their docks.



One of the many Allied convoys that contributed to the demise of the U-boats in the Battle of the Atlantic

EXPERT OPINION

DR PETER JOHNSTON, NATIONAL ARMY MUSEUM

How much did the St Nazaire raid affect German operations in occupied France and the Atlantic?

After Campbeltown exploded, the St Nazaire dry dock was rendered inoperable for the rest of the war. This severely limited the ability of the German surface fleet to operate in the Atlantic and threaten the convoys on which Britain depended. Because of the raid, the German navy never sent the Tirpitz into the Atlantic for fear that, if it needed repairs, it would have to return to German waters via the English Channel, where the Royal Navy Home Fleet could threaten it. Instead, the Tirpitz remained in Norwegian waters until the RAF destroyed it on 12 November 1944.

The raid also accelerated German plans for the Atlantic Wall. Ports, in particular, were increasingly fortified to prevent a repeat, and by June 1942 the Germans began using concrete to fortify gun emplacements and bunkers. While this diverted resources away from other German theatres of war, it would also make any future landing in Europe more difficult for the Allies.



2 THE COCKLESHELL HEROES

7–12 DECEMBER 1942 HMS TUNA

Known officially as Operation Frankton, this courageous escapade involved a band of commandos canoeing 70 miles to lay charges on German ships

One of the most unusual missions of the war, Frankton is nonetheless fondly remembered for helping maintain the Allied blockade between Japan and Germany. The idea of using canoes for infiltration behind enemy lines came from the British witnessing the success of an Italian canoe raid in December 1941 that inflicted major damage to the battleships Elizabeth and Valiant. By 1942, the Allied blockade on Germany was becoming less effective, especially at the port of Bordeaux. After considering more conventional forms of assault, it was decided that canoes would be the method of attack.

Split into two divisions, the objective was to destroy German ships in the harbour. After a series of faults, only the canoes Catfish and Crayfish managed to make it to Bordeaux. While taking cover in some vegetation, the four men were discovered but managed to convince the civilians that remaining silent would be the best course of action. The two canoes pressed on for days and eventually made it to their target on the night of 10 December. Making their way into the docks, the fuses on the limpets were set. On the next night, more mines were attached to cargo ships and patrol boats as five ships and the harbour itself were badly damaged. At one point Catfish was spotted by a sentry, but its camouflage saved the day as the soldier turned away again. Their work done, the canoes were scuttled and the crew made a hasty escape to the safety of the Spanish border. The success of Operation Frankton is credited with helping shorten the war.



THE HEROES

CATFISH — MISSION SUCCESS
LIEUTENANT COLONEL HERBERT HASLER
ROYAL MARINE BILL SPARKS

CRAYFISH — MISSION SUCCESS
CORPORAL ALBERT LAVER
ROYAL MARINE WILLIAM MILLS

CONGER — CAPSIZED
CORPORAL GEORGE SHEARD
ROYAL MARINE DAVID MOFFATT

CUTTLEFISH — MISSING
LIEUTENANT JOHN MACKINNON
ROYAL MARINE JAMES CONWAY

COALFISH — CAPSIZED
SERGEANT SAMUEL WALLACE
ROYAL MARINE ROBERT EWART

CACHALOT — LAUNCH FAILURE
ROYAL MARINE W. A. ELLERY
ROYAL MARINE E. FISHER

SUPPORT ROYAL MARINE NORMAN COLLEY

EXPERT OPINION



Winston Churchill believed the Cockleshell Heroes shortened the war by six months. How and why was it so effective?

Churchill's claim may have been a little exaggerated, based on the need for propaganda in what was otherwise a dark time for the British war effort. The long-term effects of the raid were not as significant as those of St Nazaire – but they did of course have an affect on the German war machine.

However, nothing should detract from the bravery of the men who carried it out. A small team that was well led, well trained and dedicated to success inflicted damage far outweighing their small capacity. The Germans became increasingly defensive and committed more resources to guarding ships in harbour – men and material that could have been deployed elsewhere.

***Left:** "Of the many brave and dashing raids carried out by the men of Combined Operations Command, none was more courageous or imaginative than Operation Frankton," said Lord Mountbatten*

THE ESCAPE

1 TARGET: BORDEAUX
The operation gets off to a poor start as one of the canoes is holed as it leaves the submarine. The remaining five vessels make it to the River Gironde, but two more are put out of the operation by a powerful rip tide.

2 TWO CREWS REMAIN
After Cuttlefish is spotted and apprehended by Germans, just two canoes are left to continue the operation. Arriving in the harbour, they bypass a sentry and attach limpet mines to the ships. Each one has a nine-hour fuse, so the Catfish and Crayfish are long gone by the time of the explosion.

3 DAMAGE DONE
The detonations begin at 3.50 a.m. and last for eight hours. Five ships are seriously damaged, including cargo ships, a small liner and a 'Sperrbrecher' patrol boat. As an added bonus, Crayfish purposely goes off course to sink further targets at the nearby port of Bassens.

4 ESCAPE
Jettisoning their canoes, the four men race for the Spanish border. Laver and Mills are caught by German soldiers at Montlieu-la-Garde and shot on sight. Sparks and Hasler make it 62 miles north to the town of Ruffec and escape across the Pyrenees with the invaluable help of the French Resistance.

5 AFTERMATH
The actual damage done is minor, but Operation Frankton is essential to morale. To the British, the perceived idea of an invincible Third Reich is over, while in Nazi Germany Hitler becomes more and more concerned by the renewed threat to his western frontier.

RUFFEC
ROULLE
ST PREUIL
ST GERMAIN
REIGNAC
DONNEZAC
MONTLIEU-LA-GARDE
BLAYE
BORDEAUX
BAIGNEAUX
LA REOLE

ROUTE OF HASLER & SPARKS
PROBABLE ROUTE OF LAVER & MILLS
PROBABLE ROUTE OF MACKINNON & CONWAY

3 OPERATION JACANA

APRIL–JULY 2002
45 COMMANDO BATTALION

The US forces in Afghanistan send for the help of the commandos

By the summer of 2002 there were still pockets of resistance in the hills of Afghanistan. Combat first came on 17 May after the commandos killed 11 Taliban members. Uncharacteristically, the remainder of the operation was marred by altitude sickness and low morale, and the overall performance was described as “ineffective”. Much of the blame went to commander Roger Lane, who was later dismissed. The commandos claimed they had not been given clear objectives, but nevertheless, Jacana was a rare misstep.

***Below:** A planned explosion during Jacana. The operation was the first time Britain had agreed to send its troops into Afghanistan after many previous requests*



4 OPERATION IRONCLAD

5–7 MAY 1942
NO. 5 COMMANDO

The mission to liberate Madagascar from Vichy France and Imperial Japan

Arriving at dawn on 5 May after a long journey from Britain, the surrounding area of Diego Suarez was mine swept before the assault on the port. In the intense African heat, the commandos did battle with colonial troops before boarding HMS Anthony under the cover of darkness to attack the city’s wharfs. The operation’s demoralising affect on the Vichy French forces contributed greatly to the armistice signed in November that year and kept the island out of Japanese hands.



Operation Ironclad proved that commandos could work in tropical climates just as effectively as in Europe

5 OPERATION FRESHMAN

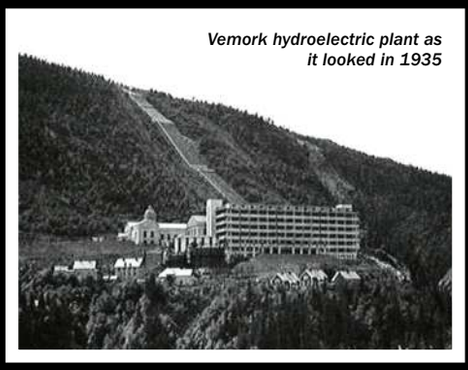
19–20 NOVEMBER 1942
ROYAL ENGINEER COMMANDOS

The commandos are sent to Norway; their aim is to stop the creation of a Nazi atomic bomb

The Allied Manhattan Project had only started in August 1942, so it was imperative that this new threat from the Nazis was stopped imminently. Located in a Norwegian hydroelectric plant in a deep valley, the decision was taken to drop off the squads via glider on a landing zone five miles from the target. The squad of 30 would split into two and be deployed on a homing beacon-marked landing site in two Airspeed Horsa gliders. Halifax bomber planes were chosen for the mission, as they were the only aircraft in the RAF capable of towing a glider for the 400 miles required to reach Norway from Britain.

The operation was nearly postponed due to adverse weather conditions but went ahead on the evening of 19 November. Disaster struck almost right away as the radio receiver struggled to pick up the signal from the transponder on the ground. Things got worse at about midnight as the towrope on one of the aircraft froze and snapped; many of the crew were killed and the rest were captured. The second aircraft managed to retreat back to the coast, but for reasons unknown, it released the glider, which crashed into the mountainside; the crew were all killed or went missing.

“DISASTER STRUCK ALMOST RIGHT AWAY AS THE RADIO RECEIVER STRUGGLED TO PICK UP THE SIGNAL FROM THE TRANSPONDER ON THE GROUND”



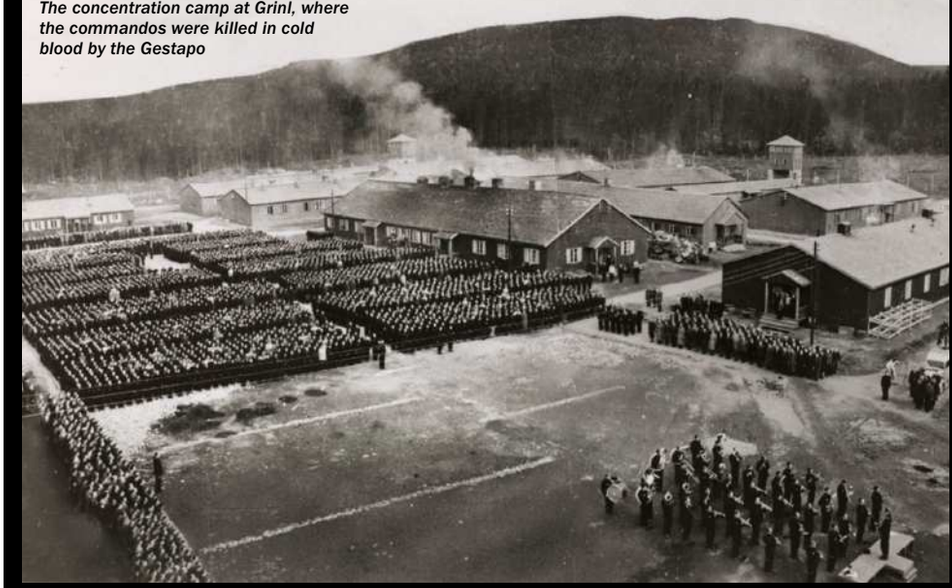
Vemork hydroelectric plant as it looked in 1935

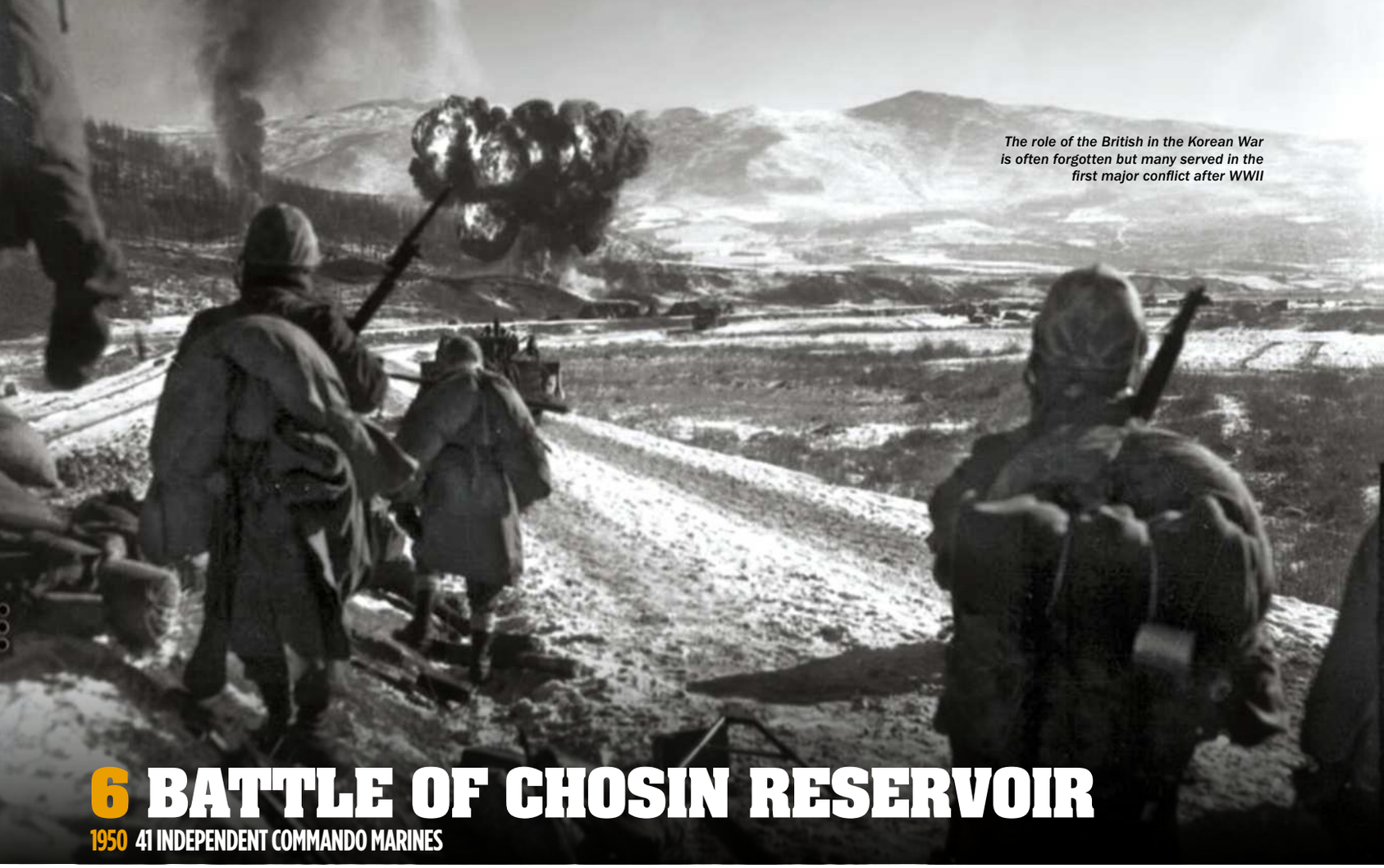
There were positives to come out of the failure. The Halifax demonstrated that long-haul military flights were achievable, and the potential versatility of airborne missions had been proven. The Norwegian Resistance would return a year later and successfully complete the objectives.

WAR CRIMES AGAINST COMMANDOS

The survivors of the two crash landings were not treated well by the Gestapo. After being captured in a German-occupied town in Norway, the men of the first crash were taken to the German camp at Slettebø while the second were executed at a concentration camp at Grinl. The liberation of Norway in 1945 revealed the true extent of the horror, and the Nazi personnel responsible for the killings were captured. Put on trial between 10–14 December 1945, the men, including the commander of German forces in Norway, were found guilty of war crimes. Freshman revealed the brutality of Hitler’s Commando Order.

The concentration camp at Grinl, where the commandos were killed in cold blood by the Gestapo





The role of the British in the Korean War is often forgotten but many served in the first major conflict after WWII

6 BATTLE OF CHOSIN RESERVOIR

1950 41 INDEPENDENT COMMANDO MARINES

Now under the command of the US Army, one of the remaining commando units took its expertise and skill set to the Far East

Barely five years after the drop of Little Boy on Hiroshima, British commandos were on the warpath once again. The majority of the commando units had been disbanded after WWII and Britain wasn't officially at war, but this didn't stop 100,000 British troops getting caught up in the Korean War. One of the remaining battalions was the 41 Independent Commando, which fought with distinction at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir.

As the People's Liberation Army poured in from the Chinese border, the United Nations forces were forced to fall back to a reservoir. Led by Colonel Douglas B. Drysdale, the 250 commandos fought bravely in a region dubbed 'Hell Fire Valley' but only advanced two miles in three hours as they became pinned down under constant bombardment. Eventually, Drysdale called for reinforcement from US tanks. Jumping on the convoy, the column pressed on but was hit hard as radio communications were lost due to one huge blast that split the 41 up from the rest of their allies. As the Chinese came in for the kill, the commandos barely escaped with their lives and just about made it to safety at Hagaru-ri.

The next day the decision was taken to break out of Hagaru-ri on what would be a gruelling 38-hour march and part of a mass fighting retreat of UN troops. A Pyrrhic victory for the Chinese, the battle is considered one of the US Marine Corps' finest moments and also an enduring memory for the Green Berets, who lost 50 per cent of their men in the battle.

BRITAIN IN THE KOREAN WAR

Sometimes considered a forgotten war in Britain, 100,000 British troops fought on the Korean Peninsula between 1950 and 1953. Under the umbrella of the UN Command, British soldiers were exposed to harsh conditions and a tough, uncompromising foe. One of the major battles involving British soldiers was the Battle of the Imjin River, where 600 soldiers from the British Army took on 30,000 Chinese troops. More than 1,000 British servicemen were captured during the war and exposed to horrendous treatment. 82 never returned home. The war resulted in huge losses on both sides and the division of Korea.

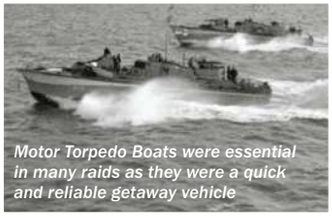
***Below:** Known as the 'Chosin Few', the efforts of the commandos in Korea aren't well documented*



7 OPERATION CARTOON

23–24 JANUARY 1943 NO. 12 COMMANDO

With the help of Norwegian allies, another Nazi power source is destroyed



Motor Torpedo Boats were essential in many raids as they were a quick and reliable getaway vehicle

The Norwegian island of Stord was functioning as a reliable store of iron pyrite for the Third Reich. British commandos charged with destroying the German facilities were accompanied by ten Norwegian commandos and a convoy of seven MTBs. Carrying 50 pounds of explosives on their backs, the men yomped to the target mine, which was two miles away. The subsequent explosion put the mine out of action for more than a year. One commando was lost in the raid, but overall the mission was a great success.

8 THE BRUNEVAL RAID

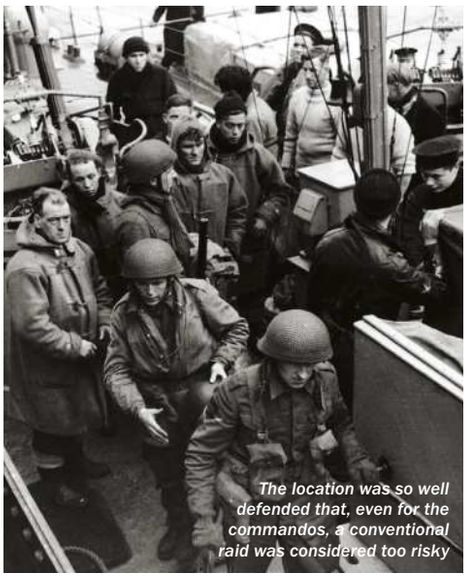
27 FEBRUARY 1942 C COMPANY, 2ND BATTALION, 1ST AIRBORNE DIVISION

A smash-and-grab parachute drop that eliminated an important German radar location, paving the way for the Allied bombing of Europe

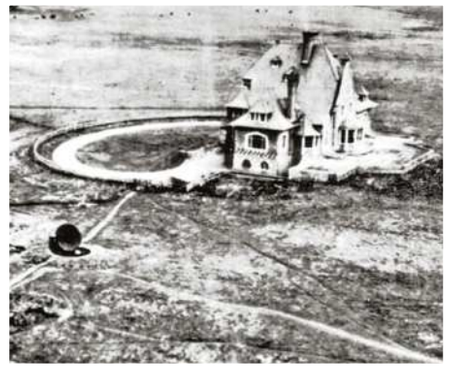
In previous attacks on this radar station in northern France, flak gun emplacements had nullified the impact of bombing squadrons. The Germans boasted highly advanced radar systems that repeatedly helped knock the RAF out of the sky. As a result, British commandos were sent on a mission that would be known as Operation Biting, or simply the Bruneval Raid. Led by Major John Frost, C Company was tasked with the destruction of a house on the cliffs of Bruneval. Seemingly inconspicuous, it was actually being used as an important radio and signalling location for the Germans that acted as an early warning system of approaching Allied ships or planes.

To avoid the machine-gun posts and barbed-wire fences, C Company was dropped a fair distance behind the house before advancing closer. Using their expert espionage skills, the commandos clinically took care of business as they killed every occupant of the house.

The next part of the operation was to destroy the radio; as this was being done, German fire came in from a neighbouring farmhouse. 12 of the company dealt with the attackers, and after the dismantling of the machinery was complete, it was time for extraction. At first no contact could be made with the Royal Navy as the relief vessels had nearly been spotted by Kriegsmarine destroyers. Finally, the boats arrived under a hail of German machine-gun fire and the commandos escaped to safety, their mission complete. A day later, a lone Hurricane flew over the area undetected – Operation Biting had been a success.



The location was so well defended that, even for the commandos, a conventional raid was considered too risky



***Above:** An RAF reconnaissance photo of the Würzburg radar array at Bruneval in December 1941*

EXPERT OPINION



Why was the Bruneval Raid so important to British bombing raids in Europe?

In 1941, British reconnaissance aircraft had photographed the Würzburg radar installations, but experts in Britain were not sure what they were and how they functioned. Bomber Command was suffering heavy casualties in air raids over occupied Europe, and it was essential to understand how German defences worked so that they could be negated.

The capture of the radar enabled British scientists to analyse it and better understand it. It was this examination that confirmed to British scientists their suspicion that the Germans had developed radar that was resistant to the jamming methods that the British were currently using. A new solution was needed, and so the British put the Window countermeasure into use. The results were spectacular, and the Germans were forced to develop new defensive strategies and technology.

9 OPENING THE STRAITS OF TIRAN

1956 NO. 40 COMMANDO, NO. 42 COMMANDO, NO. 45 COMMANDO

Known as Operation Musketeer, British commandos were dropped into Egypt to protect the economic interests of their country

Arriving at first light, the Commando Royal Marines stormed the beaches using the same strategy as landings seen in WWII. Egyptian batteries were waiting for them, but the 40 and 42 Commandos were ably assisted by offshore fire, which pummelled the Egyptian defenders as the commandos advanced.

The British assaulted Port Said, with oil tanks in the city being set alight as the port was choked by thick smoke. El Gamil airfield was captured within 30 minutes as Egyptian defences wilted in the face of expertly trained commandos and Centurion tanks. The 45 Commandos attacked Port Said in helicopters but were pegged back by heavy fire from Egyptian shore batteries, as well as some unfortunate friendly fire from British aircraft.

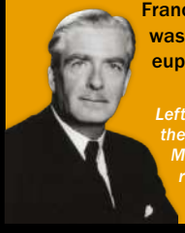
The unit also engaged in street fighting but were on the receiving end of Egyptian snipers, who picked them off at the city's Customs House and Navy House in particular. Some of the commandos were dropped in the wrong area, landing in a stadium under Egyptian control and having to make a hasty getaway. Port Said had been successfully assaulted by the British, who met up with their French counterparts, ready to continue operations. Although Operation Musketeer was undertaken effectively, political issues meant Britain would never be successful in seizing control of the Suez Canal.

***Below:** The 45 Commando assault was the first time British forces used helicopters to lift men directly into a combat zone*

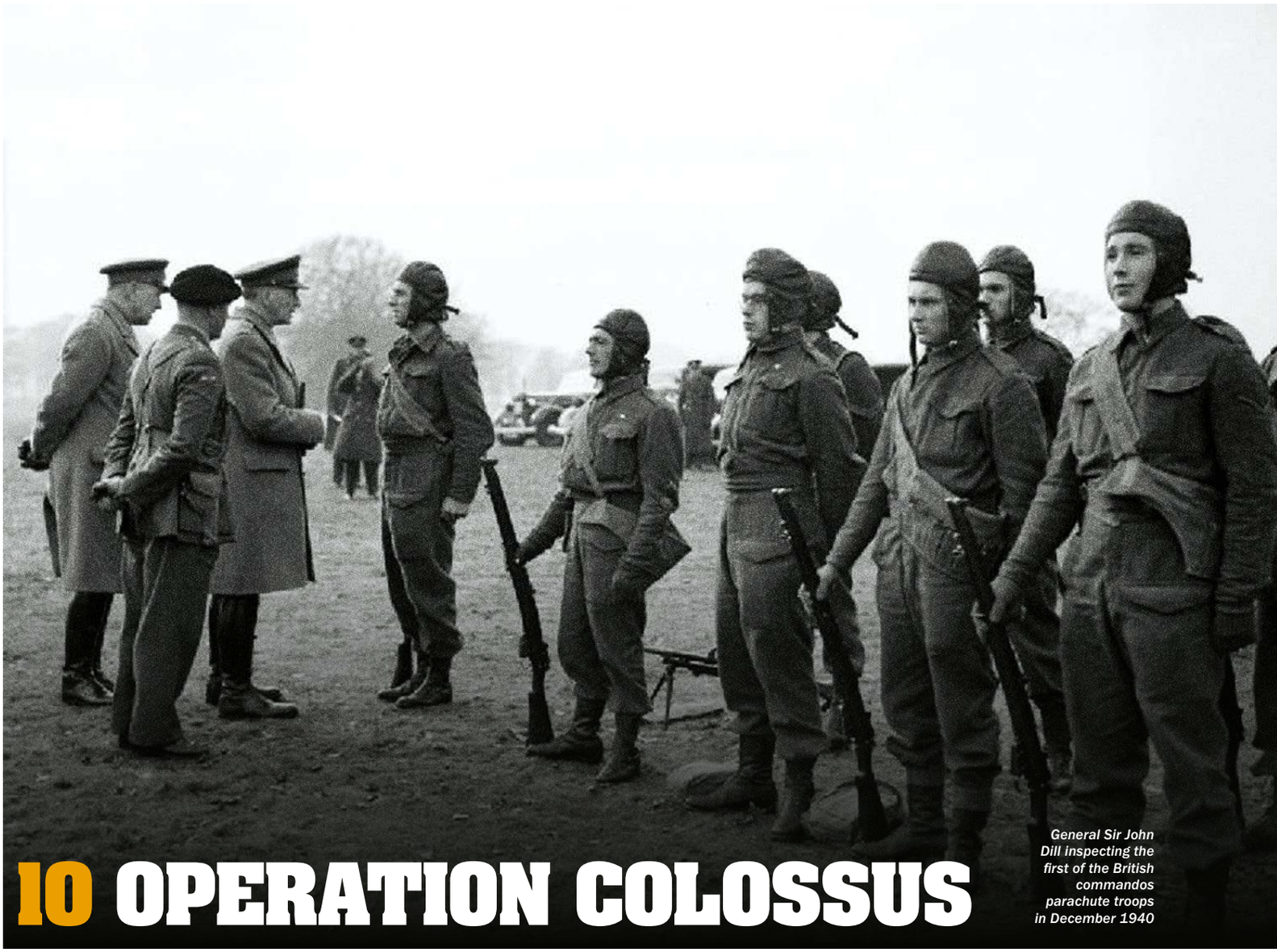


THE SUEZ CRISIS

The Suez Crisis is often seen as a black mark on Britain's history. The 102-mile canal was integral to world trade and Britain and France were keen to maintain their grip on it. In 1951, Egypt, eager to gain hold of the canal, renounced the treaty it had with Britain. With two-thirds of its oil imports coming through the canal, Britain was extremely concerned and over the course of five months sent 34,000 troops to the Middle East to protect its interests. Pressure from the UN and the US, who were apprehensive about the conflict turning into a global war, forced Britain and France to pull out, and the canal was soon nationalised by the euphoric Egyptians.



Left: The Suez Crisis wrecked the reputation of British Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden, who resigned shortly after the end of the conflict



General Sir John Dill inspecting the first of the British commandos parachute troops in December 1940

10 OPERATION COLOSSUS

14 FEBRUARY 1941 NO. 2 COMMANDO

The first British airborne raid in the heart of fascist Italy

In February 1941, 35 commandos were dropped into the heart of Axis Italy. The mission was one of sabotage, and the objective was to destroy a railway viaduct in the Apennine Mountains, north of Naples. The Tragino Aqueduct was the water supply for three Italian ports, and the operation was led by Major T. Pritchard, who trained his X troop for Colossus on the nearby island of Malta. Along with the main raid, a diversionary attack was carried out in Foggia to draw the Italians away. Back in Tragino, the commandos had dropped in and the explosives were armed and ready to go.

The huge explosion successfully eliminated the aqueduct, but the raid soon ran into difficulty as the extraction of the men became tricky. The original plan was to evacuate the commandos via submarine 60 miles away, but this idea had to be abandoned when the extraction site was discovered by the Italians. There were no plans for an alternate method of withdrawal, so the men were forced to split into four groups and escape across the countryside on foot.

Slowed down by the need to stay hidden in farms and small villages, they were soon all captured. The Italian spy and interpreter Fortunate Picchi, who was working for the British, was tortured and executed, while the others were sent to POW camps.

The mission was a success, but the aqueduct was soon repaired, nullifying the damage of the explosion and the mission. However, the operation proved that commandos could (and would) cause havoc behind enemy lines for the remainder of the war.

THE ALLIES IN ITALY

Always the junior to Hitler's Germany, Italy's war effort never really got going. In fact, Mussolini's failures in the Balkans meant German troops had to bail the Italian Royal Army out, spreading their forces thinly in other areas. After various commando skirmishes, the full invasion of Italy began in January 1943 as Allied divisions moved up through Sicily. Operation Husky was a huge success, and the Duce was deposed within six months. The push northwards was more difficult as German troops fiercely defended northern Italy and the new Salo Republic as the Allies neared the Alps and the border with Austria.



American troops in Italy are pinned down by the city of Lucca in Tuscany

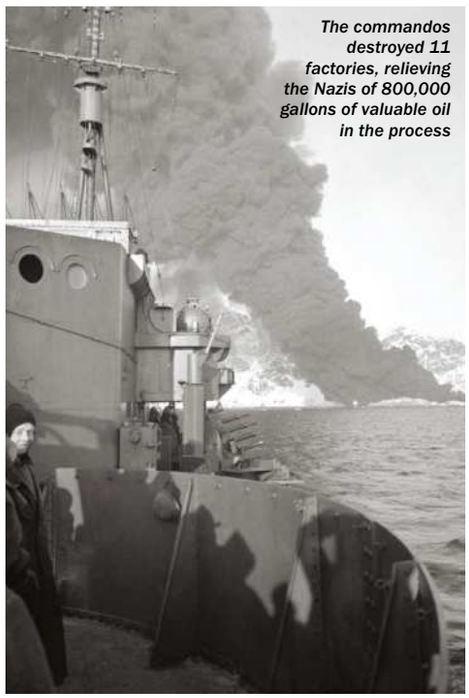
11 OPERATION CLAYMORE

3 MARCH 1941 NO. 3 COMMANDO, NO. 4 COMMANDO

The first of two British raids on the strategically important archipelago off the coast of Norway

The Lofoten Islands were home to several German glycerine factories that supported the manufacturing of weapons for the Third Reich. To put an end to this armament production, 500 commandos were sent to destroy the plants. After a three-day journey where seasickness ravaged the men, the British arrived on 4 March. Lowered down onto thick ice, the commandos stormed into the German compounds, completely surprising the Wehrmacht soldiers stationed there. Advancing through the chilly environment, the commandos swiftly rounded up the defenders and set charges on factories, military buildings and ships. 225 Germans were taken prisoner with the loss of no commandos. It has been reported that the local Norwegians were so happy at the sight of Allied soldiers that they offered ersatz coffee to them all.

The mission was such a success that the British saw the event as an ideal opportunity to poke fun at the Nazis. Lieutenant R. L. Wills sent a mocking telegram to 'A. Hitler' in Berlin saying, "You said in your last speech German troops would meet the British wherever they landed. Where are your troops?" If the operation couldn't have gone well enough, as an added bonus the commandos came across some spare rotors for a German Enigma machine, which were sent straight to Bletchley Park for study by Alan Turing and his team.



The commandos destroyed 11 factories, relieving the Nazis of 800,000 gallons of valuable oil in the process

"LOWERED DOWN ONTO THICK ICE, THE COMMANDOS STORMED INTO THE GERMAN COMPOUNDS, COMPLETELY SURPRISING THE WEHRMACHT SOLDIERS STATIONED THERE"

EXPERT OPINION



How much did the commando raids in Norway affect the Nazi war machine?

Commando raids in Norway had a significant affect on the Third Reich's war machine and had important knock-on effects with other theatres of war. They provided an opportunity to gather intelligence through captured prisoners and restore British morale. The forays helped capture a set of rotor wheels for an Enigma machine and its codebooks. This meant that the British could read German naval codes at Bletchley Park, providing the crucial intelligence that helped British convoys avoid German U-boats.

Similarly, Operation Gunnerside in 1943, which was run by the British using Norwegian commandos, saw the targeting of the Norwegian heavy water production facilities to slow German development of an atomic bomb. These raids also helped stretch German military resources across numerous theatres. After Operation Archery, the Germans sent 30,000 troops to Norway to upgrade coastal and inland defences.

NORWAY UNDER THE NAZIS

When Hitler concocted his plans for European domination in the Führerbunker, Norway was right at the top of his list. With its extensive coastline, the country was an ideal base for the Kriegsmarine from which to launch its Atlantic operations. As well as their location, Norway and Sweden were also rich in ore for the Germans to use in their war machines. Britain was aware of Hitler's desires but powerless to resist them as Operation Weserübung was launched. Norway fell quickly, and under Operation Alphabet Allied soldiers left Norway in the summer of 1940. The commando raids such as the one at Lofoten were part of renewed efforts to liberate Scandinavia.

Below: German troops occupied Norway for the majority of the war, with many Norwegians (known as Quislings) even collaborating with the Nazis



12 OPERATION FLIPPER

10–18 NOVEMBER 1941
NO. 11 COMMANDO, NO. 7 COMMANDO

The audacious attack on the headquarters of the Desert Fox

A huge gamble to kidnap or kill Field Marshal Rommel, the attack would be made 250 miles behind enemy lines. 27 men landed, exhausted and soaked by heavy rain. Using a local Arab shepherd as a guide, the commandos trudged through mud for days before reaching a cliff side. It was here that they were spotted by a watchdog and the alarm was raised. Their stealth compromised, the commandos came under fire and were forced to retreat after suffering many casualties. After the operation, the news came that Rommel wasn't even in his HQ that day, compounding the failure.

***Right:** His leadership of the Afrika Korps and popularity in the Wehrmacht ranks made Rommel a major Allied target*

13 OPERATION TELIC

MARCH 2003 3RD COMMANDO BRIGADE

The British attempts to take the strategic city of Basra during the Iraq War were spearheaded by commandos on the al-Faw Peninsula



The British operations in Iraq included units from all areas of the armed forces

Britain's military forces committed fully to Operation Telic, with 46,000 British soldiers making the trip to the Middle East. Heading for Iraq's second city, Basra, the 3rd Commando Brigade led an amphibious assault on the al-Faw Peninsula and the port of Umm Qasr in the southern part of the country.

The Rumaila oil fields were the primary target, and the capture of these would halt Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Army in its tracks. Hitting the ground from helicopters after being transported by HMS Ark Royal and HMS Ocean, the commandos were ravaged by a sand storm as soon as they arrived in Iraq. While the British aerial bombardment took place, land and sea mines were cleared by the commandos before they swept into the peninsula. Many senior Iraqi Army officers were captured on the advance, but one commando lost his life in a hail of grenade explosions and gunfire. The fight to Basra would only take 18 days. As soon as the British entered the city they stormed the Ba'ath Party headquarters and consolidated their grip. The successful mission knocked down the door for the rest of the infantry to advance as the Iraqi resistance began to wilt and the march to Baghdad began.

