'EXCELLENT'
SUNDAY TIMES

'THRILLING'
SPECTATOR

'EXTRAORDINARY'
DAILY MAIL

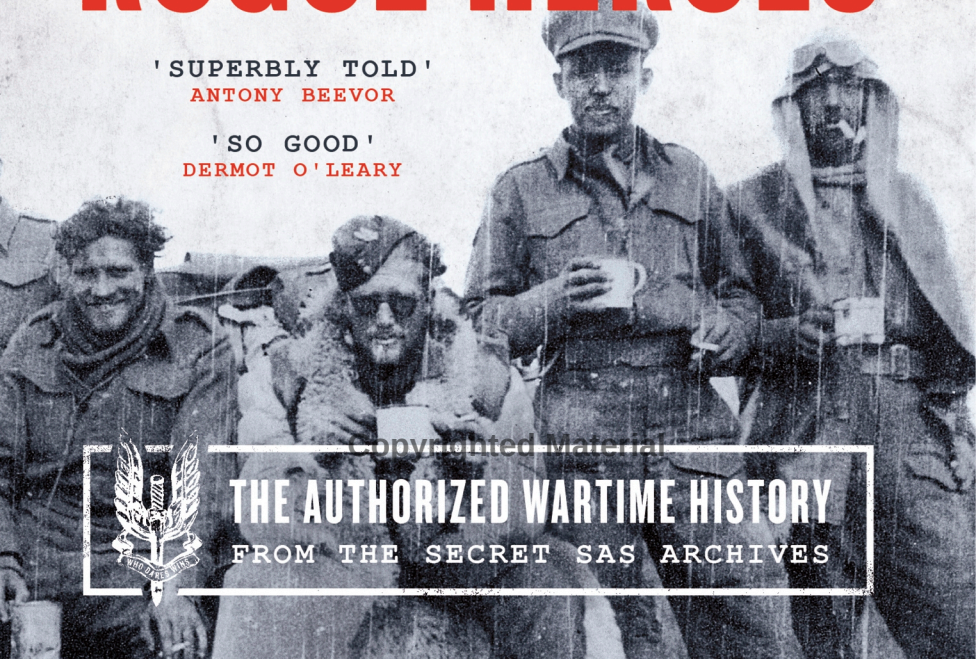
BEN MACINTYRE

SAS

ROGUE HEROES

'SUPERBLY TOLD'
ANTONY BEEVOR

'SO GOOD'
DERMOT O'LEARY



Copyrighted Material

THE AUTHORIZED WARTIME HISTORY
FROM THE SECRET SAS ARCHIVES



'Reads like a mashup of *The Dirty Dozen* and *The Great Escape*, with a sprinkling of *Ocean's Eleven* thrown in for good measure. Macintyre is masterly in using details to illustrate his heroes' bravery, élan and dogged perserverance. A gripping account'
The New York Times

'A superb study of wartime daring. A compelling take full of jeopardy: bone-shattering parachute drops, terrifying night-time raids on Nazi airfields, fizzing explosive fuses, near escapes in screaming jeeps, harrowing marches through deserts, frozen forest encounters with desperate Germans and mad, edgy drinking bouts that could end with grenades being flourished'
Daily Telegraph

'Told with brilliance. The SAS are still about the best of their kind, and how they began to achieve this is an exotic saga indeed. No one will ever tell it better than this'
Evening Standard

'Macintyre tells it with flair. A great read of wartime adventuring'
Richard Overy, *Guardian*

'A master at setting the pulse racing, Macintyre relates stories of raw courage and daring'
Tony Rennell, *Daily Mail*

Copyrighted Material

'Ben Macintyre's coverage of the SAS in North Africa and, later, Italy, France and Germany, is brilliant, blending gripping narratives of fighting with descriptions of the fears of individual soldiers before battle and their reactions to its horror'
The Times

'Grippingly readable. Macintyre tells the extraordinary story of the SAS compellingly'
Scotsman

'A riveting history of a revolutionary fighting force . . . A ripping good read' *Washington Post* (10 Best Books of 2016)

'Fascinating, entertaining, insightful, thoughtful. Macintyre tells the story of the early years of the SAS with panache'
Mail on Sunday

Copyrighted Material

SAS: Rogue Heroes

The Authorized Wartime History

BEN MACINTYRE



Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Viking 2016
Published in Penguin Books 2017
013

Copyright © Ben Macintyre, 2016

Maps designed by Jeff Edwards

The image credits on page x constitute an extension of this copyright page

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Set in 10.8/13.30 pt Bembo Book MT Std
Typeset by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–18686–2

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Copyrighted Material

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

You are 'the best of cut-throats:' – do not start;
The phrase is Shakespeare's, and not misapplied:
War's a brain-spattering, windpipe-slitting art,
Unless her cause by Right be sanctified.

Lord Byron, *Don Juan*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

List of Maps ix

Image Credits x

Foreword by the Patron of the SAS Regimental Association xi

Author's Note xiii

A Note on Sources xvii

Prologue: Into the Dark 1

PART I: WAR IN THE DESERT

1. Cowboy Soldier 5
2. L Detachment 17
3. Recruits 27
4. Into the Desert 47
5. The Long Range Desert Group 57
6. Devil Country 63
7. A Party of Ghosts 75
8. Blitz Buggy 83
9. Benghazi Bed and Breakfast 97
10. Seven Airfields 111
11. Mass Sabotage at Sidi Haneish 131
12. Desert Doctors 145

