Stirling's Men

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Foreword

THIS IS A TALE OF a group of men who sixty years ago joined a unit commanded by a charismatic and irreverent young officer called David Stirling. They didn't join for glory or medals or King and Country. They joined because they craved adventure. And they found it, in the deserts of North Africa, the mountains and beaches of Italy and the forests of France. They found something else, too: an unbreakable comradeship. They learned to depend on one another, to trust one another, to love one another like brothers. It was a fellowship of a sort few men are privileged to experience.

When the war ended and the men went their separate ways to build careers and raise families, the fellowship remained as iron as ever. But most chose not to talk about their war, wrapping themselves instead in a cloak of silent modesty for over half a century. Now, in the dusk of their lives, they have decided to tell their stories.

This isn't a book that attempts to portray the wartime SAS as a band of indomitable superheroes. The men themselves would snort derisively at such a notion and tell you, 'If it's heroes you're after look in the ranks of the infantry. It's there that epic courage is to be found'.

The wartime SAS were just ordinary men – clerks, builders, businessmen, hoteliers – who for a few years did something extraordinary. This book is dedicated to them, and to their comrades who remain in the desert and on the mountainside and in the forest.

CHAPTER ONE

NORTH AFRICA 1941–2

THE SUMMER SEASON was drawing to a close in Felixstowe. Tommy Trinder's *Loads of Nonsense* show had run its course at the Spa Pavilion and the town's entry in the East Coast Beauty Pageant in Lowestoft had failed to impress the judges. As the last of the departing guests tottered imperiously down the steps of the 250-room Felix Hotel, the manager, Mr Humphrey, and his assistant stepped forward to express their hope that everything had been to their satisfaction. Safe journey home and see you again next year. When they were gone, the staff moved quickly back inside; all, that is, except the assistant manager. Jeff Du Vivier stood for a moment warming himself in the September sun, looking forward to his first afternoon off for weeks. He had a jaunty unthreatening face with a slightly receding chin and warm light blue eyes. In the few months he'd been working in the Felix, Du Vivier had endeared himself to the guests. He knew when to talk and when to listen. In short, he was made for the hospitality business.

He turned and bounded up the steps. It was 11.15 a.m. Inside the staff were gathered round a wireless, listening to the flat tones of Neville Chamberlain.

> *This morning the British Ambassador in Berlin handed the German Government a final note stating that, unless we heard from them by 11 o'clock that they were prepared at once to withdraw their troops from Poland, a state of war would exist between us.*

Du Vivier stood with them for a minute:

> *I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany.*

He then started to organize lunch.

Bob Lowson learned of the declaration of war as he got himself together after a good night's dancing in Liverpool. Even with a thick head the tall 18-year-old had a natural poise to go with his luxuriant mane of brown hair swept spectacularly back. Girls liked Bob Lowson and Bob Lowson liked girls. But he preferred rugby. He liked the way it tested him physically, and he liked the way he stood up to the test. He was also partial to the ribald banter in the bar afterwards, so refreshingly different from the delicate refinement of the dance halls.

Johnny Wiseman heard the news in Sydney where he was on a business trip with his London spectacle-manufacturing company. The 23-year-old, a Cambridge graduate whose face was a symphony of cheerful indefatigability, appeared impervious to the pressures of hard work. It was one of the reasons his company had sent him around the globe, drumming up business in America, New Zealand and Australia: Wiseman could cope with the demands of the trip. Showing admirable initiative Wiseman went down to Sydney Harbour and talked his way on to a flying boat back to England.

France took a few hours longer to come to the aid of Poland. In the late afternoon of 3 September, Prime Minister Edouard Daladier told France she was at war with Germany. In St Malo, on the Brittany coast, 17-year-old Roger Boutinot was unconcerned. War and guns and bombs were too remote to disrupt him, a tubby assistant in a patisserie. And anyway, there was the Maginot Line.

DAVID STIRLING WAS gallivanting across North America in September 1939 when news reached him of war. He was in New Mexico, not too far from the Rio Grande. For the past two years he had pursued dreams the way cowboys pursued buffaloes. He wanted to be the first man to climb Everest.

Mallory and Irvine hadn't reached the summit, he was confident about that. The 24-year-old had climbed peaks in Europe and Canada, honing his skills and feeding his ambition. He would stand on top of the world, looking down on the tutor who had sent him down from Cambridge, and the Parisian art teacher who'd shattered his hope of becoming an artist. Stirling booked himself on the first plane leaving for Britain – first-class, of course.