"THE RUMAILA OIL FIELDS WERE THE PRIMARY TARGET, AND THE CAPTURE OF THESE WOULD HALT SADDAM HUSSEIN'S IRAQI ARMY IN ITS TRACKS"

14 OPERATION DRYAD

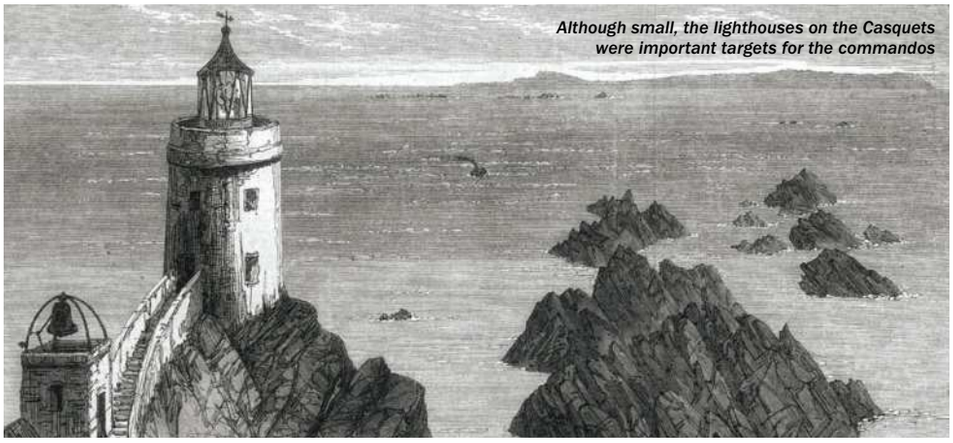
2–3 SEPTEMBER 1942 NO. 62 COMMANDO

A daring assault on a rocky Channel Island outpost

The closest Hitler ever came to a conquest of Britain was the Channel Islands. The Casquets off Alderney were home to a German naval signalling station and also some secret codebooks. An attack on the complex had been attempted many times prior to September 1942, but this time a commando team was assigned to the task. The lighthouse was protected by razor-sharp rocks that were a magnet for shipwrecks, but the commandos managed to scramble on land after disembarking a torpedo boat 800 yards from the shore.

With the noise from the waves covering their movements, the 12 men scaled the cliffs up to the walls of the compound. The seven German defenders were armed with Steyr rifles and grenades, so stealth was key. With a mixture of tactical espionage and German slackness (the defenders were either asleep or not willing to resist), the lighthouse was captured without a shot being fired. However, the raid was not over.

Upon leaving the rock, one of the commandos, Adam Orr, jumped aboard the escape boat, knife in hand, and in the choppy water stumbled into one of his fellow marines, Peter Kemp, stabbing him in the thigh. Worse still, another one of the group, Geoff Appleyard, broke the tarsal bone in his ankle when he slipped down from a rock. The mission complete and the injured safely aboard, the prisoners were interrogated upon the return to the mainland and provided the British with valuable information on German positions, movements and staffing.



Although small, the lighthouses on the Casquets were important targets for the commandos

THE CHANNEL ISLANDS UNDER THE NAZIS

Undefended after the majority of residents were evacuated, the Channel Islands were subsumed into the Greater German Reich in the summer of 1940. Under Nazi rule, every Channel Islander was issued with a new form of ID while anyone of British descent was deported to Germany. Alderney was home to the only concentration camps constructed on British territory and they were built by Nazi slave labour. There was no official resistance movement on the islands, although ammunition was stolen from the Germans, and after the islands' liberation in 1945 all Nazi collaborators were arrested or even attacked.

***Below:** Nazi Germany saw the Channel Islands as part of the Atlantic Wall, so fortifications and batteries were built*



15 ASSAULT ON WALCHEREN

1944 4 SPECIAL SERVICE BRIGADE

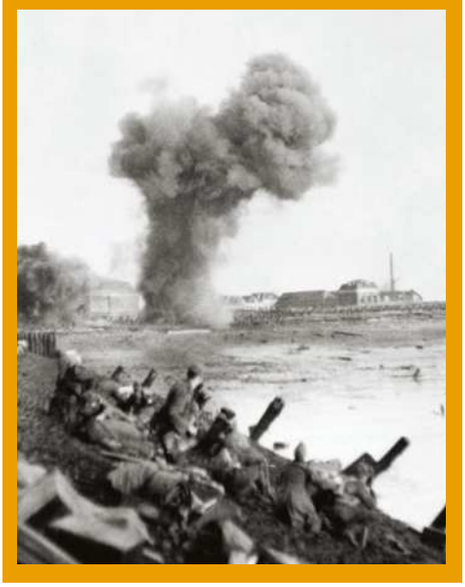
With D-Day over, the Allied companies advanced even further into German-occupied Europe, meeting more fierce resistance as they went

Antwerp was a major target for the Allies. Home to one of the biggest ports in Europe, its occupation was key to increasing the pressure on the shrinking Third Reich. However, the holding of the port was useless without access to the mouth of the River Scheldt. Walcheren was an island that was heavily fortified by the Germans with bunkers and coastal guns, which prevented mines being cleared to allow ships in to the river estuary.

The island would be attacked as part of Operation Infatuate with a pincer movement from two directions. From the south, the commandos of 4 Special Service Brigade would attempt an amphibious landing while being supported by Canadian troops from the north. A gap in the dyke had been formed by earlier RAF bombing, and the Royal Navy drew German fire away from the infantry. The tower at Westkapelle was the first to fall, followed by a radar station.

The next objective was the batteries, which were eventually taken after many commando casualties. With only one battery left to take, the German commander negotiated the surrender of his remaining 4,000 troops in the area. The mission was complete, but before the day was over disaster struck as one of the amphibious landing vehicles ran into a mine. 18 men were killed with a further nine wounded. The loss of life put a sour note on what was a tough yet successful operation.

The Anglo-Canadian operation was part of the much bigger Battle of the Scheldt, which opened up the port of Antwerp to the Allies





The commandos were met with stiff German resistance, but every Wehrmacht soldier in Norway was one less on the Eastern Front

16 THE MÅLØY RAID

27 DECEMBER 1941 NO. 2 COMMANDO, NO. 3 COMMANDO, NO. 4 COMMANDO

The British Army, Royal Navy and Royal Air Force combine forces to smash the morale of the Germans in Norway, with commandos leading from the front

By Christmas 1941, the Wehrmacht had occupied Norway for more than 18 months. In this time the Germans had extracted copious amounts of ore to fuel their armed forces. To strike back, the Allies launched Operation Archery on the islands of Vågsøy and Måløy alongside Operation Anklet on the nearby Lofoten Islands.

The raiding force was a hybrid of three commando units and a Royal Norwegian Army Group totalling 525 men. There were no Axis warships to combat, but the Wehrmacht 181st Division along with substantial fortifications and air support would be a tough nut to crack. Finishing up their Christmas dinner on HMS Kenya, the troops were deployed. The first move was taken by the Royal Navy, which opened fire on the coastal defences, followed by the RAF, which provoked the Luftwaffe into action while also creating a smoke screen for the commandos to advance under. Initially surprised, the Germans fought back with force but their resistance was stifled by the British floating reserve, which blocked reinforcements coming from the north of Vågsøy. The commandos escaped having killed 150 Germans and taken 98 prisoner. They were also joined by 71 Norwegians who were fleeing their occupied country.

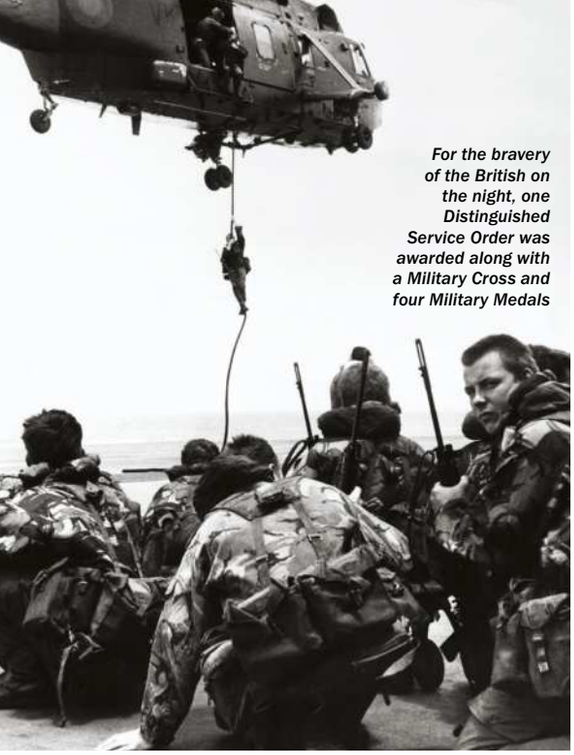
The results were not limited to land, as nine ships were sunk and four aircraft downed. The Måløy Raid was a successful precursor to Operation Claymore and demonstrated that the British armed forces could work together in one cohesive unit.

MORE GERMAN TROOPS ON THE WESTERN FRONT

The attacks on Norway prevented the Nazis from acquiring more resources from the country but also eased the pressure on the Soviet Union. Operation Barbarossa was still raging and Stalin was getting desperate as Moscow came under siege. The success of the commandos in Norway provoked the Nazi hierarchy into transporting more troops westwards rather than east. The Atlantic Wall was reinforced with 30,000 extra men as Hitler realised the importance of holding onto Scandinavia. The next summer, the decisive Battle of Stalingrad began as the Red Army started to turn the tide. The decline of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front owes a lot to the commandos in the west.



Commandos watch as an ammunition dump in Vågsøy burns



For the bravery of the British on the night, one Distinguished Service Order was awarded along with a Military Cross and four Military Medals

17 BATTLE OF MOUNT HARRIET

11 JUNE 1982 42 COMMANDO BATTALION

If the Falklands War were to have a quick resolution, the commandos needed to be at their best up on Mount Harriet

Mass disarmament and demobilisation after WWII meant the numbers of commandos began to dwindle during the 1950s. However, in the modern British military all Royal Marines are commando trained, meaning the distinction between the two titles has been blurred significantly. One conflict in which this new wave of commandos excelled was the Falklands War. 3 Commando Brigade was one of the few units that survived the cut backs and a major part of the land force in Operation Corporate. On 11 June, 42 Commando Battalion was tasked with securing Mount Harriet on the road to Port Stanley.

Supported by 29 Commando Regiment, Royal Artillery and the Welsh Guards, 3 Commando Brigade assaulted the Argentine positions in the hills. Traversing through tricky minefields, a full-frontal attack was considered too risky, so instead they undertook a flanking manoeuvre. Artillery fired from captured weapons (so as to make the Argentines believe it was their men doing the firing) reinforced the commandos.

The main battle began at 10 p.m. and four mortar positions were cleared in 45 minutes. Six Argentines were killed with more than 20 captured. Supported by invaluable 'bunker buster' fire from the artillery, the British worked their way around the mountain towards Goat Ridge and Mount Tumbledown. Two British soldiers died that night, Corporal Laurence G. Watts and Acting Corporal Jeremy Smith, but the objective was complete as the road to Stanley appeared ahead.

1 THE ARGENTINES PREPARE

Seeing Mount Harriet is a key area, the Argentines heavily reinforce it. Extensive minefields are placed to the south and the west while firing positions are built into the slopes.

2 THE BRITISH STRATEGY

Emerging from Mount Challenger, 42 Commando harass the Argentines from the west. This is a deliberate ploy to make the enemy believe that a full-frontal assault is coming from Mount Challenger. In fact, a flanking attack is being planned.

3 COMPANIES ON THE MOVE

Advancing from the east and west respectively, K and L Companies prepare to engage the enemy. J Company provides back-up fire from Mount Wall to the west as a diversion. After an hour's delay to locate a lost platoon of Welsh Guards, the code word 'Vesuvius' is uttered and the battle begins.

4 ASSAULTING THE HILL

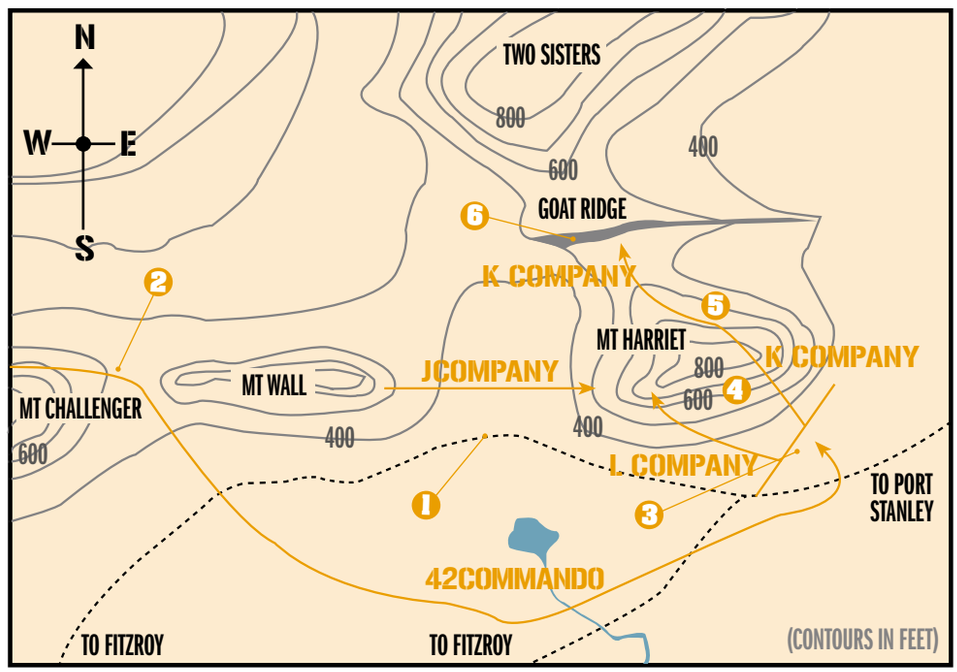
Four Argentine mortar positions are cleared within 45 minutes, but Laurence Watts is struck down by fire. The troops are making good ground, and whenever their progress is checked, artillery is called in. At times both Argentine and British shells fall together, causing confusion on both sides.

5 SEIZING THE INITIATIVE

The companies show great bravery and even greater skill during the battle. Machine-gun positions and bunkers are taken out swiftly and accurately, with 66mm anti-tank rockets and phosphorous grenades proving extremely effective. After six and a half hours of fighting Mount Harriet has been taken.

6 ONWARDS TO GOAT RIDGE

An artillery barrage on Goat Ridge had flushed the Argentines out of their positions, so it is deserted once the British arrive. With all objectives complete, a few more outposts to the north and south have to be taken before the final push to Stanley.



EXPERT OPINION



How were the commandos who served in the Falklands War different from those in WWII? How had their training/equipment/role progressed?

After WWII, most commando units were disbanded or given other roles, leaving just 3 Commando Brigade of the Royal Marines. However, while only 3 Commando Brigade were official commando units, the two Parachute Regiment battalions – 2 and 3 Para – that were sent south as part of an enlarged 3 Commando Brigade had very much retained the commando ethos. Their training still taught them physical and psychological endurance, the need to be aggressive, and the ability to strike hard and fast at the enemy.

Also, while armed with modern equipment and weaponry, the style of operations that 3 Commando Brigade conducted as part of Operation Corporate remained much the same as those of their WWII forebears; coastal raiding, infantry assault and combined operations were all vital in securing victory.

THE TWO LOSSES AT MOUNT HARRIET

LAURENCE G. WATTS
CORPORAL 42 COMMANDO, ROYAL MARINES

A section commander on the day, Corporal Watts was engaged in the lower-eastern positions of the battle. He was killed when he attempted to attack a tented position. He was 27.

JEREMY SMITH
ACTING CORPORAL 42 COMMANDO, ROYAL MARINES

Advancing through a hail of gunfire, 23-year-old Corporal Smith's 66mm anti-tank rocket was shot just as he was about to pull the trigger.



'The Yomper' statue stands in Portsmouth in memory of the 225 British servicemen who lost their lives in the Falklands War



18 OPERATION AQUATINT

12–13 SEPTEMBER 1942 62 COMMANDO

The often-forgotten pre-D-Day commando raid on Normandy

Lessons learned from failed missions, such as Aquatint, helped D-Day become the success it was

Three weeks after the disastrous events at Dieppe, the British were keen to bounce back. Operation Aquatint was essentially a small-scale D-Day. On the night of 12 September, the commandos landed at St Laurent to the east of Cherbourg. Their Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) emerged silently from the mist as they clambered into a Goatley to make the short distance to the shoreline. It was just after midnight when pistol and machine-gun fire began to rain down from the village above the beach. Illuminated by a German searchlight, the commandos were peppered with fire. Worse still, the gunners had spotted the MTB and began firing on what was the commandos' only means of escape. Now in a state of panic, the British servicemen scrambled into the Goatley and went back out to sea while still under fire.

As the commandos hurried back, shells flew over their heads towards the MTB. Luckily, none of the projectiles hit their target. After the barrage had stopped, the MTB sneaked back to the beach to extract any stranded commandos but eventually had to retreat back to Portsmouth harbour as morning broke. The raid was a disaster. 11 of the men would never return to British shores. Another failure so soon after Dieppe was damaging to British morale, but the commandos had to pick themselves up for the tougher operations that lay ahead.

19 OPERATION AMBASSADOR

14–15 JULY 1940 NO. 3 COMMANDO

One of the earliest commando operations focused on the Channel Island of Guernsey

The closest the Wehrmacht came to setting foot on the British Isles was the wartime occupation of the Channel Islands

In July 1940, the British Commando regiment was barely a month old. The objective of Ambassador was to destroy German aircraft on Guernsey, with 140 men landing at three separate points of the island. Advancing inland, the commandos found that their reconnaissance had failed them and the Germans were in completely different positions than first thought. With incorrect planning, the commandos made a swift retreat back to their boats. This retreat would prove disastrous as gunner John McGoldrick was lost and presumed drowned. Operation Ambassador represented a huge learning curve for the commandos.



GOATLEY BOATS

Used most famously by the Cockleshell Heroes, the 'Goatley' proved to be an effective vessel for a variety of commando missions. Designed by Fred Goatley of the Saunders-Roe marine engineering company, he met with Major Herbert Hasler, one of the Cockleshell Heroes, to discuss his invention. For amphibious operations, the British required a strong, light and collapsible craft that could be used with stealth. With a wooden bottom and canvas sides, the Goatley was ideal. 1,000 were ordered by the War Office and each boat could be assembled in just two minutes by two men. It would become invaluable.



Silent but deadly, the Goatley could get commandos as close to their target as necessary

20 DISASTER IN THE FJORDS OF NORWAY

20 SEPTEMBER 1942 NO. 2 COMMANDO

Operation Musketoon demonstrated that not all the commando missions in Norway went to plan

Norway was a frequent target for the commandos, and Operation Musketoon was no different. This time the objective was a hydroelectric plant in Glomfjord. The ten commandos were accompanied by two Norwegian corporals on the mission as they were transported via submarine to what was a remote fjord. The factory was destroyed, but this time not all the commandos managed to escape. Seven were captured and taken to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. Under the Commando Order, they were executed on 23 October 1942.



The Glomfjord hydroelectric power plant as it looks today

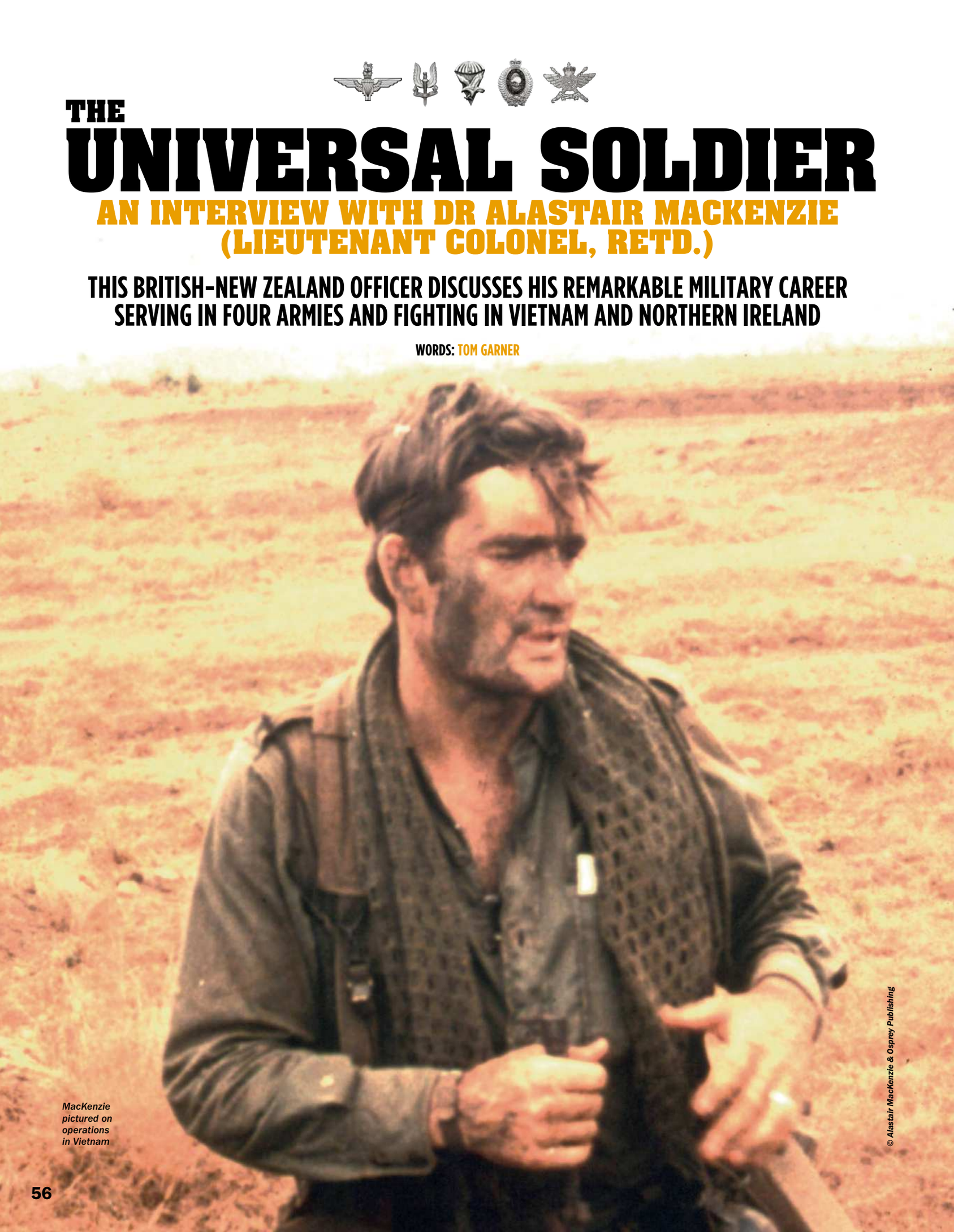
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THE UNIVERSAL SOLDIER

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR ALASTAIR MACKENZIE (LIEUTENANT COLONEL, RETD.)

THIS BRITISH-NEW ZEALAND OFFICER DISCUSSES HIS REMARKABLE MILITARY CAREER SERVING IN FOUR ARMIES AND FIGHTING IN VIETNAM AND NORTHERN IRELAND

WORDS: TOM GARNER



MacKenzie pictured on operations in Vietnam

© Alastair MacKenzie & Osprey Publishing

Soldiers have been deployed to conflicts around the world across the centuries and many have fought in several wars during their service. Most remain tied to one army for their careers, but Alastair MacKenzie chose a different path. Now a retired lieutenant colonel, MacKenzie was commissioned into the New Zealand Army in the 1960s but went on to fight for Britain, South Africa and Oman, including in the British Parachute Regiment and SAS.

A veteran of several conflicts, MacKenzie is one of the few men to have fought at the sharp end of both the Vietnam War and the Troubles of Northern Ireland. The following is his unique story of brutal combat, covert operations and the complex realities of modern warfare.

OFFICER TRAINING

Born to a Scottish family in Britain in 1948, MacKenzie's father was also a career soldier and WWII veteran. After many global postings, the family eventually settled in New Zealand but despite his father's experience MacKenzie initially considered a different career to soldiering. "Interestingly enough, I wanted to be a veterinary surgeon. I didn't get the funds to go to university at the time but I'd been heavily involved in school cadets at Wellington College so that path seemed to beckon."

MacKenzie enlisted in the New Zealand Army in 1966 and served as a private soldier for a year in order to be selected as an officer. He recalls that this was a useful time. "The private soldier training was tough but the good thing was that later on you could see two sides of every decision that was made. Once you'd been at the bottom of the pile and had decisions made for you, I had a fair idea of what decisions were as an officer."

His training was also dangerous and he was almost killed while patrolling on a rubber plantation in Malaya. "We were travelling at night and I suddenly fell into the earth. Luckily, my rifle was across my chest and that blocked me from dropping about 20 feet. I was pulled out of the hole and then we peered down with torches. I assume it was a dried up well and at the bottom there were 20–30 writhing snakes of various denominations, which would not have been a nice way to go! It was horrific peering down and I had a couple of sleepless nights after that."

After completing his training and receiving his commission, MacKenzie was promoted to lieutenant in the Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment. After a spell of service in Singapore he was deployed for a year's tour of the fiercest conflict of the time – Vietnam.

JUNGLE FIGHTING

MacKenzie commanded a patrol company in Vietnam between 8 May 1970 and 8 May 1971. His regiment was attached to 1st Australian Task Force, which was based at Nui Dat, approximately 60 miles from Saigon in the Phuoc Tuy Province. The New Zealander infantry were tasked with "search-and-destroy" missions against the Viet Cong (VC), and as the commander of 3 Platoon, Victor 5 Company, MacKenzie's men were attached to 2nd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment.

MacKenzie was undeterred by the jungle environment. "I'd grown up in Singapore as a boy and then we trained in Malaya before going to Vietnam, so the jungle was our friend really. The difference was that there was someone in there trying to kill you, but it was a transition that we were all looking forward to. The New

"THE PRIVATE SOLDIER TRAINING WAS TOUGH BUT THE GOOD THING WAS THAT LATER ON YOU COULD SEE TWO SIDES OF EVERY DECISION THAT WAS MADE"



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***Right:** MacKenzie's medals, berets and sable belts from his military career. His berets (from clockwise, lower left) belong to: Royal New Zealand Infantry Regiment, Parachute Regiment, SAS, South African Parabats, Sultan of Oman's Special Forces*

Self-propelled armoured 155mm American howitzers attached to the 1st Australian Task Force at Nui Dat, Phuoc Tuy Province. Nui Dat was the headquarters for the New Zealand Army in Vietnam


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MacKenzie carrying out a 'P' check with Patrol Company, 3 Para, in the Ardoyne area of Belfast, 1974


© Alastair MacKenzie & Osprey Publishing

MacKenzie receiving an award from Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman. He had risen from being a junior officer in the New Zealand Army to the second-in-command of Oman's special forces

Zealanders were all volunteers, so this was a time to practice our skills against a live enemy."

For patrols, MacKenzie's unit would depart from a fire base and then fan out to pick up signs of the enemy. "Most of the time we operated as a full platoon or half platoon to cut down the numbers as you were going through the jungle." MacKenzie also recalls that the Anzacs' fighting techniques differed from the Americans. "We obviously didn't have as many men as the Americans and we tried to find the enemy first. The Americans, with their preponderance of firepower, had an expression, 'Find and pile on', but we weren't in a position to do that. Consequently, we used guile rather than brute force."

Jungle tactics often came down to using gardening tools. "We would patrol quietly. New Zealand and Australian soldiers had fought in jungles before and we had the skills to move through them. For example, we would use garden secateurs to cut our way through the jungle as opposed to using machetes or saws. We'd also keep away from tracks whenever we could."

MacKenzie has since described jungle warfare as "one of the rawest operational environments in which to fight" and explains that self-reliance was essential. "You had to carry everything with you because you couldn't rely on long supply columns of water and food to come to you. You're very self-dependent and each little group relies on working and living together as a team. I always found the jungle to be neutral – it would neither hinder or help you but it could make life difficult if you didn't manage it properly."

CONTACT WITH THE VIET CONG

The problems of fighting in the jungle were not just confined to nature, and it wasn't long before the New Zealanders made contact with the enemy. In July 1970, MacKenzie and his platoon were participating in Operation Nathan, which saw the New Zealanders become responsible for the security of Phuoc Tuy.

During this operation MacKenzie became involved in a battle inside a mine-ridden VC camp. "We'd been ambushing a track where we'd successfully killed a couple of VC. There were some blood trails leading into the mountains and on the maps were red spots where there had been mine incidents. These particular mountains were almost covered in red spots but we followed the blood trail, reached their camp and had a fire fight."

During a lull in this exchange of gunfire, MacKenzie called in artillery and air support, although the former almost caused a friendly fire incident. "I called in artillery fire to block off the enemy's withdrawal route, but because the artillery was in a valley the firing was at a high elevation and not particularly accurate. They landed quite close to us so I had to give a 'Check Fire' order, but then the gunships came in. It was a heavy fire team of three Hueys with machine guns and rockets."

After the bombardment the platoon cautiously entered the camp, but the desolated area was booby-trapped. "There were very competent North Vietnamese engineers and they had actually mined inside their camp, which was most unusual. As we started sweeping through the camp we started detonating mines."

MacKenzie recalls that avoiding mines was a matter of luck. "As we proceeded through the camp I stood next to a very large rock. As the next section moved through, I followed them up and in the following section one of my soldiers stood millimetres from where I had been standing. There was then this horrific 'boom' and he and some others were badly injured."

After this "nightmare experience" MacKenzie's platoon continued to patrol, clear camps and encounter fanatical Viet Cong fighters for months. Although these tasks were, by their nature, extremely hazardous, MacKenzie felt that leading a platoon was a valuable experience.

"The training I had prior to going to Vietnam was excellent, and after contacts [with the VC] the whole issue of responsibility as an officer became very clear to me. I had managed myself in very dangerous and tricky situations so my confidence had been established. That was the main thing."

He also respected the fighting qualities of the North Vietnamese forces. "They'd been fighting

"THE AMERICANS, WITH THEIR PREPONDERANCE OF FIREPOWER, HAD AN EXPRESSION, 'FIND AND PILE ON', BUT WE WEREN'T IN A POSITION TO DO THAT. CONSEQUENTLY, WE USED GUILE RATHER THAN BRUTE FORCE"

KIWIS IN VIETNAM

New Zealand had a small military presence during the Vietnam War but it did not escape the domestic opposition to the conflict that also befell the United States and Australia

Between 1964–72 over 3,000 military and civilian personnel from New Zealand served in Vietnam. It was the first war in which the Australasian country did not fight alongside her traditional ally Great Britain. In the aftermath of WWII, New Zealand, like Australia, had developed closer ties with the United States and signed the 1951 ANZUS Treaty that agreed on military cooperation in the Pacific region.

Prime Minister Keith Holyoake officially sent troops to Vietnam in May 1965, and New Zealand's military presence reached a peak of 548 personnel in 1968. The army's units integrated within the 1st Australian Task Force while the Royal New Zealand Air Force flew helicopters and transport aircraft. MacKenzie recalls that New Zealand's contribution was modest but proportionally significant. "We had engineers, a battery of guns and two infantry companies plus a number of other units. It almost came to a third of the New Zealand Army, so they made a heavy commitment to Vietnam."

Like in the US and Australia, there was a significant anti-war movement in New Zealand, where serving soldiers were criticised. "There was a lot of dissent and the war was not viewed favourably. We were doing our government's bidding and it's unfortunate that civilians felt we were 'baby killers' etc. Australia and America had the same problem, but they also had another issue: they had conscripts in Vietnam, so there were a lot of unwilling soldiers, whereas we were all volunteers."

Although New Zealand did not introduce conscription the government still began a phased withdrawal from Vietnam in line with the Americans. The last New Zealand troops left in December 1972 at a cost of 37 killed, 187 wounded and a bitter legacy of protest.

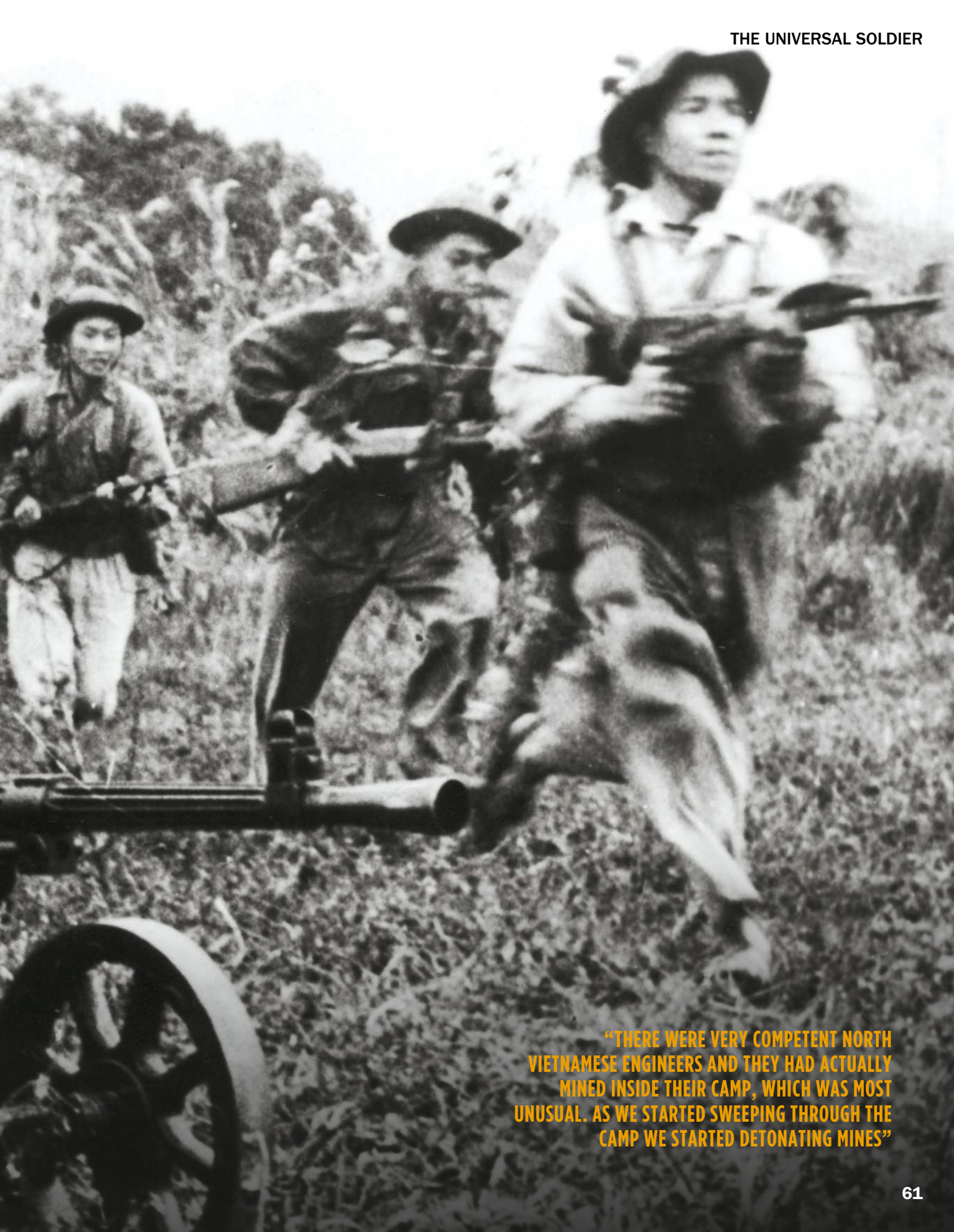


A Bell UH-1H Iroquois 'Huey' helicopter of the Royal New Zealand Air Force. Hueys were used by the RNZAF in Vietnam from 1971

New Zealand artillerymen are given an official reception by the South Vietnamese Army Command in Saigon



MacKenzie's principal opponents in Vietnam were the Viet Cong, who he describes as "good fighters"



"THERE WERE VERY COMPETENT NORTH VIETNAMESE ENGINEERS AND THEY HAD ACTUALLY MINED INSIDE THEIR CAMP, WHICH WAS MOST UNUSUAL. AS WE STARTED SWEEPING THROUGH THE CAMP WE STARTED DETONATING MINES"

for a long time, although the North Vietnamese Army didn't get along particularly well with the Viet Cong. They felt they were rather superior but their training was obviously better because they were regular troops.

"However, they were all good fighters and you couldn't give them an inch. If you took them for granted you got a bloody nose."

MacKenzie received a Mention in Dispatches for his service in Vietnam and was recommended for the Military Cross. However, like his father before him, he did not receive the medal. "I'm proud to say I was recommended for the Military Cross but they had a quota system for the number of medals that were issued.

"They ultimately didn't have enough to go around and the amusing thing for me was that my father was in a tank during WWII and received three Mentions in Dispatches. Because he had a wartime commission he also wasn't awarded an MC. He didn't have any options either so when I got a Mention in Dispatches but not an MC he found it very ironic."

