



RISK:

SOF CASE STUDIES

COLONEL (RETIRED) BERND HORN, EDITOR

THE CANSOFCOM EDUCATION & RESEARCH CENTRE

MISSION

The mission of the Canadian Forces Special Operations Forces (CANSOFCOM) Education and Research Centre (ERC) is to support the professional development framework within the Command in order to continually develop and enhance the cognitive capacity of CANSOFCOM personnel.

VISION

The vision of the CANSOFCOM ERC is to be a key enabler to CANSOFCOM as an intellectual centre of excellence.

ROLES

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2. Provide and / or assist in accessing academic advice on diverse subjects to support CANSOFCOM personnel undergoing professional military education (PME) and PD;
3. Conduct focused research and provide advice on seeking additional research capacity for CANSOFCOM best practices and force development;
4. Record CANSOFCOM's classified history;
5. Coordinate the publication of CANSOFCOM educational material; and
6. Support CANSOFCOM's "up and out" Communication Strategy.

In brief, the ERC helps to make the cognitive warrior a reality. We prepare members to make good decisions in the midst of chaos and complexity. Essentially, we help to enable members to be their best under the worst of circumstances.

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The mind is our greatest asset and it is the Command's Education and Research Centre that is tasked to develop this capacity within the Command. We teach people how to harness their greatest strength, their most reliable tool on any and every mission: their brain.

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FOREWORD

It is once again my pleasure to introduce the second volume – *Risk: SOF Case Studies*, stemming from the 2018 international Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM)/Joint Special Operations University (JSOU)/Special Operations Command (North) (SOCNORTH)/Royal Military College of Canada (RMCC) Special Operations Forces (SOF) Symposium. As I noted in the foreword to volume one, *Risk & Decision-Making*, the 2018 SOF Symposium represented the eighth iteration of this international event. Significantly, the symposium participants included members from across the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), as well as a number of our national security partners and members from our international SOF community. This expansive array of participants not only broadens and deepens our sharing of knowledge, but grows our relationships.

The theme for the symposium and resultant books, was “Risk and Decision-Making.” The topic is both timely and germane to our profession, specifically to special operations. The SOF community operates in a very complex and ambiguous security environment. We undertake operations and tasks, often with little support and sometimes, due to the unknowns, with the slimmest of guidance in very hazardous locations. In these circumstances, the assessment of risk, both physical and “political” becomes critical to mission success.

The assessment of risk, however, is difficult. It is very subjective and is based on individual and/or organizational circumstance and perspective. For some, the line between risk acceptance and recklessness can be quite slim. Yet, risk, defined as “a probability or threat of damage, injury, liability, loss, or any other negative occurrence that is caused by external or internal vulnerabilities, and that may be avoided through pre-emptive action,” can be quite subjective.* Significantly, the consequences and impact of poor risk assessment can be substantial. It is for that very reason that the symposium and its follow-on books are so important. To be operationally effective, it is paramount that we understand risk, its assessment and its impact on decision-making.

* <<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/risk.html>>, accessed 1 December 2019.

FOREWORD

Volume One focused more on the theoretical parameters of risk and decision-making, while Volume Two, examines specific SOF case studies to draw the pertinent lessons from history. As such, I wish to thank all the contributors to this volume for taking the time to share their research and insight, as well as their experience. The international flavour of authors makes this publication incredibly rich and I commend it to all members of the SOF and National Security communities. After all, the intent of the SOF Symposium and the CANSOF publication series is to share, learn, expand the network and professionally develop our SOF community so that individually, as well as collectively, we optimize our operational effectiveness.

Peter Dawe
Major-General
Commander CANSOFCOM

INTRODUCTION

This book, *Risk: SOF Case Studies*, is the companion volume to *Risk & Decision-Making*, both products of the 2018 SOF symposium. As I outlined in Volume One, instinctively, everyone comprehends the idea of risk. We all face various levels and degrees of risk every day. Simple decisions such as running an amber light, jay-walking on a busy street, making an extra stop before a meeting or event, participating in extreme sports, driving at speed, disagreeing with your boss, taking a short-cut through a darkened park or alley at night, are all simple examples of potential daily risks. Most people make these decisions involving risk assessment subconsciously without much thought or concern. Conversely, other decisions such as actions that may put your life, property or wealth at risk consume more thought and attention. Interestingly, the perception of risk varies from person to person. In short, risk assessment is very subjective.

In essence, risk is influenced by the perspectives of individuals, groups and/or institutions. Through these subjective filters, risk, as perceived by a specific entity, is the probability of positive or negative consequences stemming from a given action or decision as weighed against the perceived benefit. The consequences can be in the form of a reward (e.g. fame, fortune) or damage or injury (e.g. physical harm, financial loss, damage to reputation) to individuals, groups or institutions.

Notably, taking a risk is different than engaging in a gamble.¹ Risk is the deliberate calculus of the likelihood of how certain actions/decisions will have positive or negative outcomes. This computation helps to determine whether an action or decision will be undertaken. Conversely, a gamble is taking a decision or action based on an uncertain outcome, a decision that relies at least partly on a degree of chance that the desired result will be realized.

For SOF, the concept of risk is an extremely important issue. SOF normally operate in small teams, often far from supporting agencies or organizations. They often work in chaotic, dangerous environments that are ambiguous and complex (i.e., constantly changing). As a result, risk is ever-present. As such, SOF leaders and operators must ensure that they fully understand risk and the factors that lead to risk adversity and risk acceptance. They are entrusted with sensitive tasks that

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can have strategic impact. Therefore, they must ensure that they fully embrace the requirement to take prudent, calculated risks that provide the best likelihood that they achieve the desired results.

Additionally, they must be able to differentiate prudent risk-taking from reckless gambling. They simply cannot gamble on outcomes when so much is at stake. When deployed they represent the credentials of a nation. Therefore, their actions must be reasoned and reflect not only the commander's intent, but also their country's national interest. Their decisions and actions cannot be reckless, and instead must show determination to accomplish the mission despite the obstacles that will always be present.

The first volume was both a theoretical, as well as a practical treatise of the concept of risk. It explored risk from a theoretical concept, defining its character and the factors that lead to risk adversity and risk acceptance, as well as examining risk as a leadership challenge. This volume takes a more practical approach. It examines risk based on a series of historic case studies from World War II (WWII), the Falklands War, the first Gulf War, to the counter-insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq. The authors analyze specific actions in each of these conflicts, identify the risks and how they impacted decision-making. The upshot is incredible insight into how others assessed risk and how it affected decision-making. Collaterally, the reader can also assess what consequences resulted from risk acceptance and adversity.

In sum, parallel to Volume One, *Risk & Decision-Making*, this latest publication provides an additional window into the nebulous concept of risk. It illuminates the concept and provides insight into how individuals can better identify and mitigate risk in order to accomplish their missions.

ENDNOTE

1 Field Marshal Erwin Rommel explained: "It is my experience that bold decisions give the best promise of success. But one must differentiate between strategic or tactical boldness and a military gamble. A bold operation is one in which success is not a certainty but which in case of failure leaves one with sufficient forces in hand to cope with whatever situation may arise. A gamble, on the other hand, is an operation which can lead either to victory or to the complete destruction of one's force....Normally there is no ideal solution to military problems; every course has its advantages and disadvantages. One must select that which seems best from the most varied aspects and then pursue it resolutely and accept the consequences. Any compromise is bad." B.H. Liddell Hart, *The Rommel Papers* (London: Collins, 1953), 201.

CHAPTER 1

RISK: A NEBULOUS CONCEPT

Colonel (Retired) Bernd Horn

Risk – intuitively we all understand the concept. But, in essence, its meaning, impact and effect are variable, and risk is seen differently by different people. For example, many people have an overwhelming fear of flying. To them the idea of flight is full of risk. Yet, those same people will not give getting in their car and driving someplace a second thought. Driving is seen as routine, an everyday event, and other than getting insurance, which is both a legislated requirement, as well as a “just in case” prudent decision, it is seen as being low risk. However, facts reveal a different story. Out of 30 million commercial flights in 2014, there were only 21 fatalities. The odds of dying on one of those flights was 0.000007; a very low risk of death. Traffic fatalities, however, numbered 1.34 million or 2.45 per cent of all deaths. Clearly, one is more likely to die on the highway.¹

Another telling example of the impact of perspective of risk is terrorism. Many people believe the risk of falling victim to terrorism is very high. Travel and activities are restricted due to the perceived risk. In fact, since the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York City on 11 September 2001 (9/11), despite the successful counter-terrorism actions worldwide, individuals feel less safe now than ever before. A 2014 NBC poll revealed, “nearly half of Americans now believe their country is less safe today than before the 9/11 attacks.”² That number is almost double from a similar poll taken the previous year. Significantly, since then there have been a number of high-profile terrorist attacks in Europe and North America. Predictably in the wake of this terrorist onslaught countries across the globe are increasing their security forces, infrastructures, procedures, powers for law enforcement and security agencies, as well as legislation to deal with the perceived spike in terrorism. Billions of dollars are being sunk in the fight to combat terrorism. Yet, the risk of an actual terrorism event occurring has actually decreased.

In fact, terrorist incidents have actually declined. In 2014, there were 226 terrorist attacks (attempted/foiled/executed) and 774 terrorism arrests. In 2015, there were 193 and 1,077 respectively, and in 2016 the numbers dropped further to 142 and 1,002 respectively.³ Terrorism, in 2016, accounted for 34,676 deaths or 0.06 per cent of all global deaths.⁴ As one analyst noted:

In 2016, Western Europeans were 85 times more likely to die of a heat wave than from terrorism, 50 times more likely to die in a biking or water-sports accident and 39 times more likely to be killed by consuming a toxic product. They were 433 times more likely to die of suicide and 32 times more likely to die by homicide.⁵

Notably, in 2018, there was another 33 per cent drop in global terror attacks and terrorism fatalities dropped to a ten-year low.⁶

A final example is risk ascribed to skydiving. To some, there could be nothing riskier or more dangerous than jumping out of a serviceable aircraft. Skydiving by these individuals is seen as a very risky endeavour. Yet, to trained and experienced jumpers, particularly those using state-of-the-art equipment, the risk is seen as negligible. For example, in 2013, there were only 24 deaths out of a total of 3.2 million jumps. That translates to likelihood of death eight times in a million jumps or 0.0075 deaths per 1,000 jumps.⁷ In 2017, there were also only 24 fatalities and in 2018 only 16 deaths due to skydiving.⁸

RISK DEFINED

So, what exactly is risk? There are a number of definitions. The *Webster Dictionary* explains risk is the “possibility of loss or injury.”⁹ Another on-line dictionary describes risk as “Exposure to the chance of injury or loss; a hazard or dangerous chance”¹⁰ and the *Business Dictionary* expounds risk as “a probability or threat of damage, injury, liability, loss, or any other negative occurrence that is caused by external or internal vulnerabilities, and that may be avoided through pre-emptive action.”¹¹

Experts, such as engineers, argue that “Risk equals probability times consequence.”¹² As mentioned, the concept of risk is a very indefinable topic. In essence, it is shaped

by the perspectives of individuals, groups and/or institutions. Risk, as seen through subjective filters, can be defined as the probability of something possibly going wrong and the subsequent consequences of that outcome in the form of damage or injury (i.e. physical, reputational, financial or “political”) to individuals, groups or institutions.

Definitions aside, once again, since risk is very subjective, it is very difficult to measure. It is for that reason that risk is often hard to convey to others since it is a rather nebulous concept.

TYPES OF RISK

Since the concept of risk is very subjective, it should not be surprising that perception of risk for certain events or actions are viewed in the same manner. Research has revealed that “people overestimate their ability to influence events, which, in fact, are heavily determined by chance.”¹³ Quite simply, people tend to be over-confident about their ability to accurately forecast events. Moreover, they are also overconfident in their risk assessments and far too short-sighted in their assessments of the wide range of outcomes that may occur.¹⁴ The fateful decision to advance towards the Yalu River in November 1950, which prompted the Chinese to enter and prolong the Korean War is such a case. As the American and United Nations (UN) forces began to push the North Koreans out of South Korea, President Harry Truman’s policy “switch from ‘containment’ to ‘rolling back’ [North Korea] was made in the face of repeated threats of military intervention by the Communist Chinese government. Truman and his advisers decided to ignore the risks and took a huge gamble, without quite realizing how the stakes would be if they lost.”¹⁵ As a result of attempting to dismantle the North Korean regime, contrary to the dire warnings of the Chinese government, Truman expanded and extended the scope and cost of the war.

Furthermore, research has indicated that individuals, groups and institutions tend to “anchor their estimates” on current understanding of the environment, despite the realization that there is a real danger in trying to make future projections of a very dynamic, complex, rapidly evolving future security environment based on recent history. Groupthink and confirmation bias (i.e. the tendency to place more weight/favourable response on information that supports one’s position and

suppresses information that contradicts one's position) simply exacerbates the issue.¹⁶ Of great concern is the fact that researchers have found that "when events depart from our expectations, we tend to *escalate commitment*, irrationally directing even more resources to our failed course of action – throwing good money after bad."¹⁷ This result was the case with the Truman Administration in the Korean War. A study of his Administration's decision-making process, particularly decisions regarding Chinese capability and intent to protect North Korean territory, highlighted "that the group of decision-makers did not correct each other's oversights but instead 'supported each other's beliefs in a manner that increased risk-taking.'"¹⁸

The subjective nature of risk, compounded by the impact of individual and organizational biases, make the concept of risk even more difficult with which to come to grips. Often times, individuals, groups and organizations misinterpret or simply choose to overlook ambiguous threats or events. In fact, experts explain that regularly rather than make a conscious effort to mitigate potential risk, individuals and organizations "actually incubate risk through the normalization of deviance." Simply stated, they tolerate minor failures and ignore early warning signals of problems or deviance as "one-offs" or aberrations rather than tripwires of imminent danger.¹⁹

The tendency to underestimate possible risk is exacerbated by the fact that there are a number of types of risk. These are:

1. Preventable Risk;
2. Strategic Risk; and
3. External Risk.

Preventable Risk

Preventable Risk refers to risk that an individual or organization may incur due to the behaviours or actions of individuals that run counter to the organizational ethos and its regulations or policies. The risk assessment equation is simple. There is no gain or reward to be garnered by taking risk in this sphere. Instead, normally, clear codes of conduct, expectations, rules, regulations and policies are promulgated to guide behaviour and avoid any transgressions. The Chief of the Defence

Staff (CDS) and his institution of Operation Honour provides an excellent example of preventable risk. The CDS direction and the implementation of strict rules and guidelines have been put in place to avoid the risk of behaviours/actions that may cause negative consequences for service men and women (e.g. sexual harassment, poor morale, disciplinary action, reputational effects for both the institution and individuals).

Strategic Risk

Strategic Risk is risk that is undertaken voluntarily with the expectation of achieving a desired outcome, often with the desire for high reward. This approach can refer to either individuals or groups/organizations/governments. For instance, individuals may decide to risk money by investing in precarious capital ventures with the hopes of gaining great financial reward. Others may undertake daredevil stunts to glean notoriety or financial or reputational gain. At a higher level, Argentinian President (and military dictator) Leopoldo Galtieri's decision to invade the Falkland Islands (aka Malvinas) was a very risky venture that consequently resulted in the Falklands War with Britain. The risk was taken in hopes it could settle a long-standing dispute and restore the Falkland/Malvinas Islands to Argentina (and quell rising domestic protests).

External Risk

The final type of risk is External Risk, which refers to risk that is beyond the control of individuals or organizations.²⁰ Contingency plans, mitigating strategies and insurance are all means of trying to deal with external risk, but in the end, this is risk such as natural disasters, international political developments, market crashes, pandemics, etc. Although one can clearly assess the danger and consequence of risk of this nature, it is very difficult to accurately foresee or influence these events in any substantive way. As a result, when dealing with external risk it is a matter of early identification and rapid implementation of mitigation strategies. The Ebola Crisis in northwest Africa provides a contemporary example. Once the epidemic commenced and was identified it became a matter of travel restrictions, international medical support, segregation/isolation and careful management of travellers.

For individuals, external risk can also refer to political decisions that are made that have a direct and impactful effect on individuals and the organization. For instance, in World War II when 22 Office of Strategic Services (OSS) agents were discovered in Spain, a neutral country teetering on support for the Nazis, nine were killed in a shoot-out and 13 captured. To avoid a diplomatic catastrophe, the US government disavowed the agents who were on an approved mission, stating they were a rogue element within the OSS that was no longer under governmental control. All 13 agents were subsequently executed by the Spanish government.²¹

RISK ASSESSMENT

There is no template or fixed rules on how a risk assessment should be conducted. However, there are recognized general principles that should be followed. For instance, there are five steps to risk assessment that will provide individuals with a reliable process. These are:

1. Identify the hazards – initially it is important to recognize the difference between a “hazard,” namely, something with the potential to cause harm, and “risk,” the potential of that harm to be realized;
2. Decide who might be harmed and how – having identified hazards, it then becomes possible to identify who is at risk;
3. Evaluate the risks and decide on control measures – having identified hazards and possible people affected by the hazards, it is now possible to put mitigation strategies in place (e.g. removal, barriers, policies, regulations, contingency plans, etc.;
4. Record your findings and implement them – these actions ensure that the risk is mitigated and that there is a record to ensure hazards, risk and mitigation strategies are not lost with time or turn-over; and
5. Review your assessment and update if necessary.²²

RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk management focuses on identification, assessment, and prioritization of events that may represent potential risk for individuals or organizations. It is an important concept that has become an important tool for mitigating risk. It is defined as, “the

logical development and carrying out of a plan to deal with potential losses. The purpose of the risk management programme is to manage an organisation exposure to loss and to protect its assets.”²³ Interestingly, when it comes to risk management, psychologist Norman Dixon made a disturbing observation. He reported:

Research has shown that people vary in the degree to which they adjust the riskiness of their decisions to the realities of the external situation. Individuals who become anxious under conditions of stress, or who are prone to be defensive or deny anything that threatens their self-esteem, tend to be bad at judging whether the risks they take, or the caution they display, are justified by the possible outcomes of their decisions... Less anxious individuals will act more rationally because they are able to devote greater attention to the realities with which they are confronted.²⁴

The Crash of United Flight 173 is an interesting example. Part of the risk management plan for airlines was the creation of checklists to be used in aircraft to ensure proper procedures were undertaken to avoid risk of a catastrophic accident due to oversight or incorrect actions being undertaken in the event of a crisis. In the case of United Flight 173, its landing gear would not release. The pilot called an emergency and then diligently went through the checklist. He became so fixated on the checklist that he failed to pay attention to the flight engineer warning of fuel levels. His focus was on procedure not purpose. Not surprisingly, the aircraft ran out of fuel and crashed. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) assessed the crash as totally preventable. They stressed the requirement to focus on “risk adaptation instead of mitigation, to accept the inevitability of unexpected mechanical failures, and build flexible systems to combat these unknowns.” In essence, the FAA determined that “the risks of acting too slowly were higher than the risks of letting competent people make judgement calls.”²⁵

TYPES OF RISK RESPONSE

Risk response is the process of mitigating/controlling identified risks. It is part of the risk management process. In the simplest of terms, it is the planning and decision-making process used to determine how to deal with identified risk. The following are the basic types of risk response:²⁶

- Avoid – Change your strategy or plans to avoid the risk.
- Mitigate – Take action to reduce the risk.
- Transfer – Transfer the risk to a third party. For example, purchase insurance.
- Accept – Decide to take the risk. In reality, most, if not all, actions/plans involve a degree of risk.
- Share – spread the risk across multiple teams/partners.
- Contingency – ensure plans have contingency elements for potential risk factors.
- Enhance – enhancement is a response for “positive risk.” For example, if accelerating a plan/operation can free up resources/access additional resources, then the decision may be taken to speed up the process to take advantage of the opportunity costs.
- Exploit – another factor for positive risk. For instance, if an operation is completed early, or new information becomes available as a result of the operation, a follow-on mission may be taken because of the availability of resources or the presence of new information.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF RISK

The issue of risk is one that is shared by everyone in every walk of life. People do risk assessment and mitigation on a daily basis based on situation and circumstance. In fact, researchers have developed a number of factors that impact risk perception in the general public. They are:

1. Catastrophic Potential: if fatalities would occur in large numbers in a single event (e.g. aircraft crash);
2. Familiarity – unfamiliar or novel risks apparently worry people more;
3. Understanding – if people feel they do not understand how an activity or technology works their sense of risk increases;
4. Personal Control – if individuals feel the potential for harm is beyond their control – they worry more;

5. Voluntariness – if people do not choose to engage in an activity, the risk feels more threatening;
6. Children – the feeling of risk is much worse if children are involved;
7. Future generations – if the risk threatens future generations people tend to worry more;
8. Victim Identity – identifiable victims rather than statistical abstractions make the sense of risk rise;
9. Dread – if the effects generate fear the sense of risk increases;
10. Trust – if the institution(s) involved are not trusted risk rises;
11. Media Attention – more media means more worry;
12. Accident History – bad events in the past boost the sense of risk;
13. Equity – if the benefits go to some and the dangers to others, people feel the risk is increased;
14. Benefits – if the benefits of the activity or technology are not clear it is judged riskier;
15. Reversibility – if the effects of something going wrong cannot be reversed risk rises;
16. Personal Risk – if it endangers the individual, it is seen as riskier;
17. Origin – man-made risk is perceived as riskier than those of natural origin; and
18. Timing – more immediate threats loom larger while those in the future tend to be discounted.²⁷

RISK AND SOF

The issue of risk is one particularly close to SOF personnel at all levels. The old mantra of “be risk accepting, but only take prudent risks,” is easy to say but not always so easy to translate in reality. As noted, risk is situational, relative and very

ubiquitous. Considering the ambiguous, complex, chaotic and dangerous security environment that SOF operate in, the prevalence and level of risk is consistently elevated. It is for this reason one SOF general officer explained, “The Navy needs to know that operators can make the right call in dangerous, high-risk settings where plans are changing constantly. As a result, BUD/S [Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL] invest deeply in ensuring that every SEAL is holistically aligned in purpose with the strategic function of his unit and with the objective of any given mission.”²⁸

Similarly, General Stanley McChrystal observed of SOF operations in Iraq, “Today’s operation would be complex, and the more moving parts, the higher the risk.”²⁹ He went on to explain:

Team members tackling complex environments must all grasp the team’s situation and overarching purpose. Only if each of them understands the goal of a mission and the strategic context in which it fits can the team members evaluate risks on the fly and know how to behave in relation to their teammates.³⁰

What exacerbates the issue of risk and SOF is human nature and popular held perceptions of the ultimate warrior. Dr. Ben Shalit, a former Chief Psychologist of the Israeli Defence Force, observed, “The image of the good fighter seems to be the risk taker.”³¹ Commander-in-Chief President George W. Bush echoed that thought. In his address to the US Naval Academy in May 2001, he declared, “I am committed to fostering a military culture where intelligent risk-taking and forward-thinking are rewarded, not dreaded. And I’m committed to ensuring that visionary leaders who take risks are recognized and promoted.”³² Additionally, psychologist Norman Dixon asserted, “Other things being equal, a man who is prepared to take risks makes a more popular leader than one who is not so inclined.”³³ Veteran Ernest Jünger reinforced that observation. He acknowledged, “Bravery, fearless risking of one’s own life, is always inspiring.”³⁴

Add to these risk inducing factors the actuality, noted by Bob Work the father of the AI-driven Third Offset Strategy, that “SOF guys are less risk averse than conventional ground forces, so they’re more apt to push the limit.”³⁵ This proclivity for risk acceptance in SOF is even more telling when one considers that “risk-taking is not a natural behaviour and requires a leader to be bold and audacious.”³⁶ As one Australian Special Air Service Regiment officer explained, “We wouldn’t be able to

do the things we do if a guy knew he was going to be faced with a degree of danger and didn't have the confidence to confront that and carry out the task regardless.”³⁷

The outcome of these observations is the potential for SOF to be overly risk accepting. This reality obviously has its benefits and detriments. The ambush in Niger on 4 October 2017, was an example of the latter. Major General Mark Hicks, Commander US Africa Command directed, “I expect you to modify your assumptions about the level of risk you can accept. I expect you to plan and conduct operations with an increased margin of safety.... Back away from the edge, this is not Afghanistan or Syria.”³⁸

His admonition appears sensible. However, as already mentioned, risk is very personal and situational. What does “back away from the edge” actually mean? Arguably, the “edge” is different for each individual. So, what is it that makes individuals more risk accepting or risk adverse?

