

# Elite!

The Secret to Exceptional  
Leadership and Performance

Floyd Woodrow and Simon Acland



## CHAPTER ONE

# The magnificent workings of the human brain

You can't make a head and brains out of a brass knob with nothing in it.

Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*

## 'Behind enemy lines'

Floyd leaned forward in the Lanesborough Hotel's comfortable wing chair and rested his elbows on his knees.

'Simon,' he said, 'let me tell you a story about a couple of teams that I have come across in my time in the Army.'

He paused. I waited in the silence of the pause, expectant and rather excited. The intent expression in his eyes held me a captive audience. Floyd cocked his head slightly to one side and I now saw that the intensity was touched with humour, prompted partly by the anticipation he had sparked in me.

'It didn't really happen like this, but it might have. I think this story will show you what I want to get across in the book. I do like the title *Elite!*, by the way, and I will tell you why in a moment.

'I should probably start with a background word or two about the SAS and how it is organised as this is where I really began to learn the skill of leadership. There is no doubt in my mind that we are the best in the world at what we do. We grew out of the group founded by David Stirling in the Western Desert in 1941 during the Second World War to carry out sabotage missions

behind Afrika Corps lines. It is said that in the desert war his group accounted for more German aircraft by destroying them on the ground than the RAF managed to shoot down in the sky. The name Special Air Service came a bit later, in 1942. Temporarily disbanded as a full-time unit after the war, the permanent brigade now known as 22 SAS was reformed in 1952. Those of us in 22 SAS generally just refer to it as 'the Regiment'. The Regiment has fought in almost every conflict in which Britain has been involved since the Second World War. We have also been responsible for a myriad of actions that have had a significant impact on world events. The best-known was perhaps the breaking of the siege of the Iranian Embassy in 1981. You must remember that. It was splashed across the media – even live on TV. Men from B Squadron saved nineteen out of twenty hostages, eliminating or capturing six terrorist kidnappers in the process. Most organisations would have seen it as brilliant publicity, but the Regiment doesn't much like being in the limelight. Most of the things we have done have never been made public, and probably never will be.

'Since our formation many individuals have been decorated for bravery. One of those awards, I am proud to say, is mine. But – and this is not false modesty – I would not have that medal were it not for those people around me who performed at a truly elite level. I am just the lucky one who gets to wear it. The same can be said for my MBE.

'Today, there is still the one regular Special Air Services brigade. Nobody is quite sure why it was given the number 22. Someone's lucky number, perhaps. There are also two territorial units, 21 SAS in the south of the country and 23 SAS in the north. The Regiment itself is made up of a number of squadrons. Each squadron is commanded by a major – the rank I attained.

'It is a highly select group; many more apply for the Regiment than pass the extremely demanding and gruelling selection process. What is more, it is the most entrepreneurial business I have ever come across – more entrepreneurial than most of the companies you backed as a venture capitalist, I'll bet. What do

I mean by that? Well, it is constantly looking at ways of staying ahead of the competition. One of the exciting things about being part of the SAS is that you are constantly learning new skills. It is truly elite. And, although I will use the word *elite* throughout my stories, all I actually mean is continually pushing the boundaries of our potential. That is within the reach of all of us and why I like the title of the book.

‘Like anywhere in the Services, in the SAS you are expected to obey orders. In action, survival, let alone success, often depends on a rapid, instinctive reaction to what you are told to do. But there is a subtle difference to orders in the SAS. Wherever possible, orders are not narrow and prescriptive. Officers, commissioned and non-commissioned, are encouraged to make sure that their men take responsibility for their own actions, so that insofar as possible how a task is carried out is decided by the man or men doing it. When we plan an action, everyone to be involved in it is expected to make a contribution to that process. Ultimately, the senior officer will take the decision about how it will be done, of course; but all the participants will have had the opportunity to offer input. Even in the field of action, in the heat of battle, we will consult with our comrades if possible. Because we are so well trained to cope with the situations in which we are likely to find ourselves, and have deeply ingrained specialist skills – like some of the parts of the brain that we need to describe in the book – we can make those decisions very rapidly.

