COMMANDO

WINNING WORLD WAR II BEHIND ENEMY LINES

JAMES OWEN

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In memory of M.R.D. Foot (1919–2012),
soldier and historian of secret warfare,
and of those he briefed for Operation
AQUATINT in September 1942

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CHRONOLOGY

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ARCHERY – Vaagso, Norway, December 1941

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ANGLO – Rhodes, Greece, September 1942

AGREEMENT – Tobruk, Libya, September 1942

JV and FRANKTON – Boulogne, France, April 1942 and Bordeaux, France, December 1942

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OVERLORD – Normandy, France, June 1944

INFATUATE – Walcheren, The Netherlands, November 1944

TALON – Kangaw, Burma, January 1945

ROAST – Lake Comacchio, Italy, April 1945

ECLIPSE – Northern Germany, April 1945

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PROLOGUE

CORDITE

It was an hour after dusk when the submarine surfaced. As it began to recharge its batteries, the hush of the night air gave way to a raucous throb. Every pulse of the engines, reverberating through the hull, jarred the nerves of the two men waiting below. Never had danger felt so real before.

From the voice pipe came the words they had been expecting, spoken quietly but with urgency. They climbed a ladder into the conning tower, then another down onto the wet deck, its casing almost level with the water and speckled with foam. After days in the cramped confines of the submarine, the moonless sky above them seemed vast. The darkness was as soft as velvet and smelled of the sea.

Beyond the gun platform, a lone figure crouched on the slim fin of the starboard fore-hydroplane. With one hand, the Special Boat Section corporal clung to a steel stay meant to stop mines from fouling the craft. With the other, he held in place the two-man canoe which had been brought up through the forward hatch and lowered over the side. The prow heaved under his grasp, rising and falling on the swell.

Dressed only in a thick sweater and long-johns, the first paddler let the canoe ride up towards him and stepped across awkwardly

into the front seat. The boat lurched and clattered against the submarine as the kneeling corporal tried his best to steady it again. Then the second man vaulted athletically in behind, placing his palm flat on the canvas and levering his heavy frame into place. The satisfied grin showed even through the boot polish that covered his face.

Working swiftly, senses alert for the glare of a searchlight or the roar of an E-boat, a naval rating passed the men double-ended paddles, a Thermos flask and two small boxes. These were an infra-red transmitter and receiver, newly invented and highly secret. Already stowed in the canoe were a machine-gun and a 0.38 revolver, wrapped in the best waterproofing available – a cellophane envelope.

Then they were away, easing off with their paddles and dipping their shoulders in the purposeful rhythm that would bring the canoe in a mile to land. Behind them, the submarine drew back into the night. Ahead lay the coast of Rhodes, and thousands of enemy troops. Operation CORDITE was on.

By early 1941, Britain's position in North Africa looked much more promising than it had done a few months earlier. A series of offensives mounted by General Sir Archibald Wavell had shattered the Italian forces in the region and he was able to turn his attention to the other end of his Middle East command. At Churchill's insistence, Wavell had previously sent troops to help Greece in its fight against Italy, yet though the mainland still resisted the Dodecanese Islands had fallen to the invaders. Already the Italians and their German allies had flown sorties from the airstrips there and the threat presented by them to Britain's possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and perhaps even to the Suez Canal, was clear.

Wavell now proposed to secure this flank by seizing the largest of the Dodecanese, Rhodes. The attack – codenamed CORDITE – was to be executed in April by an infantry division, supported by tanks, which was to be put ashore by a naval contingent under Rear Admiral Harold Baillie-Grohman. More specifically,

responsibility for the convoy releasing the landing craft at the right place and on time rested with its thirty-year-old navigating officer, Lieutenant Commander Nigel Willmott.

Willmott had visited Rhodes in peacetime, but his view of his task was shaped more by what he had witnessed in Norwegian waters earlier in the war. Many of the vessels lost on both sides at Narvik in April 1940 had foundered on unseen obstructions, grounding amid uncharted shoals or holing themselves on rocks marked on no map. And those ships had had expert navigators. Willmott was only too aware that few of the landing craft which he would be dropping four miles offshore, at night, had compasses, and that none of the officers steering them would be trained in pilotage.

