



ALEX SWANSTON

# THE ATLAS OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS OF WORLD WAR II



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*of*  
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*by*  
ALEXANDER SWANSTON



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# INTRODUCTION

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The Second World War was a truly global conflict, involving almost every nation in the struggle to stop the spread of totalitarianism. This meant that battles were fought in all climates and on all sorts of terrain, from the jungle hills of Burma and the Philippines to the snow covered fjords of Norway and the vast desert oceans of north Africa. Technology had also progressed, meaning that war could be fought under the surface of the sea or in the air 40,000 feet above. This unique scenario involving all aspects of the military meant that specialist units bloomed, using the rough ground or unique setting to their advantage.

War was still fought as it had been thousands of years previously. Huge armies moved across continents and large naval units swept the oceans, but unorthodox units could creep through front lines that were thousands of miles long and report on enemy movements or sabotage installations. The evolution of the aircraft meant that they could carry heavier loads, this could mean delivering a 22,000 lb 'earthquake' bomb that literally shook the target to destruction or meant the carriage of parachute troops.

The use of the parachute soldier, or paratrooper, was prolific during the Second World War. This gave the advantage of flanking the enemy overhead. Initially parachutes had been developed during the previous war, but only as a last resort for pilots or balloon observation units. The US Army had thought of using them for dropping troops behind lines but the armistice resulted in this idea being shelved. The Russians later took to creating battalions of paratroopers but never used them in great numbers in the eventual war to follow. Italy also led the way in the creation of parachute troops, but again these troops were never delivered by air into combat and only fought as ground troops.



*The de Havilland Mosquito employed by the RAF was a brilliant fighter-bomber. Constructed almost exclusively from wood and powered by two Rolls-Royce Merlin engines the aircraft could reach speeds in excess of 400 mph. The type was employed during the low-level raid*



*Four Fallschirmjaeger troops unload their kit from an arms container.*

It was Germany that was to show the true potential of parachute infiltration. Taking strategic points in their invasions of Norway, Denmark and the Low Countries, coming to a bloody conclusion with the attack on Crete, a pyrrhic victory that led Hitler to never use them again in such a large number.

The Allied armies, particularly the US and Britain, instantly saw the potential and went about activating airborne units. This took time, so only small units saw action during the first half of the conflict, but in the final two years massive air armadas were dropped to aid conventional attacks.

At sea small craft were used to sneak through enemy defences, breathing apparatus meant that 'frogmen' could penetrate harbour defences and cause havoc. The use of aircraft carriers also meant that



specialised aircraft could be transported to the vicinity of the target, hitherto comfortable in its seclusion

During the Second World War the use of aircraft was staggering, swarms of bombers flew to enemy targets in the hope of destroying factories involved in producing war materiel as well as lowering the morale and will to fight of the opposing country. This again bred small units that could destroy small targets and structures that would have meant thousands of pounds of bombs and vast amounts of sorties to destroy, such as the Dambusters raid of 1943. The dams supplied much of the power to the Ruhr industrial region of Germany. Instead of sending over waves and waves of bombers to try and demolish these immensely strong structures the RAF took it to train a squadron of men to deliver a bizarre weapon, the bouncing bomb to great effect.

It was not just conventional fighting forces that had been streamlined into these specialised roles. Many men and women were educated in the role of resistance fighters and saboteurs that would work undercover in occupied territories. These men and women would then report on the enemy and train more units. This took great courage as discovery meant almost certain death.

This book hopes to cover a wide range of special operations during the Second World War covering the formation of certain units, why and how they were employed and the outcome of their various actions and how these affected the wider picture.



*A wounded Commando is helped back to a landing craft during the raid on Vaagso, Norway. Small raids such as these by specialist troops helped raise morale, gain intelligence and denied the enemy valuable resources.*