3 PARA

After returning from Vietnam, MacKenzie resigned from the New Zealand Army and joined the British Parachute Regiment. For a married officer with a young family this was a risky move. "Things were pretty quiet when I came back from Vietnam and the Parachute Regiment had always appealed to me. I wrote to them and asked if there was any opportunity of transferring. They said, 'You can't because that would be poaching but if you resigned from the New Zealand Army we'll certainly consider you'. We bit the bullet. I resigned from the army and became a builder's labourer. Eventually, after some nervous months, the Parachute Regiment accepted me and I was posted to a patrol company in the 3rd Battalion (3 Para)."

MacKenzie and his family moved to Britain and he served three years with 3 Para as a captain between 1973–76. When it came to parachute training MacKenzie was already experienced and had previously jumped from a famous WWII aircraft. "I was parachute trained before I went to Vietnam and was fortunate to train from a Dakota. When I went to the UK, I could proudly say that I'd jumped from a Dakota, which they hadn't done in Britain for many years."

Despite his airborne training, MacKenzie's active service with 3 Para would be of a completely different nature when he was deployed to serve in the fraught environment of Northern Ireland's "Troubles".

A "VICIOUS AND TOXIC ATMOSPHERE"

By the time MacKenzie arrived in Northern Ireland in February 1974 the province had been suffering sectarian civil strife since 1969. The complex political situation required a totally different method of military strategy. Nevertheless, no amount of preparation could prepare MacKenzie for his upcoming tour.

"We had very comprehensive training before we went to Northern Ireland and a number of the Toms (paratroopers) and senior NCOs had been there before. But it was different when you got there. What you couldn't replicate was the vicious and toxic atmosphere of the whole place."

3 Para was first deployed to Belfast and based in Flax Street Mill, which was located between the pro-Republican Ardoyne Road and pro-Loyalist Shankill Road. In this urban environment the paratroopers were vulnerable to attack. "You were living in the community and the mill was surrounded by normal houses. You'd guard the gate on a patrol and we used to say 'Targets Up' when you started a patrol and when you finished it was 'Targets Down'. This was because we were the targets but we patrolled in multiples so that in any given street there were patrols in the vicinity. This was to try and make the job of the terrorists on either side more difficult."

The paratroopers' task was clear. "We were there to protect the innocent majority who were understandably traumatised by terrorist shootings etc. The police couldn't look after everybody so we didn't get much support from either side. It was difficult and it always made me laugh that whenever there were decent TV programmes on there wouldn't be any rioting or shooting. We were also expressly told that we were there to maintain an 'acceptable' level of violence. I have to say that I thought, 'What is an acceptable level of violence? There should be no violence'. But that's the way it was."

MacKenzie was part of Patrol Company, 3 Para, whose task was to patrol Belfast's streets in open Land Rovers and establish covert observation posts. Because of their presence relations were fraught with many of the local population. This included Protestant

PARAS IN ULSTER

The Parachute Regiment served on the front line of the Troubles for decades but paid a high price in both casualties and reputation

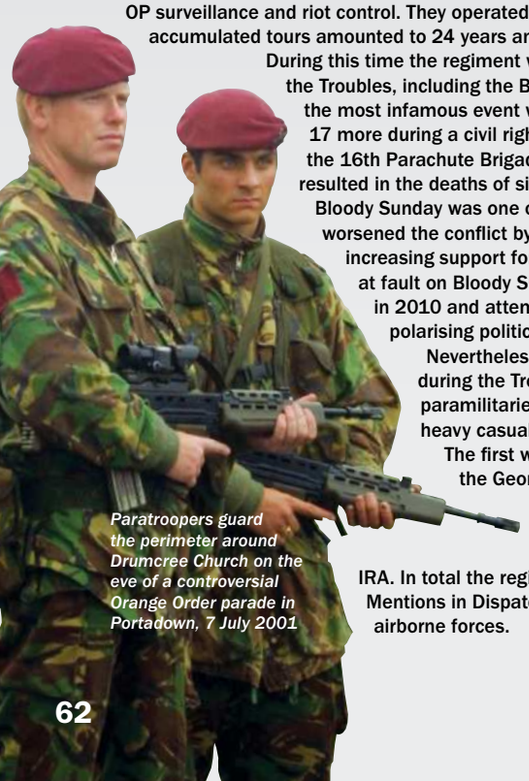
As one of the British Army's most elite units, the Parachute Regiment was extensively deployed in Northern Ireland. All three of its battalions saw service in the province and the regiment experienced an average of 14 tours. These could range from four months to over two years, with the paratroopers operating in Belfast, Derry-Londonderry and South Armagh. The Paras' routines involved patrolling, vehicle checkpoints, ambushes, OP surveillance and riot control. They operated under the constant threat of snipers and bombs, but their accumulated tours amounted to 24 years and six months of active service.

During this time the regiment was at the heart of some of the most controversial events of the Troubles, including the Ballymurphy massacre and Bloody Sunday. The latter became the most infamous event when troops from 1 Para shot dead 13 civilians and wounded 17 more during a civil rights march on 30 January 1972. The Official IRA then bombed the 16th Parachute Brigade's headquarters in Aldershot, Hampshire, in revenge, which resulted in the deaths of six civilians and a military chaplain.

Bloody Sunday was one of the most significant events of the Troubles because it worsened the conflict by alienating Catholic and nationalist communities while increasing support for the IRA. The soldiers of 1 Para were ultimately found to be at fault on Bloody Sunday when the findings of the Saville Inquiry were published in 2010 and attempts to prosecute former paratroopers continues to be a polarising political issue.

Nevertheless, terrorists murdered approximately 90 per cent of those killed during the Troubles, 60 per cent of which were committed by Republican paramilitaries. Consequently, the Parachute Regiment suffered proportionally heavy casualties, and 51 paratroopers were killed between 1971–96.

The first was Sergeant Michael Willetts, who was posthumously awarded the George Cross for saving the lives of civilians and policemen in May 1971 during a Provisional IRA bomb attack. 16 paratroopers were also killed in the Warrenpoint ambush in 1979, which was the deadliest attack on the British Army by the Provisional IRA. In total the regiment received over 40 gallantry awards, 180 honours and 60 Mentions in Dispatches in what became the longest campaign in the history of airborne forces.



Paratroopers guard the perimeter around Drumcree Church on the eve of a controversial Orange Order parade in Portadown, 7 July 2001



Soldiers take away civil rights demonstrators on Bloody Sunday after the paratroopers had opened fire, 30 January 1972



MacKenzie being briefed by Lieutenant John Winton in South Vietnam, early 1971. Winton was later killed in action

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Loyalists. “We were seen as the hard men because we responded in kind towards terrorism. The Protestant community was more forthcoming, but when things kicked off they were just as bad as the Republicans. One of the reasons was because we were stopping them from terrorising the other side.”

Relations were so tense that MacKenzie and his unit were almost killed by a Loyalist mob. “We were in a four-man ‘brick’ (patrol). The driver was driving the Land Rover and three of us were on the Shankill Road, which was normally relatively placid. There was another incident nearby where for some reason a Protestant mob attacked an armoured Humber Pig and actually pulled one of the doors off. The officer in charge had to open fire to protect his soldiers and it was a Saturday afternoon. The pubs emptied and there was this baying crowd on the street who wanted to pull us limb from limb.”

Because of the political ramifications, MacKenzie’s combat skills counted for nothing in front of the violent crowd. “It was the most frightening experience. When you’re holding a long-barrelled weapon, there’s not much you can do with it other than shoot people. However, the ‘Yellow Card’ restrictions were very prescriptive, as they should be. The problem was, what do you actually do if you have an option of firing a heavy-calibre bullet or doing nothing? It’s quite an awkward dilemma.”

The patrol was able to quickly leave the area on that occasion but MacKenzie remembers how dehumanising the sectarian violence was. “Both parties in Northern Ireland were so vicious and murderous and what they did to each other was incomprehensible. Some of the things I saw you can’t un-see. This was because both parties, but predominantly the Republicans, would torture, maim and terrorise. That to me was inhuman.”

The Troubles were not confined to Belfast, and 3 Para also did a tour in South Armagh on the border with the Republic of Ireland. This rural posting was still perilous. “The area was fairly under-populated and you could travel over open fields and hardly see anybody but it didn’t make it any less dangerous. Using vehicles, unless they were undercover vehicles, made them a prime target for explosive devices, whereas in the cities you could mingle among the crowds and have multiple patrols.”

OPERATIONS WITH THE SAS

After three years with 3 Para, MacKenzie applied to join the Special Air Service (SAS) after being inspired by one of their training courses. “One of the things the 3 Para patrol company did was to attend a ‘Resistance to Interrogation’ course, which was run by the SAS. There were also pilots and other people who were likely to be captured. I found it interesting and decided to have a shot at selection.”

The selection process to enter the SAS was gruelling. “It was very arduous, both mentally and physically, but the thing that got you through was mental strength. You could be as strong as an ox but the selection process could wear you down.”

Nevertheless, MacKenzie was selected and remained a captain when he joined 8 Troop, B Squadron, 22 SAS Regiment.

MacKenzie served in the SAS between 1976–80 and was redeployed to South Armagh. He discovered that the SAS were even more unwelcome than the paratroopers. “We probably had a more difficult time because the powers that be were very unhappy with the SAS being there. There was a bit of ill feeling and before we went to Northern Ireland we had our weapons forensically tested. This was pretty insulting, particularly if they were assuming that this highly trained organisation was going to go around causing terror and mayhem.”

22 SAS were tasked with conducting operations that would lead to the apprehension of armed members of the IRA. South Armagh was known as ‘Bandit Country’ but the SAS had difficulty cooperating with the local police. This hampered intelligence gathering. “We couldn’t deal directly with the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) Special Branch and instead went through liaison officers. Special Branch lived there, knew everything, and had the information. It disappointed me that we couldn’t have a more direct relationship but we did our best. There was no easy answer but we probably could have done it better if we’d had clearer intelligence.”

Despite the constrictions, 22 SAS did help to restrict the IRA’s movements and they operated across the province. “Other units such as the Paras were based in identifiable locations whereas we flitted about. The IRA didn’t really know where we were and that’s always unsettling for any kind of opposition.”

The fact that the SAS was operating in Northern Ireland at all gives some sense of the



Provisional IRA members receiving gun training in Derry-Londonderry, c.1972

“BOTH PARTIES IN NORTHERN IRELAND WERE SO VICIOUS AND MURDEROUS AND WHAT THEY DID TO EACH OTHER WAS INCOMPREHENSIBLE. SOME OF THE THINGS I SAW YOU CAN’T UN-SEE. THIS WAS BECAUSE BOTH PARTIES, BUT PREDOMINANTLY THE REPUBLICANS, WOULD TORTURE, MAIM AND TERRORISE. THAT TO ME WAS INHUMAN”



For MacKenzie, the ‘Troubles’ is a “ridiculous term” for a sectarian conflict that killed thousands of people



A victim of an IRA bomb blast, which killed six and injured 146 people, is treated by soldiers from 2 Para on Donegal Street, Belfast, 21 March 1972

scale of the conflict. Of the 3,500 people that were killed across 30 years, 32 per cent were from the British armed forces, and MacKenzie believes the 'Troubles' is an understatement.

"The term is so ridiculous although I suppose if you tone it down to that word it doesn't sound as grim as 'war' or 'open conflict'. The Troubles were full on. You were there with loaded weapons and were against people with mines, explosive devices and obviously loaded weapons as well."

Despite his experiences of Vietnam and subsequent conflicts in South Africa and Oman, MacKenzie considers Northern Ireland to be his toughest fighting experience. "I served four tours there: two undercover, two in uniform, and it was a very difficult soldiering experience. They were hard times, there were lots of casualties, and I would say it was the least professionally satisfying part of my military career. However, I take my hat off to the British military for the way they maintained their discipline through some very difficult times."

SOUTH AFRICAN AND OMANI FORCES

After his SAS service MacKenzie returned to the Paras before he was recruited to join the South African Special Forces as a major in 1981. He was second-in-command of the South African 44 Parachute Brigade and also commanded a pathfinder company. For the latter unit, MacKenzie served in a multinational outfit and operated in southwest Africa during the South African Border War.

This conflict was fought between 1966–90 and MacKenzie noticed that there were similarities with Northern Ireland. "Communist insurgents were coming down from Angola and laying mines, shooting people etc. We were there to protect the population. We were also occasionally required to go over the border on operations to stop the supply of mines, weapons and terrorists into southwest Africa."

MacKenzie left the South African forces in 1982, and after returning to both the SAS and New Zealand Army for several years he joined the Sultan of Oman's Special Forces (SSF). This move was a progression from previous employment. "I'd worked with a company in the UK called KMS and they logistically managed the Oman Special Forces. They were composed of former Jebali rebels who had fought against the previous sultan in Oman. When the new sultan overthrew his father he removed a lot of the issues that the insurrection was about."

Now a lieutenant colonel, MacKenzie commanded Jebalis and became the second-in-command of the SSF while also running the counterterrorism unit. He served in Oman between 1985–89 before he finally retired from full-time soldiering. MacKenzie moved to Britain and remained a reservist in the Territorial Army, but he also obtained a doctorate from the Centre for Defence and Security Studies at the University of Lancaster before he permanently returned to New Zealand.

TEAMWORK, POLITICS AND BLACK HUMOUR

With such a long and varied career, MacKenzie's common thread has always been his appreciation of teamwork. "Soldiering, particularly small-group operations, has always appealed to me. It's the planning, selection of targets, operation, carrying out the task, bringing your team home in one piece and also causing minimum casualties to the opposition. You acted as a scalpel rather than a hammer and that's sort of thing I've pursued in my military career."

MacKenzie fought in conflicts that were mired in complex, controversial politics, particularly in Vietnam and Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, despite his awareness, the realities of combat overrode any political qualms.

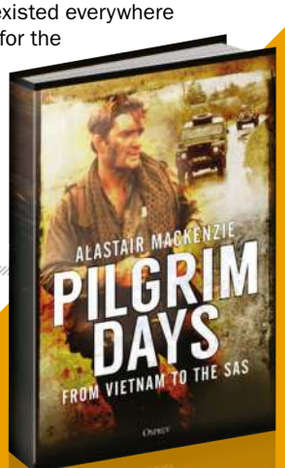
"The big political picture is one that you're well informed about. However, although it's always in the back of your mind, when you're on the ground your area of interest becomes much smaller. You've got specific tasks to do and you get on with that. For example, in Vietnam there was you, a bit of jungle and the opposition who was also in the jungle."

Because of his international fighting experiences, MacKenzie has written. "Commitment, integrity, honesty and preparedness are essential ingredients for the Universal Soldier." He has subsequently added another quality. "Loyalty too: loyalty up and loyalty down. This means loyalty to your senior officers but also to your soldiers. It's easy to go one way or the other, but the tough bit is making sure you get that balance right."

Although he served in four armies MacKenzie states that, despite many differences, humour was always present among the soldiers he served with. "Sometimes I'm asked to compare the different organisations, but that's very difficult because they were all efficient in their own way. The standard thing was the black, military sense of humour. There might be slight variations but that existed everywhere and I think it's necessary for the profession of arms. Sometimes civilians find the sorts of thing that make soldiers smile and laugh to be horrific but it helps you get through the nastiness of fighting."

Images: Alamy, Getty, TopFoto

Alastair MacKenzie is the author of the autobiography *Pilgrim Days, From Vietnam To The SAS*, which is published by Osprey Publishing. To purchase a copy visit: www.ospreypublishing.com



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An RAF CH-47 practises a limited visibility landing known as a 'brownout'. This type of landing can make large, blinding dust clouds, stirred up by the helicopter's downwash, causing significant flight safety risks from aircraft and ground obstacle collisions

H-47 CHINOOK

THE ULTIMATE HEAVY-LIFT TANDEM-ROTOR HELICOPTER, THE CHINOOK DELIVERS MILITARY SUPPORT, A POWERFUL ASSAULT CAPABILITY AND CAN EVEN ACT AS A FLYING HOSPITAL, PROVIDING AID TO THOSE IN NEED

WORDS & IMAGES: RICH PITTMAN

Initially designed and built by Boeing Vertol in the early 1960s, the CH-47 Chinook is now manufactured by Boeing Rotorcraft Systems at their recently modernised Ridley Park facility near Philadelphia. The CH-47A first entered service with the United States Army on 16 August 1962. Due to the outbreak of the Vietnam War in 1965, the Chinook entered into a baptism of fire on the front line and was heavily utilised, providing a heavy-lift capability. For a short time it also operated as a gunship.

The lack of a tail rotor permits nearly 100 per cent power to be used for lift, making it ideal for aircraft recovery missions, salvaging many damaged airframes. This recovery effort returned thousands of aircraft to service through regeneration programs and saved the US billions of dollars. In total 349 CH-47As were built, but many of these suffered damage and 79 were lost during Vietnam.

The need for higher performance saw the CH-47B/C quickly designed and introduced. The CH-47B had Allied Signal Engines T55-L-7C – rated at 2850shp (2,130kW) – installed, and improvements to the fuselage were also introduced. The C model had larger capacity fuel tanks and an uprated transmission system. CH-47A/B/C models all served in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973. By the 1970s, the Chinook received global interest and worldwide sales started.

After the Vietnam War, Boeing and the US Army began planning a major fleet upgrade that led to the development of the CH-47D. The first prototype flew on 14 May 1979 and the first production aircraft flew on 26 February 1982. 441 early model Chinooks went through an extensive modernisation process in Philadelphia that produced an essentially new CH-47 fleet. CH-47D deliveries to the US Army took place until the mid-1990s.

The D model had a more powerful Honeywell L-712 engine that could handle a 25,000-pound useful load – nearly twice the Chinook's original lift capacity. These engines were upgraded again to the L-714A variant. The CH-47D was heavily involved in United States Army combat operations in the Gulf War, Bosnia, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Several rolling modernisation programs continue to ensure this multi-mission aircraft remains in service through to the 2030s and beyond. With the number of variations, Boeing has more recently marketed the Chinook as the H-47. Modern versions of the H-47 have been built under license in Italy (ICH-47F) and Japan (CH-47JA+) in addition to the CH-47F/MH-47G that are produced in the United States. Boeing already has plans for a CH-47F Block II that will feature a series of upgrades focused on increasing payload, providing commonality across the fleet and creating a foundation for affordable future upgrades. A swept-tip, composite advanced rotor blade has already been developed, providing an estimated 1,500-pound increase in payload.

Since the Chinook's introduction over 50 years ago more than 1,200 vehicles have been delivered to 18 operators, with over 800 aircraft still in operation today. The CH-47's workhorse reputation has made it a desirable option worldwide. In addition to the US Army's substantial fleet, many countries have chosen a number of CH-47 to meet their heavy-lift needs.

CH-47F TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

FUSELAGE 15.46M (50FT, 9IN)
HEIGHT 5.68M (18FT, 7.8IN)
FUSELAGE WIDTH 3.78M (12FT, 5IN)
FUEL CAPACITY 3,914 LITRES (1,034 GALLONS)
MAXIMUM SPEED 196MPH (170KTAS)
MISSION RADIUS 200NM (230MI)
SERVICE CEILING 6,096M (20,000FT)
MAX GROSS WEIGHT 22,680KG (50,000LB)
CREW 2 PILOTS, 2 LOADMASTERS/CREWMEN

"THE LACK OF A TAIL ROTOR PERMITS NEARLY 100 PER CENT POWER TO BE USED FOR LIFT, MAKING IT IDEAL FOR AIRCRAFT RECOVERY MISSIONS"

OVER 300 CH-47F HAVE BEEN DELIVERED TO THE US ARMY SINCE 2006



An RAF pilot and co-pilot navigate their CH-47 over Wales



A Royal Air Force crew demonstrates considerable teamwork in balancing over 16 tons of Chinook on a concrete block during a handling exercise

"THE CHINOOK BECAME THE DEFINING IMAGE OF THE UK COMMITMENT IN AFGHANISTAN"

AT PRESENT BRITAIN OPERATES FOUR SQUADRONS OF CH-47. 7, 18(B) AND 27 SQN ARE BASED AT RAF ODIHAM, HAMPSHIRE, AND 28(AC) OPERATE FROM RAF BENSON, OXFORDSHIRE

UNITED KINGDOM SERVICE

The UK's final decision to purchase CH-47s didn't come until 1978. Just over ten years earlier, in March 1967, an order was placed to replace the Bristol Belvedere, but the UK decided to cancel the contract just six months later due to extensive lobbying from UK manufacturers. The initial 33 Chinook HC-1s, based on the CH-47C version with some elements of the Canadian version, entered service in late 1980 at RAF Odiham, just in time to be used in action during the Falklands War in 1982.

Four Chinooks were sent on the British merchant ship SS Atlantic Conveyor. However, three were lost when the ship was hit by an Exocet air-to-surface missile on 25 May 1982. Luckily CH-47 ZA718 'Bravo November' was away from the ship at the time of the attack resupplying British ships. Bravo November continued in the war as the sole available heavy-lift helicopter, surviving a night-time inadvertent ditching (during which the co-pilot got as far as jettisoning his door to escape before the aircraft lifted clear) and flying in defiance of routine maintenance protocols.

During the Falklands War the British Army captured an Argentine CH-47 (using the door to stop BN's co-pilot getting cold) and this was brought back to the UK to be used as a training device, eventually donating its rear fuselage to repair Chinook ZA704 following a night dust landing accident in Oman.

In addition to the Falklands campaign, RAF Chinooks have also seen extensive service, including peace-keeping commitments in the Balkans, counter-terrorism in Northern Ireland and action in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. While deployed during the Afghanistan conflict the RAF CH-47 became a valuable asset, becoming well known for its emergency response role, in which the rear of the aircraft became an emergency operating theatre. In many ways, as the UH-1 'Huey' came to symbolise the US war in Vietnam, the Chinook became the defining image of the UK's commitment in Afghanistan.



RAF Chinook ZD574 flies the Mach (Machynlleth) loop in Wales. The Mach loop is a series of mountain valleys where pilots can hone their low-level tactical flying skills

RAF Chinooks have received extensive upgrades over their operational life and have also received dozens of capability upgrades during operations thanks to the Urgent Operational Requirement (UOR) process. Many of these fits are short term, while others remain sensitive. Some persist on the aircraft and are fitted fleet-wide.



A pair of RAF CH-47 fitted with the Titan 385ES-HD Multi-Sensor Turret System operate on the vast Salisbury Plain Training Area in the UK. The Titan 385ES-HD Multi-Sensor Turret System combines high-performance sensors into a single Line Replaceable Unit (LRU) solution to meet the operational demands of today's airborne observation, surveillance and reconnaissance requirements

SPANISH SERVICE

The Spanish army became the first European force to choose the CH-47C (HT-17) after other heavy-lift helicopters, such as the CH-53 Sea Stallion, CH-46 Sea Knight, SA321 Super Frelon (France) and MI-6 Hook (Soviet Union/Russia), had all been considered.

A new battalion named BHELTRA V was formed at Colmenar Viejo airbase, situated northwest of Madrid. Spanish army service commenced during 1974/75.

BHELTRA V's motto is 'Detras de Nadie' (Behind No One) and the CH-47 operates many mission profiles, providing troop transport and moving heavy armament/equipment when tasked with supporting roles. The Spanish army CH-47 can also lift up to 10.5 tons of weight using the under-slung load capability and support special forces insertion/extraction, combat search-and-rescue and humanitarian missions when requested.

Spain bought 13 CH-47Cs and designated them as HT-17s. Nine were updated to D standards and an additional six new aircraft were purchased.

Several upgrade packages have taken place since 1989, with systems installed including the Extended Range Fuel System II. This system not only allows the CH-47 to increase its flying range, but it also enables the aircraft to refuel other aircraft or vehicles on the ground at a forward refuel point using the 'Fat Cow Procedure'. VHF/FM secure radio communication with PR4G radio has been introduced and an iridium phone has been integrated into the satellite communications system. Improved ballistic protection against 7.62mm rounds has been added. Honeywell T55-714 turbine engines with FADEC system and a helicopter engine inlet protection with an engine air particle separator (EAPS) upgrade have also been introduced. (Spain upgraded the CH-47D to the F model in 2019.)



Every 23 June the Spanish army celebrates its foundation. A formal ceremony is held with a large flypast of army helicopters to finish the event. CH-47s (H-17) from BHELTRA V form a large part of the flypast



***Right:** The loadmaster/crewman conducts many tasks in the back cabin during a flight. As well as providing visual assistance to the pilots on the Intercom, they make sure cargo and passengers are loaded safely and efficiently*

Spain's rugged and mountainous terrain allows the Spanish BHELTRA V crews to train in many different scenarios. A ski-fitted CH-47 practises snow landings in the Sierra de Guadarrama mountain range





"BHELTRA V'S MOTTO IS 'DETRAS DE NADIE' (BEHIND NO ONE) AND THE CH-47 OPERATES MANY MISSION PROFILES"



A night view of a US Army CH-47



A US Army CH-47 in Botswana. CH-47s have been used extensively in multiple theatres and conditions

Single-rotor helicopters require a torque-regulating vertical rotor, such as a tail rotor, to counteract the yawing movement produced by the single large rotor. The Chinook's counter-rotating tandem rotors eliminate this requirement, releasing most of the power for lift and thrust and avoiding other tail rotor issues. A small percentage of power is lost due to the transmission complexity and the overlapping rotors

"QUICKER PILOT DECISIONS AND MORE ACCURATE HANDLING CAN BE ACHIEVED"

ADVANCES IN DESIGN

The most recent high-production variant of Chinook is the CH-47F. Equipped with a redesigned modernised airframe, Common Avionics Architecture System (CAAS) cockpit that improves crew situational awareness, and the Digital Automatic Flight Control System (DAFCS), which offers enhanced flight-control capabilities for the multitude of conditions in which the helicopter is used, quicker pilot decisions and more accurate handling can now be achieved. A reconfigured cabin can be customised with troop seats, litters or auxiliary fuel for any mission. Triple cargo hooks and a broad centre of gravity range make for flexible load lifting. Mounts for fast roping, skis, rescue hoist and three gun positions make the latest CH-47Fs highly versatile.



A crewman, who is responsible for efficient and safe loading and unloading, looks out from the rear cabin



SELF-PROTECTION

The CH-47F can be equipped with up to three M240 7.62mm machine guns, with one positioned on the loading ramp and two at the side windows.

The M240B is a general-purpose machine gun. It can be mounted on a bipod, tripod, aircraft or vehicle. The M240B is a belt-fed, air-cooled, gas-operated, fully automatic machine gun that fires from an open-bolt position. This reliable 7.62mm machine gun delivers more energy to the target than the smaller-calibre M-249 SAW. Many operators, such as the US 160th SOAR and the RAF, elect to boost defensive firepower further by fitting the six-barrelled Dillon Aero M134 Minigun at the port and starboard doors.

Most users have also equipped their aircraft with comprehensive Defensive Aids Suites featuring Radar Warning Receivers, Missile Warning Systems, IR countermeasures and chaff/flare dispensers, as well as ballistic protection for the crew and passengers.

A CH-47 deploys flares, one part of a range of defensive equipment designed to protect the crew and any passengers



ENGINE

The Honeywell T55 family of military turboshaft engines began life, as its designation indicates, in 1955. To date, more than 6,000 T55 engines have been produced, logging some 12 million hours of operation on the Boeing CH-47 Chinook and MH-47 helicopters.

At its introduction the T55 produced 1,600 shaft horsepower (SHP). Several decades and generations of development later, today's T55 produces 4,800 SHP and powers the CH-47 Chinook to a maximum speed of 170 knots (196 miles per hour). With proven power, reliability and durability, the latest configuration 55-L-714A delivers 22 per cent more power and uses seven per cent less fuel than its predecessor.



***Above:** A T55 turboshaft engine on a Japanese Air Self-Defense Force CH-47*

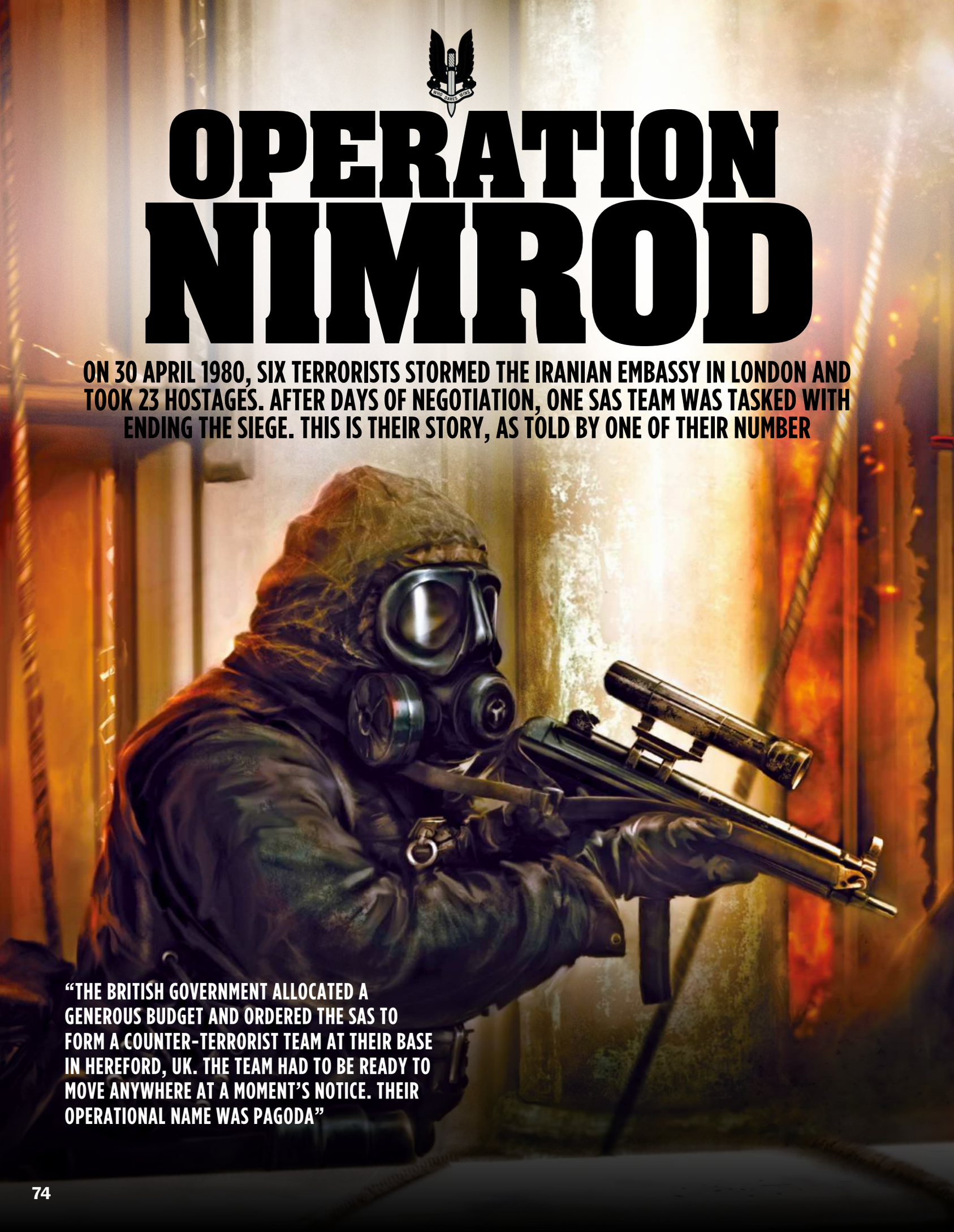
***Below:** A Honeywell T55-K-712 turboshaft engine at Kawasaki Air Base, Japan*



"TODAY'S T55 PRODUCES 4,800 SHP AND POWERS THE CH-47 CHINOOK TO A MAXIMUM SPEED OF 170 KNOTS"

OPERATION NIMROD

ON 30 APRIL 1980, SIX TERRORISTS STORMED THE IRANIAN EMBASSY IN LONDON AND TOOK 23 HOSTAGES. AFTER DAYS OF NEGOTIATION, ONE SAS TEAM WAS TASKED WITH ENDING THE SIEGE. THIS IS THEIR STORY, AS TOLD BY ONE OF THEIR NUMBER



"THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT ALLOCATED A GENEROUS BUDGET AND ORDERED THE SAS TO FORM A COUNTER-TERRORIST TEAM AT THEIR BASE IN HEREFORD, UK. THE TEAM HAD TO BE READY TO MOVE ANYWHERE AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE. THEIR OPERATIONAL NAME WAS PAGODA"



In 1976, the Special Air Service (SAS) returned to the UK from a secret war in Oman. Their experience of fighting an infantry war with artillery and air support was of very little use on the streets of Northern Ireland and they struggled to find a new role for themselves. Flexible as always, they found their niche in a new field of warfare – counterterrorism.

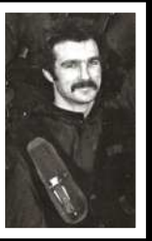
At the Munich Olympic Games in 1972, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) murdered 11 Israeli hostages and a police officer during a botched rescue attempt. This tragedy exposed the need for an effective, highly trained force that would deal with incidents where hostages were held to ransom for political objectives. The British Government allocated a generous budget and ordered the SAS to form a counter-terrorist team at their base in Hereford, UK. The team had to be ready to move anywhere at a moment's notice. Their operational name was 'Pagoda'.

Between 1970 and 1980, terrorist groups such as West Germany's Baader-Meinhof Gang, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the PLO carried out successful and deadly operations. They drew media attention to their issues and committed atrocities while often escaping unmolested. The most extreme example occurred on 4 November 1979, when Iranian Revolutionary Guards took over the United States Embassy in Tehran. 18 months later, on 24 April 1980, President Jimmy Carter sent in US special forces to rescue the hostages, who had been held for 444 days. Operation 'Eagle Claw' failed, with the tragic loss of eight American lives. Following that disaster, the morale of the Western world plunged to an all-time low.

Encouraged by the perceived weakness of Western democracies, Iraq's ruler Saddam Hussein looked for an opportunity to take advantage in his ongoing war with Iran. Sami Mohammed Ali, an officer in the Iraqi Secret Service, spent the first months of 1980 training a six-man team of young activists. They came from Arabistan, an oil-rich area in the south of Iran. The men wanted autonomy for their region following Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution.

In response to Arabistani demands, the revolutionary government of Iran arrested and imprisoned 91 people without trial. Sami's team planned to take over the Iranian Embassy at Princes Gate in London and hold the staff as hostages. They would demand the release of the Arabistani prisoners and draw international attention to their cause.

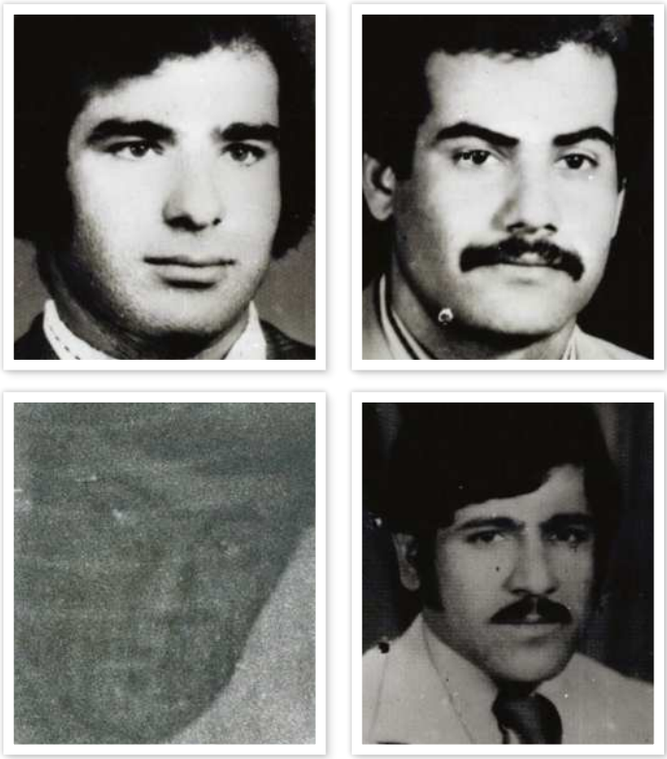
Artwork by Mariusz Kozik, from Who Dares Wins © Osprey Publishing, part of Bloomsbury



WORDS: ROBIN HORSFALL

Robin joined the SAS in 1978 and was a member of the Nimrod assault team. He went on to serve with the Regiment during the Falklands War then left the British Army two years later. Today he is a professional speaker, sharing his knowledge with audiences around the world. His autobiography, *Fighting Scared,* details his journey from a troubled childhood to serving in the world's elite military and beyond. In this brief history of Operation Nimrod, Robin has included extracts from *Fighting Scared*, which is available now on Kindle.





