RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

True Stories of the Commandos

Robin Hunter

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About the Book

‘They stretch a dark hand from the sea,’ said their founder Sir Winston Churchill, ‘to pluck the enemy sentries from their posts.’

Raised in the dark, post-Dunkirk days of 1940 to carry the war to the enemy, in five short and violent years the British Army Commandos established a reputation that has made the name ‘Commando’ the mark of the fighting man.

The Commandos began as small-scale raiders but their operations grew in size and destruction as the war progressed until, in the end, there were four full Commando Brigades; superb units which fought in every theatre of war, from Norway to Burma, from the coast of France to the islands of Yugoslavia. The Commandos were disbanded in 1945–46 but reformed in the 1970s, and in 1982, about 1000 army Commandos set sail to fight in the Falklands War.

The long and proud history of the army contains accounts of many fine and distinguished units but few can equal – and none exceed – the story of the British Army Commandos.

Also by Robin Hunter

TRUE STORIES OF THE SAS
TRUE STORIES OF THE FOREIGN LEGION
TRUE STORIES OF THE SBS
TRUE STORIES OF THE PARAS

TRUE STORIES OF THE COMMANDOS

ROBIN HUNTER

INTRODUCTION

'*They performed whatsoever the King commanded*'

Book of Samuel II
On the Commando Memorial
Westminster Abbey, London

This is the story of the real Commandos, the Army Commandos of the Second World War, the men who gave the word '*commando*' the significance it has never lost, even if terrorists and murderers have attempted to assume and corrupt it in the decades since the war. As the stories in this book will reveal, usually in the words of the Commandos themselves, in accounts extracted from the Rob Neillands archives, Commando soldiering during the war was a hard and difficult business – but one with compensations.

Some time after the Second World War, a Commando soldier, recently returned from Germany, was asked to sum up what Commando soldiering was like. The story goes that he brooded for a moment and then replied, 'Well, it's like a pleasant sort of pain in the neck.' That seems to sum it up exactly: Commando soldiering is hard work and even in the good times is fairly uncomfortable, as indeed is all infantry soldiering. And yet it has something. If I turn my head, I can see, hanging on a peg behind my study door, my faded green beret, earned on a Commando course many years ago. I have a few other trophies of a busy life, but none that means so much to me. Other trophies were given to me; the green beret I had to earn.

Over the years, other Commando soldiers, when confronted with that same question, have agreed that the above description is probably about right. Commando soldiering is easier described by saying what it is not, than by trying to sum up what it is – for the very nature of irregular, or special forces, warfare demands that Commando soldiering might be many things. What it is not, is easy.

However, I recently asked a very distinguished wartime Commando leader, a man with a chestful of decorations and a well-deserved reputation in battle, 'Was it fun?' He gave me what we used to describe as an 'old-fashioned look', and said slowly, 'Yes, as a matter of fact, most of the time it was great fun.' That is also true and the thing that makes it fun is the people you do it with – your 'oppos', your 'mates', or 'muckers', the other blokes in the green berets, those who have been through the same mill that you have, who know the score and will never let you down.

Commando soldiering is dangerous. That is part of the attraction. Even the training is dangerous but that too is the good part; the hard part is the relentless, ongoing grind, the sheer discomfort, the cold and wet and lack of sleep, the carrying of great weights over long distances and terrible ground, the need, the demand, to keep going, keep smiling and keep up. If you can ignore all that, Commando soldiering is indeed great fun.

So, in brief, how do you become a Commando? It helps to be a lunatic but assuming that you have enough common sense to know what you are doing, how can you get a green beret? First of all, the only way to get it is to earn it. It does not come easily and would be without value if it did. So, the first step is to become a soldier and a good one.

Good soldiers come in various guises and the tall, good-looking one, he with the well-pressed trousers and the steely gaze, may not be right for Commando soldiering. You will frequently hear Commando soldiers talking about some

acquaintance and running him down happily, discussing his various shortcomings but usually concluding, ‘He knows how to soldier, though,’ and in these circles that is the ultimate accolade. So, you join, you learn to soldier and you volunteer for Commando training.

If you do, you have to know what you are letting yourself in for . . . at least six weeks of soul-searching, feet-blistering, shoulder-aching, muscle-weary misery – with lots of cold and wet and hunger thrown in. There are even some dangerous bits but those are the good parts, as they take your mind off the misery and fill it with a few seconds of stark terror.