‘Most people probably have the idea that there is just one type of person in Special Forces units across the world. I bet you had me down as a stereotype before we met. Of course it’s true that everyone who attempts to join a Special Forces unit has some common characteristics: you have to be tough, mentally as well as physically; you have to enjoy physical activity, and to relish a challenge, in spades. You have to be able to undertake tasks both as an individual and as a member of a team. But these organisations would not be the formidable fighting forces they are without embracing a diversity of personalities. In any great team, you need

different types of people. You need the extroverts, the introverts, the people who analyse the hard facts and those who rely more on their instincts. In the Regiment you will find examples of every personality type.

'I have also been fortunate to be involved in most operational deployments the country has undertaken since I joined the Army in 1981. I can remember each conflict with great clarity, although there are slight differences in my reactions to those events as I became more experienced as a leader.

'The first conflict I can remember was when I was flying back from a three-month training assignment and heard on the radio the news of an aggressor moving their army over the border into the territory of a neighbouring British ally. It immediately sounded like war. Our defence treaty with the country stretched back to goodness knows when. This country was one of our most loyal allies and in a strategically important position. All of this was significant of course, but the most important element of all was that there was a principle at stake. Allow the success of the sort of naked aggression shown by this state, permit the infringement of the rights of a peaceful, independent sovereign state, and the whole world order could begin to totter.'

I found myself nodding vigorously in agreement.

'Obviously at that early stage it was not clear what role I would have in the conflict. What was crystal clear, though, was that I would have a role. The team and I knew we would be assigned the toughest, the most dangerous jobs going. That was what we were there for. What's more, we wanted them.

'Briefings for any deployment pulsate with excitement. But I remember this one better than most. All of us feel some element of trepidation on the eve of a major conflict. But most importantly we look forward to doing what we were trained to do. When I was deployed for that first time on a major conflict, most of us had never taken part in a full-on war.

'I have been fortunate to learn how to operate in the most demanding of environments, whether that was in the bush, in the

desert, in the jungle, in Europe or even in the Arctic. But I was particularly excited about fighting in a desert war. I have always been proud of the Regiment's roots in the thin sand of the Western Desert and David Stirling's daring missions behind Afrika Corps lines. And I had heard stirring stories about the key role played by some of our forerunners in the Omani desert in the 1950s.

'I'd passed into the SAS at the first attempt and four years before that I had been in the Paras. The selection course had been every bit as tough as I had expected and I have no doubt that I passed not because I was the finished article but because the people who selected me thought I had some potential. They were willing to give me a chance. I was intensely proud, at the age of twenty-two, to be one of the youngest soldiers ever to make it. In my superstitious moments I thought that my age matching the name 22 SAS could be a lucky sign. Every soldier who joins the Regiment has to start at the bottom, as a trooper, which for many means a step down in rank. Because I was so young, I was only a lance corporal in the Paras.

'Most of the other people I served with were older than me. But in terms of rank I was in the upper half. However, rank matters less in Special Forces than in some other units. The hierarchy is less strict. The key element is that every member is expected to be a leader or a follower depending on the situation. In any arena I was likely to be a follower of others, but if those more senior to me were to fall in battle then I would *de facto* become the leader. Or I might be put in charge of some specific task.

'In the late 80s and early 90s I considered myself highly professional, but, frankly, I was pretty brash and full of myself. I refused to cut any corners at all. I worked exceptionally hard at my training and expected others to do the same. I judged others too quickly and did not listen well. I was not afraid to let people know if I thought they were underperforming. It was not until later in my career that I learned to smooth off some of the sharp corners of my personality and use empathy more effectively. I now know this is critical to effective leadership, and that you have to take into

account the characteristics of the individuals with whom you are interacting in order to achieve the optimum result. That's another point I want to get across in our book.'



## **It's all in the brain**

Every thought I have, I create. I am in charge of my mind. Probably one of the most important moments in my life was when I realised that everything I do begins with a single thought in my mind and that I control it. Please take a little time to understand this chapter as it is the foundation block of everything you will ever undertake. As I will often say in this book, there is a price to pay to be successful. Understanding how your mind works is part of it.

