



Individualism, exceptionalism and counter culture in Second World War special service training.

Scottish Centre for War Studies, Glasgow University, conference 24-5 June 2010. *Waterloo to Desert Storm: new thinking on international conflict, 1815-1991.*

Stuart Allan

NMS Repository – Research publications by staff of the National Museums Scotland

<http://repository.nms.ac.uk/>

Individualism, exceptionalism and counter culture in Second World War special service training.

Scottish Centre for War Studies, Glasgow University, conference 24-5 June 2010. *Waterloo to Desert Storm: new thinking on international conflict, 1815-1991.*

Stuart Allan

Senior Curator of Military History

National Museums Scotland

Individualism, exceptionalism and counter culture in Second World War special service training.

The popular literature of British special operations and special forces is extensive, sensational and hugely successful.¹ Even in its less lurid manifestations, the genre is characterised by a focus on outstanding individuals and their extraordinary deeds of courage and daring. Given the nature of special operations and the forces that undertake them, this is not surprising in itself. It is also ideal writing material; the small scale of these operations presents a self-contained, manageable subject for a narrative wherein a small number of characters may be presented and developed for the reader's understanding and entertainment. The stories are invariably of risk, high-stakes, tension and incident. From them emerge the exceptional individuals, the mavericks, the heroes. They are often charismatic and unorthodox, and there is overt or implicit celebration of their non-conformity as a virtue in itself. They succeed, or they fail heroically, as individuals. Such is the appeal of these accounts, and the consistent market for them, they have tended to crowd out more rigorous efforts to consider the historical and strategic context of special operations and special forces.

And where a more analytical approach is intended, the temptation to dwell on exceptional individuals and remarkable operations remains.² The present author might have been guilty as any of giving in to temptation at times in his 2007 account of Second World War special service training centres in the Scottish highlands.³ The geographic scope of the work looked across the irregular warfare training centres run by different military organisations - Military Intelligence, the Commandos and Combined Operations, Special Operations Executive and the American Office of Strategic Services, and found running through them a common thread of philosophy, practice and instructing personnel. Specifically, this first flowering of commando training could be traced back to one place and one time. Not, or at least not a first, to Achnacarry which later in the war made a reputation for toughness as the Commando Basic Training Centre, but to the requisitioned highland estate around Inverailort House, on the shores of Loch Ailort by the Road to the Isles, which in the early summer of 1940, became the first British irregular warfare training school.

This study documented the make-up of the original instructing team which improvised a training curriculum under the aegis of the short-lived 'Research' Branch of Military Intelligence. This first guerrilla warfare teaching staff was described, rather breathlessly, as 'one of the most extraordinary combinations of talent and personality that the British war effort was to produce'.⁴ The special forces heroes were there alright, at the outset of their war careers – the Stirling brothers of Special Air Service (SAS) fame, Michael 'Mad Mike'

¹ The terminology developed in recent years distinguishing between 'special forces' and 'special operations forces' has not been applied for the purpose of this paper, anachronistic as it would be in the context of the Second World War and immediate post-war developments considered here.

² In commending a more strategic literature on the subject, Colin S. Gray allows that 'The temptation to seek spectacular missions which could have strategically extraordinary consequences is well-nigh irresistible.' James Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy. From World War II to the War on Terrorism*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), foreword by Colin S, Gray, xii.

³ Stuart Allan, *Commando Country* (Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Publishing, 2007).

⁴ Stuart Allan, 2007, 37.

Calvert, of the Chindits and the SAS, the celebrated Commando officer Lord Lovat, Freddy Spencer Chapman, he of 'the mad fortnight' and three years of guerrilla operations behind Japanese lines in Malaya for Special Operations Executive, and with them were a collection of distinguished polar explorers and mountaineers, unarmed combat specialists and demolitions experts as well as stalkers from highland estates passing on their skills in the reading of country and stealth approach.

The unique environment of the highland sporting estate, as understood by the major Scottish landowners Stirling and Lovat who selected it as a suitable training environment, and some of the pre-existing cultural ideas associating that environment with masculinity, virility and character, influenced the training culture of the new special forces of Britain and its allies. It would be an exaggeration to claim that the training improvisations conducted in the heather and peat hags of the west highlands made an outstanding material contribution to the course and outcome of the Second World War, or to argue that the origins of its training programmes made British and Allied special forces more or less successful in themselves than they might otherwise have been. Nevertheless, the individuals at Inverailort, and the training methods they introduced, might be credited with a legacy stretching beyond the Second World War, one which could still have some relevance to British military organisation in the twenty-first century.

