

DUNCAN FALCONER

FIRST
INTO
ACTION



A DRAMATIC PERSONAL
ACCOUNT OF LIFE IN THE

SBS

After leaving the SBS, **Duncan Falconer** opted to live and work in America. This is his first book.

A Dramatic Personal Account of Life in the SBS

Duncan Falconer

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*God and the soldier all men adore
in time of trouble and no more
for when war is over and all things righted
God is neglected and the old soldiers slighted*

to absent friends

For obvious reasons, many of the names, and certain identifying features, of individuals who appear in this book have been changed, and details of certain operations and events have been appropriately disguised.

In particular the names and addresses of IRA or PIRA personnel, or members of any other paramilitary organisation against whom internal security operations have been mounted, or with whom internal security organisations have had to engage, are not their real ones.

Preface

It was not a simple decision for me to write this book. The pros and cons, political and personal, took several months to sift through my conscience. I abandoned the idea more than once, but each time the urge to write a revealing account of life in the Special Boat Service came back to nag at me. But if an accurate story of the unit was to be written, one that examined its faults and excesses as well as its glories, its nobles as well as its heroes, it would have to include equally revealing stories of the Special Air Service since the two units are joined at the hip. There is an abundance of literature available to the public describing the greatness of the SAS, so I decided to illuminate some of their blunders, just to even things out a little.

The SAS has remained unchallenged as the world's finest special forces unit since its formation during the Second World War (except when it was disbanded for a few years after 1945). Since then it has sustained its superiority by constantly updating its skills, tactics and equipment, getting stuck into fights wherever it could to keep its edge, and maintaining a level of ability, in most climates and theatres of war, at least one step ahead of the competition. The SBS was formed at around the same time and might have maintained a similar prominence, but due to a lack of foresight from its leaders and support from its parent unit, the Royal Marines (a minuscule group compared to the Army, and more traditional and less flexible), it failed to keep up with the times and in so doing lost the confidence of the combined services' commanders in chief. When a specialised military job came along, the SAS were the first, and most often the only, choice. At one time, it looked as if the SBS might never grow beyond a conventional beach reconnaissance support group with an unclear role operating behind enemy lines. Had the SBS not changed its focus and begun to look as far as decades into the future, it might never have even seen action in the Gulf War, for instance, where it was selected to be the first into action. After the unit identified and focused on a specific arena (Maritime Anti-Terrorism), the SBS's awesome improvements in skills and abilities have overflowed into other areas. Today, the SBS not only seriously challenges the SAS for pole position in the league of world special forces, it has gained the full confidence of the commanders in chief and taken over many areas the SAS once assumed were exclusively its own.

In writing this book, initially wanting to play it safe (from a security point of view – I have no desire to be a whistle-blower), I first thought about drafting a collection of anecdotes, avoiding the politics, opinions and more sensitive material. But an SBS book, the first modern one written by an actual operative, that did not look under the covers to reveal the true character of the mysterious unit seemed pointless.

I could not make the decision alone and sought advice from those whose opinions I most care about – the men of the SBS itself. I chose men currently serving and others retired, a mixture of senior NCOs and officers, and introduced the book as a purely hypothetical idea to protect them from the Directorate of Special Forces (for reasons I explain later in this preface). I did not avoid consulting men who I felt certain would be against the idea. To my surprise, the vote to write the book was almost unanimous, the abstainers being unsure. Of the dozen I talked to, none gave an absolute thumbs-down. It was impossible to get the views of the entire unit but I was confident I had a majority opinion. That does not mean the book has the blessing of the SBS. The SBS recently (unofficially) sponsored the publication of an official history of the unit that contains more hard facts about the SBS than my book, but it is a characterless record and skips all the juicy details – understandable since

was written by a civilian and edited by a rupert (our affectionate nickname for officers).

The reasons against such a book as this are obvious. The SAS, having produced somewhere in the region of thirty books by actual operatives, have blown so many whistles that their reputation within the corridors of power has been tarnished by the publicity it has attracted – all publicity for special forces being bad. The reasons I got from the SBS members who approved of my book idea hovered around a central point which was rebellious in nature. The target of their dissent was the Directorate of Special Forces (DSF). In 1997 DSF made it compulsory for every serving member and new recruit prior to selection to sign a non-disclosure contract, making it illegal to tell anyone outside of special forces anything learned while in special forces (the breadth of this relationship is not accurately defined since that is impossible). The contract was supposedly initiated to prevent further book publications where members or former members were involved. This was sound as far as security was concerned. However, the non-disclosure clause turned out to be two-pronged.

Apart from seeking to prevent the writing of books, the decree was also a control over civilian employment if it required the use of knowledge and experience gained within special forces. This was immediately seen by operatives as a threat to their future livelihoods since the majority are forcibly retired by the age of forty. For most of them their military skills are all they have. Breaking the contract, which was seen as an addendum to the Official Secrets Act, could result in a fine and/or imprisonment. The DSF were quick to point out that the contract did not mean a man could not do an unrelated job on leaving special forces, it just wanted control over who did what for whom and when. The DSF proposed an organisation, run by people appointed by the DSF that would centralise, assess and then disperse suitable civilian job offers that required the skills of former special forces operatives. Anyone with a pinch of imagination could see the idea was as flawed, hypocritical, narrow-sighted and unfair as the people who came up with it. One of the more obvious disadvantages for the SBS of this central jobs office was that it was manned mostly by former SAS operatives who naturally, looked after their own (SAS) first. This became a bit too obvious when certain water-oriented security jobs went to former SAS operatives who couldn't tell the difference between Boyle Law and an egg recipe. The DSF went on to threaten that any member who did not sign the contract would be kicked out of special forces. Many SBS operatives said they would not sign on principle until their considerations were noted and the contract amended. They were ignored, and by the time the deadline to sign arrived, only two SBS members, two senior NCOs and highly respected individuals, remained steadfast in their threat and refused to put their mark on the paper as it was written. The DSF booted them out without review or court martial. To my knowledge, neither of the men planned to write a book or teach special forces techniques abroad. One of them recently moved to Russia to run security patrols on a river owned by a fish company, and the other is a published poet.