Copyrighted Material

13. Quite, Quite Mad 157
14. Alamein 171

PART II: WAR IN EUROPE

15. Italy 193
16. Bulbasket 213
17. Houndsworth 227
18. An Eye for an Eye 241
19. Paddy McGinty's Goat 253
20. A Predilection for Risk 261
21. Battaglione Alleata 277
22. Into the Reich 289
23. Liberation 303
24. Who Dares Survives 311

Afterlives 319
Wartime SAS Operations 327
Regimental Roll of Honour 331
Select Bibliography 339
Acknowledgements 341
Index 343

Copyrighted Material

List of Maps

1. North Africa: the desert war 14
2. Axis airfields along the Libyan coast 16
3. The Tunisian episode: Stirling's last stand 181
4. The assault on Sicily, July 1943 192
5. The SAS campaign in Italy 200
6. SAS operations in France after D-Day 212
7. Operation Tombola, March 1945 275

Copyrighted Material

Image Credits

Every effort has been made to contact all copyright holders. The publishers will be happy to make good in future editions any errors of omission or commission brought to their attention.

All photographs are from the SAS Regimental Association Archive unless otherwise noted.

Section 1: p.3 *centre* © IWM; p.4 *top left*, *top right* © National Museums Scotland; p.4 *centre left* Getty Images/Popperfoto; p.4 *centre right* Private Collection; p.4 *bottom right* Alison Smartt (née Pleydell); p.5 *top left* © National Museums Scotland; p. 5 *top right* Private Collection; p.5 *centre right* Getty Images/Keystone-France; p.6 John Lewes Archive. **Section 2:** p.1 *top* © IWM; p.1. *bottom* Getty Images/Keystone; p.4 *top* Nicola von Lutterotti; p.6 Alison Smartt (née Pleydell); p.7 *top right* Private Collection; p.7 *bottom* Getty Images/Keystone. **Section 3:** p.2 *top*, *bottom right* Private Collection; p.8 *top* De Agostini Picture Library/A. Dagli Orti/ Bridgeman Images. **Section 4:** p.3 *top* Private Collection; p.4 *top* © IWM; p.4 *bottom* Getty Images/Universal History Archive; p.6 *top* Getty Images/George Rodger; p.6 *bottom* © IWM; p.7 *top* SAS Regimental Association Archive/Mirrorpix; p.7 *bottom* The National Archives UK WO 204/13021; p.8 *top right* Private Collection; p.8 *bottom left*, *centre right* © IWM.

Copyrighted Material

SPECIAL AIR SERVICE REGIMENTAL ASSOCIATION

Founder (the late) Colonel David Stirling DSO, OBE
Patron The Viscount Slim OBE, DL

FOREWORD

THE RT HON. VISCOUNT SLIM

Many books have been written about the origins and formative years of the SAS during the Second World War, and most are excellent in their own way.

Here however, for the first time, is the full early story of the SAS based on our own Second World War Diary, personal accounts of those involved and never-before-released archive material. Ben Macintyre has drawn together a gripping tale which follows the Regiment's exploits through North Africa, to Sicily and Italy, before D-Day saw it in France and then the final thrust deep into Germany taking SAS jeep patrols to the shores of the Baltic.

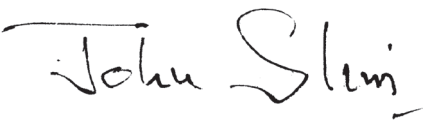
Joining 22 SAS on its formation in 1952, I was privileged to command the Regiment from 1967 to the end of 1969. I had the good luck to know David Stirling well, together with many of the Originals such as George Jellicoe, David Sutherland, Pat Riley and Jim Almonds.

I believe the author has done an outstanding job in capturing the audacity of the operations and teasing out the eccentricities of the very different characters involved; how they related to one another and fought together in these early operations was key to the success of the Regiment.

The darker side of war cannot be ignored and Ben Macintyre does not shirk from exploring the effects on all involved as the fighting becomes bloodier and more desperate in the final months of the conflict. Events have also been placed in the wider strategic context of the war in Europe. This is important as he recognizes both the core ethos of the SAS and the fact that its role and impact were strategic. This remains true to the present day.

Copyrighted Material

The SAS in the Second World War became the blueprint upon which other special forces around the world are based. This is the first SAS authorized history. It is a cracking good read and made even more fascinating because it is true.



John Slim
Patron
The Special Air Service Regimental Association

Copyrighted Material

Author's Note

Like war itself, battlefield courage takes many forms. This is a book about a style of warfare that was quite different from anything that preceded it, an unexpected species of hero, and an unusual sort of bravery.

The Special Air Service pioneered a form of combat that has since become a central component of modern warfare. It began life as a small raiding force, but grew into the most formidable commando unit of the Second World War and the prototype for special forces across the world, notably the US Delta Force and Navy SEALs.

Yet throughout the war, and for many years afterwards, the activities of this specialized regiment were a closely guarded secret. This book, describing the origins and wartime evolution of the SAS, has been written with full and unprecedented access to the SAS regimental archives – an astonishingly rich trove of unpublished material including top-secret reports, memos, private diaries, letters, memoirs, maps and hundreds of hitherto unseen photographs.

The most important single source has been the SAS War Diary. This is an extraordinary compilation of original documents, gathered by an SAS officer in 1945, bound in a single, leather-clad volume of more than 500 pages. Held in secrecy for the next seventy years, it is now preserved in the SAS regimental archives.