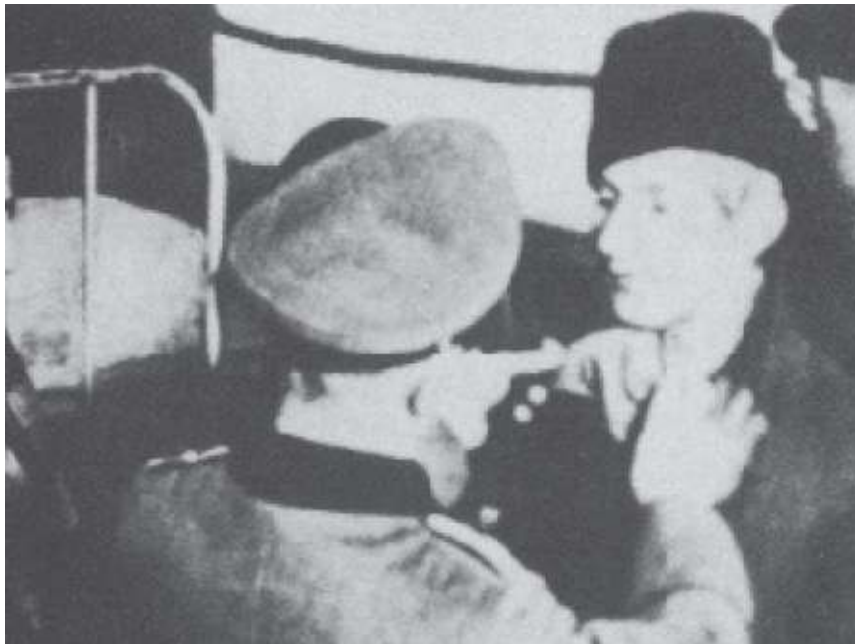
*A member of the French resistance is joined by an American Lieutenant during the liberation of Paris. He is armed with a Sten gun supplied the British via RAF air drops.*

# BRANDENBURGERS

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Hauptmann Theodor von Hippel, a German intelligence officer, had the idea of utilising bilingual troops to infiltrate ahead of regular forces in order to gain control of strategic targets such as bridges, communications hubs and spread panic in the rear of the enemy. He took this idea to the regular army, the Wehrmacht, but was rejected out of hand. He then approached Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the head of the Abwehr, (German military intelligence). The idea was green-lit and fluent Polish speakers were formed into the first company and given the innocuous title of 800th Special Duties Construction Company.

The men were infiltrated into Poland in civilian dress, posing as coal miners or construction workers just ahead of the main German invasion forces in late August 1939. They then seized communication hubs and important river crossings as well as preventing demolition of railway tunnels important to the main German advance. Even though these missions on the whole were carried out with great success, the company was disbanded shortly after the Polish capitulation.



*A Brandenburg is outfitted in local dress for an operation in Poland. Brandenburgs infiltrated Poland in the days before the invasion on September 1939 to seize communications centres and spread panic in the rear of the enemy.*

Hippel persisted and this time a battalion strength unit was formed ready for the invasion of Denmark and Norway the following April. Again using civilian disguise the men were able to infiltrate and capture strategic points.

The battalion was again used in the German invasion of France and the Low Countries in May 1940. Men dressed in Dutch police uniforms approached the Gennep bridge over the Meuse River supposedly escorting captured German prisoners. When the Dutch sentries let down their guard the Brandenburgers leapt into action, pulling out hidden weapons and capturing the bridge intact. However, this ruse did not work on other bridges in the area as the Brandenburgers were caught and shot as spies.