While in pursuit of opinions on my proposed book, I visited a friend at his house one sunny weekend. Stan, a lieutenant who made his way up through the ranks having served some eighteen years in the Branch, was digging in a complex web of pipes throughout his garden. He was putting together an automatic sprinkler system so that in future, when he was called away unexpectedly, and no matter how long for, his lovingly manicured flowerbeds would get all the water they needed. As he put the finishing touches to the system, he explained his argument in favour of such a hypothetical book, hypothetical because the DSF even made it an offence not to report even the suspicion that such a book was being written (it was all beginning to feel a bit like a 'Tolpuddle conspiracy'). Stan's reason was sponsored by the experience of another SBS member, or to be more precise, of his children. Apparently his two boys had been getting a hard time from school friends because their dad was in the SBS, a unit, the friends claimed, that was not really special forces and whose members d

nothing other than paddle around in boats all day. The friends also claimed the SAS were the tops and the only special forces unit worth being a member of. This was obviously due to the spate of books, TV shows and press coverage the SAS was getting. It was upsetting for the children, who even began to show signs of doubt about their dad's importance. Stan felt it was about time at least one book by an SBS operative told the facts. It was not the best of reasons since it was purely ego-driven, but it made the list of considerations. Stan's own footnote was that he wholeheartedly believed it was far more demanding to get into the SBS than the SAS, both physically and intellectually, because of the selection process and nature of the job. With that, Stan tightened the last nut on the sprinkler system.

'And now for the moment we've all been waiting for,' he declared as he went into the house to turn the water on.

He joined me as the first sprinkler heads spluttered to life, forcing the air-pockets from the pipes one after the other in quick succession.

'Who needs a plumber, eh? Just takes a bit of ingenuity and intelligence,' Stan said, tapping his forehead with his cranium to reinforce his earlier point about the superior intelligence of the SBS.

Suddenly, we noted steam coming off the sprinkler heads and spreading to the grass and flowerbeds. The water had turned boiling hot. Stan had accidentally plumbed into his central heating system. As I charged into the house to turn the water off, I decided it might not be wholly accurate to claim the superior intelligence.

As for the execution of the book, I decided that, since I had been an SBS operative for many years, the reader might appreciate discovering the SBS as I did, which was in rather unusual circumstances. This personal guide through the early part of the book gives it the unavoidable impression of being autobiographical. But once into the world of British special forces, I drift to the wings to let the sometimes tragic, sometimes humorous experiences of other SBS members tell the story. While the book often gives the impression of a conflict and great division between the SAS and SBS, it is really a story of their coming together. For the future of the two great units ultimately lies on a single path.

When all is said and done, I can only feel pride that the two finest special forces units in the world both come from the same small group of islands. After reading some of the cock-ups by both units, the reader might wonder how true that statement is. Bear in mind it's a most dangerous and dynamic business and the rules are rewritten every day. Anyway, believe me, you should see some of the other units out there.

I was in my first ambush waiting to kill two men I had never seen before. Christmas was not far away and it was cold and wet. I was twenty years old and alone, outside the back door of a stone farmhouse that had been built more than a century ago. I had a partner from the other special forces unit, an SAS trooper, who was somewhere covering the front. The clouds were low and heavy, making it one of those exceptionally dark nights. I was motionless, crouched like a Gothic carving in the blackness, as much a part of the run-down building as the moss caked to its sides. The farmhouse lay in a dip in the drenched Irish countryside surrounded by clumps of bushes and a few trees. Everything was black. Spindly, leafless twigs surrounding me were charcoal streaks against a barely lighter background. Trying to figure out my surroundings was something to do to pass the time while I waited for the men to come.

I was sitting on a mound of earth and roots under a stunted tree close to the back door, gripping my black, rust-proof M16 assault rifle. The safety-catch was off and my wet, leather-gloved left hand gripped the tapered, Toblerone-shaped plastic stock, while my right encircled the pistol-grip. I had cut the index finger off my right glove to expose the finger which rested outside the cold trigger-guard. I had to remain sensitive and unencumbered to find the trigger instantly. The ground all around the farmhouse was a swamp of creamy mud pitted by the daytime traffic of farm animals and humans. Every indentation filled with black rainwater. It looked as if an army had recently trudged through.

The air was still. All was silent. A faint wedge of light came from inside the house. A dim bulb had been left on. The back door was an awkward black rectangle a few yards away. I was invisible where I was, the wall of the house only feet from my back. Anyone moving to the back door would pass just in front of me and I would not miss when I pulled the trigger. I had to be that close. Any further away and I would not see them well enough to make my first shots count.

We would never have been sent out with direct orders to kill someone, but some jobs had inevitable scenarios. Going to arrest a desperate fugitive from justice, a known murderer and one who carried a weapon, was prepared to use it and would never surrender was as clear cut as a sheriff meeting a gunfighter in an old cowboy movie. Whoever got off the quickest, most accurate shot won the day.

I had been surprised, though I did not show it, when during orders for the ambush I was told I would be alone. It was indeed rare, but not unusual for an operative to be alone on an ambush, but it was new to me. There were several of us at the briefing in the TV room in our secret base-camp concealed within a regular Army camp. We were a mixture of SBS and SAS operatives. The TV was on all day and night except during briefings. Those who were not involved in the night's op, mostly admin staff, left for their rooms until we had finished. They would be back after we left to plonk back down in the musky armchairs that were never cleaned and carry on watching TV.

We were trying to cover every lead that came out of the intelligence office, keeping busy and attempting too much, which was usual when you took part in this conflict for only a few months. The tour of Northern Ireland was the first live military assignment of my career. Every ambush I had carried out until then had been in basic training with no fewer than a dozen other raw recruits. We would lie beside one another, flat on our bellies in the spiteful gorse, nudging anyone who started snoring, watching a dirt track in the middle of Woodbury Common military training area, the lights of Exmouth a faint glow on the horizon. We waited for the exercise enemy to come along and trigger the trip-wire which would set off a blinding magnesium flare behind them. Then we would open fire on

the silhouettes with blank bullets and keep firing until someone yelled 'Stop' or we ran out of ammunition.

That was not much more than a year before when I was just a noddy, a raw Royal Marine recruit. But now, incredible though it may seem, I was in the SBS, and working alone was part of the job. I could not put out any trip-flares on this ambush because I did not know from which direction the two men would come. My ears, not my eyes, were to be my most important sensory equipment that night.

