

Intelligence in Public Media

The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare: How Churchill's Secret Warriors Set Europe Ablaze and Gave Birth to Modern Black Ops

Damien Lewis (Quercus, 2016), 402 pp., bibliography, appendices, gallery of photographs (eight pages), three maps, index.

The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare: Churchill's Mavericks—Plotting Hitler's Defeat

Giles Milton (John Murray, 2016), 356 pp., illustrations and photographs (16 pages), notes, bibliography, index.

Rogue Heroes: The History of the SAS, Britain's Secret Special Forces Unit That Sabotaged the Nazis and Changed the Nature of War

Ben Macintyre (Crown, 2016), 380 pp., maps, photographs (32 pages), index.

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

In the 1941, the only British land forces fighting the Germans and the Italians were doing so in North Africa; elsewhere in the European theatre, the British Army focused on building capability for a future assault on Europe. Small raiding units known as the Small Scale Raiding Force (SSRF) but better known as “commandos” were conducting operations along the Atlantic coast of Europe. At the same time, an organization known as the Special Operations Executive (SOE) was training soldiers and civilians to conduct sabotage and subversion operations in occupied Europe. SOE was not a military organization—at least not until the invasion of Europe. SOE had soldiers, sailors, and civilians—men and women who were committed to the orders from Prime Minister Winston Churchill to “set Europe ablaze.”

SOE operations are probably best known by students of intelligence operations literature for their program of training and supporting local resistance forces in France, Italy, Greece, and the Balkans. Dozens of books have been published on these operations—both memoirs and formal histories. Less well known are the SOE operations planned and executed by SOE members themselves.

The first of these operations was in January 1942. Operation POSTMASTER involved a small team of SOE operators sailing into a Spanish port in West Africa and stealing three Axis ships used to provide support to the German submarine fleet operating in the Atlantic. The operation involved infiltrating into the port and then “cutting out” the ships by destroying their anchor chains with plastic explosives and towing the ships out of the harbor using two ocean going tugboats. Once out on the open sea, the POSTMASTER team delivered the ships to

a Royal Navy squadron which “just happened” to be on patrol off West Africa.

POSTMASTER was an operation consistent with a British tradition of privateers going back to Sir Francis Drake, but this sort of operation was anathema to the War Office and the Admiralty. At its inception, the Admiralty refused to support POSTMASTER. Support was given only after the prime minister issued direct orders, as POSTMASTER was not considered an appropriate means of conducting warfare. Of course, SOE didn't work for the War Office or the Admiralty. Churchill had insured the new organization would be separate from both, placing it under the command and control of the Ministry of Economic Warfare. The minister, Sir Hugh Dalton, and Churchill received briefings from SOE seniors when it was deemed necessary. This was just the sort of buccaneer spirit that Churchill wanted in this new type of war against totalitarian adversaries. In fact, the SOE conducted this sort of operation not once, but twice—the second time, in March 1943, in the neutral harbor of the Portuguese colony of Goa. In another, similar operation—Operation CREEK—the SOE actually destroyed Axis ships in port.^a

Among the members of Operation POSTMASTER were three British army officers, Capt. Gus March-Phillips, Lt. Geoffrey Appleyard, and Lt. Graham Hayes, as well as Andre Lassen, a Danish refugee who had joined the UK military and, eventually the SOE. All three officers were part of the SSRF before joining the SOE, and none of them would live to see the end of the war.

a. For more on Operation CREEK, see James Leasor, *Boarding Party: The Last Action of the Calcutta Light Horse* (William Heinemann Ltd., 1978).

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After POSTMASTER, they continued raiding operations, either as part of the SSRF or as members of subsequent raiding forces. Lassen left the SOE and served as an early member of one of the squadrons of the Special Air Service (SAS) that focused operations in the Aegean. The high casualty rate in the SOE demonstrated that audacity clearly had its price among the members of the “Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare,” as Churchill described the SOE.