FACTORS THAT AFFECT RISK ACCEPTANCE

A survey of historical SOF and other military operations has produced a number of factors that appear to affect risk acceptance and risk adversity. Their importance lies in the ability to take this information and apply as required to garrison, training and operational situations to assist with making risk assessments. The identified factors are:

- No “skin” in the game/No personal risk
- Feeling of control/Control own destiny
- Self-confidence/Group Confidence/Over-confidence
- Perception of need to get something done
- Peer pressure/Groupthink
- Contempt for ability of opposition
- National credibility at stake
- Huge reward possible
- Well-prepared
- Ability to achieve surprise
- Innovation

- Desperation
- Time Constraints
- Fatigue
- Opportunity
- Complacency

No “Skin” in the Game/No Personal Risk

The first factor is not entirely surprising, particularly for anyone who has been sent on a mission planned and/or directed from a higher headquarters. Intuitively, the idea of accepting a higher level of risk is easier or more readily done if you personally do not have to face that demon. Operation Colossus, the first Allied airborne commando raid on 9/10 February 1940 to destroy the Tragino Aqueduct in southeastern Italy, is a perfect example. Planners convinced decision-makers that the mission would meet the Prime Minister’s demands for an ambitious raiding policy and it could possibly lead to Italy pulling out of two theatres of war (i.e. North Africa and Macedonia). The risk to the 38 commandos who would be stranded 50 kilometres from the coast without a realistic chance of escape or survival was downplayed as a minor risk. The mission was approved.³⁹

Another example is Operation Mikado, the plan for Special Air Service (SAS) operators to destroy Argentinian Étendard strike fighters and their Exocet missiles on their mainland airbase at Rio Grande, Tierra del Fuego. The British Director Special Forces, General Sir Peter De La Billière was a staunch protagonist for the mission. He envisioned landing two British C-130 Hercules transport aircraft loaded with approximately 60 SAS operators and their vehicles directly onto the tarmac at Rio Grande airbase. The SAS would then disgorge from the aircraft, similar to the Israeli mission at Entebbe years earlier, and destroy the Étendard fighters, the remaining Exocet missiles, as well as the pilots in their quarters.

De La Billière’s plan was not met with enthusiasm. One former SAS operator recalled, “the Director [De La Billière] wished us all good luck, said he would have our backs and that we would have his full support throughout the [Falklands] campaign. Unfortunately, at that time, little did we realize what he meant, but we were to learn later in the conflict that we were being signed on to execute “mission impossible” tasks, without the benefit of discussion or first refusal.”⁴⁰

Artwork by Brenda Wight



"Operation Colossus"

The candid assessment was not alone. “In my own mind I saw it as a one-way ticket,” Tom Rounds, the navigator in one of the two Hercules aircraft designated for the mission, confided. He added, “You knew you weren’t coming back because there was no tanker plan for the return leg,” Rounds revealed, “The Mikado Raid? I thought it was bloody stupid, actually.”⁴¹

So too did the Officer Commanding SAS “B” Squadron. He was not convinced of the plan’s viability. While staging on Ascension Island he voiced his concern. Director Special Forces was not impressed. De La Billiere lamented, “I was dismayed to find that the attitude of this unit [B Squadron] remained lukewarm. The trouble, I found, lay in the squadron commander, who himself did not believe in the proposed operation.”⁴²

The end result, the squadron commander, Major John Moss, was fired. “Moss articulated what a lot of his men felt, and took the flak,” opined Rounds.⁴³ Moss himself later explained:

Only four people knew what was happening, I was one them. One person, who has written a book, didn’t actually know everything as he wasn’t at the training... I put my point of view across at the time, which I felt was the right one. After leaving the Army I went down to Argentina to look at things in a bit more detail. I’m happy with the decision I made. It was the correct one.⁴⁴

Feeling of Control/Control Your Destiny

Predictably, feeling in control, which is often derived from confidence borne from good training, good planning and detailed intelligence, as well as confidence in self and team-members breeds risk acceptance. The award-winning journalist, Sebastian Junger, observed, “The primary factor determining break-down in combat does not appear to be the objective level of ‘danger so much as the feeling – even – illusion – of control. Highly trained men in extraordinarily dangerous circumstances are less likely to break down than untrained men in little danger.”⁴⁵

The German raid on the vaunted impregnable Belgian fortress of Eben Emael provides an excellent example of risk accepted due to a feeling of control. The seizure of the fortress was key to accessing crossing points across the Albert Canal

and Meuse River to allow German invasion forces to cut through Belgium and Holland in the early hours of 10 May 1940. The German commando assault force of 86 personnel was responsible for neutralizing the fortress that consisted of 17 major gun positions and 1,200 defenders. However, the element of surprise (first time gliders would be used for an assault), innovation (newly invented shaped charges), detailed planning and intelligence, tight security and realistic training, provided the assault force with complete confidence allowing the mere 54 assault airborne engineer commandos who actually landed on the objective to neutralize the fortress in approximately 30 minutes allowing for the invasion force to advance unimpeded.⁴⁶



German Fallschirmjäger practicing glider assaults.

A similar example is Operation Thunderbolt, the Israeli raid on Entebbe, Uganda. When terrorists hijacked an Air France A300 with 248 passengers aboard and finally settled at the old airport terminal in Entebbe with 106 Jewish hostages, having allowed the others to go free, Israel was left with a huge problem. Exacerbating the issue was the fact that since the airliner was of French origin, France was lead in negotiating. In addition, the Israelis were unsure of the Ugandan complicity in the current situation. The risk of a hostage rescue four thousand kilometres away seemed enormous. However, confidence in their intelligence, planning and commando forces led them to conduct a stunning operation that rescued 102 of the 106 hostages with the loss of only one military personnel in a ninety-minute operation.⁴⁷



Bundesarchiv, 183-122757/Bork

The effects of the *Hohlladung* (shaped charge)
on an Eben Emael gun emplacement.

Self-Confidence/Group-Confidence/Over-Confidence

Related to the previous factor, confidence in self and/or team can lead to risk acceptance. If individuals/teams feel they have the skill-sets, support, resources to accomplish a mission, they are more likely to take on extra risk to achieve their objective. General Archibald Wavell, when ordering his subordinate to launch an offensive in North Africa, despite the fact that the British were hopelessly outnumbered, explained:

I realise the risks of such an operation and am fully prepared to accept them, and the possibility of considerable casualties to personnel and to AFVs [armoured fighting vehicles]. I consider that the advantages of the operation entirely justify the risks run. Nor do I consider the risks excessive. In every thing but numbers we are superior to the enemy. We are more highly trained, we have better equipment. We know the ground and are better accustomed to desert conditions. Above all we have stouter hearts and greater traditions and are fighting in a worthier cause.⁴⁸

In addition, Operation Dingo provides another simple example. Between 23 to 25 November 1977, a force of 96 Rhodesian SAS operators and 88 soldiers from the Rhodesian Light Infantry attacked Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) headquarters in Chimoio, Mozambique. The following morning they launched another attack against a ZANLA training base in nearby Tembue. The assault was incredibly risky as they were grossly outnumbered and they risked the ire of the international community. Lieutenant-General George Peter Walls conceded, "Dingo was very risky, but well worth doing."⁴⁹ Planners assessed that during Operation Dingo, the most favourable ratio the Rhodesians could expect "would be seven enemies to one Rhodesian, but that ratio could rise to 40:1. The odds seemed overwhelming." The risk was well rewarded. The Rhodesians killed an estimated 3,000 insurgents and wounded another 5,000 at the cost of two Rhodesians killed and six wounded.⁵⁰

Operation Paraquet, the SAS raid to recapture South Georgia Island during the Falklands War in April 1982, provides yet another example of risk having been accepted because of over-confidence. Hoping to establish observation posts to gather a better picture of the Argentinian garrison in Grytviken, the SAS ignored warnings and insisted on being landed on the Fortuna glacier, where 70 knot winds howled and the temperature hovered at -20 degrees Celsius. Lieutenant-General Cedric Delves, recalled:

[Major] Guy [Sheridan] a hugely experienced mountaineer, advised us to avoid glaciers like the plague. [HMS] Endurance expressed strong opposition, citing that the unpredictable weather loaded the dice against success. In the background and unknown to me, the British Antarctic Survey [BAS] also briefed against going up onto glaciers, pointing out that even their experts were subject to tight safety rules when venturing into South Georgia's mountains.⁵¹

Similarly, Alan Bell an SAS operator at the time, later revealed that the BAS personnel with loads of experience had cautioned against using the Fortuna glacier. Bell lamented:

We didn't listen to them. Everything they said not to do – we did. It was Special Forces arrogance. What do scientists know about what we do? New day every day – new disaster every day.⁵²

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The over-riding confidence, if not arrogance, cost the SAS and the British expeditionary force two helicopters and almost an entire troop of SAS operators on that mission.

A detrimental side to over-confidence leading to risk acceptance was Field Marshal Erwin Rommel in his counter-moves during the British Operation Crusader offensive in North Africa in November 1941. The British attacked on 18 November 1941 with the intent of relieving the Tobruk garrison and pushing the Germans from Cyrenaica. Initially, they achieved tactical surprise and their offensive seemed promising. Rommel finally blunted the British advance on 24 November. In his normally audacious manner, Rommel decided to exploit the momentary British confusion and disorganization by shifting to the offensive. He scraped together a weak holding force to maintain the siege of Tobruk and marshalled all of his mobile forces for the pursuit. It burst into the British rear and caused panic and confusion.



Bundesarchiv, 1011-785-0286-31

Rommel discussing next moves with his subordinates.

The British Theatre Commander, General Claude Auchinleck, also took a huge risk. He gambled that Rommel did not have the resources to sustain his attack. As such, he risked the survival of the Eighth Army and ordered it to continue the advance. Both commanders now seemingly risked everything based on their confidence of their abilities and those of their armies.

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In the end, the British were able to infuse fresh troops into the fight. The Germans were not. As a result, Rommel had to withdraw, but the gamble cost him greatly in troops, resources and territory. The Germans now retreated. They pulled back from Tobruk and lost Cyrenaica.

Artwork by Katherine Taylor



Det 101 patrolling in the Burmese jungle.

A final example, also with detrimental effects of over-confidence, occurred during the Burma campaign. The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) deployed Detachment 101 to Burma to assist the Allied Northern Combat Area Command (NCAC). A planned drop to insert a six-man team behind enemy lines came under scrutiny. The OSS commander in theatre questioned the team's selected drop zone because it was close to several villages and the drop could be seen by the locals. The Team leader assured the commander that the group would be fine and insisted on keeping his selected site. When the villagers witnessed the actual drop they rushed out and killed three of the agents immediately and eventually tracked down the remaining three and turned them over to the Japanese, who subsequently beheaded them. In the aftermath of the horrendous miscalculation, no mission leader was ever allowed the authority to make the decision to execute a questionable mission. Detachment 101 staff concluded, "a group's leader could not be relied on to make an objective assessment when immediate risk had escalated."⁵³ In essence, over-confidence and ignoring risk could prove disastrous.

Perception of Need to Get Something Done

Often, undue risk is accepted because of the perception, or desire, that something needs to get done. Frustration with inertia, or fear that failure to do something/ameliorate the situation will lead to a loss in reputation or credibility can act as a catalyst to accept risk. In many ways, the perception is there is greater risk of negative consequences by doing nothing rather than the risk entailed in action.

The entire German mission-type tactics/command philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* that was instilled by the Prussians following their loss to Napoleon in 1806 speaks to this approach. This concept posits that it is better to risk taking action in the face of opportunity than to do nothing. As a result, subordinates are given clearly defined objectives but are trusted, and given the freedom, to plan and execute their mission with minimal interference from higher authority. Furthermore, the concept entails a lack of censure or punishment for subordinates using initiative in the face of opportunity, or acting in the absence of orders, to achieve the tactical objective. Rather, the failure to do so is chastised.

The SAS's first mission, Operation Squatter, is a telling example of risk acceptance due to the pressure of getting something done. Captain David Stirling's pitch to the commander-in-chief Middle East Forces was to drop behind enemy lines and

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destroy five of the German advanced airfields in advance of Operation Crusader. However, on the night of 16 November 1941, a torrential rain storm with howling winds raged across the moonless pitch-black desert. One account later described the conditions. “It was one of the most devilish nights North Africa has known. Rain was splashing down in icy sheets in total darkness. Even on the ground the wind was a thirty-mile gale, murderous to parachutists. It was the worst possible night.”⁵⁴ Both the Air Force and the staff at General Headquarters (GHQ) counselled against considering a parachute insertion and recommended scrubbing the mission. However, they left the decision to Stirling.

Stirling gathered his officers together. “Personally,” he began, “I would like to go ahead regardless of the risk. It would shake the men’s confidence in the unit if we chucked in our hand at this late hour.”⁵⁵ He was also concerned what the cancellation would do to the unit’s chance of survival at headquarters. All agreed to continue the mission.

Artwork by Brenda Wight



Landing in a sand storm – Operation Squatter

Predictably, the drop was a catastrophe. Stirling himself conceded, “the operation was a complete failure.”⁵⁶ Only 22 of the 65 SAS troops who participated in the drop made it to the rendezvous points. No German airfields were attacked. Not surprisingly, the reputation of the SAS tanked at GHQ.

Similarly, by 1944, the SOE wanted to drop its agents into Hungary. The choice of Pécs was controversial. The area had a considerable population of German origin. However, it was also the only district in which SOE had a contact and, therefore, planners felt “we are justified in taking the risk.”⁵⁷ After all, pressure was mounting to move forward on advancing SOE operations in Hungary. The entire SOE team was captured.

Peer Pressure/Groupthink

Within the SOF community peer pressure, direct or indirect, as well as groupthink are serious factors when considering risk-accepting behaviour. Individuals who have self-selected to volunteer to join a particular organization; have passed through the same rigorous tests of selection and training; have shared hardship and experience, and have developed tight bonds of cohesiveness, as well as the fact they share the same strong organizational culture, often see the world and solution sets to given problems in a similar way. Moreover, camaraderie and the desire to be seen “on-board” and supportive often kills objective dissent or alternate views. As such, the group can easily suffer from collegiality and a lack of critical thinking with the result being a poorly thought out plan or decision. Professor Wilfred Trotter observed, “He [Mankind] is more sensitive to the voice of the herd than to any other influence.”⁵⁸ Similarly, Professor Janis concluded, “a high degree of group cohesiveness is conducive to a high frequency of symptoms of groupthink, which, in turn, are conducive to a high frequency of defects in decision-making.”⁵⁹ In essence, this can lead to more risk than is prudent being accepted so as not to “rock the boat.”

The attempted invasion of the Bay of Pigs, an inlet of the Gulf of Cazes on the southern coast of Cuba, by a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) sponsored Cuban exile rebel group called Brigade 2506 on 17 April 1961, is a perfect example. In an effort to overthrow Fidel Castro whose Cuban Revolution ousted the Dictator General Fulgencio Batista, the CIA proposed an ambitious plan to

President John F. Kennedy and his Cabinet. However, the strong views of Kennedy and his brother Robert, who was the Attorney General, carried the chamber and muted potentially dissenting views.⁶⁰ The end result was a complete disaster. The invasion was squashed within days and the failure greatly embarrassed the Kennedy Administration. Arguably, it also led to the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.⁶¹

Another example is Operation Redwing in Afghanistan. In June 2005, a four-man Navy SEAL team established an observation post (OP) in the mountains overlooking a village housing a dangerous al Qaeda leader. During the mission three shepherds stumbled across the OP. The team now faced the decision of what to do with the Afghans. Fearing the reactions back home if they were to kill them, they decided to allow the shepherds to leave. The team leader revealed, “Was I afraid of the liberal media back in the U.S.A.? Yes. And I suddenly flashed on the prospect of many, many years in a U.S. civilian jail alongside murderers and rapists.”⁶² The entire team quickly agreed to his perspective. Not surprisingly, in no time, approximately 100 Taliban fighters began to hunt down the team. Only the team leader survived.

Contempt for Ability of Opposition

Perceptions of the ability and effectiveness of the opposition can also effect the level of risk acceptance. If the opposition is seen as weak, ineffective or vacillating, intuitively, planners, commanders and operators will accept a higher level of risk. The aforementioned Operation Dingo is a perfect example. So too is Russian President Vladimir Putin’s strategic moves in the Ukraine and Syria. Realizing that NATO was unwilling to challenge Russia militarily unless there was a clear military provocation he was able to orchestrate a complex assault utilizing hybrid warfare methodology (i.e. the employment of a wide range of overt and covert military, para-military and civilian measures in a synchronized manner) that achieved his aims in annexing the Crimea and establishing a break-away republic in the Donbass region in the Ukraine, without any NATO interference.

General Robert E. Lee’s victory at Chancellorsville on 1 May 1863, provides another graphic example. Facing a Union army three times the size of his Confederate forces, Lee gambled, or risked complete destruction by dividing his

force into three components – one to hold Union forces at Fredericksburg, one to meet a Union advance and a third to conduct a surprise thrust into the Union's undefended right flank. Lee accepted this risk because he realized the Union command was unimaginative, plodding and timid in their decision-making. He parlayed his risk into a rout of the Union forces.⁶³

A final example occurred on 3 October 1993, when Task Force Ranger met with cataclysmic failure. Arguably, their contempt for the opposition, Somali militiamen, led to a risk acceptance that was greatly miscalculated. This was the seventh raid in Operation Gothic Serpent. The assault force consisted of 19 aircraft, 12 vehicles and 160 personnel. The mission was to capture two “top lieutenants” of the fugitive self-proclaimed president Mohamed Farrah Aidid in Mogadishu. The assault force followed exactly the same tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) it had for the previous raids. Moreover, the helicopters flew in circles above the ground force at approximately 500 feet. Quite simply, the entire task force underestimated the ability of the Somalis to react quickly or effectively to the intrusion. In essence, the risk they accepted by not changing their TTPs but relying on past practice had an extremely high cost. The operation failed. The one-hour planned mission became a prolonged affair that dragged through the night into the following day. It was engulfed in a running firefight that resulted in 18 dead, 73 wounded, one helicopter pilot captured and the eventual withdrawal of the United States from Somalia months later in March 1994.⁶⁴

National Credibility at Stake

A higher level of risk by decision-makers is also evident when organizational/institutional, or particularly national, credibility is at risk. President Jimmy Carter's decision to authorize a high-risk rescue operation, Operation Eagle Claw to release 52 American embassy staff members taken hostage and held for 444 days after three thousand Iranian students/protesters stormed the US embassy in Tehran was a direct result of the international and domestic perceptions of his administration's impotence to act. The mission's failure did little to alleviate the international loss of respect and credibility for the US.

DoD



RH-53 Sea Stallions on the USS Nimitz, 23 April 1980

DoD



Wreckage of the failed mission at Desert One.

The Falklands War provides another example, in fact, Operation Paraquet, once again. Although Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's decision to go to war was

initially enthusiastically embraced by Britons to correct the egregious insult of the loss of the Falkland Islands, very quickly the loss of ships and personnel brought about a sombre realignment of the cost of war. Domestic support plummeted. Thatcher required a quick win to bring support back on line. It was important to get a national win to restore credibility and morale. The Government decided the recapture of South Georgia Island would allow for a low risk endeavour to restore national stature.

Not everyone agreed. Lieutenant-General Sir Cedric Delves revealed:

There were growing military reservations. Concern over South Georgia would mount over the coming days; at one stage Mike Rose [CO 22 SAS] remarking that Op Paraquet (all too easily corrupted to paraquat, a notably toxic herbicide) need to be killed off before it killed us off – by which he meant scupper the entire Falklands effort, Op Corporate itself.

Strategically, the operation had probably been mounted because it could be involving a relatively small number of warships and few troops. It held the prospect of an early win this serving to strengthen the country's diplomacy.

On the other hand, it could be viewed as a distraction from the Main Effort, the Falklands and its population, diverting resources, presenting a range of unwanted and unnecessary risks. Setback stood to damage our morale, correspondingly raise that of our enemy. And the risks were severe. At times the difference between success and catastrophe hung upon the thinnest of margins.⁶⁵

However, while the risk calculation was correct, the military hierarchy failed to understand the strategic intent and requirement. After the retaking of South Georgia Island, Prime Minister Thatcher appeared on the steps of Downing Street and urged the nation to "Rejoice, rejoice."⁶⁶ Captain Chris Nunn, the officer commanding the Royal Marine contingent (M Company) sent to recapture South Georgia Island later acknowledged that the troops were "largely oblivious to the effect the retaking of South Georgia had in Britain."⁶⁷ It had the necessary morale boosting effect.

Huge Reward Possible

A common, and obvious, factor for risk acceptance is the “promise” or likelihood of a huge reward. If the payout is seen as out of proportion to the perceived chance of negative consequences, a higher level of risk will be accepted. An example of the acceptance of risk as a result of the expectation of a huge reward is Operation Market Garden, the airborne invasion of Holland intended to provide the Allies with a quick route into Germany in World War II. In his seminal work, *The Psychology of Military Incompetence*, Norman Dixon assessed:

In its conception the plan [Market Garden] was a high-risk venture which, if it had paid off, might have shortened the war by several months. A secondary feature of the plan was that it promised to gratify [Field Marshal Bernard] Montgomery’s wish that his armies would win the race to Berlin. In the event this incentive took precedence over the first, with calamitous results.⁶⁸

Bundesarchiv, 1011-497-3529-03



German armoured forces in Arnhem.

The issue of risk was exacerbated when the Dutch underground reported the appearance of two SS armour divisions near the intended drop zones, and aerial reconnaissance captured the presence of German armour in the Arnhem

area. Despite the warning, Montgomery and his senior commanders ignored the information because their plan fed their desire for a huge reward – a speedy route to Berlin. As Dixon explained, “But since these ugly facts did not accord with what had been planned they fell upon deaf ears.” Montgomery dismissed the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) headquarters report as ridiculous. Lieutenant-General F.A.M. Browning, Commander of the 1st British Airborne Division, went so far as to reject the information quipping the tanks were “not serviceable at any rate.” Amazingly, the intelligence officer who diligently tried to warn his superiors of the high-risk operation being planned, was counselled by the Corps Medical Officer to take some time off since he was clearly exhausted.⁶⁹ The end result was a calamitous Allied failure.⁷⁰



Bundesarchiv, 1011-497-3531-17

British prisoners captured at Arnhem.