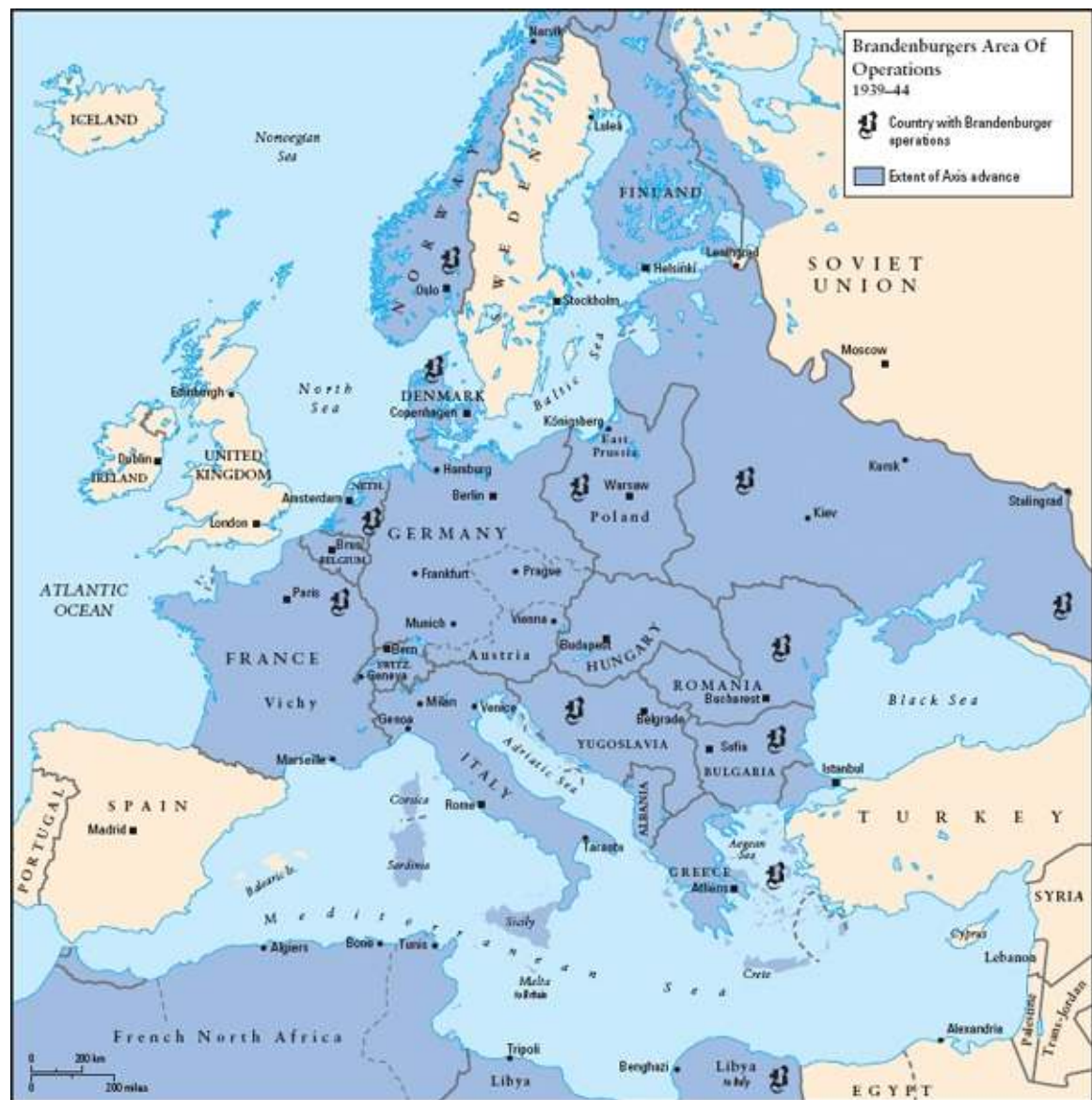
These operations were carried out all along the path of the invasion, securing anything that could hinder the rapid advance of the Nazi Blitzkrieg with such success that after the campaign the battalion was enlarged to regimental size. The Regiment now recruited men that could speak all the Balkan languages and most importantly Russian. These were the areas now in the sights of the German war

machine.

Again the men of the Brandenburgers were infiltrated ahead of the main advance in order to secure rapid advance. This time men posed as river boatmen on the Danube river in order to stop the scuppering of large ships therefore blocking the important river route.

With the opening of Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 the Brandenburgers adopted the dress of the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. This allowed the men free reign to countermand orders given to the defending troops. The Soviet troops, already lacking sufficient communications equipment were left in disarray.

In North Africa the Brandenburgers attempted to carry out missions behind enemy lines, disrupting supply and communications to the Allied armies. Lack of investment in these units led to most being captured. They did not have the same amount of success that the Allied Long Range Desert Group and the SAS were to have.

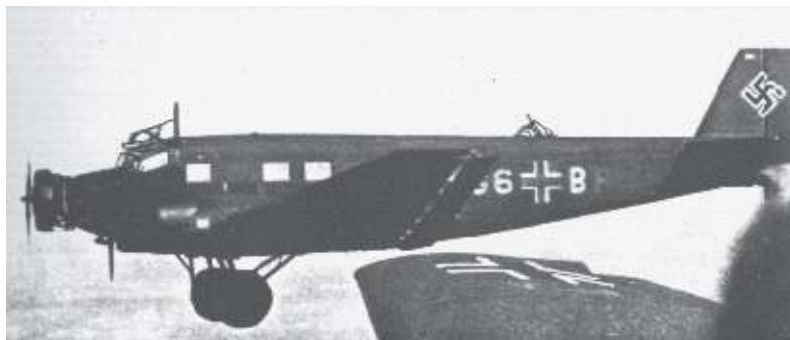


*The Brandenburgers fought on all fronts during the war before their disbandment in late 1943.*

Due to political infighting the Brandenburgers were eventually disbanded in late 1943, most of the troops joined other special forces units within the Wehrmacht, even so, they had proven that with skill and deception, major victories could be achieved by small, specialised units, even though these tasks had been carried out flaunting the 'rules of war' by adopting the uniforms of the opposing armies.