It is the habitual perspective of military museum specialists, concerned as we are with material culture over and above written sources, to think about military *cultures* as much as we think about strategy, doctrine, tactics and operations. If one accepts, without necessarily entertaining determinist constructions about inherent national military tendencies, that culture has a meaningful influence over military institutions and how they organise and fight, then the individualist culture of British special forces deserves some scrutiny beyond our acknowledging the merit and fascination of it. Alastair Finlan is one historian who has given due weight to the cultural context of special forces development internationally. He considers special forces to represent 'a counter-cultural trend to the mainstream institutional culture of the armed forces from which they sprang.'⁵ In citing the British experience, Finlan focussed on David Stirling and the formation and development of the SAS in North Africa from 1941, acknowledging Stirling's background in, and inheritance from, earlier Commando formations. It may be that to understand this experience fully we also need to look back a little further in time and a little closer to home, to what David Stirling and others of a like mind were prototyping in the Scottish highlands a year earlier. Because if early British special service training exhibited traits that were counter cultural responses to traditional British military thinking, and this paper will seek to demonstrate why they might be so considered, then these may be seen to have had an influence on the development of competing cultures in relation to special forces during the Second World War and beyond. Initial ideas about training might go some way to explaining the doubts and opposition evinced towards special forces among more conventional military élites from the very beginning, and account for some of the ways in which special service training came to be institutionalised.

This opposition, running the gamut from scepticism through suspicion to hostility, was expressed through reasoned arguments that commando-type operations were a sideshow

⁵ Alastair Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror. Warfare By Other Means*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 87-91. Finlan's assessment of special forces culture is developed further in relation to the technology of special operations.

that could not contribute meaningfully to the outcome of the war, and were therefore a distraction drawing resources away from the planning of large-scale military operations that could. There was a concern that some of the best officers and men were being attracted away from army units that needed them, and placed instead in the control of figures outside the conventional chain of command and responsibility. These arguments gained force beyond late 1941 when British strategy concentrated on building a conventional offensive capability, and the sceptics essentially won the day at the war's end when the Army Commandos, the SAS and Special Operations Executive were among the units derided as 'private armies' that were disbanded or reduced to cadre strength.⁶ After the reactivation of the SAS to meet the requirements of the Malayan Emergency the existence and value of special forces became more generally accepted, but there remained at issue the matter of co-ordination and integration between special forces and conventional forces, and the question of whether the best use was always being made of the capabilities of the former.⁷

Although Tim Jones has detected some activity on the part of the Secret Intelligence service and the War Office in preparing 'stay-behind parties' to operate in the events of Soviet invasion, there is as yet no evidence that special operations were a significant element in British planning for major war in the Cold War context.⁸ That the subject was not altogether ignored is represented by a guerrilla warfare study produced by the Ministry of Defence as a restricted publication in 1957.⁹ This compared recent experience in combating insurgents in Malaya with the record of Second World War insurgencies supported by the Allies, and was loosely directed towards application in conjectured forms of a future war in Europe. However, as had been the case during the Second World War, active consideration of guerrilla operations remained on the fringes and was largely left to the specialists and their individual champions in senior staff positions, and notable successes for the SAS in post-war minor conflicts, as in Oman and Borneo, did not automatically bring their strategic potential to the forefront. The higher public profile enjoyed by the SAS in particular from the early 1980s was however accompanied by a firmer placing for British special forces in the order of battle. It has recently been suggested by commentators on both sides of the Atlantic that the nature of 21st century military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has seen for the first time special forces fully integrated with and supported by conventional military forces at a strategic level.¹⁰ If this is true, it has been a long time coming, and might lead us too easily towards assumptions about

⁶ Alanbrooke, Montgomery and Slim were among senior commanders who expressed the view that special operations capability should be developed inside and not outside conventional military structures. Contributors to the debate in the immediate post-war years include those involved in the organisation and training of wartime special forces, e.g. Robert Laycock 'Raids in the late war and their lessons', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, November 1947, 534-5; JP O'Brien Twohig, 'Are Commandos really necessary?' *Army Quarterly*, 1948, 86-8. See also Brigadier TBL Churchill, 'The value of Commandos', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, February 1950, 85-90; Colonel JW Hackett, 'The employment of special forces', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institution*, XCVII, 1952, 26-41.

⁷ Colin S. Gray, 'Handful of heroes on desperate ventures: when do special operations succeed?' *Parameters*, US Army War College Quarterly 29, Spring 1999, 2-24.

⁸ T. Jones, 'The British Army and counter-guerrilla warfare in transition, 1944-52', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 7, 1996, 265-307; see also Colin McInnes, 'The Gulf War, 1990-91' in Hew Strachan (ed.) *Big Wars and Small Wars. The British Army and the lessons of War in the 20th Century*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006) 166-7.