***Above, left:** An armoured personnel carrier*
***Above:** A total of six terrorists attacked the embassy, clockwise from top left: Themir Mohammed Hussein, Shakir Abdullah Radhil, Awn Ali Mohammed, Shakir Sultan Said, Makki Hanoun Ali, Fowzi Badavi Nejad*

Sami told his group that other Arab countries supported their mission, while also assuring them that when their mission was over Arab ambassadors would negotiate their safe return to Iraq.

When Sami's team arrived in London at the beginning of April he provided them with semi-automatic pistols, automatic machine pistols and Russian-manufactured hand grenades. These were allegedly delivered to the UK in Iraqi diplomatic bags. The scene was set for yet another terrorist victory.

THE SIEGE BEGINS

Sami Mohammed Ali deployed his team in London at 11:30 a.m. on Wednesday 30 April 1980. He then took a taxi to Heathrow Airport to make his escape from the country. By pure coincidence, at 11:25, embassy staff invited their door guard, Police Constable Trevor Lock, to come inside for a cup of coffee. While he was inside, the six-man terrorist team entered the open door and shot a long burst of automatic fire into the ceiling. Within minutes they had secured the four-storey, 54-room building and had taken 23 hostages. These included 19 embassy staff, Trevor Lock, BBC sound recordist Sim Harris, BBC News producer Chris Cramer and Syrian journalist Mustapha Karkouti, who had all been inside applying for visas.

The response by the Metropolitan Police, under the command of Deputy Assistant Commissioner John Dellow, was immediate and efficient. The building was secured front and rear and all of the adjacent buildings were evacuated.

Terrorist leader Salim immediately made demands for the release of the Arabastani prisoners and autonomy for his region. He gave a deadline of 24 hours, expiring at noon the next day, and threatened to kill all of the hostages if his demands were not met.

In Downing Street, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's cabinet assembled at the cabinet office briefing room known as 'Cobra' to discuss their response. Thatcher was adamant that she would not give in to terrorists, but she would not authorise a military assault unless the terrorists killed a hostage. Until that happened, her policy was to contain the situation, remain calm and hope that the police could negotiate the release of the hostages and the surrender of the terrorists – without casualties.

In Hereford, the Pagoda team were preparing for a routine training exercise in Edinburgh with the Scottish police. The first indication that something had changed was when the noon move to Scotland was postponed.

"Big Bob smiled coldly. 'My Tikka is ready,' he said, closing one eye and squeezing an imaginary trigger. At about midday, Major [Gullen] called us into the team room… The exercise was off."

The team spent the following seven hours listening to the BBC news and hoping for permission to move.

By 19:00, no authorisation had been received from the government, so SAS Colonel Mike Rose took the initiative and moved his men closer to London. All their equipment was carried in six white Range Rovers, six Ford Transit vans and a large, yellow pan-technician truck. They left in small groups with orders to rendezvous at the Army Education Corps barracks in Beaconsfield some 20 miles west of London. By midnight the teams had travelled the 120 miles when they were then officially authorised to move to Regent's Park Barracks in Central London. Once officially sanctioned, the mission was then given the code name NIMROD (the name of a mighty biblical figure).

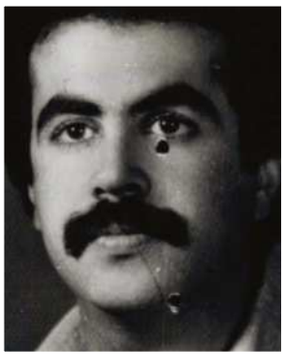
"HE GAVE A DEADLINE OF 24 HOURS, EXPIRING AT NOON THE NEXT DAY, AND THREATENED TO KILL ALL OF THE HOSTAGES IF HIS DEMANDS WERE NOT MET"

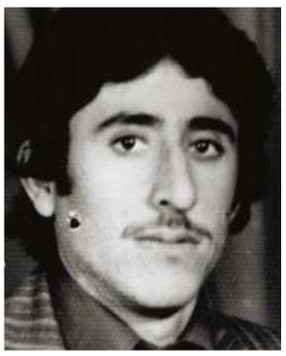
Tension increased on the second day when Iran refused to consider the terrorists' demands and left all negotiations firmly in the hands of the British authorities. As the noon deadline approached the police were left hoping for the best while appeals and promises were made by negotiators in the hope of gaining more time. "The situation was close to panic," said Sim Harris, "as the hostages believed that they were about to die." Faisal, Salim's second-in-command, was establishing himself as the tough guy. He repeatedly threatened to execute the hostages and was seen to pull and replace the pin of a hand grenade during moments of increased excitement.

While Faisal was establishing his credentials, Abbas Lavasani, the Iranian chargé d'affaires, was setting out his stall as a zealot. Lavasani made it clear that he wanted to be a martyr for his religion. Provocative and difficult, he was only prevented from being shot in the first few days of the siege by the intervention of Mustapha Karkouti.

Chris Cramer began to feign illness as soon as the siege began, and his performance was so desperate and convincing that he was released. Trevor Lock instructed Cramer to give as much information as possible to the police about the situation inside, including types and numbers of weapons and, most importantly, the number of terrorists.

On the evening of day two, SAS troop commanders completed a reconnaissance of the embassy building and established a holding area for the team. The chosen area was only one door away from the embassy at numbers 13–15 Princes Gate – the headquarters of The Royal College of General Practitioners. Major







Police marksman cordon off the Iranian Embassy during the siege

"FAISAL, SALIM'S SECOND-IN-COMMAND, WAS ESTABLISHING HIMSELF AS THE TOUGH GUY. HE REPEATEDLY THREATENED TO EXECUTE THE HOSTAGES AND WAS SEEN TO PULL AND REPLACE THE PIN OF A HAND GRENADE DURING MOMENTS OF INCREASED EXCITEMENT"

Hector Gullan (in camouflage) and his command group during the assault



SAS troops prepare to abseil onto the rear balcony of the Iranian Embassy

Hector Gullen, B Squadron's commander, prepared his men to move at midnight hidden in the back of two pan-technician trucks. Between 01:00 and 02:00 a.m., B Squadron, with all of their equipment, moved silently into their holding area. The unit comprised 68 men on the ground including support arms.

On day three all phone lines to the embassy were cut and a field phone was passed to the building. This move meant that Salim could only speak to the trained police negotiators and forced him to request essentials such as food via the police. By controlling his access to the outside world the negotiators hoped to manipulate Salim.

Intelligence services attempted to place listening devices inside the walls and cavities of the embassy, but squeaky noises from hand-operated drills were heard inside. Trevor Lock persuaded Salim that this noise was caused by mice, but the unconvinced Salim threatened to kill someone if the noise didn't cease. In response to his threat, aircraft approaching Heathrow were directed to fly over Knightsbridge and roadworks with drilling were started nearby. The noise was enough to hide the sounds of the drills, plus the movements of the SAS on the roof, searching for entry points and preparing belays for their abseil ropes.

The SAS waited. Half were on immediate standby, fully dressed except for their gas masks, while the remainder were stripped down to overalls so that they could rest. An 'Immediate Action Plan' had been put in place as soon as the troops were on the ground. If the terrorists started to kill people then six eight-man teams would make an entry and clear their pre-designated areas, hoping to reduce the casualty list to a minimum. As time passed information about the construction of the building and intelligence about the terrorists was collated so that a more precise 'Deliberate Action Plan' could be developed.

By day four the Deliberate Action Plan started to take form. Photos of the terrorists had been obtained from visa applications, Cramer had disclosed his information, and the embassy janitor had identified armoured windows and doors. Blueprints of the building were secured from architectural records, which showed the exact layout of every room.

Salim used Trevor Lock, Sim Harris and Mustapha Karkouti as go-betweens and advisers, hoping for insights into the British psyche, while they in turn hoped to persuade the terrorists to give up. Under his heavy overcoat, Lock still had his .38 Smith and Wesson revolver with six rounds. Salim believed that all British police officers were unarmed, so Lock had only received a rudimentary search during the takeover. The weapon weighed heavily on Lock's mind as threats were repeatedly made to "kill a hostage".

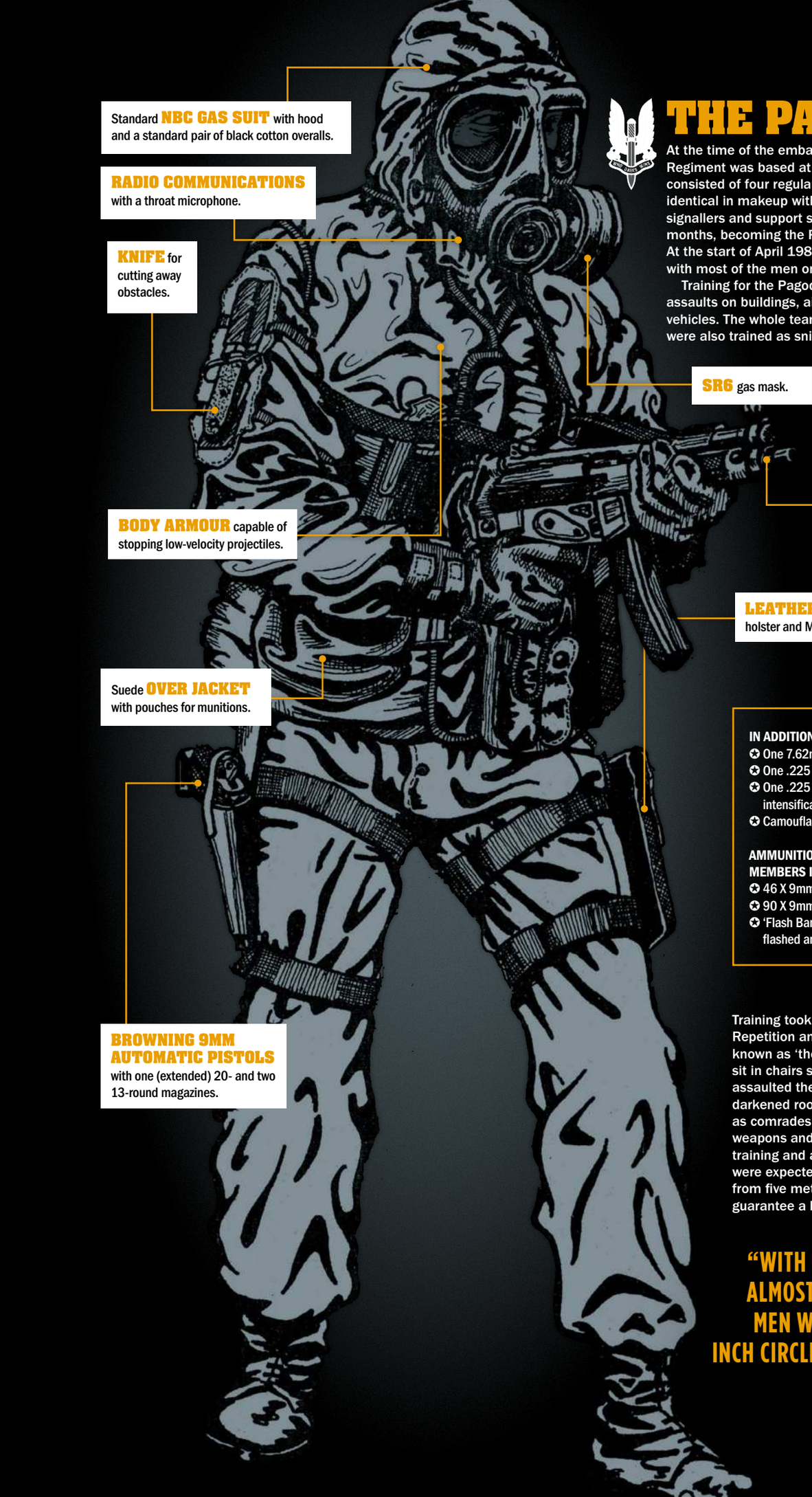


"SALIM BELIEVED THAT ALL BRITISH POLICE OFFICERS WERE UNARMED, SO LOCK HAD ONLY RECEIVED A RUDIMENTARY SEARCH DURING THE TAKEOVER. THE WEAPON WEIGHED HEAVILY ON LOCK'S MIND AS THREATS WERE REPEATEDLY MADE TO 'KILL A HOSTAGE'"

Mustapha tried to convince Salim that surrender now would be a victory – no one had been injured and their cause had been brought to the world's attention. Mustapha suggested asking for a radio announcement by the BBC. Salim still hoped for the intervention of Arab ambassadors but relented and asked the negotiators to make the suggested announcement. The negotiators used this moment to barter for the release of one hostage – Salim agreed and chose Mustapha.

An announcement was made at 9 p.m. on the BBC World Service. Mustapha was released and the terrorists were ecstatic. It seemed at this moment that the siege would end peacefully – the tension subsided and hopes were high. The departure of Mustapha, however, had taken an intelligent, mature and steady man who spoke Arabic out of the equation. When Faisal scribbled "Down with Khomeni" on a wall, no one with enough influence was there to stop Lavasani from overreacting. He provoked Faisal and brought the tension back to a fever pitch. Salim returned to his demands for an ambassador in the belief that Sami, his handler, had told him the truth. Sadly, Salim's whole team had been set up by Iraqi intelligence. No agreements had been made and, even in the unlikely event that they had, they were denied. This created an impasse – there were no ambassadors and Salim thought the police were lying to him.

On Monday 5 May, at 11:00, Faisal took Lavasani down to the ground floor, away from the other hostages. He tied his hands and blindfolded him, then forced him to kneel. Outside the building, three pistol shots were heard. The SAS stood by once again for an immediate assault, but time passed and no indication was given about what the shots meant.



Standard **NBC GAS SUIT** with hood and a standard pair of black cotton overalls.

RADIO COMMUNICATIONS with a throat microphone.

KNIFE for cutting away obstacles.

BODY ARMOUR capable of stopping low-velocity projectiles.

Suede **OVER JACKET** with pouches for munitions.

BROWNING 9MM AUTOMATIC PISTOLS with one (extended) 20- and two 13-round magazines.

SR6 gas mask.

HECKLER AND KOCH 9MM MP5 automatic sub-machine pistol with three 30-round magazines strapped by a quick-release harness across the chest.

LEATHER BELT with low-slung pistol holster and MP5 magazine pouches.

THE PAGODA TEAM

At the time of the embassy siege, the 22nd Special Air Service Regiment was based at Bradbury Lines, Hereford. 'The Regiment' consisted of four regular Sabre Squadrons – A, B, D and G – all identical in makeup with a full complement of 70 men, including signallers and support staff. The squadrons rotated every six months, becoming the Pagoda team once every two years. At the start of April 1980, it was once again the turn of B Squadron, with most of the men on their second or third Pagoda tour.

Training for the Pagoda team consisted of continuous practice assaults on buildings, aircraft, trains, ships in harbour and moving vehicles. The whole team were trained as assault troops, but half were also trained as snipers.

IN ADDITION TO THIS EQUIPMENT THE SNIPERS HAD:

- ✪ One 7.62mm L42 sniper rifle with an X3 scope
- ✪ One .225 Tikka Finlander hunting rifle with a X10 day scope
- ✪ One .225 Tikka Finlander hunting rifle with an image intensification night scope
- ✪ Camouflage suits

AMMUNITION CARRIED BY THE ASSAULT TEAM MEMBERS INCLUDED:

- ✪ 46 X 9mm pistol rounds
- ✪ 90 X 9mm machine pistol rounds
- ✪ 'Flash Bang' stun grenades that banged, whistled, flashed and released CS gas

Training took place day and night, five days a week. Repetition and practice were the key words. In a building known as 'the killing house', soldiers took it in turns to sit in chairs surrounded by targets as team members assaulted the room with live ammunition. Men stood in darkened rooms with their shoulders touching targets as comrades wearing gas masks turned, drew their weapons and fired live rounds. With concentrated training and almost unlimited ammunition, the men were expected to hit a four-inch circle in a human head from five metres without aiming. Snipers were able to guarantee a head shot at ranges of up to 200 metres.

"WITH CONCENTRATED TRAINING AND ALMOST UNLIMITED AMMUNITION, THE MEN WERE EXPECTED TO HIT A FOUR-INCH CIRCLE IN A HUMAN HEAD FROM FIVE METRES WITHOUT AIMING"



Entering from the front balcony after the initial explosion to gain entry



"I GRIPPED MY M-5 IN BOTH HANDS AND THUMBED THE SAFETY CATCH, ASSURING MYSELF ONCE AGAIN THAT IT WAS OFF. THE ONLY SOUNDS I COULD HEAR WERE THE STATIC HISSING IN MY EARPIECE AND THE SOUND OF MY HEART POUNDING IN MY EARS. MY GREATEST FEAR NOW WAS OF MAKING A MISTAKE THAT MIGHT ENDANGER LIFE – ESPECIALLY MINE"

It was possible that a hostage had been killed. In preparation, Major Gullen briefed his men on his Deliberate Action Plan. Six teams of eight men would silently approach different entry points on the five floors, from basement to roof. Once in position, they would place specially shaped frame charges on the windows and doors. When all of the groups were ready, the command "GO-GO-GO" would be given and the assault would begin.

The shaped charges would direct most of the explosive effect outwards, removing the entrances and minimising the risk to those inside. The groups would enter the building and clear their allocated areas – the mission was to rescue the hostages. The men were reminded about the laws of self-defence and what constituted a lawful killing. They had to believe that their lives, or the lives of those they were trying to protect, were in danger for the law to support them against charges of murder. The Prime Minister sent a message in which she said, "I don't want any martyrs." In other words – get it right!



At 06.50 a.m., Lavasani's body was unceremoniously thrown out of the front door and quickly recovered by two plain-clothes police officers carrying a stretcher. Lavasani's body had two shots to the head and one to the chest. Salim made another deadline, which he now expected to be taken seriously. He wanted the ambassadors by 07:00 or he would kill another hostage.

Home Secretary William Whitelaw instructed Deputy Assistant Commissioner Peter Neivens to give written authority to the army to take control. When this note was signed at 07:07, it legally sanctioned military action and a building assault by the SAS.

The negotiators played for time, telling Salim the ambassadors were en route and that they would all be driven to Heathrow as soon as the ambassadors arrived. Salim was suspicious, but he hesitated long enough for the SAS to get into position. At 07:23, Salim was on the phone to the senior police negotiator Detective Chief Inspector Max Vernon, who said that as he saw the SAS approach the building he heard a voice in his head singing, "You're going to die, you're going to die," over and over and over.

At the rear of the building the SAS team slid over the edge of the roof and began to abseil down towards the first floor balcony. Around them other teams approached the back door, the top floor fire exits and the basement doors, while a final group was approaching the front windows – all in full view of a hundred live television cameras.

"I crept quietly out of the back door of the college and across the concrete patio towards the rear door of the embassy. I looked ahead of me at Robert as he began to insert detonators into the explosives and place them on the back door.

"Then I looked up. Above me, four men began to descend slowly from the roof on their abseil ropes. Behind me, Big Bob was wielding an eight-pound sledgehammer as back up, should it be needed to get through the door.

"BEHIND ME, BIG BOB WAS WIELDING AN EIGHT-POUND SLEDGEHAMMER AS BACK UP, SHOULD IT BE NEEDED TO GET THROUGH THE DOOR"

"I gripped my M-5 in both hands and thumbed the safety catch, assuring myself once again that it was off. The only sounds I could hear were the static hissing in my earpiece and the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. My greatest fear now was of making a mistake that might endanger life – especially mine. My mind raced. Watch the windows, Robin. What do I do if someone looks out now? Don't rush. Is my pistol still in my holster? Where is my partner?

"The police dogs, which were being held back just inside the doors of the college, began to feel the tension in their handlers and started barking and howling. 'Why don't you shut the bastard dogs up?' I thought. The fear that for so long had been my greatest enemy welled up inside me like a balloon, waiting to escape from my throat. Hello, I thought, I'm glad you're here. Without you, I wouldn't be functioning at my best. I needed to be scared to be alert."

At the rear of the building, an unexpected mistake occurred when one of the abseilers put his foot through a glass window. Salim heard the noise and left the telephone to investigate. Major Gullen, realising the game was up, gave the "GO-GO-GO" early. Troops exploded their frame charges, destroying the windows and doors. The team on the ground floor hadn't finished laying their charges and smashed the door in with a sledgehammer. Flash bangs were thrown inside closely followed by the troops.

Inside, on the first floor, Trevor Lock grabbed Salim and drew his pistol. He later recalled the surprise in Salim's eyes when he saw the gun



BBC sound man Sim Harris leaps from the front balcony to escape the flames

that Lock had kept hidden for six days. The door burst open and Lock heard a voice telling him to move away. In seconds, Salim was dead.

On the first floor balcony an abseiler was trapped on his rope above the balcony window.

"I looked up as three bullet holes appeared in the window above my head. Dangling on his rope, about 12 feet above the balcony and 20 feet from the ground, was one of the assault team. He was stuck. His rope jammed in the figure-of-eight abseil device attached to his harness. The curtains beneath him had been set on fire by the grenades that had exploded when the first group had entered. The flames were climbing higher and higher and were now lapping against his legs. His screams of pain sounded over the radio."

Beneath him, Sergeant Tommy Palmer had thrown his flashbang inside and entered the building. The flames set his head and gas mask alight and he was forced momentarily to retreat, but only long enough for him to discard the mask and enter the gas-filled building unprotected. He quickly identified two terrorists in the Telex room who had just shot and killed Ali Akbar Samadzadeh and wounded Ahmad Dadgar. Palmer identified a grenade and promptly killed them.

After entering from the front balcony, John McAleese and his group discovered two armed terrorists. John's description of the event was simple and concise: "Bang, bang, job done."

Only two terrorists remained alive. On the stairs leading down to the ground floor, the hostages were passed hand-to-hand towards the rear doors. Once on the grass at the rear of the building, they were all forced to the ground and handcuffed. This action controlled all the

"WITHOUT HESITATION I FIRED ONE SHORT BURST OF FOUR ROUNDS AT HIS CHEST. TWO OTHER TEAM MEMBERS ALSO OPENED FIRE SIMULTANEOUSLY. FAISAL SLUMPED TO THE FLOOR WITH 27 HOLES IN HIM"

frightened participants and kept them safe from further harm.

Back inside on the stairs, there was a scuffle – a voice shouted "Grenade!" – Faisal had placed himself among the hostages; as he reached the ground floor three men opened fire.

"Without hesitation I fired one short burst of four rounds at his chest. Two other team members also opened fire simultaneously. Faisal slumped to the floor with 27 holes in him. He didn't spasm or spurt blood everywhere. He simply crumpled up like a bundle of rags and died."

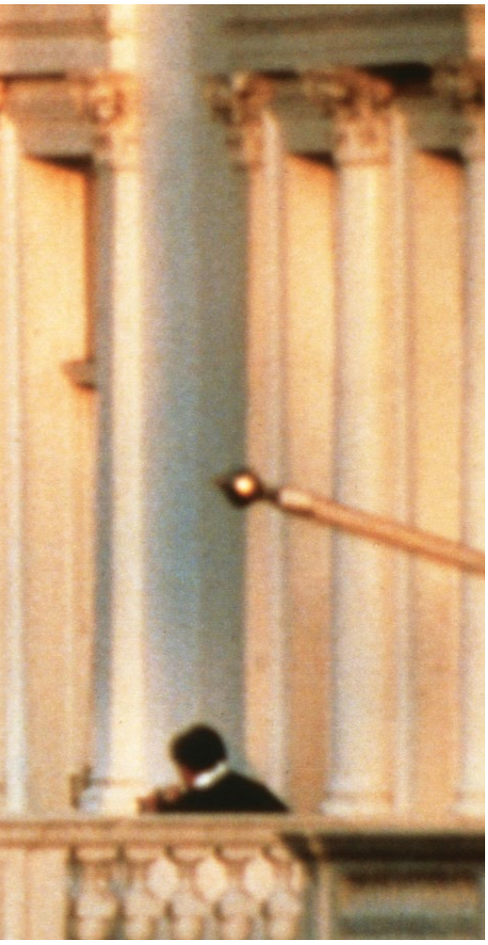
The grenade that he had previously used to threaten the hostages rolled from his dead hand. The pin was still inserted. The building burned fiercely as the last hostage departed and the remaining soldiers moved outside to assist at the hostage holding area. Handcuffed on the grass, Sim Harris nodded his head vigorously to his left to tell the soldiers that the man lying beside him was Fowzi Nejad, the surviving terrorist. Nejad was lifted up and moved away towards the building and placed a safe distance from the others.

11 minutes had passed from initiation to completion. During that time, two SAS soldiers were injured, one hostage was murdered, two were wounded by the terrorists and a further 17 hostages were rescued in good health. Five terrorists were lawfully killed by the SAS and one was captured.

The team quickly handed the situation over to the police and returned to their holding area to reorganise their equipment. A short time later the Home Secretary arrived to give his thanks. He was in tears and said, "I knew it would be good, but I never thought it would be this good." Whitelaw had been given an estimate of up to 20 per cent casualties by SAS Brigadier Peter de la Billière. One dead hostage was terribly sad, but it was a lot better than five. William Whitelaw wanted to parade the troops to the press, but he was politely informed by Major Gullen that they wished to remain anonymous.

While the world sat back in wild admiration, the SAS stacked their gear and crept into the back of their civilian trucks to withdraw to Regent's Park Barracks. There they would recover their vehicles and return quickly to Hereford. They were still on call and needed to be ready – another attack could be about to unfold anywhere, anytime.

At 21:00, while they stacked their kit in their vehicles, it was announced that the Prime Minister would be visiting to congratulate "her boys". She arrived, accompanied by her husband Denis, and personally thanked each man. She then joined them to watch a replay of the assault on the *BBC News at 10*. A famous anecdote still resounds in the bars of Hereford about the moment when legendary Scotsman John McAleese said to the Prime Minister, "Hey hun,





Troops landing on the rear balcony to make their entry into the embassy

get yer f***ing head oot o the wee. I canna see the telly." Some cringed, some laughed, but Maggie simply apologised and moved aside.

The team returned slowly in dribs and drabs to Hereford. One team arrived late following a puncture that drove them into the sanctuary of the Heston Service Station on the M4 motorway. Unfortunately, the tools to change their wheel were hidden beneath all their guns and equipment.

"As we were trying to work out what to do, I saw an AA van parked about 50 yards away. 'I know, I'll get the AA to change it.' I said. Before anyone could protest, I strolled over and asked the AA driver if he had heard about what had happened in London that day. He said that he had, becoming quite animated about the events. 'Well I'm one of the blokes who did it,' I told him, 'and I have a problem.' I explained our predicament to him and, not sure whether to believe me or not, he drove over to take a look, probably as much out of curiosity as anything else. Confronted by four tired-looking heavies, and with the signal from our police radio bleeping in the front of the vehicle, he was convinced and changed the wheel for us."

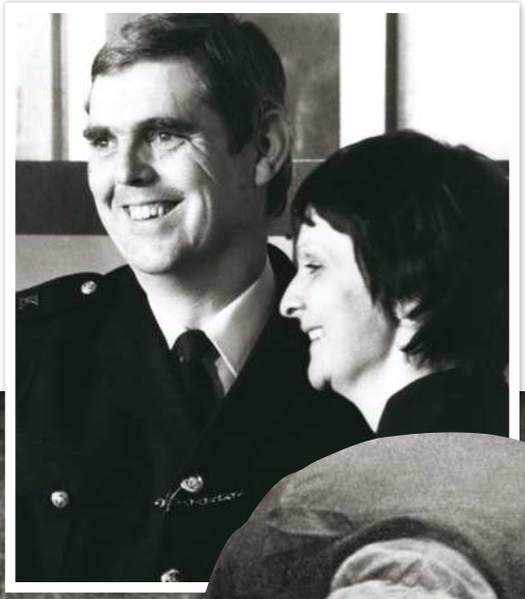
A week later, B Squadron received an engraved plaque from the Commander US Special Forces, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. The plaque read, "To the brave British commandos who assaulted the Iranian Embassy in London on 5 May 1980. It just goes to show you can't make chicken salad out of chicken shit."

The assault on the Iranian Embassy was a lift for the moral of the free world. A classic special forces operation. The foresight of the British Government to finance and support the Pagoda team was exceptional. The strong leadership and determination of Margaret Thatcher's government ensured that the terrorists would never succeed. However, it was the training and calibre of the men that made it all possible and ultimately saved innocent lives.

Operation Nimrod ended the era of hostage-taking in the UK for the next 20 years, and as the SAS taught their skills elsewhere, they gave the same deterrent to other countries. The combination of best man, best management and adequate financial commitment made them the envy of the world. The SAS maintained their silence for 22 years until, in 2002, the BBC persuaded three of them to reveal the truth about those six days in Louise Norman's documentary *SAS: Iranian Embassy Siege*.

The trauma of the events dramatically affected most of the hostages and negotiators. None of the SAS men, however, were psychologically injured by the events on that day. The surviving team members know that they still hold a special place in British history and are proud that they saved so many lives.

Fowzi Nejad was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder and was released after serving 27 years. He now lives peacefully as a mini-cab driver in South London.



"OPERATION NIMROD ENDED THE ERA OF HOSTAGE-TAKING IN THE UK FOR THE NEXT 20 YEARS, AND AS THE SAS TAUGHT THEIR SKILLS ELSEWHERE, THEY GAVE THE SAME DETERRENT TO OTHER COUNTRIES"

***Left:** PC Trevor Lock holds a press conference at Scotland Yard after the end of the siege*

The SAS secure the hostages on the lawn to the rear of the Iranian Embassy. One of the terrorists would be found in their number

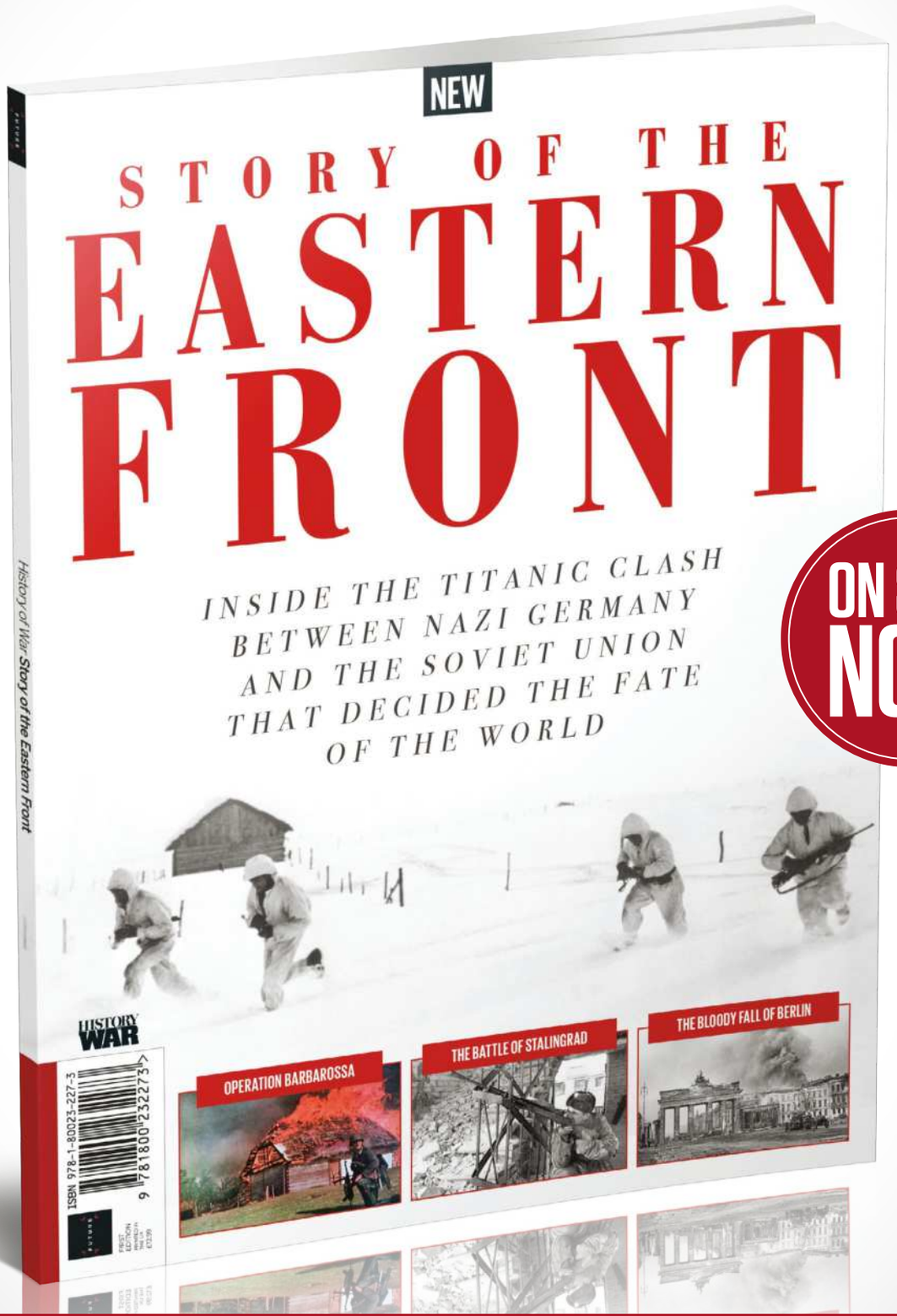
IN MEMORY OF ASSAULT TEAM MEMBERS SINCE DEPARTED:

- ✪ Staff Sergeant John McAleese QGM
- ✪ Sergeant Thomas Palmer QGM
- ✪ Sergeant David Playford
- ✪ Sergeant Keith Johnson
- ✪ Captain Frank Collins
- ✪ Sergeant Dom Pavlov