The farmhouse was just north of Lough Neagh. It belonged to the family of Simon O'Sally, a Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) terrorist, one of the most wanted men in the province. He was an accomplished killer, highly professional, and a man who enjoyed his work. He moved most often at night and usually on foot across country to avoid the roads and the possibility of running into an Army checkpoint. He carried the same kind of weapon I had with me that night. It was said that he always walked with it aimed out in front with the safety catch off and his finger on the trigger. If he was going to meet anyone who had no business being out at night on his turf he intended to be the first to let rip. I had the utmost respect for him as an adversary.

That night he was supposed to come to the farmhouse. It was one of the places he used to rest up and meet colleagues. I did not dare move a muscle in case he was out there, at the edge of my hearing range, watching the house, which is what he would do for at least half an hour before moving forward. I had been there for several hours and knew all the sounds around me. Keeping still throughout the night was going to be difficult, especially for someone as young and energetic as I was. I decided that ambushes like this were better suited to old soldiers.

We knew that O'Sally was coming home one night that week with another member of his Active Service Unit (ASU). We knew because a third member of the same ASU was a tout, a snitch, and was being paid well for the information.

My backside ached against the cold earth, the damp seeping through my camouflaged pants and thermals. No matter where I sat on this mound a root would dig into me. If I had been more experienced I would have brought a small piece of neoprene rubber to sit on, and worn swimming trunks instead of underpants because they dry out quicker, but I did not know about little tricks like that yet. As long as I kept perfectly still I would remain invisible, to anyone without a thermal image detector that is, and the IRA did not have any of those.

My body heat had dried out the black cam-cream on my face and hands. It felt like old mud and cracked and aggravated me when I moved my mouth and cheeks. I contorted my face in the hope that the more annoying flakes would fall off. Only when it became a distraction would I risk lifting my hand away from my gun to pick at it. The black cream was designed to take the shine off your face, even black soldiers wore black cam-cream. In training I used to apply it as thinly as possible because it was laborious to wash off afterwards. That night I had spread it on like butter.

It started to rain halfway through the night. I was not wearing waterproofs, just regular camouflage clothing. No one had yet invented a camouflage waterproof that did not make even the slightest noise when you moved. It might not sound loud in the daytime, but at night, in these graveyard conditions, it would be like a crisp packet being opened in a dark movie theatre. My nose started to run. I let it. My sniff carried a long way at night, and it sounded like a sniff. I was a little cold, but I didn't care.

'If you can't ignore being cold and wet, don't join the SBS,' an instructor's voice echoed in my mind – words we were told the first day of the SBS selection course. Truer words were never spoken.

O'Sally and his partner would not move across country in the daylight hours, so I would stay in the spot waiting to kill them until just before dawn. If they did not show, my SAS partner and I would sneak off and spend the daylight in a hide about a mile away, then be back before dark the following

day. O'Sally would be home one night this week for sure, and I would be waiting to greet him. As I hunched under the tree, listening to every sound, the rain trickled through my short hair, down my face, following the cracks in the cam-cream and off my chin on to my gun. There was nothing else to do at times like this but think. I could drift away a little. My ears would instantly warn me of the slightest change in the routine sounds around. I had been in the SBS only a few months but my senses were already razor-sharp. There's nothing like a live ambush to bring out those old animal survival instincts we depended on so long ago to get through every day. I was virile and unpolluted.

I was the youngest and least experienced man in British special forces at that time, and that's why I was here – getting experience. I was alone, in the dark and rain, waiting for my first kill and when I thought about it, it amazed me. I was nineteen years old when I passed my special forces selection course, eleven months after joining the Royal Marines from civvy street. It is unlikely that the unusual circumstances that led me to be accepted when so young and inexperienced will be repeated.

As a boy, I thought the only special forces in the world were the US Green Berets, but that was because of a John Wayne Vietnam war movie playing in the cinemas at the time. Years later, when I was passing through Fort Bragg (a huge US Army camp in North Carolina) I walked by the Green Berets' headquarters and could not believe my eyes. Right outside the building's front doors was a larger than life-sized bronze statue of John Wayne dressed as a Green Beret. He had never been in special forces. I wondered if they had to get permission from Hollywood to build it.

I had no military ambitions when I was a kid other than playing war-games with Airfix tanks and soldiers on my bedroom floor. I enjoyed military history, mostly of the Second World War, and knew most of the major events of that war, but I knew nothing about the modern military and its equipment even though the Vietnam War was often in the newspapers. I lived in Battersea with my father in a flat on the eighth floor of a council block that overlooked London. We were close to the railways that passed through Clapham Junction. A train rattled by at least once a minute, hardly noticed after a while unless there was a tense, silent moment in a TV drama. Up until moving to Battersea I had spent the first ten years of my life in a Roman Catholic orphanage run by nuns in Mill Hill in north London. My mother had died a few months after I was born. My father wanted to get away from everything that reminded him of her and so he placed me in the orphanage and took a job aboard a merchant ship bound for Australia. He had been with my mother for ten years, meeting her not long after losing a large part of his wealth, which was rumoured to have been a considerable amount of money, in a business venture. He never told me much about her, or about any other of my relatives I had never seen. All he ever did say was that he was simply a peasant who worked hard for what he had made for himself, and that my mother was the illegitimate daughter of a Welsh nobleman. That has always been the source of some curiosity for me, wondering who my grandfather was. My mother was a beautiful woman and in her photographs with me looks composed and dignified, if a little sad. Perhaps she knew she was dying.

When my father returned from his travels he got a job working nights as a waiter in a hotel on Pall Mall Lane. When I came to live with him at age ten, he kept the same job and so I never saw much of him. He usually came home in the early hours, often a little drunk, and went into his room. I got myself up in the mornings, made myself breakfast and ironed my school clothes. When I came home in the evenings he had usually already gone to work. I would make myself supper if he had not left some on for me, which he often did. I would watch TV after homework then put myself to bed. That was my routine for many of my school years. There was a bad patch when I would head out on to the streets at night to get up to no good with school friends – bunking into the pictures or hanging around amusement arcades to fiddle money out of the machines. When I was fifteen I crept into Batters

Park late one night with four friends. Each of us had a brand new air pistol. While we were assassinating passing umbrellas from behind the park fence and coldly executing tramps, someone called the police and reported that there were 'men with pistols' in the park. Things were just beginning to heat up in Northern Ireland at that time with the introduction of Internment, the first British soldier had been killed (by a Protestant), the IRA had begun a serious bombing campaign and had also taken to shooting off-duty soldiers out on the town getting drunk. But I was oblivious to all that. I was also unaware that the police had arrived in force and were lying in wait for us at various points outside the park. As we jumped the fence to go home they sprang at us from all directions. They must have been wearing bullet-proof jackets under their coats because they looked heavy and cumbersome as they charged us, caps in one hand and radios in the other. I was swift and reckless. In my efforts to avoid being caught and ran blindly across a busy road to escape, sprinting through the familiar back-streets, pausing to make sure I was not followed, before finally going home. I was the only one to escape.