Commando recruits don’t get a lot of rest. The training is physical and the hours are long, and much of the training takes place at night, in all weathers. The basic elements consist of trying to find out – or rather helping you to find out – exactly how much more you can do than you think you can; and suprisingly, with the right attitude and a helping hand from the ‘oppo’ you are helping, you gradually find that you can hack this sort of training, do the runs, cover the ground, scale the cliffs, hit the target – and enjoy it.

Where that enjoyment comes from is hard to say, but there is a definite moment in a Commando’s life when it all makes sense, and those tasks that were seemingly impossible a few days or weeks before are now in your gift. You are fit and strong and your head has got the hang of all this and you are now not just a soldier, but a Commando soldier, a very different kind of animal.

That animal is bred at night, on long marches in the rain, in small boats bobbing about on wild seas, on rain-drenched cliffs, snow-caked mountains and most of all by wet nights in damp trenches. Hardship is the breeding ground of the Commando soldier. He is created by assault courses and scramble courses and Tarzan courses, by ‘full regains’, ‘death slides’ and ‘cat crawls’, by weapon training

and unarmed combat training and cliff assault training – and the training never stops.

In the end, or at some time in the process of that training, the budding Commando learns that he can do more than he thought he could, that it is indeed ‘all in the heart and the mind’ – and that mental toughness, the ability to stick it, depends more on attitude than on the ability to do a hundred press-ups.

As for the rewards, the first one is the satisfaction of finishing what you started, of completing the course and getting the green beret. That also admits you to the company of an élite, cheerful, dauntless bunch of rogues, the best friends and comrades anyone could wish for, men who give you all they can and ask in return only that you pull your weight, do your bit – and know how to soldier. The worst thing you can do is let your mates down. And if things get a bit rough, and you break every bone in your body, remember the old Commando saying – ‘If you can’t take a joke, you shouldn’t have joined’. The men whose stories are told in these pages know all about that and I commend them to you.

1

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMANDO WARFARE

> '*If there were a hundred tongues in every head they could not recount or retell or enumerate all we have suffered at the hands of that valiant, wrathful, purely pagan people*.'
>
> An Irish monk on the Viking raids
> AD 468

THE STORY OF the Commando soldiers of the British Army, and the units in which they served during the Second World War cannot be less than inspiring. This is the story of how a small group of men, many of them junior officers, created a force, a special force trained to fight a new kind of war, units that were to carry the war to the enemy, even in the darkest days of defeat, and later play in every campaign of a world war, taking the green beret from the fjords of Norway to the jungles of the Arakan. It is also a tale of official obstruction, wilful misunderstandings and a failure to grasp what these new 'Commando' forces could do – and could not do.

As far as possible this story is told in the words of the original Commando soldiers, covering every aspect of their time from recruitment to disbandment, and many of the conflicts, triumphs, defeats and disasters the Army

Commandos encountered during the years between. These soldiers then stayed together in the Commando Association – the Old Comrades Association of the Army Commandos – and kept up their wartime comradeship in the long dull years of peace; yet the story of the Army Commandos as a fighting force was not over when the wartime units disappeared.

After the Army Commando units were disbanded in 1946, it seemed that they had gone for ever, but today, as the world moves into a new millennium, they live again. Over 1,000 Army Commandos now serve in No. 3 Commando Brigade, Royal Marines, providing many of the services that fighting brigade needs – artillery, engineers, transport and air. These Army Commandos, having taken the All-Arms Commando Course at the Commando Training Centre, Royal Marines, at Lympstone in Devon, and having earned the green beret, serve with Commando units all over the world. They sailed with their comrades of the Royal Marines Commandos – in Nos 40, 42 and 45 Commando – unit survivors of the Second World War, to retake the Falkland Islands from Argentina in 1982.

Nor are Commando units restricted to the British Army and the Royal Marines. Australia has Commando units; and the Belgians retain a Para-Commando Regiment that has its origins in the Belgian Troop of No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando, in the Second World War. The United States used Commando units for reconnaissance tasks – Recondo Units – in the Vietnam War. Like all good ideas, the Commando idea has spread.

Besides, in the full context of history, and especially British history, there is nothing new about Commando operations. It is possible to go back to the Old Testament and trace stories that are easily identified as typical exploits for the modern Commando soldier. Small wars – and guerrilla warfare – have a long history, and from the earliest times irregular warfare – ambush, night raids,

sudden attacks, cut and run operations – has been the way a small country can keep fighting against a larger or more powerful foe.

This is true of many nations, but especially of the British nation, which has never been heavily populated – or short of enemies. When British history is examined, it seems to be a long series of campaigns where amphibious warfare – Britain being an island – has played a significant part. This being so, it is hardly surprising that Britain's soldiers took naturally to amphibious warfare when the Second World War began in September 1939. It is appropriate, therefore, that this book should begin with a brief historical survey of amphibious assault – striking from the sea – the chosen way of attack for the British Commando soldier.