This is an authorized history, not an official one; I have been generously aided by the SAS Regimental Association at every stage of its production, but the views expressed herein are entirely my own, and not those of the regiment. It is not a comprehensive history. If such a thing were possible, it would be unreadable. For reasons of space and continuity, I have tended to focus on key individuals and events; many men who played gallant roles in the early days of the regiment do not appear in these pages; a few major operations have been omitted, to avoid repetition, and many minor ones. I have also given more

Copyrighted Material

prominence to the British elements of the SAS than to their French, Greek and Belgian counterparts. The Special Boat Squadron (later the Special Boat Service, SBS), emerged alongside the SAS, but the two forces divided in April 1943 and pursued largely independent paths. The wartime story of the naval special forces unit (remarkable as it was) therefore does not feature prominently in these pages. This is not a specialist military history but a book for the general reader, and I have tried to keep to a minimum the particulars of rank, unit numbers, medal awards and other military details when these are not essential to the narrative. A full list of wartime SAS operations and the regiment's roll of honour are included at the end.

Many books have been written about the SAS. Some are excellent, but often these have focused on a single individual, consequently downplaying the impact of others; some veer towards the hagiographic; many are somewhat over-muscled, tending to emphasize machismo at the expense of objectivity, physical strength over the psychological stamina that was the hallmark of the organization in its earliest incarnation. While many members of the wartime SAS exhibited extraordinary qualities, they were also human: flawed, occasionally cruel, and capable of making spectacular mistakes. The SAS has become a legend, but the true story contains darkness as well as light, tragedy and evil alongside heroism: it is a tale of unparalleled bravery and ingenuity, interspersed with moments of rank incompetence, raw brutality and touching human frailty.

At the time of its founding, the SAS was an experiment, and an unpopular one among many of the more traditional-minded officers in the British army. The idea of inserting small groups of highly trained men behind enemy lines, to carry out special operations against high-value targets, ran contrary to all the accepted notions of symmetrical warfare, in which armies faced one another across a defined battlefield. Originally a British unit, formed in the North African desert in 1941, the SAS drew fighting men from all over the world: American, Canadian, Irish, Jewish (from Palestine), French, Belgian, Danish and Greek. The regiment started small, and expanded hugely in the space of three years.

Copyrighted Material

Some exceptional warriors appear only briefly in what follows,

but a handful of individuals fought in the SAS from its inception to the war's end, from the sands of Libya to the coasts of Italy to the hills of France and into Germany. Recruits tended to be unusual to the point of eccentricity, people who did not slot easily into the ranks of the regular army, misfits and reprobates with an instinct for covert war and little time for convention, part soldiers and part spies, rogue warriors. They were, as one former SAS officer put it, 'the sweepings of the public schools and the prisons'. Success in the ranks of the SAS required a particular cast of mind, and this book is, in part, an attempt to identify those elusive qualities of character and personality.

At the end of the war the SAS was disbanded, on the erroneous assumption that such specialized troops would no longer be necessary. The importance of special forces in the prosecution of modern war has grown steadily ever since.

In 1947, the SAS was re-formed by the British government as a long-term, deep-penetration commando force. The SAS has never confirmed or denied its participation in any operation carried out after that date: in accordance with the terms of the Ministry of Defence Disclosure Policy, the post-war activities of the regiment lie outside the scope of this book, and do not feature in what follows.

The techniques employed by the SAS have changed radically over the last seven decades, but its essential nature has altered little since 1941: an elite force deployed on clandestine, highly dangerous missions beyond the capability of conventional forces.

The US defense secretary recently described the role of special forces carrying out missions against ISIS, the brutal Islamist self-styled caliphate in Iraq, Syria and (once again) Libya, where the SAS story began seventy-five years ago: 'We have the long reach . . . You don't know at night who's going to be coming in the window. And that's the sensation that we want all of [ISIS's] leadership and followers to have.' That is a definition of the role of special forces that David Stirling, the founder of the SAS, would have recognized and applauded. Today special forces are deployed more widely, and more effectively, than ever before.

Copyrighted Material

The SAS was at the sharp end of the Second World War's toughest assignments, and inflicted immense damage on enemy forces, both

material and psychological. In the desert, SAS raiding parties wrecked fleets of aircraft, terrified Rommel's troops, carried out vital espionage operations and forged a myth; in Italy they spearheaded the Allied invasion; in support of D-Day, they parachuted into occupied France to conduct guerrilla operations that helped to turn the tide of war. They paid a heavy price, in blood and sanity. The hallucinatory hell of war echoes through these pages, as well as the delight of comradeship, the pleasure in destruction and the horror of senseless death.

Bravery sometimes comes in unexpected forms, and in places far from the battlefield. The wartime history of the SAS is a rattling adventure story, but in the following pages I have also tried to explore the psychology of secret, unconventional warfare, a particular attitude of mind at a crucial moment in history, and the reactions of ordinary people to extraordinary wartime circumstances.

This is a book about the meaning of courage.

Copyrighted Material

A Note on Sources

The bulk of the source material for this book comes from the SAS regimental archives, most importantly the War Diary. I am also indebted to those who have preceded me in exploring the history of the regiment, notably Gavin Mortimer, Gordon Stevens, Martin Morgan, Alan Hoe, Damien Lewis, Lorna Almonds Windmill, Stewart McClean, Virginia Cowles, Hamish Ross, Paul McCue, John Lewes, Anthony Kemp, Martin Dillon, Michael Asher and many others. A great debt is owed to those historians who had the foresight to record, on paper, film or audiotape, the memories of the participants before it was too late, and I have been fortunate to be able to draw on these. Only a handful of SAS wartime veterans now remain, and I have spent many happy hours talking about the past with Mike Sadler, Keith Kilby and Edward Toms. The family of former SAS intelligence officer Robert McCready kindly shared his wartime diaries and other artefacts. Archie Stirling generously enabled me to explore the David Stirling papers. In addition to the unpublished first-hand accounts held in the archives, much valuable information is contained in the post-war memoirs published by several former soldiers, including Malcolm Pleydell, Johnny Cooper, Vladimir Peniakoff, Alan Caillou, David Lloyd Owen, Roy Close, Fitzroy Maclean and Roy Farran.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Prologue: Into the Dark

On a November evening in 1941, five elderly Bristol Bombay transport aircraft lumbered along the runway of Bagush airport on the Egyptian coast, and then wheeled into the darkening Mediterranean haze. Each aircraft carried a 'stick' of eleven British parachutists, some fifty-five soldiers in all, almost the entire strength of a new, experimental and intensely secret combat unit: 'L Detachment' of the Special Air Service. The SAS.