However, I was grassed on by one of the others and picked up by the police as I arrived at school the following day. I spent half that day in a cell waiting for my father to come and get me. He was not at all that angry and most of his lecturing was done at the police station for the benefit of the police. Not that he didn't mean every word of it. He knew I was not a bad kid at heart. Petty things seemed to upset him more, like making holes in the knees of my trousers. After I did that to my first new pair within a few days of having them, it was all second-hand clothes from then on. The air pistol incident put an end to my night activities and, although I had lied to the police that I had ditched it as I ran from them, I threw it away the next day anyway. I could not have imagined that only a few years later I would embark on a career that would see me operating mostly in the dark hours and carrying weapons many times more lethal than that air pistol.

I stayed at home in the evenings after that. I had few friends anyway and no money. I went to an all-boys' school, William Blake Secondary Modern, which was only a mile and a half from my home. I was not into football – I have never liked crowds – and I could not afford to keep up with clothing fashions which seemed to be the main interests of most of the boys in my year: Ben Sherman button-down collar shirts, stay-pressed, two-tone trousers and tasselled loafers. The group I hung out with most were five Jamaicans. It probably appeared to others, the white boys in my school in particular, that what I had in common with them was a lack of money. The truth was the six of us shared a pleasure for extreme mischievousness.

Our everyday aim was to get one another into trouble, and the deeper and more serious the better. While passing through shops one of us might slip something into another's bag or pocket in the hope they would be caught by the store detective for shoplifting. On one occasion we were having lunch in a pizza restaurant and, after the meal, I collected all the money we had between us and went to pay the bill. Moments later they saw me outside, across the street, waving and holding up the money with a sadistic grin. Naturally, on my way out I had told the lady at the cash register that the others did not have any money and she should warn the manager. It was entertaining watching them scramble out of the place, under and over tables while dodging the manager and staff. When we travelled on the underground, none of us would buy a ticket. On reaching our destination, when the automatic turnstile doors opened, there was a frantic, jungle-rules sprint from the platform, up the escalators and along the crowded corridors. Just before the ticket collector, the leaders slowed to a walk so as not to attract undue attention then jostled for position to get through the gate.

The first through the narrow opening would indicate the one behind, saying, 'He's got the tickets.'

The following person would say the same, and so on, until the ticket collector cottoned on and made

a grab for us. The first three usually had the best chance of getting through. If you had not passed through the gate by the time the game was rumbled, you had to run back down and take a train to the next station and try again. If you were caught, it meant being taken to the station office and your parents or the school were contacted. I was blessed with a set of powerful legs and always managed to be one of the first to the ticket collector and was never caught.

In the five years I spent at that school, apart from an Irish and a Polish boy I was friends with, the Jamaicans were the only boys who invited me to their homes for supper with their families. They all liked to come around to my house for a bite to eat because of the food I always had available. At that time, I thought most people, except my poorer friends, ate smoked salmon, pheasant, and rump steak – food my father always brought home from the fine hotel kitchens.

I did not know a single girl by name during my school years. I had not even spoken to one until my last year and that was a few fumbled sentences after she was introduced to me by her brother outside school one day. They were alien to me and gorgeous and I watched them from afar. In that last year, I had the confidence to be head boy of the school but not enough to walk up to a girl and introduce myself.

There were two reasons why one day, at eighteen years old, I decided to catch a bus to Kilburn and London's military careers offices. Firstly, the two dust-men who collected the rubbish from my council estate had engineering degrees and could not get better paying jobs, which made college seem a waste of time to me. Secondly, my relationship with my father was deteriorating and I felt I could no longer live at home. By that time I had finally lost my virginity to a girl from Tooting Bec who had picked me up off a street in France, which perhaps helped make me feel a bit more manly. That trip was my first time abroad. I was sixteen and with my Irish friend, Patrick. He was an artist, sensitive, somewhat frail, though by no means a wimp, and as penniless as I was. We owned bicycles we had built out of second-hand parts and had scraped up enough money, or so we thought, whilst working over the first part of the school holidays, for a two-week cycling trip across western Europe. We visited First and Second World War battlefields in Belgium and France, with a brief stop at Waterloo. By the time we reached Strasbourg we were very short of money, though that didn't faze us. I suppose it was because we were always short of money. To add to our problems, our bikes were vandalised by the Alsatian French. Patrick had covered both our bicycles in detailed miniatures of his favourite subject, the World War Two German war machine, which included details of its hardware and emblems of some of its infamous fighting divisions. Not very smart, but then we did not really understand what that war had meant to so many people. We did a bit of shoplifting for food, feeling a little justified since it was the locals who had wrecked our transport. Our luck changed when we were picked up by a couple of English girls in a car on their way back to London having just toured France themselves. The driver fancied Patrick, which left me in the back seat with the girl from Tooting Bec who was slight and pretty. In such close proximity, wedged between baggage and blankets for many hours, I discovered that women could bring out the very best of my wit and entertainment, and that there were heavenly rewards for making them laugh.

I stepped off the bus in Kilburn and headed for the RAF Careers Office. I fancied myself as a fighter pilot after reading a RAF newspaper advertisement and discovering that I had the minimum educational requirements to join, but as I walked around the elaborate showroom nothing sparked me and my interest dwindled. I left the building and headed down the street wondering 'What now?' Then I saw the little Royal Marines Careers Office.

I stopped at the window to stare at the action-packed posters. I had heard the Marines were some of the toughest and most highly trained soldiers in the world – that was all I knew about them. I began

wonder, if I could get through the training, whether it might do me some good and I could see the world for a few years, after which things might be a little better on the home front. Curiosity nudged me forward and I stepped into the building to look around. The marketing frills were nowhere near as elaborate as in the RAF office. Perhaps that's why I felt more comfortable there. A pleasant Royal Marine in uniform – a sergeant – approached me and began to chat with me about the job. Before long I was sitting opposite him at his desk filling out an application form. It was a spontaneous move and I felt strangely free from any doubt. The size of the step I was taking had little effect on me. I would have put more time and consideration into buying a new pair of running shoes.