The written history of Britain could be said to have begun with the Roman seaborne invasion of 55 BC. That invasion was repulsed but the following year a more successful assault was launched and Britain remained a Roman colony for the next five hundred years. The Roman Empire in Britain lasted about 470 years. From the late fifth century, the Britons faced new maritime attacks, this time from the Jutes, Angles and Saxons who came sailing across the North Sea in their narrow ships to loot monasteries and towns, slaughter or enslave the Romanised population and eventually to settle in East Anglia – home of the Angles. Essex and Sussex, once settled by the East and South Saxons, are just two county names that can be dated back to those raiders whose descendants created Anglo-Saxon England and ushered in a brief period of peace.

This interlude did not last long. In the following centuries the Saxons were followed by the Danes – the Northmen – who occupied half the country, and then by the seagoing Normans, who took over the whole Saxon–Danish kingdom. It is clear, therefore, that the British people, often

described as a hybrid race, come from a raiding, sea-roving stock.

The British have always had a taste for irregular warfare and, especially around the Celtic fringe, their menfolk seem to have an affinity for it. Indeed such warfare was a feature of daily life for centuries in large areas of the British Isles, for example on the Welsh Marches and the Scottish Border – and any roll call of Britain's irregular and Commando forces is notably full of Celtic names – Lord Lovat and Paddy Mayne, to name but two.

In 1066, William the Conqueror, himself a descendant of Viking raiders who had created a Northman state in Normandy, repeated Caesar's landing and eventually conquered most of the island. This too proved a precedent. Nearly 900 years later, in 1944, armies sailed the other way in a series of combined operations, culminating in the D-Day landings in Normandy of 6 June 1944 – landings in which Britain's Commando soldiers played a leading role. The 'Overlord' Tapestry in the D-Day Museum at Portsmouth mirrors the scenes on the one at Bayeux – with green berets dotted among the steel helmets. A visit to the D-Day Museum formed part of the research for this book.

During the Hundred Years' War, from 1337 to 1453, the French constantly raided the south coast of Britain, paying particular attention to the Cinque Ports of Kent and Sussex, ports charged with supplying ships for the English Navy and with conveying English armies over to France. The English, in turn, raided French towns and returned repeatedly to land armies on the coast of France, notably at Harfleur at the mouth of the Seine, to start the Agincourt campaign of 1415.

In 1588 the English Navy, with the royal galleons in the van, beat off the Spanish Armada of Philip II. King Philip, who dispatched the Armada to destruction, was in no doubt regarding the difficulties of an invasion if contested by English seapower. 'The Kingdom of England is, and must

always remain, strong by sea, since on this the safety of the realm chiefly depends,' he wrote during that brief period when he was consort of the English queen, Mary Tudor. The Armada was, in fact, part of a combined operation, a naval force sent to ship an army to England. Had the Duke of Medina Sidonia managed to meet with the armies of Alexander Farnese, the Duke of Parma, in the Low Countries, as was the intention, there would still have remained the complicated task of landing that army on a hostile shore.

English cannon and English weather prevented even that possibility, but the lesson to be drawn from history here is that although navies are ideal for defence, they lack the ability to project their power ashore – unless they possess some amphibious capacity. For a landlocked power this may not matter; for an island kingdom it is essential. The Falklands War of 1982 only underlines that historic lesson and – as in the defeat of the Spanish Armada – that too was a close-run thing, entirely dependent on Britain's small but well-trained amphibious capacity.

In the seventeenth century, with the Royal Navy now officially in existence, a force of infantry was available – though in a rather minor way – for just such an amphibious role. The Duke of York and Albany's Maritime Regiment of Foot, raised in 1664 from the Trained Bands of the City of London, were armed with the new-fangled flintlock musket, a weapon calculated to be more suitable on the wild, wet and windy sea than the usual matchlock musket.

This regiment, which was also known as The Lord Admiral's Regiment, eventually became the Royal Marines – Britain's sea soldiers – a corps of soldiers, trained in amphibious warfare, which was to provide the captains and admirals of the fleet with that capacity to project some force ashore, enable snipers to shoot enemy officers and gunners in close-fought, ship-to-ship engagements and – if the need arose, as it sometimes did – suppress mutiny

among the sailors. These Marines were stationed amidships, to prevent mutiny or, as they used to say, ‘to stop the sailors and their officers eating each other’. The Marines took part in many great naval engagements, but amphibious operations were not confined to them. The British Army also took to storming ashore and was often at the launch of great campaigns.