# INVASION OF NORWAY AND DENMARK

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*The Junkers Ju 52 was the workhorse of the Luftwaffe. Used extensively on all fronts during the Second World War it was nick-named 'Trojan Annie' by the crew and troops who flew in her. After the capture of key airfields in Norway fleets of Ju 52s brought in follow up troops to consolidate positions.*

Scandinavia was a major supplier of raw materials that was required for the Nazi industrial machine that drove the expansion of the Reich. Neutral Sweden in particular held vast iron ore deposits and these were exported to other nations via the Norwegian port of Narvik in the north of the country just inside the Arctic Circle. Adolf Hitler and his general staff saw the importance of securing these supplies and concluded that the invasion of Norway was required before the Allies could make a pre-emptive occupation of the country. In order to facilitate this Denmark would also have to be invaded.

Denmark had a very small army and it was thought that the capture of strategic points around the country along with the royal family would produce its rapid capitulation. These points were the fort of Madneso and the airport of Aalborg in the very north of the country. The capture of these points was given to the Fallschirmjaeger, the German parachute division.

Formed in 1938 on the orders of Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe, the first unit, the 7th Fliieger Division was commanded by General Kurt Student. A former First World War fighter pilot, Student believed that the use of airborne forces could make an impact disproportionate to their size. This was to be proven correct when his men were dropped on Madneso and Aalborg in the early hours of April 1940, quickly securing them, the airport being of particular importance to the plan as it was to be a staging post for the follow-up invasion of Norway.

As Denmark fell airborne troops of the 7th Fliieger Division were dropping on the airports of Oslo and Kristiansand in southern Norway, along with the air station at Sola. The latter was the only defended airfield but was eventually taken by the paratroops. Waves of Junkers Ju 52 transport aircraft, staging through the captured Aalborg airfield, began disembarking thousands of troops to begin the occupation of Norway.

The Norwegian government soon left Oslo and fled into the interior of the country, King Haakon VII giving the command of the defence to Major General Otto Ruge. Ruge decided to fight a delaying action whilst help arrived in the form of an expeditionary force from Britain. This was to land in the port of Trondheim, but was soon beaten off by the superior fighting of the Germans.

In the north the Germans had landed around 2,000 mountain troops in the northern port of Narvik. The town was quickly taken and the troops took up positions in the hills surrounding the port as battles between the destroyers of the Kriegsmarine that had landed there and the Royal Navy took place. The Germans took heavy losses in these engagements and the surviving German sailors salvaged what they could and assisted with the land defence.

British troops were landed to the north of Narvik on the 14 April, followed shortly by French and

Polish forces. The Allied commanders were cautious in their advance on Narvik due to the difficult terrain and adverse weather. However, by 28 May the port had been re-taken and the Germans were forced into the mountains. However, the situation by this time had changed significantly for the Allies as the invasion of the west had begun and the British and French forces were ordered to evacuate. On 10 June King Haakon and his government left for England and exile. The Germans had successfully captured Norway in just under two months. Crucially the Germans suffered heavy losses, over 5,500 men and 260 aircraft and two major warships.



The invasion of Norway and Denmark commenced on 9 April 1940 combining maritime, air and land forces successfully for the first time in military history. The Allied response to the situation was slow and weak, leading the Germans to capture Norway completely in a little under two months.

# EBEN EMAEL

The Fort of Eben Emael was the largest in a string of defences along the Belgian-German border. The fort defended the city of Liege, to its south, and the numerous bridges that crossed the Albert Canal. Construction was completed within four years in the mid-thirties, utilising the Albert Canal along its eastern boundary as an extra defensive barrier. Armament consisted of two 120mm cannon in turrets supplemented by 16 75mm cannon placed in retractable cupolas with 360° traverse. These were protected by machine gun and anti-tank bunkers, everything was connected via tunnels under a thick concrete roof impervious to all airborne bombs at the time. The fort itself was garrisoned by 1,200 men under the command of a major.