As the planes rumbled north-west the wind began to pick up, bringing the electric inklings of a brewing storm. The temperature inside dropped quickly as the sun slipped below the desert horizon. It was suddenly intensely cold.

The fledgling SAS was on its first mission. Codenamed Operation Squatter, it ran as follows: to parachute at night into the Libyan desert behind the enemy lines, infiltrate five airfields on foot, plant explosives on as many German and Italian aircraft as they could find and then, as the bombs exploded, head south to a rendezvous point deep in the desert where they would be picked up and brought back to safety.

Some of the men strapped in and shivering in the rushing darkness at 18,000 feet were regular soldiers, but others were not: their number included a hotel porter, an ice-cream maker, a Scottish aristocrat and an Irish rugby international. Some were natural warriors, nerveless and calm, and a few were touched by a sort of martial madness; most were silently petrified, and determined not to show it. None could claim to have been fully prepared for what they were about to do, for the simple reason that no one had ever before attempted a night-time parachute assault in the North African desert. But a peculiar camaraderie had already taken root, a strange esprit compounded in equal parts of ruthlessness, guile, competitiveness and collective determination. Before take-off, the men had been informed that anyone seriously injured on

Copyrighted Material

landing would have to be left behind. There is no evidence that any of them found this odd.

The wind had reached gale force by the time the bucking Bombays neared the Libyan coast, two and a half hours after take-off. Storm-driven sand and pelting rain completely obscured the flares on the ground, laid down by the Royal Air Force to guide the planes to the drop zone, 12 miles inland. The pilots could not even make out the shape of the shoreline. German searchlights on the coast picked up the incoming planes, and flak began exploding around them in blinding flashes. A shell ripped through the floor of one plane and missed the auxiliary fuel tank by inches. One of the sergeants made a joke, which no one could hear, though everyone grinned.

The pilots indicated that the parachutists should prepare to jump – although, in truth, they were now flying blind, navigating by guesswork. The parachute canisters were tossed out first containing explosives, tommy guns, ammunition, food, water, maps, blankets and medical supplies.

Then, one by one, the men hurled themselves into the seething darkness.

Copyrighted Material

PART I

War in the Desert

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1. Cowboy Soldier

Five months before Operation Squatter, a tall, thin soldier lay, grumpy and immobile, in a Cairo hospital bed. The twenty-five-year-old officer had been brought into the Scottish Military Hospital on 15 June 1941, paralysed from the waist down. A letter to his mother from the War Office stated that he had suffered 'a contusion of the back as a result of enemy action'.

This was not, strictly speaking, true. The injured soldier had not set eyes on the enemy: he had jumped out of a plane, without a helmet or proper training, ripped his parachute on the tailfin and plummeted to earth at roughly twice the recommended speed. The impact had knocked him out and badly injured his spine, leaving him temporarily blinded and without feeling in his legs. The doctors feared he would never walk again.

Even before his parachuting accident, the officer's contribution to the war effort had been minimal: he lacked the most basic military discipline, could not march straight and was so lazy his comrades had nicknamed him 'the Giant Sloth'. Since being posted to Egypt with the British commando force, he had spent much of his time in Cairo's bars and clubs, or gambling at the racecourse. The nurses at the hospital knew him well, for he frequently popped in during the morning, whey-faced and liverish, to request a blast from the oxygen bottle to cure his hangover. Before his parachute jump landed him in hospital, he had been under investigation to establish whether he was malingering and ought to be court-martialled. His fellow officers found him charming and entertaining; his senior commanders, for the most part, regarded him as impertinent, incompetent and profoundly irritating. On completing officer training, he had received a blunt appraisal: 'irresponsible and unremarkable'.

Lieutenant David Stirling of the Scots Guards was not a conventional soldier.

Copyrighted Material

The writer Evelyn Waugh, a fellow officer in the commando force,

came to visit Stirling about three weeks after his admission to hospital. Waugh had been misinformed by the matron that one of Stirling's legs had already been amputated, and he would likely lose the other. 'I can't feel a thing,' Stirling told his friend. Embarrassed, as Englishmen tend to be when faced with disability, Waugh kept up a steady stream of meaningless small talk, perched on the edge of the bed, and studiously avoided the subject of his friend's paralysis. Every so often, however, he would sneak a surreptitious glance to where Stirling's remaining leg ought to be, and whenever he did so Stirling, with extreme effort, would wiggle the big toe of his right foot. Finally, Waugh realized he was being teased, and hit Stirling with a pillow.

'You bastard, Stirling, when did it happen?'

'Minutes before you came. It takes a bit of effort, but it's a start.'

Stirling was regaining the use of his legs. Others might have cried for joy; for Stirling, however, the first sign of his recovery was an excellent opportunity to play a practical joke on one of Britain's greatest novelists.

It would take two more weeks before Stirling could stand upright, and several more before he was able to hobble about. But during those two months of enforced inaction he did a great deal of thinking – something which, in spite of his reputation as a feckless gadabout, he was rather good at.