If you look at your arm, you can get a pretty good idea of how it works. You know what most of the parts are called – elbow, wrist, biceps, triceps, tendons, knuckles and so on. You know that if you tighten your biceps, you raise your forearm at the elbow. You know that if you tense your triceps, your hand will form a fist, and you know why, because you can see the tendons moving in your forearm and on the back of your hand. It may not be simple, but it is clear. It is a comprehensible, mechanical process, cause and effect.

Actually, of course, that is not quite right. In reality, the way you perceive the sequence of events is that you raise your forearm at the elbow and your biceps tighten. You make your hand into a fist and feel your triceps tensing. The effect seems to come before the cause.

Welcome to the workings of the human brain. You think 'I want to pick up that object'. That triggers the act of raising your forearm. You think: 'That person is going to attack me; I'd better defend myself.' That triggers the act of clenching your fist. You don't think: 'I want to raise my forearm, so let's tighten my biceps' or 'I want to clench my fist, so let's tense my triceps.' The unconscious element of the human brain is at work.

## **Your brain's black box**

Most people can name the different parts of their arm. Far fewer can name the different parts of their brain. To many of us, our brain is a black box. It produces a result, creates an effect – of some sort, usually – but we do not necessarily understand why. We may have some vague idea that some people are right-brained and left-handed, or vice versa, and that different parts of the brain perform different functions. But unless we have gone out of our way to learn about the brain, we don't really begin to understand the workings of what most people (apart, perhaps, from certain teenagers) would count as their most important organ.

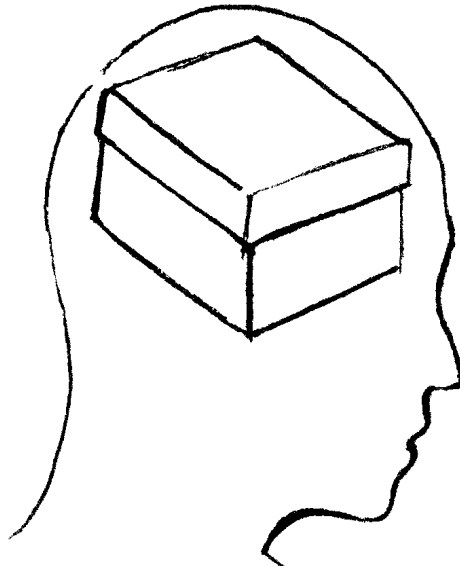
We also know that if we wish to develop the muscles in our arm we can exercise it, do press-ups and lift weights. After a few days, we can see the physical difference, as the muscles have become larger and more toned. We can also sense the difference because the exercises become easier; after a while we can do more press-ups and lift heavier weights. It is far harder to discern the direct effect of exercising or training the brain.

One reason for this lack of understanding is that we cannot see our brains at work. We can see how our arms work; we can watch those muscles get bigger from exercise. As I said before, it is a complex but comprehensible mechanical process. The brain is closed away in its box. We cannot watch it work.

Another reason is the extraordinary complexity of our brains. And the third reason is that, until relatively recently, scientists were unable to study accurately the workings of the brain. It is only in recent years that rapid advances in medical technology and sensing techniques have made it possible for scientists to understand more thoroughly the functions of different parts of the brain and their complex interactions.



MY HEAD'S A BRAIN BOX AND  
I NEED TO KNOW WHAT'S INSIDE



## **What's going on in my head?**

In the course of my career in the Paras and the SAS I have done many, many hours of training. Much of it of course has been physical training, or training in special skills – weapons training, unarmed combat and so on. But I have also spent many hours in leadership training, learning about how to lead groups of soldiers and improve motivation, teamwork and capability to achieve success. Some of those training courses have been immensely valuable, others less useful. But I often felt that there was a missing element, a lack of explanation about what was actually going on inside my mind. I had to learn the practice without the theory because the understanding of the theory was not available at the time. Subsequently, I have had the chance to learn about the theory. The advantage of doing it that way round is that it means you know which parts of the theory really work in practice. This is