Stirling arrived back in England and presented himself at the Scots Guards depot in Pirbright. He had joined the supplementary reserve in 1938, just before heading to Canada on another jaunt. Stirling was an execrable soldier. His mind was too creative for the stifling routine of the Guards, and his 6ft 5in body too ungainly for the parade ground. During one weapons inspection his sergeant had peered down his rifle, then recoiled in horror.

'Stirling, it's bloody filthy. There must be a clown on the end of this rifle.'

Stirling nodded. 'Yes, Sergeant, but not at my end.'

His nights were spent at the more racy clubs in London; during the day he caught up on his sleep at the back of army lecture rooms. Stirling's superiors described him as an 'irresponsible and unremarkable soldier'. In January 1940 Stirling's eyes flickered momentarily with excitement; he was posted as a ski instructor to the 5th Battalion, the Scots Guards, 'the Snowballers', and for a while it looked as if they might be sent to aid the Finns in their war against Russia. But this never materialized and Stirling was plunged back into drudgery. Only his trips to White's Club in London broke the boredom.

LOWSON WAS SEEN off to war by his father, a good man cast adrift from his family by his experiences in the Great War. He had raised his children as best he could, but his memories had made him remote. On the morning Lowson left home to join the Liverpool Scottish his father broke with tradition. He sat his teenage son down and talked to him.

'He asked me if I had a watch,' recalls Lowson. 'I didn't, so he gave

me his. Then he said, "I'm going to give you some advice: you'll be with men from now on so remember, you don't tell lies and you don't bear grudges."'

In early 1940 Lowson became one of 3,000 territorial soldiers to volunteer for Independent Company (the forerunner of the Commandos), raised by Colonel Gubbins. In April that year his company, No. 4, totalling 300 men, was despatched north, to Norway, to counter the German invasion. Lowson soon realized what Stirling had known right from the start, that the average British staff officer was a dunderhead in comparison to his German counterpart. Everything about the Norway operation, recalls Lowson, was 'stupid ... we'd had no training, all we had done were 12-mile route marches in the morning followed by trench digging in the afternoon'.

No. 4 Independent Company – the first of the ten companies to land in Norway – disembarked at Mo on 4 May and, strengthened by a battalion of Scots and Irish Guards, dug in along the main road from Bodo to Finneid.

'I was a lance corporal in command of a section nearest to the Germans and we could see them over the other side of a bridge,' recalls Lowson. They glared at each other for several days, 'and then we got the order to withdraw and head north for the coast. We walked 40 miles overnight and were picked up by a destroyer'.

That was on 29 May. Nine days later, with Germany overrunning France, the British Army withdrew in its entirety from Norway.

'At times,' says Lowson of his bit part in the doomed mission, 'we didn't know which day of the week it was.'

A FEW DAYS after returning from Norway, the Independent Companies merged with a force of specially trained Royal Marines to form the Commandos. They were officially amalgamated into the British Army on 12 June 1940 with the enthusiastic support of the Prime Minister. In a minute dated 18 June Winston Churchill had expanded on his wish to see the creation of British Special Forces:

'We have always set our faces against this idea, but the Germans

certainly gained in the last war by adopting it, and this time it has been a leading cause of their victory. There ought to be at least twenty thousand Storm Troops or 'Leopards' [soon changed to Commandos, a name inspired by the irregular Afrikaner forces who had caused Britain so much trouble in the Boer War at the turn of the century] drawn from existing units.'

Six days later the Commandos mounted their first offensive operation, a reconnaissance raid near Boulogne by 120 men.

Up and down the country notices were pinned in infantry barracks calling for Commando volunteers. Albert Youngman, a lightly built 18-year-old from Norfolk with an artless face, put his name down having spent several months 'patrolling the Norfolk coast sharing one rifle between three of us'. Before enlisting in the Royal Norfolk Territorial Regiment, Youngman had seen little of the outside world beyond his job as a post office clerk. But he liked the army; the salty language of his instructors and the camaraderie and the physical training. He was accepted and posted to No. 7 Commando, an amalgam of infantry regiments.

In the same unit was a Fenman called Reg Seekings, who had previously tried to join Bourne's Naval Commandos and the nascent parachute unit. 'The old RSM [of the Cambridgeshire Regiment] was turning everyone down,' he recalled. 'So what I did was to get all the beds and furniture in the billet, including the NCO's room, and pile them outside ... I refused to let anyone in until I got an interview with the CO.'