The British Empire expanded from the 1750s – a process that often involved a landing operation, most notably in 1759 when General Wolfe’s army was ferried up the St Lawrence river in Canada to storm the Heights of Abraham by night, take the city of Quebec and endow the British crown with the vast icy resources of Canada during the Seven Years War. Wolfe’s landing below the Heights of Abraham was the blueprint for a dozen major Commando assault landings in the Second World War, and many more such landings were to follow during the ensuing two centuries. This Army–Royal Navy capture of Quebec in 1759 was a classic ‘Combined Operation’ but only one of many as the Royal Navy pushed across the world and added new territories to the British Empire.

Fifty years after Quebec, during the Napoleonic Wars, the British received first-hand experience of what an irregular force could do in a land campaign – another lesson from history. When Lord Wellington took Britain’s only effective field army to fight in Spain, he found that the Spanish Army could achieve very little in open battle against the French, but that the peninsular terrain – a country ‘where small armies are defeated and large armies starve’ – was ideal for the ambush and snipe activities of the Spanish *guerrilleros*. It was this Spanish campaign, which lasted from 1808 to 1814, that gave us the term guerrilla warfare, from the Spanish *guerra* – war. There were great battles fought by regular troops, at Vittoria, Salamanca, Badajoz and Talavera, but it was the

combination of regular and guerrilla troops that wore down the French and forced them out of Spain.

Parties of well-armed irregulars attacked and slaughtered French garrisons, cut the lines of communication, ambushed couriers and generally rendered the French position in Spain completely untenable. Meanwhile, there were coastal raids, when dashing frigate captains – real-life Captain Hornblowers – sent in parties of sailors and Royal Marines from the sea, to cut out ships from well-defended ports. These attacks were not without risk; Admiral Nelson lost his right arm during the amphibious assault on Tenerife.

All this should have added up to something, not least the establishment of an amphibious tradition, yet such forays were still seen as ancillary ventures, mounted as required, with whatever forces came to hand, not the highly specialised operations a later war showed them to be. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the main conduct of war was left to capital ships – battleships and cruisers – and big battalions; Britain's amphibious forces, never large, almost disappeared.

The small wars, colonial campaigns and conquests of the Victorian era were not greatly concerned with amphibious operations, for by then the Empire was established and needed to be controlled and extended by land campaigns. Even the landing in the Crimea was unopposed and the subsequent campaign was a disaster. As far as the British were concerned, the Royal Navy ruled the waves, while the British Army could land at will and, protected by the guns of the fleet, could march wherever it wished . . . or so it seemed until the Boer War at the turn of the century. Then the British Army met a new foe, not some ill-equipped tribesman but a resolute irregular, skilled in fieldcraft and equipped with modern weapons he knew how to use.

In the early years of the twentieth century, the scene shifted to South Africa during the South African War of

1899–1902. After some initial successes, the Boer Army found itself quite unable to defeat the ever-increasing power of the British armies in regular engagements. But after the Boers went ‘on commando’ – the name *commando* being the Boer name for locally raised parties of mounted riflemen – they were able to keep up the war for years, against the full might of the British Empire and its most famous generals, Roberts and Kitchener. The story of the British Commandos of the Second World War and the present day can be traced back directly to the South African War. Indeed, many Second World War commanders cut their soldiering teeth in that long and gruelling campaign.

One Boer commando, Denys Reitz, wrote a book about his life in the Boer commandos – called, inevitably, *Commando* – still in print and an inspiration to British soldiers some forty years later. In *Commando*, Reitz describes how small roving forces of horsemen, equipped with little more than courage, tenacity and high-powered rifles, could beat off the assembled might of an empire, though they took terrible losses and suffered considerable privation. Reitz’s account of his departure for the wars would touch the ‘get-up-and-go’ spirit essential to any Commando soldier:

> In September of 1899, we heard that British troops were moving up to the Transvaal and the Free State, and we were ordered to entrain for the Natal border. The moment we heard of this, we took our rifles, fetched our horses from the stables and within ten minutes had saddled up and mounted . . . little knowing on how long and how difficult a trail this light-hearted enlistment was starting us.

One Boer Commando blew up an armoured train. Among the passengers was an officer of the 4th Hussars, serving in

South Africa as a war correspondent. His name was Winston Churchill, Britain's Prime Minister in the Second World War and the 'Father of the British Commandos'.