The commandos were intended to be Britain's storm troops, volunteers selected and trained to carry out destructive raids against Axis targets. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had decided that the ideal theatre in which to deploy the commandos would be North Africa, where they could conduct seaborne raids against enemy bases along the Mediterranean coast.

In Stirling's unsolicited opinion, the concept was not working. Most of the time the commandos were inactive, awaiting the order for a great assault that never came; on the rare occasions they were deployed, the results had been disappointing. The German and Italian troops fully expected to be attacked from the sea, and were primed and waiting. The commando forces were simply too large and cumbersome to launch an assault without being spotted; the element of surprise was immediately lost.

Copyrighted Material

But what, wondered Stirling, if the combat troops attacked from the opposite direction? To the south, stretching between Egypt and Libya, lay the Great Sand Sea, a vast, waterless expanse of unbroken dunes covering 45,000 square miles. One of the most inhospitable environments on earth, the desert was considered by the Germans to be virtually impassable, a natural barrier, and they therefore left it largely unprotected, and entirely unpatrolled. 'This was one sea the Hun was not watching,' Stirling reflected. If mobile teams of highly trained men, under cover of darkness, could be infiltrated on to the enemy's desert flank, they might be able to sabotage airfields, supply depots, communications links, railways and roads, and then slip back into the embracing emptiness of the sand sea. A commando force several hundred strong could attack only one target at a time; but a number of smaller units, moving quickly, raiding suddenly and then retreating swiftly, could destroy multiple targets simultaneously. The opportunity to attack the enemy in the rear, when he least expects it, is the pipedream of every general. The peculiar geography of North Africa offered just such a possibility, reflected Stirling, as he lay half paralysed in his hospital bed, trying to wiggle his toes.

Stirling's idea was the result of wishful thinking more than expertise; it had emerged not from long hours of reflection and study, but from the acute boredom of convalescence. It was based on intuition, imagination and self-confidence, of which Stirling had plenty, rather than experience of desert warfare, of which he had none.

But it was an inspired idea, and the sort of idea that could only have occurred to someone as strange and remarkable as Archibald David Stirling.

Stirling was one of those people who thrive in war, having failed at peace. In a short life, he had tried his hand at a variety of occupations – artist, architect, cowboy and mountaineer – and found success in none of them. Privileged by birth and education, intelligent and resourceful, he could have done anything, but had spent the early part of his life doing little of any consequence. The war was his salvation.

Copyrighted Material

The Stirling family was one of the oldest and grandest in Scotland, an aristocratic clan of great distinction, long military traditions and

considerable eccentricity. David Stirling's mother was the daughter of Lord Lovat, the chief of Clan Fraser, with bloodlines stretching back to Charles II. His father, General Archibald Stirling, had been gassed in the First World War, served as an MP and then retired to Keir, the 15,000-acre Perthshire estate that had been the family's seat for the previous five centuries. The general presided over his sprawling lands and unruly family like some benign but distant chieftain observing a battlefield from a remote hill. David's formidable mother Margaret was the more forceful presence: her children were in awe of her. Keir House, where David Stirling was born in 1915, was a vast edifice, freezing cold even at the height of summer, filled with old hunting trophies, noise and devilment. The Stirling parents drummed good manners into their six children, but otherwise largely left them to get on with their lives. The four Stirling boys, of whom David was the second in age, grew up stalking deer, hunting rabbits, fighting and competing. One favourite game was a form of sibling duel using air rifles: two brothers would take pot shots at each other's backsides in turn, moving closer by a pace after each shot.

Despite this aristocratically spartan start in life, David Stirling was not a hardy child. Dispatched to Ampleforth, the Catholic boarding school, at the age of eight, he caught typhoid fever and was sent home for an extended period of recovery. A speech impediment was eventually cured by surgery. He disliked sport, and did his best to avoid it. He grew at an astonishing rate: by the age of seventeen, he was nearly 6 feet 6 inches tall, a gangly beanpole, wilful, reckless and exceptionally polite. Largely by virtue of his class, he was awarded a place at Cambridge University, where he misbehaved on a lavish scale, spending more time at Newmarket racecourse than he devoted to studying. 'If there was a serious side to life it totally escaped me,' he later admitted. If he ever opened a book, the event was not recorded. After a year, the master of his college informed him that he was being sent down, read out a list of twenty-three offences that merited expulsion, and invited him to select the three which he considered 'would be least offensive' to his mother.

Copyrighted Material

David Stirling decided he would become an artist, in Paris. He had little talent for painting. But he did have a beret, and a yen for the

bohemian life. Some have detected 'a strange mixture of beauty and the macabre' in his paintings. His French art tutor, however, did not, and after a year and a half of louche Left Bank life, he was told that while he might one day make a half-decent commercial draughtsman, his 'painting would never achieve any real merit'. Stirling was profoundly upset; his failure as an artist marked him for ever, and perhaps explained the consistent ripple of insecurity that lay beneath the carapace of confidence.

He returned to Cambridge to study architecture, but soon dropped out again. A job with an Edinburgh architect was short lived. His mother now intervened, and told her second son that he must stop drifting and do something with his life. Stirling announced that he intended to become the first person to climb Mount Everest.