For, despite Britain's long military and naval traditions, the truth was that it still had a great deal to learn about cooperation between the two arms. Willmott's uncle had taken part in the last major amphibious landing, at Gallipoli in 1915, where the assaulting troops had been slowed by barbed wire hidden in the surf. Now Willmott worried that he could give the landing craft no information about what they might find if they actually reached their designated beaches.

Aerial reconnaissance only showed half the picture. It would not reveal the sandbar that might convince a helmsman he was in the shallows, only for soldiers laden with kit to plunge off the ramp into deep water. Nor could the survey of Rhodes's coast which Willmott had recently made through the periscope of a submarine tell him whether sand at a particular spot lay fourteen inches deep – enough to bear the weight of armour – nor where the enemy had concealed their pillboxes.

The Navy was Willmott's career and accordingly he made decisions cautiously. Yet there was a side to him that was open to possibilities which eluded others. As a young midshipman, he had had his fortune told by an old woman in Ceylon. She had predicted that a great war would come but that he would survive it in the desert. His shipmates had laughed, pointing to his sailor's uniform, but here he was with a cushy berth on the Staff in Cairo. It was this

same willingness to look beyond the obvious that now persuaded him that – whatever his superiors thought – CORDITE would fail, and with catastrophic loss of life. The only way to avoid that was for him to see the beaches for himself.

When Willmott first suggested this to Baillie-Grohman he was rebuffed. He knew far too much about the operation to risk being captured. Yet he was sure that sooner or later the Army would want better intelligence about the places where it was to land. So certain was he that, although he disliked swimming, he started a training routine. In the early mornings, while the sun was still below the Pyramids, he did twenty-five laps of the Cairo Club Baths, practising sliding silently through the water as if approaching a beach watched by sentries.

The call came earlier than he had anticipated. There was a panic on: the plans had changed and the Army needed to know if they could land tanks below the town of Rhodes itself. By the next day, Willmott was in Alexandria, negotiating passage in a submarine. His intent was to row between it and the beach in a rubber dinghy, swimming the last hundred yards or so for greater stealth. The flotilla commander pointed out straight away that a dinghy would not fit through a submarine's hatch. Instead, he had another suggestion.

A few weeks earlier, a large and rather mysterious body of troops had disembarked in Egypt and they were now encamped north of Suez at Kabrit. They were commandos. There had been much talk about this new organisation since its formation six months before, but no one seemed to know what commandos actually did, or indeed how they might be used in North Africa. One of their sections, however, had contacted the submariners to explore the feasibility of making clandestine landings by canoe. They were currently training on the Great Bitter Lake, where Willmott was introduced to their leader, Captain Roger Courtney.

The two men proved to have very different temperaments. Willmott had an ancestor who had won the Victoria Cross in the Indian Mutiny, but he did not see himself in the heroic mould. He

achieved results through planning and dedication. Courtney was, by contrast, in the words of one of his men, 'a grown-up boy' with the adventurous outlook of an Elizabethan privateer.

Now nearly forty, Roger Courtney had abandoned a job in a bank to seek his fortune in Kenya. There he had become a white hunter, helping wealthy visitors to shoot big game and acquiring the nickname 'Jumbo'. He had then paddled the length of the Nile in a canoe, armed only with an elephant spear and living off a sack of potatoes. The journey had left him with two shillings in the world and in need of work, so he made his way to Palestine and signed up as a colonial policeman.

The Arab Revolt of the mid-1930s had taught him much about irregular warfare. He had seen how a handful of guerrillas could pin down a larger force using rapid movement and camouflage. When the insurgents began to snipe his barracks, Courtney was sent up a clock-tower with binoculars to spot their muzzle flashes. The bullets kept coming out of nowhere. Not until later was it discovered that the flash was being masked by wet sacks hung in front of the rifles.

Courtney had had a spell in the Army as a young man, and several months before war broke out in 1939 he joined up again. He had got married a year earlier, and had spent his honeymoon travelling down the Danube to the Black Sea in a collapsible German-made canoe. The locals called it a *folbot* – a folding boat; Courtney and his wife called it *Buttercup*.