Images: Alamy, Getty, Robin Horsfall

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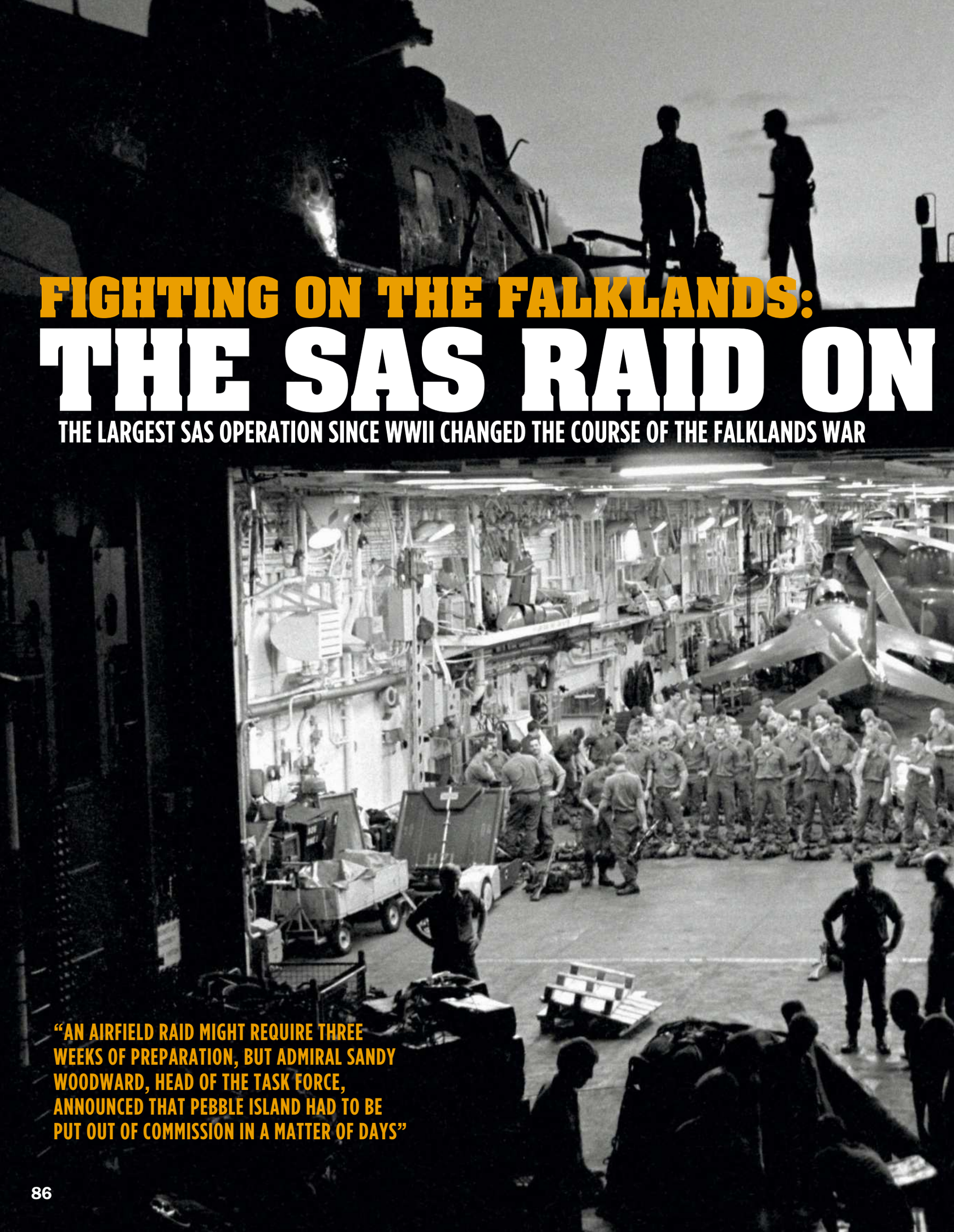
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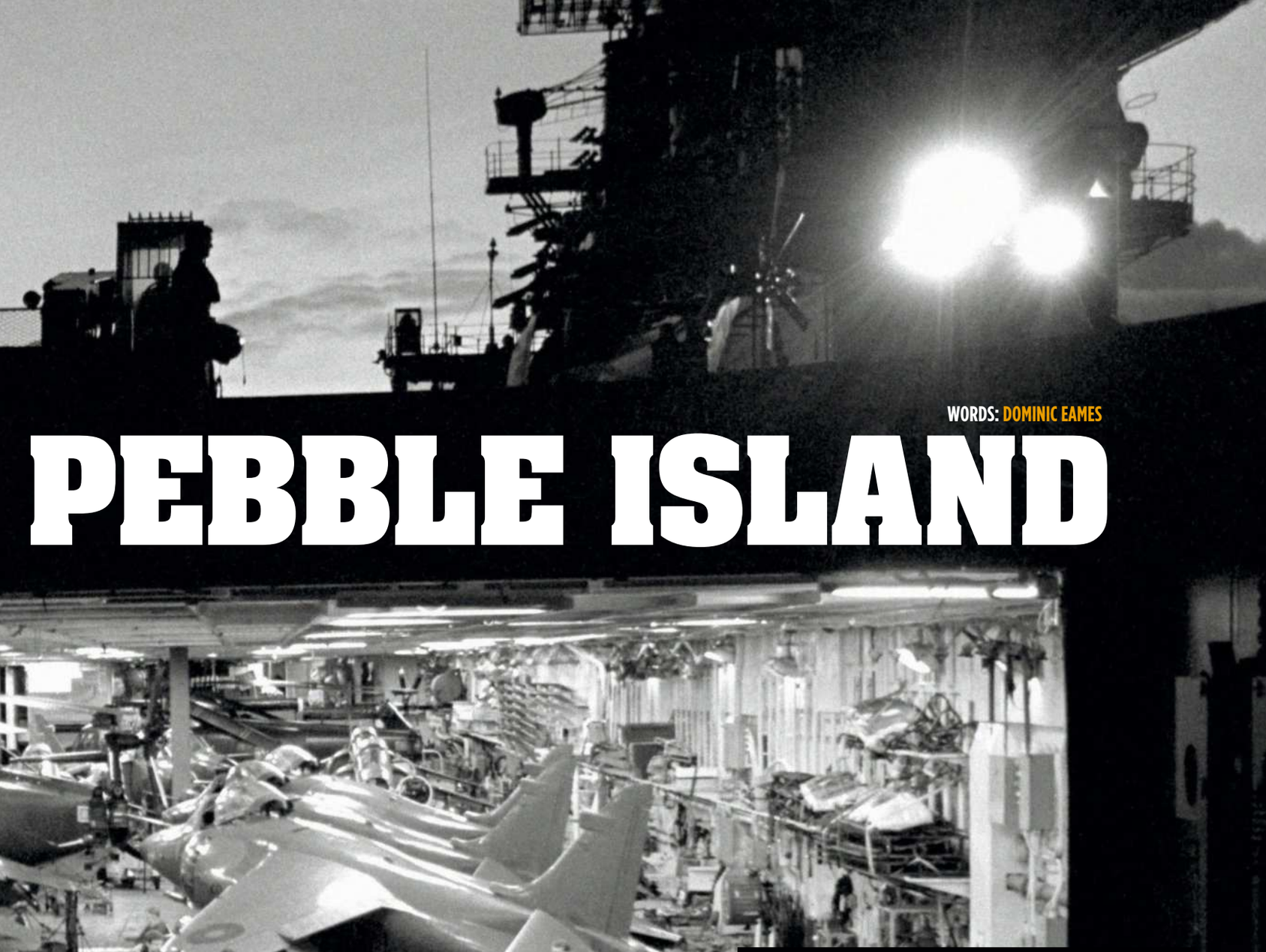


FIGHTING ON THE FALKLANDS:

THE SAS RAID ON

THE LARGEST SAS OPERATION SINCE WWII CHANGED THE COURSE OF THE FALKLANDS WAR

"AN AIRFIELD RAID MIGHT REQUIRE THREE WEEKS OF PREPARATION, BUT ADMIRAL SANDY WOODWARD, HEAD OF THE TASK FORCE, ANNOUNCED THAT PEBBLE ISLAND HAD TO BE PUT OUT OF COMMISSION IN A MATTER OF DAYS"



WORDS: DOMINIC EAMES

PEBBLE ISLAND

The HMS Hermes is a hive of activity as the launchpad for SAS operations in the Falklands

April 1982: Argentinian forces invade the Falklands Islands and trigger a war with Britain. The South Atlantic islands have been in British hands since 1833 and its population (1,850 strong in 1982) is mostly descended from British settlers, but the Argentinians have long staked their claim to what they call Islas Malvinas, some 400 miles off their coast. On hearing of the invasion, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher dispatches the largest military expedition since the Suez Crisis of 1956. As the fleet races the 8,000 miles from Britain to the Falklands, it is abundantly clear that central to the campaign will be the elite soldiers of the Special Air Service (SAS).

Of huge strategic importance if Argentina had any chance of winning the war were the three small airfields on the islands, from which they could attack British ships and impede a counter-invasion. These were at the capital, Port Stanley, Goose Green on East Falkland, and the tiny Pebble Island at the north of West Falkland. The latter was identified as a potential forward operating base, capable of being upgraded into a launching point for the FAA, the Argentine Air Force.

On 23 April, a plane landed on Pebble Island, or Isla de Borbon, and, as the couple of dozen residents looked on, Argentinian troops disembarked, planted the national flag and sang the anthem. Improvement works got underway and Lieutenant Ricardo Marega was given command of a platoon of the 3rd Marine Infantry Battalion. Adding engineers and air crews, around 150 men were posted. Soon, Pebble Island was the base for six FMA IA-58 Pucara

Image: Martin Cleaver / PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo



British troops march towards Port Stanley after the landings



***Above:** Sea King helicopters, used to transport the SAS*



***Above:** HMS Hermes and Broadsword (behind) both played key roles in the Pebble Island raid*

ground-attack aircraft, four T-34 Turbo Mentors and one Short SC.7 Skyvan. All posed a threat to any proposed British amphibious invasion.

British forces similarly recognised the strategic value of Pebble Island and began planning how to best neutralise the threat. The obvious option of an air strike was deemed unfeasible as it put the civilian population in danger. Instead, a special forces operation was preferred. The 22nd SAS regiment – under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Michael Rose and on board the flagship HMS Hermes – were assigned the job of the largest SAS mission since WWII, codenamed Operation PRELIM.

And they did not have long to get everything ready. Rose reportedly stated that an airfield raid might require three weeks of preparation, only for Admiral Sandy Woodward, head of the whole task force, to tell him that Pebble Island had to be put out of commission in a matter of days. But that was the type of thing the men of the SAS were trained for.

The plan was to insert eight men of Boat Troop D Squadron as a reconnaissance team. Dropped by helicopter on another island near Pebble, they would approach by crossing the sound in Klepper canoes. They would then have to determine exactly how many aircraft there were, their precise positions and the defences in place to protect them.

"IN 45 MINUTES, ALL 11 OF THE AIRCRAFT ON PEBBLE ISLAND HAD BEEN UTTERLY DESTROYED, AND THE MEN WERE BACK IN TIME FOR BREAKFAST"

Once the recce was completed the rest of D Squadron and G Squadron would follow: 18 (Mobility) Troop were responsible for crippling the aircraft, arms and fuel dumps; 16 (Air) Troop were tasked with attempting to seize prisoners; and 19 (Mountain) Troop were the reserves. The operation would be supported from the sea by the frigate HMS Broadsword and HMS Glamorgan, a destroyer that would bombard the airfield to distract from the presence of the assault force.

All was ready for the reconnaissance mission to get underway on the night of 11 May. After landing at Keppel Island, six of the eight men remained at a hiding position while two, on rotation, made their way to an observation post. This required careful movement and concealment as the barren landscape of the Falklands did not offer much cover. Immediately, valuable information was being gleaned: shortly after their arrival, the team realised that the area intended for a landing zone, off Phillips Cove, was actually a pond.

It took two days to complete the recce and report the findings back to the Task Force, and the final preparations for the night-time raid were made. Stormy weather and strong winds on the ocean meant that not everything went smoothly though, as the Hermes had to move into a riskier position closer to potential Argentine spotters to ensure the helicopters could be launched and recovered. Still, the raid was given the go-ahead and, in the early hours of 15 May, Sea King helicopters took off with 45 SAS troops on board.

"The weather was very cold and foggy for that time of year and did cause some problems landing folks ashore," recalled Lieutenant Commander Roger Edwards. "On the night of the raid, it was generally good visibility, but with a gale from the WNW [west-north-west]. I can remember quite a large sea running as every now and again a breaking crest could be seen level with the door of the Sea King – we were quite low!"

The Sea Kings arrived at the landing zone at 3.50 a.m., unloading the SAS quickly before returning to the Hermes. The men, each carrying around 80 pounds of gear, were armed with M-16 rifles, machine guns, grenade launchers, LAW 66mm anti-tank rockets, and a mortar. After meeting up with the reconnaissance



team, the commander, Major Delves, ordered the SAS to set off for the airfield.

By 06.15, the mortar position had been set up. But there was a problem: Mobility Troop had become detached during the march and gotten lost. With dawn fast approaching, the reserve troop, Mountain, took over as the assault force and moved into position by 07.00. Led by the 29-year-old Captain Gavin John Hamilton, Mountain Troop had already seen action on South Georgia (an island located 800 miles east-south-east of the Falkland Islands), invaded by the Argentinians the day after landing on the Falklands. Hamilton and demolitions expert Corporal Raymond Armstrong opted to use charges on the six Pucaras, and small arms fire, grenades and the LAWs on the Mentors and Skyvan.

The raid began when HMS Glamorgan started to rain down 4.5-inch shells on the airfield and two seven-man teams from Mountain Troop made their way, undetected, to the aircraft. They laid charges and began firing. The fuel dump and ammunition stores were destroyed. "Our own mortar opened up, lighting the whole place up like it was bright daylight," said SAS member Jack Ramsey. "There was virtually no enemy fire on us, so the boys got stuck into the planes."

There were six Argentinians on patrol duty that night, but once the Glamorgan's salvo began they found themselves pinned in their shelters and other hiding spots. The marines on Pebble Island were inexperienced and untrained for such an attack. Some tried to emerge when one of the Mentors went up in flames, only to retreat once the SAS spotted them and opened fire. What level of counterattack the Argentinians managed to muster proved ineffective as they could not pinpoint the SAS, and they attempted no advances.

"There was a very short firefight on the strip and a couple of Argentinians were slightly wounded – I do not remember anyone being killed," recounted Edwards. Although there are differing accounts on whether or not a single Argentinian was killed, it *is* known that there were no SAS fatalities and only mild casualties. One man got a piece of shrapnel in his leg, another was concussed, and Armstrong had been blown off his feet by a charge and was deafened for several days.

In just 45 minutes, all 11 of the aircraft on Pebble Island had been utterly destroyed or so badly damaged that it was improbable that they could even be salvaged for parts. The SAS then made their way back to the rendezvous to be picked up by the Sea Kings and returned to the Hermes. They were back in time for a cooked English breakfast to celebrate a job well done. One of the helicopter pilots, Richard Hutchings, described it as "the best example ever of a combined operation Special Forces mission since WWII".

***Above, top:** A map of the Falklands, with Pebble Island visible at the north of West Falkland*

***Above:** One of the damaged Pucaras riddled with machine-gun fire from the raid*

In a cruel twist of fate, however, while no one died during the raid, the SAS would suffer its worst single loss of life since World War II just a few days later, and in a tragic accident. A Sea King crashed while transporting SAS soldiers – including men who had been on Pebble Island – from one ship to another. It is possible the helicopter was hit by a bird. There were 20 fatalities and only nine survivors.

The raid itself is still remembered as a textbook operation. Such was the success of the men of 22 SAS that the Argentinians did not even know the attack was over: they feared special forces might not have actually left and were lurking in the plains to strike again. The threat of Pebble Island had been extinguished – the airstrip had become so pockmarked with craters that it even hindered other craft from landing there – denying the Argentinians a vital reconnaissance and attack base. A week later, the skies were that little bit clearer for the British when they landed on the Falklands at San Carlos.

Images: Getty Images, Alamy

BRAVO AND BEYOND

92 The demise of Bravo Two Zero
Dropped deep inside enemy territory, this SAS unit was doomed from the start. But what really happened?

98 Delta Force
Uncover the training, weapons and missions that have shaped America's formidable anti-terrorist squad

104 Billy Billingham exclusive
We talk to the former SAS sniper about jungle warfare, catching war criminals and serving in the Regiment

110 The hunt for Osama Bin Laden
Inside the daring raid to bring the world's most-wanted terrorist to justice

118 Special forces around the world
From China to South Africa, meet some of the world's elite troops and find out what it takes to join them

124 The future of war
Get to grips with the technologies set to revolutionise special ops, counterterrorism and inter-state conflicts










118


98
70159



THE DEMISE OF BRAVO TWO ZERO

DURING THE 1991 GULF WAR, AN SAS OPERATION IN THE IRAQI DESERT WENT TERRIBLY WRONG

WORDS: MICHAEL E. HASKEW



Above: Soldiers examine the remnants of a Scud missile during the 1991 Gulf War

Left: The SAS men of Bravo Two Zero pose before their ill-fated mission

Below: Andy McNab's bestseller, chronicling his experience with Bravo Two Zero, stirred controversy

The situation began to unravel from the start. They were trained to complete their missions against long odds, operating behind enemy lines. But when communications could not be established and their presence was apparently discovered, there was no real choice but to abort, exfiltrate and attempt to fight another day.

The eight-man team of B Squadron 22 SAS known as Bravo Two Zero, deployed hours earlier into the trackless Iraqi desert, then began an incredible and tragic odyssey, the circumstances of which are still debated more than 30 years later.

PRELUDE TO DEPLOYMENT

When Saddam Hussein sent the Iraqi Army into Kuwait on 2 August 1990, condemnation from the community of nations was virtually unanimous, and a coalition force from 35 countries assembled to deal with the dictator's naked aggression against his neighbour. During the build-up for Operation Desert Storm, SAS formations deployed to forward operating bases in Saudi Arabia. They brought with them expertise in the covert operations that were deemed essential to the successful prosecution of the offensive, which began on 17 January 1991, to eject the Iraqis from Kuwait.

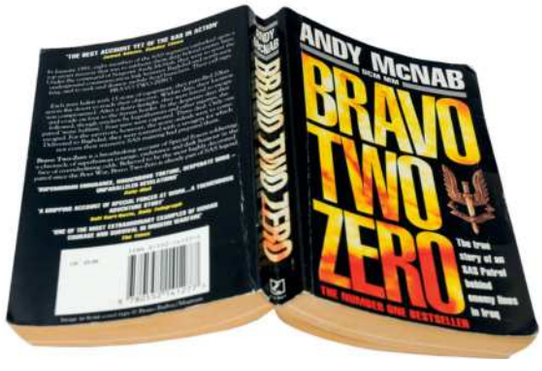
Founded during WWII as an elite special forces unit of the British Army, the SAS had earned the reputation of a highly skilled fighting force, and more recently 22 SAS had gained notoriety with their rescue of hostages from the Iranian embassy in London in 1980. During the opening days of Desert Storm, several apparent threats to coalition personnel were identified, and 22 SAS were detailed to eliminate – or at least impair – the ability of the Iraqis to launch tactical ballistic missiles, or Scuds, which were capable of delivering high-explosive warheads against both military and civilian targets. Bravo Two Zero, one of three SAS teams with similar missions, were inserted into the Iraqi desert on the night of 22–23 January.

SCUD HUNTERS

Detailed planning was essential to the success of the Bravo Two Zero mission, and on its face the task was daunting. The team consisted of its commander, Sergeant Steven Billy Mitchell, second-in-command Sergeant Vince David Phillips, Corporal Colin Armstrong, Lance Corporal Ian Robert 'Dinger' Pring, and Troopers Robert Consiglio, Steven 'Legs' Lane, Malcolm MacGown and Mike 'Kiwi' Coburn (a pseudonym).

Numerous aspects of the Bravo Two Zero saga have been disputed, and members of the team have even put forth different interpretations of the mission itself. According to Sergeant Mitchell, writing under the pseudonym Andy McNab, the objective was to seek and destroy Iraqi Scud launchers along a 155-mile stretch of the Iraqi Army's main supply route. However, Corporal Armstrong, writing as Chris Ryan, asserted that the team were to find a suitable lying-up position, gather intelligence, and monitor the movements of enemy troops and Scud launchers.

Regardless, key decisions were made that heavily influenced the outcome of the mission. Although each SAS member was assigned



Images: Alamy



to carry a load of equipment and supplies estimated to weigh at least 210 pounds, the team chose not to utilise vehicles since their numbers were few, the vehicles themselves were small, and their usefulness would be limited in an operation that was to be conducted from a fixed position.

MISSION AND MISSTEP

In the predawn darkness, Bravo Two Zero were inserted by Chinook helicopter into the desert 200 miles behind enemy lines and northwest of the Iraqi capital of Baghdad. Accounts differ as to how far the men walked that night, but temperatures were unusually cold.

"We found a perfect lying-up place," McNab (Mitchell) wrote in his 1993 bestseller, *Bravo Two Zero*. "Dead ground, out of sight and with cover from enemy fire... It was time to transmit our first Sit Rep (situation report) back to SAS base camp in Saudi, telling them where we were and what state we were in. On the patrol radio, Legs, our signaller, sent the encoded message in a single, very short burst... We waited for the acknowledgment, but none came... If the SAS base didn't hear from you, the rule was that you trekked back to the landing site and rendezvoused at a set time with a helicopter to pick up new radios."

Unknown to the team, their messages were being received at the base, but they were unable to receive any communications in return.

The following morning, an Iraqi shepherd boy stumbled across the Bravo Two Zero hiding place. McNab realised their cover was blown, and the team began to move south towards the expected helicopter rendezvous point. He asserted in 1993 that the patrol soon met a formidable force of Iraqi troops and armoured personnel carriers, and though later investigations cast some doubt on his account, McNab wrote of a fierce firefight.

"We pulled our scarves over our faces and set out, making good progress with the Sun in our eyes until suddenly we heard the sound of more tracked vehicles. Adrenaline rushed, blood pumped. We stopped. We couldn't go forward, we couldn't go back – and we were probably no more than seconds away from contact... 'Let's do it!' I yelled... Rounds thumped into the ground, getting closer and closer to where I lay. A truck stopped 100 yards away and infantry were spilling out shouting and firing... We were now all furiously getting rounds off. One of our rockets hit a truck and there was a massive shudder of high-explosive... Mark and Dinger reached one of the Iraqi APCs, found the rear doors carelessly left open and lobbed in a grenade. The occupants were killed instantly."

"I STARTED HALLUCINATING AND SEEING VISIONS OF MY DAUGHTER. IT WAS THAT VIVID I WAS PUTTING MY HAND OUT TO GET A HOLD OF HER AND SHE WAS TALKING TO ME"

When the slugfest was over, scores of Iraqi soldiers lay dead on the ground; others were seriously wounded. Miraculously, none of the SAS men had been injured. When the team reassembled, McNab attempted to contact the AWACS surveillance aircraft, but his tactical distress beacon (TACBE) received no response. Further, an RAF Chinook dispatched to extricate the team at the anticipated rendezvous point was forced to turn back. McNab then decided to move northwest towards the Syrian border rather than south towards Saudi Arabia. The Syrian frontier was closer and perhaps even an alternative discussed prior to the mission. However, the deviation from the standard southern trek may well have nullified any further attempts to locate and recover the SAS team.

EVASION, CAPTURE AND DEATH

During the night of 24 January, as McNab attempted to contact the AWACS, the eight-man group became separated. While five waited for

***Above:** Actor Sean Bean starred in the 1999* **Bravo Two Zero** *television production*

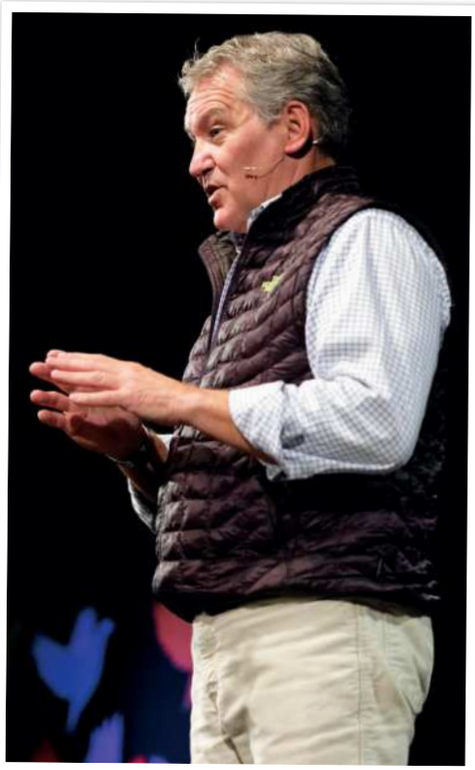
***Above, right:** Bravo Two Zero commander Andy McNab (Sergeant Mitchell) obscures his face from a camera*



TACBE confirmation, Phillips, MacGown and Ryan (Armstrong) continued moving towards the Syrian border. Phillips soon began to suffer the effects of hypothermia, and hours later he died of exposure to the bitter cold. Around noon on 26 January, MacGown and Ryan encountered an elderly goat herder. Rather than killing the old man, they decided that MacGown would go with him and attempt to locate a vehicle while Ryan remained behind, anticipating contact with MacGown in a few hours. Ryan later reported that MacGown came upon several men with a Toyota Landcruiser, shot one individual as he ran towards it, and then gunned down another pair. Out of ammunition and unable to flee in the Toyota, he was captured.

McNab's account of MacGown's skirmish differs from that of Ryan, but it is only one of many contradictions.

Meanwhile, McNab's group hijacked a taxi and drove some distance to an Iraqi checkpoint, where Lane reportedly shot one sentry while two more were killed by other members of the SAS team. Again, Ryan contradicts McNab, and further investigation years later failed to confirm the actual sequence of events. Subsequently, it is known that Consiglio was killed by hostile fire during a confrontation with local police and civilians in the early morning hours of 27 January. Lane and Pring swam the Euphrates River that morning, and Lane died



The One That Got Away *author and Bravo Two Zero survivor Chris Ryan addresses a gathering*

BRAVO TWO ZERO BECOMES LEGEND

BOOKS AND TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS HAVE BROUGHT BRAVO TWO ZERO FAME AND ADDITIONAL SCRUTINY

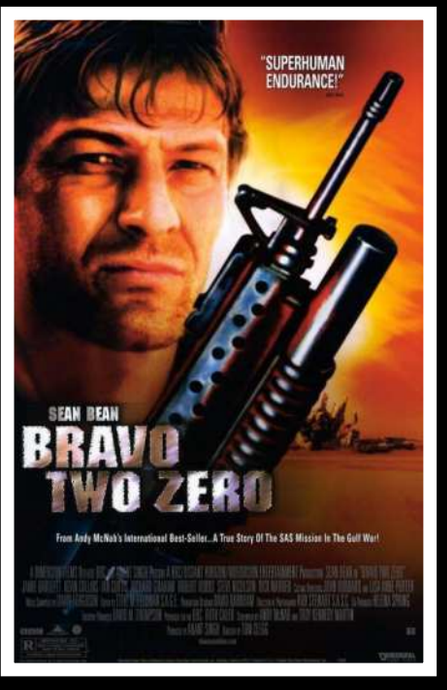
In addition to McNab's (Mitchell) 1993 book, *Bravo Two Zero* and Ryan's (Armstrong) 1995 work, *The One That Got Away*, Peter Ratcliffe, the SAS Regimental Sergeant Major at the time of the operation, wrote the book *Eye Of The Storm* in 2000, a memoir that also introduces contradictory information about the abortive mission. In 2001, former SAS Trooper Michael Asher travelled to Iraq and conducted numerous interviews with witnesses while retracing the Bravo Two Zero patrol route. His book, *The Real Bravo Two Zero*, which is largely at odds with the accounts of McNab and Ryan, was published the following year. Trooper Mike 'Kiwi' Coburn also wrote a book, *Soldier Five*, published in 2004.

"I wanted to portray events as they really happened," Coburn said in reference to other available material, particularly labelling some of what McNab and Ryan wrote as fiction. "You can't have all this rubbish out there."

The Ministry of Defence failed in its attempt to suppress Coburn's book but has received all of the proceeds from its sales.

The BBC, ITV and Channel 4 have all produced documentaries based on the accounts of the SAS survivors of Bravo Two Zero and those who subsequently sought to shed light on the events.

***Below:** Bravo Two Zero has been explored in books and television documentaries*



"I WANTED TO PORTRAY EVENTS AS THEY REALLY HAPPENED. YOU CAN'T HAVE ALL THIS RUBBISH OUT THERE"



***Above:** A Chinook inserted the team into the desert, but the one headed for the rendezvous point had to turn back*

of hypothermia a short time later. Coburn was wounded in the arm and ankle. In short order, the three survivors of McNab's group were taken prisoner.

RYAN'S INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Ryan, however, remained at large. In fact, he began an incredible trek of approximately 180 miles to the Syrian frontier and safety, the longest such journey undertaken by an SAS trooper – or perhaps any soldier – in history. However, as with so many other aspects of the Bravo Two Zero mission, Ryan's account remains the subject of scrutiny and conjecture to this day.

During a harrowing week, Ryan maintains, he crossed the desert towards Syria. Surviving the bone-chilling cold each night, he had to find water. But when he came upon a pool and drank, his throat burned and he retched. The creek he had drawn from was downstream from an Iraqi nuclear facility and had been contaminated with a toxic substance known as 'yellowcake'.

In February 2021, he explained to Forces News, "For the last three nights I had nothing and I was walking about 40 kilometres [25 miles] a night. I started hallucinating and seeing visions of my daughter. It was that vivid I was putting my hand out to get a hold of her and she was talking to me."

Near the end of his trial, Ryan had lost 38 pounds and stumbled into the village of Abu Kamal, Syria. In 1995, he wrote an account of his ordeal entitled *The One That Got Away*, and he told his story to the *Daily Star Online* in 2018. "Every day, I would lie there and plan my route to get closer and closer to that Syrian border," he recalled. "All I thought for the seven days was 'Get across that border and I'll be safe' – but actually I wasn't. I ended up in the town right next to the border and a lynch mob tried to drag me back into Iraq."

Ryan managed to reach the local police station, but his fate remained unclear for a time as several men hustled him into a vehicle. "Driving in the car, we passed this large sign which said 'Baghdad' and the guys said, 'We're Iraqis.' They blindfolded me and I thought I'd been tricked, heading towards an Iraqi prison. As I sat there, I started running through in my head what would happen next, I'd get beaten up and interrogated, so it wasn't a surprise. As it was, they were having a joke and took me into Damascus."

Ryan added that the Syrians were gracious hosts and even bought him a suit before turning him over to the British embassy. He received the Military Medal for his exploits, despite the fact that suspicions regarding his story linger.

McNab, MacGown, Pring and Coburn were moved on several occasions during their six weeks of captivity and spent part of that time in the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.

"AS THE KICKS CONNECTED WITH MY SKULL, THERE WAS A HISSING, POPPING SOUND IN MY EARS... I FELT BLOOD TRICKLE OUT OF MY EARS AND DOWN MY FACE... I FELT MY MOLARS CRACK AND SPLINTER, AND WHEN THE PAIN HIT ME I WAS SCREAMING MY HEAD OFF"

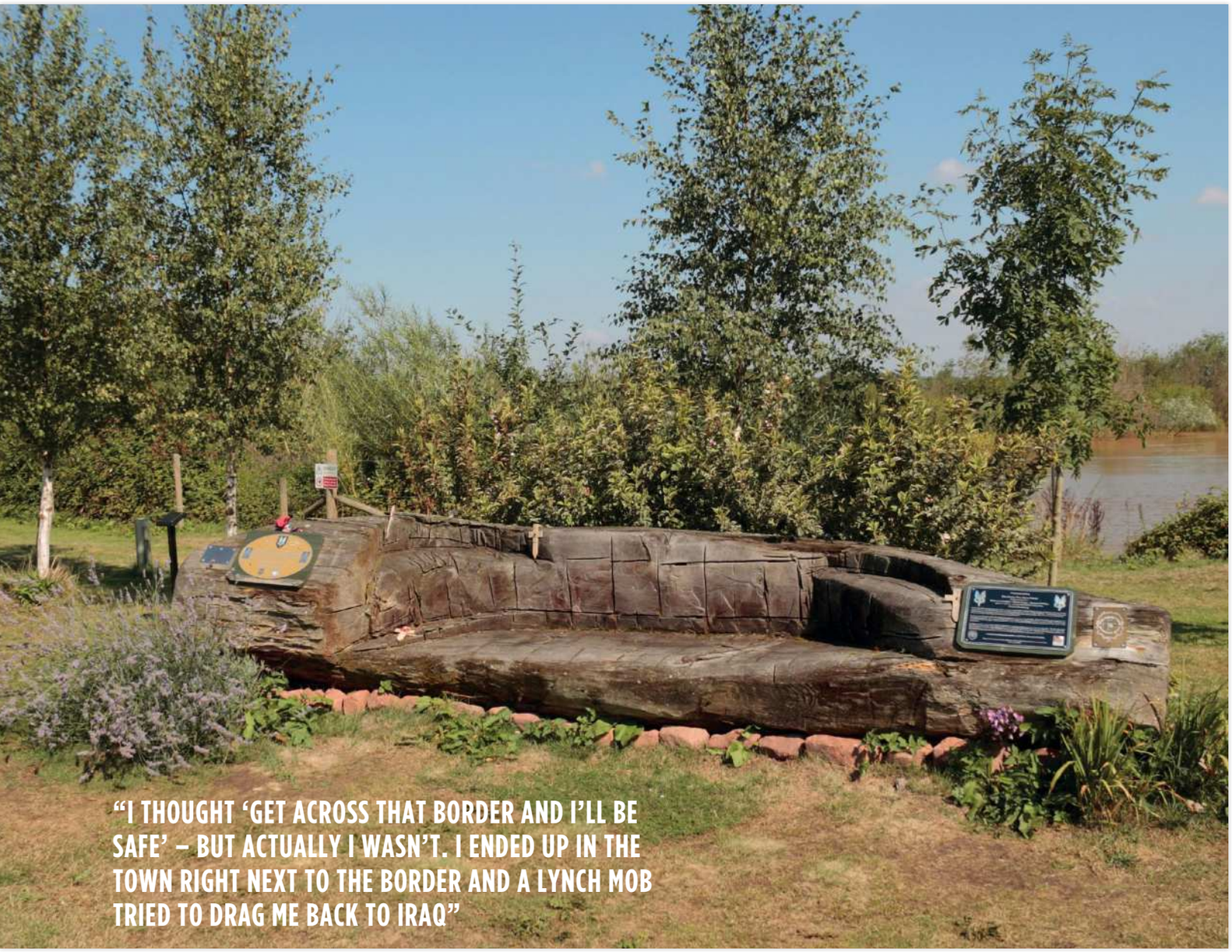
The Bravo Two Zero team leader told a tale of excruciating physical torture and mental anguish. A few times McNab and Pring were able to make eye contact and encourage one another to keep going through winks and faint smiles. Still, McNab wrote, their captors were utterly brutal.

"As the kicks connected with my skull, there was a hissing, popping sound in my ears, and as I clenched my jaw I heard the bones creak together," he recalled. "I felt blood trickle out of my ears and down my face. I was worried I'd be left permanently deaf… They set at me with rifle butts and one particularly heavy blow caught me on the jaw. I felt my molars crack and splinter, and when the pain hit me I was down and screaming my head off.

"And so my ordeal went on and on, day after day, night after night. At one point we were driven out onto the streets and exhibited to roaring crowds of people – women with sticks, men with guns or stones, all waving pictures of Saddam Hussein."

McNab, MacGown and Pring were eventually released in early March, a few days after the Gulf War had ended. McNab received the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and Lane and Consiglio the Military Medal.

While there is no doubt that the brave SAS men of Bravo Two Zero engaged in their deployment with the intent to complete their mission, a series of unforeseen circumstances converged to create the ensuing catastrophe. Although their heroism cannot be denied, the accounts of those who participated and those who investigated reveal statements, eyewitness testimonies and theories that raise questions that may never be fully answered.



“I THOUGHT ‘GET ACROSS THAT BORDER AND I’LL BE SAFE’ – BUT ACTUALLY I WASN’T. I ENDED UP IN THE TOWN RIGHT NEXT TO THE BORDER AND A LYNCH MOB TRIED TO DRAG ME BACK TO IRAQ”

Above: *The Bravo Two Zero Patrol Memorial bench is located at the Allied Special Forces Memorial Grove, National Memorial Arboretum, Alrewas, UK*



Above: *This memorial to Sergeant Vince Phillips of Bravo Two Zero is also located at the National Memorial Arboretum*



Above: *A close-up of Bravo Two Zero’s plaque at the National Memorial Arboretum. It is dedicated to those who lost their lives in the mission*

DELTA FORCE

THE HISTORY, TRAINING, WEAPONS AND MISSIONS BEHIND THE US'S ELITE ANTI-TERRORISM UNIT

WORDS: CALLUM McKELVIE



"DURING THE 1970s THE US HAD BECOME THE TARGET OF AN INCREASING NUMBER OF TERRORIST ATTACKS. INDEED, BETWEEN 1970 AND 2013 THERE WERE MORE THAN 2,600 TERRORIST ACTS IN THE UNITED STATES, WITH MORE THAN HALF OF THESE TAKING PLACE DURING THE 1970s"

The armed forces of the United States comprise one of the most formidable military powers in the modern world. Of course there are the Marines and the Navy Seals, but, like a number of countries, the US also has need for military units that can conduct more clandestine operations, away from the full-scale engagements expected of regular troops. For this, one unit in particular has become shrouded in myth and legend: Delta Force. Created to battle an ever-increasing terrorist threat, Delta Force are a highly secretive elite squad that operate in the shadows and have been involved in some of the US's most high-profile missions…

HISTORY

Delta Force, officially known as 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment Delta, came into being in 1977 at the behest of Colonel Charles 'Charlie' Alvin Beckwith, who proposed the creation of an elite counter-terrorism unit. Beckwith had worked with the British SAS in Vietnam and proposed a similar strike force for use within the US military. Project Delta, a counterintelligence unit commanded by Beckwith in South Vietnam, proved to be something of a precursor to Delta Force and were highly successful. During the 1970s the US had become the target of an increasing number of terrorist attacks. Indeed, between 1970 and 2013 there were more than 2,600 terrorist acts in the United States, with more than half of these taking place during the 1970s. As well as these internal attacks, there were also numerous high-profile international incidents, such as the four aircraft hijacked by members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine in September 1970. Beckwith and his colleagues prepared the 'Robert Redford Paper', which outlined the proposed training for such a unit and would take place over a two-year period.