⁹ Lt. Col. CNM Blair, *Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Ministry of Defence, 1957). The book was reprinted in 2005 by Naval and Military Press, Uckfield.

¹⁰ Alastair Finlan, 2008, 139-162; Matthew Johnson, 'The growing relevance of special operations forces in U.S. military strategy', *Comparative Strategy*, 25(4), 2006, 273-96.

conservatism on the part of traditional military élites in the post-war era.

Part of the explanation for this incongruity might, it is suggested, be found in the realms not of strategy and doctrine, but of culture, subculture and counter culture. As Colin Gray contends,

A detached observer or historian of special operations, particularly a civilian, generally will have difficulty grasping just how alien and even distasteful special operations can appear to those trained and socialised in regular military behaviour.

11

Military cultures, like the cultures of any human organisation, are organic, ambiguous and difficult to define. Accepting that the special operations environment is probably not a suitable one for embedded social anthropologists, one useful theoretical framework is to be found in the literature of organisational culture employed in the fields of management theory and work psychology.¹² There are in this field nuanced interpretations and emphases on the nature of organisational cultures and the subcultures into which they differentiate, but they exhibit a shared acceptance that these cultures form and operate in meaningful ways in working groups of all kinds. Two essential, if rather obvious, elements garnered from the literature stand out here. The first is the abiding influence of individual founders/originators and the personal values and assumptions that they bring at the outset to the cultures or subcultures of the organisations they create. The second is that the originators impose these values through selection and training of group members.¹³

Bearing this in mind, we return to Inverailort in the west highlands of Scotland in early June 1940. If not by any means the only source of early thinking about special forces and their training, this was certainly an early meeting of minds and an exemplar for what followed. There are no Commandos as yet, no Special Air Service, just some small operational teams and the Independent Companies raised hastily for the Norway campaign, both by Military Intelligence (Research). One MI(R) operational team waiting in Scotland after the cancellation of a Norway operation is given leave to set up an experimental training school and allowed the freedom to approach it in their own way. This occurs in the context of the failure in Norway and rapidly unravelling campaign in France, defeats for regular forces alongside which nascent special operations teams were insufficiently prepared and organised to make an impact. Two of the moving figures are William (Bill) Stirling of Keir, and his cousin Lord Lovat, both major Scottish landowners with long-standing interests in the highland sporting estate. They are Regular Army Reserve captains only, former Scots Guards regulars whose political and social connections belie their military rank.¹⁴ They are typical of the officers that had been, and would continue to be, attracted to developing branches of special service, with international experience and contacts in the worlds of

¹¹ Colin S Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, (London: Praeger, 1998) 151.

¹² Organisational culture theory was first referenced in relation to special forces training in Susan Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: rebuilding U.S. special operations forces*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1997).

¹³ The classic definition of the culture of a group is given by Edgar Schein, *Organisational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd edition, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004). The theory of subcultures was further developed by Joanne Martin, *Organisational Culture. Mapping the Terrain*. (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage, 2002). A case study of counterculture within a large business organisation is given by Joanne Martin, and Caren Siehl, 'Organizational culture and counterculture: an uneasy symbiosis', *Organizational Dynamics*, 12(2), 1983, 52-64.

¹⁴ The importance of political patronage to special operations forces is referred to by Colin Gray and others as a requirement for success. Colin S. Gray, 1999.

commerce, imperial administration and sport.¹⁵ They, and their fellows, possess a strong streak of individuality, which in the case of Lord Lovat has already brought him into conflict with his commanding officer in the uneasy relationship of regimental service in the Lovat Scouts, the regiment founded by his own father. They value non-conformity as a sign of strength and regard conformity, that essential of military organisation and discipline, as a cause of stagnation.

As we have seen, in order to create an irregular warfare training course, essentially from scratch, the assistance that Stirling, Lovat and their associates brought to bear was not in the main drawn from standard British military resources. Those brought to Inverailort as instructors, whether serving soldiers or civilians, had attributes that in military terms were unusually highly developed, such as in demolitions or marksmanship, or essentially extra-curricular, as in polar exploration and mountaineering. Naval personnel were acquired to instruct soldiers in the handling of small boats. Skills in wireless communication were drawn from Royal Signals personnel previously working with MI(R) teams in Norway. These relatively conventional pursuits were supplemented by the more unorthodox disciplines of reflex shooting, knife-fighting and unarmed combat offered by the retired Shanghai Municipal policemen W.E. Fairbairn and Eric Sykes. And then there was highland fieldcraft wing, the deerstalking disciplines that pervaded the Inverailort course. The senior fieldcraft instructor was Lord Lovat, assisted by civilian stalkers employed on his family's sporting estates, Spanish Civil War (Nationalist) veteran Peter Kemp, and Lieutenant David Stirling, younger of Keir. It would be hard to imagine something more removed from the parade ground, rifle range and manoeuvres of military training as then more usually practised.