The unimaginative Seekings was like a bad-tempered dog, snarling and scowling at anyone who came to close to his kennel. Before the war he had been an amateur heavyweight boxing champion and his fists were the weapon he used to mask his social insecurities. The first pack of Cockney soldiers he had met in the war laughed at his bucolic manner.

'It was because I talked slowly, like Fenmen, but I said to them, "yeah, maybe [but] if there's something we don't understand do you know what we do? We hit it, and we hit it bloody hard, so just watch it".'

Du Vivier had spent the winter of 1939/40 working in the Great Western Hotel in his native London after the Felix had been requisitioned by the army. In April 1940, with the new summer season imminent, he

decided 'the best thing I could do was join up and do something to help'. He enlisted in the London Scottish, an affiliated regiment of the Gordon Highlanders, and it was to be Aberdeen where he underwent his training.

'Then one day this fellow came along to say there was a new unit called the Commandos.' Du Vivier volunteered: 'I would have done anything to get away from square-bashing.' He was posted to No. 11 Scottish Commando in Galashiels under the command of Colonel Pedder. 'There were 700 of us there,' remembers Du Vivier, 'but Pedder only wanted 500 so the way he sorted us out was to march from Galashiels to Ayr.'

Marching alongside Du Vivier was Jimmy Storie, a 22-year-old with a cheerful, whistle-while-you-work face. Before the war he'd been a tile fitter in Ayr.

'When we got to Ayr we bedded down in Craigie Woods,' he says, 'in a potato field I had used to dig up with my uncle.'

The day after their arrival, recalls Du Vivier, 'we were given three and sixpence each and told to go and buy some breakfast. Me and a pal, Tom Calderwood, walked down a street and a woman came out of a house and offered to make us breakfast'. The pair accepted the offer. Breakfast was served to them by a winsome young ATS girl called Rea. It was the most enjoyable breakfast of Du Vivier's life.

From Ayr they moved to Arran for more training. One of the officers was Geoffrey Keyes, son of Lord Roger, Director of Combined Operations. He wrote to his father from Lamlash at the end of August, telling him about the training:

'[It] was rather a shocker, as we started off from scratch with eleven miles non stop in three hours, twenty minutes halt for lunch, then another four miles in one hour. No joke.'

Another officer, says Storie, 'was known in Arran to sit on his bed and shoot the glass panes of the window with his revolver'. His name was Blair 'Paddy' Mayne.

SINCE HIS CHAMPIONING of Special Forces in June 1940, Churchill had established a Combined Operations Command and a few months later

issued instructions to study the possibility of offensive operations in northern Europe. But a chaotic raid on Guernsey, which had infuriated Churchill – 'Let there be no more silly fiascos like that perpetrated at Guernsey' – convinced him that for the foreseeable future the only theatre of war in which it was practical to blood his Commandos was North Africa.

Thus on 1 February 1941, a troop of No. 3 Commando and the whole of No. 7, No. 8 and No. 11 Scottish sailed for the Middle East under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Laycock. They were known as 'Z' Force (they were soon rechristened 'Layforce') and one of the officers on board was David Stirling, in No. 8 Commando, having heard about them one night in White's. He soon became known to his fellow officers as the 'Giant Sloth', so much time did he spend in his bed.

Layforce's mission was to exploit the success of General O'Connor's offensive, which had culminated in his signal to General Sir Archibald Wavell on 7 February, 'Fox Killed in the Open'. Having advanced into Egypt the previous September the Italians had been all but annihilated and the control of North Africa was within O'Connor's grasp. Initially 'Z' Force was to seize the island of Rhodes as part of a wider strategic goal to control the Aegean and open up a Balkan front. But Germany – as in Norway – were quicker off the mark and invaded Greece before the British landed on Rhodes. The Rhodes operation was now scrubbed, the vessels earmarked for the invasion instead used to evacuate some 45,000 British troops from Greece.

By the end of April 1941, the British High Command seemed befuddled by the incisiveness of the enemy. Germany was in possession of the Balkans and General Erwin Rommel had taken a little over two months to drive the British out of Cyrenaica (except for the besieged coastal town of Tobruk) back on to the Egyptian border.

No one now seemed quite sure how to best employ 'Z' Force. No. 7 Commando launched an assault on Bardia in late April, 'but,' recalls Youngman, 'it was our first raid and as everyone was green it didn't work out'. Seekings was wounded in the leg, while Youngman's section was

left behind by the mother ship. 'It wasn't at the RV so after a quick council of war we decided to sail our little dingy to Tobruk, about 90 miles up the coast.'