Though differently subtitled, two of the books in this review are entitled *The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare*, and both are filled with one tale after another of incredible courage and audacity behind the lines in the European theater in World War II. Both books are focused exclusively on special operations in the European theatre. Many of the operations, such as POSTMASTER, have been covered in other books, including post-war memoirs from the members of the SSRP, SOE, and even the British Secret Intelligence Service. As the British war archives opened—50, 60, and 75 years after the war—a flood of books was published on SOE operations in Europe.^a But what makes these two books excellent additions to the shelf is that both their authors are superior researchers and writers who offer new insights into both the tactical and strategic decisionmakers involved in the SOE.

Despite their identical titles, these are two very different books. Damien Lewis’s follows the exploits of Andre Lassen, starting with Operation POSTMASTER, through his transition to the raiding parties in North Africa as a member of the SAS, and then into the Adriatic and Eastern Mediterranean raiding parties of the Three Squadron of the SAS, known as the Special Boat Squadron (and eventually known as the Special Boat Service (SBS)). Lewis’s book is filled with vivid descriptions of numer-

ous operations conducted behind German and Italian lines—operations conducted by Lassen and his team that ran the gamut from intrepidity to foolhardiness as they consistently relied upon the element of surprise in facing adversaries, often more than 50 times their number.

Lewis is a well-established military historian. He has pulled details from the British military and civilian archives that allow him to describe events that could well be fictional accounts in thriller novels. In fact, as noted in Brian Lett’s description of Operation POSTMASTER and in Lewis’s book, one of Ian Fleming’s early war responsibilities was to serve as the Office of Naval Intelligence liaison to SOE. He was well aware of many of the SOE operations and the early members of the SOE, including Andre Lassen. Fleming was also in regular contact with the future commander of the SOE, then-Col. Colin Gubbins, who was at the time of POSTMASTER the director of SOE operations and training and had the unofficial title. “M.”^b Most writers who have analyzed Fleming’s novels have pointed out that James Bond was an amalgam of several characters Fleming met in the war. One of these was Andre Lassen.

While Lewis delivers an excellent tale of wartime special operations, his book is really a biography of Andre Lassen. He provides significant detail on Lassen’s background and wartime experiences. One topic that Lewis covers in detail is Lassen’s slow and dangerous slide into what today would be diagnosed as posttraumatic stress disorder. While Lewis makes it clear that Lassen’s mates were aware of his increasingly reckless behavior in a dangerous environment, they were also aware that his bravery and skills made success possible and increased the chances of their own survival. As in many stories of special operations in World War II where “command” was hundreds of miles away, it was unlikely that anyone with authority would have taken Lassen off the line or would have even known of this development in Lassen’s mental state. This part of the story is hard to take in, but it is surely one of the most important reasons to read Lewis’s book.

Where Lewis’s book focuses primarily on the actions of one individual, Milton’s labors to expand the story to include many players inside the “ministry,” including staff officers, resistance leaders, commandos, and the scientists and engineers who designed special devices for the SOE—the real life “Q” section (“Q” for quarter-

a. Some recent titles include: A. R. B. Linderman, *Rediscovering Irregular Warfare: Colin Gubbins and the Origins of Britain’s Special Operations Executive* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2016); Bernard O’Connor, *Churchill’s School for Saboteurs: Station 17* (Amberley Press, 2014); Brian Lett, *SOE’s Mastermind: The Authorized Biography of Major General Sir Colin Gubbins* (Pen and Sword, 2016); Brian Lett, *The Small Scale Raiding Force* (Pen and Sword, 2014); and Brian Lett, *Ian Fleming and SOE’s Operation POSTMASTER: The Top Secret Story Behind 007* (Pen and Sword, 2012). Core resources for SOE research include Peter Wilkinson and Joan Bright Astley (both SOE seniors), *Gubbins & SOE* (Pen and Sword, 2011); E. H. Cookridge, *Set Europe Ablaze* (Thomas Crowell, 1967); and M. R. W. Foot, *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive, 1940–1946* (BBC, 1984).

b. Lett, *Ian Fleming and SOE’s Operation POSTMASTER*: 18–20.

master). Milton describes in great detail the designers of the specialized explosives that are essential for sabotage. Milton's book moves smoothly from the SOE's Baker Street headquarters, to research facilities in rural England, to training facilities in Northern England and Scotland, to operations behind the lines throughout occupied Europe. Given this effort, what the reader receives from Milton is a greater understanding of the strategic value of the SOE and the bureaucratic as well as operational challenges that the SOE faced both in London and in occupied Europe.