TRAINING

Although it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what the Delta Force training and selection programme looks like due to the (understandable) extreme



A Delta Force operative near the Kandahar Province in Afghanistan





***Above, left:** Members of Delta Force about to undergo HALO (High-Altitude Low-Opening) training*

***Above:** The exploits of Delta Force have been fictionalised as early as 1986, when Chuck Norris and Lee Marvin starred in an action film produced by Cannon Films*

secrecy surrounding the unit, some information concerning the eligibility and tests is known. To be chosen, troops must be at least 21 years old, be an Airborne volunteer or have the relevant training, hold the rank of E-4 through E-8, be capable of obtaining a secret security clearance, have no disciplinary action on their record and have two and a half years remaining in service. From here they must then take the selection tests, one of which involves an 18-mile march at night, during which the candidate must carry a 40-pound load in their rucksack. Another similar test involves a 40-mile route with a 45-pound weight. If the candidates are successful in passing this task, they are then sent to a training camp and put through a rigorous six-month programme in order to become fully fledged operators. The biggest clue as to the background of these successful trainees came in June of 2006 at a hearing before The Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee of the Committee On Armed Services, where General Downing stated that Delta Force are "probably 70 per cent Rangers who have come out of either a Ranger special forces track or directly from a Ranger regiment to Delta".

WEAPONS

The official, primary weapon rifle used by Delta Force is the Colt M4A1, described by *Weapons Of Delta Force* author and special forces expert Fred Pushies as "a most capable and deadly weapon, suitable to any mission". The weapon has both a fully and semi-automatic option and is known for its accuracy and ability to fire 5.56mm ammunition. In particular, the M4A1 is noted for its higher penetration rate in an age when terrorists are more likely to have access to bulletproof armour. The weapons used by Delta Force have to be fully compatible with SOPMOD (Special Operations Peculiar MODification) kits – developed to make the M4A1 even more effective in both close-contact and long-distance confrontations. These kits are designed to be adaptable with all guns used by Delta Force and provide everything an operator would need for a variety of missions. SOPMOD kits include everything from a carrying sling to a visible laser sight, sound suppressor and grenade launcher mount. The visible laser is primarily used for precise aiming, though this is not its only purpose – it can also be used to laser a target for the delivery of smart bombs.

In terms of more close-range weapons, for years the handgun of choice for Delta Force was the M1911 pistol. These were civilian-made weapons, which were then customised and tweaked by skilled technicians. The Deltas' 1911s were match grade with an unheard of 100 per cent reliability rating. In a 2017 interview with *Tactical Life* magazine, ex-Delta operator Brian Searcy said, "The 1911 was revered by the guys!" and explained headshots from 25 yards and body shots from 50 were standard with the 1911. However, some reports now suggest that due to the sandy terrain Delta Force have been operating in over the previous 20 years that some operators now prefer the Glock 22. This 40-calibre is deemed to be more suitable to sandy conditions than the 1911, though some operators still prefer this handgun.

EQUIPMENT

Numerous vehicles have been used by Delta Force in their missions. During desert operations, DPVs (Desert Patrol Vehicles) – three-men machines that are similar in nature to dune buggies – are used by US special forces including Delta Force. The Scorpion DPV is manufactured by Chenowth Racing Products and the public first saw it in action during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, during the Gulf War. Indeed, during the liberation of Kuwait in the latter stages of the conflict US Navy Seals were some of the first to enter the city using DPVs. The Scorpion has 200 horsepower, a two-litre engine and can travel at a speed of up to 60 miles per hour, with a combat payload of around 1,500 pounds. The vehicle has a number of optional weapon-mounting capabilities, including automatic 40mm grenade launchers, .50-calibre heavy machine guns and anti-tank missile launchers.

Armoured Ground Mobility Systems are the favoured personnel carriers of Delta Force. In 2019 it was announced that plans were in place for a Next Generation Armoured Ground Mobility System to replace the Pandur 1, which was developed by the Austrian company Steyr-Daimler-Puch Spezialfahrzeuge (SSF) back in the 1980s. This new design will carry nine or ten passengers, have a payload capacity of 4,500 pounds or more, and fit inside a C-130 series transport aircraft. It is also expected to have Special Weapons Capability and increased situational awareness. This would improve on the open-topped manned turret and limited visibility of the Pandur 1s.

A 6x6 all-terrain vehicle used by Delta Force is the Pinzgauer S0V, which has been deployed

"ONE SELECTION TEST INVOLVES AN 18-MILE MARCH AT NIGHT, DURING WHICH THE CANDIDATE MUST CARRY A 40-POUND LOAD IN THEIR RUCKSACK"



A Chenowth Scorpion, one of the Desert Patrol Vehicles used by Delta Force



Iranian demonstrators burn the American flag during the 1979 embassy siege



by a variety of organisations, both military and civilian. They are renowned for their off-road capability and air-cooled engine, which is easy to maintain in difficult territory. It's suspected that Delta Force used Pinzgauers during the early stages of the war in Afghanistan in 2001. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Delta Force operators infiltrated Iraq through Saudi Arabia using Pinzgauers.

MISSIONS

On 4 November 1979, Iranian students raided the US Embassy in Tehran, detaining more than 50 members of American diplomatic staff. The situation put extreme pressure on President Jimmy Carter to do something drastic in order to free his trapped countrymen. By April 1980, Carter was prepared to use Delta Force in what would be one of the unit's very first missions. Code named Operation Eagle Claw, the mission would ultimately prove disastrous.

The two-night plan involved a small strip of road codenamed Desert One, where on the first night around 100 Delta members and 12 US Rangers would be brought. On the second night, a team of 15 CIA-trained Fasi-speaking Americans and Iranians would drive the majority of the Delta Force operators into the capital. The remaining troops were to cut the city's power while the Rangers captured the abandoned Manzariyeh Air Base, from which they could land two Lockheed C-141 Starlifter aircraft in order to make their escape. Delta Force were to raid the embassy, kill the guards and move the hostages to a sports stadium located opposite, where the helicopters could take them to the air base and then home.

However, almost none of this occurred. Three of the helicopters ran into trouble and were unable to make the journey, while a group of Rangers securing the deserted road blew up one of the tankers smuggling the fuel. This left only five helicopters – the absolute minimum required for the mission being four. Colonel Beckwith requested to abort and President Carter gave the order. In attempting to refuel during the evacuation, one of the helicopters crashed, killing eight servicemen. The helicopters were subsequently abandoned. As a result of the debacle surrounding Eagle Claw, Beckwith would retire. The hostages were eventually freed on 20 January 1981 after 444 days in captivity.

GULF WAR

Delta Force's next high-profile mission, during the 1991 Gulf War, would ultimately prove far more successful. Some of the key weapons in the arsenal of Saddam Hussein were his Scud missiles, a Soviet-made tactical ballistic missile system. On 26 February one of these missiles hit a US airbase in Saudi Arabia, killing 27 servicemen. However, the largest threat posed by the Scuds was that, if targeted at Israel, their use might prove successful in luring the country into the conflict. For a while, various ideas were pitched about how Delta could be involved in the war, with one operator noting to *Insider* later that "Saddam was pretty high on the target deck. Of course, the guys were all up for it, but in the end it came to nothing. We couldn't pinpoint him." Instead, another, decidedly less-human target was chosen: the Scuds themselves.

"CARTER WAS UNDER PRESSURE TO FREE HIS TRAPPED COUNTRYMEN. HE WAS PREPARED TO USE DELTA FORCE IN WHAT WOULD BE ONE OF THE UNIT'S FIRST MISSIONS, BUT OPERATION EAGLE CLAW WOULD PROVE DISASTROUS"

***Above:** US and Saudi soldiers check out a Scud missile during the first Gulf War. One of the Delta Force's missions during the war was sabotaging Scuds*

***Right:** An Iranian revolutionary soldier examines the wreckage of one of the crashed aircraft following the disastrous Operation Eagle Claw*

The missiles were moved around regularly by the Iraqi forces, making them hard to find, and fake missiles were also built in order to fool coalition troops. Nonetheless, Delta Force valiantly hunted Scud missiles during the war, and on the final day of the conflict Delta snipers found and neutralised 26 missiles that were aimed at Israel. It's been suggested that the involvement of both US and UK special forces reduced the threat of a Scud attack against Israel by 80 per cent.

SOMALIA

The Battle of Mogadishu, dramatised in Mark Bowden's book, *Black Hawk Down*, and stunningly portrayed in Ridley Scott's 2001 blockbuster of the same name, took place in Somalia in 1993. At the start of the Somali Civil War (a conflict that began in 1991 and continues to this day), US forces launched Operation Restore Hope, which supported a UN initiative to secure food supply routes. However, US forces were constantly under attack from militias led by the warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid. In an attempt to cripple Aidid's forces an operation was launched with the intention of snatching two of his key lieutenants.



Images: Alamy, Getty Images

However, the mission began to unravel almost immediately when two American Black Hawk helicopters were shot down during the operation and Delta operators were sucked into an intense 18-hour firefight to rescue the airmen. A catastrophic battle for the US forces saw 19 servicemen killed, 73 wounded and one captured in a mission that continues to haunt the memories of those present.

THE WAR ON TERROR

In the wake of 9/11 there was a scramble to coax recently retired operators back into the field. The initial attacks waged against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were by small paramilitary forces – units such as Delta Force and operators from organisations like the CIA who worked with anti-Taliban forces. According to Brian Searcy, the first of these, on 19 October, saw Delta Force operators scatter hundreds of copies of a photograph among the bodies of Taliban fighters – the photo was the now-iconic image of US firefighters raising the American flag at Ground Zero.

As the US and coalition assault in Afghanistan gathered momentum, Osama Bin Laden led a number of his followers to a fortified cave complex in the mountains of Tora Bora. Delta Force and CIA operators landed in the area and secured the base of the mountains as fierce fighting and constant bombing raids worked to obliterate the enemy. However, despite the vicious attack, it was discovered that Bin Laden had escaped.

DELTA FORCE TODAY

Perhaps Delta Force's most famous recent mission was their involvement in the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in a 2019 raid. On the night of 26 October, between 50 and 70 Delta operators landed at al-Baghdadi's compound and, suspecting the main entrance to be booby trapped, blew a hole through one of the walls into the complex. Once inside, a vicious firefight occurred and five residents were killed. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi fled into an escape tunnel, pursued by a Delta dog. Seeing no escape, al-Baghdadi detonated his suicide vest, killing himself and two children in the process. Around 3.30 a.m. the entire compound was obliterated by a US airstrike, reducing the once-fearsome fortress to nothing but ash and rubble.

The al-Baghdadi raid showed the world that Delta Force are very much still a brutal weapon in the arsenal of the US special forces. Their history may be littered with ups and downs, but this elite unit remains a committed and capable force. The world may be changing, but Delta Force will still be there, fighting in the shadows.

FOUNDING FATHER

THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF CHARLES BECKWITH, FOUNDER OF DELTA FORCE

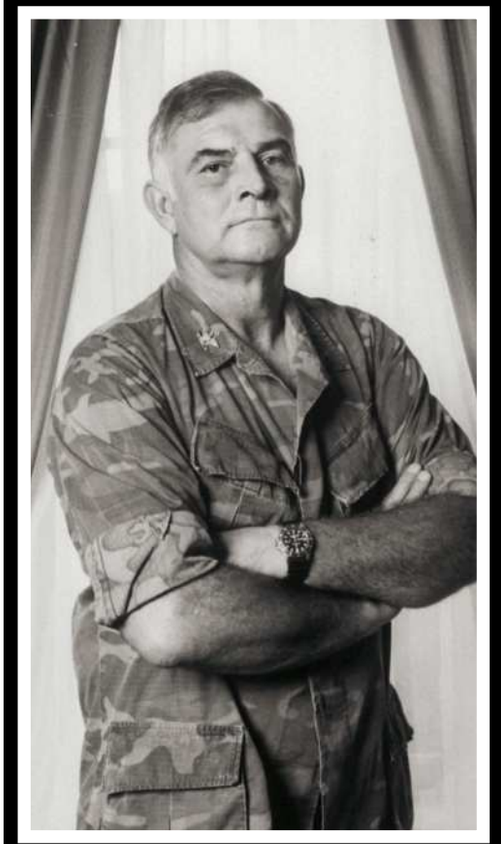
If one man can be said to have been instrumental in the creation of the Delta Force, it's Colonel Charles Alvin Beckwith, nicknamed Chargin' Charlie. In 1952, after graduating from the University of Georgia, he turned down a chance to play professional football for the Green Bay Packers, choosing a life in the US Army instead. A year later Beckwith would see his first active duty, during the Korean war.

After finding success in the regular army, in 1958 he volunteered for active duty with the special forces. By 1959 Beckwith found himself in Laos working as part of Operation Hotfoot to train soldiers to fight the Communist Pathet Lao, or People's Liberation Army.

It was in Malaysia in the 1960s, when Beckwith was working with the British SAS, that he made the first of two lucky escapes from death. He contracted a rare case of leptospirosis, a bacterial infection that causes liver failure, and the doctors who treated him informed him it was one of the worst cases they had ever seen and gave him only a few short weeks in which to live. Against all odds, not only did Beckwith survive, but he also lived through a bullet to the abdomen a few years later while

In 1981, following the failure of Operation Eagle Claw, Beckwith retired from the army to Austin, Texas, where he set up a consulting firm called Security Assistance Services. He passed away at his home in 1994.

Below: Beckwith at home in 1981



EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

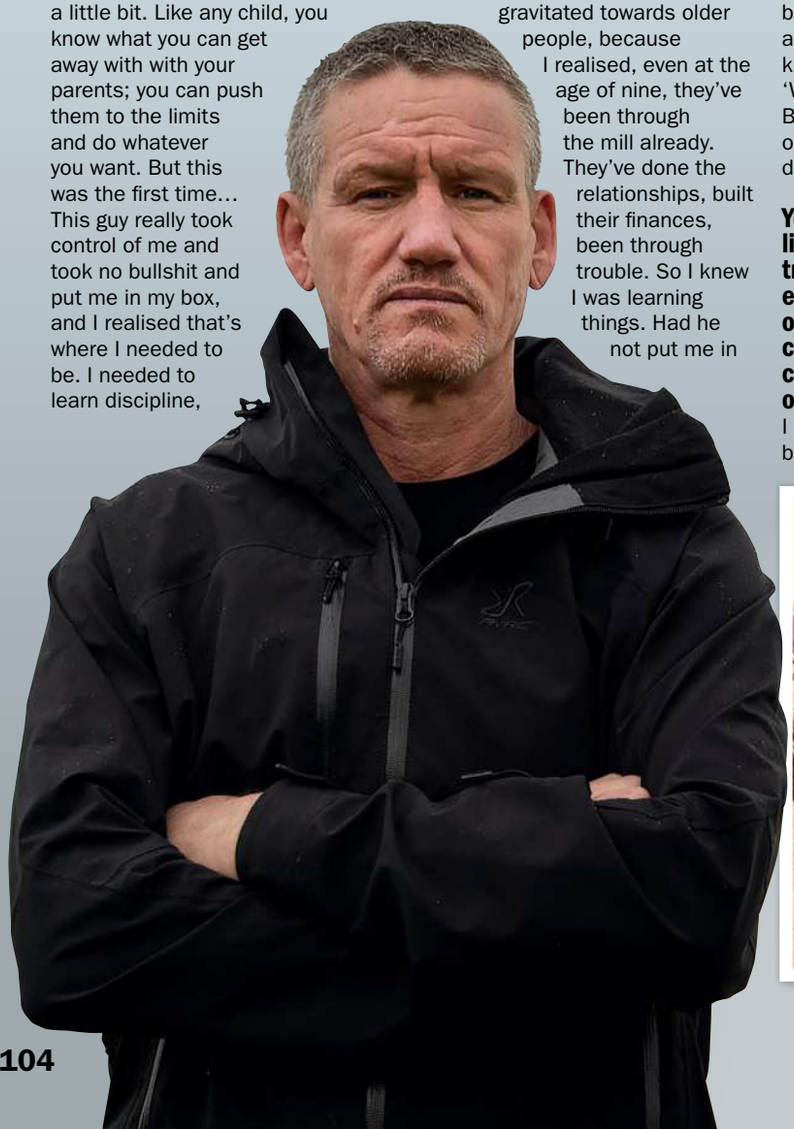
MARK 'BILLY' BILLINGHAM

MBE QCB

WE TALK TO THE STAR OF CHANNEL 4'S *WHO DARES WINS* ABOUT LIFE IN THE PARAS, JUNGLE WARFARE, THE SAS, CATCHING WAR CRIMINALS AND LOOKING AFTER ANGELINA JOLIE

You've been very open about your childhood in Walsall, running around being a bit of a troublemaker. How do you think your life might have played out differently if you hadn't been apprehended by that chap whose trilby you stole? Do you think that moment turned your life around?

I absolutely do, I think it really did change my life. I don't want to say I lacked discipline, but I guess I did a little bit. Like any child, you know what you can get away with with your parents; you can push them to the limits and do whatever you want. But this was the first time… This guy really took control of me and took no bullshit and put me in my box, and I realised that's where I needed to be. I needed to learn discipline, and this guy became one of the most influential people in my life after my father. By rights he should've given me a good hiding, and that's kind of what I was expecting, but he didn't. I don't know this, but I think he had a similar life to me, and somebody had given him a chance. He gave me a chance, and although I was still getting into trouble, I always remembered the lessons this guy taught me. From that moment I gravitated towards older people, because I realised, even at the age of nine, they've been through the mill already. They've done the relationships, built their finances, been through trouble. So I knew I was learning things. Had he not put me in the right direction I probably wouldn't be speaking to you now. The way I was going, I was getting into a lot of trouble. I was in juvenile court at the age of 11, I was getting into gang fights, all sorts of trouble. Getting into boxing stopped me going further than I would have gone.



So it was a really integral moment then?

Yeah. When I wrote my book I went back to my street and I remembered all the kids I'd grown up with, the kids I used to fight with. I'd ask, 'Where's Kelvin, where's Vass?' Both dead. One had been shot, one had been stabbed. I was destined for the same journey.

You left school at 13, but you liked to return for football training. You were also an extremely capable boxer who once defeated the Welsh champion. Do you think you could have gone pro in either one of those?

I probably couldn't have in football, but with the boxing, yes, I could definitely have turned professional in boxing. When I joined the Army I wasn't allowed to box for the Paras because my standard was too high compared to the novice inter-company boxers, so I trained the team. There was a guy there, an older guy from London who'd been to the Falklands and who was massive on his boxing, and he said to me, 'Look, if you want to get out, leave the military, I can get you into the top gyms in London and get you turned pro.' I really thought about it for a short while but then I thought, 'No, this is where I need to be, in the military.'

So your next step after school was the cadets. How long did it take you to realise that the military was the place for you?

This is where I met the other influential person in my life, a guy called Mac Gaunt. He's one of the best blokes I've ever met. He's responsible for putting about 100 kids in the West Midlands through the military cadet training and helping them to get into either



Billy receives the award for the champion recruit upon passing selection for the Paras

the military or jobs. Two of his sons went into the military: one served in the Falklands, one was a sergeant major and beyond with the [Grenadier] Guards. Again, a no-bullshit guy. He took no nonsense. Stand there, do this, do that. And I thought, 'OK, I'm not going to mess around with this guy.' I started to understand respect and discipline. Everything I was learning made sense to me. I thought I could use first aid, I can learn how to navigate, I can learn how to use a weapon, I can see why I need to be fit. It was all making sense to me. Also, even as a young kid, you used to see guys who'd done their time in the cadets and joined the military come back and visit the unit and they just looked smart, disciplined, always had money. We all looked up to them, and I thought, 'That's what I want to be.'

You were in a fight at 15 in which you were stabbed, and you also later fell into a vat of caustic soda while you were working the night shift in a factory. I can't even begin to imagine how scary that must be, or how painful, but do you think coming through those experiences gave you the strength and belief to go on and achieve what you did?

Yes, I think so. You don't appreciate what you've got until it's almost taken away from you, and on the two occasions you've just mentioned – there's probably more – my life was nearly taken. That's when I realised what is important to me: doing the right thing, being around family and trying to make yourself somebody people are going to respect, and give something back. But I still pushed the limits. I remember when I got stabbed I went through a range of emotions in about five minutes as I was crawling back to the house. I was angry, I was going to get revenge, and then it was, 'Oh my god, what am I doing?' Then I start feeling light and I'm thinking to myself, 'I'm going to die, I'm going to die. This is it. I'm not going to see my family again.' After that I thought, 'There are more important things in life than trying to be some hard boy with a name for the wrong reasons.' So it gave me the drive and the inspiration. I thought, 'Nothing's really going to kill you unless you do something ridiculous, so go for everything and believe in yourself.' I started to believe in myself. I knew I had to find a new direction, I had to push the barriers. I needed it. I needed to be somewhere and I needed to do something. I wasn't going to let anybody tell me I couldn't do it. There were some things I couldn't do, but from that moment on I just knew that everything I'm going to do now, I'm going to try my hardest. They were difficult moments, but they did spur me on. I realised there was a better way out there. The factory thing was just an accident, but I was lucky to get away with it. I remember saying to myself, 'I've gotten away with it. I'm still here. Keep going.'

Before you applied for the Paras did you ever consider going into a different branch of the military?

Funnily enough, I was in the Marines Cadets, and I was doing really well – I got to cadet sergeant major. I went up to Arbroath after they [British soldiers] had just come back from the Falklands and I met all the Marines. Then I was just about to leave to join up as a junior leader before I had the accident and all the cadets that had been before me who'd been to the Falklands came back; some from Signals, some from the Marines, some from the Paras, some from the Engineers. They were all there at this party and I watched them all and I listened to all their stories. I was still a bit confused about where I wanted to go. It would have made sense to go to the Marines, because I knew all that stuff. But in the group of people at the party was a paratrooper called Frank, a real good friend of mine now. He got shot on Mount Longdon [during the Falklands campaign] and he was all bandaged and plastered up. I listened to his story and it just suited me. It was raw. It was more of a case of 'get on and do it'. So it happened [being shot] but let's move on and go again. That was his drive. You'd think once you've been shot you wouldn't want to risk it again, but he couldn't wait to get back out there. I thought, 'I've got that drive, that's where I want to go.' That's what influenced me to go into the Parachute Regiment.

When I went into the careers office I said I want to go into the Parachute Regiment and they said, 'You need to consider something else because you're too light.' We went to the gym and the guys all going for the Parachute Regiment got given a band. There was a band on the table, and they weren't going to put me in that group, so I just got the band, put it on and went and sat with that group. And the next thing they know, I've done the pull-ups, I've done the run, and they [the instructors] call out the five names for the Paras and there are six of us. They said, 'Who are you?' I said, 'Billingham.' 'Right, OK', and that was it, they left me in that group.

You joined up as the champion recruit, with only seven out of 70 originals making it. How do you keep going in that sort of environment? Did you ever have a moment where you thought, 'I just can't do this'?

I had a lot of moments, I ain't going to lie. I remember standing on the square and I was just over eight and a half stone because I'd been boxing all my life. I was the skinniest there, and I looked down the line and everybody had moustaches, tattoos, big arms and muscles and hairy chests, and I was like, 'What the fuck have I done?' I've stepped into a man's world that I'm not ready for. But what happened was, as the days went by, 70 became 60, became 50, and I'm still there. It gave me strength – I started believing in myself. We used to get up every morning and go on a run, and I'd be somewhere in the middle, or near the front, and I'd be thinking to myself – and you never knew how far you were going to run – 'This is horrendous.' I thought, 'Maybe if I just trip and pretend I've hurt myself I could get a medical discharge.' That was the devil on one side of my head, then the angel's going, 'No chance, you need to be at the front, get your arse moving.' So I always had these moments of questioning myself and doubting myself, thinking, 'I don't know if I can do this.'

But what I did, and I've done this throughout my life when I'm doing anything challenging, is break it down into time. I knew it was a six-month course – if I want to pass I've got to be here for six months. So I thought I'll take it month by month. After about week one I was taking it week by week. By week two I took it day by day. And then by week three or four, probably like everybody else, I'd get up and think, 'Let's see how today goes. Take it day by day now, and if I'm still here at the end of the day it's a bonus.' You had good days and bad days.

I always kept saying to myself that I didn't want to go back to the lifestyle that I had. I've got to do this. That was a massive drive. I've got to prove to my family that I'm somebody, I've got to prove to myself that I'm worthy of something. It was hard. It was really hard, especially as a young kid now in a man's world. Don't forget, everybody had just come back from the Falklands. These were all veterans, they don't want to deal with bullshit kids who've got too much to say, which I was, or I thought I was. So it was difficult, and like I said, I had the devil and the angel every day playing games with me: 'This is gonna get too hard'; 'No, I'm gonna keep going.' I used to say to myself that it's a passage of time. Before I know it this day's over. It's history. It's done. And that's still right to this day. Just get it done. Every step going forward is a step closer to finishing that day, that event, whatever it may be.

Midway through it I really did start to grow in confidence. I wouldn't say I got cocky. What



A heavily loaded (and armed) Billy on one of several tours of the Middle East

"EVERYBODY WANTS TO BE A GANGSTER UNTIL IT COMES TO DOING GANGSTER STUFF"



Billy photographed as a proud member of the Regiment

really helped me was all the cadet stuff that I'd learnt. It was the same, but adding it to a grown-up world now, with a few changes and different weapons. A lot of the skills I learned in cadets put me ahead of a lot of people. But yeah, it was day to day a case of, 'How much more of this can I take?' It was winter, lying in Brecon [the Brecon Beacons in Wales] in -10, freezing, holding onto these weapons, shaking like a pissing dog. It was horrendous.

It sounds it!

Looking back, it was great. At the time it wasn't so great [laughs].

Shortly after that you were going from -10 to the jungles of Central America. What would you say was the hardest part? It must have been a shock to the system...

Oh absolutely. I'd never really been out of Walsall. The furthest I went was London to have a medical for the Army because I'd had a broken leg as a kid. I'd never been on a plane before. The first time I was on a plane I was getting thrown out of it. Then all of a sudden I end up in this country – Belize in Central America. I remember ringing my mum when I got told I was going to 3 Para [3rd Battalion, Parachute Regiment], and all I could think was Central America – America! Sun, sea, sand, chicks – this is gonna be awesome! I said to my mum, 'I'm going to Belize', and she said, 'It's a jungle, you clown!'

When I got there, as tough as I thought I was, I started to feel homesick. I was miles away from home with people I didn't really know. It was going to be a tough world. I got there and the Falklands veterans didn't really have time for me, so that was hard. I wanted to settle into their world.

The only jungle I'd seen was in *Tarzan*, so that's what I was expecting. But you get in there and it's not like that at all. The noise was horrendous. Everything screaming around you, it was deafening, and so claustrophobic. There are literally trees everywhere. I was thinking, 'I don't even know where I am. How am I going to navigate? If I turn right here I'm going to get lost forever.' It was intimidating. It was really frightening. At the time there was a little bit of trouble with Guatemala coming over the border, and we were actually carrying live rounds for the first time. There was the possibility that you could end up in a gunfight. So there was a lot going on. But as the hours and days went by I settled into it. Towards the end of my first jungle patrol it had become therapeutic to me. I was now used to the noise. The noise helped me relax and made me feel good. The smells. I just got used to it. I didn't mind being sweaty, covered in leeches, stinking of piss. Within a week or so I didn't want to come out of the jungle. I absolutely loved it, and it's been my favourite place ever since. I ended up as the sergeant major of the Jungle [Warfare] School out in Brunei. When I was there I was in the jungle for eight or nine months at a time.

When you're in a situation like that, where it's claustrophobic and there's a very real chance of a gunfight, do you get used to that? To constantly being alert? Or are you always looking over your shoulder at any little noise?

Yeah, you are. You're looking for the enemy threat, you're looking for animal threats. You become attuned to the environment and you notice the unusual. All the skill sets I learnt in the jungle I carried on through life, into bodyguarding. You can smell a problem. People will say, 'How did you know how to [sniff out danger] when you've got thousands of people in front of you?' But if thousands of people have come to see Angelina Jolie they're all coming to smile, and if all of a sudden in a crowd of smiling teeth and faces you've got one looking like thunder, there's my problem straight away.

Going back to the jungle, you're looking for the thing that's unusual, the thing that's moving out the corner of your eye. 'Right, OK, that doesn't look quite right. I'll give that a wide berth, get round that.' But yeah, you learn those skills there and take them on through life.

When I'm out my head's all over the place – not because I feel threatened; it's just natural to me. I look for the unusual. What's different? And I like to people watch. You can sense when something ain't right, and it comes from those days of being in the jungle. When we first got off the helicopters and started moving the jungle was alive, screaming and shouting. Then it settled down. It's still loud, but it's settling right down, so you get used to the volumes. So when you're lying around waiting or in an ambush you knew when somebody was moving, because the animals, their volume would step up a gear. They don't do that with other animals; they do that with humans. Then you knew something was happening.

Can you remember how you felt when you first experienced real-life combat?

I guess it was in Northern Ireland with the Parachute Regiment. No, in fact we went to Cyprus in '86. I'd been in the Army for three years, we'd done Belize, and this was meant to be a UN, laid-back tour. What happens? I think two days after we get there the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization], a terrorist organisation, attack Akrotiri [the largest RAF base outside of Britain at the time], they shoot somebody just on the road outside – everything went crazy. So it turned into a combat zone. There was live terrorist stuff going on, attacking the military. Although



"THE JUNGLE WAS ABSOLUTELY HORRENDOUS. IT'S LIKE BEING IN A SAUNA WITH A HOUSE ON YOUR BACK AND SOMEONE SMACKING YOU IN THE FACE EVERY TWO MINUTES WITH STICKS AND LEAVES"

“WHEN SHIT WENT DOWN, SOME PEOPLE FROM TRAINING DIDN’T QUITE STEP UP TO THE MARK”

I didn’t come face to face with it at that stage, it was combat, and shit was going down. There were bombings and killings and it was happening right around us. I was excited by it. ‘I want this – this is what I’ve come for. Let me see how I feel about this.’ I never felt scared. I didn’t feel Johnny Rambo-ish. I thought, ‘This is good, this is what I’m here to do. Let me see what I can add to this.’ We never really got any contacts or fights then.

But then we went to Northern Ireland, and we had a few people killed. We got shot at, we got bombed, we had joyriders, so that was a whole new world again. That was kind of the second layer of combat for me. Again, it didn’t bother me. That’s why I was there. I said to myself, ‘You’ve got to stay switched on, but you’ve also got to stay lucky. There’s no point panicking and worrying about it. Just do your job.’

Then Bosnia. Bosnia was a different kettle of fish. We did get in some scraps. And again I loved it. Then the Gulf War in Iraq… In the cold light of day when you’ve walked out of a situation – and I’ve walked out of many that I shouldn’t have – you’d have a beer and calm down and then you’d go, ‘Fucking hell, what the hell was that about?’ But then it’s done. ‘No worries. Let’s go again.’

In the moment of being face to face with a threat, I don’t know, I guess the great training I had from the depot to where I got to gave me all the tools, all the knowledge… I just had to get on and do it. And I did it. It never worried me.

There’s times when you’re outnumbered and you’re thinking, ‘How the hell are we going to get through this? Right, let’s think about this…’ And you just come out with an idea and a plan. Let’s go.

That just sounds incredible, because you hear stories throughout history of people who had all the best training and all the greatest preparation and then just froze in the moment. So the fact that you could just keep cool and carry on...

It’s true. I mean, it’s easy to judge, but some people disappointed me. Some of the people from training, when shit went down, didn’t quite step up to the mark. I was expecting a bit more. And then the little quiet kid who wasn’t bullied but was never one of the main players, he’s right at your side. Everybody has a different reaction to what is happening in front of them. And everybody who thought they were tough… everybody wants to be a gangster until it comes to doing gangster stuff.

There are always some surprises. There were people who were there all the way through it until we really got tested and they kind of let the side down a little bit. My experience of it was that I embraced it: ‘I’ve been given the tools – now use them.’ And I did.



Billy stands at the front of a Jackal armoured vehicle alongside two comrades



That inner steel must have been key when you were thinking about applying for the SAS. What inspired you to apply and what was the hardest part of the process?

Well, there’s a number of things really. I always say when I talk about this, imagine being a footballer. You start off in the Sunday League and you want to be professional, so you want to go to the next league up. So that’s where you’re going to go. And then you get into the third division and then you want to get to the Premier League. I knew from being in the military and going around the world working with different units all over the place that the best in the world, without a shadow of a doubt, was the SAS. No two ways about it, and I just thought, ‘I want to be part of that, I want to go to that next level.’ Parachute Regiment sergeant, fantastic – brilliant unit, absolutely brilliant. But I knew the Regiment [the SAS] was better because of the way they work. Smaller units, working at a strategic level as opposed to a big unit level, and I thought that’s where I want to go. That’s the next challenge for me. Plus I had quite a few friends of mine who had gone on to join the Regiment and I’d bump into them once in a blue moon. They never really told you what they did but you knew they were up to some good stuff, and I thought, ‘I’ve got to have a piece of that.’

So I decided I was going for selection, and I remember asking guys that had been before, getting tips. People all had their own ideas, but at the end of the day you’ve got to go and do it.

One of the best things somebody said to me was, ‘It doesn’t matter what we tell you, you can go and walk the routes, you’ve still got to do it.’

The best bit of advice [chuckles] that one of my best mates gave me was, ‘Listen, never give up on your beer fitness.’ I went, ‘What?’ He said, ‘What happens when people go on selection is they change their diet, they don’t drink, and then all of a sudden they’re not the person they were and they end up falling over three days later. Just be yourself. If you go out drinking, then go and drink.’

So I went off and did selection. I think it was 183 that started, and seven of us finished. Might have been more than that, I can’t remember. It was a lot. It was big back in the day, a lot of people going for selection. I had in my head – bearing in mind now I’d already been to the jungle – I know part of selection is going to the jungle, so I kind of threw that to the side. If I can get to the jungle I’ll be fine. I’ve done the jungle already, two or three times now with the Parachute Regiment. That’s easy. The hardest part for me is going to be the hills phase, getting over the mountains and test week. I was actually wrong, but I didn’t realise it.

I got through test week and I did really well. I was one of the fastest runners. Like for everybody else, it got really hard towards the end, and by the time I got to endurance [a phase in the selection process] my knees were the size of my waist. But I kept going. I did the hills, and it was horrendous, and it is horrendous, and there weren’t many of us left by the end of it. I thought, ‘Oh great, all I’ve got to do now is keep my nose clean and just get on with it. Then we got to the jungle. Was I in for a fucking shock! Jesus! The jungle was absolutely horrendous, because it’s physically and mentally challenging from day one. You’re being watched all the time. You

don't get any encouragement. You don't get discouraged. So you don't really know where you stand. It's like being in a sauna with a house on your back and someone smacking you in the face every two minutes with sticks and leaves. It was horrendous.

You're playing games with yourself. 'Did I do something wrong there? Did the DS [Directing Staff] see that?' You start beating yourself up. And the deprivation. You think you're going to get 12 hours' sleep – you don't. Once it gets dark you've got reports to write, you've got to clean all your scabs and cuts, because if you don't, you'll get infected. It's exhausting. At the end there was hardly anybody left.

Jumping forward, I realised when I became a DS for selection for the SAS I didn't even look at people on the hills. We're not interested. That's just a phasing out. The chaff will go. The weak will go. Some good people will go, of course, but that's the way it is. Then we end up with this number, then when we get them into the jungle, that's when selection starts for us as a DS. This is what we're looking for. Now I can see who you really are. It's not about soldiering – there's nothing special about the soldiering. The jungle is the place where they really look at you, peel you back – not break you, *peel you back*. Who are you? Where can you go? Are you a team player? Can you play on your own? Can you think outside the box? Are you willing to go that bit further? As a DS I learned that, and I remember looking back and thinking, 'Fucking hell, no wonder I felt the way I did.'

So the hardest part, without a shadow of a doubt, was the jungle. Interrogation wasn't pleasant either, I wouldn't like to do that ever again.

What is it that you think makes the SAS the best? Compared to American units you don't have all the big fancy toys, you don't have quite what they have behind them in terms of investment, but you do hear time and again that the SAS is the top of the top.

We are a lot smaller, you're right. We don't have all the tools and all the play kit, so we make do with it. We improvise better. We are, I feel, a little bit harder. We'll find a way to do it, we won't find an excuse and we won't go, 'We haven't got the kit, the technology, we're not doing it.' We go, 'OK, how else can we do it? Well, instead of now flying 100 kilometres, we're going to walk.' A lot of people would say, 'Fuck that, I'm not doing that', but we do it. We train hard. We've got a lot of experience. I think lessons learned is the key thing. Everything we've learned through the years, from Northern Ireland, the Gulf War, we remember it and add that to everything as we go forward.

From the Parachute Regiment days, all those little skills – listening, learning, smelling – you carry it through every little operation and place you go. We're good at that, the Brits are good at that. We're pretty robust, hard people. We don't have the luxuries and we never rely on luxuries. We get on with it. We work on results, not excuses, and that's the mentality of who we are and that's what makes the SAS better.