Stirling was quite the wrong shape to scramble up rocks. He had little experience of serious climbing. He also suffered from vertigo. Intrepid British mountaineers had been trying to scale the world's highest mountain since 1921; dozens had perished in the attempt. Climbing Everest was an expensive, dangerous, demanding business, and Stirling was broke – none of which dented his determination to succeed where other, qualified, experienced, well-funded mountaineers had failed. He spent a year climbing in the Swiss Alps, bankrolled by his mother, before joining the supplementary reserve of the Scots Guards, his father's regiment, in the hope that part-time army training might bolster his mountaineering quest. He soon drifted out of uniform, repelled by the mind-swamping boredom of the parade ground. In 1938, at the age of twenty-three, he went to the US with the intention of climbing the Rockies and riding across the continental divide. He was south of the Rio Grande, having spent several months herding cattle in the company of a cowboy named Roy 'Panhandle' Terrill when he learned that Britain was at war – the run-up to which had, it seems, almost entirely passed him by. His mother sent a telegram: 'Return home by the cheapest possible means.' Stirling flew to Britain on a first-class ticket, and rushed back into uniform.

Copyrighted Material

The David Stirling who turned up at the Guards Depot in Pirbright in the autumn of 1939 was a strange mixture of parts. Ambitious

but unfocused; steeped in soldierly traditions, but allergic to military discipline. A boisterous exterior belied a man prone to periodic depressions, whose extreme good manners and social ease masked moments of inner turmoil. Stirling was a romantic, with an innate talent for friendship but little desire or need for physical intimacy. He appears to have lost his virginity in Paris as an art student. With Panhandle Terrill he had enjoyed the company of 'some of those dark girls down in Mexico'. But his natural shyness coupled with a stern all-male Catholic education seems to have left him in fear of women. 'The totally confused, guilt-ridden years of puberty exerted an awful pressure,' he once remarked. He spoke of 'predatory females'; his few romantic encounters were described as 'close escapes', as if he feared entrapment. 'Bonds of any sort are a pressure I find very difficult to bear,' he admitted. He had many women friends, and according to his biographer was 'not unattracted to the opposite sex'. Yet he seemed to relax only among men, and 'in wide open spaces'. Like many convivial people, he was slightly lonely. A warrior monk, he craved action and the company of soldiers, but when the fighting was over, he embraced solitude.

Stirling was also possessed of a profound self-belief, the sort of confidence that comes from high birth and boundless opportunity. He was blithely unconstrained by convention, and regarded rules as nuisances to be ignored, broken or otherwise overcome. He was elaborately respectful towards his social inferiors, and showed no deference whatever to rank. Strikingly modest, he was repelled by braggarts and loudmouths: 'swanks' (swanking) or 'pomposo' (pomposity) were his gravest insults. His manner seemed vague and forgetful, but his powers of concentration were phenomenal. Despite an ungainly body and a patchy academic record, he had a stubborn faith in his own abilities, intellectual and physical. Stirling did exactly what he wanted to do, whether or not others thought his aims were sensible or even possible. The SAS came into being, in part, because its founder would not take 'no' for an answer, either from those in authority or from those under his command.

Copyrighted Material

Just as he had been bored by the logistics of mountaineering, so Stirling found the practical preparations for war indescribably

tedious. Like many young men, he was hungry for the fight, but instead found himself shackled to a regime of endless marching, kit inspections, weapons drill and all the other rote elements of military life. So he rebelled. Slipping away from the Guards Depot at Pirbright, he would frequently head to London for a night of drinking, gambling and billiards at White's Club; just as frequently he was caught, and confined to barracks. Stirling was a nightmare recruit: impertinent, indolent and often half asleep as a result of his carousing the night before. 'He was quite, quite irresponsible,' recalled Willie (later Viscount) Whitelaw, a fellow trainee officer at Pirbright. 'He just couldn't tolerate that we were being trained along the lines of the last major conflict. His reaction was just to ignore everything.'

It was at the bar of White's Club, one of the most exclusive gentleman's clubs in London, that Stirling first learned about a form of soldiering that seemed much closer to the adventure and excitement he had in mind: a crack new commando unit intended to hit important enemy targets with maximum impact. Stirling's cousin, Lord Lovat, had been among the first to volunteer for the commandos.

Formed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock, the force – christened Layforce – would consist of more than 1,500 volunteers formed into three commando regiments, recruited from the Foot Guards (the regular infantry of the Household Division) and other infantry regiments: an elite troop of specialized, highly trained raiders and marauders. Lord Haw Haw, the British traitor who broadcast radio announcements into England for the Nazis, would describe the commandos as 'Churchill's cut-throats'.

Stirling immediately volunteered. Soon he found himself stomping through the wilds of western Scotland, familiar boyhood terrain and far from the parade ground he loathed. For weeks the commandos trained in the bogs and bracken of the Isle of Arran: route marches, unarmed combat, endurance, fieldcraft, navigation and survival techniques. Even at this early stage, some of the other volunteers noticed something different about the tall young officer: Stirling was a natural leader, with an understated but adamant faith in his own decisions, and a gentlemanly insistence on doing everything he asked of his men, and more. On 1 February 1941, Layforce sailed for the

Copyrighted Material

Middle East. Finally Stirling was heading into battle, leaving behind a long string of unpaid bills: from his bookmaker, his tailor, his bank manager and even from a cowboy outfitter in Arizona, seeking payment for a saddle.

Layforce had been deployed to disrupt Axis communication lines in the Mediterranean, and to spearhead the capture of Rhodes. But by the time the commandos arrived in Egypt, the military situation had changed: the arrival in Cyrenaica (eastern coastal Libya) of the Afrika Korps, the German expeditionary force under Erwin Rommel, had transformed the strategic picture. The British were now scrambling to oppose the German advances, and the first stage of the see-saw war in North Africa was under way. Initially deployed to shore up the Italian defence of their North African colonies, the Afrika Korps moved with alarming speed, driving the British back to the Egyptian border with Libya and laying siege to the coastal town of Tobruk. Instead of storming Rhodes, the commandos were split up and variously deployed to garrison Cyprus, cover the evacuation of Crete, reinforce the defence of Tobruk and carry out raids along the coasts of Cyrenaica and Syria. An assault on the Libyan coastal town of Bardia achieved little, with sixty-seven of the British raiders taken prisoner. Of the 800 commandos sent to cover the evacuation of Crete in May, fewer than 200 managed to escape – among them Evelyn Waugh, who boarded the last ship to leave. In June, the commandos successfully established a bridgehead on the Litani River in Lebanon against Vichy French forces, but lost a quarter of their attacking force.