The First World War (1914–18) provides two examples, one disastrous, one successful, of amphibious operations. The first was the landings at Gallipoli in the Turkish Dardanelles Strait on 25 April 1915. These landings, by British, French, Gurkha, Australian and New Zealand forces, were compromised from the start when the Royal Navy attempted to force a passage through the Dardanelles and so alerted the Turks to the coming assault. The landings met with firm resistance, and were soon checked, with great loss. The force maintained itself ashore until the end of 1915, at great cost in lives and to no visible gain, finally being withdrawn under cover of night on 8/9 January 1916. The Gallipoli landings set a temporary blight on the political career of Winston Churchill, who had been in favour of this maritime attempt to outflank the Western Front and drive Turkey out of the war. Nothing at all was achieved and the losses among the troops were considerable: 30,000 killed, 74,000 wounded, 8,000 missing or taken prisoner.

Even worse, no lessons were learned about the conduct of major amphibious operations. Churchill was forced to resign and, from then on, the British military establishment became very wary indeed of amphibious operations. Fortunately, the next amphibious operation, the Zeebrugge raid, if smaller in scale, was much more successful in execution.

On St George's Day, 23 April 1917, a force of Royal Marines, drawn from the 4th Battalion of the Corps, carried out a raid on the Belgian port of Zeebrugge. The port was believed to be a submarine base and the raiders were to block the channel and the docks and destroy the harbour facilities. The raid was carried out with considerable success; the harbour was completely blocked and the Corps

gained two Victoria Crosses. It did not stop German submarine operations, for Zeebrugge was only one of several U-boat bases, but this landing was made under the overall command of Captain Roger Keyes RN, later Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, a distinguished naval officer and believer in amphibious warfare who in 1940 became the Director of Combined Operations, in charge of Britain's amphibious and Commando forces.

Peace was forced on the Central Powers at the end of the First World War by a naval blockade, by terrible losses on the Western Front, and by the entry into the war of the United States, which offered the Allies an unlimited supply of cannon fodder should the war of attrition continue (successful strategy having very little to do with it). The war ended on 11 November 1918, and for the next twenty years the military forces of Britain quietly stagnated. Even so, a few of our Commando characters are already on stage, notably Roger Keyes and Winston Churchill, men who had some experience of irregular warfare. Given 2,000 years of history and countless examples of what an amphibious strategy could achieve, it is somewhat surprising that Britain still saw no need for a properly trained and equipped amphibious force – other than the Royal Marines – a force properly equipped for this complicated kind of warfare.

In this book, which covers the Second World War, amphibious warfare falls into two broad areas, small coastal raids and all-out amphibious assaults. Since 1664 Great Britain had maintained a force designed for these two purposes, The Corps of Royal Marines, but by 1918 the Corps had all but lost its amphibious role. The role of the Corps had become more naval than amphibious, its opportunities for shore training were limited, and even its continued existence was often in doubt. If the admirals had been forced to choose between a new battleship and the Royal Marines, the Corps might have vanished.

During the Great War, apart from Zeebrugge, the Corps had manned part of the main armament, the big gun turrets on battleships and cruisers and it had provided some infantry brigades for service with the Royal Naval Division on the Western Front. When the war ended, Corps' strength stood at 55,000 men, divided into two branches, the Royal Marine Artillery and the Royal Marine Light Infantry. This force was swiftly reduced by demobilisation to around 15,000 men, and in 1923 the two arms were amalgamated into a single Corps, the Royal Marines. The functions of this Corps were then defined by the Admiralty as 'to provide detachment for HM ships which, while capable of manning their share of the main armament, are also trained to provide a striking force . . . for amphibious operations such as raids on the enemy coastline, or for the seizure and defence of bases for the use of our own fleet'.

This directive seemed to offer the Corps the chance to develop the role it had demonstrated at Zeebrugge, but there is no further indication of the need to develop amphibious forces or specialised craft and equipment, although the problems of making assault landings had been outlined by a joint Army–Navy Committee as far back as 1913. This committee's findings had been published in *A Handbook of Combined Operations*, which laid out the problems of amphibious warfare very clearly. Analysing the problems, however, was not enough. Money was tight and nothing was done to tackle the problems, to provide the necessary craft or to train men in amphibious techniques. It was thought they could learn on the job; and the British technique of 'muddling through' was to underpin any difficulty.