Clearly, the selection of instructing personnel and subjects they taught was directed towards the practical requirements of irregular warfare in as much as these were envisaged at that early stage in the war. But there were cultural undercurrents also. The individualism of such figures is, and was at the time, unmistakable. The structures of conventional military service were not for them; indeed in certain cases they had taken determined steps to escape from its limitations. The job they had won for themselves was to take conventional soldiers and, in this new type of training environment, turn them into something else, something more like them. There was a sense among such figures that the circumstances of defeat in Norway and France in 1940, and the national crisis this created, meant that a different approach was needed to combat an enemy of the character and capability of Nazi Germany, and that they were fit to give the lead. As W.E. Fairbairn wrote of his methods of killing at close quarters,

When it is a matter of life and death, not only of the individual but indeed of the nation, squeamish scruples are out of place. The sooner we realize that fact, the sooner we shall be fitted to face the grim and ruthless realities of total warfare.¹⁶

Implicit in this was the assumption that conventional military measures had already been found wanting. There was a moral purpose in training of this kind, and a rejection of the perceived failures of the recent past. The products of the training were intended to become something exceptional to the run of normal soldiering. The instructors, with their unusual know-how, were defining themselves and their finished trainees against the norm of traditional British military cultures.

¹⁵ The background to MI(R) recruitment is discussed in Stuart Allan, 2007, 23-6. See also Ashley Jackson, 'The imperial antecedents of British special forces', *RUSI Journal*, 154 (3), 2009, 62-8.

¹⁶ William Fairbairn, *All-In Fighting*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 8.

Organisational culture theory further expounds elements by which subcultures may be identified and through which they identify themselves. These elements include 'artefacts', a word of immediate interest to the material culture specialist. That all human groups employ objects as symbols of membership and shared assumptions is understood and has been explored by sociologists and material culture theorists of many descriptions. But in the context of organisational subculture and counter culture these symbols emerge in contrast or challenge to those of the mainstream. The definition of artefact in this context is broad, including such things as products, dress-codes, manners of address, shared rituals and stories.¹⁷ For a single artefact defining the nascent subculture at Inverailort in 1940 one can readily identify the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife designed there by the two eponymous members of the instructing staff based on their experiences with criminal gangs in Shanghai. This was a lethally elegant close-quarter killing weapon whose practical value was overlaid with a powerful emblematic quality. The 'Commando knife', as it came to be known in its subsequent mass production, was a weapon of the ruthless trained killer which became, both in itself and through its adoption into the design of insignia worn by Commandos and others, a symbol of what was supposed to be different about those engaged in special operations. An infantryman might use a bayonet to kill, and indeed the lore of bayonet fighting has its place in mainstream military culture, but the connotations of knife-fighting and silent killing were something else altogether. The Fairbairn-Sykes knife was carried as a weapon suited for the work that might be at hand, though the extent to which it was actually used is open to question, and it was also flaunted as a challenge to the enemy, and indeed to those on the same side who did not carry such things.¹⁸



Figure 1. Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife, mark 1. National Museums Scotland M.1990.298.

The definition of artefacts in organisational culture theory extends to encompass the differentiated working environment of each subculture. The Scottish highland setting of this special service training initiative merits further consideration in such terms. The practical attractions were clear: challenging mountain terrain and weather for fieldcraft, fitness and endurance, water and shoreline for small boat work, remoteness and seclusion for security,

¹⁷ Edgar Schein, 2004, 25-7; Joanne Martin 2002, 47.

¹⁸ Paul Cornish has observed that the training methods of Fairbairn and Sykes in unarmed combat and knife fighting might have been more effective in instilling confidence over the prospect of such fighting than in inculcating practical techniques. Paul Cornish, 'Weapons and equipment of Special Operations Executive', in Mark Seaman (ed.), *Special Operations Executive. A New Instrument of War*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 22-31.

substantial built property for accommodation. But it was also redolent with meaning in the values and assumptions of the originators, principally in this case Stirling and Lord Lovat who chose and requisitioned the specific locations.¹⁹ The association between prowess in hunting and fitness for war is one with an ancient heritage in many cultures, but the highland sporting estate has a cultural and political context of its own. Environmental and social historians have examined how the nineteenth and early twentieth century landowners, sporting tenants and their guests, who enjoyed near-exclusive access to this environment for recreational hunting, developed around it a set of self-regarding ideas regarding their own prowess, character and masculinity. The initiated successful sportsman was at once master of this challenging environment, more alive than other men, and through his intimacy with the responsibility and the visceral reality of the kill, attuned to the nobility of nature and removed from the mundane scruples of the domesticated.²⁰