You've been in Bosnia catching war criminals, you've used yourself as bait to catch an IRA sniper, you've rescued hostages. You've been in numerous high-pressure scenarios. How do you remain calm and collected in a situation where it's not just your life but several innocent people's lives on the line? That must be an incredible pressure.

It is a lot of pressure but you've just got to take a breath, focus. 'What am I here to do? I've got everything I need, so there's no point having a meltdown and starting to panic.' I just go, 'OK, we're here, we're in this situation. I can't change it – I can do something about it.' There's always an option. It might not be a good option, but there is another option to lying down here and waiting for fate. Let's go and find it.

These things just go through my head pretty rapidly. Again, it's based on all the training and experiences we've had. 'We're here, we can't change it, stay calm.' I've always been able to do that. I just take a breath, think about it. 'OK, let's try this, let's do that.' Remain flexible. Be ready to change. Look for other opportunities, whatever that may be on a battlefield, in a fight, on a surveillance task – whatever it might be, come up with a solution.

After you finished your service in the SAS you went into bodyguard work, and you protected some really high-profile clients. Did you enjoy it, and what would you say was the hardest part about it?

I loved it. The hardest part was the trust, honesty and integrity, which is massive. What I found was, working with the clients, and obviously you're their PPO [Personal Protection Officer], their right-hand person, you live with them, you organise everything, I couldn't trust the team around me. A lot of the time you're moving around, and you end up with a driver or somebody else helping you that you don't know. It was hard. I couldn't trust them. I had to do everything myself.

The recces [reconnaissance] I'd have to go out and do. I'd set up a lot of decoys along the way. To test the driver I'd tell them, 'Tomorrow morning, we're going to go and do this', but actually we weren't going to do that, we were going somewhere else. We'd jump in the car and he'd go to take us there and I'd say, 'We're not going there, we're going here.' So what I'd do is dispatch another driver down to where I told him we were going to go. He gets down there, and I say, 'What's down there?' He'd say, 'There's loads of paparazzi.' 'Oh really?'

Clever!

I just couldn't trust them, because I didn't know them. At the end of the day, the buck stops with you. If something goes wrong, it's your fault. The hardest part was not being able to trust people. And you had to work long hours. If your client's working 16 hours, you're working 18 hours, because once they are settled and done then you go and do all the recces and make sure the cars are ready, the people are ready. It's a lot of work.

You can't always take the full entourage with you, it's just not practical, so you have to rely on hotel security for some things, you have to rely on drivers from some company in another country. And they're like, 'Oh my god, I'm driving Angelina Jolie' and their ears are this big, they're listening to all the conversations. And then all of a sudden they all think they're Formula 1 drivers. So you're like, 'Fucking slow down!' because they are trying to impress.

Now, you're very well known outside of your active service as an instructor on *Who Dares Wins*. How did you get into being part of the show?

I'd done a programme some years before called *Unbreakable*, which was again taking people and

"AS A BODYGUARD, I COULDN'T TRUST THE TEAM AROUND ME. I HAD TO DO EVERYTHING MYSELF"





Billy executed numerous operations overseas and has trained troops in the Middle East, Africa and South America

challenging them, see if you can break them. Of course, I broke them. I didn't like it. Then over the years doing bodyguarding I got asked would I come and do this or that and I wasn't interested. Then one day a good friend of mine, who I took through selection, left the Regiment and got involved in some TV, he says, 'Hey, we're putting this programme together called *SAS: Who Dares Wins*.' As soon as he said that I said, 'I'm not interested, mate.' There'd been some cheesy stuff about the Regiment, some stupid things about, and I thought, 'I don't want to be a part of that.' Anyway, so I left it, and that programme started being put together, with the team as it was then. And then I was approached again, to do something with Freddie Flintoff. It was *Special Forces: Ultimate Hell Week*. It was a bunch of people being put through kind of a selection thing. It was two days with the SAS, two days with Spetsnaz. I thought, 'That might be all right. And it's Freddie Flintoff. You know what, I'll do that.'

Anyway, long story short, the day we were meant to start filming I'd just got back from a bodyguarding job in Nigeria, and I was not well. I ended up in hospital that night. I didn't do the show, which was a blessing in disguise. I had malaria for the fourth time. Both shows went out, and I started to hear through the grapevine that SAS one [series one of *Who Dares Wins*] went really well. People really enjoyed it; it wasn't quite what people thought it would be and it was all right. I got hounded before the second one by one of the producers to come on the show. He kept saying, 'We really want you on the show.' I said, 'You don't even know me.' But he kept ringing and I thought, 'Fucking hell.' I was back in Hereford, and I said, 'I'm not coming up to London.' He said, 'Fine, I'll come to Hereford.' He jumps in the car and turns up in Hereford three hours later. So we talked about the show, and he asked me to have a look at it and tell them what I think. So I was on a bodyguarding job and I was bored and I watched it, and I thought, 'This ain't as bad as I thought.' I know what I can offer to this, I've got experience, I've got a lot of time served. It's not about us [the Directing Staff], we're there for some authenticity, and I thought, 'I've got plenty of that.' So that's why I did it.

Away from your career in TV and touring you've done an awful lot of charity work, particularly in Haiti. What inspired you to do that?

I've always been a charitable person, and at the time we had a company called Sabre International, which was a security company out in Iraq. It was all ex-Regiment guys running it. It was a very successful company, and we worked off the principles that we'd learned in the Regiment. The complete ethos. It's about hearts and minds and working with the right people and getting things done. Anyway, while I was out in Iraq we had a massive charity thing there – we built roads, we built schools, which was the right thing to do. Then the earthquake happened in Haiti. I watched it on the TV and thought, 'Wow.' I remember talking to my business partner and asking him, 'Should we do something?' and he said, 'Yeah, we should.' We thought we'd go out to Haiti and see what we could do. Don't send money because it's corrupt, and we knew about the corruption. So I went out to Haiti and saw the devastation, and bearing in mind I've been to wars all over the place, I've seen death, but not like this. 150,000 people killed, buildings down – it was horrendous. It was like Bosnia on steroids, it was mental. We decided what we'll do is donate a hospital: bring it, build it, all that. It turned out that the hospital then became a school for thousands of kids and a little clinic that Sean Penn took on and ran. So it worked out pretty well.

That's really remarkable.

I'm still doing it now, still putting the kids through school, then through job training and then my wife gives them a job. We've kept that going for 11 years now, and I'm also an ambassador for Phoenix Heroes, an amazing veterans charity, and also an ambassador for the Royal British Legion Tommy Club. A lot of charity stuff, which is what we should be doing. Giving back.

As someone who served in Afghanistan, what's your take on the recent situation there and the withdrawal? Does it frustrate you?

What a mess. It absolutely frustrates me. Disgusting. I think it's terrible, what we've done. The way it's happened. I think the US administration has got a lot to answer for. He's [President Joe Biden] basically turned his back on everybody, including us, did a deal with the Taliban and included the Afghan Government. You've just now armed the biggest terrorist group in the world, there's no two ways about it. They've got more helicopters and equipment than we have. It's absolutely terrible, and I just feel for all the people who wanted a normal life and helped the coalition. I hate to think what's going on there.

I was fortunate enough to get two families out that I know from my time working out there, and that makes me happy, but I'm so sad about the way this was done. The Americans basically turned their backs on 41 countries. It just… I can't even talk about it. It drives me fucking insane. I just feel so sad about what these poor people are going through.

With the endless breakthroughs in technology, robotics and artificial intelligence, did you ever experience anything in your time in the SAS where new technologies were coming in and changing the way operations were conducted?

Yeah, technology is always going to keep getting bigger, but it's never going to replace a human. You're always going to have to have feet on the ground, probably to a lesser capacity. There will come a day when you'll have certain robots doing aggressive actions and this sort of stuff, but how long down the line that'll be… We've now got drones doing a lot of stuff that we'd do. I mean, the introduction of drones, the very earliest phase, was what we saw and we thought, 'Wow, where's this going?' Then there was the replacement of some surveillance stuff, because you now had computers and phones, that technical side was coming into play, and I'm sure it's massively enhanced now. So yeah, we saw the change, and it's only going to get bigger. All working off satellites, phones, the internet – warfare is definitely cyber to a massive degree. But there'll never be a complete replacement for the guy on the ground, and you'll always fall back to basics.

Images: Kindly supplied by Gordon Poole Agency

THE HUNT FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN

INSIDE THE DECADE-LONG SEARCH FOR THE AL-QAEDA MASTERMIND OF 9/11, FROM THE MOUNTAINS OF AFGHANISTAN TO THE DUSTY STREETS OF ABBOTTABAD, PAKISTAN



After the 9/11 attacks, Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden and his Al-Qaeda organisation were swiftly identified as the prime suspects. The Taliban, an extremist Islamic movement who governed Afghanistan, had given Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda shelter in exchange for their assistance during the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s and later during the bloody Afghan Civil War of the 1990s. The United States gave the Taliban an ultimatum to give up Bin Laden or suffer severe consequences. The request was ignored, so in October 2001 NATO air forces attacked Afghanistan.

However, by the time the bombing started, a CIA team codenamed Jawbreaker had already been in the country for two weeks. They had specific instructions: 'bring back the head of Bin Laden'. Their target had been sighted in Khost around the day of the 9/11 attacks but went to ground knowing that some form of US retaliation was likely. By November, with the Northern Alliance and US special operations forces closing in, Bin Laden relocated to Kabul. From there he and his number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri, fled to Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan.



President Obama and other officials gather in the White House Situation Room to watch the siege of Bin Laden's compound, 1 May 2011

As the Taliban government rapidly fell, Bin Laden retreated to the Spin Ghar ('White Mountain') Range and specifically Tora Bora ('Black Cave'). The terrorist leader was intimately familiar with the area as it had been a key mujahideen logistics hub during the Soviet–Afghan War. A US report described Tora Bora as "a collection of narrow valleys, snow-covered ridgelines and jagged peaks reaching 14,000 feet". The CIA followed.

In late November 2001, a joint CIA and military special operations team ventured into the inhospitable region and began reporting on significant numbers of foreign fighters – probably Al-Qaeda – in the region. Soon this small team were guiding in American air strikes. They were reinforced by a US Army Special Forces ('Green Beret') detachment and by locally recruited Afghan militia paid for by the CIA. These militia were of dubious quality and questionable loyalty. However, under orders from the Pentagon, the US military and CIA were to keep a 'light footprint'.

THE BLACK CAVE

Because of increasing intelligence indicating the presence of Al-Qaeda High Value Targets (HVTs), a squadron from the elite Delta Force was also inserted into the fight at Tora Bora. On numerous occasions the Delta operators managed to close in on Al-Qaeda remnants believed to be defending Bin Laden himself but were forced to withdraw under orders to let the Afghans do the fighting. These local militia negotiated a truce with the Al-Qaeda forces after which the foreign fighters would supposedly surrender to the Afghans and their US allies. Not surprisingly, this was a deception designed to enable the Al-Qaeda leadership to slip away, heading for Pakistan.

Why the mountain passes into Pakistan were not sealed is a bitterly contentious issue to this day. Both the Delta and CIA commanders requested the passes be mined and Army Rangers inserted into man-blocking positions but their calls fell on deaf ears and Bin Laden escaped the noose and disappeared. Gary Bernsten, commander of the CIA Jawbreaker



Air strikes in the Tora Bora mountains



HVT-1 himself: Osama bin Laden



"IF WE WERE GOING TO EMBARK ON ANY KIND OF ASSAULT ON THIS COMPOUND... WE HAD TO MAKE DARN SURE THAT WE KNEW WHAT WE WERE TALKING ABOUT"

"WHY THE MOUNTAIN PASSES INTO PAKISTAN WERE NOT SEALED IS A BITTERLY CONTENTIOUS ISSUE TO THIS DAY"

team commented several years later, "We could have ended it all there".

From Tora Bora, Bin Laden, known as HVT-1 to the CIA, spent time in Peshawar and the notorious Swat Valley before relocating to a compound his faithful personal courier, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, had commissioned to be built in the northern Pakistani city of Abbottabad. Abbottabad is also the home of the Pakistan Military Academy, a fact that led some observers to question later Pakistani denials about the whereabouts of Bin Laden.

The CIA and the military's Joint Special Operations Command, or JSOC, both felt that their target was in Pakistan, specifically sheltering in the Waziristan tribal areas, a safe haven for Al-Qaeda and Taliban fleeing US operations in Afghanistan.

JSOC infiltrated a small team that worked undercover alongside the Pakistani Special Services Group hunting Al-Qaeda in the region. The Americans wore Pakistani uniforms to blend in but were constantly under the watchful eye of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), who



An Afghan mujahedin watches US bombings



EYEWITNESS JOHN MCPHEE

Along with being both a former Ranger and Green Beret, John 'Shrek' McPhee is a veteran of America's most elite fighting unit; 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta, better known as Delta Force. McPhee was part of a small Delta unit that entered the mountains of Tora Bora in December 2001 to hunt Osama bin Laden.

What was your mission in Tora Bora?
"Close the distance, find, fix and kill Bin Laden."

What was the quality of the locally recruited Afghan militia the CIA had recruited to fight alongside you?
"They completely sucked, [they] were ineffective and lacked the will to fight, but that was our option at the time. We had to make do with what we had."

"IT TOOK US TEN GUYS IN TEN DAYS TO DO WHAT THE RUSSIANS COULDN'T DO IN TEN YEARS"

Do you think the restrictions placed upon your unit by the Pentagon actively stymied your chances of killing bin Laden?
"I don't think what Rumsfeld and Bush had in mind to kill OBL was an acceptable risk to the Pentagon. The Pentagon generals were extremely risk adverse and lacked the will to see the mission through, to include (JSOC commander) Dell Dailey."

Given the opportunity to operate unilaterally away from the duplicitous militias and given the resources to seal the mountain passes into Pakistan, could your unit have killed or captured him?
"Yes, not only could we have bagged him but we failed because of our chain of command. It took us ten guys in ten days to do what the Russians couldn't do in ten years. We could have killed OBL in the first days of the war."

***Below:** The US was involved in airstrikes on Tora Bora during late 2001*





US military psy-ops leaflets

ensured that they knew the Americans' every single move.

The CIA also infiltrated its own special operators into Pakistan using contractors assigned to the Special Activities Division to conduct human intelligence gathering, looking for the connection that would lead them to the Saudi terrorist. These operators were also monitored by ISI but the CIA had a long history in Pakistan and, working alongside British intelligence, the Agency had developed a significant array of assets at all levels of Pakistani society.

Into 2002, the US military remained focused on capturing or killing HVT-1. SEAL Team 6 maintained a troop of operators based at Bagram Air Base specifically tasked with going after Bin Laden should the Pentagon receive actionable intelligence on his location. JSOC commander, General Stanley McChrystal, set a high standard for launch, however – he wanted an 80 per cent surety before he would authorise any such mission into Pakistan.

The team, known as the 'Bin Laden package', developed an operational protocol should Bin Laden be found. Up to a dozen operators would fly along the Pakistani border in a modified C-130 Hercules called a Combat Talon before exiting the aircraft at 25,000 feet and conducting a HAHO or High Altitude, High Opening parachute jump. Their steerable parachutes meant they could jump while still in Afghan airspace but glide up to 18 miles inside Pakistani territory.

Surveillance continued with JSOC flying customised Beechcrafts along the border, listening for specific mobile phone numbers known to be associated with Al-Qaeda leadership. Other JSOC signals intelligence personnel operated outside of the US embassy in Islamabad but always in concert with a mistrustful ISI.

Their target, and his close associates, were also smart enough to minimise their electronic footprint, using physical couriers and hand-written letters and audiotapes rather than emails and mobile phones. The trail had grown cold and in 2005 Alec Station, the CIA's Bin Laden desk, was controversially shut down although evidence now suggests much of the CIA's efforts were covertly moved to Pakistan.

THE KUWAITI

Intelligence garnered from detainee interrogations, including that of the alleged 20th 9/11 hijacker who had been refused entry to the US but was later captured at Tora Bora, eventually pinpointed a man called Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, the Al-Qaeda name of one Ibrahim Saeed Ahmed, a Kuwaiti national. It took from

"THEIR STEERABLE PARACHUTES MEANT THEY COULD JUMP WHILE STILL IN AFGHAN AIRSPACE BUT GLIDE UP TO 18 MILES INSIDE PAKISTANI TERRITORY"

2002 with the first identification of the possible existence of this high-level Al-Qaeda courier until 2007 before he was finally identified by his real name and his family was traced. From this loose thread the effort to hide the location of Bin Laden slowly began to unravel.

In 2007, JSOC and the CIA developed what they considered the first real actionable intelligence on Bin Laden since Tora Bora. Indeed, Operation Valiant Pursuit would see JSOC return to Tora Bora targeting a high-level Al-Qaeda meeting that might include HVT-1. The scope of the mission widened to include a proposed airstrike by five B-2 Spirit stealth bombers that would pummel the location before the SEALs flew in to gather DNA and recover any bodies. Ultimately, the meeting never occurred and the mission was scrubbed amid suspicions that the ISI may have tipped off the targets.

After Admiral Bill McRaven took over the reins at JSOC in 2008, he advocated for a renewed

TIMELINE

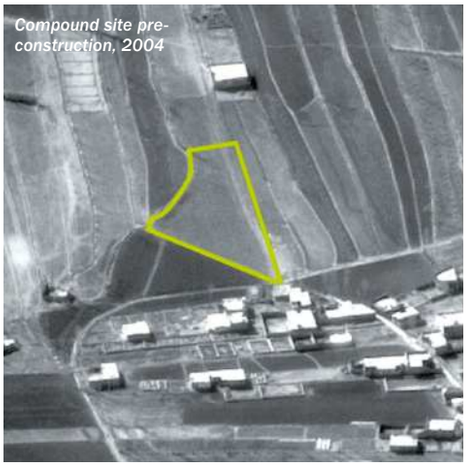
14 DECEMBER 2001
TORA BORA
US signals intelligence captures the last radio transmissions of OBL during the battle of Tora Bora. He narrowly avoids death at the hands of Delta Force and American airpower.

27 DECEMBER 2001
THE TRIBAL LANDS
OBL arrives in Pakistan after escaping from Tora Bora. Based in Peshawar with his wives, he soon relocates to the Swat Valley where he is protected by Al-Qaeda.

JUNE 2005
HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT
OBL and his family move into a specially built compound in Abbottabad, a city north of Islamabad. From here he uses couriers to pass messages to Al-Qaeda.

OCTOBER 2005
ALEC SHUT DOWN
After years of no leads, the CIA close Alec Station, the Agency's Bin Laden unit that since 9/11 had been dedicated solely to the hunt for OBL.

JUNE 2007
THE COURIER
Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti is identified as OBL's likely personal courier and all efforts are made by the NSA to locate al-Kuwaiti through signals intelligence intercepts.



Compound site pre-construction, 2004



Compound site post-construction, 2011





The Bin Laden compound in Abbottabad

"ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS THE DELTA OPERATORS CLOSED IN ON AL-QAEDA REMNANTS BELIEVED TO BE DEFENDING BIN LADEN HIMSELF BUT WERE FORCED TO WITHDRAW UNDER ORDERS TO LET THE AFGHANS DO THE FIGHTING"

JULY 2008
OPERATION VALIANT PURSUIT

The US military plans a large-scale operation against an Al-Qaeda meeting on the Pakistan border thought to include OBL. The mission is eventually called off.

3 SEPTEMBER 2008
OBJECTIVE AX

US Navy SEALs assault a compound in Southern Waziristan, capturing several low-level Al-Qaeda. The political fallout from Pakistan and alleged civilian casualties all but ends operations into Pakistan.

JULY–AUGUST 2010
THE NET CLOSES IN

The CIA – assisted by Pakistani ISI – intercepts the courier's mobile phone and he is eventually physically tracked by CIA operators to a suspect compound in Abbottabad.

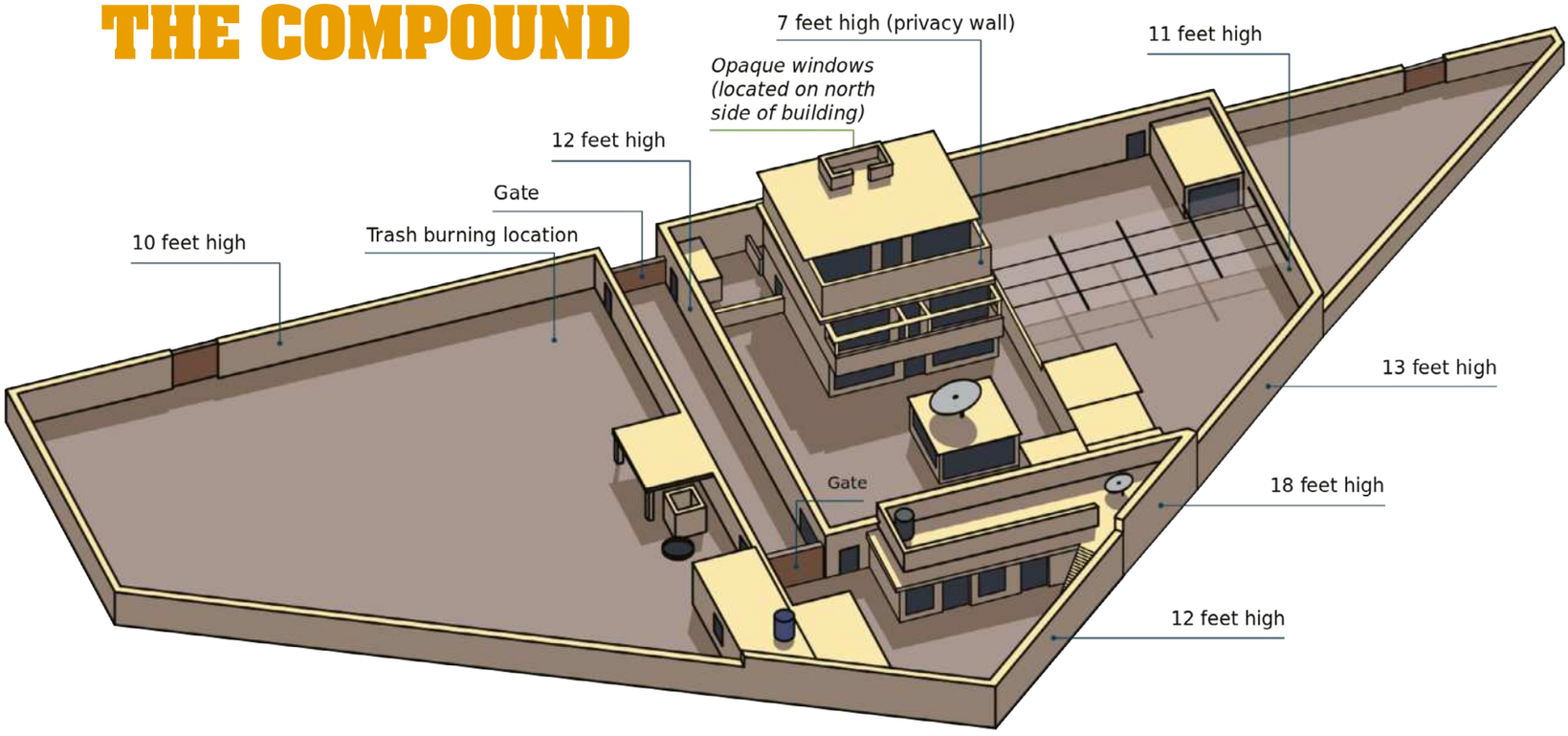
NOVEMBER 2010
INFORMING THE PRESIDENT

CIA Director Leon Panetta tells Obama "we think there is a strong possibility that Bin Laden is in the Abbottabad compound". Planning for an operation begins.

1 MAY 2011
THE END

Operation Neptune Spear successfully locates and kills OBL in Abbottabad. His body is brought back to Afghanistan for identification and is buried at sea the following day.

THE COMPOUND



effort at flushing out Bin Laden from his supposed hiding place in the tribal areas. The first such operation, launched in September 2008, saw SEAL Team 6 enter a suspect compound in South Waziristan, but it ended in political disaster. The fallout from Pakistan convinced the Bush administration that such raids were counter-productive and all plans for similar operations were shelved indefinitely.

It was only after the inauguration of President Barack Obama in 2009 that there was a new focus on the manhunt; "I directed Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA, to make the killing or capture of Bin Laden the top priority of our war against Al-Qaeda, even as we continued our broader efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat his network".

The National Security Agency (NSA) were tasked with scouring the airwaves and internet for any mention of the courier known as al-Kuwaiti, while the CIA, in concert with the ISI, conducted its own telephone tracing on the ground in Pakistan.

ATLANTIC CITY JACKPOT

In 2010, this renewed effort paid dividends with the identification of al-Kuwaiti's mobile phone number. Every call he made was intercepted by the NSA and transcribed by the CIA looking for clues that he was indeed Bin Laden's courier. The CIA began to feel that he was their best chance of finding Bin Laden. In August, an undercover CIA team driving locally procured vehicles followed al-Kuwaiti when he left Peshawar and travelled to Abbottabad.

Al-Kuwaiti led the surveillance team directly to a three-story compound in Abbottabad that was later described to CIA Director Panetta as "a fortress" but one hidden in plain sight. Panetta was intrigued and ordered full 24-hour surveillance of the property from both ground and air. The CIA established a safe house nearby and even employed a Pakistani medical doctor to conduct a vaccination programme in an (unsuccessful) attempt to gain DNA samples to confirm the Bin Laden bloodline.

"THE MOST DANGEROUS PARTS OF ANY OPERATION WOULD BE GETTING INTO THE TARGET UNSEEN AND UNANNOUNCED, AND AFTER COMPLETING THE RAID, GETTING OUT AGAIN"

Drone footage spotted an individual that was soon nicknamed 'the Pacer' who took his or her daily exercise by walking around a vegetable patch in the compound. A tarpaulin covered the area in a possible counter-surveillance measure so the drones and satellites could never get a positive identification. The CIA had established that at least two families connected to al-Kuwaiti lived in the compound and remarkably the property had no telephone or internet access.

All of the evidence, although still largely circumstantial, pointed at an important Al-Qaeda-linked individual residing in the compound. President Obama himself later remarked, "If we were going to embark on any kind of assault on this compound… we had to make darn sure that we knew what we were talking about." An unprecedented surveillance effort was launched and confidence slowly increased that the Abbottabad compound, codenamed 'Atlantic City', was the one.

CIA analysts judged the probability of Bin Laden's presence anywhere between 60 and 80 per cent. President Obama was briefed on a number of options including a drone strike (discounted due to the comparatively small damage it could inflict) or a B-2 stealth bomber strike (conversely discounted due to the probability of collateral damage). All aerial options also had one fatal flaw – only boots on the ground could confirm whether Bin Laden was indeed in the compound. If they were wrong, a special operations raid would also cause less bloodshed than a bomb or missile.

What made the Abbottabad raid unusual was its location in Pakistan – the most dangerous parts of any operation would be getting into the target unannounced, and after completing the raid, getting out again. JSOC planners looked at everything from the typical response times of the Pakistan Air Force to what to do should any of the SEALs be captured.

On 29 April 2011, President Obama made the fateful decision: "It's a go." Finally, SEAL Team 6 would have their chance to go after Bin Laden in a mission suitably entitled Operation Neptune Spear. Admiral McRaven took personal charge, although the SEALs would be under the temporary command of the CIA once they crossed the border due to the requirements of US law. To ensure secrecy the decision was also made to keep the mission from the Pakistanis, who would only be informed once the SEALs were safely back in Afghan airspace.

The mission proved to be a complete success (see page 117), with the most-wanted terrorist in the world shot dead inside his concrete compound while reportedly cowering from his attackers. His body was then flown to the USS Carl Vinson, a US aircraft carrier in the north Arabian sea, where Bin Laden was prepared for burial. The body was then placed in a weighted bag and dropped into the water from the vessel's deck. The exact location remains a secret to this day.

Images: Getty

OPERATION NEPTUNE SPEAR
ABBOTTABAD, PAKISTAN

A SELECT GROUP OF VETERAN SEALS FROM SEAL TEAM 6'S RED SQUADRON WERE CHOSEN BY ADMIRAL MCRAVEN TO CONDUCT THE MISSION. THE SEALS WERE CLEAR THAT THE OPERATION WAS A KILL MISSION AND BIN LADEN WOULD BE SHOT UNLESS HE WAS FOUND WITH HIS HANDS IN THE AIR AND CLEARLY SURRENDERING

To reach the compound the SEALs would fly through Pakistani airspace in specialised stealth Black Hawks called the MH-X, or Stealth Black Hawk. Although able to fly undetected through enemy radar, the experimental helicopters were somewhat unstable and difficult to fly. Each Hawk would carry a dozen operators from the 23 SEALs selected for the mission, along with a CIA interpreter and a SEAL Combat Assault Dog named Cairo. Just before midnight on 1 May 2011, these MH-Xs and their supporting Chinooks lifted off from Jalalabad and headed east toward Abbottabad. US electronic warfare assets blacked out the power grid as the helicopters approached, meaning the SEALs would have the advantage of near complete darkness. One of the MH-Xs ran into trouble as it attempted to hover to allow its complement of SEALs to fast rope into the compound – a unique and dangerous state called 'settling with power' that means a helicopter cannot stay aloft under its own power. Only the skill of the pilots saved the mission from disaster as the MH-X made a hard landing inside the compound walls. Having experienced similar crashes on past missions, the SEALs climbed out and continued with their mission.

The operators swept through the compound, blowing in gates and quickly silencing the minimal resistance they encountered. As one team moved carefully up to the top floor of the main building where the CIA indicated Bin Laden would likely be found, the lead SEAL spotted a head pop out from a doorway. The SEAL fired two rounds from his suppressed HK416 carbine and the head disappeared. Clearing the room, the SEALs then discovered Bin Laden on the floor with a bullet wound through his left eye. As the SEALs began a hasty search for intelligence the news was radioed back to Jalalabad, the Pentagon and the White House Situation Room – "Geronimo EKIA" using the CIA's code name for Bin Laden and declaring him "Enemy Killed-In-Action". Finally, the ten-year search was over in a scant 38-minute operation on the ground in Pakistan.



President Obama tells the nation the news about Bin Laden's death

Bin Laden's body was flown out of Pakistan with the SEALs and formally identified via DNA samples extracted by the operators before being transported to the aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson. He would be buried at sea as Saudi Arabia had refused to receive his body. After being prepared in accustom to Islamic tradition, Bin Laden's body was dropped into the sea. President Obama appeared on national television to announce, "Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda". The largest manhunt in modern history was finally over. The architect of 9/11, Osama Bin Laden, was dead.



USS Carl Vinson



SPECIAL FORCES AROUND THE WORLD

DISCOVER THE ELITE SOLDIERS ENGAGED IN SPECIAL OPS ACROSS THE GLOBE

WORDS: SCOTT REEVES

From *Rambo* and *Black Hawk Down* to *Bravo Two Zero* and Tom Clancy's novels, there are many depictions of special forces in action. However, while most popular accounts focus almost exclusively on the SAS, Navy SEALs and Delta Force, it is a mistake to think that special ops are limited to the militaries of the UK and US.

Generals around the world recognise that small numbers of highly skilled soldiers can have a huge impact on the theatre of war and have created their own bands of stealth warriors. Each nation's special force has their own identity, often forged in the heat of battle. Soldiers consider it an honour to join their unit of choice and fiercely defend its reputation with intense pride, even if a veil of secrecy means most people will never know the details of their service. Join us as we explore the wider world of special forces.

NATIONAL GENDARMERIE INTERVENTION GROUP

YEAR FOUNDED: 1973 ALLEGIANCE: FRANCE

On the evening of Boxing Day 1994, French people sat glued to their television screens as news of a major operation emerged. 30 members of the National Gendarmerie Intervention Group (GIGN) had launched a raid on an Airbus A300, Air France Flight 8969, which had been hijacked in Algeria two days before and was now parked on the tarmac at Marseilles Provence Airport. The aircraft was boarded, all four hijackers were killed and 229 passengers and crew were rescued.

The successful rescue brought the GIGN into the spotlight. Formed in 1973 in response to the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games in 1972, the GIGN are a police tactical response unit designed to deal with hostage situations. Initially comprised of 15 men, it has since grown to around 1,000 men and women trained in hostage extraction, infiltration, reconnaissance, sniping and close protection.

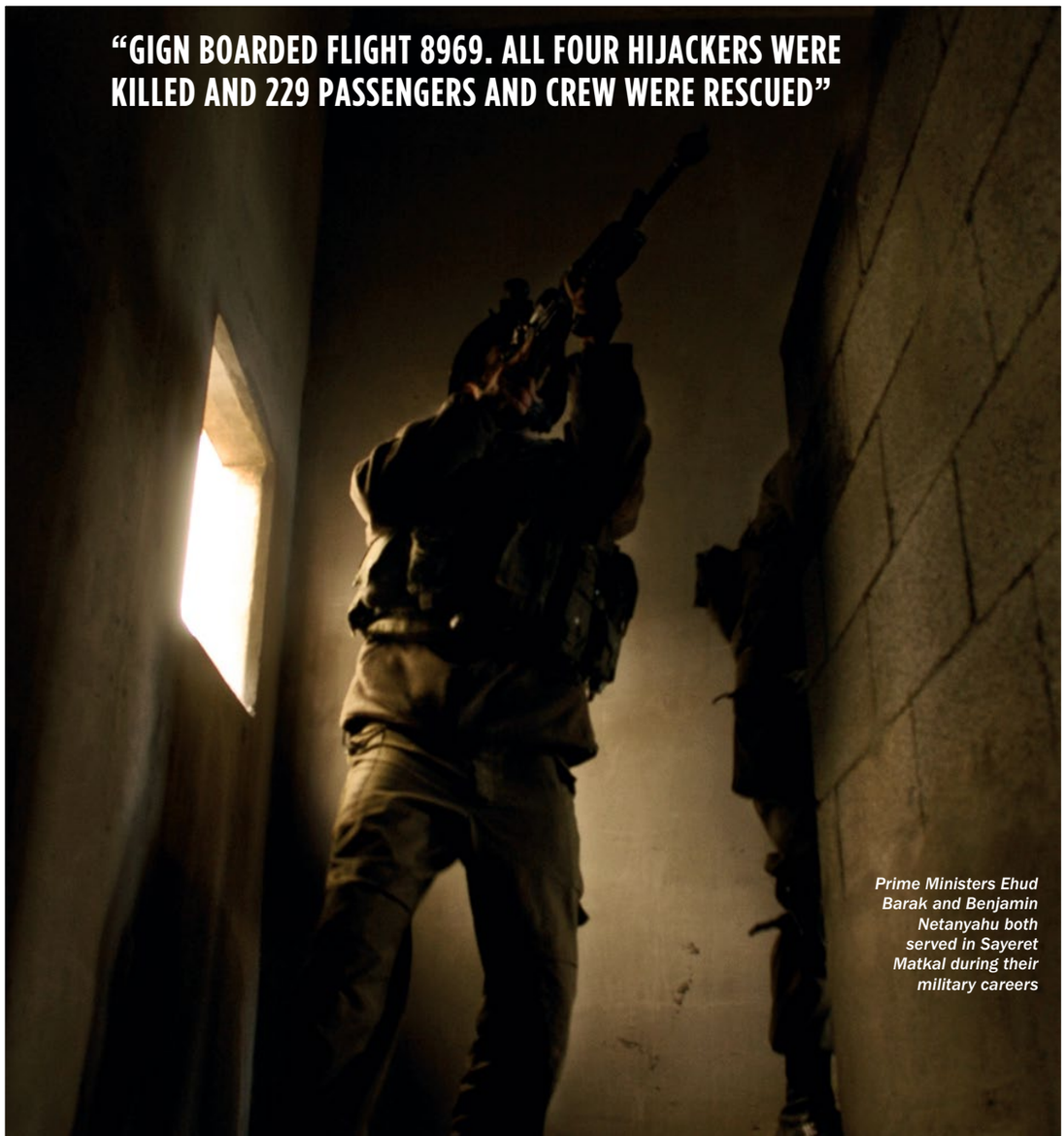
Although GIGN are authorised to act on foreign soil, most missions are carried out within France. Unlike the raid of Flight 8969, few occur in the public eye. In their first 50 years, GIGN have carried out more than 1,800 missions, freeing around 600 hostages and apprehending 1,500 suspects.