Although the Corps' amphibious role was raised again by the Madden Committee in 1924, no funds were provided for equipment, training or landing craft, and when war broke out again on 3 September 1939, Britain was, as usual, woefully unprepared. The problems of Combined

Operations – which in practice meant large-scale seaborne landings with air and naval support – had by now been under review for about ten years, following the belated appreciation that Great Britain was an island. In 1930 an Inter-Service Training and Development Centre (I-STDC) was established at Fort Cumberland in Portsmouth, commanded by a naval captain, L. E. H. Maund, assisted by a small Inter-Service staff, an RAF Wing Commander, a Royal Artillery major and a then captain of the Royal Marines, J. Picton-Phillips. Colonel Picton-Phillips was later to be killed at the head of his men, leading No. 40 Commando – then the Royal Marine A Commando – ashore on the Dieppe raid in 1942.

On its formation in 1930, the I-STDC had got hold of three prototype landing craft, which were used to experiment with. The best of these craft had a top speed of five knots and drew four feet of water; none of them could get near a suitable landing beach. In the next ten years the number of landing-craft available expanded to six – but none was of a noticeably better design. On the rare occasions when there were landing exercises, the army was rowed ashore to the beaches in the launches and cutters of the Royal Navy. Nelson would have felt completely at home. Ten years of relentless prodding from the I-STDC failed to convince the War Office that landing craft or amphibious training were necessary and the centre failed to get the necessary funding or manpower.

When war broke out in September 1939 and the British Expeditionary Force departed for France, the I-STDC were given short shrift. Captain Maund sent a signal to his superiors requesting instructions for expansion, and was told that – with the BEF already established on the Continent – there would be no need for amphibious operations of any kind. The I-STDC was therefore to be shut down at once, the equipment put in store or sold, the officers and men returned to their units; the concept of

Combined Operations had been dropped . . . then, less than a year later, came Dunkirk. Now that the British had been evicted from the Continent, the need for an amphibious capability became all too obvious – yet none existed.

There is a certain gap in British military thinking. No nation has produced so many innovative soldiers; great generals and officers such as Marlborough, Wolfe, Sir John Moore, Wellington, T. E. Lawrence, Orde Wingate of the Chindits, David Stirling of the SAS – the list is endless and continues. No nation has been so willing to experiment with new methods of warfare: tanks, paratroops, the SAS, the Long Range Desert Group, the SBS, midget submarines, bouncing bombs, jump jet aircraft . . . again, the list continues. But every fighting soldier writes of the sheer weight of bureaucracy and red tape that strangles new or even obvious ideas presented to the military establishment where everything has to be done by the book, where innovation must be resisted or, better still, crushed.

This is not seen as a snag by the 'powers-that-be'; far from it. According to the book, there is, there must be, a place for everything, with everything in its place. But there is no place in the book for people with wild ideas who want to raise private armies and go about at night with blackened faces, killing sentries. Fortunately, nothing concentrates the military mind quite so much as a crushing defeat of the kind experienced by the British Army in 1940.

Between September 1939 and the spring of 1940, Hitler's armies, masters of *blitzkrieg* or 'lightning war', rapidly overran those parts of Europe which had not already been ceded to the Nazis during the years of appeasement. During the 'Phoney War', which occupied the winter of 1939–40 after the defeat of Poland, attention shifted to the northern flank, and in particular to Denmark and Norway which the German Army invaded on 9 April 1940. Denmark, with only one short strip of land to defend

against the German *blitzkrieg*, was swiftly overrun, but France and Britain were able to send forces into Norway; this turned into a mixed blessing for the Norwegian campaign was another débâcle.

The German Luftwaffe ruled the skies, and although the Royal Navy scored some successes against the German fleet and transport ships, a shortage of air cover plus the combined effects of the bitter weather swiftly led to a collapse of the Allied effort, and Norway surrendered. This disaster, however, does have two bearings on the Army Commando story. First, as a result of this defeat, Neville Chamberlain was forced to resign and Winston Churchill became Prime Minister. Second, the Independent Companies, the forerunners of the Army Commandos, took the field for the first time.

Five Independent Companies – hastily raised forces from the Territorial regiments – were sent to the Norwegian campaign because the Royal Marines, who might have been rushed north, were busy manning the guns of the fleet or serving in Coastal Artillery, their infantry role seemingly forgotten. A Royal Marines Brigade was being formed, mainly from wartime recruits – Hostilities Only or 'HO' ratings – men considered incapable of grasping the technicalities of naval gunnery; but since this Brigade – which later became a full Division – was still undermanned and quite untrained, the decision was taken to raise a number of small units – to be called Independent Companies – from the various divisions of the Territorial Army.