Another example is Operation Oak, Captain Otto Skorzeny’s rescue of Mussolini at Gran Sasso, Italy on 12 September 1943. Having executed a daring mission and rescued the Italian dictator from the mountain top plateau from the Hotel Campo Imperatore, Skorzeny was not to be cheated of his reward, namely, presenting the *Duce* to the Führer himself in Berlin. As a result, he risked the lives of Mussolini, himself and the pilot of a Fieseler-Storch aircraft by insisting he accompany the dictator in the small, light, overweight aircraft. “Then the left landing-wheel hit the

ground again,” Skorzeny recounted, “the machine tipped downwards and we made straight for the gully. Veering left, we shot over the edge. I closed my eyes, held my breath and again awaited the inevitable end.”⁷¹ The aircraft dropped out of sight, but then slowly rose into the air as it gained power. Skorzeny delivered Mussolini to Hitler and reaped his reward: an immediate promotion to the rank of major, the award of the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross and leave to see his wife.

Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503C-15



Skorzeny with Mussolini following his rescue.

The suicide bombing in December 2009, at the CIA Forward Operating Base Chapman in Khost, Afghanistan, is another stark reminder of how heightened risk is accepted in the hopes of a huge reward. When Jordanian Khalil al-Balawi, who had infiltrated the senior ranks of al Qaeda, offered to turn himself in and assist with the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, the CIA readily agreed to terms that violated their standard operating procedures. Despite protests and warnings from the security staff, the up-and-coming CIA star and head of the remote station waved rudimentary security precautions such as a personal search of the apparent informant. She did not want anything to discourage the prospect of a huge reward – the location of Bin Laden (as well as her role in locating him). Once inside the compound and face-to-face with the group of high-level CIA terrorist

hunters he detonated a 66-kilogram explosive device instantly killing seven CIA operatives. This represented the CIA's worst loss of life in decades.⁷²

Relatedly, the hunt for Bin Laden is a final example of risk acceptance in the hope of a huge reward. By mid-April 2011, the CIA believed they had located Bin Laden. "It was far from certain," President Barack Obama revealed, "and it took many months to run this thread to the ground."⁷³ Despite the enormous risks (e.g. violating Pakistani sovereignty, stigma of a failed attempt) and the objections of his vice president and secretary of defense, Obama sanctioned the mission hoping for a massive political reward. On 2 May 2011, the al Qaeda head was killed during a daring raid in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Obama's risk had paid off.

Well-Prepared

Not surprisingly, when individuals or organizations feel well-prepared they are more willing to accept risk. This also correlates with high levels of confidence and control. The First Special Service Force (FSSF) seizure of Mount La Difensa on 3 December 1943 is one such example, as is the capture of the German positions on Point de Hoc on 6 June 1944 (D-Day) by the U.S. Rangers. In both cases, the SOF organizations had well-trained troops, specialists/mountaineers who prepared the routes up the cliffs and supporting fires. In each case, the hazardous, risky approaches paid dividends as the positions were wrested away from the German defenders.

The So'n Tây Raid is another instance of preparation allowing for greater risk acceptance. Hoping to rescue a number of American prisoners of war (PoWs) from a suspected prison camp at So'n Tây, approximately 37 kilometres from Hanoi, a task force of 56 Special Forces soldiers, flying in six helicopters, penetrated the world's densest air defense system. Based on careful intelligence analysis of the air defence system and weather, the coordinated employment of 116 aircraft, and 170 rehearsals, the task force landed and killed approximately 100-200 enemy with no casualties of their own. Unfortunately, the prisoners had been moved to another camp.⁷⁴

Artwork by Katherine Taylor



The Making of a military legend: the FSSF attack on Monte La Difensa.

Ability to Achieve Surprise

The ability to achieve surprise is also a key factor in risk acceptance. The ability to catch an opponent unaware and unprepared provides great advantage that allows for the margin of risk to be raised. The German *schwerpunkt*, or main effort in the Ardennes forest was a gamble much of the German high command did not support. Their view of the difficult terrain was shared by the Allies. The only terrain left unfortified between the French and Belgian defensive belt was the Ardennes forest, an obstacle the Allies believed would be impenetrable to German forces. In fact, the Allies were so adamant that the Ardennes represented no threat to a German incursion that the Belgians did little to supplement natural obstacles and many of their road blocks were left unmanned. The French were even more negligent. The French High Command “declined to block the forest roads by felling thousands of trees on the grounds that this would impede the advance of the cavalry.”⁷⁵ In fact, Field Marshal Henri Pétain scoffed, “The Ardennes are impenetrable...this sector is not dangerous.”⁷⁶



National Archives (NA) RML-000147

German river crossing during the invasion of France.

Necessity, forced on the Germans when their original war plans fell into Allied hands, led to a change in design. Gambling that the Allies would be drawn by the

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feint through Holland, Belgium and northern France, the Germans pushed seven of their ten armoured divisions through the Ardennes breaking out at Sedan and launching themselves into the rear of the Allied main positions forcing the epic Allied withdrawal at Dunkirk. The campaign lasted six weeks but was decided in only ten days.

GL Archive / Alamy Stock Photo, C4XXEN



Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, 7 December 1941.

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor is yet another example of risk acceptance based on the element of surprise. Hoping to catch the American Pacific Fleet at its home station in Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, Hawaii, the Japanese launched an audacious attack on the morning of 7 December 1941. They had hoped to cripple US sea power so that the Americans would be unable to interfere with Japanese expansionist plans in the Pacific Ocean, which had become a necessary because of crippling Western economic sanctions. The attack achieved total surprise. The first wave consisted of 183 aircraft, followed by a second wave of 168 attacking aircraft. They inflicted massive damage. They killed 2,403 Americans and wounded another

1,178. They sunk or damaged 18 ships (including the sinking of six battleships) and destroyed and damaged 164 and 128 respectively. They achieved this success at the cost of only 29 aircraft and six submarines (five of which were midget submarines). However, believing he had lost the element of surprise, the Japanese naval commander refused to dispatch a third wave of aircraft to destroy the base's fuel installations or repair facilities.⁷⁷ This failure, as well as the fact that all of the American aircraft carriers were at sea, allowed the US to quickly recover. In the end, the risk acceptance was misguided. The attack failed to cripple US sea power, but it pushed the Americans into the war.

Innovation

Much like surprise, innovation also spurs risk acceptance. The use of gliders and shaped charges gave the Germans a decisive advantage on 10 May 1940, allowing 56 airborne engineers to neutralize a fortress that was categorized as impregnable prior to the assault. Similarly, the Italian invention of the manned torpedo, as well as rubber dry suits, underwater breathing apparatuses and specialty mines, allowed for high risk attacks on shipping in well-defended harbours. On 19 December 1941, the Italians infiltrated Alexandria Harbour and destroyed two British battleships the *Valiant* and *Queen Elizabeth*. The sudden loss temporarily changed the balance of power in the Mediterranean Sea.

Operation Badr, the Egyptian crossing of the Suez Canal on 6 October 1973, during the Yom Kippur War is another example of risk acceptance due to innovation. Egyptian engineers used war cannons to quickly cut passageways into the sand wall on the east bank of the canal. They then hastily laid bridges and ran ferries across the canal to allow five Egyptian infantry divisions to seize the Israeli Bar-Lev defensive line by the following day. Eventual Israeli counter-attacks were repulsed with the effective deployment of anti-tank weapons. By 8 October 1973, the Egyptians had penetrated along the entire east bank of the Suez Canal to approximately fifteen kilometres. However, the Israelis would eventually encircle the Egyptian army and occupy Egyptian territory. The war ended on 25 October 1973.

Desperation

Much like the feeling/need to accomplish something, desperation creates the urge to take greater risk to create momentum or achieve the mission. The 2nd Parachute

Battalion attack on Darwin and Goose Green in the Falklands on 28-29 May 1982, provides an example. The Battalion made good progress during its night advance and combat, but as daylight seeped over the sodden gorse-filled terrain the advance ground to a halt due to heavy Argentinian fire. The Battalion now fell behind in its schedule. With his lead company pinned down, the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel H. Jones, virtually on his own, moved forward to attempt to get a better idea of the obstructing Argentinian positions. When he advanced to clear a problematic trench he was gunned down by another enemy position that he had failed to see. The extreme risk he took due to a sense of desperation to revitalize the stalled offensive was fatal. Apparently, however, his act was the catalyst for another push that won the day, earning him a Victoria Cross.⁷⁸

Time Constraints

Time, always a short commodity, also drives risk acceptance. Backed up against a constantly closing window, decision-makers are often left with the option of putting off a decision or event or taking higher risk. They often decide on accepting the higher risk. For instance, during Operation Colossus, aircraft issues, specifically problems with the paratrooper containers carrying weapons and equipment prior to take-off, which prompted an Air Force officer to strongly recommend the mission be delayed, was categorically refused. The mission commander decided to take the risk of malfunction rather than postpone the mission, which meant a delay of approximately one month until the next moon period (and the requirement to stall Churchill's raiding policy). Although five of the six aircraft dropped their paratroopers on target most of the containers did not release. As a result, only half of the explosives, one of twelve ladders and only a small portion of their weapons landed near the objective. This shortage of equipment had an adverse effect on the mission.⁷⁹

In the same vein, during Operation Oak, Skorzeny realized that his rescue of Mussolini was time-constrained, which drove his level of risk. He assessed that he had to drop quickly onto the objective and access the dictator within three minutes or his Italian guards would kill him. This drove Skorzeny to decide on using the DFS-230 glider for the dangerous assault onto the small mountain plateau. As one of Skorzeny's subordinates assessed, "May I suggest, sir, that we forget all about figures and trying to compute our chances; we both know that they are very

small, but we also know that, however small, we shall stake our lives on success!”⁸⁰ Skorzeny also decided to have an Italian general accompany him to create confusion and delay with regard to the Italian guards. “Why not take with us an Italian officer, someone who must be reasonably well known to the Carabinieri up there,” Skorzeny explained, “His very presence will bluff the guards for a short time and restrain them from immediately reacting to our arrival by violence against the *Duce*.”⁸¹



Library and Archives Canada (LAC), PA 205032

**Paratroopers retrieving equipment from a container
after a drop during an exercise in England.**

Finally, time was an essential factor in the Allied decision to launch Operation Overlord, the invasion of Occupied Europe. General Dwight D. Eisenhower was up against the wall. He had already delayed Operation Overlord for a month to

give the Allies additional time to build up their strength. He then set 5 June 1944 as D-Day. However, cloudy skies, heavy rain and turbulent seas forced him to delay for 24 hours to see if the weather improved. The forecast dictated that there would be a brief window in the storm starting on the afternoon of 5 June extending into 6 June. Any further delay would mean a pause of two weeks until the tides were once again favourable. This extension could have compromised the Allied landing location. As a result, Eisenhower took the risk and made the call to invade.

US National Archives (NA), 181101-D-ZZ999-003



**Airmobile insertion of members of Reconnaissance Platoon,
1st Air Cavalry Division.**

Fatigue

Fatigue is often underestimated for its impact on decision-making and risk. It can actually increase risk acceptance due to the fact that thinking is impaired and/or a feeling of inevitability or lack of concern takes centre stage. When exhausted, normal precautions and best practices are forgotten. During the cataclysmic 34-day campaign in the Ia Drang Valley of the Central Highlands in South Vietnam

in November 1965, fatigue played a critical element in risk acceptance. Following the savage three-day break-in battle at Landing Zone (LZ) X-Ray, which began on 14 November 1965, the 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry, which had come to reinforce LZ X-Ray was ordered to move to LZ Albany for extraction. Heavy rucksacks, difficult terrain, strained nerves, and extremely hot, humid weather conditions took their toll. The Battalion column was stretched out. During a long halt, fatigue got the better of leaders and no effort was made to ensure an adequate security posture was assumed. Unknowingly due to fatigue, an unacceptable level of risk was assumed. As a result, when the North Vietnamese soldiers attacked they were able to shred the unsuspecting battalion piece-meal. The cost: 155 American soldiers dead and another 124 wounded.⁸²

Opportunity

Additional risk is also often embraced when fleeting opportunity presents itself. In the spirit of German *Auftragstaktik*, the opportunity to take initiative and capitalize on a situation usually creates risk acceptance due to the perceived favourable position that presents itself. For example, during Operation Paraquet, in the aftermath of the successful helicopter strike on the Argentinian submarine *Santa Fe*, as well as the perceived effect of naval gunfire on the Argentinian positions, the British command team decided to use the surprise and confusion of the Argentinian force to their advantage and mount an immediate assault on the town, even though they had not planned for such a sudden deployment. Lieutenant-General Delves, then a squadron commander with the SAS recalled:

We had ditched tactical surprise in near myopic favour of operational shock. Tactical surprise was lost, but we should cash in on the moral[e] sway the Navy had just attained over the enemy. The Argentine garrison must be teetering upon psychological collapse, their hopes shattered, their defensive strategy in tatters. We needed to finish them off. They had just witnessed the loss of their forward and principal line of defence to a swarm of helicopters. Lord knows what they must think lay behind. We should feed their fears, get in before they could regain composure, threaten them with everything we could lay our hands on. Go, go, go, go, go!⁸³

The risk they accepted paid off as the Argentinians quickly surrendered.

Complacency

Complacency, the state of feeling satisfied with actions or decisions, although that feeling or belief is cloaked in an unawareness of actual dangers or deficiencies that the behaviour is actually opening one to, is the bane of professional soldiering. Complacency also, dangerously, creates an atmosphere of unintended risk acceptance.

The renowned American military historian S.L.A. Marshall described one graphic example of how complacency led to risk acceptance that had serious consequences during the Vietnam War in May 1966. A platoon left to guard LZ Hereford assumed they were in a safe location and would soon be picked up by helicopters. Although the platoon commander realized their posture was ill-suited to an all-around defence and that a visiting journalist was walking from position to position, thus, giving away the location of his personnel, he did nothing to improve the situation. Neither did any of the troops scout the vicinity of their location or take up a security posture. The over-riding belief was “nothing will happen here.” The platoon was suddenly attacked and virtually wiped out by a North Vietnamese attack.⁸⁴

Courtesy Bill Knarr



Airmobile operation in Vietnam.

The earlier example of Operation Gothic Serpent is also relevant as a case of complacency and the acceptance of a higher level of risk based on the disregard for changing standing TTPs because of an underestimating of the ability of the opposition to react/adapt to your methodologies. Another graphic example is the 1 March 2019 Taliban attack on Camp Bastion (renamed Camp Shorab), which housed the Afghan Army's 215th Corps, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The camp, taken over from the Americans, lapsed into complacency and failed to ensure

the proper security. Taliban fighters who hid inside a sewage tanker truck (realizing the stink would inhibit guards from actually checking its interior), as well as others who scaled a wire fence (entirely missed by sleepy guards in watch towers) were able to kill 23 Afghan soldiers and wound many more. The estimated 20-30 Taliban fighters were only neutralized after 20 hours of fighting and American airstrikes.⁸⁵

Factors That Affect Risk Adversity

In the same manner that some factors influence risk acceptance in individuals, others act to inhibit behaviour or decisions that may seem precarious in nature. These factors cause individuals to be more risk averse. These factors include:

- The presence of personal risk
- Lack of Knowledge/Situational awareness
- Lack of Control/Not in control
- Lack of Confidence
- Poor/Lack of Communications
- Fear
- Fatigue
- Presence of Personal Risk

Not surprisingly, when personal safety is at play, risk acceptance often plummets. Most individuals do not have a desire to be hurt, maimed or killed. As such, actions are prudently considered with a meticulous cost/benefit analysis. James Webb, a Vietnam veteran and accomplished writer captured in his seminal work *Fields of Fire* the essence of the soldier on the ground who actually faces the danger:

A Private knows intrinsically what a General must learn through experience. That is because a Private thinks with caution since he will be killed. A General can be daring when only the Private will die for his mistakes.⁸⁶

Not surprisingly, another combat veteran stated, “A comrade on whom I could count, who took no unnecessary risks and knew what he was doing, was worth his weight in gold, in my eyes.”⁸⁷

Another example risk aversion with regards to personal safety by those in the field was provided by a commando veteran from WWII. Speaking to the practice of

binding prisoners who were captured during raids for security and safety reasons, despite the fact that the procedure was outlawed by international convention, he stated, “Those orders we received from our superiors were always in accordance with the internationally accepted laws of warfare, but we violate them because our lives were at stake. While we were breaking them, those who framed them were probably fast asleep in their beds.”⁸⁸

Unknown photographer, DND/LAC, PA 183766.



Commandos from No. 4 Commando on return from the Dieppe Raid.

Similarly, for the airborne commandos who assaulted the Tragino Aqueduct on 10 February 1941, and found themselves surrounded in southwestern Italy, the calculus became clear, even though they were surrounded by villagers and local police. Lieutenant Anthony Deane-Drummond later explained, “Women, children and unarmed peasants were everywhere and we would not be able to avoid casualties amongst them.” He reasoned, “All we could achieve were a few extra hours of freedom at the price of a particularly odious and inglorious action.”⁸⁹ Of the four groups that attempted to break out to the coast for submarine extraction, all but one

surrendered without a fight. The one group that resisted, capitulated rather quickly as their ammunition ran out, but not before killing two civilians. That group was stood up against a wall by a civilian mob to be gunned down. Only the intervention of an Italian military officer saved their lives.

Lack of Knowledge/Situational Awareness

A lack of detailed knowledge or situational awareness from which to assess a course of action is another source of risk aversion. The German confusion with regard to the massive D-Day airborne landings in Normandy on the night of 5/6 June 1944 provides a perfect example. Although the drops were widely scattered, which created serious issues of assembling the required combat power for the Allied paratroopers, the wide dispersion made it difficult for German commanders to understand what the actual target was. Due to this lack of knowledge they hesitated releasing reserve forces, thus, allowing the Allies time to consolidate and execute their missions. A committee of German generals later noted:

It is a unique characteristic of airborne operations that the moments of greatest weakness of the attacker and of the defender occur simultaneously. The issue is therefore decided by three factors: who has the better nerves; who takes the initiative first; and who acts with greater determination. In this connection, the attacker always has the advantage of being free to choose the time and place of attack, and he therefore knows in advance when the moment of weakness will occur, whereas the defender must wait to find out where and when the attack will take place. The attacker will always endeavor to aggravate the defender's disadvantages by deception and try to force him to split up his countermeasures.⁹⁰

Another example of risk aversion based on a lack of knowledge/situational awareness is NATO's inaction to the Russian hybrid attack on Ukraine. Unsure, or unwilling to acknowledge, Russia's expert application of a hybrid methodology to the conflict in the Ukraine, NATO stood by as Putin dismantled the Ukrainian state. US Army College Professor Antulio J. Echevarria II opined, "Gray Zone [hybrid warfare] war sits below threshold and level of violence to prompt United Nations (UN) security council resolutions or NATO Article 5 response yet [its] not peace." He explains that countries such as Russia and China "exploit this zone of ambiguity to accomplish 'wartime-like' objectives outside the normal scope of what military strategists and campaign planners are legally authorized or professionally trained

to address”⁹¹ This uncertainty creates risk aversion. As one Estonian official noted, “in the hands of Russia hybrid warfare could cripple a state before that state even realizes the conflict had begun, and yet it manages to slip under NATO’s threshold of perception and reaction.”⁹²

Artwork by Ted Zuber



Night Drop, 5/6 June 1944.

A final example is the observations of a US Delta officer. He asserted, “Risk aversion is a direct by-product of not understanding what’s going on around you.” He explained, “One of the unfortunate by-products of risk aversion was, and still is, something we called the footprint paradox. To obviate any risk to the small number of men needed to conduct high-risk operations, the upper echelons of the military believed they had to employ massive armadas of helicopters, jets, vehicles, and people to address every possible contingency.”⁹³

Not in Control

Although initiative is always stressed as a core competency for all levels of soldiers and leaders, the reality is when one is not in control it is not always easy to be risk

accepting. The personality of a superior often drives risk avoidance. If the superior is one who accepts mistakes, empowers subordinates to use their initiative, exudes trust, is comfortable with dictating commander's intent but allowing subordinates to plan and execute within those parameters, then risk acceptance is normally high. However, those are rare individuals. More often than not, careerism, a zero tolerance for mistakes, the difficulty of not micro-managing subordinates are all factors that tend to be difficult for many superiors to overcome. As a result, those not in command, or in control, tend to be risk averse.

Lack of Confidence

When decision-makers lack confidence in the plan, situation or others, risk aversion spikes. The example of the SEAL Team during Operation Red Wing provides a clear example. Having no confidence in the ability of a liberal press back home to give them an objective, impartial judgement, the four-man team fatefully decided to allow the Afghan shepherds to go free, believing the risk of releasing them had fewer consequences than killing them. The risk aversion caused by the lack of confidence in the press and their domestic audience led to the death of three of the four team members.

Operation Colossus provides yet another example. Following the attack on the Tragino Aqueduct an allied reconnaissance flight took pictures, which based on the angle, appeared to show no damage to the bridge. With a failed mission, an aircraft that ditched in the sea because of engine failure (in the same vicinity as the commando extraction rendezvous point with a submarine), the Admiralty, having lost confidence in the mission and the commandos, called off the submarine extraction, leaving the 38 individuals stranded. Although all four teams were captured prior to the set extraction date, the Admiralty was not aware of that fact when they cancelled the submarine. The rationale was that they would not risk a submarine on top of all the "failures" the mission had accumulated to date.⁹⁴

Poor/Lack of Communications

Clarity and knowledge create confidence and spur action. The lack, thereof, has the opposite effect. Poor communications, poorly articulated intent, willful ignorance, limited cognitive abilities, fatigue, noise and stress can all lead to misunderstanding and confusion. This state of mind has a forceful effect on risk acceptance, namely it normally manifests itself as risk avoidance.

CHAPTER 1

The Allied landing at Anzio, Italy on 22 January 1944, was intended to drive a wedge between the German forces holding the Allies at bay at the mouth of the Liri Valley and Rome. The Allies flung approximately 36,000 troops, as well as over 3,000 vehicles onto the beaches at Anzio, approximately 60 kilometres southeast of Rome.⁹⁵ The Germans were caught by complete surprise. Aside from a few infantry companies, who were quickly overrun, the enemy had nothing locally available to block the Allied landing or thrust inland. By noon, the Allies had engineers clearing mines and cutting exit routes through the dunes to allow men and equipment to flow inland.

Courtesy JFK Special Warfare Museum



First Special Service Force machine-gun position covering the Mussolini Canal in the Anzio salient.

Although given direction to aggressively cut the German line of retreat, unfortunately, Major General John P. Lucas, the VI Corps commander, took to heart his superior's concern that he not over-reach. The mixed messages, or poorly articulated commander's intent, resulted in a very risk averse approach by Lucas. He surrendered the initiative. The Allied timidity now gave German Field Marshal Albert Kesselring ample time to move forces into the Anzio area to hem in the Allied salient.⁹⁶ By 1700 hours that evening, the first German troops began to arrive. By the end of the day, a thin defensive crust encircled the Allied beachhead. And, it would grow stronger with every day. Within 48 hours, Kesselring amassed 24,000 troops to contain the Allied assault. By the beginning of February it became

obvious that the cautious and slow Allied approach had allowed the Germans sufficient time to recover and contain the beachhead. Churchill angrily decried, “I had hoped that we would be hurling a wildcat ashore, but all we got was a stranded whale.”⁹⁷ By 12 February, Kesselring had approximately 120,000 troops arrayed against the reinforced Allied bridgehead.⁹⁸ The soft underbelly had been quickly transformed into an armoured shell. In fact, the German response was so overwhelming that the initiative was reversed. The Allies now feared the prospect of being swept back out to sea.

