

RM MUSEUM GUIDE SHEET 048: COMMANDOS

The word 'Commando' originates from the South African War of 1899-1902, and was used to name the groups of irregular Boers that were raised by electoral district to fight the British. Their methods of living off the land combined with hit and run raids managed to prolong the war for some eighteen months after their conventional forces had been all but defeated by October 1900.

The German 'Storm Troopers' of the First World War did much to impress an aggressive image, with their high mobility, stick grenades, and early automatic weapons; so much so that Winston Churchill referred to them in a minute of 18th June 1940 "What are the ideas of the C-in-C about Storm Troops.." By coincidence Lieutenant-Colonel Dudley Clarke RA had had the same thought twelve days earlier as he watched the remnants of the British and French Armies arriving from Dunkirk. Commando raids on enemy occupied Europe could be the only offensive military action possible in this theatre until a full invasion could be mounted. Britain would also be forced on the defensive elsewhere, with the desert army being driven back into Egypt and the Japanese taking Singapore. Something needed to be done to boost morale and provide some form of offensive action against the Axis forces. The raising of small raiding units would provide this requirement without diverting precious resources needed for the rebuilding of Britain's conventional forces.

The 'Independent Companies' raised from 1940, subsequently evolved into twelve numbered Army Commandos, but the training of these volunteers was left to the combination of their individual regiments, and the unit they formed. Inevitably this meant there was a marked variation in standards. A formal syllabus of training was devised and evolved under Colonel Charles Vaughn, a former drill Sergeant of the Coldstream Guards, and training of all Commandos and RM Commandos centralised at Achnacarry, in Scotland, between February 1942 and March 1946.

In spite of their amphibious tradition and suitability for this role, the Admiralty was reluctant to divert their Royal Marine manpower into the Commando venture. They maintained the view that the sea-borne Royal Marine detachments within the global fleet offered the necessary military landing capability for the Navy's activities in a number of oceans.

The Royal Marines were additionally committed to a Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation. This force consisting of Infantry, Anti-Aircraft, Searchlight, Anti-Tank and other units, was deployed to Egypt, and then to Crete to build up defences following the British evacuation from Greece, but soon found itself having to fight its way out after a major German air and sea-borne invasion. Elsewhere a Royal Marine unit called "Force Viper" was deployed to Rangoon for coastal patrolling but it too had to fight its way out after the Japanese invaded Burma in 1942.

Back home the Combined Operations Organisation started to take shape under Lord Mountbatten's leadership. The army had responded to the

challenge by forming the initial Commando units that served with great distinction throughout the war. Meanwhile, the RM Division, as it was called, lay idle as a complete unit. "I have heard nothing of the Royal Marine Division since the Royal Marine Brigades went on the Dakar expedition " wrote Churchill in a minute dated 3rd June 1942," what are the plans for its employment?" The Admiralty got the hint, and with pressure from Lord Mountbatten, the Chiefs of Staff Committee broke up the RM Division and the MNBDO's and between 1942 and 1943 started to form them into Commandos.

The first 'Royal Marines Commando' was deployed in the Dieppe raid of August 1942, and was perhaps fortunate to be ordered to turn back before landing too many of it's men into the carnage the operation had become on the beaches. A month later 11th RM Battalion, the infantry element of MNBDO 1, was decimated in the ill-fated raid on Tobruk, and this provided the spur to reorganise.

40 Commando rebuilt itself from the survivors' of Dieppe, while the 8th Battalion became 41 Commando. The Commando Training School at Achnacarry then produced 42 to 48 Commandos. 40 and 43 Commandos served in Italy, the Aegean, and Yugoslavia, 42 and 44 Commandos in Burma, and the remainder worked up for the invasion of France. 41 Commando initially took part in the operations at Sicily and Salerno in 1943 but after taking 50% casualties returned to Britain to rebuild for D-Day.

Commandos were by now placed in brigades known as special service brigades, combining army and Royal Marine Commando units into battalion size for larger assaults and operations. The small raids were now conducted by specialist sub-units such as Small Operations Group, Small Scale Raiding Force, and elements that would be better known as the SAS and SBS.

Combined Operations also required new support units such as landing craft crews, engineers and the formation of a Royal Marines Armoured Support Group, in which Royal Marines manned "Centaur" tanks that could fire from landing craft whilst approaching the shore, and then land and deploy from the beaches.

On D-Day, 6th June 1944, some 17,500 Royal Marines took part in their largest deployment in Corps history. Around 2000 were Royal Marine Commandos, while the remainder served in two thirds of the Landing Craft and in the warships bombarding the defences. The success of the operation carried the Royal Marines Commandos forward into France and north-west Europe. However, as lines of communication got longer the impetus petered out and the Allies badly needed to open up the port of Antwerp to improve the supply line. To do this, it was necessary to seize control of the Scheldt and this required the capture of the Island of Walcheren, which was heavily defended by the Germans. The result was one of the bloodiest fights the Commandos had ever faced with 41, 47 and 48 Commandos landing under heavy fire. In covering them, the landing craft support vessels had to fight an unequal artillery duel with the German shore batteries and many were sunk or

crippled with heavy losses. However, with great determination the Commandos fought their way ashore and the Germans were finally driven out.

In April 1945 at Lake Comacchio in north-east Italy, 43 Commando fought a battle to dislodge the Germans from their strongly held position. It was here that Corporal Tom Hunter charged alone with a Bren gun to draw fire from German machine guns, thus enabling his troop to reach cover. He was killed soon afterward, but was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his gallant action.

In Burma 42 and 44 Commando fought in the bitter fighting at Akyab, Myebon and Kangaw, along with raids along the Arakan coast. The surrender of Japan was marked at a ceremony in August 1945 when the Union flag was officially hoisted ashore at Yokohama, fittingly by Major P Norcock RM, whose grandfather had carried the Colour with the Royal Marines Battalion which landed in Yokohama in 1870.

In 1946 the army commandos were disbanded and the responsibility for the provision and training of Commandos became that of the Royal Marines.

Many of the elements of the twelve-week Achnacarry Commando course of the Second World War are still present in modified form in the current course undertaken by recruits at the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines (CTCRM) at Lympstone, Devon. This base was known as Exton in 1939 and undertook the training of 'Hostilities Only' Royal Marines during the 1940s. The physical training, cliff climbing, unarmed combat, speed and cross-country marches, field-craft, and boat-work of the Achnacarry course have all evolved into the current CTCRM programme. Coupled with map reading, navigation, survival, and advanced weapon and Infantry skills, the course is now thirty weeks in duration, but does include the basic training that was taken for granted for candidates at Achnacarry. The 'Young Officer' course runs to almost forty-seven weeks, and includes identical Commando training elements to the recruits, only with the completion times reduced, for example on the endurance and assault course, and the thirty-mile load carry.

The Royal Marines are the only UK armed service that carry out military training to Operational Performance Standards for officers and men at the same establishment. The fact that both have occasion to see the other during such arduous training, as well as work together during field exercises, creates the basis of a mutual respect.

Upon the successful completion of their courses, the officers and recruits individually receive their Green Berets prior to a Pass-Out Parade. The senior recruit squad is known as the King's Squad, and a 'Kings Badge' can be awarded to the best all round recruit within it, if merited. Likewise, The Commando Medal can be awarded to any officer or man who throughout training shows exceptional defined qualities.