The class-based exclusivity of the highland sporting life was integral to this idealised genre, and the value of such a lifestyle as training for the leadership responsibilities of social élites in British imperial endeavour and administration, and in warfare itself, was an idea that had been expressed long before the outbreak of the Second World War.²¹ And yet there was room within this exclusive circle for the men who understood the sporting environment better than any other. Albeit fixed socially in the role of loyal native retainer, the professional estate workers, the deerstalker and the ghillie, were accorded respect and a lore of their own for their skill, physical capability and wisdom. The sporting gentleman had to learn and be guided in his first steps by the real experts. If he was not a man of the requisite calibre he could be judged and found wanting. But if he listened and learned he might earn the prize of the ghillie's respect. Prowess over highland ground was something that might be brought out in any man under expert instruction, provided his character and resolve were of the right sort.

In addressing the necessity of killing by stealth, and in cold blood, the culture of the highland sporting life coalesced with the rather less refined know-how in close-quarter fighting contributed by Fairbairn and Sykes. Both entailed having blood on one's hands. In the former, the 'gralloch' or disembowelling of the deer was exalted as part of the ritual of the hunt, and indeed was included as a demonstration element of fieldcraft training in the early days at Inverailort. And if clinical marksmanship in deerstalking was the norm in the act of killing itself, a deadly encounter at closer quarters was also something to be lauded. The extraordinary man who could bring down an unwounded stag by his own strength and skill, and dispatch it with his own knife, was a legendary figure of Gaelic prowess extolled in Victorian and Edwardian stalking literature.²² The same feat was attributed to Danish volunteer Anders Lassen, displayed to general admiration in January 1941 at one of the Special Operations Executive paramilitary schools run on Inverailort lines in nearby Morar,

¹⁹ Stuart Allan, 2007, 35-7.

²⁰ Hayden Lorimer, 'Guns, game and the grandee: the cultural politics of deer-stalking in the Scottish highlands', *Ecumene*, 7(4), 2000, 431-59; Andy Wightman. *et al*, 'The cultural politics of hunting: sporting estates and recreational land use in the highland and islands of Scotland' *Sport in Society*, 5 (1), 2002, 53-70; Katherine Grenier, *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770-1914. Creating Caledonia*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 106-18.

²¹ For an analysis of British hunting culture and its relationship to imperial power see John MacKenzie, *The Empire of Nature. Hunting, Conservation and the British Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

²² Hayden Lorimer, 2000.

and held up to epitomise the height of exceptional ability in the special service soldier.²³

At Inverailort, and the related establishments soon operating, it was not a great step from such ideas to the elevation of training from practical preparation for specific kinds of military task, to a test of the worth of the individual soldier, his fitness for the responsibility of special operations in every sense. The syllabus was incremental, ending in a multi-day endurance exercise or 'scheme' whereby the wisdom imparted over the weeks was tested overall. This was an extended initiation ritual. All trainees started from scratch, officers had to prove themselves exactly as other ranks and train alongside them. Even instructors invited in to reinforce the original team, such as Lieutenant David Stirling, had first to take and pass the Inverailort course before they could begin work. By means of the training course which they themselves had devised, the originators of special service training had designed an admission test. For those who made the grade in the eyes of their mentors, the prize was admission into a new, self-defined military élite. For those who were seen to have failed, the fate was rejection and return to the normal world of regimental soldiering whence they had come. Such an approach necessarily challenged the value of the latter.

This idea of screened admission might help to explain one of the features of British special forces culture noted by Finlan in his description of the later formation of the SAS,

the most striking element that makes them stand apart from traditional army formations is the unprecedented level of informality between officers and soldiers that simply would not work elsewhere...the genesis of these values goes back to Stirling's original idea that Special Forces should be essentially classless.²⁴

Placed against the class profiles of the originators of special forces, this might seem something of a paradox, but as the earlier example of Inverailort might suggest, it was the patrician background of men like Stirling and Lovat that led them to see themselves outside the confines and concerns of the mainstream culture and structure of military organisation.²⁵ Uninterested in waiting for others to lead them in a wartime citizen's army, peopled by men apparently less dynamic than themselves, they created a counter-cultural alternative which, in the highland setting in particular, was something fashioned on their own home ground. With these assumptions established from the outset, those admitted to magic circle of special operations could afford to be relaxed, indeed dismissive, about the conventions of rank and formality which were associated with traditional military culture. Once the men had shown themselves masters of their own bodies and minds through training, they entered a different kind of relationship with their leaders.