A more recent example occurred on 4 October 2017. A platoon of Islamist militants ambushed a team of American and Nigerien soldiers near the Mali-Niger border and killed four American Special Forces soldiers, or Green Berets. The resultant fire storm of controversy on whether the mission was adequately prepared, whether it over-stepped its mandate, whether it suffered from poor planning has created an environment of risk aversion. Quite simply, the official US Strategy toward Sub-Saharan Africa has expired. With nothing to replace it, the gap in American national strategy vis-à-vis the Sahel leaves SOF leaders and operators in a vacuum of clear direction/communication. Therefore, risk aversion reigns supreme as it is safer to do nothing, or take a minimalist approach and take less risk than use initiative and potentially risk negative consequences.⁹⁹

Fear

Intuitively, all understand the relation between the emotion of fear and risk aversion. When someone is frightened, scared out of their wits, they are less likely to take action. Often they are paralyzed into inaction. S.L.A. Marshall in his years of studying warfare observed, “Fear is general among men... The majority are unwilling to take extraordinary risks and do not aspire to a hero’s role.”¹⁰⁰ A British Commando sergeant during the invasion of Juno Beach, Normandy, France on D-Day confessed, “I was so scared, all the bones in my body were shaking. I said to myself, pull yourself together, you’re in charge and supposed to show an example. When the ramp went down dead on 0600 [hours], I looked around, and there were pools of water by men. It wasn’t sea water.”¹⁰¹

Another combat veteran from another era recounted, “Cameron could hardly keep on his feet, every step was a stagger. I thought he was wounded, but no, it was fear made him that way.”¹⁰² Another anecdote from a mercenary fighting in the Congo

revealed, “A moment of panic totally flooded my senses and made me blind for a moment. It was pure fear, fear of the unknown, and my mind screamed that the rebels would capture, torture and kill us slowly.”¹⁰³

A final example is a Canadian SOF patrol in the Baghran Valley in 2005. Coalition air support had been called in to suppress enemy fire. Shortly afterwards a villager approached the convoy of vehicles, cradling what he said was a dead child. He blamed the SOF patrol and warned them that if they proceeded on their current route they would come across enraged villagers, including women and children, who were bent on vengeance. Faced with the fear of potentially requiring them to engage civilians, even if only in self-defence, the patrol opted instead to take a more risk averse approach and avoid the possible confrontation. Ironically, taking this tack, actually required taking a more dangerous route through a known Taliban ambush site, thereby arguably, providing an example of how fear can also create risk acceptance.¹⁰⁴ They were ambushed but prevailed in the firefight.

Artwork by Katherine Taylor



Ambush in the Baghran Valley.

Fatigue

Fatigue is a double-edged sword with regard to risk. As noted earlier, it can create risk acceptance, however, it can also have the opposite effect and create

risk avoidance. It is often personality and situationally dependent. Psychologist F.C. Bartlett explained the impact of physical exhaustion in combat. “In war,” he asserted, “there is perhaps no general condition which is more likely to produce a large crop of nervous and mental disorders than a state of prolonged and great fatigue.”¹⁰⁵ Staff Sergeant Thomas Turner conceded, “we were all surprised to find that we had suddenly gone weak. . .under fire we learned that fear and fatigue are about the same in their effect on an advance.”¹⁰⁶ Similarly, one veteran noted, “Some frightened men have spent two hours negotiating the distance, which calmer ones cover in six minutes.”¹⁰⁷ In essence, fatigue impacts our cognitive ability. It makes concentrating difficult, slows down reaction time, impairs decision-making ability, increases errors in judgement, hampers communication skills and the ability to manage stress. In short, fatigue makes us prone to fear and risk aversion.

CONCLUSION

The great historian Hans Delbruck believed, “Great military ideas are actually extremely simple... Greatness lies in the freedom of the intellect and spirit at moments of pressure and crisis, and in the willingness to take risks.”¹⁰⁸ However, “taking risks” is a rather nebulous concept. As explained, most people intuitively understand the concept. However, in practice, the definition, realization, impact and effect of risk are variable. Quite simply, risk is seen differently by different people. The concept of risk is a very indefinable topic. In essence, it is shaped by the perspectives of individuals, groups and/or institutions. Risk, as seen through subjective filters, can be defined as the probability of something possibly going wrong and the subsequent consequences of that outcome in the form of damage or injury (i.e. physical, reputation, financial or “political”) to individuals, groups or institutions. As risk is very subjective, it is not surprising that it is difficult to measure or convey to others. Nonetheless, with a better understanding of risk, particularly the factors that lead to risk acceptance and aversion, the hope is that individuals can better navigate the complex, ambiguous contemporary security environment safely.

ENDNOTES

- 1 “Causes of Death in Recent Decades,” <<https://ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death>>, accessed 17 February 2019. In fact, other common risks outweighed air travel. For instance, in the US, there were 30,000 deaths due to accidental falls; 38,000 unintentional poisoning, 16,000 homicides, 27 deaths by lightning strikes and an average of 19 fatal dog attacks each year.
- 2 Luiza Ch. Savage, “The return of fear on the U.S.-Canada border,” *Maclean’s*, 5 October 2014. <<http://www.msn.com/en-ca/news/world/the-return-of-fear-on-the-us-canada-border/ar-BB7D7vU>>, accessed 5 October 2014.
- 3 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Trends in Extremist Violence & Terrorism in Europe through End 2016*, 22 June 2012. <<http://www.csis.org/burke/reports>>, accessed 1 August 2017. As a comparison, in 1979 and 1980, there were 1,615 terrorist incidents in Europe that killed at least 719 people. Kim Hjelmgaard, “You’d be surprised by the trend in Europe’s terrorist attacks,” *USA Today*, 10 July 2017, <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/07/10/europe-terrorism-attacks-islamist-extremists/454836001/>>, accessed 20 July 2017.
- 4 “Causes of Death in Recent Decades,” <<https://ourworldindata.org/causes-of-death>>, accessed 17 February 2019.
- 5 Hjelmgaard, “You’d be surprised...,” (2017).
- 6 <<https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/study-global-terror-attacks-down-33-percent>>, accessed 24 January 2019.
- 7 Catherine Cloutier, “How Common are skydiving accident deaths? Not Very,” *Boston Globe*, 30 September 2014, <<https://www.bostonglobe.com/2014/09/30/how-common-are-skydiving-accident-deaths-not-very/Rr7NltopKnJMPWy92c3SiO/story.html>>, accessed 2 March 2019; and Luke Roney, “Skydiving deaths are rare,” *newser*, 7 August 2016, <<http://www.newser.com/story/229291/family-watched-as-18-year-old-skydiver-plummeted-to-death.html>>, accessed 2 March 2019.
- 8 Numbers vary based on sources but they are all relatively close and small. For instance, some sources place deaths at: 2013 (59), 2014 (38), 2015 (41), 2016 (111), 2017 (50) and 2018 (16). See Paul Sitter, “Malfunction, Malfunction, Malfunction – The 2017 Fatality Summary,” *Parachutist*, April 2018. <<https://uspa.org/p/Article/malfunction-malfunction-malfunctionthe-2017-fatality-summary>>, accessed 2 March 2019; and “Fatal Skydiving Accidents,” *Dropzone.com*, <<https://www.dropzone.com/fatalities/>>, accessed 2 March 2019.
- 9 <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/risk>>, accessed 11 July 2018.
- 10 <<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/risk>>, accessed 12 February 2019.
- 11 <<http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/risk.html>>, accessed 11 July 2018.
- 12 Dan Gardner, *Risk* (Toronto: Emblem, 2008), 75.
- 13 Robert Kaplan and Anette Mikes, “Managing Risks: A New Framework,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2012. <<https://hbr.org/2012/06/managing-risks-a-new-framework>>, accessed 11 July 2018.
- 14 Ibid.

- 15 Irving L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 60.
- 16 Yale University psychology professor Irving Janis defines groupthink “as a quick and easy way to refer to a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ striving for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action...Groupthink refers to a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.” Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, 9.
- 17 Ibid. The researchers also noted that “organizational biases also inhibit our ability to discuss risk and failure. In particular, teams facing uncertain conditions often engage in *groupthink*: Once a course of action has gathered support within a group, those not yet on board tend to suppress their objections—however valid—and fall in line. Groupthink is especially likely if the team is led by an overbearing or overconfident manager who wants to minimize conflict, delay, and challenges to his or her authority.”
- 18 Ibid., 60.
- 19 Ibid., 55.
- 20 Alternate types of risk have also been identified by scholars and business practitioners. For example, these risk categories include: financial risks, process risks, intangible risks, time risks, human risks, legal risks, and physical risks. See Mark S. Dorsman, “Risk Management,” <<https://hubpages.com/business/Risk-Management-and-Various-Types-of-Risk-Management>>, accessed 12 February 2019.
- 21 Patrick K. O'Donnell, *Operatives, Spies and Saboteurs. The Unknown Story of the Men and Women of World War II's OSS* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 47.
- 22 Taken from: <<https://rospaworkplacesafety.com/2013/01/21/what-is-a-risk-assessment/>>, accessed 12 February 2019.
- 23 Dorsman, “Risk Management.”
- 24 Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (London: Pimlico, 1994), 167.
- 25 General Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams. New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Penguin Kindle Edition, 2015), 209.
- 26 Taken from John Spacey, “8 Types of Risk Response,” 2 July 2017, <<https://simplicable.com/new/risk-response>>, accessed 19 February 2019.
- 27 Gardner, *Risk*, 76-77.
- 28 McChrystal, *Team of Teams*, 99.
- 29 Ibid., 15.
- 30 Ibid., 98.
- 31 Ben Shalit, *The Psychology of Conflict and Combat* (New York: Praeger, 1988), 114.
- 32 Thomas J. Williams, “Strategic Leader Readiness and Competencies for Asymmetric Warfare,” *Parameters*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer 2003): 26.

- 33 Dixon, *On the Psychology*, 217.
- 34 Ernest Jünger, *Storm of Steel* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), 213.
- 35 Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Artificial Intelligence: Will Special Operators Lead The Way?” February 13, 2019. <<https://breakingdefense.com/2019/02/artificial-intelligence-will-special-operators-lead-the-way/>>, accessed 19 February 2019.
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- 37 Major Reg Crawford, Australian SASR, Phil Mayne, “Professionals Accept High-Risk Employment,” *Army*, No. 907 (27 June 1996): 3.
- 38 Christina Goldbaum, “U.S. Gen. Reins in Special Operations Forces in Africa After Niger Deaths and Daily Beast Investigations,” *The Daily Beast* (15 December 2017), <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/us-gen-reins-in-special-operations-forces-in-africa-after-niger-deaths-and-daily-beast-investigations>>, accessed 15 January 2019.
- 39 See Colonel (retired) Bernd Horn, *The Wrecking Crew* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2019), 46-59. All 38 commandos were captured and became prisoners of war. The only casualty was the Italian SOE seconded linguist (who immigrated to England prior to the war) who the Italians shot as a traitor.
- 40 Alan Bell, “On a Wing and a Prayer – Task Force 317 and the Recapture of South Georgia Island,” unpublished paper, 2014.
- 41 Neil Tweedie and Thomas Harding, “The Secret Falklands ‘suicide mission,’” *The Telegraph* (22 March 2019), <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/falklandislands/9158097/The-secret-Falklands-suicide-mission.html>> accessed 27 January 2019. Lieutenant General Cedric Delves, then a squadron commander in the SAS later explained, “The EXOCET menace eventually grew acute. But an operation employing us to reduce the threat would have been pregnant with disproportionate risk, probably requiring a sizeable carrier task group to take forward the Squadron and its supporting helicopters, closing the Argentine mainland, bringing us all well within range of hundreds of enemy aircraft. And there could be no guarantee of nailing the objective, aircraft having a habit of moving. Nobody in his right mind would contemplate such a gamble. It was the sort of thing that could end in catastrophe and lose us the war.” Lieutenant General Sir Cedric Delves, *Across an Angry Sea. The SAS in the Falklands War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 115.
- 42 General Sir Peter De La Billière, *Looking for Trouble. SAS to Gulf War* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 346-347.
- 43 Tweedie and Harding, “The Secret Falklands...”
- 44 Ibid. The aircraft and SAS “B” Squadron deployed to the staging base at Ascension Island, but the British Prime Minister did not authorize the raid in the end.
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- 46 See Colonel Bernd Horn, *Innovation and Daring. The Capture of Eben Emael, 10 May 1940* (Kingston: CANSOFCOM ERC Press, 2014).

- 47 William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops. Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1996), 333-380.
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- 49 Ian Pringle, *Dingo Firestorm. The Greatest Battle of the Rhodesian Bush War* (Solihull, UK: Hellion & Company, Kindle Edition, 2012), loc 1879.
- 50 Ibid., loc 2324.
- 51 Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 38. The Royal Marine commander of "M" Company acknowledged, "The SAS plan to go across the Fortuna glacier was not one that either Guy [Sheridan, the land forces commander] or I thought was a particularly sensible or necessary one." James Sturcke, "The Retaking of South Georgia," *The Guardian* (25 April 2007), <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/apr/25/falklands.world>>, accessed 14 May 2019.
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- 53 Troy J. Sacquety, *Burma. Jungle War against the Japanese* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 2013), 37.
- 54 Gordon Gaskill, "Toughest Job in the War," *The American Magazine*, July 1942, reproduced in Christopher Westthorp, ed., *The SAS Pocket Manual* (London: Conway, 2015), 70.
- 55 Cited in Virginia Cowles, *The Phantom Major. The Story of David Stirling and the S.A.S Regiment* (London: St. James Place, 1958), 41.
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CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 2

OPERATION COLOSSUS: A QUESTION OF RISK

Colonel (Retired) Bernd Horn

Any military operation, particularly those launched behind enemy lines by small teams with limited external support, entail a careful, deliberate and comprehensive risk assessment. What can go wrong? What will the cost be? And, of course, what is the gain or reward from undertaking the action? What makes this risk assessment so difficult is the fact that risk is often difficult to define. It is subjective and prey to many factors that create risk acceptance or risk adversity in decision-makers.

Operation Colossus, the British raid by thirty-eight airborne commandos to destroy the Italian Tragino Aqueduct in Southern Italy on 10 February 1941, provides an excellent example of how risk assessment in the conception, planning and execution of an operation can affect decision-making. The observations from this operation provide important lessons that remain relevant to this day.¹

BACKGROUND

“We will not be content with a defensive war,” the newly appointed combative Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, vowed in the British Parliament on 4 June 1940.² England was reeling from its catastrophic defeat on the continent. The Germans had punched through the previously believed impenetrable Ardennes forest with seven armoured divisions. The collapse of the Allied armies in Western Europe took six weeks, but the campaign had been decided in the first ten days.

Fortuitously, Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of Allied forces from the beaches of Dunkirk between 27 May and 4 June 1940, was a resounding success. However,

although the British were able to evacuate 338,226 personnel, all of their heavy equipment and weapons, as well as armour and vehicles lay smoldering on the beaches of Dunkirk.³ British commanders now had to rebuild, re-equip and retrain their Army, while at the same time preparing for the inevitable invasion of Britain by Germany. Their focus was strictly on the defensive. They held no aspirations for offensive action other than strategic bombing and a naval blockade of the Continent.

Churchill, however, was not to be denied. He was an accomplished adventurer, journalist, soldier and politician who held an irrefutable belief in the offensive. Churchill believed that audacity and willpower constituted the only sound approach to the conduct of war. Relevantly, he knew that to win a war meant ultimately offensive action.⁴ After all, only through offensive action could an army provide the needed confidence and battle experience to its soldiers and leaders. Furthermore, only offensive action could sustain public and military morale. And finally, offensive action represented a shift in initiative. By striking at the enemy, the opponent is forced to take defensive measures, which represents a diversion of focus and scarce resources.

Although Churchill's military commanders constantly bemoaned the Prime Minister's relentless push for the offensive and consistently tried to stymie his schemes, Churchill would not be rebuffed. His fixation on striking back at the Germans despite Britain's current predicament was relentless. And, he had no shortage of ideas.⁵

Churchill assailed his staff with the necessity to undertake special operations and the requirement of raising the requisite troops to conduct them. On 5 June 1940, he penned one of his famous memos to his Chief of Staff of the War Cabinet Secretariat, General Hasting Ismay. "We are greatly concerned," he wrote "with the dangers of the German landing in England ... why should it be thought impossible for us to do anything of the same kind to them?" He then directed, "We should immediately set to work to organize self-contained, thoroughly-equipped raiding units."⁶ He explained his rationale. "How wonderful it would be," he added, "if the Germans could be made to wonder where they were going to be struck next, instead of forcing us to try to wall in the island and roof it over!"⁷

CHAPTER 2

Two days later, the impatient Churchill dispatched yet another memo to Ismay. “Enterprises must be prepared,” he wrote, “with specially trained troops of the hunter class who can develop a reign of terror down these coasts, first of all on the butcher and bolt policy; but later on, or perhaps as soon as we are organized, we should surprise Calais or Boulogne, kill and capture the Hun garrison and hold the place until all the preparations to reduce it by siege or heavy storm have been made, and then away.” He then curtly directed that the “Joint Chiefs of Staff propose to me measures for a vigorous, enterprising, and ceaseless offensive against the whole German-occupied coastline.”⁸

LAC, PA 183776



Commandos returning from a raid against the French coast.

Despite resistance from many senior military commanders who felt that valuable resources were being frittered away for no valuable return at a time when the nation faced invasion, Churchill pressed his demands. In a remarkable display of military efficiency, by 8 June 1940, Commandos were created and that same afternoon, Section MO9 of the War Office (responsible for raising forces for, and planning, cross-channel raids) was established.⁹ Four days later, Churchill appointed Lieutenant-General Sir Alan Bourne, the Adjutant-General of the Royal Marines as “Commander of Raiding Operations on Coasts in Enemy Occupation and Advisor to the Chiefs of Staff on Combined Operations.”¹⁰

In addition, making matters worse for his military commanders, he also demanded the establishment of an airborne capability. “I very well remember the day in June 1940,” Air Chief Marshal Sir John C. Slessor wrote, “when we received one of Mr. Churchill’s characteristic minutes: ‘Let there be at least 5,000 parachute troops. Pray let me know what is being done,’ or about the same number of words to that general effect, crowned with the well-known tab ‘Action this day.’”¹¹

To the beleaguered military commanders this was just too much. During the inter-war period they had invested no mental or physical effort in the concept of airborne warfare. Most of the Western Nations scoffed at the idea, describing it more as a “circus act.” They were now behind the proverbial curve. As late as 1937, the British Secretary of State for War, after receiving a report on German paratroop activity, refused a proposal to use parachutes for troops.¹² However, German success with its airborne forces in Norway, Holland and Belgium in the Spring of 1940 convinced Churchill of its utility. Predictably, despite the daring German airborne operations, that in the words of their architect General Kurt Student, “caused the world to gasp,” Allied military commanders were not willing to devote resources to this new form of warfare.

As always, the Prime Minister had to push. Churchill first directed the development of paratroops on 6 June 1940 and followed up with a note a little over two weeks later. Despite his direction, his military commanders dragged their feet. Conservatism, as well as a degree of concern for more pressing matters, such as the defence of the island itself, prompted vehement resistance from his military commanders who felt that the utility of airborne troops did not warrant the investment of scarce resources, particularly some of its best soldiers. “There are very real difficulties in this parachute business,” one senior Royal Air Force (RAF)

officer recorded. “We are,” he explained, “trying to do what we have never been able to do hitherto, namely to introduce a completely new arm into the Service at about five minutes’ notice, and with totally inadequate resources and personnel.” He pointed out, “little, if any, practical experience is possessed in England of any of these problems” and concluded, “it will be necessary to cover in six months what the Germans have covered in six years.”¹³

LAC, PA 205025



British paratroopers exercising in England.

Additionally, and not surprisingly, the RAF was especially resistant to establishing a parachute force because of its potential impact on their strategic bombing campaign. “There can be no question,” the Air Ministry asserted, “at the moment of forming special units for dropping parachute troops. We have neither the aircraft, nor the crews available, nor are we likely in the near future.”¹⁴

The enmity was initially so entrenched that Churchill had to continually prod his military commanders for progress reports to ensure some movement was underway. His frustration was so great that at one point he suggested to Anthony Eden, the British Secretary of State for War, that an example should be made of “one or two” of the reluctant officers to set an example for the others.¹⁵ Notwithstanding Churchill’s commitment, exigencies at the time, as well as the institutional resistance, combined to convince the Prime Minister to be satisfied, initially in any case, with a parachute corps of five hundred men instead of the five thousand he had wanted.

As a result, on 6 August, the Chiefs of Staff Committee informed Churchill that out of 3,500 volunteers, 500 men had been specially selected to undergo training.¹⁶ Furthermore, the following month, the Committee passed a report to Churchill that outlined the envisioned roles of airborne forces. The roles were very limited:

1. A raid on a selected position, to be followed by the evacuation of the raiding force by air;
2. A raid to be followed by evacuation by sea; and
3. The dropping of parachutists as saboteurs, pure and simple.¹⁷

To conduct the parachute and affiliated training the Central Landing School, later renamed the Central Landing Establishment (CLE), opened on 21 June 1940 at Ringway, near Manchester. Training began on 8 July and the first live drop for instructors occurred five days later. Students began to jump on 21 July 1940.¹⁸

Initially, the CLE was the responsibility of Director Combined Operations (DCO). However, on 19 September 1940, the Air Ministry took responsibility for the development of the “flying side” of airborne forces. Specifically, the RAF was responsible for producing the necessary aircraft, gliders, parachute equipment, developing and instructing the methods of dropping, training the pilots, teaching the Army troops their air parachute and air drills, flying or towing them to the objective area and putting them on target, on time.

The Army was subordinated to the RAF for instruction on parachute drills and equipment and was itself responsible for developing the specially trained fighting force to conduct airborne operations.¹⁹ In June 1940, to push ahead with the prime minister’s directive the Army converted No. 2 Commando to parachute status.

On 21 November 1940, the name of the unit was changed to 11 Special Air Service Battalion.

Churchill now had commandos and a neophyte airborne capability. As such, he was in a position to allow Britain to conduct a limited offensive against the Axis forces on the ground. While the Army was being rebuilt, retrained and re-equipped, Churchill's irregular forces could take the fight to the enemy. Out of necessity, Commando raids, as well as SOE subversion and sabotage became the tactic of the moment. The airborne capability added yet another dimension to the prosecution of Churchill's focus on irregular warfare. All that was now missing was adequate targets.

THE PLAN

Continuing pressure from the Prime Minister to launch raids put additional stress on the Air Ministry and Combined Operations Command leadership and planners. Aside from developing their new capabilities, they were also responsible for finding worthwhile missions that would warrant risking scarce resources. As such, in early December 1940, it appeared a gift horse had just arrived. Mr. W.G. Ardley, an employee of the well-known engineering firm of George Kent and Sons of London, suggested cutting the Apulian Aqueduct in Italy near its source.²⁰ The firm had been employed by the Italians in the late 1930s to supply the water flow metering and measuring system. The viability of the target site was confirmed by another well-respected engineering firm, Meik & Halcrow, who had conducted considerable research on the subject.²¹

The proposed target was an aqueduct over the stream at Tragino, approximately sixty kilometres east-north-east of Salerno. The military planners hoped that they could destroy the Tragino Aqueduct in such a way that it would take at least a month to repair the structure in order to resume the water supply from this source. Significantly, it represented almost the only source of pure water for the Province of Apulia. The planners assessed, "Once this was cut off, an area comprising 2,000,000 inhabitants, many engaged in important industries in Taranto, Brindisi, Bari, Foggia and elsewhere, would have to depend on local reservoirs whose maximum capacity work out at 30 gallons a head." More than this, the planners believed that possibly the Italian Government "might be dubious of the advisability

of continuing an unsuccessful campaign on two fronts, and the stoppage of drinking water to their three main ports of shipment might turn the scale and bring one or both campaigns [North Africa and Albania/Greece] to an abrupt end.”²²



UK NA

The Tragino Aqueduct.