In skilled hands, Courtney realised, canoes were fast and silent. He came to think that they would be perfect for carrying out reconnaissance and sabotage at close quarters, but like Willmott he failed at first to persuade more conventional minds of his idea's merits. Yet where Willmott had waited to be proved right, Courtney had resorted to direct action. In the late summer of 1940 he made a bet with his commanding officer that he could board a ship at night and get away again, even if the crew was forewarned. A few evenings later, the CO was hosting a drinks party for the other officers when the French windows opened abruptly and in

stalked Courtney, naked apart from a pair of sodden swimming trunks. Without a word he flung down the breech-blocks and covers from the ship's anti-aircraft guns and left the way he had come. Daylight revealed a line of crosses chalked on the hull where there would have been limpet mines.

Challenged to repeat his feat against a submarine depot vessel, Courtney and a comrade again succeeded in placing their canoe undetected alongside the ship and making their chalk marks. They were then tempted by a dangling rope-ladder – only to find a master-at-arms and two marines with fixed bayonets waiting for them at the top. Yet Courtney had made his point, and when the commandos sailed for the Mediterranean, their Folbot Troop went with them.

The 'folboteers' would soon be given a more anonymous name to disguise their activities – the Special Boat Section (SBS). Courtney quickly found, however, that no one on Wavell's staff knew what to do with them. He was therefore delighted to be given the chance to demonstrate his worth by helping Willmott carry out his reconnaissance. One of his NCOs, Jimmy Sherwood, was equally excited to be told that he too had been selected for the SBS's very first operation.

They had a fortnight to prepare. 'For several nights we practised approaching the shore in folbots, with the object of getting ashore without being seen,' Sherwood later remembered. 'There were people on the beach trying to spot us.' A canoe seen bow-on has a narrow silhouette and usually they were only sighted at the last moment. They were happy enough with this since the Italian patrols on Rhodes would not be actively looking for them, and the sound of the waves would help to cover any noise they made.

The two officers also spent hours in games of hide and seek. 'Generally speaking, it's surprising what one can do at night if one keeps low to the ground or water and quiet,' Willmott wrote afterwards. Courtney had a hunter's eye, but after ten days Willmott was able to swim ashore in the dark and circle behind him twice as often as he was caught. They also found that as long as Willmott remained

motionless in the sea, a torch shone on him would dazzle Courtney rather than illuminate Willmott.

The latter had sheathed the torch in a contraceptive to keep the water out, and the rest of their kit was equally makeshift. They might have to stay submerged for hours, and in an age before wetsuits the best protection against the cold that Willmott could devise was a submariner's thick jersey and woollen leggings soaked in periscope grease. On top of this he wore an inflatable Gieves waistcoat to add buoyancy. Even so, the clothing was heavy and uncomfortable, and did not stop Courtney from catching a bad chill which for several days put an end to their training.

The folbot did not inspire Willmott with confidence either. He soon learned the rudiments of paddling, but the canoe had been made for the pre-war leisure market rather than to military specifications. There were no spray caps and the boat risked being swamped in rough water. It was also prone to tip over in all but the lightest of winds. In fact, the sole piece of high technology that they had laid their hands on was the infra-red transmitter. Its rays were visible only when seen on the screen of the receiver, and most nights they practised homing in on the beacon being flashed by Sherwood from the base of Alexandria's lighthouse. Without the device, their chances of returning safely to the submarine would be remote.

In the last week of March 1941, the trio sailed for the Dodecanese aboard *Triumph*. 'I'd never been in a submarine in my life,' said Sherwood. 'I thought it was romantic, not dangerous!' They saw little sign of enemy activity on the surface, although they spotted much in the air; far to the west, the Navy was eviscerating the Italian fleet in the battle of Cape Matapan. On the night of the 30th, Sherwood helped to launch the folbot a little over a mile from the northern tip of Rhodes.

Willmott was to make the first recce, and after they had closed to within a hundred yards of the beach, he slipped as silently as he could into the water. The canoe was floating in a small bay, separated from the main harbour by a promontory. Shingle sloped steeply up from the shallows to a sea wall, beyond which lay the

Hotel des Roses. Once a fashionable resort, it was now the headquarters of the Axis forces on the island.