The freedom enjoyed in those first experimental months at Inverailort did not last long and, with the formation of the Army Commandos, this first training establishment and the organisation of special service training as a whole was reined in by the War Office and the new Combined Operations Directorate. The original instructors departed from what was now designated the Special Training Centre Lochailort in search of active service themselves, and the content of the Inverailort course was picked up by the newly-formed

²³ Mike Langley, *Anders Lassen VC, MC of the SAS* (London: New English Library, 1988), 47-8.

²⁴ Alastair Finlan, 2008, 95.

²⁵ Lovat and Stirling were cousins. The latter's father had served as an officer in the Lovat Scouts, the specialist regiment raised by the Lord Lovat's father from among stalkers, ghillies and keepers on highland sporting estates. See Michael Leslie Melville, *The Story of the Lovat Scouts, 1900-1980*, (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1981).

Special Operations Executive (SOE) for its own paramilitary training establishments located nearby. These went their own way in the new organisation dedicated to the support of resistance networks in enemy-occupied territory, forming one part of a three-step training programme for recruits. This 'paramilitary' training element, conducted in the Scottish highlands, continued in the Inverailort mould until the European organisation of SOE was wound down towards the end of the war.

The function of the Special Training Centre Lochailort meanwhile became more socialised into the mainstream and concerned itself principally with the training of Army Commandos. Its capacity was expanded and variations on the training syllabus refined to fit the new requirements. Officers and NCOs and selected groups from Commando units went through the course as part of their overall training diet, and were expected to pass on their knowledge to their units as a whole. The Commandos had begun forming in the summer of 1940, assembled from volunteers seconded from army units, chosen by interview. The fact that officers and men had put themselves forward meant that, if they failed to meet required standards of discipline or performance, they could be sent back from whence they came, a sanction that came to be established as 'Returned to Unit' in Commando parlance. This practice dovetailed nicely with the Inverailort philosophy, and during 1940 and 1941 the Special Training Centre Lochailort stood at the highpoint of intensity in Commando training.

From late 1941, with the war situation changing, and the Commandos unable to point to more than patchy success in small raiding operations, the Chiefs of Staff exerted greater control over the organisation and resourcing of special service troops. The Commandos were to be transformed into a larger force concerned less with stealth and raiding operations and directed instead towards deployment as amphibious assault troops working in concert with the three services in large-scale combined operations. But the culture of exceptionalism survived the change. The Commandos continued to define themselves as special, even as their role became a little less so. Conformity was re-asserted and individualism was controlled, but the essential idea of training and selection was not rejected. The existence of special training centres, and their location in a challenging 'wilderness' environment, had become established in the system and embedded in the culture. Indeed, it was at the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry, originally requisitioned for use as a holding centre for Inverailort, that the culture of special training as an admission test to special service was institutionalised. Much of the Inverailort training culture was adopted at Achnacarry, including the presence of professional deerstalkers on the instructing staff but, in line with the new requirement for a greater number of Commandos to perform the assault troops role, the Achnacarry syllabus developed from the Inverailort model with greater attention to heightened performance in physical fitness and recognised infantry skills and with an emphasis on uniformity. Every Commando had to go to Achnacarry, and a would-be Commando could not become a Commando unless he passed the common standard of the Achnacarry course. This stipulation was reinforced with the use of another culturally powerful artefact, the green beret that had begun to be worn by No.1 Commando early in 1942, but which at Achnacarry was presented to the successful trainee at the end of his course, then and only then, as an honoured mark of his new status as a Commando soldier. This remained the practice in Royal Marines Commando training post-war, first at Tywyn in Wales and latterly at the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines at Lympstone in Devon. ²⁶

The establishment of the commando function as that of amphibious assault infantry, and its continuation and development solely in the hands of in the Corps of Royal Marines, were among the immediate post-war outcomes of the struggle over the status and function of the special forces roles. As a long-established corps with its own distinct culture, the Royal Marines had been reconciled with the new special service culture of the Army Commandos from late 1941 with a degree of initial reluctance not least over the prospect of Royal Marines being trained at Achnacarry by Army instructors from outside the Corps. In moving post-war commando training away from Achnacarry, which was restored to its owner in 1945, ultimately to the south coast of England, this aspect of commando culture came more firmly into the traditional realm of the Royal Marines. The culture of the post-war Royal Marines Commandos might be seen as a hybrid of the two traditions, and its rigid maintenance of training and selection as a screening process was one defining element, alongside its unique status as the soldiers of the Royal Navy, that kept the Corps distinct in approaching its specialist roles of amphibious assault, mountain and cold weather operations. Exceptionalism was implicit in the content and ethos of the Royal Marines Commando course, individualism relatively suppressed in favour of the promotion of teamwork and unit identity within a carefully codified Royal Marines and Commando ethos.²⁷