The Deputy Director of Plans (DD Plans) at the Air Ministry enthusiastically supported the option. On 12 December 1940, he forwarded his endorsement to his superiors. The appeal of the target was hard to resist. The flow of fresh water through the aqueduct furnished 275,000 cubic metres per day, which importantly was used for power and navigation in addition to the supply for drinking purposes.²³ Although normally areas serviced by the aqueduct had a reserve of water that could last up to seven days if the aqueduct was cut, the planners calculated that the addition of troops being deployed through the Adriatic ports on the south east coast would further tax demand to the extent that the reserves would be limited to only four days. They believed destroying the aqueduct would have an immediate and far-reaching impact. In fact, they assessed, “The cutting of this life line to South East Italy will undoubtedly affect the morale of the enemy apart from the physical effect produced by water shortage. On the other hand, a daring operation of this type, if brought to a successful conclusion, cannot fail to hearten the people of this country.”²⁴

The Plans Division at the Air Ministry considered the project and decided that the Tragino Aqueduct presented “a most important target especially at the present time.” Importantly, they determined that it was not suitable as a bombing target and that it should be referred to the SOE and Director Combined Operations “with

a request for his most urgent attention.” They did add that the Air Ministry would provide any assistance required.²⁵

On 27 December 1940, the Special Operations Executive responded to the Air Ministry letting them know that it was unable to take on the mission. Quite simply, the SOE was “not yet in a position to provide either a suitable demolition squad duly equipped or, if such could be found at relatively short notice, to land the party at a convenient place in Italy or on the Italian coast.”²⁶ Unable to pass the project off to the SOE, the Air Ministry decided the only remaining option was to conduct a sabotage mission carried out by trained volunteer engineer (sapper) parachutists. To underline the importance of the mission, the planners wrote, “It cannot be stressed too strongly that a successful surprise attack on this aqueduct at or near the source resulting in a complete cessation of fresh drinking water to the whole of the province of Apulia, may effect an immediate change of plans by the Italian High Command of great strategical importance.”²⁷ For the planners at the Air Ministry the mission embodied exactly what Churchill was railing for, an offensive strike at the enemy that would force them to surrender the initiative and continually look over their shoulder.

The project seemed to take on some urgency. On 2 January 1941, a report confirmed that the possibilities of destroying the bridge by bombing or by sabotage by introducing local agents had been examined and found impossible to execute. However, the skeleton outline of a plan was introduced. The report noted that trained volunteer sapper parachutists, supported by a covering force, dropped by aircraft from Malta and then recovered by a submarine from the mouth of the Sele River on the West Coast might work. The rendezvous was approximately 60 kilometres to the south west of the target as the crow flies. The report insisted, “the matter became urgent as German Air and military reinforcements were expected, with the anticipated effect of stiffening the Italian morale.”²⁸

The following day the Plans chief of staff (COS) weighed in. “If the Apulian Aqueduct was successfully breached,” he wrote, “there can be little doubt that the results would be profound on the Italian effort against Albania.” The COS explained, “The Italians would probably have to change their bases they are now using for the Albanian campaign to others in the north of the Adriatic as, for instance, Trieste, Venice or Fiume. It would also affect to an extent which it is difficult to gauge the use of Brindisi and Taranto as naval bases.”²⁹

On 5 January 1941, the Director Plans briefed the Chief of the Air Staff (CAS). Reality began to sink in. Not everyone shared Churchill's vision of daring raids. The Director of Plans informed CAS, "I saw C-in-C [commander-in-chief] Bomber Command today and explained the project to him. Whilst appreciating the value that the successful completion of this operation would have on the situation generally in Italy, he felt that it was unjustifiable at the present moment to divert Whitleys [bombers] from their primary task."³⁰ The mission requirement was nine Whitley bombers. But this was nine too many for bomber command.

The C-in-C candidly revealed that if "he was asked for an opinion on the advisability, or otherwise, of carrying out the operation he would vote against it if Whitley [bombers] were the only means of transport. However, the C-in-C of Bomber Command did not have the last word. The project continued to have trajectory. On 6 January 1941, the Chiefs of Staff Committee approved the operation in principle.

As approvals began to fall into place, the planning staff drilled deeper into the selection of the objective. The planners assessed the bridge over "Stream 'T'" offered greater possibilities of interrupting the flow of water for at least a month. The Tragino aqueduct was described as a reinforced concrete structure supported on three piers spaced at 66-foot centres. The piers were reported as relatively thin, being only approximately three feet six inches thick by eighteen feet in width. Moreover, in both the English description of the work which appeared in *The Engineer* and also in an Italian technical journal, the piers are stated to be of masonry, although the planners did consider it more reasonable to expect that in a reinforced concrete bridge that the piers would be of reinforced concrete also. This was a critically essential point since the cutting charge required for reinforced concrete is approximately thirty times as great as that required for masonry. Since it was so explicitly and definitively reported in the two technical journals that the piers were made of masonry the planners took it as fact. That leap of faith would later haunt the mission.

By 8 January 1941, the plan began to take on the formality of an operation. The project was now formally titled "Project 'T'" and the Air Ministry planning staff drafted an operational order. Despite the urgency to carry out the mission, the operation was inevitably restricted to a full moon period. This meant that it had to be conducted no later than the February moon, specifically between 10 and

16 February, because the shorter nights would not have allowed the Whitley bombers to fly to Malta and back under cover of darkness.³¹ This compressed window of execution would make itself felt.

On 8 January 1941, as the Chiefs of Staff had formally approved the preliminary plan, training was to commence immediately at the Central Landing Establishment since the operation was to take place in mid-February. The operation itself was sponsored by the Director of Combined Operations and the Air Ministry. Importantly, the Chiefs of Staff Committee submitted an outline plan for Project ‘T’ to the prime minister, “asking for an early decision as to whether it should be carried out.”³² The following day, Churchill gave his ascent with a simple “I approve.”³³

Two days later with the operation blessed by the Chiefs of Staff, the Defence Committee and the Prime Minister, the Air Ministry planning staff held a meeting to discuss preliminary arrangements for Project “T,” which now was renamed Operation Colossus.

Although preparations were steaming forward, some latent resistance still surfaced. On 14 January, the DCO called a conference to determine possible Italian actions to correct the blown aqueduct. In essence, was the target worth the effort? It appears an expert opinion had arisen that “it might be possible for the Italians to install a syphon across the valley after the operation and thus obtain a flow of water in a short time, even though the aqueduct had been destroyed.”³⁴ Colonel J.R. Davidson, a former Chief Engineer to the Metropolitan Water Board, and Mr. Ardley, from whom the project originated, were brought in as experts. They assessed that working day and night, the Italians may be able to achieve a 40-50 per cent flow after approximately a month.³⁵ Moreover, the planners projected that if bombing attacks could be made at intervals after the operation they could impose even a greater delay in restoring the water supply. Optimism ran high that the planned mission would inflict substantive damage to the Italian war effort.

Final details now began to fall into place. That same day, 14 January, the Admiralty directed the C-in-C Mediterranean to make a submarine with punt available for the retrieval of the raiding force.³⁶ Command and control of the operational component was also coming together. On 17 January, Group Captain L.G. Harvey the CLE commander nominated Wing Commander Sir Nigel Norman to proceed to Malta to take control of the operation.³⁷ Two days later, The RAF placed the

actual parachute force, 5 officers and 50 other ranks (ORs) from 11 Special Air Service Battalion, under the operational control of DCO.³⁸

The Battalion had been training for several months on parachuting and commando skills. In mid-January, the commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel C. Jackson, informed the unit that a top secret deep penetration operation was coming up. “Now this is serious,” he advised the unit personnel, “I’m being told there is something coming up and I’ll need some volunteers.”³⁹

Jackson now had to select some “good men” to undertake the first British airborne raid. For the ground force commander, he picked his deputy commanding officer, thirty-year-old Major Trevor Allan Gordon (commonly called TAG) Pritchard, from the Royal Welch Fusiliers, who was also a former Army boxing champion. Jackson picked Captain Gerrard Daly as the Chief Engineer, as well as four other strong officers to lead the various sections of the raiding party. Due to the nature of the operation, higher headquarters had directed that half of the force be comprised of engineers (sappers). Jackson left it to his subordinate officers to pick their own men.⁴⁰

With the ground force selected, the only missing command component was the actual commander for the aerial armada. As such, the RAF named Wing Commander J.B. Tait, as the officer in charge of the air assault component.

Planning also extended to cover for the parachute drop itself. The DCO and RAF headquarters in Valetta, Malta arranged for bombing and leaflet raids on Avellino, Rochetta Scalo and Buccino prior to the operation. The DCO request stated, “These attacks should be carried out for 3 or 4 nights between 4th and 9th February or until the operation starts in order to accustom the local stations to the sound of aircraft, but not in such force as to interfere seriously with the primary operations in which you are at present engaged.”⁴¹

Every effort was made to plan for every aspect of the mission. Optimism for the potential impact of the raid ran high. “This operation is an ideal one in which to employ a part of the specially trained parachute force,” assessed one report, “Its successful conclusion will have far-reaching effects upon the course of the war and its effect upon enemy morale will be incalculable.”⁴²

However, the planners, at any extent, were realistic about the chances of the raiding forces returning to England. “It should be pointed out that, although the chances of the majority of the proposed force of reaching the coast and getting picked up by reserve craft in the neighbourhood of Salerno are slight, it is a ‘volunteer job’ and as such entails the possible consequences of this type of operation.”⁴³ Whether this assessment was shared with those undertaking the mission is unknown. Nonetheless, the concept of the raid, utilizing a new form of warfare, supporting Churchill’s directive to undertake offensive action drove those planning and approving the mission to see Operation Colossus as a significant blow against the Axis powers. Headquarters staff asserted, “The fact remains that whatever the sacrifice in men and aircraft a successful conclusion may be the saving of thousands of lives and millions of money in the Middle East and Albania and the bringing of one or both campaigns to an early if not abrupt end.”⁴⁴

PREPARATION

From a planning perspective it seemed that all was in place. It was now a question of preparing the aircraft and personnel for the mission. The planners recommended that the team be given ample opportunity to practice and experiment, particularly to determine the best way to secure the explosives to the boarding and struts of the aqueduct. This fell to the combined staff of the CLE who were responsible for all the preparations. They faced a difficult task. As a report later revealed, “As the task was the first of its kind, it will be appreciated that a large number of problems would arise.”⁴⁵ Their largest hurdle was the time factor, which was of vital importance because the mission had to take advantage of moonlight conditions and the Whitley aircraft had to be returned to normal operations with a minimum of delay.

As this was the first mission of its kind, with no precedent for guidance and a narrow time window meant there had to be a great deal of improvisation. The enormity of the task did not escape Group Captain Harvey, the commander of CLE. He “stressed the absolute necessity of a full dress rehearsal before the departure to Mildenhall [RAF base in Suffolk, England], and arrangements were to be made for aircraft to be made available from dawn onwards during the 1/2 [February timeframe], and for all crews to be in readiness to take the air with the least possible delay.”⁴⁶

The burden on the CLE was immense. One report revealed, “Practically the whole of the equipment for ‘X’ Troop, including the design and manufacture, was undertaken by CLE and the work proceeded concurrently with the final training period of the paratroops themselves.”⁴⁷ Significantly, the staff possessed no experience in airborne operations or raids. Neither did they have any previous operations from which to draw lessons. This called for innovation and creativity.

Initially, the CLE staff anticipated that the major problem in launching the mission in the February timeframe would be completing the modifications to the Whitley bombers. Less difficult problems were identified as pilot training and container development. However, a CLE report revealed, “In actual practice, this order was reversed as the chief problem turned out to be the containers, followed by pilot training, whilst the modifications to the aircraft were completed well within time.”⁴⁸

The training itself commenced swiftly. “X” Troop deployed from their unit lines at Cliffe House in Knutsford to a segregated barracks at Ringway. Training focused on rigorous physical training, rehearsals, escape and evasion and parachuting. A full-size mock-up of the Tragino Aqueduct, or more precisely the piers against which the explosives were to be set, was constructed in Tatton Park, which allowed the commandos to practice.

On 24 January a full-dress rehearsal was planned, however, Mother Nature was less than cooperative. Weather conditions were extreme throughout the training period leaving only short periods to train during the day and night. The final rehearsal was conducted with exceptionally high winds that gusted to 48-56 kilometres per hour. Only half the men were dropped, mostly in the wrong location, and containers were wildly scattered. Those that did jump found themselves hung up in trees or being dragged across the ground by the fierce winds. The net result was two broken legs.⁴⁹ And, at that, they got away lucky.

As time was short, the commandos departed RAF Base Mildenhall at 2200 hours, 7 February 1940, and arrived in Malta at 0900 hours the next morning. Although staging through Malta made planning sense from a perspective of distance, it did have its downside. Malta was virtually under constant siege by German aerial assault. Significantly, the air raids intensified in January 1941. As such, “X” Troop was caught in this aerial onslaught. Aircraft were damaged and preparations were constantly delayed. As one report described, “Frequent air raid alarms interfered a good deal with loading. Previous dive-bombing attacks indicated that there might

be risk of casualties if troops did not take cover. However, on the last day it was necessary to ignore warnings.”⁵⁰

Despite the aerial bombardments, “X” Troop carried out their pre-raid preparations with diligence. Wing Commander Norman, the commander of the operation in Malta, asserted, “All worked magnificently during the preparations for the operation. They were not always helped by the fact that the RAF organization for the flight was of a somewhat casual nature.”⁵¹

Norman’s criticism, despite his Air Force background, was telling. An after-action report was quite explicit in its criticism. It revealed, “Considerable difficulty was experienced throughout the training period in convincing the selected Bomber crews of the difficulty of the task they had to fulfil, and it was not until the latter part of the training that the pilots realised that to drop 35 soldiers and 30 containers on a given objective from the height of 500 feet in hilly country, called for a high degree of skill and concentration, differing very considerably from normal bombing operations, with which they were all familiar.”⁵²

The report’s scathing critical assessment of the bomber crews continued. “Throughout the period prior to the operation,” it explained, “it appeared that the aircraft crews were incapable of appreciating the importance of their task, but rather regarded it exactly as they would have done a normal bombing flight from a home station, although by the time the party reached Malta, the RAF crews and Army personnel had completed day combined training.” The report revealed, “At Malta it was necessary for the soldiers undertaking the operation to work extremely hard preparing equipment and loading containers, without assistance from the crews which after two days rest was to say the least disappointing.” The authors concluded, “It would have been within reason to expect that the [air] crews knowing the difficult task ahead of the Army would have at least been available to assist if necessary.”⁵³

The most significant problem, however, was the equipment containers. This issue had far reaching impact. The immediate effect was that it monopolized available training time. One report revealed, “It was unfortunate that the arms and equipment containers gave more trouble during the preparation stages, as this factor reduced the time available for full scale rehearsals.”⁵⁴ Adding to the glitch was the apparent lack of cooperation and assistance from most of the RAF crews.

Significantly, on 9 February, the day prior to the conduct of the operation, the aircraft were serviced and hasty repairs had to be made to the fabric of two aircraft that were caused by flying rocks from enemy bombs dropped during the night. In addition, containers were repacked and parachutes inspected. Significantly, no test drop of containers was undertaken. A report explained:

It was considered essential to carry out the attack on the first possible day, since the likelihood of more than one fine night was small, and the risk of damage to Whitley aircraft by hostile action was considerable. The take-off was, in fact, made at the earliest possible moment after completion of packing and loading of containers and servicing of aircraft. Time did not permit a test drop of containers, nor the detailed testing of all fittings and last moment drilling of the combined teams in the action necessary over the dropping ground. This involved some risk of failure, but in the circumstances it was decided, with the concurrence of the A.C.C., Malta, that the risk was less than would have resulted from delaying the operation.⁵⁵

Flight Lieutenant J.E.M. Williams affirmed, "Owing to the more or less exhausted condition of the troops, and the other calls on their time, it was impossible to drop test all the load, and re-assemble, but I had previously been over every aeroplane, and tested the action. I also checked the static panels."⁵⁶ He added, "right up to starting the engines, work was being carried out."⁵⁷

As the engines were cranked for warm-up, Williams discovered that someone had tampered with the strops in one of the aircraft, putting them behind the door. "As this must have taken some doing," an exasperated Williams stated, "I cannot imagine why or how." This now caused grave concern. William informed Wing Commander Norman and recommended taking a pause "until a proper check was made." Norman, however, disagreed. As a result, two aircraft managed to depart before Williams was able to inspect them. He did manage to inspect three other aircraft and "found various minor errors, static lines twisted, undone off press studs and trapped in doors; no light in the troops bomb panel, which I was assured made no difference." Williams concluded, "generally speaking, I think we were inclined to rush things too much."⁵⁸

Importantly, on 9 February Major Pritchard conferred with the submarine commander that was responsible for the rendezvous to pick them up after the

raid. In addition, in the evening a conference was held to discuss the operational plan and consider the latest photographs of the objective.⁵⁹ The lack of up-to-date intelligence on the objective had been a sore point. During the preparations the raiding team concluded, “the absence of any up-to-date-photographic record of the objective might prejudice success.” Although numerous attempts to take photographs were undertaken, it was not until 9 February that the RAF was successful. As a result, finally, the airborne raiders had a complete strip of film from the Tragino Aqueduct to the coast where they would be withdrawn by submarine. Although arriving at the last minute, as the adage goes, better late than never.

Wing Commander Norman lamented, “It was clear that had these photographs been available earlier immense value would have been gained from study of them by all members of the expedition.” He concluded, “As it was, there was not time for full advantage to be taken of the information provided.”⁶⁰ Time seemed to be the biggest impediment. Concerns were raised on whether the raiding party and aircraft were sufficiently prepared. Yet, the commander pressed to carry on.

Finally, at 1245 hours, 10 February 1941, the commander directed that the operation was on for 1800 hours that night. Thirty minutes prior to take off Major Pritchard finally disclosed the target to everyone. Lieutenant Anthony “Tony” Deane-Drummond recollected “All the troops cheered when they heard that it was going to be Italy.”⁶¹ Most had speculated that their mission was in North Africa, Italian occupied Abyssinia to be exact.

The first aircraft, which contained the covering party, actually took off at 1740 hours. The two aircraft for the diversion bombing run left at 1800 hours and the aircraft with the demolition team five minutes later. The aerial rendezvous for the air armada was over Mount Vulture at 2130 hours.⁶²

Bad luck continued to plague the operation. On take-off one of the aircraft, designated “J,” containing the bulk of the demolition party developed a defect. As a result, only two of the three aircraft carrying the demolition party lifted off. “J” aircraft finally took-off at 1817 hours. It followed the others but did not join formation.”⁶³

The flight was four hours from staging airfield to the objective. The planned flight route was from Malta to the Sicilian coast near Agrigento, then north to near Palermo and from there direct to the mouth of the Sele River. Flying conditions were acceptable. There was some cloud over the Mediterranean Sea and fog over

parts of Sicily. Some anti-aircraft fire, or “flak,” was experienced over Palermo. The intention was to run up to the target from Calitri across the River Ofanto and to land the parties on Hill 427 about half a mile north of the aqueduct.”⁶⁴

For most of the aircraft and their crew the landfalls were easily identifiable. As a result, all aircraft, with the exception of “J,” arrived in the target area at approximately 2130 hours. As luck would have it, the navigator and crew of “J” aircraft made a bad landfall on the Italian coast. They followed a river partially obscured by mist inland until they hit the Adriatic coast. At that point they turned around and made their way back west until they hit the coast at Scalca. Having situated their location the crew then flew the aircraft up to the Sele River and finally reached the objective area at 2313 hours.⁶⁵

EXECUTION

The first of the aircraft arrived over the objective at 2125 hours. On arrival, Wing Commander Tait, the Air Attack Commander, broke from formation and did a preliminary reconnaissance. It was only at 2200 hours, after flying over the objective area for thirty-five minutes, that dropping commenced. Of the eight Whitley bombers that departed from Malta, five completed their task by 2245 hours and returned to Malta by 2339 hours. The sixth aircraft, “J,” carrying a component of the raiding party, however, in spite of excellent weather conditions, made a number of navigation errors and did not drop their paratroops, which consisted of the most experienced of the engineers, until 2330 hours. Moreover, they failed to release any containers and dropped the paratroopers far from the objective. It did not return to Malta until 0200 hours, 11 February 1941.⁶⁶ With the return of the six aircraft Wing Commander Norman reported back to England, “6 aircraft dropped “X” Troop and stores in vicinity of objective in ideal conditions.”⁶⁷

His assessment was not totally accurate. The aircraft with the senior engineer officer and most of the sappers dropped their commandos in a distant valley. Moreover, most of the containers from all the aircraft failed to release. As a result, just a little over a third of the intended charge of approximately 1,000 kilograms of explosives was dropped.⁶⁸ In addition, only one container of weapons arrived leaving them short a number of Bren guns and sub-machine, as well as ammunition. The commandos were also missing eleven of the twelve ladders they required.

Nonetheless, for the most part the drop went well aside from the long loiter time over the objective by the aircraft. As the members of “X” Troop floated to earth they noticed, “very little sign of local activity in the vicinity of the objective.”⁶⁹ Luckily there were no enemy forces guarding the aqueduct or stationed nearby. After all, “dropping necessitated 20 runs over the objective instead of 6.”⁷⁰ The failure of the air crews to fully apply themselves during training now became noticeable. They had spent thirty-five minutes over the objective before commencing dropping the paratroopers. Any hope of surprise was lost.

The commandos were unsure if the bridges would be guarded. The closest military garrison was in Foggia. However, there was *Carabinieri*, who normally travelled in teams of two and travelled in private motor vehicles. They were armed with a rifle and sword. Most villages had two to four *Carabinieri*. There was also the *Guardia Rurale*, a para-military organization that was responsible in peace-time for prevention of poaching and enforcing game laws. They were armed with carbines. Finally, railway militia were an autonomous entity under the railway administration. During peacetime their responsibility was to maintain discipline among passengers and to guard rail yards. They were armed with revolvers and had access to carbines.

Despite the twenty passes, or perhaps because of the overcautious approach to the drop, the troops, with what containers were released, all landed within an average distance of 500 metres of the objective.⁷¹ Major Pritchard’s ground tactical plan was to utilize two separate groups: a covering party consisting of three officers and fourteen ORs, as well as three linguists; and a demolition party consisting of two officers and sixteen ORs. Lieutenant Deane-Drummond, in charge of part of the covering party, jumped from the first aircraft and landed approximately fifty metres from the aqueduct. Due to the light of the full moon he noticed immediately that the bridge was not guarded. As Deane-Drummond shed his parachute and orientated himself, his sub-section of men quickly gathered around him. He sent two men to search the farm buildings above him and the other three to go to the farm across the ravine, with orders to bring back all the occupants to the aqueduct, where he remained. At approximately 2200 hours they returned with the Italian peasants from the farm buildings. In total, there were about twelve men, as well as twelve women and children.