One of the last things he asked me was, 'Do you think you're fit, lad?'

I had a green belt in judo by then and attended regular classes. When I answered yes he chuckled, as if he knew something I did not. It was a long time before a Royal Marine sergeant was to be quite so pleasant and cordial to me again.

There was one thing that worried me about joining the Marines, and it was not a small problem either. I thought of myself as something of a coward. There was no one I could discuss it with, nor did I want to. I would get scared before a fight, and when I dreamed of being in one I moved as if knee-deep in mud while the other person pounded me relentlessly. Dare-devil stunts didn't worry me as long as I did not pause to think about them. I once somersaulted from the highest diving board at Crystal Palace without any coaching (I landed badly and burst an eardrum that day) and I performed mindless Evil Knievel-style jumps and crashes on my bike, but the threat of a fist-fight made me go shamefully weak. My strength would drain before it began.

One day at school, my cowardice became public knowledge when I lost control when confronted by a class-mate and I ran away. I didn't stop and continued out through the school gates and down the street. By the time I slowed to a walk I hated myself completely. I could never go back. It was the worst feeling I had ever experienced. As I walked the streets the self-loathing got a desperate hold on me. I have never felt more alone in the world than on that day. What was wrong with me, I wondered. What exactly was I afraid of? I knew so many boys who seemed completely fearless when it came to fighting. How had I ended up with this disability? I had other fears, normal ones it seemed, such as fear of the dark and close confinement. I knew I had to do something about this one though, but what? How do you deal with cowardice?

I took a long and different route home that afternoon while I thought about it. My route led me past a rival school which was emptying out for the day. I was wearing my school blazer and it was not long before I heard a shout, 'There's a Bill Blakey.'

I instantly knew this meant trouble, but something kept me from running. I don't remember making a conscious decision to stay. They were far enough away at first for me to get away. But I walked on until I was aware they were running towards my back. Perhaps I wanted to punish myself. I had run away enough times that day.

They soon arrived and quickly crowded around me, six or seven boys of about my own age, pushing and shoving me between them. I did not say a word. The first punch came and then it quickly escalated into a frenzy of kicks, punches and karate techniques learned from movies. I tried to cover myself but the blows rained down. It seemed to go on for a long time, but it was probably less than a minute.

'Why don't you run?' a voice asked.

When they finally stopped hitting me they ran away laughing. I lowered my trembling hands, trying to shake off the mild concussion and ignore the bruises that felt like they were all over me. I was in pain, but it actually had not been so bad. I took a few deep breaths and walked on. Then I heard shouting and the sound of running. They were coming back. It had obviously been too entertaining for them and

they were not fully satisfied. Again I refused to run. I covered myself as the kicks and punches came with more confidence and enthusiasm this time. I felt fists come through my hands and wallop my face – someone was chopping my neck repeatedly. I could not protect my sides. I had to keep one hand over my balls as someone was repeatedly trying to kick them. There was a general effort to get me down on the ground, and although I was not defending myself I backed up against a wall and had no intention of going down. Perhaps it was my judo skills that kept me on my feet. They broke off and I ran away again, but they were soon back. This routine of breaking off the attack and coming back to resume the punching and kicking went on a few more times, I don't remember how many, until they finally left me alone.

I arrived home battered and shaken with my clothes torn in several places. I was not crying, but I wanted to. I was bleeding from cuts and welts all over. My knuckles were skinless from protecting myself. A couple of my teeth were loose and my lips were cut in several places. I think my nose was broken, but I was never sure, and my jaw felt the same, but it was not. My father had already left for work, which was a relief. I did not want to talk to anyone. I set about cleaning myself up.

I was a dab hand at sewing by then and did a pretty good job fixing my torn clothes. But as I put myself back together I felt neither cleansed nor braver. I did note, however, that the body can take a great deal of punishment. It became obvious to me I had to fix my mind, not punish my body. I suppose I was not too bright to go to such lengths to come to such a basic conclusion, but even by going the long way around, I was finding the answers to some questions in life by myself, and that was the whole point, wasn't it? But solving this one was not going to be easy. How do you correct the feeling of being a coward? I wish I had known then how much I was trying to rush things. I was so eager to get out of this irritating stage of life and on to the next. I had no way of knowing it was life experiences that formed certain parts of a person's character. But I also later learned, as a special forces operative, that a little bit of cowardice – or fear, as I later came to recognise it – was not altogether a bad thing.

The following morning, although I was stiff and bruised, I did not feel all that bad physically, and mentally OK to go to school. My father was asleep and I left the house without him seeing me. As I walked down the road I recognised one of my assailants from the previous day coming towards me. I locked my eyes on him, but nothing stirred in me – no hate or anger. About twenty yards away he recognised me. He was alone and I felt strangely superior to him. If he and five or six of his friends could not break me he did not have a chance alone. He must have come to the same conclusion because he ran across the road through busy traffic to avoid me. It was obvious who the greater coward was and I ignored him.

A month or so after my interview at the Royal Marines Careers Office a letter arrived addressed to me headed Her Majesty's Royal Marines. It was the first letter I had ever received and it contained joining instructions typed on military paper and a railway pass. In six months I was to report to the Royal Marine pre-commando training depot at Deal in Kent. I immediately felt butterflies in my stomach. I was really going to do it. I don't think a day went by when I did not look at that letter on my bedside table. I had left school by then and so, to pass the time, I took a job in a Mayfair hotel as a ledger clerk.

I was four months short of my nineteenth birthday when I stepped on to the train at Charing Cross Station carrying a small suitcase. I had said goodbye to my father at home. He gave me an awkward hug and wished me luck. I think he was about as surprised at me joining the Marines as I was. I still knew nothing about what I was getting into. I had not received any instructions other than where to report – no programme, no descriptions, no list of requirements, nothing. I had not even bothered

find out any more about the Marines. All I knew was what I saw on their posters – they wore green berets and cam-cream. I felt I was embarking on a journey to a new world and I did not have a clue what to expect.