After acting as garrison troops in Cyprus for a while, No. 11 Scottish Commando was blooded in Syria at the battle of Litani river in June 1941. They established a bridgehead in the face of heavy fire from Vichy French 75mm battery. Colonel Pedder was killed, waving his swagger stick at the enemy, and the Scottish suffered 25 per cent casualties among the banana groves that lined the banks of the river. The most fortunate of them being a young lieutenant called Bill Fraser, who had been shot in the face as he led his section into the hills against a detachment of dismounted French cavalry. The bullet hit the chinstrap of his helmet and he handed over command temporarily to his sergeant, Jock Cheyne, while he gathered himself. A short while later he resumed command, insisting he was suffering just 'slight concussion'.

Stirling and No. 8 Commando, meanwhile, had been deployed in piecemeal fashion; carrying out raids on the Cyrenaica coastline, buttressing the defences of Tobruk and covering the withdrawal from Crete. But with no sign of being able to launch an offensive before late autumn Middle East Headquarters (MEHQ) decided that 'Z' Force should be disbanded and the soldiers dispersed to infantry regiments.

'We weren't a success,' reflects Du Vivier. 'That job we did in Syria [Litani river], well, to this day I still don't know if it was successful. I remember once we heard Lord Haw-Haw describing us on the wireless as "Churchill's Cut-Throats". We looked at each and said "is that us?!"'

Stirling repaired to Cairo, to the flat of his brother, Peter,* who was Third Secretary at the British Embassy, while the future of the Commandos was decided by MEHQ. For the next few weeks he divided his time between the flat and base in a merry-go-round of parties and route marches and parties. Whenever Stirling felt the hedonism might impair his soldiering he would visit the Scottish Hospital, to see a pretty young nurse

* Stirling had three brothers: Peter, Hugh and Bill. Hugh was killed in April 1941 and is commemorated on the Alamein Memorial.

he'd befriended, who let him have 'a couple of deep snifters from the pure oxygen bottle ... the hangover vanished in seconds'. Word of his shenanigans reached the ears of his superiors. They were not impressed. More intolerable impertinence. A Board of Officers was commissioned to examine whether Stirling was guilty of malingering.

Stirling was saved from any possible censure by a meeting in the officers' mess with Lieutenant Jock Lewes, a man who was as much a puritan as Stirling was a playboy. Lewes fell short in humour, had no time for frivolity and, as Stirling recalled in his biography, would never be caught having a 'quick drink in Cairo or taking a flutter at the racecourse'. But his ascetic lifestyle had its benefits; while his fellow officers had been living it up in Cairo, Lewes had carried out a raid on an Axis coastal airfield using motorized gunboats. The success of the German paratroopers on Crete convinced him that that was where the future lay for Special Forces units in North Africa. Laycock granted permission to experiment with a batch of fifty parachutes destined for India. On hearing of this, Stirling sought out Lewes and sweet-talked his way on to the scheme as one of the parachute pioneers.

LEWES AND STIRLING, along with four other men, made their jumps in June 1941. They leapt from an obsolescent Vickers Valencia biplane with Lewes and 26-year-old Roy Davies, his batman from the Welsh Guards, going first.

'The instructions were to dive out as though going through into water,' said another of the guinea-pigs, Mick D'Arcy. 'Lieutenant Lewes and Davies dived out. Next time round I dived out, and was surprised to see Lieutenant Stirling pass me in the air.' Stirling's parachute had snagged on the plane's tail section as it ripped away from the static line, tearing the top of the 'chute. He had hit the desert floor hard. For more than an hour he was blind.

As Stirling lay in his hospital bed he digested the news from the desert battlefront and started scribbling down some notes. The arrival of Rommel had knocked the British off balance; Wavell had been sacked after June's

'Battleaxe' offensive to relieve Tobruk had failed and his successor, General Auchinleck – an old friend of the Stirling family – had replaced him as commander-in-chief. The 'Auk' was a man who admired swashbucklers. 'Always be bold', he liked to tell his men.

Stirling's notes soon became a lucid appreciation of the situation in the Western Desert: 'Yes, Rommel has the upper hand,' he wrote, but in seizing the initiative he had left himself vulnerable; his lines of communication and airfields, strung out along the coast, invited attack. The reason the Commandos failed, he continued, was because their units were too large and cumbersome. Stirling argued that surprise was the key to success in this sort of guerrilla warfare. Surprise and a small group of men, five at the most. He concluded his analysis in characteristically bullish fashion: that a force of men, handpicked and rigorously trained, could parachute behind enemy lines and attack thirty different targets on the same night. There was a caveat.