As they surveyed their target the gaps in their intelligence became evident. Deane-Drummond, as well as the others, were all very surprised to discover exactly how high the centre pier actually stood. And, this was just the beginning of the

set-backs. One of the commandos was injured in the drop. He was left at a farm house in the care of Italian civilians.

Despite the lack of containers, the commandos remained unmoved by the shortages of equipment or explosives. Approximately, five minutes after Deane-Drummond landed Major Pritchard arrived. Deane-Drummond reported what he had done and Pritchard quickly issued his orders. Second-Lieutenant George Paterson, a Canadian, in the absence of Captain Daly, the senior Royal Engineer, was to conduct a reconnaissance of the aqueduct and determine how to carry out the demolition. He ordered what sappers were in location to collect all the explosives that had landed. Pritchard also directed them to take the Italian civilians down to the farm buildings across the Tragino and placed under guard. Next he directed the covering party to be deployed in a semi-circle to the north and down-stream of the aqueduct, under Lieutenant Deane-Drummond, Lieutenant A. Jowett and Captain C.A. Lea. Pritchard explained that everyone was “to assemble at the farther end of the Ginestra aqueduct when the job was done.”⁷²



Artwork by Katherine Taylor

Artist conception of Op Colossus.

Meanwhile, Paterson made his examination of the aqueduct. For the most part, initially, he was not surprised. He found it much as he had been led to expect from his study of the description and of the photograph and diagrams. However, there was one very important exception – the centre pier. It was in the middle of the stream and it was over nine metres high and not squat as he was led to believe from the diagrams he had seen.

This surprise in construction was not the only problem. When he broke the surface of the farthest pier with a cold chisel he found that the pier was not masonry as he was led to believe but rather it was fabricated out of reinforced concrete, as he had originally feared from his examination of the photograph that was provided just before departure.

Second-Lieutenant Paterson now found himself with a dilemma. To attack the centre pier at the base alone was out of the question. He quickly discovered that he could not tamp the charges for a demolition of the waterway, the planned alternative if the piers proved to be of reinforced concrete. As a result, he decided to concentrate on the Western pier, which was the most easily reached.

The junior most officer of the mission now unexpectedly found himself in charge of the demolition. Paterson was faced with an inaccessible centre pier, piers made of reinforced concrete and with only half the explosives. The explosive situation, however, was not quite as dire as it appeared. Astutely, the raiders had added a safety margin of 100 percent to the calculated charges and then another 50 percent to allow for other contingencies. As such, despite the missing containers, Paterson still had sufficient explosives to blow the Western pier.

The charge was laid against the base of the pier at ground level on the uphill side. It was tamped down with earth and stones. Two necklace charges were placed on the upper part of the pier, one at the top under the water way and one on the ledge at the top of the base. In total, 290 kilograms of gun cotton was placed against the pier and 73 kilograms on the abutment.⁷³

The actual process took a lot of time. Although only a third of the explosives were dropped, there was still a considerable amount of material to move. Some of the explosives dropped from the aircraft were over a kilometre from the objective. As a result, Pritchard directed that the Italian men should be used as

a carrying party in order to free the sappers for their skilled work of preparing the demolitions.

At 0015 hours, the main charges on the Tragino Aqueduct were all in place and the sappers had withdrawn to the farthest end of the Ginestra Aqueduct. The Italian men were taken back to the farm buildings, warned by the interpreter that the sentry outside the door would shoot to kill, and then locked them in with the women and children. No sentry was actually posted.

At half past twelve the aqueduct blew up. Pritchard and Paterson ran up and examined the destruction of the aqueduct. The pier had collapsed. The water way had broken in two where it had been supported. The two halves were sloping up to the abutment and the centre pier, with the broken ends in the bed of the torrent. Water was flooding down the ravine. Pritchard later described, "All job took four hours. West Pier collapsed. Result half top structure dropped with clean break."⁷⁴ Deane-Drummond elaborated, "The aqueduct consisted of 3 piers, one of which was blown up, and as a result half the bridge was completely flattened and a very large volume of water started to flow out. It appeared that despite all of the bad luck, Operation Colossus was a success!"⁷⁵

ESCAPE

After examining the damage Pritchard and Paterson rejoined the rest of the team at the end of the Ginestra Aqueduct. Pritchard now split up the men into three parties for the escape and evasion to the coast. A fourth group was made up of Captain Daly and his five sappers who were dropped in the wrong valley. After hearing the distant explosions, Daly had decided immediately to make for the coast after their parachute landing.

To make travel quicker and easier the Bren guns and other large equipment and weapons were broken down and tossed in the river and buried in the mud. Each group left with only a single Thompson sub-machine gun. Each of the commandos maintained their Colt pistol and a thirty-pound rucksack with rations for a week. Pritchard now shared the time and place of the rendezvous with the submarine at the mouth of the Sele River, almost eighty kilometres away, with the senior NCOs.⁷⁶ Another daunting challenge now faced the airborne commandos.

Unbeknownst to Wing Commander Tait, the submarine extraction plan was known only to Pritchard, Deane-Drummond and the submarine commander. As a result, when the pilot of one of the diversionary aircraft developed engine trouble and realized that he would be forced to make a crash landing he sent a message in the low level code indicating he was “out of action” and could be found on the coast near the mouth of the Sele River for the next five days. He selected the location quickly from his map deducing that it was a location where he would have a chance of being picked up by one of the submarines that he knew operated from time to time near the coast. In addition, he believed five days would be an adequate time for a rescue before he would give himself up.⁷⁷

Upon receiving the encoded distress signal on 11 February 1941, Naval headquarters in Malta quickly reported to the C-in-C Mediterranean that the subject aircraft made a forced landing near the intended rendezvous point. Upon receipt of the message, the Vice Admiral in charge of naval operations in Malta instructed the submarine to “proceed in with the utmost care.”⁷⁸ The life line to the airborne commandos was still in place.

All four teams set off on different paths at a rapid pace. However, the muddy, wet ground and lack of adequate cover quickly took a toll on the commandos. Very quickly the teams decided to forgo the difficult cross-country travel and opted to travel on the roads to make better time. Not surprisingly, all four teams were eventually captured. Often surrounded by civilians, including women and children, three of the four groups surrendered without firing a shot. In each case, reluctantly, the team leaders did not want to kill non-combatants for both ethical and pragmatic reasons. With virtually no cover and limited ammunition and firepower they knew eventually they would either be killed in battle or be forced to surrender. Therefore, their chances of survival were better if they did not kill innocent civilians.

Only one group shot it out until they ran out of ammunition, but not before killing two civilians. Predictably, once the commandos surrendered the civilians lined them up against a wall and were preparing to execute them when an Italian military officer arrived and stopped the imminent slayings.

MISSION ASSESSMENT

On 12 February 1941, the RAF flew a reconnaissance mission over the objective. Based on the angle of the camera, which took a straight down picture (i.e. the collapsed waterway laying across the valley), the resultant photographs seemed to indicate the aqueduct was still in place. Based on a comparison of two aerial photographs, one taken on 9 February and the other on 12 February, Wing Commander Norman reported the operation as a failure.⁷⁹ Norman was at a loss to account for the misfire. “The failure of the operation cannot yet be explained,” he wrote.⁸⁰

The perceived failure of the mission, the loss of a Whitley bomber and 38 trained airborne commandos was already too much for the chain-of-command. The potential loss of a submarine as well was just too much. The Admiralty feared that the use of the low-level code by the doomed bomber crew to indicate where the aircraft was ditching would be compromised and the Germans would be waiting. As such, the Admiralty cancelled the submarine extraction. Therefore, had the group not been captured, they would have arrived on the coast with no means of rescue.⁸¹

AFTERMATH

It took approximately nine months for the British political and military leadership to realize the significance of the mission. Although the raid failed in the planner’s ambitious design and the actual damage done by the airborne raiders was superficial, requiring mere days for the Italians to complete repairs the operation was an unmitigated success. It proved to be a tonic for the British public that had suffered terribly at the hands of the enemy and needed to know that retribution was being meted out. Moreover, the raid psychologically dislocated the Italians. Paranoid and fearing additional raids they diverted large amounts of personnel and resources and tied them down for rear area security in the homeland. But equally important, the raid confirmed a neophyte airborne capability and paved the way for future Allied airborne operations.⁸²

A QUESTION OF RISK

Throughout the planning and execution of Operation Colossus, risk was always present. And, risk assessment shaped subsequent decisions. Interestingly, the risk assessment and decision-making was contingent on who was making the evaluation of risk and the specific circumstances surrounding the required action. As such, an examination of the key decisions provides insight into risk and its effect on decision-making. Table 1 captures the key risk factors and decision points for Operation Colossus.

EVENT (requiring action)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT (Pers & Eqpt)	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF	DECISION/ COMMENT
Devise strategic objective/ mission	Planning Staff	Low	High	Force Italy out of North African/ Macedonian campaigns
Devise escape plan/ Prospect of raiders not escaping	Planning Staff/ Senior Commanders	High	Low	Only a small amount of men potentially lost
Approve Plan	Chiefs of Staff Committee / Service Chiefs	Acceptable / Low	High	Show progress meeting PM's political objectives
Failure to test containers	Senior Mission Commander	Low	High	Execute mission on time
Practice of Air Component in dropping paratroopers	Air Assault Commander/ Aircrew Captains	Low	Low	No different than a bombing run – why practice a skill already known
Carry-On mission despite unresolved issues	Senior Mission Commander	Acceptable/ Low	High	Delay meant waiting weeks/months
Submarine Extraction Plan – extremely limited distribution	Senior Mission Commander	Low	High	OPSEC – avoid possible disclosure
Cancel Submarine Extraction	Chiefs of Staff Committee/ Service Chiefs	High	Low	Why reinforce failure

Utilize roads during E&E	Team Leaders	Acceptable/ Low	High	Increase speed/ distance from objective
Resist Capture	Team Leaders	High	Low	Capture inevitable, therefore surrendered

Table 2.1 – Key Decision Points / Risk Factors

Predictably, personal proximity to risk was a major determiner of risk acceptance or avoidance. For the planners at headquarters in London, the pesky details of escape and the likelihood of returning to friendly territory was a minor consideration. They easily accepted the fact that the fate of the raiding force was pretty well sealed working so deep behind enemy lines. Similarly, the chain-of-command was also willing to trade-off the risk of losing 38 commandos compared to the potential gain they were led to believe was possible. Distance from a life or death decision, particularly, not their life or death, made taking risk for planners and commanders considerably easier. Conversely, the actual commandos, trapped behind enemy lines, left with the option of shooting it out or surrendering quickly assessed the risk of such aggressive action was not in their best interest of survival. In three of the four teams, the leader decided to surrender without firing shot. The assessment was based on the realization that surrender allowed for the greatest chance of survival, where the risk of fighting it out, without a realistic chance of escape, particularly if civilians were killed or injured, won out. In sum, not surprisingly, personal risk dramatically impacts decision-making.

Perceived reward or consequence of taking on risk was another key factor in decision-making. For the planners and chain-of-command, the risk of losing 38 Commandos compared to the potential reward was an easy decision. Realistic or not, the planners and hierarchy of commanders believed that the operation could potentially force the Italians out of two theatres of war. A huge success if achieved, particularly during the early stage of the war when Britain had its back against the wall. Moreover, the operation would placate a very impatient and demanding prime minister. As such, the decision to support the operation was a “no-brainer.”

Conversely, perceived negative consequence or no huge reward refutes taking risk. When the military leadership perceived (albeit incorrectly) that the mission had been a complete, dismal failure and to continue with the planned extraction

risked endangering a submarine, which would simply add to the loss of a Whitley bomber and 38 highly trained commandos, little opposition was raised to calling off the submarine to rescue the raiders. There was little risk acceptance due to the likelihood of a negative consequence, as well as an aversion to reinforcing “failure.”

Operation Colossus also demonstrated another factor in risk acceptance, namely, the perception of the need to get something done. When the task force commander was cautioned that a myriad of issues pertaining to aircraft readiness necessitated postponing the mission, he quickly demurred. The risk of equipment failure compared to postponing the operation, which meant a delay of at least another month, which in turn required tying up scarce aircraft and aircrew, as well as delaying the prime minister’s raiding program, was the perceived lesser of the two evils. The task force commander believed that the greater risk of failure lay with not conducting the mission in which everyone had invested so much expectation. And so, feeling the need to get something done, to finally move forward and advance an operation or concept, can fuel risk acceptance.

Similarly, desperation and/or time constraints were two other important factors in accepting risk. As with the previous example, throughout the preparation phase of the operation, the task force commander, cognizant of the shortage of time, waved fundamental requirements, such as full “dress rehearsals,” testing of container drop procedures and confirmation of aircraft readiness. In each case, he accepted risk in these areas to ensure the operation advanced on time. In the same vein, the airborne raiders accepted additional risk when they determined their progress towards making the evacuation rendezvous with the submarine was in jeopardy. The cold, harsh, muddy terrain slowed their progress and put them behind schedule. As a result, they accepted the risk of travelling on roads, including daylight travel.

Closely associated with the decision to accept risk and travel on the easier terrain, namely roads, was the issue of fatigue. Attempting to traverse the mountainous terrain was not only slow and difficult going, it was also extremely exhausting. As such, the acute fatigue the raiders experienced quickly reinforced their decision to risk using the roads instead of a cross-country route to the rendezvous site.

The impact of risk on decision-making during Operation Colossus provides a window on how different individuals, in different positions, under different

circumstances assessed risk and how that assessment influenced decision-making. As discussed, what makes risk assessment so difficult is the fact that risk is often difficult to define. It is very subjective and prone to a myriad of factors that create risk acceptance or risk adversity in decision-makers. Operation Colossus demonstrated that risk assessment in the conception, planning and execution of an operation can and does profoundly affect decision-making. Whether the allure of a huge reward; or the consideration of personal risk; or the perception that something needs to be done; or factors such as desperation, time constraints or fatigue; risk has a direct relationship to decision-making. Understanding this dynamic and the factors that impact risk adversity or acceptance, and the influence that they have on decision-making, is key to conducting effective operations in the current and future security environments.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a detailed account of Operation Colossus, see Bernd Horn, *The Wrecking Crew. Operation Colossus, 10 February 1941* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2019).
- 2 Cecil Aspinall-Oglander, *Roger Keyes. Being the Biography of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Keyes of Zeebrugge and Dover* (London: Hogarth Press, 1951), 380.
- 3 The BEF lost 68,111 killed, wounded, taken prisoner at Dunkirk. Equally significant, the British left behind 2,472 guns, 63,879 trucks, 76,000 tons of ammunition and 600,000 tons of fuel and supplies. The Royal Navy (RN) lost 243 ships (out of more than 1,000 engaged). See Christopher Hibbert, "Operation Dynamo," *History of the Second World War*, Part 6, 164; Cesare Salmaggi and Alfredo Pallavisini, *2194 Days of War* (New York: Gallery Books, 1988), 4 June 1940; I.C.R. Dear, ed., *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 312-313; and A.J. Barker, *Dunkirk: The Great Escape* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1977), 224. Exact numbers vary between these sources and others but they all reflect the general magnitude. A major problem with determining numbers is the actual categorization/description of weapons and equipment.
- 4 See Eliot A. Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians* (Cambridge: Center for International Affairs, Harvard University, 1978), 37-40; Maxwell Schoenfeld, *The War Ministry of Winston Churchill* (Ames: The Iowa State University Press, 1972), 124; and Patrick Cosgrove, *Churchill at War Alone 1939-1940* (London: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1974), 95.
- 5 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once quipped, "He [Churchill] has a hundred [brilliant ideas] a day and about four of them are good." Cited in Nassir Ghaemi, *A First-Rate Madness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 61.

- 6 Aspinall-Oglander, 380. This was part of Churchill's vision. In the dark early days of the war he described, "There comes from the sea, a hand of steel that plucks the German sentries from their posts. Cited in Hilary St. George Saunders, *The Green Beret. The Story of the Commandos* (London: Michael Joseph, 1956), 118.
- 7 Cited in John Terraine, *The Life and Times of Lord Mountbatten* (London: Arrow Books, 1980), 83.
- 8 Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War. Their Finest Hour* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1949), 246-247. See also Colonel J.W. Hackett, "The Employment of Special Forces," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, Vol 97, No. 585, February 1952, 28. Psychiatrist Anthony Storr observed of Churchill, "Only a man who knew what it was to discern a gleam of hope in a hopeless situation, whose courage was beyond reason, and whose aggressive spirit burned at its fiercest when he was hemmed in and surrounded by enemies, could have given emotional reality to the words of defiance which rallied and sustained us in the menacing summer of 1940." Cited in Ghaemi, 63.
- 9 Combined Operations Command, responsible for joint operations, specifically raids against Occupied Europe, was created shortly after the establishment of MO9. As a result, MO9 was dismantled by the end of the year.
- 10 *Combined Operations. The Official Story of the Commandos* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943), 16.
- 11 Air Marshall Sir John C. Slessor, "Some Reflection of Airborne Forces," *Army Quarterly* 1948. DHH Collection.
- 12 John Lucas, *The Silken Canopy* (Shrewsbury, England: Airlife Publishing, 1997), 104.
- 13 Lieutenant-Colonel T.B.H. Otway, *Airborne Forces* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1990, reprint), 23.
- 14 "Development of Parachute Troops - Air Requirement - Conclusions of a Conference held in the Air Ministry on June 10 1940," NA, Air 39 / 132. See also Otway, 25-26; and General Sir Richard Gale, *Call to Arms* (London: Hutchison of London, 1968), 124.
- 15 Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), 8.
- 16 Otway, 21. Churchill pushed back reminding the generals that he wanted 5,000 paratroopers. However, the lack of training equipment and aircraft made his directive impossible to meet.
- 17 Ibid., 22.
- 18 Ibid., 29.
- 19 Ibid., 31.
- 20 Report, "Colossus," 14 March 1941. National Archives (NA), DEFE 2/152.
- 21 Minute Sheet, "Apulian Aqueduct," 3 January 1941. NA, Air 8/1066, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy."
- 22 Report, "Colossus," 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152.
- 23 Minute Sheet, "Apulian Aqueduct," 3 January 1941. NA, Air 8/1066, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy."

24 Minute Sheet, “Apulian Aqueduct,” 3 January 1941. NA, Air 8/1066, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy.”

25 Minute Sheet, “Water project. Southern Italy,” ND. Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.”

26 Letter, Ministry of Economic Warfare to CWR, 27 December 1940. Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report. The SOE did explain, “Plans are at present being devised and the means towards their execution being developed, which, if successful, will make it possible in due course to undertake this and similar projects in Italy. No definite promises can be made, however until the means of transport – requiring the co-operation or consent of other departments, have definitely been assured – which is not yet the case. I am sorry that we cannot, for the present, be more helpful.”

27 Memorandum, “Apulian Aqueduct,” ND. NA, DEFE 2/153, Operation Colossus, Part I.”

28 Report, “Colossus,” 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152.

29 Minute Sheet, COS (41), “Special Operation,” 3 January 1941. NA, Air 8/1066, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy.”

30 Minute Sheet, D of Plans to C.A.S., 5 January 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.”

31 Memorandum, DCO, War Cabinet to DMC, Air Ministry, “Report on Operation Colossus,” 28 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7760, “Report on Operation Colossus.”

32 Minute Sheet, War Cabinet Office to CAS, “Project ‘T,’” 9 January 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report. See also Report, “Colossus,” ND. NA, DEFE 2/152.

33 Minute Sheet, Ismay to PM, 28 January 1941. NA, PREM 3/100; and Minute Sheet, War Cabinet Office to CAS, “Project ‘T,’” 9 January 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report. See also Report, “Colossus,” ND. NA, DEFE 2/152.

34 Memorandum, “Operation Colossus,” ND. NA, DEFE 2/153, Operation Colossus, Part I.”

35 Ibid.

36 Report, “Colossus,” 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152. A punt is a flat-bottomed boat with square ends designed for use in rivers or shallow waters.

37 Ibid.

38 Letter, Lieutenant-Colonel J. Rock to unspecified, 22 January 1941. 11 Special Air Service Battalion became the precursor to the Parachute Regiment.

39 Cited in Niall Cherry, *Striking Back. Britain’s Airborne and Commando Raids, 1940-1942* (West Midlands, UK: Helion & Company Ltd., 2009), 60.

40 The total number for the mission was eight officers and thirty-one ORs. However, the actual number participating in the raid was seven officers and twenty-nine ORs, as well as two linguists. The extra numbers were reserves in case of injury or other reason requiring a replacement.

CHAPTER 2

- 41 Memorandum, DCO to HQ RAF Malta, "Operation Colossus," 25 January 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report."
- 42 "Project T," ND. NA, Air 8/1066, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy."
- 43 Minute Sheet, "Apulian Aqueduct," ND. Air 2/7450, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report."
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 "Report on Colossus Operation," HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report."
- 46 "Minutes of a Meeting Held at Headquarters Central Landing Establishment on 31.1.41 at 1900 hrs." NA, Air 39/14. File: Colossus – Corres[pondence]: & Reports Various.
- 47 "Report on Colossus Operation," HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report."
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Report, CLE, "Colossus Operation," 1 March 1941. NA, Air 39/13, File: Colossus, Corres[pondence] & Reports Various.
- 50 "Report Colossus Operation Appendix XVI," ND. NA, Air 39/14. File: Colossus – Corres[pondence]: & Reports Various.
- 51 Letter, Norman to Harvey, "Operation Colossus," 20 February 1941. NA, Air 39/13, File: Colossus, Corres[pondence] & Reports Various.
- 52 Report, CLE, "Colossus Operation," 1 March 1941. NA, Air 39/13, File: Colossus, Corres[pondence] & Reports Various. The Army / Air Force tension was not limited to the stay in Malta. A CLE report noted, "At [RAF Base] Mildenhall, before the departure, in the absence of superior command, the organization was haphazard, and showed little consideration for the Army." Ibid.
- 53 Report, CLE, "Colossus Operation," 1 March 1941. NA, Air 39/13, File: Colossus, Corres[pondence] & Reports Various.
- 54 "Report on Colossus Operation," HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report."
- 55 "Operation Colossus. Report Covering Period At Malta," 13 February 1941. NA, Air 39/12, File: Report on Colossus Operation.
- 56 "Report Colossus Operation, Appendix XVII, Answers by F/LT J.E.M. Williams RAF. NA, Air 39/14. File: Colossus – Corres[pondence]: & Reports Various.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid. Williams also revealed, "The mark VI [modified Whitley] are not suitable for this job, as I am sure they would be unreliable at low altitudes."
- 59 "Report on Colossus Operation," HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: "Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report."

60 Ibid.

61 Cited in Roderick Bailey, *Target: Italy. The Secret War Against Mussolini, 1940-1943*. (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), 65.

62 “Report on Colossus Operation,” HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report; and “Operation Colossus. Report Covering Period At Malta,” 13 February 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.

63 “Operation Colossus. Report Covering Period At Malta,” 13 February 1941 . NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.

64 “A Narrative of the execution of the operation based on information given by Lt. A.J. Deane-Drummond,,” ND. NA, Air 8/1066, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy.”

65 Ibid.

66 “Report on Colossus Operation,” HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.” Six of the Whitley bombers returned safely to England on 17 February 1941, although owing to very bad weather one of the aircraft conducted a forced landing in a field and was slightly damaged. The seventh, last, Whitley returned safely on 26 February.