The third book in this review is about the most famous of all special operations organizations in World War II: the British Special Air Service (SAS). In *Rogue Heroes*, Ben Macintyre provides a critical look at SAS operations throughout the war in Europe. *Rogue Heroes* is a very important addition to the public history of the SAS Regiment insofar as Macintyre was the first writer granted full access to SAS Regimental records from 1941–46. For *Rogue Heroes*, Macintyre researched countless operational after-action reports, intelligence reports, and formal correspondence between the Regiment's leaders and headquarters. Macintyre, who has written several books about espionage and counterintelligence in World War II, is an outstanding storyteller, so the book offers one adventure after another, punctuated with key insights into SAS origins, how it was perceived by the British Army command in North Africa, and how it was eventually understood to be an essential force in support of the Allied effort—both in the Italian campaign and after the invasion force landed in Normandy.

As with the Lewis and Milton books, *Rogue Heroes* can be read primarily as a tale of courage in the face of long odds, or it can be read as a tale of the strategic, bureaucratic, and personal challenges faced by a small, unconventional force conducting warfare outside the boundaries of conventional military doctrine. Macintyre spends two-thirds of the book on the creation of the SAS and its raiding operations behind German and Italian lines from 1941 through 1943. It was during the first two years in North Africa that SAS established its own policies on training, planning and raiding techniques, so Macintyre's decision to limit the discussion of the Regiment's operations in Italy, France, and eventually Germany to the last

third of the book makes sense from the standpoint that it could otherwise have easily doubled in size.

All three of these books make one critical point: neither the creation nor the survival of the SOE, the SAS, and British Special Operations in World War II was a foregone conclusion. The fusion of intelligence and special operations was by no means "invented" in World War II; there were similar UK efforts in World War I, such as the Great Arab Revolt and the British covert action against Bolshevik Russia, as well as similar efforts during the inter-war years in the British colonial conflict. Though these efforts created individuals experienced in special operations, none of these operations resulted in the creation of special operations forces inside the UK military establishment.

In the cases of the SSRF and SOE, Churchill bypassed senior command and uniformed and civilian bureaucracies inside the War Office, the Admiralty, and the Secret Intelligence Service in order to create these unconventional or "irregular" units. For most of the war, the UK military and intelligence services were reluctant—to the point of unwillingness to provide any material support, clandestine communication, or delivery (submarine, motor torpedo boat or aircraft). Churchill had to intervene several times to keep these elements alive. In the case of the SAS, Macintyre makes clear that the only reason the unit survived was that Capt. David Stirling's father, who was a retired senior officer who had served alongside General Officer in Command of Middle East Forces, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, and most of his senior staff. Further, Auchinleck and his staff had been on shooting parties at the Stirling residence in Scotland prior to the war; Auchinleck knew the family and was aware of David Stirling's commitment to the commandos and unconventional warfare. When David Stirling presented Auchinleck with his plan for the SAS, the general had little to lose, given the small size of the unit Stirling was proposing and the less-than-successful results conventional forces had achieved against Erwin Rommel and the German Afrika Corps. In sum, if the prime minister hadn't been Winston Churchill (who had his own experience in colonial wars and insurgencies) and if Stirling had had a design for a desert raiding force but no particular social pedigree, it is

entirely possible that the none of the three groups would ever have been created.

Special operations in World War II were designed to create the greatest strategic effect with the smallest number of personnel. These operations were critical in the first years of the war, when allied forces were forced off the European continent and onto the defensive in Africa and Asia. In 1940, commando raiding forces demonstrated to the Nazis that Occupied Europe was by no means secure. When Churchill instructed the minister of Economic Warfare, Hugh Dalton, to “set Europe ablaze,” he was asking Dalton to create an organization that would attack Axis units anywhere and anytime, using any means necessary. Auchinleck and his successor, Gen. Bernard Montgomery, understood that these operations could only be conducted by small, unconventional units. In sum, conventional leaders were willing to accept the low level of risk, balanced against potential successes and morale gains, that these forces might deliver.

These three books demonstrate precisely how important unconventional solutions were to the war effort and how the courage of a small number of men and women created conditions for key victories on the battlefields of North Africa and Europe during World War II.