On the train I picked up a discarded newspaper to pass the time. The first article I read was about the North Sea and the huge oil and gas fields that were opening up there. Oil company executives were worried about where they were going to find the divers they needed to work on the platforms. The North Sea offers some of the worst diving conditions in the world because of the cold and constant storms. The thought of being a deep-sea diver one day appealed to me, but I had no idea there were other implications in that article that, six months later, would change my life.

I walked through the train to see if I could spot other likely recruits. I had this idea that I was not quite big enough for the commandos even though I'd been selected to try them out. I counted half a dozen who fitted my picture of a Marine, all much bigger and harder looking than me.

When the train finally stopped at Deal, I stepped off it and headed along the platform to where a large Royal Marine corporal was barking for recruits to come forward and hand him their joining papers. I merged with the converging crowd of young men and held up mine. Those around me looked like boys too and were all shapes and sizes. I don't think any of the men I had selected on the train were amongst them. I did not realise the corporal was reaching for my papers and that my hand was drifting away from his as I looked around. He lunged forward, snatched my papers then lowered his face inches from mine.

'You little germ,' he said, as bits of spittle hit my face. 'You just went to the top of my list to be straighten out – if you make it through today that is.'

He kept glaring at me as he collected the rest of the papers. I was already a marked man.

Seventy-eight of us piled into the back of several four-ton trucks outside the station and we headed for the camp. As we drove through the town I looked out the back down on to the ordinary people on the streets going about their everyday lives. I felt different from them, as if I was off to serve some kind of sentence. For all that, it did not seem as if I was in the wrong place. I didn't want to be anyone other than myself at that moment. I found the whole experience fascinating and that fascination stayed with me throughout my career. No matter where I went or who I met, even the rich or famous with their fancy lifestyles, I knew they did not envy me, but nor did I them, not when all was totalled up. Today, when I smell diesel exhaust fumes, I often have flashes of those early days in training as a young man riding in the back of a four-tonner, and inside I smile.

When we arrived at Deal camp we piled out of the trucks and were shouted at by half-a-dozen Royal Marine instructors to form ranks and march. This was our first attempt at anything military and of course we were useless. I was still curious about my new-found colleagues, many of whom did not look like my idea of a Royal Marine Commando. It seemed obvious to me that many would fail and I wondered what would make them quit. I never wondered that about myself. It's not that I had made any deep pledge to myself not to quit, or that I was gung-ho and consciously determined to pass. I just never considered it, nor did I think for a second about what I would do if I failed. I felt as though I was there to observe the Marine Commando course even though I was taking part. I had always felt like I was on the periphery and looking in, and this was no different. I would be there at the end, simple as that.

The first man to quit, about two hours after we arrived, had had his hair cut and styled early that morning in an expensive London salon, presumably believing the Marines would be so impressed with his coiffure that they would bend the rules. The recruit's hair was heavily bonded together with hairspray and I watched the camp barber as he gleefully concentrated on the job of clipping the

recruit's hair off in one solid, helmet-shaped piece. He got half of it off before it dropped to the floor and lay there like a bird's nest. The recruit walked out of the barber's shop and straight out of the camp. The next two quitters walked out of the main auditorium a few hours later in the middle of the camp commander's welcome speech. He told us that one of us in the room would be likely to be killed somewhere in the world in the next three years if we passed through training. It seemed there were some recruits who knew less about the Marines than I did. I at least had accepted that, being a soldier like they did, on occasion, die.

During the first two weeks, if we were not doing educational and medical tests, we were sprinting up and down the gym, climbing ropes, or in the barracks-room (grotts) learning boot and brass-buck cleaning, and for some, basic personal hygiene. The Royal Marines were part of the Navy and Navy hygiene was of the highest order. Early morning shaves in the surf on the beach was a favourite with the instructors had to make that point, and those recruits who did not have facial hair had to practice for when they did. Locals passing by appeared to think nothing of seeing a bunch of recruits attempting to shave as the cold waves broke over their heads.

One day I was sprinting through the camp alone to join my troop after having been for a medical examination – recruits ran everywhere or stood to attention, there was no in between. Up ahead I saw a Marine walking towards me in full dress uniform. I was not sure what to do as I sped towards him. We had not been allowed to go anywhere by ourselves as yet and were marched everywhere as a squad. As we passed an officer the squad was ordered to give an 'Eyes right!' We had not been taught how to salute yet.

I didn't want to make a mistake and so I rehearsed it quickly in my mind. As I closed on him I hit the brakes stopping a few feet short of him, came to attention smartly and gave him a stiff salute.

He brushed passed without returning my salute and said, 'Don't salute me, you wanker, I'm just a corporal. And anyway that's how the Yanks do it.'

The purpose of the first two weeks of training was to get rid of the dead wood, and this they did. We were down to about fifty-five recruits when we climbed aboard the four-tonners to leave Deal, the time in uniform, with blue recruit berets (the green ones were presented only to those who passed selection) and heavy boots, carrying sausage-bags filled with our new military kit (we didn't have rifles yet, we hadn't even held one). We were bound for the main Commando Training Centre (CTC) in Lympstone, near Exmouth in Devon. Mine was one of the last troops to do their first two weeks at Deal. The next time I saw the camp at Deal was in photographs several years later, after an IRA bomb exploded there killing ten Royal Marine bandsmen.

Whereas Deal was old and steeped in Naval history, CTC was a huge, modern military complex more like a small town. My first morning there, whilst heading across the camp for breakfast, I reached the top of a wide flight of stairs and found myself at the back of a large crowd of recruits which was only part of a very long, broad queue waiting to enter the galley. There were over two thousand recruits in CTC and nearly every one of them was here in front of me anxiously waiting to shove cereal, fried eggs, beans and sausages down their throats before the long day's workload. It was an impressive sight to see that number of soldiers, and I was just a little speck amongst them. It turned out that the queue was unusual – the duty chef had either lost the keys to the main entrance to the galley or forgotten to open the doors. Someone at the front of the queue started to *baa* like a sheep and soon everyone joined in. We all *baaed* as loud as we could, all two thousand of us. It was strange to think that only about a third of us would survive the course to wear the coveted green beret. The NCOs and officers, chomping in their own messes, must have wondered what the hell was going on.

When a new troop arrives at CTC to begin the commando training course it begins at the bottom

a ladder, each rung representing two weeks of the twenty-four-week course (twenty-six in total counting Deal).