*The German plan in the West was to lure the Allies into a defensive line in northern Belgium whilst the weight of their attack took place through the heavily wooded Ardennes region. The panzers would then rush north to the coast, effectively cutting off the British expeditionary force from its French ally.*

The Germans assigned the 7th Fliieger Division and the 22nd Airlanding Division for the preliminary stage of the invasion of the Low Countries. From these units Sturmabteilung Koch under the command of Hauptmann Walter Koch was assigned the job of neutralising the fort at Eben Emael and capturing three bridges over the Albert Canal. Training took place in complete secrecy, men not being able to wear their unit badges assaulted replicas of the fort deep inside of Germany. They familiarised themselves with flamethrowers and the new shaped charge. These cone-shaped devices concentrated the power of conventional explosive, allowing them to cut through thick steel emplacements.

Just before 3 am on the morning of 10 May 1940 the eighty-five men of Group Granite, the force that was to assault the fort, clambered aboard their DFS 230 transport gliders. Tugged to the border of Germany and Belgium and released. During this period two of the gliders were released early from the

tugs and landed well inside of Germany. On board one of these aircraft was the force commander Oberleutnant Witzig. Due to strict radio silence the rest of the unit were unaware that they were to land under strength and without their commander.

The nine remaining gliders landed on the roof of the fort with no loss, the troops disembarking and immediately going about their pre-ordained tasks, all cupolas being disabled with the use of shaped charges apart from one that had to be engaged by air support, Stukas being called in. After this attack took no further part in the battle. All exits and entrances were secured by the airborne troops, effectively trapping the defending Belgians in the fort with no means to escape.

Witzig then arrived on the fort after arranging for another Ju 52 to tow his glider to the target, by now the Fallschirmjaeger were assaulting secondary targets and readying for the inevitable counter-attack. This came within an hour of their arrival but was successfully held. Reinforcement in the shape of German ground troops was to arrive in a matter of hours, but this was stymied by blown bridges. Relief came early on 11 May, the Belgians eventually surrendering the fort at 12.30 that day, casualties amounting to over 100 with over a 1,000 captured. The Germans lost six men in the attack.

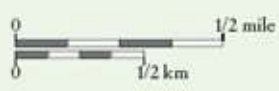
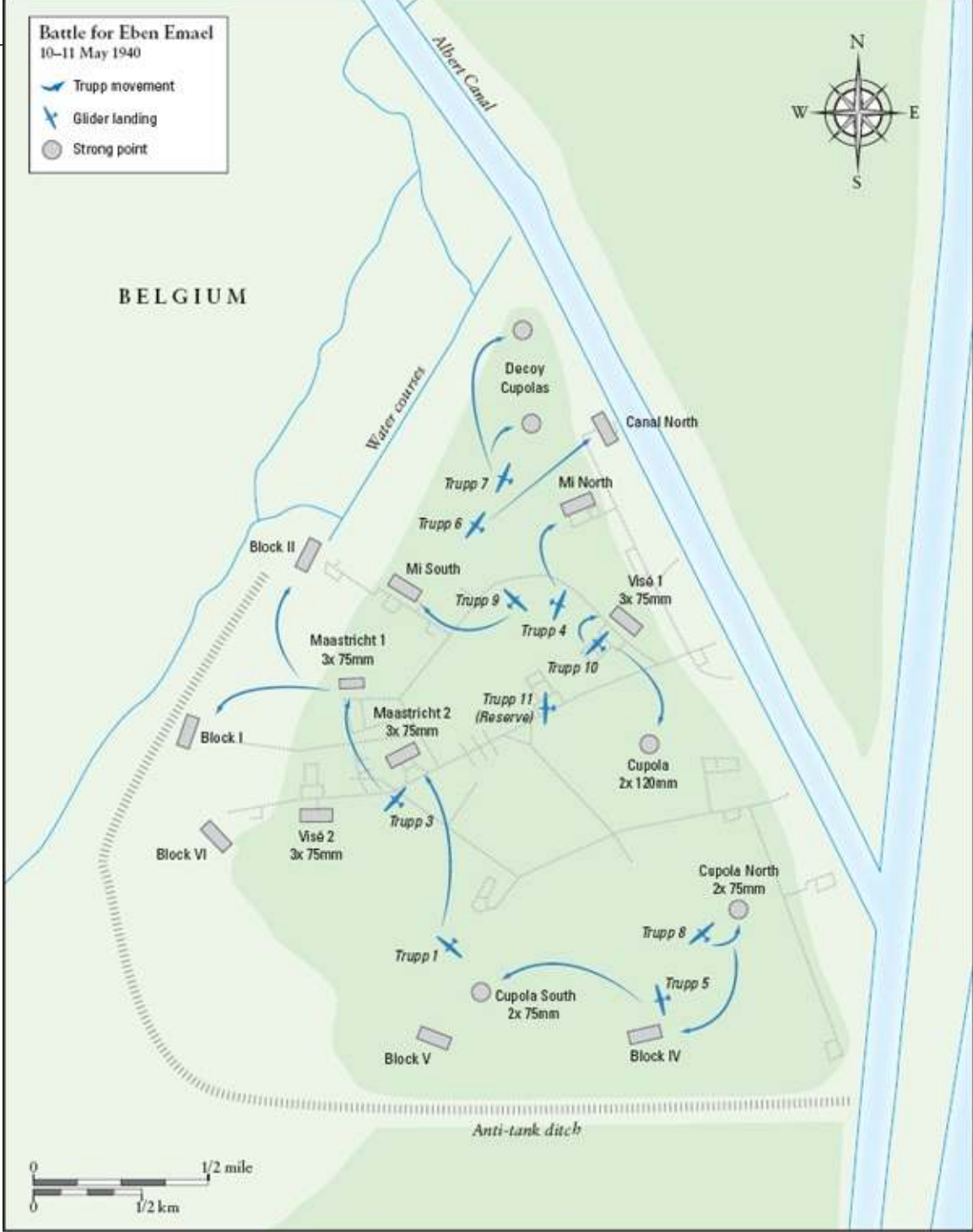