The sea was so cold that it took his breath away, and Willmott quickly started to swim towards the narrow crescent of sand. Almost instantly, he saw that it would be impossible to land tanks there. The foreshore was too rocky and the gradient was too stiff. He then began to check whether it was suitable for troops, stretching his toes down to see how the sand shelved under the surf. As he did so, he heard someone speaking in German.

On the road behind the wall at the back of the beach, two sentries were stamping their feet to warm themselves. One was having a surreptitious smoke while the other hawked and wheezed. Willmott focused on the sound of the water around him. Then, moving in time to the noise made by each breaking wave, he began to crawl up the shingle on his elbows.

He had got halfway to the wall when he saw one of the soldiers looking at him. He froze. The hours of practice with Courtney had taught him that if he stayed absolutely still he resembled nothing more unusual than a rock in the dark. Through his wet clothes he felt a breeze coming from the sea, and he clamped his teeth together to stop them from chattering. The sentry turned his head again and moved away.

Peering over the wall, Willmott realised that the Germans were no more than ten yards from him. A truck passed between them, and the headlights revealed two others stationed further up the road. His limbs felt tired and numb, and he did not relish going back into the water. Digging deep into his reserves of willpower, he dragged himself back down to the sea and began methodically to explore the shallows.

Within a few minutes he found a sandbar, some fifteen yards out. If the landing craft came to rest on this, their cargoes would be sitting targets. He traced its course, noting carefully where it ended so as to be able to direct the boats around it. Then he headed for the last of his objectives – the Hotel des Roses itself.

There might be hidden gun emplacements here, and he crept

slowly round the edge of its lawn, keeping to the shadows, until he was only fifty yards from the building. Satisfied that there were no tank traps or machine-gun nests, only tamarisks and bougainvillea, he retraced his steps downhill. Grabbing a few pebbles from the beach as geological specimens, he braced himself for the icy coils of the sea.

Three hours had passed and the Benzedrine tablets he had taken to keep himself alert had worn off. Fatigue began to wash over him as he held his torch aloft, two hundred yards from the shore, praying that Courtney would see his signal. It took all his concentration to keep flashing 'R' in Morse code and after ten minutes he started to worry that the commando had been captured. Or perhaps he had lost his bearings in the dark and been carried out of position by the current.

Willmott felt a blissful exhaustion overwhelming him. He lost sensation in his feet, and then in his legs as it crept up him. His eyes closed, but he willed them to open and as he did so heard the sound of a blade parting water. Up came Courtney, and with a final effort Willmott pulled himself over the stern of the canoe. So cold was he that he could not feel the whisky that Courtney poured down his throat, but the hot coffee revived him a little and they began to paddle out to sea to rendezvous with the submarine. A thick mist came down, but once through it they were able to begin transmitting with the infra-red equipment, watching in turn for *Triumph*'s own beam. They did not have long to wait before they saw her rise from the water.

The next night, Willmott went onto a beach south of Rhodes town. There he found an unmarked reef below the waterline which would have holed any landing craft. Pushing his luck, he worked his way through barbed wire and got onto the esplanade of the town itself. No sooner had he begun to swim for the canoe than he saw a group of sentries with torches combing the area where he had just been. By now his strength was spent, and after resting for two days in the submarine he agreed to Courtney's suggestion that he let him make the third and final recce.

It was the nearest they came to getting caught. The beach was twenty miles down the east coast, and while Courtney was ashore Willmott paddled off to take depth soundings at another. When he returned four hours later there was no sign of Courtney. The minutes passed and Willmott began to fear that something had gone wrong.

Then out of the dark came the frantic barking of a dog. It was a high, angry snarl warning of an intruder. There was a guard hut close to the water, and Willmott expected at any moment to be picked out by a searchlight and to see tracer arcing towards him. Instead, all he heard was a long, muted whistle. Was it Courtney? Or was it a ruse to lure Willmott in? If he was captured, the entire invasion would be compromised. Yet the outcome would be the same if he left Courtney there. Willmott presumed that it was the commando's presence which was disturbing the animal, and cradling his tommy-gun in the crook of his arm he slowly nosed the canoe right in to the beach.

