

## **Minor British Commando Operations 1939-42**

v.1.0 October 4, 2006

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Source: *Combined Operations: The Official Story of the Commandos HMSO McMillian Company, New York 1943*

Before British Special Forces were formed into Commandos, right after the outbreak of war volunteers serving under specially selected officers were put into regimental independent companies. The name commando comes from the Dutch word for the irregular Boer units that harried the British in South Africa. Previous to the Army commandos, the land raiding mission was the province of the Royal Marines, and conducted by ad hoc groups from Marine detachments assigned to Royal Navy ships.

Britain being a maritime power, the army commandos had of necessity to work with Royal Marines. A major part of raising Army commandos was the creation of Combined Training Centers “so that the men might become familiar with the ways of life, the customs, the habits and the outlook of sailors.” [p. 5] Many American and Dominion troops were also trained by the centers.

The Independent Companies were later combined into Special Service Troops, which later became numbered Commandos.

The true impact of the minor operations was certainly not on the Axis, for they were scarcely pinpricks. The raids, particularly those from the sea, were astonishingly difficult to plan, train for, and to execute. The experience gained was directly parlayed into the attacks on St. Nazaire and Dieppe, and those raids became the “schools” for the great Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944.

On a psychological level, the raids were critical because they provided an opportunity, however meaningless in military terms, for the British and allies to strike back at Germany at a time the Germans were invincible, having conquered all of Europe - including European Russia – within 2 ½ years. The raids played perfectly into the British mythos of small groups of men showing unlimited initiative and courage coolly undertaking missions fraught with foolhardy risks, and returning to tell the tale.

### 1939-43 Norwegian Campaign

- Lillebo 23/24 January, 1943. Target: iron pyrites mine. 1 NCO killed. Mine out of operation for one year.
- Vaagso 26 December 1941. Target: Diverse targets in Maaloy Island, South Vaagso, and the ship channel to North Vaagso. Units:
  - No. 2 Commando
  - No. 3 Commando
  - Royal Army medical Corps detachment, No. 4 Commando

Royal Engineers, No. 6 Commando  
HMS Kenya (cruiser)  
4 destroyers  
Several RAF squadrons

The commando contingent numbered 51 officers and 525 ORs. Estimated German casualties included 150 KIA, 98 POW, 15,000 tons of merchant shipping. 77 Norwegian volunteers were evacuated

- Glomfjord: hydel power station elements No. 2 Commando; other units. Summer 1940.
- Loften Islands I: 3/4 March 1941. Special Service Brigade including No. 3 and No. 4 Commandos. Target: cod and herring factories at Stamsund, Henningsvaer, Svolvaer, and Brettesnes. Brigadier JC Haydon. Naval force under Captain C. Caslon, RN, included destroyers – Somali, Bedouin, Tartar, Eskimo, and Legion, and 2 infantry landing ships. The raid returned with 225 prisoners and 315 volunteers from locals, including 8 women wanting to join the Norwegian Red Cross. 1 fish factories, a power plant, 800,000 gallons oil storage, and 5 ships totaling 18,900 tons were destroyed.
- Loften Islands II: 26/28 December 1941. No. 12 Commando.
- Spitzbergen 25 August 1941. Objective: destroy the coal mines and evacuate inhabitants, denying Germany any advantage from the mines. Troops, largely Canadian, were under the command of Brigadier AE Potts; the naval force was led by Rear Admiral PL Vian<sup>1</sup>. Units included:
  - 1 Company Royal Canadian Engineers
  - Edmonton Regiment (detachment)
  - Saskatoon Light Infantry (detachment)
  - Royal Canadian Signals (detachment)
  - Royal Engineers
  - Norwegian forces (detachment)

Because of the isolated location of Spitzbergen, the Allies were able to mount A remarkable deception: they kept the two radio transmitters on the island Functioning, putting out reports of dense fog and boring normalcy. The Germans did not even realize till September 3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> that something had gone Wrong at the island.

### 1940-42 French Coast

- Cap d'Alprech/Berck: 200 men [Major RJF Todd] Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders 23/24 June.
- Guernsey: elements No. 3 Commando [Major JF Durnford Slater] and No. 11 Independent Company [Major RFJ Todd] 14/15 July.

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<sup>1</sup> This was, of course, the former commanding officer of HMS Cossack, perhaps the most famous British destroyer of World War II. He won instant recognition in the Altmark incident and subsequently continued to lead his men in several remarkable exploits.