**Battle for Eben Emael**  
10-11 May 1940

- Trupp movement
- Glider landing
- Strong point



BELGIUM



# FORMATION OF THE COMMANDOS

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After the withdrawal of the British Expeditionary Force from the beaches of Dunkirk and with the sky dark with the Luftwaffe ceaselessly bombing RAF installations, Britain's Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, issued an order for a unit to be created that would raid the enemy coast and leave, 'a trail of German corpses behind'. This unit was to become the Commandos.

One man was already ahead of Churchill, Lieutenant Colonel Dudley Pound had drawn up a proposal for a clandestine raiding unit to the then Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir John Dill, who immediately green-lit the project. Volunteers were hastily assembled and an action was put in place as soon as possible with a night assault on the French coastline near Boulogne. Very little was actually achieved with only two unlucky sentries falling to the Commandos, later another raid on the occupied island of Guernsey, codenamed Ambassador was of little consequence with poor intelligence and heavy seas causing more problematic than the enemy. Nevertheless lessons were learned such as the acquisition of dedicated landing craft in the form of the Thornycroft LCA (Landing Craft Assault). This was an excellent vessel that would be used for the entire conflict in Europe and Asia, the Commando had a love-hate relationship with it as it gave moderate protection, but being a flat-bottomed boat, in the open sea led to seasickness.



*A Commando scales a cliff during training, slung over his back is the ubiquitous Thompson Sub-machine gun.*

By November 1940 over 2,000 men had volunteered for the Commandos and were duly formed into the Special Service Brigade, in turn coming under the command of Combined Operations Headquarters commanded by Sir Roger Keyes, himself a veteran of amphibious assault having been involved in the Zeebrugge raid in April 1918.

Training was carried out in Scotland with emphasis on self reliance. The potential Commando was

billeted with a local family and was required to make his own way to training and look after himself rather than living in barracks. Less emphasis was placed on the parade ground and more on cliff scaling, beach assault and demolitions. Rank became less of an issue, with everyone expected to make decisions as the need arose.

Weapons proficiency was a top priority, with the units having a higher proportion of automatic weapons than a regular unit. These included the standard light machine gun for the British Army, the Bren gun. Firing the .303in round it was a fantastically reliable and accurate weapon, perhaps its only draw back was the thirty round magazine meaning it had to be reloaded more often than the German equivalent, the MG.34 which relied on a belt feed. The Commandos also acquired the Thompson Submachine gun. Made famous by the gangsters of the thirties, this weapon was heavy but packed a heavy punch with its .45in round and was a favourite amongst the troops.