The whistle sounded again, and then Courtney came floundering loudly through the surf. He was unable to swim, having seized up with cramp after mapping more than half a mile of enemy defences. The dog had followed him much of the way, growling from the other side of the fence. Stroke by stroke, Willmott backed the folbot out to sea, keeping his weapon levelled at the beach all the time, until they could hear the barking no more.

The mission had achieved all of Willmott's ambitions for it. He had acquired vital intelligence and shown that many of the charts on which the planners of CORDITE had relied were wrong. As he put it later: 'There had been natural misgivings at Headquarters about the practicability of this sort of snooping . . . but the venture proved the possibilities.' But when *Triumph* returned to Alexandria they learned that all their efforts had been for nothing. Germany had invaded Greece on 6 April, so Wavell's priority was now to reinforce the mainland. The attack on Rhodes was cancelled.

None the less, it would seem clear that Willmott had demonstrated beyond doubt the value and potential of covert beach reconnaissance. He and Courtney had also shown what could be

accomplished by enthusiastic cooperation between the Army and the Navy, and that a few men might by foresight, surprise and daring succeed where a more orthodox approach would not. Yet their reward was to be ignored by those who should have made best use of just such a lesson.

Roger Courtney was awarded the Military Cross for his courage on Rhodes but within three months the Commandos in the Middle East would be disbanded, and by the end of 1941 the SBS in the Mediterranean had been absorbed into other units. Similarly, Nigel Willmott was appointed to the Distinguished Service Order (DSO), but not for another year and a half did his superiors think to make use of his unique experience again. In the meantime he found himself evacuating British troops from other beaches in Greece, and teaching navigation in the desert.

It is a mark of the legendary status that the Commandos have attained in the seventy years since they were founded that so little of what is commonly thought about them is true.

When they were set up in 1940 Britain's fortunes were at a low ebb. After Dunkirk, its armed forces appeared permanently on the defensive, and even the Battle of Britain was a victory won on the back foot. The public was ready to be inspired by any organisation which took the fight to the enemy, and the media was willing to do its bit to raise morale. So was born the image of the commando, dagger between his teeth, striking night after night in a carefully coordinated campaign of sabotage and raiding. By and large, that has remained the heroic picture of them cherished by successive generations.

The reality was considerably more complex. In fact, for much of their wartime existence, the Commandos were regarded by those in charge of military strategy not as a major asset but as a nuisance. Occasionally they were treated by the rest of the Army from whose ranks they originally came, and by the other armed services, with undisguised hostility. As Willmott discovered after CORDITE, this was partly due to the suspicion within the higher ranks of the Staff

of anything untried and irregular. The Army is an institution, and a vast one, and it functions most efficiently when running on straight lines. Yet the failure of the Commandos to win greater approval from the High Command was also self-inflicted.

Their early raids were described by their greatest supporter, Winston Churchill, as 'silly fiascos'. But even once fully trained, they endured years of frustration as political in-fighting, the high-handedness of their commanders and resentment at the resources given them led to the cancellation of operation after operation. From July 1940 until June 1941 they carried out just one attack of any significance, and before March 1942 only two more of real importance. So much for 'hitting back'.

Moreover, when they were given an opportunity, the raid often ended in failure or at an almost recklessly high cost in blood if it managed to achieve its aims. Three men out of thirty-four came back from FLIPPER, the attack on Rommel's supposed headquarters. More than two-thirds of those who went to St Nazaire were killed or taken prisoner, while the fledgling Special Service Regiment was annihilated at Tobruk. Four from twelve survived Operation MUSKETOON, two from the original party of twelve returned after ANGLO, and just two of the ten 'Cockleshell Heroes' lived to tell of FRANKTON. The toll on officers was especially high. The five who went on BASALT in the autumn of 1942 won between them a Victoria Cross, the DSO and six Military Crosses (MCs), but none saw the end of the war.

Nor were their successful raids indispensable to Britain's survival. At a strategic level, such exploits were of questionable value, drawing off highly skilled troops who might have been better used elsewhere. Their early operations made for good propaganda, perpetuated by numerous films after the war, but that has led to their effect being overestimated in the years since.