Stirling, based in Egypt with the Layforce Reserve, was bored and frustrated. He had yet to fire a gun in action. 'We were involved in a series of postponements and cancellations, and that was extremely frustrating,' he later recalled. Before the departure of the commandos, the Director of Combined Operations had told them they were about to 'embark on an enterprise that would stir the world'. So far, Stirling had barely stirred. As always when he was under-employed, he turned to revelry. Peter Stirling, David's younger brother, was serving at the British embassy in Cairo, and his comfortable diplomatic flat in the Garden City district became the venue for riotous parties and nocturnal forays into the city's fleshpots.

Copyrighted Material

Stirling began to miss parades, and make excuses. His claims of ill health were not wholly untrue. He was stricken by a nasty bout of dysentery. Then, returning from a night exercise, he tripped over a tent rope and gashed an eyeball, requiring stitches. Stirling found the American hospital particularly comfortable, and began to contrive to spend his days there, claiming to be suffering from fever. 'In a sense, I was pretty ill,' he later argued. 'Because I would go out in the evening, having recovered from the appalling hangover caused by the previous night's activities in Cairo, and re-establish my illness by my activities the following night.' Alerted by the hospital matron, Stirling's superiors began to question just how unwell he really was. He was drinking and partying himself into serious trouble when his life was changed by a conversation, in the mess, with Lieutenant Jock Lewes, a fellow officer in the commandos who was as self-disciplined and uptight as Stirling was dissolute and nonchalant.

Lewes told Stirling that he had recently obtained a stock of several dozen parachutes, destined for a paratroop unit operating in India but accidentally shipped to Port Said, where he had appropriated them. Colonel Laycock had given Lewes permission to attempt an experimental parachute jump in the desert. Stirling asked if he could come along, 'partly for fun, partly because it would be useful to know how to do it', and mostly because he was very bored. So began an important and unlikely partnership between two men who could hardly have been more different.

Copyrighted Material

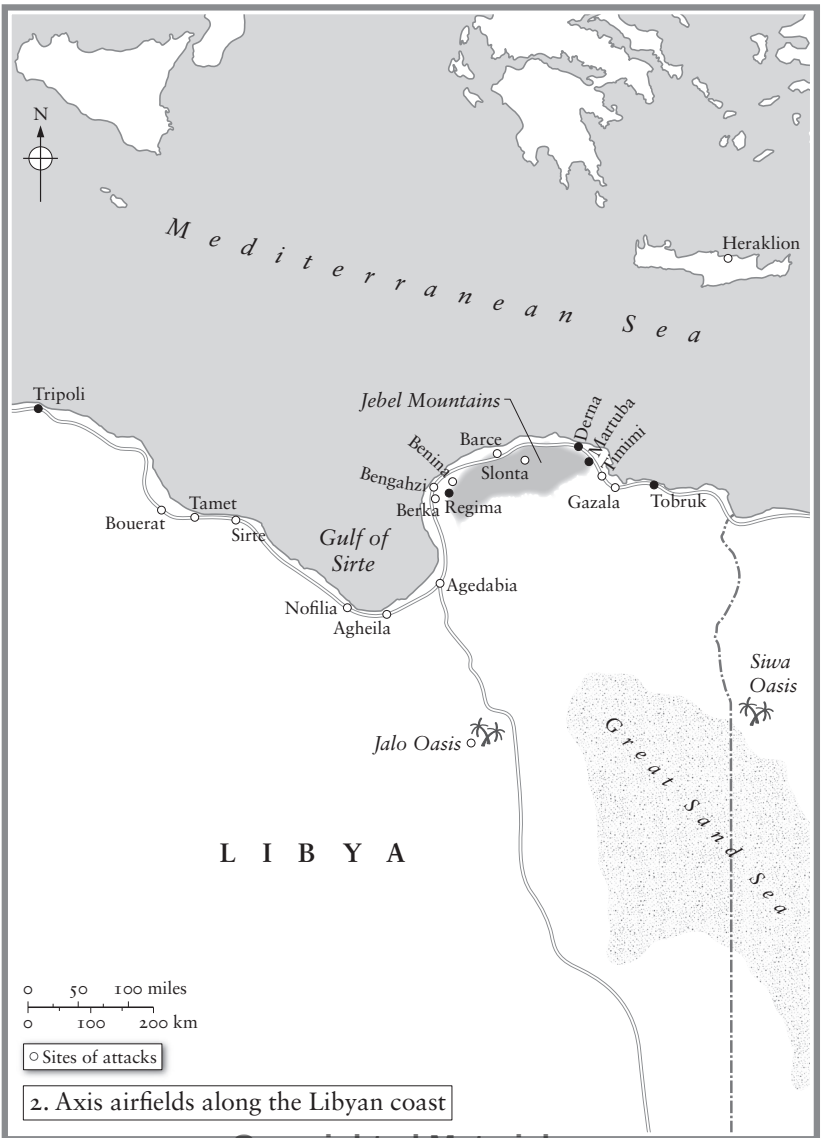


1. North Africa: the desert war

Copyrighted Material



Copyrighted Material



2. Axis airfields along the Libyan coast

Copyrighted Material

2. L Detachment

Lieutenant John Steele Lewes was a paragon of military virtue, a man of rigid personal austerity, and a martinet. Born in India to a British father and Australian mother, he had captained the Oxford University Boat Club, graduated from Christ Church and seemed destined for a career in politics or the upper reaches of the army. Having joined the Welsh Guards on the outbreak of war, he was appointed regimental training officer and billeted at Sandown Racecourse. There he was painted by the artist Rex Whistler, a fellow officer and friend, sitting on the steps of the grandstand with a Bren gun across his knees, looking as if he was about to mow down the runners and riders in the 3.15.