Another weapon synonymous with the Commandos was the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife. Developed by William Fairbairn and Eric Sykes, both ex policemen from Shanghai, they created a 'stiletto' style blade that was perfect for penetrating the ribcage of an enemy sentry. The men trained ceaselessly until they were completely comfortable with the blade in their hands. This weapon would also be issued to SAS troops as well as agents dropped into occupied Europe.

Units would be supplied and trained on support weapons such as 2in motors and later the PIAAT (Projector, Infantry, Anti-Tank) as well as evolving their personnel kit to match their operations, discarding the steel helmet of regular units, replacing it with a woollen cap comforter as well as wearing rubber-soled boots as opposed to the iron studded standard boots that could potentially give away their position.

By 1941 there were twelve Commando units each of 500 men, No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando being made up of foreign troops from France, Netherlands, Belgium and Poland, that had managed to escape from occupied Europe.



*A Commando with blackened face poses with a Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife in his teeth. Developed by two ex-policemen from Shanghai would become the unofficial symbol of the Commandos.*

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# FORMATION OF THE LRDG

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The vast open deserts of North Africa had been little charted in the first half of the 20th Century and was thought impassable with modern motorised vehicles. But in between wars there had been groups of men taking modified motor cars into the Sahara and using their own initiative had developed ways of taming the ocean of sand. At the head of this group was Major Ralph Bagnold. Bagnold solved the problem of navigation by adopting a solar compass and modified standard cars by adding larger tyres with low pressure, all this combined made roaming the desert feasible.



*The Chevrolet 30 cwt truck was the mainstay of the LRDG. Rugged and reliable the vehicle was retro-fitted with a radiator condenser and numerous weapons for defence.*

Bagnold came to the end of his time in the British Army just before hostilities were commenced. He quickly rejoined, and in the army's infinite wisdom sent perhaps the best desert explorer of the time to Kenya. Due to a string of events he never made it to his posting and he ended up in Alexandria. He then set to work on pitching his ideas for a desert patrol. He eventually came to the attention of Field Marshal Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander of the Middle East at the time. He gave permission to Bagnold to raise a small unit for the purpose of infiltrating the flanks of the Italians in Libya and pass back any information gleaned. Bagnold first approached Australian units for volunteers, presuming that the more rugged outdoor life would be more suited to the rigours of the mission. Officers were not interested in letting their best men go to such nascent and untried patrol. The New Zealand Division was approached and the commander, General Freyberg, a friend and colleague of Wavell, obliged the transfer of some of his best men to the patrol. The Long Range Patrol was born. The first reconnaissance was led not by Bagnold, but by Pat Clayton, a former friend from his inter-war expeditions. It was a success and the patrols were quickly expanded. Bagnold could no longer rely on the New Zealand Division as a source for potential troopers so looked to the newly arrived Scots and Coldstream Guards as well as the Yeomanry Divisions. These were segregated into individual patrols. The name was also



The patrols relied mainly on the Chevrolet 30 cwts and Ford trucks for transport on patrols. They were armed with Vickers or Lewis guns for defence from air attack, equipped with camouflage netting, water condensers and wide tyres.

The primary mission of the LRDG was to go on 'Road Watch' patrols. This entailed a wide-flanking patrol via bases like the Siwa Oasis and then penetrate north behind enemy lines and sit for days counting the number of vehicles passing to the enemy front. En route to these missions the men also reconnoitred possible future routes by themselves or larger units as well as charting the previously unsurveyed desert, at the head of this was Ken Lazarus, who commanded a patrol dedicated to this task.

With the introduction of other specialised units the LRDGs skill and capability was called on, SAS troops and intelligence units used the LRDG as a 'taxi' service, using them to be inserted behind enemy lines then whisked back to the relative safety of the Allied lines.

# ATTACK ON TARANTO

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*The Fairey Swordfish, known affectionately as the 'Stingbag' was an aircraft of the first generation, being of wire, strut and fabric construction. However it was ideal for the task assigned to it, being able to fly at exceptionally low speed which aided greatly in the laying of its main armament, the anti-ship torpedo.*

At the beginning of Second World War the Regia Marina, the Italian Navy, exerted the concept of the fleet in being. This meant a strong naval force was in place to impose power over a certain area without ever leaving port. This had been foreseen by Admiral Dudley Pound and secretly before the start of hostilities the Royal Navy had made plans for an aerial strike on the Italian fleet based in Taranto, on the 'heel' of Italy. This would entail a force of aging Fairey Swordfish torpedo bombers making a surprise attack on the fleet at anchor. The Swordfish was an anachronism, being a biplane with wires and struts in an age of new sleek all-metal monoplanes. Yet it was ideal for the job, being able to fly at remarkably slow speeds, aiding in the laying of torpedoes on targets.