67 Report, “Colossus,” 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152.

68 Ibid.

69 “Operation Colossus. Report Covering Period At Malta,” 13 February 1941. NA, Air 39/12, File: Report on Colossus Operation.

70 Report, CLE, “Colossus Operation,” 1 March 1941; and Letter, Norman to Harvey, “Operation Colossus,” 20 February 1941. NA, Air 39/13, File: Colossus, Corres[pondence] & Reports Various.

71 “Report on Colossus Operation,” HQ Central Landing Establishment, 14 March 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.”

72 “A Narrative of the execution of the operation based on information given by Lt. A.J. Deane-Drummond,” ND. NA, Air 8/1066, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy.”

73 Report, “Colossus,” 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152.

74 Ibid.

75 Missing throughout the demolition process was Captain Gerrard Daly and five of his sappers. Not only did his aircraft have technical issues, the aircrew missed the landmark on hitting the Italian west coast and even after backtracking Daly and his men were dropped three quarters of an hour after the other airborne raiders in the wrong location. They were dropped in the next valley. Report, “Colossus,” 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152.

76 “A Narrative of the execution of the operation based on information given by Lt. A.J. Deane-Drummond,” ND. NA, Air 8/1066, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct Over Tragino, Italy.”

77 Ibid.

78 Message, VA Malta to CinC Mediterranean, 1105, 11 February 1941. NA, PREM 3/100.

79 Report, “Colossus,” 14 March 1941. NA, DEFE 2/152.

80 “Operation Colossus. Report Covering Period At Malta,” 13 February 1941. NA, Air 2/7450, File: “Operation Colossus – Attempted Destruction of Aqueduct in S. Italy – Report.”

81 All but one of the raiders survived the war. He was an Italian expatriate who made the mistake of confessing that he was an Italian citizen. He was tried and executed for treason. Many of the commandos were able to escape Italian detention and return to England.

82 The new focus on airborne operations that occurred after the German capture of Crete by airborne forces, as well as the lessons learned from Operation Colossus, were quickly put into practice. On the night of 27/28 February 1942, a little over a year after the raid on the Tragino Aqueduct, a similar mission, Operation Biting, was carried out to capture sensitive secret German radar equipment. Specifically, DCO assigned “C” Company of the 2nd Parachute Battalion the task of securing details and components of the German Würzburg radar that was used to control German night fighter aircraft in their intercept of Allied bombers. In addition, they were to capture technicians familiar with the use of the technology. The raid was a spectacular success. The operation highlighted inter-Service cooperation and delivered material that proved invaluable to the electronic warfare research being undertaken by Britain at the time. In fact, Allied researchers were able to develop counter-measures, code named “Window” (or chaff – thousands of small, thin aluminum strips that were dropped to reflect radar beams and simulate a large number of aircraft in the air), which was used to great effect during the Normandy invasion. For a detailed account of the Bruneval Raid see Ken Ford, *The Bruneval Raid. Operation Biting 1942* (Oxford: Osprey, 2010).

CHAPTER 3

WHATEVER IT TAKES: OPERATION OAK, 12 SEPTEMBER 1943

Colonel (Retired) Bernd Horn

The flimsy canvas buckled in the wind making a loud flapping noise. More bothersome was the constant motion of sinking and then suddenly lifting in the air as the DFS-230 glider ploughed and pitched through the turbulence left by the wake of the towing aircraft. For the German commandos crammed inside the narrow fuselage the flight seemed to last an eternity. Making matters worse, they had to trust the glider pilots to deliver them on target, hopefully in one piece.

The armada of aircraft towing gliders cut through the banks of clouds that blinded them from the mountain peaks that seemed to reach through the clouds. Then, suddenly, the glider detached the tow cable and began a tight, spiralling circle downwards. Its objective was what appeared to be a small patch of meadow beside the impressive Hotel Campo Imperatore nestled between majestic mountains on the Gran Sasso plateau. But as the glider closed distance with its landing field it became evident the meadow was actually a bolder strewn field. The large glider struck the ground with a resounding thud, violently throwing those inside the aircraft against each other causing further disorientation.

But, the initial impact was just the beginning. The glider continued to careen seemingly out of control heading straight for a number of imposing boulders, and more dangerously, the edge of the cliff. The risky approach to the objective appeared to be more of a gamble! The success of the mission was now in dire jeopardy as the ten gliders all had to navigate a landing on a very small landing area covered with boulders and precipices.



Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503A-02

DF-230 Glider on the Gran Sasso Plateau.

THE FALL OF A DICTATOR

By the summer of 1943, the ultimate outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. For the Italians the situation seemed calamitous. The Allies had ejected Axis forces from North Africa, stormed across Sicily and were about to gain a toehold on the Italian peninsula. Not surprisingly, many senior Italian leaders clamoured to make peace with the Allies before more destruction was wrought on their country. As such, an anti-Mussolini cabal, including the members of the Italian High Command, as well as senior politicians, plotted against *Il Duce*.¹ On 24 July 1943, when the dictator Benito Mussolini went to see King Victor Emmanuelle III at his residence in Rome to gain his support, the King revealed, “My dear *Duce*, there’s no point going on. Italy is on her knees, the army has been completely defeated and the soldiers no longer want to fight for you. At this moment, you are the most hated man in Italy.”² When Mussolini attempted to leave he was promptly placed under arrest, bundled into an ambulance and spirited away. Importantly, he was kept isolated so that he could not communicate with his supporters and former allies.

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The coup quickly moved forward. The *Carabinieri* and *polizia* swiftly moved to arrest Mussolini's Fascist supporters and seize key communication, as well as command and control centres. Although the new government assured the Germans that they were still aligned with the Axis power, secretly they began to open peace negotiations with the Allies.

Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503C-13



Il Duce.

HITLER REACTS

Predictably, the Führer, Adolf Hitler, was enraged when he heard of the overthrow of his close ally. His immediate instinct was to swiftly occupy Rome and arrest the coup leaders. However, his General Staff were able to convince him that delay was necessary in order to deploy additional troops to Italy. Although he agreed, on 26 July 1943, he directed that a special task force was necessary to find and rescue Mussolini.

It took little coaxing to get Hitler to agree that *General der Fallschirmtruppe* Kurt Student should undertake the task. On Student's arrival at the Wolf's Lair near Rastenburg, the Führer declared, "one of your special assignments will be to find and free my friend Mussolini."³ The mission was designated Operation Oak.

The German high command also tasked officers from the Abwehr's (German intelligence) Brandenburg Battalion, as well as elements of the Luftwaffe special units to also report to Rastenburg to assist in the mission. Not to be outdone by his rivals, SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler decided to include elements of his *Schutzstaffel* (SS) as well. As such, he convinced Hitler to assign Captain Otto Skorzeny, commander of SS-Jäger-Battalion 502, to lead the mission over the more qualified Brandenburger officers. Subsequently, Hitler assigned Skorzeny to General Student to conduct a covert search for the missing Italian dictator. Hitler explained:

I have a very important commission for you. Mussolini, my friend and our loyal comrade in arms, was betrayed yesterday by his king and arrested by his own countrymen. I cannot and will not leave Italy's greatest son in the lurch. Italy under the new government will desert us! I will keep faith with my old ally and dear friend; he must be rescued promptly or he will be handed over to the Allies. I'm entrusting to you the execution of an undertaking which is of great importance to the future course of the war.⁴

THE HUNT FOR MUSSOLINI

Having established a task force that included both SS troops and Fallschirmjäger, the next step was to actually locate *Il Duce*. Skorzeny's instruction explicitly stated

that he not coordinate his search with any other agencies, and he was specifically directed not to inform Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, Commander-in-Chief South, responsible for Italy.⁵ Despite, the sensitive nature of the mission, a veritable circus erupted. The stakes were simply too high, in the form of currying favour with Hitler, for other agencies such as the Gestapo and Abwehr not to become involved.

Skorzeny sent small teams in civilian clothing to scour Rome looking for clues and information on Mussolini's whereabouts. The Abwehr utilized its agents stationed in Italy who up to this point had no idea of the dictator's location. Student employed his military intelligence apparatus and Himmler dispatched two experienced SS officers to Rome to assist with the search. With so many pokers in the fire, the Italians quickly realized the Germans were actively looking for Mussolini and fed volumes of disinformation to their erstwhile allies.

Despite the ungainly search effort, eventually, after a number of false starts, the Germans traced Mussolini to La Maddalena Island. Skorzeny attempted to fly a reconnaissance mission over the objective but his aircraft ended up in the Mediterranean Sea.⁶ Subsequently, Skorzeny convinced Student that *Il Duce* was on the island and the airborne general began planning for a daring naval raid using his Fallschirmjäger and a flotilla of torpedo boats or Schnellboot (S-Boats).

However, the German activity did not fail to arouse Italian suspicions and they quickly moved the deposed dictator. On 28 August 1943, Mussolini was flown by seaplane to Lake Bracciano, northwest of Rome. From there, days later, he was taken by vehicle and then cable car to Hotel Camp Imperatore on Gran Sasso mountain. The change in location once again left the Germans blind to his whereabouts.

Fortuitously for Student and Skorzeny, one of Himmler's men, SS-*Sturmabführer* (Major) Herbert Kappler, who had been assigned to the German embassy in Rome since 1939, had from the start installed a number of wiretaps on important communication nodes. This foresight now paid dividends. Having heard reference to Gran Sasso in a call, Kappler passed on the clue to Student. This lead was followed up with confirmation that a seaplane had flown from La Maddalena Island to Lake Bracciano. Moreover, a Luftwaffe officer reported seeing the arrival of a seaplane surrounded by exceptionally heavy security. Further digging indicated that something out of the ordinary was occurring at the mountaintop hotel. Student now decided to plan a new rescue operation based on the new location.

ITALY SURRENDERS

Concurrent with the hunt for Mussolini was the issue of the Italian defection. Hitler directed Kesselring to commence planning Operation Axis, the mission to seize Rome and disarm defecting Italian military forces. The German High Command immediately ordered the deployment of four German infantry divisions into Northern Italy, with additional troops to follow. The Italians, for their part, attempted to delay the Germans as much as possible while desperately trying to attain an armistice with the Allies.

On 8 September 1943, the anticipated defection took place. The Italians formally surrendered to the Allied powers. This agreement now complicated Operation Oak. The Germans quickly moved on Rome and began to disarm all Italian units. The Italian leadership, both political and military, swiftly fled the capital leaving their troops to fight without higher direction. In most cases, Italian forces surrendered without a fight, however, there were scattered instances where the Italians put up a stiff resistance. By 10 September, the senior Italian officer remaining in Rome negotiated the surrender of all Italian forces around the capital.

Despite the Italian capitulation and apparent German control, the new political situation created additional risk for Operation Oak. The status of Italian military and police forces in the area was still in question. In addition, Italians also began to engage in partisan activity.

Student, who was deeply involved with the fighting to regain control of Rome, now refocused on the rescue of Mussolini. With the defection, as well as the Allied landings at Salerno, he assessed that *Il Duce* would soon be executed or handed over to the Allies.

THE RESCUE PLAN

Based on available information, Student decided to risk a mission centred on the objective of the 70 room Campo Imperatore Hotel located on a plateau on the top of Gran Sasso, a 1,900 metre peak in the central Apennines mountain range. Realizing that time was of the essence, General Student assigned the mission of planning the rescue to one of his Fallschirmjäger officers Major Harald Mors. Due to time constraints he gave Mors less than 24 hours to plan and execute the task.



Campo Imperatore Hotel.

The challenge for Major Mors was considerable. There were only three options: ground assault, airborne attack or glider raid. The airborne option was quickly ruled out because there was little space for a drop zone (DZ). Moreover, the wind currents in the mountains could scatter the drop causing massive casualties, as well as cause a delay in consolidating the scattered Fallschirmjäger and assaulting the hotel, which could give the Italians time to kill Mussolini. Skorzeny privately assessed that they would have about three minutes to reach the dictator before his guards would kill him.⁷

The ground assault option was also problematic. First, there were no roads leading up to the hotel and a dismounted assault up the mountain would take time, which, once again, would give the guards ample time to remove or kill Mussolini. Furthermore, an Italian infantry division was located a mere 12 kilometres away. This represented a huge risk should they decide to intervene.

As such, the last remaining option was a glider assault. Although the plateau was relatively small, the DF-230 gliders had been fitted with rocket assisted brakes that would allow them to stop in as short as 20 metres.⁸ Nonetheless, experts predicted that due to the “rarefied air” only 20 percent of the gliders would actually survive

the flight. Moreover, they predicted 80 percent casualties for the assault force.⁹ Skorzeny discounted the “experts,” exclaiming:

There are some things you can’t work out with a slide rule. That’s just where our experts may be wrong; and the Italians too. The safer the enemy feel, the better our chances of catching them unawares.¹⁰

Out of options and having decided to accept the risk on the glider assault, Student ordered 12 gliders to be brought to the Pratica di Mare airfield immediately. Based on 10 passengers per glider (one being the pilot) the glider assault force would consist of 108 combat troops. They would face an estimated one hundred *Carabinieri* at the hotel with approximately the same number at the lower cable car station.



Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503-14

The rugged terrain of the central Apennines mountain range.

The attack plan also consisted of a ground component. Major Mors planned to use two of his companies (approximately 260 troops), loaded in 20 Italian Fiat trucks taken from a disarmed Italian infantry division two days prior, to seize the lower cable car station in Assergi and provide a cordon so no outside Italian forces could intervene in the raid.¹¹ For the extraction Mors planned to bring Mussolini down

the mountain by cable car, but in the event the cable station was damaged in the fighting, Student provided two Fi-156 Fieseler Storch light aircraft that he believed could land and take-off on the small mountain plateau.¹²

During the planning phase, Skorzeny approached Student and insisted, based on direction from Hitler and Himmler, that he and his troops have a role in the actual raid and rescue of Mussolini. As a result, Student allowed Skorzeny and 17 of his men to participate in the glider assault.¹³ Student saw the role of Skorzeny and his SS troops as acting as bodyguards for the dictator, while his Fallschirmjäger were responsible for fighting the Italians.¹⁴

Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503C-34



Fallschirmjäger on the objective.

The plan was now in place. Oberleutnant Georg Freiherr von Berlepsch would lead his company in the first chalk of three gliders with 30 troops. Their objective was to assault the hotel. The second chalk consisted of Skorzeny and his SS troops. Their assigned task was to secure the LZ and guard any Italian prisoners. The third chalk was responsible for securing the upper section of the cable car station and the fourth chalk, which consisted of the heavy weapons and support troops (e.g. medics, signalers), had the task of providing support near the hotel in the case of a prolonged fight.

Berlepsch's plan was for his first three gliders to land simultaneously to provide maximum strength to the assault force. However, after the landing of the assault wave, the following gliders were to land one minute apart.

THE RAID

The first component of the rescue was the ground assault force tasked with securing the cable station at the bottom of the Gran Sasso plateau. Major Mors decided on a circuitous route to both serve as deception, as well as to steer clear of known areas in which partisans were active. The long column of vehicles was preceded by a motorcycle scouting party. Throughout the over 10-hour drive Italian police checkpoints reported on the progress of the German convoy, however, until Major Mors and his troops neared Assergi, the Italians were unsure of their intent.

This uncertainty changed very quickly. As the ground assault force approached Assergi they noticed a number of *Crabinieri* check points that were established to provide an early warning buffer, which now attempted to warn off their compatriots at the cable car station. The motorcycle scouts engaged one checkpoint and then pushed through to the town where they came under fire. The German advance party promptly returned fire, which caused resistance to quickly dissipate. The motorcycle party then drove to the lower cable car station where they accepted the surrender of the remaining Italian forces stationed there.

As opposed to the ground attack, the aerial assault plan began to fray almost immediately. Originally, the plan was for the gliders to arrive at approximately 0500 hours, 12 September 1943. However, due to allied bombing, as well as OPSEC constraints that failed to ensure the necessary details were passed on to the transport organization, the gliders did not show up until 1100 hours. Moreover, only ten, not 12 gliders arrived. The supporting unit, again, not knowing the specific timings, assumed the remaining two gliders could be delivered later in the day. Therefore, before the mission even commenced, they were down two gliders or 18 fighting men. In addition, the delay meant that the gliders would have to fly in the heat of the day when the air was thinner making flight more difficult and the ground assault party was required to delay their H-Hour and potentially attack in broad daylight.

To add to the issue, when Skorzeny arrived he disrupted the load tables even more. Not one to miss an opportunity, he brought along a war correspondent and a photographer to capture the dramatic rescue for posterity. In addition, he also brought along Italian *Generale di brigata* Fernando Soleti, largely against his will, to mitigate the risk of a firefight. To provide Soleti with encouragement, Skorzeny apparently explained, “You will ride in the third glider with me, General, or the Italian army will be short one general.”¹⁵ Skorzeny deemed Soleti presence important because he was known to the carabinieri. As a result, Skorzeny believed his appearance would cause some confusion and could create enough doubt that the Italian forces guarding Mussolini would hesitate to open fire. Although the addition of the extra passengers had some merit, it also meant that another three Fallschirmjäger were bumped from the flight.¹⁶

Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503B-05



Precision landing by the DF-230 glider pilots.

At 1305 hours, the first chalk of three tow planes and gliders launched from the airfield. Subsequently, the remainder of the aircraft departed at two-minute intervals. The distance to the objective was 126 kilometres. One major challenge the tow pilots faced was gaining enough altitude to clear the 1,200 metre ridgelines near Tivoli. As a result, the lead chalk of three aircraft executed a loop to gain more altitude before proceeding to cross the mountain range. The following chalks, which were approximately seven kilometres behind, not realizing why the first chalk had detoured, continued flying towards the objective. Skorzeny, who was lead aircraft in the second chalk, was now the lead aircraft for the assault.

As the planes approached the objective, heavy winds and cloud cover obscured visibility. As a result, the tow planes stayed beneath the clouds at 2,800 metres instead of the planned 3,200 metres altitude. At 1403 hours, the gliders began to cut loose to begin their two-minute silent approach. Lieutenant Meyer, the pilot of the now lead aircraft carrying Skorzeny, recounted:

Despite extending the air brakes, the strong updrafts from the mountaintop pushed against the aircraft and it was difficult to keep on the glide path toward the target...I could also see that the intended landing zone – in contrast to the aerial photograph [taken before the raid] – had steep slopes that dropped off into an abyss. Looking left and right, I could see that I was far ahead of the remaining gliders in my kette [literal translation “chain,” or chalk]. Therefore, I seized upon a quick resolution. I put the glider into a steep left circle, which pressed the passengers hard. I deployed the braking parachute as we approached the windy slope, heading straight toward the hotel. A jolt went through the glider when it first hit the hard, stony ground, tearing up the barbed wire wrapped under the skid like string. When the glider stopped, it stood only 40 metres from the hotel.¹⁷

Skorzeny’s account was dramatically different. He recounted the approach in his memoirs:

I got out my knife and slashed right and left in the fabric to make a hole big enough to give us something of a view... My peephole was enough to let us get our bearings when the cloud permitted...The pilot turned in a wide circle, searching the ground – as I was doing – for the flat meadow appointed as our landing-ground. But a further, and ghastly, surprise was in store for us. It was triangular all right, but so far from being flat it was a steep, a very steep hillside! It could even have been a ski-jump. It was easy to see that a landing on this “meadow” was out of the question. I called out: “Crash landing! As near to the hotel as you can get!...We were within 15 metres of the hotel!”¹⁸

Time now was 1405 hours. The occupants of Meyer’s glider and those that landed immediately after were dazed by the hard landing, as well as from airsickness. In addition, they had not planned to be the first assault wave, therefore, there was a degree of uncertainty of what to do. Fortuitously, the Italian defensive response was

equally indecisive.¹⁹ The Italian guards on duty milled around unsure of what to do. Those off-duty in their rooms chose to hide and ignored the order to “stand-to.” The leadership was equally befuddled. The guard commander was asleep at the time of the raid. Awoken by his subordinate, he glanced out the window and witnessed more gliders landing, as well as five heavily armed *Fallchirmjäger* approaching the hotel. “Don’t shoot!” he quickly yelled down to the guards outside watching the German assault in progress.

His immediate subordinates ran to Mussolini’s room unsure whether to execute him as ordered, or to try to sneak him down the back of the mountain. On arrival they found the dictator looking out the window. An argument soon commenced as Mussolini, sensing he was about to be killed, warned his captors that if he was harmed the Germans would slay the entire guard force. This seemed to make the Italian officers hesitate.

Skorzeny had perceptively ordered his men prior to the raid not to shoot unless required to do so in self-defence. He and a subordinate now made their way to the hotel. After a few false starts he found the front entrance to the hotel. However, the Italians had piled up furniture to barricade the front door and they were unable to force it open. Armed only with a pistol, Skorzeny decided to await reinforcements. As more German troops arrived the Italians defending the front entrance decided, in consonance with William Shakespeare’s play *Henry IV* that discretion was the better part of valour, gave up any form of opposition.²⁰ Overall, the Italian guard force evinced no organized resistance. The guards either stood by impassively or ran to their rooms and hid.

Once the entrance was open, Skorzeny ran up the stairs to find Mussolini. Upon arrival at Room 201, Skorzeny found Mussolini standing between two Italian officers who had not drawn their weapons. He immediately drew his pistol and ordered them to stand against the wall. Once they were ushered out, he declared to a surprised Mussolini, “Duce, the Führer has sent me! You are free!” Upon which the dictator replied, “I knew that my friend Adolf Hitler would not leave me in the lurch!”²¹

Berlepsch’s assault force of three gliders arrived at 1410 hours and all executed perfect landings close to the hotel. He quickly took stock of the situation and secured the upper cable station and the hotel. He messaged Major Mors mission complete at 1417 hours. In total, the raid had taken 12 minutes and no shots were fired.



Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503B-17

One of the 10 gliders that landed on the plateau.

Concurrent with both the ground and glider assault, a component of Skorzeny's SS unit under *Untersturmführer* (Second-Lieutenant) Hans Mändel arrived at Mussolini's home at Rocca delle Caminate. The Italian *polizia* guarding the dictator's family quickly surrendered to the German force. *Il Duce's* wife Rachele and their two youngest children were quickly bundled up and taken to the airfield at Rimini from where they were flown by the Luftwaffe to Vienna, Austria.

The drama, however, did not end there. The rescue force now had to evacuate Mussolini. The initial ground evacuation plan was scrubbed due to an inability to contact higher headquarters to arrange airlift at the Pratica di Mare airfield and the threat of Italian military or partisan interference. Therefore, Mors and Skorzeny opted to use the Storch light aircraft. The first plane damaged its undercarriage on landing because of the uneven ground. As a result, the second Storch, piloted by General Student's personal pilot Captain Heinrich Gerlach, landed on a short patch of even ground in front of the hotel.

After a brief discussion with Mors and Skorzeny, Gerlach agreed to fly the dictator out from his mountaintop prison. However, when Skorzeny insisted that he accompany Mussolini, Gerlach flatly refused, explaining that Skorzeny would overload the aircraft, particularly on such a short runway in the thin mountain air.

After a heated discussion involving apparent threats, Gerlach relented. Although Mussolini, also a pilot, objected, he was outrightly ignored.