- Bruneval (Operation Biting)<sup>2</sup> 27/28 February 1942. Target: German radar station; the raid was to bring back equipment for inspection. This was a combined air-sea operation. The air part was led by Major JD Frost commanding C Company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Parachute Regiment. He is, of course, the same officer who led the battalion in the epic defense of the bridge at Arnhem in 1944. The naval party consisted of 32 officers and ORs of the Royal Fusiliers and the South Wales Borderers. They were to cover the withdrawal of the airborne troops, who had to retire 600 yards from the radar station to the beach. The naval force came from No. 14 Flotilla; its boats and craft were escorted by two destroyers. The airborne drop was conducted by Whitleys of No. 51 Squadron RAF. The mission was a success, at a cost of 3 killed, some wounded, and 7 captured. Bruneval is the Parachute Regiment's first battle honor. Interestingly, in the source book, Major Frost is credited as belonging to the Cameronians. The source book is cagey on details about British airborne troops and Major Frost's was commissioned in the Cameronians. He won a Military Cross for the raid, a DSO in North Africa, and a bar to the DSO at Arnhem.

### 1941 Italian Coast

- Monte Vulture, Campagna Province 10/11 February 1941. Target: an aqueduct across River Tragino. Elements from "an Airborne Division" including Royal Engineers. Commander Major TAC Pritchard. East Anglia to Malta to drop zone: 1800 miles. 8 Whitley aircraft. Target was destroyed, a secondary target – a bridge across the River Ginestra, a subsidiary of the Tragino – was also destroyed. Troops were formed into 3 escape parties; Major Pritchard and his party were captured.

### Mediterranean 1941

Several raids were conducted by Layforce, which consisted of

No. 7 Commando  
 No. 8 Commando  
 No. 11 Commando  
 Two locally raised commandos.

- Bardia 19/20 April 1941. Objective: the German-Italian base. No. 7 Commando, detachment Royal Tank Regiment.
- Sphakia 26/27 May 1941 After the failure of an attempt to cover the British retreat from Crete, No. 7 and 8 Commandos and the two local units were sent to Alexandria. They embarked on 4 destroyers and made a second attempt, landing at Sphakia. This time the commandos were successful, but having got the remains of the Crete garrison off, they were left without sufficient ships/landing craft for

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<sup>2</sup> Many details from

[http://members.aol.com/awat6/parachute\\_regiment.htm#BRUNEVAL%20\(Operation%20Biting\)](http://members.aol.com/awat6/parachute_regiment.htm#BRUNEVAL%20(Operation%20Biting))

evacuation. About 600 men were killed, wounded, or missing, equating to 75% casualties.

- Litani River 7/8 June 1941. Objective: support the British/Dominion forces in the Syrian campaign by seizing crossings of the Litani River. Commander: Lt. Col. RRH Pedder. No. 11 Commando, 27 officers and 456 ORs. Royal Navy escorts included the destroyers Hotspur and Ilex. The objective was achieved, but at the cost of 123 officers and men killed/missing.
- Tobruk 18/19 July. Objective: neutralize an Italian force holding the Twin Pimple heights which overlooked perimeter position of Indian 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry. Commander: Captain M. Keely. Five officers, 70 ORs; of which 3 officers and 40 ORs formed the assault party. The mission was successful, “largely due to the careful methods of reconnaissance learnt from the Indians” (p. 41). Casualties: 1 KIA, 4 WIA.

[Note: Because of heavy losses in the Sphakia and Litani operations, Layforce had to be disbanded as no trained replacements were available in the theatre.]

- Raid on Rommel and his HQ 10/11 November 1941. Commander: Colonel Laycock. Troops included 6 officers and 53 ORs of the Scottish Commando. Troops were carried from Alexandria on the Royal Navy submarines Torbay and Talisman. As is well known, Rommel was not at home. The detachment assigned to cover the house was led by Lt. Col. Keyes, son of Admiral Roger Keyes, with 18 men. He was killed during the storming of the house and subsequently awarded a Victoria Cross. Because the Germans – as usual for them – reacted rapidly to the raid, the attackers were unable to get back to their submarines. Only two men got back from the raid: Colonel Keyes and a sergeant. It took them 41 days to escape overland to Cyrene