With the bulk of the Regular Army in France with the BEF, the Territorials provided the Home Army Commands, and they proved a fruitful source of volunteers. Each brigade was directed to furnish a thirty-man platoon for an Independent Company, with every battalion of that brigade providing a ten-man section. Each section was led by a lieutenant or subaltern, and the company was commanded

by a major. Ten Independent Companies were eventually formed and among their numbers were some famous Commando soldiers, men like Major Charles Newman, later to win the VC as CO of No. 2 Commando at St Nazaire, Major Thomas Trevor of No. 1 Commando, Major Ronnie Tod, who was to lead No. 9 Commando in Italy, and many more who appear in this book.

Each Independent Company had a strength of 21 officers and 268 men, and the first 5 companies were soon in Norway, where they did sterling service, notably in the heavy fighting around Narvik. The Norway campaign was otherwise a complete disaster. The Anglo-French forces withdrew from Norway on 8 June, the country fell to the Nazis . . . and the disaster at Dunkirk was to follow within weeks. Recruiting for the Independent Companies continued and there was no shortage of volunteers.

Charles Hustwick, a signaller, was one of the early Commando soldiers and joined No. 9 Independent Company:

> One morning they called for volunteers who wanted to see some action and I was the first to step forward. We were kitted out in battledress and sent to St Mellons in Herefordshire where we met the rest of the Company, all volunteers from 38 Division. It was a real mix-up, and not all of us were infantry. There were sappers Royal Engineers, sappers Royal Army Medical Corps, medics, Ordnance, Signals, Cavalry, Tank men, you name it, all mixed up together into No. 9 Independent Company, a complete, self-supporting unit, about 250 strong.
>
> I was a Signaller so we also got radio sets but they had been manufactured for the Romanians and all the instructions were in Romanian so needless to say it took us some time to work out how to use them but it was like that in the early days. These sets had to be carried on backpacks, plus our other equipment, rifle, 200

rounds of ammunition, water bottle, gas mask, entrenching tool – and any other odds and ends. When fully loaded with all our kit we couldn't stand upright. Our then OC, Major Siddons DCM, had fought in the battle of Mons in 1914. He had a German sabre scar on his forehead and carried an African club – a knobkerry – as his personal weapon.

The first task was to get fit and we got very fit indeed before embarking at Gourock on the Clyde. The ship had been a cattle boat and was still full of straw and manure, and we had to sweep out the cattle stalls before we could bed down. We were then told our destination – Norway. Our task was to carry out behind-the-lines warfare and interfere with the enemy lines of communication, but as you know the campaign in Norway collapsed and we returned to Glasgow – where for some reason we were greeted as heroes.

This was now the end of June 1940, the time of Dunkirk. Following their return from Norway, certain members of Nos 6, 7, 8, and 9 Independent Companies were sent to Southampton to form No. 11 Independent Company under Major Ronnie Tod. Charles Hustwick again:

We paraded for the first time at Southampton Football Club ground, The Dell, but in August 1940 No. 11 Independent Company was disbanded and we were returned to our various units. I went back to No. 9 Independent Company which was by then in the Scillies. From there we were sent to man coastal defences at Mounts Bay – it was thought that the Germans were sure to invade and every spare man was manning a position somewhere on the South Coast during the Battle of Britain. Then we heard that No. 9 Independent Company was to be disbanded and we could either return to our parent units or re-volunteer for 'Special

> Service' – type unspecified. The volunteers from No. 9 joined those from No. 2 Independent Company, who had also been fighting in Norway; and became No. 1 Special Service (SS) Battalion though nobody liked that SS title, for obvious reasons after what the German SS got up to, and it was soon changed. We mustered about 800 all ranks, under Lieutenant-Colonel Bill Glendenning, and Major Tom Trevor was the second-in-command. The CO was a gentleman in every respect. Being too large for a special service unit – most Commandos were 400 strong or less – in about October 1940, No. 1 SS Battalion broke up to form No. 1 and No. 2 Commandos. I went to join the SS Brigade Signals and started a long service in the Commando forces.

It was now late summer of 1940 and Britain was in a perilous situation. The German Army's *blitzkrieg* offensive of May–June had pushed the British Expeditionary Force back to the Channel coast from where, with collapse and surrender imminent, they had had to be evacuated. The Dunkirk evacuation was seen at the time as a miracle and it was at least remarkable. No fewer than 338,000 soldiers, most of them British, had been lifted across the Channel to the elusive safety of Britain. The British people were briefly ecstatic – not least because they could now get on and fight the war without being hindered and harassed by the French – but, as Winston Churchill remarked at the time, 'Wars are not won by evacuations.' Britain had lost her position on the Continent and it would take a major amphibious landing to get back there again.