HMS *Eagle* was chosen for the job of launching the aircraft 200 miles short of the Italian harbour. The Swordfish themselves were modified with extra fuel tanks, this came with the loss of the third crew member in the aircraft. The torpedoes that were to be used in the attack were given sensitive contact fuses and altered slightly to prevent 'bottoming out' in the shallows of the harbour. Due to a fire aboard the *Eagle* and subsequent damage to her fuel systems the force was transferred to the new carrier, HMS *Illustrious*. The crews and aircraft for the attack were drawn from 813, 815, 819 and 824 Naval Air Squadrons, Fleet Air Arm, under the command of Lieutenant-Commander Williamson. The Naval task force consisting of *Illustrious* and her escort of cruisers and destroyers came under the command of Rear Admiral Lyster, who had been instrumental in the planning of the attack.

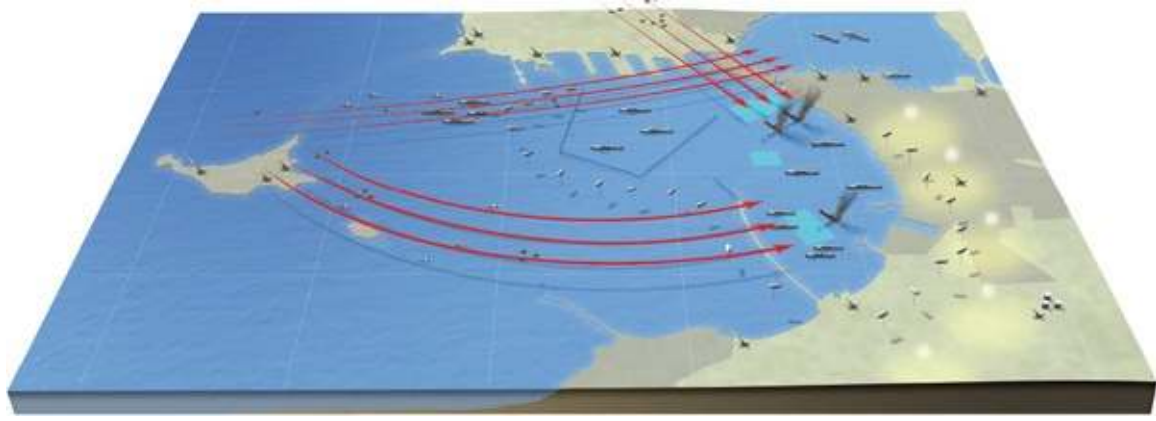
Prior to the attack various reconnaissance flights flying out of Malta had overflown the harbour to check the fleet had not sailed, followed on the afternoon of the 11 November by a Sunderland flying boat making a final pass. This led to the harbour defences being alerted to a probable attack, but was essential in confirming the Italian fleet was still there. The target was to be six battleships, seven heavy cruisers, twolight cruisers and eight destroyers.

The attack was to be in two flights, the first being led by Williamson consisting of twelve aircraft took off just after 2,100, followed an hour and a half later by nine others, one turning back with fuel pump difficulties.

The first wave approached the harbour in two formations after losing sight of each other in a cloud bank. Nevertheless the attacks went in, with oil tanks to the west of the harbour being set ablaze by bomb-armed Swordfish and Williamson putting in a successful attack on the battleship *Conte di Cavour* holding her. She would never see action again. Neither would Williamson and his crewman, being shot down soon after and then taken prisoner.

The second wave flew in an hour after the first, again against substantial anti-aircraft artillery. The battleship *Littorio* suffering heavy damage in the attack. The second wave lost another aircraft, this time the crew perishing.

The attack put out of action three battleships, effectively ending the Italians 'fleet in being', the remainder fled to the safer harbours of north-east Italy. Naval planners from all nations studied the attack with great interest, especially the Japanese, the attack being highly influential in its development of the attack on Pearl Harbour just over a year later.



*The attack on Taranto Harbour on the night of 11-12 November 1940. The first wave were split into two formations and attacked from the west, one unit torpedoing targets in the harbour whilst the other bombed installations. The second wave, arriving approximately an hour later, flew in from the north.*



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