'I insisted that the Unit must be responsible for its own training and operational planning,' he recalled after the war, 'and that, therefore, the commander of the unit must come directly under the C-in-C.' Stirling knew Auchinleck was planning an offensive some time in late 1941 and he proposed that a raid be launched to coincide with the attack.

For a man who had a visceral aversion to any form of paperwork Stirling was rather pleased with his military appreciation. He plumped up his pillows and leaned back in satisfaction. Now all he had to do was get the Top Brass to examine it. He rejected the idea of going through official channels; MEHQ's obtuse staff officers, the men Stirling referred to as 'fossilized shits', would pooh-pooh the document before any officer of influence had the chance to examine it. It was time to be impertinent.

A few days later he climbed through a hole in the perimeter fence of MEHQ. There was a shout of 'Halt!' from one of the guards but Stirling had hobbled inside before the man could react.

The first office he barged through contained one of his former lecturers from Pirbright. He remembered Stirling all too well. He tried another door, and found himself addressing General Neil Ritchie, the Deputy

Chief of Staff. When he'd finished leafing through the report Ritchie looked up at Stirling.

'This may be the sort of plan we're looking for,' he said. 'I'll discuss it with the Commander-in-Chief and let you know our decision.'

WHILE STIRLING WAITED to hear if Auchinleck was prescient enough to accede to his Special Forces idea, Johnny Wiseman was fighting nineteenth-century style with the North Somerset Yeomanry.

'We were sent into action at Syria and must have been some of the last people in action on horse,' he says. [The Syrian campaign was indeed the last ever British Cavalry action.]

When his flying boat had touched down in Southampton after an eleven-day flight Wiseman went to enlist in the RAF.

'I'd been in the Volunteer Reserve so I presumed there would be no problem.'

He was told to 'go home and wait until contacted'. A couple of days later he was travelling to work on the London Underground, ever the dapper businessman in his pin-striped suit and newspaper, when he decided he would join the army.

'I got off at Ealing Common and enlisted.' He had the choice of which branch of the army to enter and 'thought the cavalry sounded terrific so I signed on with them and was posted to Shorncliff in Kent as a trooper'.

With his degree in Modern Languages from Cambridge, but more pertinently, his good showing in the regimental rugby team, Wiseman was soon recommended for a commission. But on the eve of his departure to the Officer Cadet Training Unit (OCTU) he heard that a draft was being sent to the Middle East.

'I went to see the CO and told him I was prepared to give up my commission if I could go on the draft. I don't know why I made that decision, I suppose I just wanted to get to where the war was.'

On the night of 7/8 June the North Somerset Yeomanry crossed into Syria as part of a multi-national Allied force. Facing them were over 40,000 Vichy French under the command of General Henri Dentz.

Wiseman's regiment was involved in a series of skirmishes for the next six weeks, culminating in an engagement in the Jebel Mazar on 12 July.

'We dismounted in the valley and went in on foot to engage them [French native troops]. It was all fairly innocuous, we killed a few of them and they killed a few of us.' What was notable, however, says Wiseman, was their 'amateur' officers, young well-to-do men probably not unlike David Stirling.

'They didn't show any leadership,' he reflects. 'It was left to the NCOs, the regular soldiers, to do that.'

ON 14 JULY AT Acre, where the British commander Sir Sidney Smith had repulsed Napoleon in 1799, armistice terms in Syria were agreed between Dentz and the Allied generals, Catroux and Wilson. The Vichy Army went up the coast to Tripoli to where most were expected to join the Free French. It soon became clear, however, that Dentz was riddled with perfidy as he enjoined the Vichyistes to return home rather than fight for the Allies. Dentz and several of his associates were arrested, but it was decided to reinforce the Free French forces in Syria in case of a Vichy uprising.

On 21 July the *Cameronian* sailed from the UK for the Middle East. On board were over three thousand troops. Fifty-two of them were French paratroopers under the command of Captain Georges Bergé, one of whom was Roger Boutinot, now 19 years old. When the Maginot Line had failed to frighten off the German Army France had fallen quickly. One day in late June 1940 Boutinot was told to assemble in St Malo's town square.

'They announced that all males over the age of 16 must go to work in Germany.' Boutinot and two other young men decided to flee to England. 'We stole a boat and rowed to Jersey and knocked on the door of the first house we saw.'

The woman who opened the door had some alarming news: the Germans had invaded the previous day, 1 July.

'So we rowed to England,' says Boutinot. 'It took us about five or six days.'