Geoff Riley, later of No. 5 Commando, remembers being evacuated from France in 1940:

> I was on the last boat out of St Nazaire on the 19 or 20 June. My most vivid memory is of a French boy, about fourteen years of age, who was sobbing bitterly as he

watched us marched out to the dock. He clung to me, begging me to take him with us. I couldn't do that, of course, but I promised myself that I would be back with the British Army as soon as I could.

Unless they were checked, it was more than likely that the Germans would soon come thrusting across the Channel to invade Britain. If they could mount a landing, there was little to stop them once they got ashore. In the House of Commons, Prime Minister Winston Churchill told the members and the British people bluntly: 'The Battle of France is over and the Battle of Britain is about to begin.'

This could not be a purely defensive battle. Britain must display her fighting spirit and hit back, soon and often, and as hard as possible, for an army that has been soundly defeated will not be left alone to gather strength; the enemy will pursue it, and strike again. That development could only be a matter of time, for Hitler's armies had passed on from Dunkirk to capture Paris. France duly surrendered. Hitler was triumphant and an invasion must follow.

Fortunately, there was the Channel, that invaluable, 24-mile tidal ditch that has stood so often between the British people and a foreign invader. To cross the Channel Hitler must have air cover for his invasion barges, so the fight now spread to the skies where, for a few weeks in that long, hot summer of 1940, the future of Britain and the free world depended on less than 1,500 young men, the trained fighter pilots of the Royal Air Force, the men of the hour, the famous and gallant Few.

In June 1940, Britain was almost alone and her resources were limited. Other than in the Royal Air Force, where pilots from the Dominions were already in the fight, the British Empire had still to muster. The United States would not enter the war for another year and a half, until the Japanese attacked the US Fleet at Pearl Harbor in

December 1941. If the British people were not dismayed, those in the government and in High Command knew how desperate the situation really was; but even in this dark hour the fight back had already started. On 26 June 1940, a day before the French government surrendered their country to the Germans, a small British force made the first Commando raid on the Channel coast of France.

2

EARLY RAIDS, 1940–1

> '*The object of Special Service is to have available a fully trained body of first-class soldiers, ready for active offensive operations against an enemy in any part of the world.*'
>
> Lieutenant-Colonel Newman, CO
> No. 2 Commando, 1940

THE DUNKIRK EVACUATION, which rescued most of the BEF, and a large number of French soldiers, though not, alas, most of their equipment, was officially terminated on the afternoon of 4 June 1940. The first feeling, when the news of this successful evacuation was broadcast to the nation, was one of relief. That feeling was then replaced in some quarters by worry about what would happen next and how the British Army, without weapons or transport, could again be brought up to fighting trim. It was clearly necessary to gain some time, and show the enemy that Britain was still full of fight – and one way to do that was by raiding.

The birth of the Commandos can be timed almost precisely. It occurred at about 19:00 hours on the evening of 4 June 1940, when Lieutenant-Colonel Dudley Clarke, Military Assistant to General Sir John Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, the man who advised the government on military matters and relayed official policy to the High Command, was walking home from the War

Office, pondering on the need to find some way to strike back at the German forces now celebrating their victory on the Channel coast. While serving in Palestine, watching the British Army attempting to keep the Arabs and Jews from cutting each other's throats – not always successfully – he had seen how a handful of guerrillas could nullify the strength of an army corps mustering two divisions.

Clarke wondered if what had been done in Palestine could now be attempted here, on the shores of enemy-occupied Europe, where a thousand miles of coast from Norway to the Spanish frontier lay open to the Royal Navy and her amphibious forces. The difficulty was that there *were* no amphibious forces, neither men, nor equipment, nor boats to put them ashore. There was one force, the Royal Marines, who, by tradition, should have filled this raiding role, but they were now hastily manning coastal defence batteries, or serving the main armament on HM ships or – for those newly joined HO ratings – mustering for some sort of as yet unspecified service in the Royal Marines Division. Besides, they were under the Admiralty and the sailors tended to be even more hidebound than the Army Staff; in the circumstances it seemed wise to start with the Army.

That evening Dudley Clarke put his ideas down on one sheet of paper and passed it to his chief. Briefly, the idea harked back to those Boer Commando raids in South Africa at the turn of the century, suggesting that it might well be possible for something similar to be attempted on the coast of France where lightly equipped teams of fighting men, carried across in small fast ships of the Royal Navy, could harass the enemy and give evidence of Britain's willingness to fight on. It would also, Clarke suggested, demonstrate to the public at home that all was not yet lost. The gamble was not excessive, a few men and boats, and the effect might be considerable.