A similar process might be traced through the training culture of the Parachute Regiment, another new and unconventional unit, born of Second World War requirements, and much reduced from its wartime strength by 1948. As its original airborne role became obsolescent in strategic terms, the paratroopers were assimilated into a co-existence with British Army regimental culture.²⁸ The improvised forms of early parachute training, as practised by No.2 Commando in 1940, had included a strong physical training element. From 1942 this was refined and formalised at the Airborne Forces Depot at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire as the pre-parachute training test required for a candidate to progress towards earning the coveted beret denoting special status, maroon rather than green in this specific subcultural context.²⁹ Post-war, this practice was enshrined in P (Pegasus) Company, one particularly challenging week in a two-phase basic training programme for would-be paratroopers. P Company remains a requirement for service today with Parachute Regiment battalions and also for other elements of 16 Air Assault Brigade, a rapid response formation based not on the technology of the parachute but on that of the attack helicopter. Again, screening by training and selection became the mark of the paratrooper, who was set apart from the conventional soldier by this rite of passage as much as by the original specialised operational role.³⁰

²⁷ Anthony King, 'The ethos of the Royal Marines: the precise application of will'. Independent report commissioned by the Commandant, Commando Training Centre Royal Marines, Lympstone. (Exeter: University of Exeter Department of Sociology and Philosophy, 2004).

²⁸ Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 223-4.

²⁹ James Dunning, *"It Had to Be Tough" The fascinating story of the origins of the Commandos and their special training in World War II* (Durham: Pentland Press, 2000). Among the parachute training pioneers of No. 2 Commando was Captain Martin Lindsay, polar explorer and member of the original instructing team at Inverailort. Information about Hardwick Hall supplied by Airborne Assault, the Museum of the Parachute Regiment and Airborne Forces, Duxford, July 2010.

³⁰ A description of P-Company training in the early 1980s is given by Frank Hilton, *The Paras*, (London: BBC, 1983), 78-118. Colin Gray has commented on the culture of coloured berets to demote elite status as an aberration from the more flexible and unconventional outlook suited to special operations. Colin S. Gray, *Modern Strategy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 286-90.

The 1945 disbandment of the Army Commandos and other wartime special service units was enacted in the context of reduced budgets and retrenchment. It nevertheless reflected a reassertion of mainstream military culture over these strange new entities that had seemed to be in competition with recognised structures of command and organisation for roles, resources and status. That this apparent hiatus lasted only until the Malaya Emergency suggests with hindsight that something of real practical value had been dispensed with in the process. Indeed, within the War Office there were elements engaged in a study of the future potential of special operations before the end of 1945, and almost simultaneously with the formal disbandment of the SAS Regiment, SAS personnel were covertly deployed in support of counter-insurgency strategy in Greece.³¹ An SAS unit within the Territorial Army was constituted in late 1946, suggesting recognition for the continued relevance of an organised specialism of this kind, even if only at the level of a reserve cadre.

The overt operational revival of the SAS in Malaya in 1950 was initially a rather unsatisfactory reasserting of the special forces role. The Malayan Scouts was an SAS unit put together, at the request of senior commanders, by Brigadier Michael Calvert who stands out in the context of this paper as having been one of the original instructors at Inverailort ten years earlier. Calvert did not however have the opportunity to conduct a training and selection process when assembling his original Scouts from personnel available to him in Malaya.³² Problems with indiscipline and organisation dogged their early performance, and back in the United Kingdom in 1952 Major John Woodhouse drew on this salutary Malayan Scouts experience to start a rigorous training and selection scheme in Snowdonia for SAS Territorial Army volunteers. Moved subsequently to the Brecon Beacons, this course has endured since as a permanent feature of SAS recruitment and as a seminal element in SAS culture.³³ Alongside this structured exceptionalism, the heritage of individualism remained as part of the culture at least, if subdued somewhat over time by a more rigorous concept of SAS professionalism than existed in the mind of the regiment's founder. Perhaps aware of this subtle shift in emphasis, in 1985 Colonel Sir David Stirling wrote of the importance of 'amateur soldiers' to the qualities of the Regiment,

when...a specialist unit becomes part of the military establishment, it runs the risk of becoming stereotyped and conventionalised. Luckily the modern SAS looks safe from this danger; it is constantly experimenting with innovative techniques, many of which stem from its Territorial regiments, drawn as they are from every walk of civilian life.³⁴