It has also coloured the public perception of the Commandos' role. Their time as coastal raiders was in fact brief. By 1942, they were already being envisaged – when used in large numbers – primarily as assault troops. It was as this spearhead that they were

deployed from 1943 on the beaches of Italy and later of Normandy, side by side with the newly formed Royal Marine Commandos, whose adoption of a name and tradition created by the Army at first caused much resentment.

Even in this new role, though, it could be argued that the wrong lessons were drawn about their abilities. Certainly, the Commandos did all that was asked of them as flank guards and amphibious warriors in the push to the Po and the drive to the Rhine. The evidence suggests, however, that they were largely wasted on the tasks they were allocated, and could have done more if handled with greater flexibility and imagination. Pertinently, many of the objectives assigned to the elite Commandos were accomplished as well by ordinary regiments of the line. It was not the Commandos but the 8th Infantry Brigade which supplied the first troops to storm ashore Sword Beach on D-Day.

It was only in the decades after the war that the more important achievements of the Commandos came to be appreciated and acted on. For there is no doubt that the approach of some of them to combat, especially of those ever-smaller units which specialised in raiding, has had a profound effect on the art of war. It is no coincidence that the Parachute Regiment, the SAS and the SBS all sprang directly from the Commandos. Indeed, the very idea of 'special forces', now such a feature of modern warfare, is their legacy.

The particular methods and feats of a few individuals on a handful of occasions have often been taken to stand for the tactics and deeds of the Commandos as a whole. That was not the case. One of the aims of this book is to reveal the wide variety of commandos' experiences, and the diversity of formations the term encompassed. Some commandos, for example, saw very little fighting. For many, it came in intense bursts rather than as the prolonged slog endured by regular soldiers. Perhaps the most famous Commando leader, Lord Lovat, spent about a week on the front line in the course of the war, the great majority of it – until he was severely wounded – in the period after D-Day.

The soldier's job is to win battles. That of the historian, seated

safely at his or her desk, is to set the record straight. No one's memory is honoured by the repetition of myths or by the sensationalising of events in which men lost their lives. To show that things sometimes go wrong, however, is not to denigrate the courage of those who served in the Commandos, nor to overlook the pride with which they wore the green beret. Those virtues were common to all commandos, as was a shared ethos of self-belief and self-reliance that frequently allowed them to wield influence in war far out of proportion to their number. That standard military training now aims to instil in every recruit those Commando qualities, and often by using the techniques they first developed, is the most enduring tribute to the reputation they won for themselves during the Second World War.

Many books have already been written about the Commandos. Most concentrate on a particular unit or operation, or just on the original Army Commandos and not on their comrades (as they were from 1942) in the Marines. Meanwhile, the previous general histories, largely written by an earlier generation, tend to favour the wider military context over the viewpoint of the individual soldier.

This book is, I think, the first to try to tell the full story of the Commandos in the words of those who were there, and to do so by focusing on the most important or representative of their missions. It is written for a wide readership rather than for the scholar, but I hope that even those who already know something about the Commandos will find in it much that is new to them.

Among the little-known and first-hand accounts in the archives on which I have drawn is that of Gerald Montanaro's waterborne raid on Boulogne harbour – Operation JV – which pre-dated 'Blondie' Hasler's overly bold attack on Bordeaux by nine months. There are also insights from the only other survivor of FRANKTON, Bill Sparks, and reminiscences by Tommy Langton of his epic walk to safety after the debacle of AGREEMENT, when commandos dressed as German soldiers tried to seize Tobruk.

Other chapters include new material on the extraordinary

assassination of a German commandant in Yugoslavia by a commando disguised as a shepherd, and the even more remarkable assignment he was then given personally by Field Marshal Alexander. The tensions behind the façade of unity maintained by two of the Commandos' leaders, Lord Lovat and Robert Laycock, are laid bare in their private letters, while one written by a prisoner-of-war sheds light on the fate of two officers executed in a concentration camp on Hitler's orders. Another chance find means that the suspected treachery of a member of 62 Commando (the Small-Scale Raiding Force), who became an agent for the Gestapo, can now be revealed.

Above all, this is a book about the impact of war on men, and the impact they had on war. The Second World War continues to fascinate us because we wonder how we would cope if we faced such a test. These are the stories of those who did so for real.