This course is for senior recruits, those of seventeen and a half and older. Junior recruits, those who join at sixteen, do a slightly different, extended commando course because they cannot join a regular fighting unit until they are eighteen. As each troop is two weeks apart, the previous troop becomes the much more senior. Whatever the troop ahead of yours is doing that day, your troop will be doing the same two weeks' time, and the troop behind you is doing what you did two weeks ago. When the troop ahead was seen returning to camp filthy and exhausted having been away for a gruelling week somewhere you knew you had that to look forward to. On the flip-side, it was a good feeling when you came back from a week of hell and saw the faces of the troop behind yours as they watched you shuffle back to the grots.

There were six recruits to a room in CTC and when we first moved into the accommodation block we occupied thirteen rooms. Each week the number of recruits in the troop dwindled and survivors were moved to keep the rooms up to six where possible. By the end we were down to five rooms. Recruits in commando training are called noddies because of the way they tend to whip to rigid attention when questioned by an instructor and nod or shake their heads wide-eyed while they answer.

One of the instructors on our training team was a corporal named Jakers. Jakers wore a permanent scowl whenever he was around noddies and made it obvious at every opportunity that he considered them the lowest form of life. One day a handful of us were debating the characteristics of a particular military weapon while we hung around outside the NAAFI during a break, having a wet of tea.

'Ask Jakers,' one of my squaddies said as he pointed up the road ('squaddy' is a term that usually refers to regular Army soldiers, but Royal Marines also use it to describe someone who is or was in their recruit troop).

Jakers was walking down the main drag towards us. I was nudged forward to ask the question. I had already gained a reputation for repeatedly asking questions in lectures until I understood the answer, showing a confidence I never had before. I stepped forward and politely posed the question to Jakers. He didn't slow down as he glanced at me and his nose wrinkled as if I was a bad smell.

'Fuck off and talk to me when you're a Marine,' he said as he passed.

All 'green lids' (green berets – full Marines) communicated with noddies using similar courtesy. It was part of the process – a growing pain. Commando training was one huge serving of hardship with a good-sized helping of fun on the side, for those who were willing to make the best of it. Reality did raise its ugly head on occasion though.

One hot, sunny day, during a twenty-mile run/walk with rifle and full equipment while in columns of three, we passed a recruit lying still by the side of the road. He belonged to another troop up ahead doing a similar run and he was still wearing full equipment. The recruit's head was covered by a towel and he was lying on his back part way up the grass verge with one of his legs turned out in an unnaturally relaxed manner. One of his instructors stood above him holding his rifle and watched us with a blank expression as we doubled past. We all sensed the recruit was dead. I thought of the only other dead person I had ever seen, a nun back in the orphanage. She had been our English teacher. There must have been a shortage of paper in the orphanage because we used to write mostly on the back of old Christmas cards. When you went up to her desk to ask for more paper she would hastily tear a card along its crease and draw lines in pencil across the blank part for you to write on. The lines were never straight or the same distance apart and always curved down the page to the right. One morning, instead of us all walking into the classroom at the period change, we were made to line up outside. There were about twenty of us. I was about eight. None of us knew why we were lining up

We were told to be quiet. We never disobeyed the nuns. The atmosphere was grave. When we finally filed into the small classroom we saw our English teacher lying on her back on several desks that had been moved together to support her. She was at my chest height. Her eyes were closed and her hands were crossed over her chest. After passing around her we were filed back out of the room.

The Marine recruit had died of a heart attack.

When the last week of the commando course finally arrived only twenty-five out of the original seventy-eight members of my squad remained. I stood on the huge parade ground the size of seven football pitches in my white pith helmet, white gloves and navy-blue uniform and a Marine band marched and played in the background. I had reached the top rung of the ladder. We were the Kings Squad, the name given to the most senior troop in recruit training. The occasion was made more memorable by an event that had happened earlier that morning when we first arrived on the parade ground.

Discipline, especially when marching in a column of three ranks in full dress uniform, is iron in the Marines and it's instant death to turn your head, even slightly, to look at something – the white pith helmet would give the movement away. When we marched on to the parade ground that morning the whole troop was straining to look out of the corner of their eyes at something unusual parked in the middle of it. We were brought to a resounding halt, but still did not dare turn to look.

The drill instructor screamed, 'Left turn'na!'

Twenty-five men moved as one and our feet came together with a crack that could be heard across the River Exe a mile away. We had drilled throughout the six-month training course for this day, but this final week had been spent doing little else so that we would be faultless in front of Lord Louis Mountbatten, which we were. It was with some relief that we turned for we could now see what was the centre of the parade ground.

It was a standard issue, single, wooden bed, sleeping for the use of, and there was a recruit sleeping in it in his pyjamas. During the night, members of his troop had carried his bed, with him in it, out of the grot and across camp to the parade ground without waking him. He must have had a few beers that night. He continued to sleep soundly even with all the heavy marching and yelling of orders going on around him. The drill instructors and NCOs remained poker-faced, none venturing near the recruit. They were all waiting for God to arrive on parade.

The God of any camp is not the commanding officer, as most would assume, but the Regimental Sergeant Major (RSM). He is chosen for his loud voice as well as for his immaculate bearing. Recruits cowered when he walked through the camp. He could spot a loose thread or an unpolished brass buckle at fifty yards. I was once standing with a couple of my squaddies outside the NAAFI during a break (we did a lot of that). One of them leaned back against a wall to support himself and placed a hand in his pocket.

A voice boomed from nowhere, like Zeus shouting down from Olympus. 'You, with your 'and in your pocket!'

We jerked instantly to our feet like wide-eyed chickens having just heard a fox bark. We knew instantly who it was, but we just could not see where he was.

'Christ,' one of the lads said as he indicated with a jut of his chin, 'he must be two 'undred sodding yards away.'

There was the RSM, silhouetted against the sky way up at the other end of the main drag, standing rigid and alone in his immaculate uniform. Our instincts were to run and hide but that would have been suicide. God would find us.

'Come 'ere!' he boomed. 'At the double!'

The recruit dropped everything and ran towards the RSM as fast as he could. We watched from cover while he leaned back under the RSM's mouth and received a severe bollocking.