Nevertheless, the post-war military subcultures descending from wartime special forces have tended to stress their exceptionalism whilst containing and controlling the individualism dear to their progenitors. This has been to good purpose in maintaining the quality of the units concerned. It has however raised some interesting issues around co-operation between special forces derived 'élite' units and those who must work with them. The post-war role assigned to the Royal Marines Commandos necessitated their working in full integration with supporting forces within 3 Commando Brigade. One consequent

³¹ Tim Jones, *Post-war Counterinsurgency and the SAS, 1945-52. A Special Type of Warfare*. (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 14-18.

³² David Rooney, *Mad Mike. A Life of Michael Calvert*, (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 1997), 136-41.

³³ Michael Asher, *The Regiment. The Real Story of the SAS* (London: Viking, 2007), 328-9. See also John Newsinger, *Dangerous Men. The SAS and Popular Culture*. (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 16.

³⁴ William Seymour, *British Special Forces. The Story of Britain's Undercover Soldiers*, 2nd ed. (London: Pen & Sword Military Classics, 2006). Foreword by Sir David Stirling.

development was the 'All-Arms Commando Course' run at the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines, so that those serving with 3 Commando Brigade artillery, engineers, logistics and indeed infantry units could be put through a version of the Commando-training test before being passed to serve with the Brigade. This is a situation that continues to generate debate among those affected, among the most recent being an exchange in the *British Army Review* over the relevance of the All-Arms Commando course to the operational environment in Afghanistan. While such issues are discussed around the practicalities, the debate cannot be conducted without some reference to 'ethos', to the tensions between competing cultures therefore.³⁵

For special forces in the purer sense, from the end of the Cold War in particular British army doctrine and structure has been adapted to enhance integration between special and conventional units. The organisational status and influence of the former was enhanced in 1987 with the creation of the United Kingdom Special Forces Directorate and the relevance and influence of special forces have since grown markedly in the operating environment of the Gulf War, Iraq and Afghanistan. It has been suggested that for a conflict with the heavy demands and duration of the intervention in Afghanistan, UK Special Forces may simply not be big enough and that a lack of trained personnel might quickly become an issue in any greater conflict.³⁶ High failure rates among those seeking to join special forces and other élite units are an inescapable fact of the selection process; they are indeed necessary to the cultural assumptions upon which the process is based. One response to the heightened requirement for special operations was the 2006 creation of the Special Forces Support Group, whereby elements and individuals from the Parachute Regiment, the Royal Marines Commandos and others received further training for roles in direct support of the special forces units themselves. In strategic and tactical terms this development suggests a drive for flexibility; in cultural terms it reinforced the position of the training and selection culture. The earlier passing of one of the established tests, either in commando or pre-parachute training, was established at the outset as a precondition of individual acceptance into the Special Forces Support Group. The Royal Marines Commandos and the Parachute Regiment might in the process have bridged a gap and acquired an additional role closer to that practised by their ancestors of 1940-41, but for British military organisation as a whole, for good or ill, there remained a cultural divide between special and conventional forces.

Those who argued against the commando concept during and immediately after the Second World War were reacting against something that had grown up outside their control and which, as the nature of the culture at Inverailort suggests, was a culture first conceived in challenge to established military thinking and organisation. Curiously, from late 1941, in seeking to wrest control from the individualists and render new ways of war palatable to the mainstream culture, more conventional military thinking seized on and institutionalised the new approaches to training, the very thing that would give enduring life to the counter-cultural tendencies. The rigid relationship between training and élite status stays with British armed forces to this day, and may also be found in the military cultures of nations which emulated British practice in this area, notably in the United States where first the Army Commandos and later the SAS were taken as the models for the development of

³⁵ Major Jon Creswell, 'United we conquer – the Commando course of the future', *British Army Review*, 146, Spring 2009, 92-3; Lt. Col. Richard Smith, 'The All Arms Commando Course – meeting the operational requirement', *British Army Review*, 147, Summer 2009, 83-6.

³⁶ Alastair Finlan, 'The (arrested) development of UK special forces and the global war on terror', *Review of International Studies*, 25, 2009, 971-82.

similar capabilities. The founders of the first special training centre did not themselves necessarily foresee that their methods would, or should, lead to the units they were preparing becoming permanent fixtures on the British establishment. If, since 1940, discriminatory cultures based on training and selection have not always contributed to cooperation and integration in strategy and tactics, this may be because they were conceived in the first place as a gateway into a new kind of élite, one that was never intended to be part of the system.