Fewer than one in ten of GIGN applicants make it through the selection process and gruelling training course

© Domenjod

"GIGN BOARDED FLIGHT 8969. ALL FOUR HIJACKERS WERE KILLED AND 229 PASSENGERS AND CREW WERE RESCUED"



Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu both served in Sayeret Matkal during their military careers

SAYERET MATKAL

YEAR FOUNDED: 1957 ALLEGIANCE: ISRAEL

Although their name means Special Reconnaissance Unit of the General Staff, most Israelis know Sayeret Matkal simply as 'The Unit'. A special unit of the Israeli Defence Forces, Sayeret Matkal were set up to carry out intelligence-gathering missions on foreign soil, although their operations have expanded to include hostage extraction, counter-terrorism and direct action raids.

Sayeret Matkal soldiers assassinated Fatah leader Abu Jihad in 1988 and plotted to kill Saddam Hussein in 1992. The unit's most famous mission, however, is 1976's Operation Entebbe, during which 100 commandos stormed Entebbe Airport in Uganda to free 106 hostages taken from a flight hijacked by Palestinians and Germans. They successfully evacuated 102 hostages and destroyed up to 30 planes belonging to the Ugandan Air Force as punishment for Idi Amin's complicity. Three hostages were killed in the crossfire, and a fourth, who'd been moved to a Ugandan hospital, was later murdered in retaliation. A single Israeli soldier – the older brother of future Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu – was killed in the shootout with Ugandan troops.

Although their existence was officially acknowledged in the 1980s, Sayeret Matkal remain secretive. They report directly to the chief of staff and their soldiers wear no insignia to identify them as members of Israel's leading special forces unit.



MARCOS commandos carry out anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean

MARCOS

YEAR FOUNDED: 1987 ALLEGIANCE: INDIA

Indian's Marine Commando Force, or MARCOS, were formed in 1987 to undertake specialist maritime operations. They were quickly called into action as part of the Indian Peacekeeping Force in Sri Lanka. A team of 18 commandos from what was initially called the Indian Marine Special Force were deposited 7.5 miles offshore from a Tamil separatist base at Gurunagar. They swam to their target, towing their combat loads, and rigged the harbour with explosives. The commandos escaped by sea under heavy gunfire without suffering any casualties.

The longest MARCOS operation is still ongoing. Commandos are permanently stationed at Jhelum River and Wular Lake in Jammu and Kashmir, near the disputed border with Pakistan. Their mission is to disrupt insurgents using the area, working undercover to gather intelligence, infiltrate militias and engaging them where appropriate.

MARCOS soldiers are selected from the best of the Indian Navy and undergo two to three years of training, including parachuting and diving. One of the toughest elements is the 'death crawl'. Trainees must struggle through 2,600 feet of thigh-high mud in 55 pounds of full combat gear, then a 1.6-mile obstacle course, before shooting a target that, though only 25 metres away, has a fellow trainee standing next to it. Missing is not an option.

SPECIAL AIR SERVICE

YEAR FOUNDED: 1955 ALLEGIANCE: NEW ZEALAND

The NZSAS give the relatively small nation of New Zealand the ability to punch above its weight in the Pacific and Far East. Formed in 1955 as a special force to support British efforts to quash a communist insurgency in Malaya, the NZSAS were called back into action a number of times over the next two decades to combat communist uprisings in Borneo and Vietnam.

The end of the Cold War brought about a change in direction. The NZSAS shifted focus to counterterrorism, with soldiers regularly conducting long-range mobile patrols on deployment in Afghanistan. It was during one of these operations that Corporal Willie Apiata became the first (and so far only) recipient of the Victoria Cross for New Zealand. NZSAS soldiers were also among the forces involved in the protection of Kabul from 2009 to 2012, responding to attacks on the Presidential Palace and Intercontinental Hotel.

The NZSAS wear sand-coloured berets and are posted to specialist sections. Two Sabre squadrons carry out most of the special operations abroad. A Commando squadron aid counterterrorism efforts, while the Explosive Ordnance Disposal squadron are trained to deal with explosive, chemical, biological and nuclear threats. Though traditionally an all-male unit, the NZSAS established a six-woman Female Engagement Team in 2017.



NZSAS special operations squadrons are split into four troops focusing on amphibious, air, mobile and mountainous operations

Images: New Zealand Defence Force



Soldiers from Joint Task Force 2 are known to have deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan but most of the details are closely guarded secrets

JOINT TASK FORCE 2

YEAR FOUNDED: 1993 ALLEGIANCE: CANADA

In the face of a growing threat from terrorism, a new unit of Canada's armed forces was established to inherit counterterror responsibilities from the Special Emergency Response Team of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Being a military rather than a police unit eased Canadian fears about police officers being trained to use deadly force.

The Canadian Army are tight-lipped when it comes to revealing details about missions that Joint Task Force 2 have carried out. They are known to have conducted anti-sniper operations in Sarajevo during the Bosnian War and to have provided military support in Haiti. An outcry occurred in Canada in 2002 when soldiers from JTF2 were photographed handing over captured Taliban soldiers to American forces. Not even the Prime Minister was aware that JTF2 had been deployed to Afghanistan as part of the War on Terror.

JTF2 have continued to carry out special operations in the Middle East. In June 2017, it was reported that a JTF2 sniper had killed an Islamic State fighter from a distance of 2.2 miles. The shot, made from a position in a high-rise building, became the world's longest confirmed sniper kill.

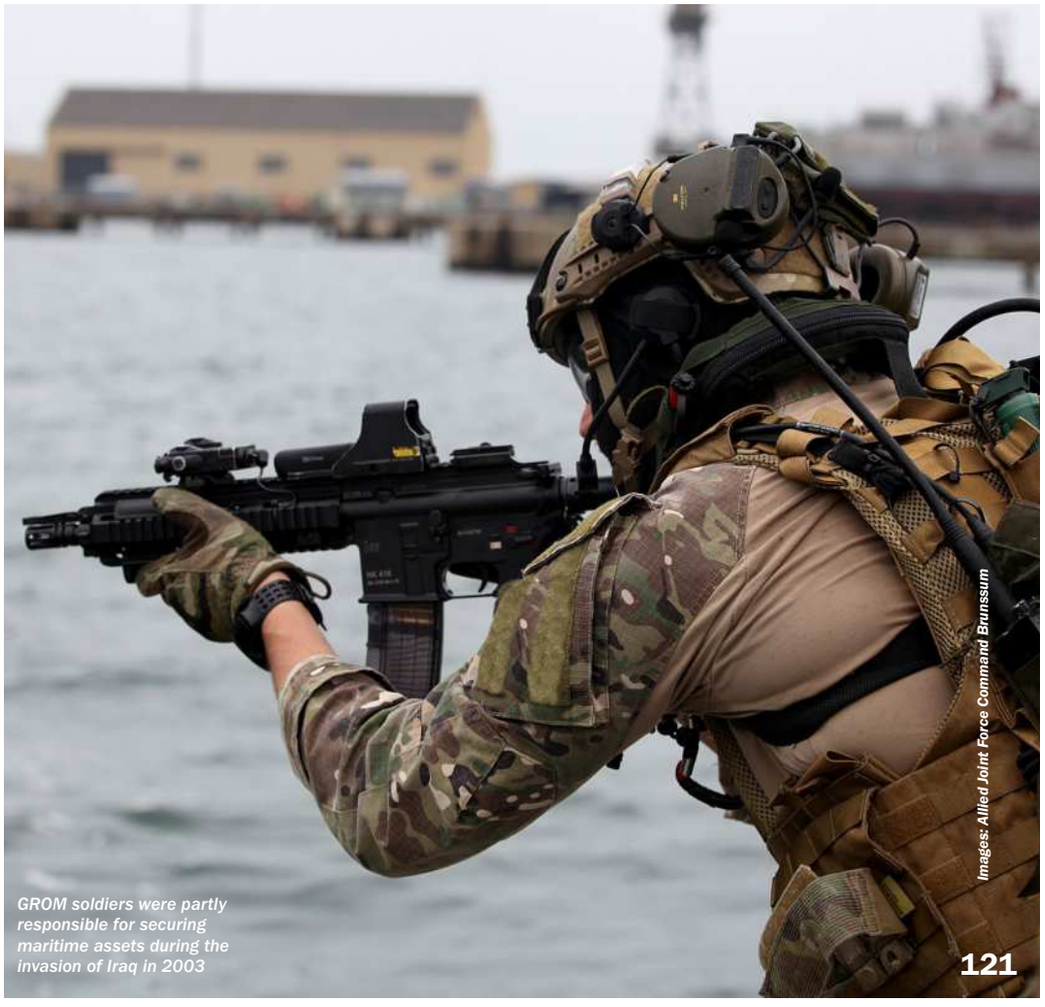
GROM

YEAR FOUNDED: 1990 ALLEGIANCE: POLAND

As the Soviet Union collapsed and the Iron Curtain fell in Eastern Europe, a new unit, GROM, was created in the Polish armed forces to carry out special operations. They were so secretive that nobody knew of their existence for the first few years as GROM operatives – all of whom were initially selected from other special warfare units – carried out domestic operations in support of the police and army.

Once GROM were publicly acknowledged, their soldiers began to take part in operations to support international allies. GROM were part of a coalition alongside the US and Argentina to restore Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power after the 1991 coup d'etat. They also conducted several tours in the Balkans, arresting seven suspected war criminals, including Slavko Dokmanović, the Butcher of Vukovar.

Since the turn of the 21st century GROM have centred their operations on the Middle East. During the 2003 invasion of Iraq GROM operatives seized oil terminals and the Mukatayin hydroelectric dam to prevent their destruction by the enemy. Since then, 'the Surgeons' – so called due to their ability to cleanly execute special operations in enemy territory – have carried out counterterror operations and helped to train local soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.



GROM soldiers were partly responsible for securing maritime assets during the invasion of Iraq in 2003

Images: Allied Joint Force Command Brunssum



The Snow Leopards are just one of a few police special units in China. Others include those named after the Falcon and Mountain Eagle

SNOW LEOPARD COMMANDO UNIT

YEAR FOUNDED: 2002 ALLEGIANCE: CHINA

The Chinese Government, often cagey about the information they release to the rest of the world, unveiled a new elite police unit in 2006. Journalists were invited to Beijing Police Academy to view black-clad operatives arriving by helicopter and shooting targets with near-perfect marksmanship. The Snow Leopard Commando Unit were coming to the end of a five-year training programme designed to safeguard the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

Each Snow Leopard – so called due to that animal's stealth – undergoes arduous physical and tactical training and is assigned to one of four squadrons. Two deal with counterterrorism, hostage rescue and riot control. One specialises in bomb disposal and threat neutralisation, while the fourth is a sniper unit. Aside from protecting the Olympics and other high-profile events in China, members of the crack force have been used to guard diplomats and embassies in high-risk countries and to quell domestic unrest in Xinjiang province.

Since the SLCU were initially founded to protect the Olympic Games, it is fitting that the unit have twice won the Annual Warrior Competition, an Olympic-style international challenge in Jordan that pits teams of military and police special forces against each other.



Only about five per cent of recruits successfully pass Special Service Group training each year

SPECIAL SERVICE GROUP

YEAR FOUNDED: 1956 ALLEGIANCE: PAKISTAN

The Maroon Berets of Pakistan's elite special forces, the Special Service Group, are kept busy due to decades of border tension. One of their first missions was to infiltrate the semi-independent but unstable princely state of Dir in 1960, removing the Nawab from power and replacing him with his son. The SSG also saw service in the Second Kashmir War in 1965 and the Bangladesh War of Independence. Soldiers from the SSG are suspected to have fought alongside the Afghan mujahideen as they opposed the Soviet invasion of 1979, although this has been denied by the Pakistani Government.

The SSG have also been regularly called upon to carry out missions against insurgents on home soil. Notable hostage-rescue raids were carried out against militants who were holed up in the Afghan embassy in Islamabad in 1994, the Red Mosque in Islamabad in 2007 and the Pakistan Army headquarters in Rawalpindi in 2009.

Though the exact strength of the SSG is classified, we do know that recruits volunteer from other units, must pass a rigorous medical screening and complete more than a year of training. Stints in parachute school, basic SSG training and special warfare courses are required before a soldier is able to wear the maroon beret.



Alpha Group were ordered to take part in the 1991 attempted coup but did not move to arrest Boris Yeltsin

SPETSGRUPPA A

YEAR FOUNDED: 1974 ALLEGIANCE RUSSIA

After the 1972 Olympics massacre, Spetsgruppa A, or Alpha Group, were formed as part of the KGB to fight domestic terrorism. Their first high-profile mission came when Aeroflot Flight 6833 was hijacked by Georgians hoping to flee the USSR in 1983. Alpha Group stormed the aircraft, but five of the 64 hostages died.

When Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Alpha Group were utilised as an offensive force as part of a special operation to attack Tajbeg Palace in Kabul. The Soviets, amid fierce gun battles with more than 2,000 Afghan guards, seized control of the palace within 45 minutes. President Hafizullah Amin was among the dead, as was his 11-year-old son.

After the collapse of the USSR, Alpha Group were incorporated into the FSB and continued to be deployed in hostage rescues, although not without criticism. A chemical agent was used in the storming of a Moscow concert hall to end a hostage crisis in 2002 and may have resulted in the deaths of 130 of the 912 hostages, while the firefight that ended the Beslan school siege in 2004 saw Alpha Group use flamethrowers and grenade launchers. Tragically, more than 330 people died, including 186 children.





Special Forces Brigade have intervened in several African nations that have been left unstable due to infighting and civil war

SPECIAL FORCES BRIGADE

YEAR FOUNDED: 1972 ALLEGIANCE: SOUTH AFRICA

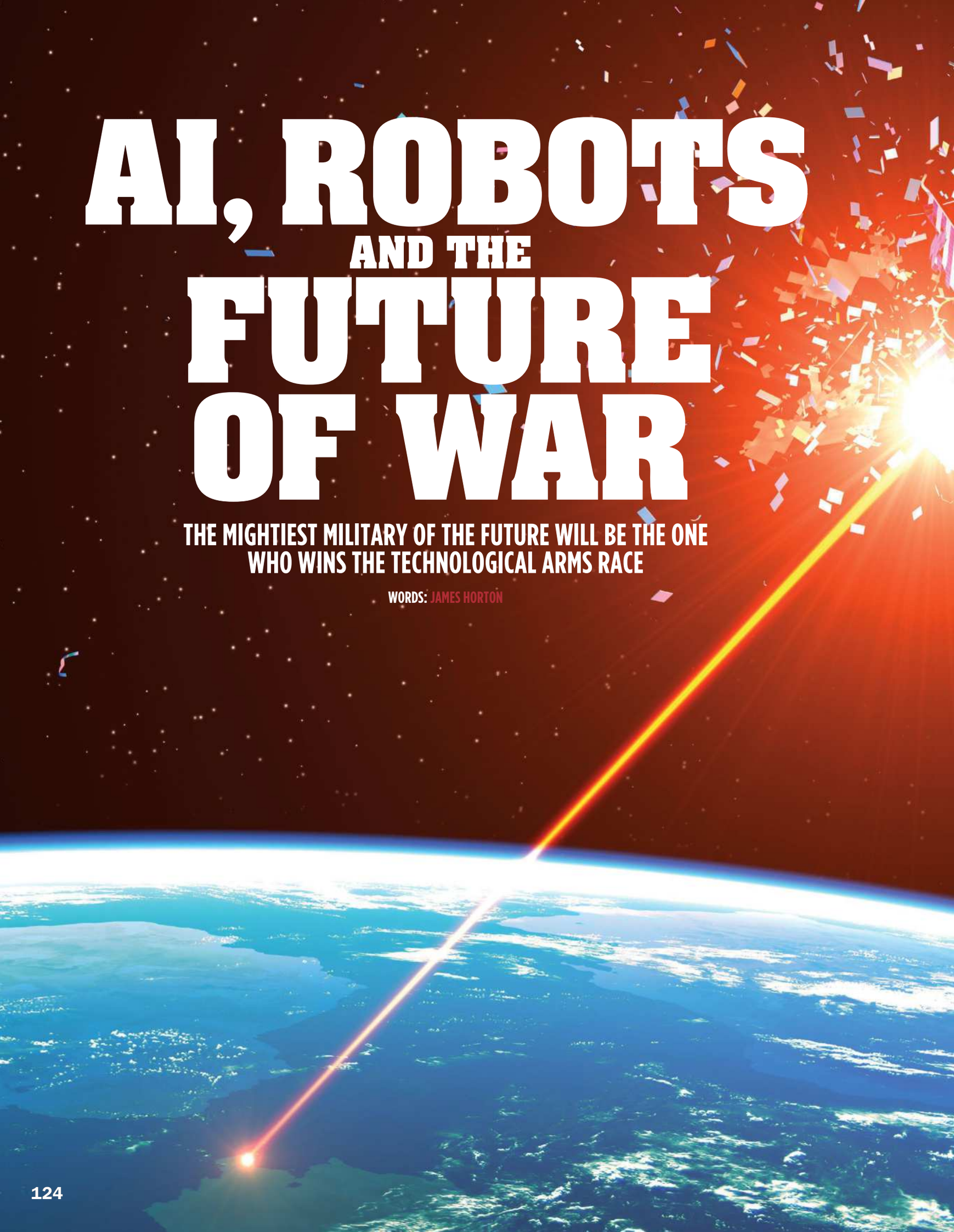
South Africa spent much of the second half of the 20th century in isolation, ostracised from the international community due to apartheid. Recognising the need for a special force within the military and with little prospect of international cooperation, the South African Defence Force formed six Reconnaissance Commando units during the 1970s.

Soldiers from the South African Special Forces Brigade, known as Recces, were deployed in Angola to carry out covert missions to disrupt the campaign for Namibian independence. The Special Forces Brigade were also involved in controversial assassinations carried out by the Civil Cooperation Bureau, a shady government-sponsored death squad that targeted political opponents and enemies of the states. After post-apartheid South Africa was welcomed back into the international fold, troops from the Special Forces Brigade saw action in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of the Congo, aiming to stabilise nations rocked by civil war.

"THE SELECTION PROCESS FOR SOUTH AFRICA'S RECCES – NICKNAMED 'THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE' – IS SO GRUELLING THAT SOME YEARS NOT A SINGLE CANDIDATE SUCCEEDS"

The Recces' HQ is in Pretoria and now comprise a supply unit in Walmansthal and two regiments – one based near Cape Town that specialises in maritime and amphibious operations and one near Phalaborwa in the north that focuses on airborne and long-range, land-based infiltration. The selection process – 'nicknamed the Ultimate Challenge' – is so gruelling that some years not a single candidate succeeds.

Images: Alamy, Getty Images



AI, ROBOTS AND THE FUTURE OF WAR

THE MIGHTIEST MILITARY OF THE FUTURE WILL BE THE ONE WHO WINS THE TECHNOLOGICAL ARMS RACE

WORDS: JAMES HORTON



Whether a state is currently at war or enjoying a period of peace, the military arms race never stops. Ever since nation states came into existence, so too have the concepts of enemies and adversaries. From the perspective of one state there have always been those who are politically ideologically opposed to them, who possess coveted resources that they desire, or who greedily eye the coveted resources they hold in their possession. In other words, there have always been motives for war. And, unfortunately, these motives are set to persist into the future. In ancient times a state would primarily wage war with their immediate neighbours, but in the globalised modern world enemies can be formed across continents. The powerful nation states positioned around the globe do not wish to lose their place at the top of the power pyramid, either to their immediate rivals or to the upstarts that are investing in modernising their own militaries. And so while the world enjoys a period of relative harmony, governments continue to invest billions into superseding the technological capabilities of their actual and anticipated enemies. From electromagnetically powered railguns, to exoskeletons, to autonomous vehicles, to nanotechnology, to quantum computer-powered artificial intelligences, there are a multitude of technologies with military applications occupying research laboratories around the world. If any or all these come into force, the battlefield as we know it will be forever reshaped.

How will special forces operate in these new theatres of war? Primarily they will likely continue to operate in the familiar three theatres of land, sea and air. However, their efforts in these areas will be supported and disrupted by two emergent theatres: space and cyberspace warfare. While warfare in space may escalate to blowing enemy satellites into oblivion to scupper their communication network, cyber warfare offers a chisel alternative to this hammer. Cyber warfare will launch digital attacks on enemy systems, either by derailing civilian networks or by attacking military networks. In an age where data collection is paramount and where greater

Above: *The future of warfare will involve novel weapon types and new theatres of war*



numbers of military machinery will be controlled or monitored remotely by humans hundreds if not thousands of miles away, disrupting military networks through cyber warfare could prove especially devastating. As such, the prevention of cyberattacks will likely become a priority for many states.

One way of insulating against enemy decryption and digital interference may be to utilise quantum-computing technology. Unlike the binary bits in use in conventional computer systems, which can either exist as 1s or 0s, quantum bits can exist in a spectrum of states. Therefore the potential processing power of quantum bits is exponentially more powerful than their conventional counterparts, and quantum encryption will be simply unbreakable to conventional computers. The only computers powerful enough to decrypt these systems will be even more powerful quantum computers, meaning that the most technologically adept states will hold a considerable advantage on the battlefield.

Quantum computing won't merely unlock an enemy's digital networks but will vastly improve the autonomous capabilities of military machinery. The use of autonomous machines is already commonplace in many industries, where their activity is highly repetitive. However, more sophisticated autonomous machines – such as self-driving cars and the latest Mars rover, Perseverance – require more sophisticated algorithms to operate effectively. Deploying autonomous machines on the battlefield will demand yet more development of sophisticated algorithms, likely in the form of highly advanced artificial intelligences. However, due to the moral implications of allowing autonomous machines to take human lives, and due to the danger of these machines being disconnected from the wider network following enemy cyber intervention, it is likely that human operators will travel alongside and control their semi-autonomous arsenal. Such soldiers may represent the next phase of land special forces, where a small unit of highly equipped soldiers act as a hub for a formidable semi-autonomous robotic force.

***Above:** Use of augmented reality may benefit soldiers both during training and when fighting on the front line*

***Right:** Quadrupedal unmanned ground vehicles may support human soldiers by carrying supplies and weaponry*

Consolidating the information relayed by semi-autonomous machines and dictating their next actions in a combat situation will mark a significant deviation from modern warfare

"AN ARMOUR-CLAD MACHINE IS LESS SUSCEPTIBLE TO DAMAGE FROM BALLISTIC WEAPONRY THAN A SQUISHY HUMAN"



***Above:** Railguns will use electromagnets to launch projectiles at high velocities*

***Right:** Powered, active exoskeletons will enhance a wearer's physical capabilities, including strength and endurance*



“WITH BULKY EQUIPMENT TO CARRY – INCLUDING STANDARD-ISSUE SUPPLIES AND AUGMENTED REALITY DEVICES – AND WITH THE NEED TO KEEP PACE WITH THEIR SEMI-AUTONOMOUS COHORT, SOLDIERS MAY ALSO EMPLOY EXOSKELETONS”

for the ground soldier. The soldiers in these special units may therefore rely on emergent technologies, such as augmented reality, for their training, helping them to closely emulate real combat situations. By using digital visualisations projected over real-world scenery, soldiers will be able to better mimic and experience a multitude of hypothetical battle situations before they set out on campaigns. Augmented reality may also assist them in the field. For example, maps of terrain can be projected before their eyes in three dimensions, allowing for better strategic planning for their semi-autonomous units.

With bulky equipment to carry – including standard-issue supplies and augmented reality devices – and with the need to keep pace with their semi-autonomous cohort, soldiers may also employ exoskeletons. Larger land forces will likely be equipped with passive exoskeletons that rely on strong yet lightweight chassis to distribute loads more effectively around the soldier’s body, helping them carry more for longer. However, the special forces units that are controlling machines may well utilise active, powered exoskeletons. These will carry a portion of the load and provide a dynamic interface system by which a more seamless soldier-machine interface can be achieved.

There are an array of applications for a special unit comprised of largely autonomous machines controlled by a central hub of human soldiers. One potential use would be for them to adopt high-risk, high-reward missions, such as establishing advanced beach head positions in enemy territory. We can imagine how the combination of advanced technologies may permit them to do this. The target area, if within around 110 miles of the coast, could first be subject to repeated bombardment by railguns. These weapons, which are currently in development, rely on electromagnets to propel their payload at frightening speeds up to and over 6,500 feet per second. This means that the payload itself does not need to have explosive properties or a propulsion system, as devastating damage is caused simply through the kinetic energy of an object striking its target at such high velocity. This means that the payloads are vastly cheaper than missiles, which can each cost millions. Therefore, providing the railgun has enough energy to operate, it can conduct prolonged bombardments. As the energy requirements for railguns of this magnitude are considerable, their natural home will be on naval warships, where the railgun will also work as an offensive tool capable of destroying rival ships of a similar size.

Once the bombardment is complete, the advance unit – consisting of machines and human personnel – could be deployed aerially using technologies such as the heavy payload Low Velocity Airdrop System. This clustered parachute design technology is currently in development and will be able to deploy up to 36 tons from the air. Alternatively, future advancements may couple similar technology with airbag shock absorbers to allow the payloads to be delivered at lower altitudes and higher velocities when near-complete deceleration is unachievable. In addition, the advancement of composite nanomaterials





***Below:** Military construction vehicles such as excavators could operate autonomously to minimise risk to human life*

***Right:** Passive exoskeletons, which require no energy input, help soldiers deal with heavier loads for longer periods*

will facilitate lighter weight yet sturdy chassis designs for the semi-autonomous machines, bringing down the payload weight yet further and therefore enabling faster deployment.

After being launched into enemy territory, autonomous excavators may get to work shovelling earthworks and constructing a defensible position around the weaponised machines, solar panels and their human handlers. These solar panels, also made of composite nanomaterials such as nanocellulose, will both help to power the autonomous units and their laser weaponry. Although lasers may not be their primary armament, due to the weapon's reduced effectiveness in certain environments where dust and particulates are abundant, they will possess enough merit to warrant their inclusion. Providing they have power, lasers will offer unlimited firepower and offer a means of attack that moves at the speed of light, two marked improvements over conventional gunpowder-reliant ammunition rounds. Using a low-energy setting, lasers can scramble communications in drones flying overhead, and with a high-energy setting they can set fabrics ablaze and inflict serious burns on human assailants attacking the new fortification.

While semi-autonomous units will be effective as front line combatants, fully autonomous systems will thrive at other military objectives, such as reconnaissance. Such autonomous systems will partner especially well with aerial and nautical drones. This is because autonomous artificial intelligences (AIs) will be more efficient than a human data analyst and will also be able to achieve things that a human operator simply cannot do. Autonomous AIs will co-ordinate the flight paths of tiny drone swarms that are sent out to scout the enemy. They may also be utilised to interfere with enemy radar and distract tracking missiles targeted at allied craft, as well as potentially debilitating other anti-air defences on the ground. Similarly, underwater drones will be used to patrol waters, probe for enemy craft and engage them, defend allied units, and identify and destroy enemy mines. The controlling AI will also consolidate and parse through vast swathes of data collecting by reconnaissance drones, retaining and relaying only relevant information to their human operators. In an age where orbital strikes can rain down on identified enemy positions, such powers of reconnaissance will revolutionise the battlefield.

In today's Western world there is a much lower tolerance for human military casualties than in previous eras. Barring a large-scale outbreak of war, this sentiment is set to continue, meaning we will continue to see a concerted emphasis on developing autonomous military machines. This transition is not without its disadvantages though, namely the formidable cost to governments for the research and development, manufacture and deployment of these units. Furthermore, any new technology presents opportunities for new countermeasures, which in this case will likely take the form of disrupting the operating AI through signal interception and interference or electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) weaponry. Even so, an army filled with robots instead of human personnel offers several clear advantages.

"WHILE CHEMICAL WARFARE IS WIDELY CONDEMNED BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY, A LARGER THREAT LOOMS ON THE HORIZON IN THE FORM OF BIOLOGICAL AGENTS"

First and foremost, the risk to and cost of human life when waging war becomes markedly reduced. Not only does this allow a government to keep their citizenry safe, but it also offers a state's regime staying power in a conflict. The citizenry are less likely to turn against a war if none of their own are losing their lives for it. Likewise, an armour-clad machine is less susceptible to damage from ballistic weaponry than a squishy, organ-filled human.

Furthermore, military invasions are often won and lost by the efficacy of an army's supply train, which must keep the army's soldiers fed and watered as they advance. It was supply train issues that helped topple Hitler's attempt to capture Moscow in 1941, which if successful may have knocked the Soviets out of the war. A mainly robotic force, however, would not be so heavily reliant on a stable supply train. Finally, robots possess fewer vulnerabilities than human forces, who are susceptible to chemical and biological agents.

Just as nanomaterials will be used in solar panels and exoskeletons, they may also present a severe threat as chemical agents. Nanomaterials are formed by manipulating components at the level of single or a handful of molecules. These manipulations allow for intricate lattices of molecules to be arranged to provide materials with incredible properties like immense strength or malleability. However, they may also be used in a more crude and



***Below:** China already possesses a hypersonic missile in the form of the DF-17, which was unveiled in 2019*

HYPERSONIC WEAPONS

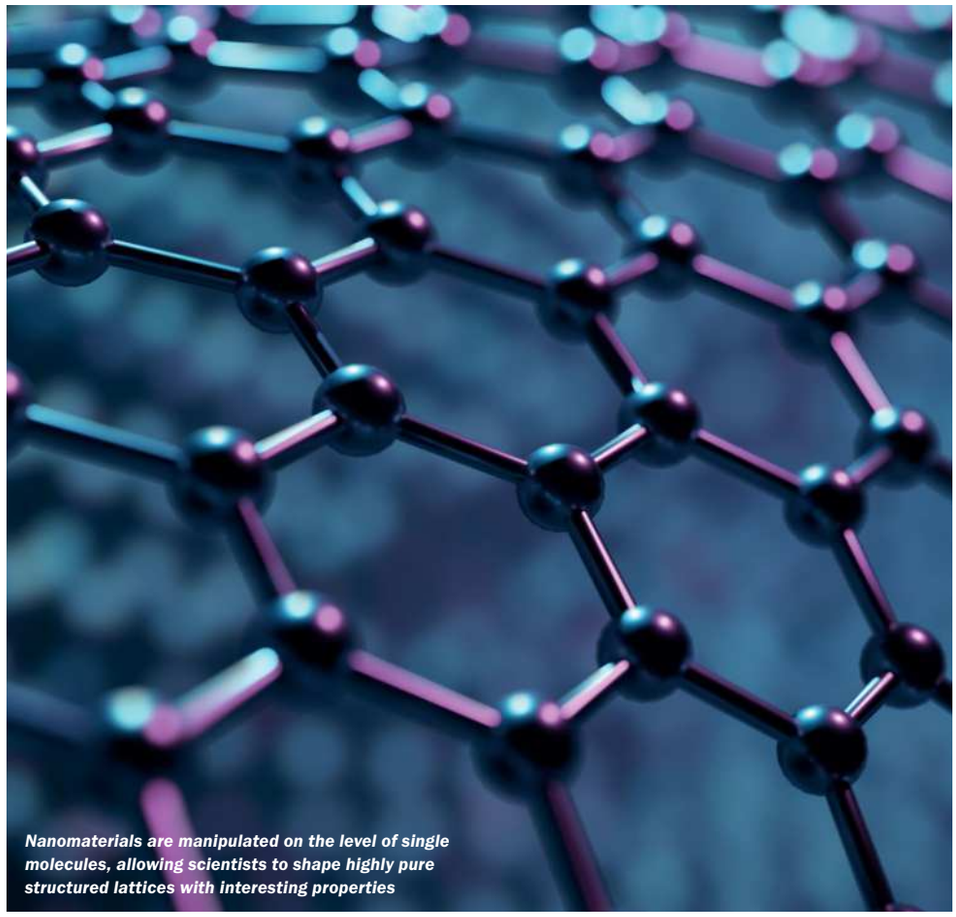
ULTRA-FAST AND MANOEUVRABLE MISSILES WILL DELIVER DEVASTATING AND UNSTOPPABLE DAMAGE

For every sword there is a shield, a device to ward off the threat of the weapon. For ballistic missiles, there are missile defence systems. Conventional ballistic missiles utilise rockets to boost them into the upper atmosphere then rely on momentum to carry them in a free-falling arc to their target. Missile defences utilise radar recognition to identify an impending strike and interceptor missiles to destroy it. These travel to an intercept point calculated from the attacking missile's arcing trajectory and collide with it either directly or by releasing 'kill vehicles' that do so mid-flight. However, advancements into hypersonic boost-glide vehicles (HGVs) will soon allow attacking missiles to fly over five times the speed of sound and alter their course multiple times mid-flight, rendering an intercept by missile defence systems nearly impossible. China has already showcased their own functional HGVs, and other competing states are busily developing their own variants. If equipped with nuclear payloads, nuclear HGVs may force states to invest in developing and deploying missile defence launchers in low earth orbit, militarising space as a means to get comprehensive defensive coverage of their territory. Whether this will be enough to prevent HGVs, however, is currently unknown.

cruel manner by being included as aerosolised agents in explosives that invade human lungs and act as aggravating toxins.

While chemical warfare is widely condemned by the international community, a larger threat looms on the horizon in the form of biological agents. These could take the form of an engineered virus that could sweep through armies and destroy them before they can take to the battlefield. As we are all acutely aware, living through the current pandemic of a naturally occurring virus, such a weapon's damage would not end with the army but could bring entire populations to their knees. This would be an example of 'scorched earth' tactics in its most extreme, a ploy utilised only by a desperate defender.

Roman general Fabius the Delayer burned his own people's crops to deny them to the enemy, consigning many of his own to hunger. Mongols launched corpses harbouring the Black Death into the city of Caffa during a prolonged siege, hoping to afflict them with a disease they themselves had been ravaged by. From their opposing trenches in WWI, German and British troops shelled each other with mustard gas. The history of warfare is littered with examples of scorched earth tactics, chemical warfare and biological warfare. A future biological weapon could bring about destruction unrivalled even by nuclear warheads. This is but one more reason why the future of warfare should, and likely will, be waged primarily not by humans, but by their inorganic successors.



Nanomaterials are manipulated on the level of single molecules, allowing scientists to shape highly pure structured lattices with interesting properties

Images: Alamy, Getty Images

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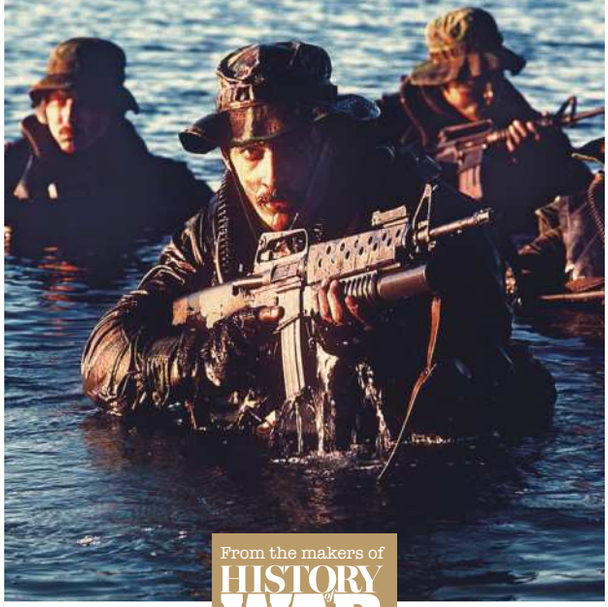
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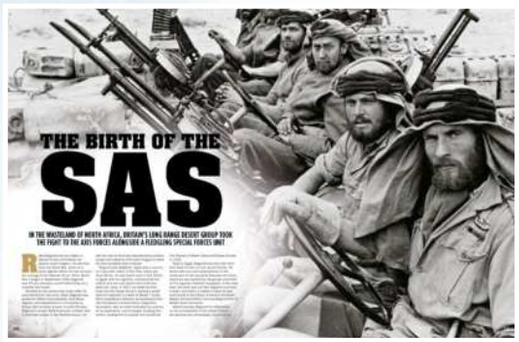
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THE TRAINING, TACTICS & TARGETS BEHIND THE WORLD'S ELITE UNITS

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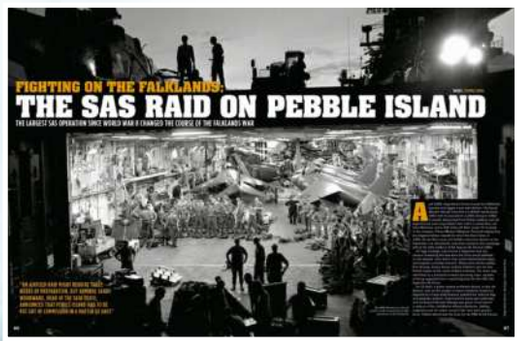
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