Looking down on the parade ground, a hundred yards away, was the officers' mess, and the RSM stepped out of it to survey his empire. Then his eyes locked on to the imperfection in the centre of it. If the camp was the RSM's domain, the parade ground was his hallowed plot. There was no power on earth to help you if you desecrated this piece of terra firma. Everyone watched motionless – if you moved a finger of your white-gloved hand he would spot it, then you might as well faint and take your chances with a medical examination. There must have been 200 Marines frozen solid. If it suddenly poured down and lightning struck the parade ground no one would have moved.

The RSM marched slowly down the gravel path from the mess, digging his heels in, his cane in his left hand swinging parallel with the ground. The Royal Marines have a unique march in the British military. Whereas the rest of the Army, Navy and Air Force, without exception, march in a brisk, tick-tock fashion that looks like a speeded-up silent movie, the Marines march much more slowly with a longer pace and a proud, historically earned swagger. That is why Royal Marines rarely integrate with other branches of the armed forces while marching. Marines arrive at the same time as everyone else, they just do it with more panache.

The RSM came to a smart halt on the edge of the parade ground and stood staring at the bed some fifty yards away.

'Who's sleeping on my fucking parade ground?!'

No one moved except the recruit, who turned in his sleep to get more comfortable. The RSM developed a terrible grimace and marched towards the bed. The clip of his heels echoed as they came into the ground. I started to feel sorry for the nobby curled up in his bed. The RSM halted by the bed and glared down at the recruit all snuggled up.

'WAKE UP!' he yelled with all his vast might.

The recruit sat bolt upright and for a second had no idea where on the planet he was.

'Your fucking grot not spacious enough for you, then?' boomed the RSM.

If there was ever a man who wished the world would swallow him up it was that recruit.

'Get that bed off my parade ground, you maggot . . . NOW!'

The recruit fell out of the bed and started to drag it away as fast as he could.

'Don't you make a scratch on my floor or you'll spend what career you've left re-tarmacking it!'

The recruit struggled to lift the bed and carry it off. That night his entire troop ran several times around the camp in full equipment, each carrying their own mattress.

Before lunchtime we were awarded our green lids and passed for duty by the Admiral of the Fleet Lord Louis Mountbatten. My father stood amongst the other parents. It felt odd knowing he was watching me in my immaculate uniform marching as a soldier. It must have felt strange to him too. He almost hadn't called him to tell him about the pass-out parade. It was as if this was my new world, my new life, and I did not want him to be a part of it.

The RSM, naturally, had the last words before we marched off the parade ground as he shouted the immortal phrase, 'Royal Marines! To your duties, quick march!'

My green beret felt good on my head. But I did not quite feel like a Marine Commando. That would come when I could make important decisions on my own. There were still many things inside my head I had to straighten out. Only a month earlier my section of ten noddies had been spread out in arrowhead formation headed up a barren, rocky slope in the middle of Dartmoor. It was past midnight and we were on an advance-to-contact patrol with live ammunition, expecting to be attacked at any time. The ground was sodden and heavily pitted as if an artillery bombardment had struck several years

before. Suddenly the still, misty night erupted in explosions as simulated mortar shells flashed and boomed, tossing earth skyward all around us. A heavy machine-gun nest then began firing from the crest. The instructors supplemented the enemy attack with a continuous flow of thunderflashes (like bangers but several times more powerful), literally throwing them at us. We hit the dirt and rolled away in preparation to return fire once a fire control order was given. My ears were ringing. Our section commander for that exercise was about to direct our counter-attack when the senior instructor put his foot on the recruit's back and told him to lie still and play dead. The instructors had deliberately not told us who was second or third in command, and so for a moment no one was in command and confusion reigned. I lay there, like the others, waiting to be told what to do. Suddenly a voice boomed behind me.

'You! Yes, you. You're in command.'

He emphasised the order with a thunderflash that bounced off my back to explode only feet in front of me, forcing me to roll away as I tried to gather my thoughts. It seemed to take me ages to recall the sequence of orders and considerations when under attack. We had practised it often on the camp sports field or on Woodbury Common in daylight with blank ammo, but never under these conditions. I stretched my neck to see where everyone was.

'Get your 'ead down!' shouted the instructor.

'Gun group, go left!' I yelled.

'They've gone left,' he continued angrily as he towered directly behind me. 'Move your fucking self! Your men are dyin' out here!'

I squinted ahead to look for the enemy position so that I could give a fire control order.

'Section. Pile of rocks . . . !'

'Which pile of rocks, moron?' The instructor was causing me more stress than the guns and explosions.

'To your front,' I shouted. 'Three hundred metres!'

'Bollocks. It's less than two!'

'Section! Rapid fire . . .' Before I could get out the word 'fire' the instructor shouted above my voice.

'Cancel that!' Then crouching closer to make his dark words penetrate further. 'You waste our fucking space. God help any section you ever command . . . Harris! Take over.'

I numbly joined the others to assault the enemy position. All I could think of was what a useless bastard I had been. The instructor knew exactly what he was doing, though. The Royal Marines had been churning out professional soldiers for over 300 years. He knew that making a fool of me and letting me see myself fumble under pressure would rile me enough to make sure it never happened again. Several years later, while on my junior command course, seventy-five of us were lined up in a ditch in full combat gear waiting to mount a sweep through a forest at the end of a heavy five-minute bombardment. The instructors had given each of the seven sections orders, but had omitted to select an overall commander to launch the attack. That was only apparent when the deathly silence fell after the bombardment and no one moved. It felt like a scene from World War One – waiting to go over the top. But there were no officers to lead the charge. I had never forgotten my pathetic effort in training. Once I realised no one else was going to, I jumped up on to the lip of the ditch and shouted for each section commander to advance his men in staggered formation. Then I turned and led them into the wood. Although it was just an exercise I knew I would have done it for real. I had notched up another lesson in life. Whenever you drop down, and the odds are you will once in a while, use it to bounce yourself back even higher. But I was never destined to lead a section of soldiers into a battle like that. During my career in the British military, my involvement in every conflict would be in small teams.

pairs, or alone.

After the pass-out parade I walked up to my father feeling a little awkward, as he had never seen me in uniform before. When I got to him, the way he greeted me, I suddenly felt like a schoolboy again. He forced a smile and nodded his understanding of the whole charade then immediately moved on to the subject of times of buses and trains back to London. He never asked what the training was like, where was I headed next. He wasn't deliberately trying to be mean. That's just the way he was. Why did I think my new experiences would change him at all?

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