'Jock' Lewes was almost too good to be true. 'Be something great,' his father had told him, and Lewes intended to fulfil that injunction. He was athletic, rich, patriotic and handsome, with glinting blue eyes and an immaculately tended Douglas Fairbanks Jr moustache. He appeared in the society magazines, and was courting a well-born and sensible woman called Miriam Barford, whom he lectured on the importance of sacrifice and hard work. 'We acquire more merit on this earth in doing gladly those tasks set us which are least attractive than by any amount of enjoyable labour,' he wrote.

Lewes was stern, workaholic and slightly priggish, with a deep 'contempt for decadence', according to his biographer. He had no sense of humour, and 'his austerity could be simply too much for other mortals.' 'You wouldn't find Jock catching a quick drink in Cairo or taking a flutter at the racecourse,' observed Stirling, who was usually to be found doing one or the other.

The two officers did, however, share an urgent desire for action, and a belief that the commandos were not being properly used. A rising star in Layforce, Lewes had already demonstrated his pluck and ingenuity in several operations, including a successful attack using motorized gunboats on an enemy airbase near Gazala on the

Copyrighted Material

Libyan coast. Lewes had been impressed by the Germans' use of paratroops in the conquest of Crete, and thought that a parachute force might prove a useful addition to future Allied commando operations. He began lobbying senior officers to be allowed to form his own, hand-picked unit, and wrote home that he had been given 'that which I have longed for – a team of men, and complete freedom to train and use them as I think best'. Stirling was struck by Lewes's calm demeanour, great professionalism and experience. According to one version of the story, he had got wind of what Lewes was up to and deliberately sought him out in the officers' mess. Others say the conversation was purely accidental. Either way, the ideas of Lewes and Stirling were converging.

There was, however, another, secret side to Jock Lewes that might have given Stirling pause, had he known about it: Lewes had flirted with Nazism.

On a cycling tour to Germany in 1935, Lewes had been deeply impressed by the organization and strength of the nascent Third Reich. 'England is no democracy and Germany far from being a totalitarian state,' he wrote to his parents. 'Dazzled' by National Socialism, he visited Germany several times in the following years, returning home more smitten from each visit: he mixed with German high society, attended a 1938 ball where Hitler and Goebbels were guests of honour, and fell in love with a young German woman, Senta Adriano, an enthusiastic member of the Nazi party. He mooned over Senta's 'frankness and sincerity', her 'golden hair, eyes greeny blue and well spaced, fine delicate eyebrows – not plucked'. Plucked eyebrows would have been a mark of frivolity.

Then came *Kristallnacht*, the night of broken glass, as Nazis rampaged through Germany and Austria, smashing and looting Jewish shops, businesses and synagogues. Jock Lewes may have been politically naive, but he was not a fool: the events of November 1938 provoked in him a violent and painful change of heart. Suddenly, with horrible clarity, he understood the true nature of the regime he had appeased, politically and emotionally.

Copyrighted Material

'I have been struggling to retain my belief in German sincerity but only a fanatic faith could withstand the evidence they choose to

put before us,' he wrote. 'I swear I will not live to see the day when Britain hauls down the colours of her beliefs before totalitarian aggression.' He broke off his engagement to Adriano, and became, almost overnight, a ferocious opponent of Nazism. 'I shall willingly take up arms against Germany,' he wrote. He felt he had been duped, both by the Nazis and by the fascist woman he loved. 'He took the lie personally'; he was out for revenge.

Lewes's determination and ruthlessness, his utter dedication to the task of fighting Germany, was the reaction of a man who has been wronged by a faithless lover, one who has made a terrible mistake, and needed to make amends.

The light was already fading when Lewes, Stirling and four other men climbed into an elderly biplane to perform the world's first desert parachute jump: for Stirling, a jaunt; for Lewes, the next stage in his campaign of revenge against Nazi Germany. The Vickers Valentia, on loan to the Royal Air Force, was used to deliver mail; it was almost comically unsuitable for parachuting. The parachutes purloined by Lewes were designed with static lines to be clipped to a steel cable, attached fore and aft: as the parachutist left the plane, the line would pull out the folded parachute until fully extended, at which point a connecting thread would snap and the parachute canopy should fill with air. There were no parachute instructors in the Middle East, but a friendly RAF officer advised them to 'dive out as though going through into water'. The team practised by jumping off the plane wings, a fall of about 10 feet. By way of a test, Lewes tossed out a dummy parachutist, made from tent poles and sandbags, at a height of 800 feet. 'The parachute opened okay, but the tent poles smashed on landing.'

Lewes and Stirling agreed they were ready to go: they would simply tie the parachute lines to the legs of the passenger seats, open the door and dive out. The pilot took off from the small airfield 50 miles south of Bagush, circled once and then gave the signal to jump: Lewes and his batman went first, followed by a volunteer named D'Arcy and then Stirling. D'Arcy later wrote: 'I was surprised to see Lieutenant Stirling pass me in the air.' But not half as surprised as Lieutenant Stirling. His parachute had snagged on the tailfin of the plane and

Copyrighted Material