Gerlach now revved his engines as a number of Fallschirmjäger held the wings to allow the engine to reach maximum power. Although the Storch normally only required 80 metres to take-off, the overloaded aircraft in the high thin altitude needed every bit of his 200 metre long improvised runway. Skorzeny described the risky take-off:

Although our speed increased and we were rapidly approaching the end of the strip, we failed to rise. I swayed about madly and we had hopped over many a boulder when a yawning gully appeared right in our path. I was just thinking that this really was the end when our bird suddenly rose into the air. I breathed a silent prayer of thanksgiving! Then the left landing-wheel hit the ground again, the machine tipped downwards and we made straight for the gully. Veering left, we shot over the edge. I closed my eyes, held my breath and again awaited the inevitable end. The wind roared in our ears. It must have been all over in a matter of seconds, for when I looked round again Gerlach had the machine out of its dive and almost on a level keel. Now we had sufficient air speed, even in this thin air. Flying barely 30 metres above the ground, we emerged in the Arezzano valley.²²

Bundesarchiv, 1011-567-1503A-45



Fieseler Storch aircraft preparing to take-off with Skorzeny and Mussolini.

The overburdened aircraft arrived at the Practica di Mare airfield at 1615 hours, and Skorzeny and Mussolini transferred to a Heinkel-111 bomber and flew to Vienna. Hitler congratulated Skorzeny on the rescue and awarded him the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, as well as a promotion to major. He also authorized leave so that Skorzeny could see his wife.

In the aftermath of the raid, even Germany's enemies took note. Prime Minister Winston Churchill conceded in Parliament, "The stroke was one of great daring and conducted with heavy force." He added, "It certainly shows there are many possibilities of this kind open in modern war."²³

Both Himmler and the Reich's propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, quickly seized on the successful rescue. The official narrative, however, credited Skorzeny and his SS troops with the planning and execution of the raid and completely downplayed, if not outright ignored, the role played by Student's Fallschirmjäger.²⁴ The controversy was never fully settled, as the official account crediting Skorzeny's role continues to be the dominant narrative even today.

SO WHAT? AN ANALYSIS OF RISK DURING OPERATION OAK

EVENT (requiring action)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT (Pers & Eqpt)	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF	DECISION/ COMMENT
Authorize Rescue Mission	Hitler	High Germans knew Italians were seeking a separate peace and could shortly be belligerents.	High With Mussolini in control – Italy would remain an ally.	Hitler placed high importance on the mission.
Selection of Mission Leader	Hitler/Himmler	High Failure was not an option	High Successful mission meant reinstating Mussolini	Despite arguably better available officers – Skorzeny was chosen due to his SS affiliation
Search for Mussolini	Skorzeny Abwehr Gestapo Student	High If Italians became aware – would kill Mussolini	High Rescue operation could be mounted	Each agency conducted their own search – glory to the victor

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Reconnaissance (recce) flights	Skorzeny	High Compromise of search/danger of enemy action	High Be credited with finding Mussolini	Skorzeny shot down on one recce flight
Wiretaps	Gestapo	Low Standard operating procedure	High Confirm location of Mussolini	Methodology confirmed Mussolini's actual location
Assault Plan a. Parachute Insertion b. Ground Assault c. Glider Assault	Student & Staff/ Skorzeny	High – small DZ/mountain currents & winds High – loss of surprise/Italian forces suspect High – small LZ/difficult terrain	Low Low High	Scattered drop – no mass Loss of surprise – only one approach Time factor key – anticipate 80% casualties
Replacement of Fallschirmjäger with SS troops and Photographers	Skorzeny	Medium – dilute combat power	High – notoriety and self-promotion of Skorzeny	Skorzeny brings public affairs photographer to capture event
“OPSEC” issues – failure to inform Theatre commander	Planners	Low	High	Maintain OPSEC – however backfires – failed to utilize sources to assist search for Mussolini; only 10 not 12 gliders arrive
Long route for ground assault	Ground Assault Commander	Low	High – surprise and no delays	Safer route and less likely anyone will guess destination until too late
No fire first policy	Skorzeny	High – can take heavy casualties – lose momentum to successfully assault objective	High	Rescue Mussolini with no bloodshed
Skorzeny insisting on accompanying <i>Il Duce</i> on Storch flight	Skorzeny	High – weight too heavy for take-off especially with short field	High	Desire to be with Mussolini on presentation to Hitler – claim the glory

Table 3.1 – Risk versus Pay-Off

When the element of risk in this case study is examined two over-riding observations can be made with regard to risk acceptance. First, whether considering the Fallschirmjäger or Skorzeny's SS commandos, it appears that highly-motivated, elite troops will always accept whatever risk is required to complete the mission. This theme resonates with numerous other examples provided throughout this volume.

Although this is a highly desirable trait, it underscores the requirement for clear and detailed commander's intent and direction to ensure that the amount of risk to be assumed is made perfectly clear. Not all missions require the risk to life and limb. Others do. Therefore, that delineation must be made up front so as not to promote needless risk acceptance by the mission leader or their team when not required.

A second observation would seem to demonstrate that exceptional risk will be accepted if there are highly desirable potential rewards. Although this correlation is easily understood, and is often highlighted by the mantra, "high risk – high reward," it is also potentially problematic. The acceptance of high or unacceptable risk for the purpose of personal gain (e.g. awards, commendations, promotion, reputation), particularly when exercised by leadership, potentially exposes subordinates, as well as the mission, to unnecessary hazard and failure. Risk must always be assessed against mission success and not personal gain.

A third observation centres around Skorzeny's "no fire first policy." This direction on the surface appears to be counter-intuitive. Although he believed that they had three minutes upon landing to rescue *Il Duce*, he still dictated this order that could have spelled disaster. The directive removed initiative, shock and surprise from the attackers and opened them up to heavy casualties. Yet, the order was brilliant. Understanding the cultural make-up of the defending forces; potential confusion (particularly with the arrival of a known superior/general); and the psychological impact of a heavily armed force of reputed elite troops, swooping in and swarming the plateau, Skorzeny realized that the risk of issuing the order actually lowered the overall risk to his force by not initiating violence. As such, the psychological and cultural aspects of an opponent are critical in assessing risk and devising plans.

Operational Security (OPSEC) was another interesting issue in Operation Oak. From the start, Hitler directed that the mission be kept close-hold to the point he did not want his commanding general in theatre, Albert Kesselring, to know

about the operation. In light of the chaos in Italy and the unknown intent and actions of the Italian military when Italy surrendered to the Allies, this decision dramatically increased the risk to the raiding force. It denied possible assistance in locating Mussolini and/or in ensuring safe conduct for the assault force, or any other possible assistance.

Without argument, OPSEC is critically important. Plans, identities, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and capabilities must be carefully guarded. However, secrecy in and of itself without purpose is detrimental to mission success and can increase risk to personnel. Unnecessary secrecy can limit possible (and important) cooperation, information and resources. A failure to optimize in these areas can cause a lack of effectiveness, time delays, increased risk to the force and potentially mission failure. OPSEC must always be carefully and diligently examined to determine the “need to know” list. A default of everything is secret to anyone outside the small in-group is an acceptance of unnecessary risk.

A corollary to the dangers of unnecessarily restrictive OPSEC is interagency rivalry. Despite the importance of the mission, or perhaps, because of it, interagency rivalry reigned supreme. Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring pushed General Student and his Fallschirmjäger; Himmler lobbied for Skorzeny and his SS commandos; and Admiral Wilhelm Canaris pressed for the Abwehr and his Brandenburgers. The internecine jockeying for favour and power increased the overall risk of successful completion of the mission due to the danger of compromise as too many different organizations were pursuing the same objective without coordination; necessary information and resources were not being shared; and too many competing plans were undertaken. Risk to mission success and those undertaking it, is clearly increased when interagency rivalry cannot be overcome and competition erodes overall effectiveness.

On a more positive note, the study of Operation Oak also demonstrated the importance of developing mitigating strategies to deal with identified risk. For example, the ground assault party opted for a longer, circuitous route that avoided potential conflict areas and provided a veil of deception. In addition, the air assault element “drafted” an Italian general to accompany the raiding party to sow confusion and hesitation within the defending Italian forces to buy them precious time during the approach. This underlines the necessity when identifying potential risk to also develop mitigating strategies that can lower the perils that must be faced.

In the end, Operation Oak is an excellent example of a SOF action. It contains all the hallmarks of a classic action: specialized troops; a daring plan, courageous execution, and a tactical action that had strategic overtones. Importantly, it also provides numerous observations that provide insight into the window of risk. These lessons are important as they provide vicarious experience in the pursuit of understanding risk and ensuring that the necessary mitigating actions are taken to avoid unnecessary personnel loss and mission failure.

ENDNOTES

1 *Il Duce*, derived from the Latin *dux*, translates to “the leader.” This was a title adopted by Mussolini. General Albert Kesselring, who met with Mussolini on a regular basis, noted, “On 24 July even Mussolini still felt himself firmly in the saddle.” Albert Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 168.

2 Cited in Robert Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini. Gran Sasso 1943* (Botley, UK: Osprey, 2010), 9. This volume, while very well-written and detailed, contains considerable bias against Skorzeny.

3 *Ibid.*, 10. Hitler also tasked Student, when the moment was right, to arrest key conspirators, including the King and top government officials.

4 Cited in Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Special Missions. The Memoirs of “the Most Dangerous Man in Europe”* (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 46.

5 Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Special Missions*, 46. Kesselring noted in his memoirs, “...Hitler's wish to rescue Mussolini so that they could reshape a common policy together, a feeling of solidarity which prompted him to order its execution by any means available – in effect by SS Major Skorzeny working under General Student. Even though this hare-brained scheme was kept secret from me, naturally I could not fail to get wind of it as all the threads ran together through my hands.” Kesselring, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring*, 171.

6 There are competing stories on virtually every aspect of Operation Oak. One narrative, which became the official version for propaganda purposes, was that Skorzeny and his SS troops were responsible for the planning and execution of the raid. Propelled by Himmler, Paul Josef Goebbels (the propaganda minister), and Hitler himself, this version became the accepted storyline. However, General Student and his Fallschirmjäger complained bitterly after the raid that the actual planning was conducted by them, and that they played an instrumental part in the rescue. As far as Student was concerned the operation was the domain of his Fallschirmjäger and the security of Mussolini once rescued was then the responsibility of Skorzeny and his SS troops. For Student there was a clear military and political component to the mission. In any case, with regard to the downing of the

aircraft, the “official” version has the plane shot down by two British fighters, while the opposing narrative states that the aircraft stalled and crashed when Skorzeny ordered the pilot to fly at an extremely low altitude.

7 William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops. Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1996), 180.

8 Due to time constraints and a lack of intelligence, the planners did not know the size of the actual LZ. They did know it was smaller than the LZ they faced at Fort Eben Emael.

9 McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 178; and Skorzeny, *Skorzeny’s Secret Missions*, 72.

10 Cited in McRaven, *Spec Ops*, 179-180. When Skorzeny himself was working out the probability of success, his second-in-command commented, “May I suggest, sir, that we forget all about figures and trying to compute our chances; we both know that they are very small, but we also know that, however, small, we shall stake our lives on success!” Skorzeny, *Skorzeny’s Secret Missions*, 73.

11 The ground force had to depart a mere 12 hours after receiving the order to plan/launch the mission.

12 A plan was also in place to rescue Mussolini’s family being held at Rocca delle Caminate. Not heavily defended, Student assigned the mission to Skorzeny who sent an 18-man detachment to rescue them concurrent with the main raid on Gran Sasso.

13 Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 25.

14 James Lucas, *Storming Eagles. German Airborne Forces in World War II* (London: Cassell & Co, 2001), 1200. Student allegedly told Mors, “He [Skorzeny] has no competence; he is participating as an observer.” Cited in Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 25.

15 Cited in Glenn B. Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler’s Commando* (New York: Military Heritage Press, 1981), 41.

16 The shortfall in fighting troops was a considerable risk. General Student warned the assault force prior to take-off that his staff estimated 80 percent casualties due to glider crashes and enemy action. Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 31.

17 Cited in Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 39.

18 Skorzeny, *Skorzeny’s Secret Missions*, 77-78. Lieutenant Meyer later refuted Skorzeny’s claim. He stated, “The statements Skorzeny made about giving me landing instructions were made up; it would be absurd for a passenger to give instructions to the commander of a glider echelon and besides, Skorzeny sat in a position in the glider from which he couldn’t see the landing area.” Cited in Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 39. In addition, Skorzeny’s second-in-command prior to the mission, when looking at photographs of the possible landing site, observed that the “meadow” was full of rocks and small ditches and he concluded that trying to land there would be certain suicide. Cited in Infield, *Skorzeny: Hitler’s Commando*, 38.

19 The Italian force guarding Mussolini was a mix of various military and police units. This make-up was intentional. Maresciallo Pietro Badoglio, a major coup leader and now Italian prime minister was uncertain of loyalties and therefore decided that he did not want Mussolini guarded by a single unit or commander.

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- 20 The actual original line is “The better part of valour is discretion;...” <<https://brians.wsu.edu/2016/05/25/discretion-is-the-better-part-of-valor/>>, accessed 4 October 2019.
- 21 Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Secret Missions*, 80-81.
- 22 Ibid., 84.
- 23 Leo Kessler, *Hitler's Special Forces. Kommando* (London: Leo Cooper, 1997), 74.
- 24 See James Lucas, *Storming Eagles. German Airborne Forces in World War II* (London: Cassell & Co, 2001), 199; and Forczyk, *Rescuing Mussolini*, 39.

CHAPTER 4

ON A WING AND A PRAYER: TASK FORCE 317 AND THE RECAPTURE OF SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND

Alan Bell

The Falkland Islands erupted onto the geo-political world stage in the spring of 1982. Just days before earning commercial media appeal, the crisis began 800 miles further into the remote South Atlantic Ocean on a lesser-known island named South Georgia. And, unless the reader is a history buff of early Antarctic explorers such as Sir Ernest Shackleton, there is little reason to have heard of such a desolate and forbidding place near the ends of the earth.

In 1914, Shackleton's HMS *Endurance* set sail from Buenos Aires, Argentina, towards the Antarctic Circle. After undue hardships in a most inhospitable part of the world, including the loss of his ship, Shackleton and five crew sailed 800 miles in a lifeboat to reach the nearly uninhabited island of South Georgia. One writer described, "When by some miracle they made their destination, they found they had to cross a nearly impassable frozen mountain range to reach civilization: a whaling station. The whalers, who had seen so much in their own hard lives, were in awe of the invincibility of the men, horribly ravaged by the elements."¹

South Georgia and the nearby South Sandwich Islands have been under sovereignty dispute since 1927, when Argentina staked its claim. The Argentinians were a little late, however, since the British had already laid claim over South Georgia. In fact, Captain James Cook in HMS *Resolution* made the first landing, survey and mapping of South Georgia. On 17 January 1775, he took possession for Britain

and named the island “Isle of Georgia” for King George III. Subsequently, Britain claimed the South Sandwich Islands in 1908.

The Argentinian claim over South Georgia sparked the 1982 Falklands War, a “come-as-you-are party with lack of equipment, improvisation and confusion being the universal experience.”² What has been described as a “tragicomic affair,”³ during which Argentinian forces briefly occupied South Georgia, which in turn, triggered the full-scale invasion of the Falkland Islands.

SOUTH GEORGIA DEMOGRAPHICS AND ITS HISTORICAL STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

The sub-Antarctic South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands comprise a remote and inhospitable British overseas territory in the South Atlantic Ocean, 1,300 kilometers from the Falkland Islands. There is no native population on South Georgia; the present inhabitants are the scientists and support staff of the permanently manned British Antarctic Survey (BAS) team who maintain scientific bases at Bird Island and at the capital, King Edward Point. The current population as of 2006 is approximately 30 people.

The British government had always hoped that the chain of islands would provide a useful base for the Royal Navy (RN), which indeed proved to be the case in the First and Second World Wars. During the Second World War, the RN deployed an armed merchant vessel to patrol South Georgian and Antarctic waters against the Nazis. Two four-inch shore guns (still present) protected Cumberland Bay and Stromness Bay, manned on a volunteer basis by Norwegian whalers. However, in the post-war decolonization era, the strategic necessity for global naval bases was no longer essential.

The Argentinians expected and hoped that British interest in the South Atlantic would diminish post-war and sovereignty of the islands would be handed over to them. Britain did in fact want to relinquish its responsibility for the islands and the 1,800 settlers (almost all of British stock) who lived on the Falklands.

BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS

In 1965, the United Nations (UN) passed a resolution requesting that Britain and Argentina negotiate a peaceful solution to the long-standing sovereignty issue. Over the next seventeen years, successive governments and negotiators on both sides sought out a compromise. There were various ideas proposed for sharing or transferring elements of sovereignty but the Falkland Islanders were resistant to ceding any sovereignty to the Argentinians, particularly since Argentina was ruled by a Fascist military junta at the time. Consequently, the British Government found it diplomatically difficult to hand-over the inhabitants, who were British subjects.

By the early 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Government was aggressively cutting back spending during a period of deep economic stress. Specifically, the British Government announced that it was closing down the Antarctic research station on South Georgia Island. Additionally, John Nott, then Minister for Defence, announced sweeping cuts within the Royal Navy including the withdrawal from service of the Antarctic research vessel HMS *Endurance* with no plan for replacement. Perhaps the most surprising decision was the withdrawal of full British citizenship for the Falkland islanders. This decision had actually been introduced to prevent an influx from Hong Kong before its return to China, but the rules were applied to all the British dependencies.

These announcements sent mixed messages to the Argentinians who perceived indifference by the British Government towards its South Atlantic possessions. These events may have helped the Argentinian generals convince themselves that the British might not have the resolve to recover the islands should they seize them by force.

During the same period the Argentinian military government, presiding over a collapsing economy, was forced to introduce austerity measures that incited public demonstrations early in 1982. As these demonstrations became increasingly out-of-hand, the military Junta sensed that it was losing support and even the ability to impose civil law and order. Credibility might be restored, it figured, if it were to appeal to the patriotic values of the Argentinian people through the recovery of what they refer to as "*Las Malvinas*."

What the Argentinian government perceived as a “re-occupation” of sovereign territory, the British government saw as an invasion of British dependent territory. Despite the looming combat, neither side declared war.

THE PREAMBLE: SOUTH GEORGIA

The conflict in South Georgia served as a preamble to the Falklands War. In late 1979, an Argentinian scrap metal dealer named Constantino Davidoff won a contract to salvage a derelict whaling station at Leith on South Georgia. The Argentinian Navy became aware of the opportunity that Davidoff’s contract presented and made arrangements to facilitate his movements as a way of covertly setting up a presence in the islands to challenge British sovereignty. They christened their plans Project Alpha.

Davidoff’s initial journey in December of 1981 to South Georgia Island provoked suspicion by the British who wondered why they had not received notification of his visit until after he departed Buenos Aires, as well as why he failed to answer, or return, radio calls and why his party had not registered its arrival at the British science station in Grytviken, on South Georgia, as required of all visitors. The incident was reported to Governor Rex Masterman Hunt in the Falklands, then administrator of the Falkland Islands dependencies. What the British did not know at the time was that part of the journey was a reconnaissance mission of the Argentinian Navy to test the resolve of the British Foreign Office over a minor sovereignty issue. The actions taken were intentional, not neglectful.

Davidoff returned to South Georgia aboard the Argentinian Navy transport *Bahía Buen Suceso* in January of 1982, after gaining authorization from the British Embassy. Forty-one Argentinian workmen employed by Davidoff accompanied him, arriving at Leith Harbour on 19 March. The British Embassy had advised Davidoff that the captain would have to report to the British Antarctic Survey station at Grytviken upon arrival on British territory. This, again, he did not do. The ship followed the same pattern as the previous journey, failing to observe immigration formalities and travelling in radio silence.

Nearly 1,300 kilometers away in Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, Governor Hunt was beginning to be concerned about the diplomatic turn of events. He requested

that HMS *Endurance*, which had just arrived from Grytviken with a detachment of 22 Royal Marines, return to South Georgia to observe the Argentinian activities at Leith.

While en route, Captain Nicholas Barker of HMS *Endurance*, received a message from London, which he passed on to Lieutenant Keith Mills, saying “The officer commanding Royal Marines is not, repeat not, to take any action which may endanger lives.”⁴ This order confused both Mills and Barker who wondered how they would resist an Argentinian invasion if not allowed to open fire? They returned to Grytviken on 23 March.

The Argentinian perspective was quite different. In one of his more enthusiastic speeches in 1982, after taking the Islands, but prior to the arrival of the British Task Force, Argentinian President/General Leopoldo Galtieri stated that the recovery of the *Malvinas* was only the start of a larger operation aimed at restoring Argentinian greatness and repossession of territories which had been stolen.

Importantly, among Davidoff’s workmen (covertly at first) were a group of tactical divers from the Argentinian Navy’s Special Forces (*Buzo Tactico*) under the command of Lieutenant Commander Alfredo Astiz. Upon their arrival and unloading at Leith, Astiz and his men paraded in uniform, raised the Argentinian flag, and killed indigenous reindeer.

When the lead British scientist, Trevor Edwards, who also acted as the Island’s chief magistrate, went to investigate the rifle shots, he found a wall painted with “*Las Malvinas son Argentinas*” scrawled upon it. He also found a substantial party of 50 mixed civilian and military personnel barbecuing reindeer and an Argentinian flag flying on a makeshift flagpole. British signs warning against illegal entry had been vandalized. A building holding BAS supplies had been broken into and food, stores and equipment had been rummaged through. Edwards immediately reported this news to the authorities in Port Stanley.

Edwards soon thereafter met with Captain Briatore of the Argentinian Navy ship in Leith and delivered a message from his Government in London:

You have landed illegally at Leith without obtaining proper clearance.
You and your party must go back on board the Bahia Buen Suceso

immediately and report to the Base Commander at Grytviken for further instructions. You must remove the Argentinian flag from Leith. You must not interfere with the British Antarctic Survey depot at Leith. You must not alter or deface any of the notices at Leith. No military personnel are allowed to land on South Georgia and no firearms are to be taken ashore.⁵

The Argentinians reluctantly lowered their flag but no attempt was made to report to the Base Commander at Grytviken.

Governor Hunt reported the Argentinian actions to the Foreign Office and expressed his concerns that Davidoff's second infringement should be grounds for a full removal of his team regardless of whether the Argentinians acquiesced at that point. Hunt also suggested that if Davidoff's team did not respond, that HMS *Endurance* should be deployed back to Leith to enforce the removal. The Foreign Office quickly became involved, informing the Argentinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the incident was regarded with the utmost seriousness and that if the *Bahía Buen Suceso* did not comply with the removal order, Britain would take whatever actions it deemed necessary. The first action was to deploy the HMS *Endurance* and her complement of Royal Marines to Leith as reinforcement.

The Argentinian government assured the British that the team would be removed and on 22 March, the *Bahía Buen Suceso* departed. What the British did not yet know was that 39 members of the Argentinian team remained in place on the island. The Captain of HMS *Endurance*, Nicholas Barker, claimed that he heard the Argentinian Navy send radio congratulations to the *Bahía Buen Suceso* for a successful operation. On 23 March, HMS *Endurance* arrived at Grytviken with instructions to keep the Argentinians under surveillance by helicopter but to take no offensive action.

Tensions were escalating rapidly on both sides. The Argentinian Foreign Minister, complaining that the presence of *Endurance* was a threat unacceptable to his superiors in Buenos Aires, consequently dispatched a corvette warship to intercept *Endurance* if she removed Davidoff's party from Leith. Military assistance for Davidoff's crew arrived on the 24th, aboard the *Bahía Paraiso* along with two helicopters.

THE MAIN TARGET – THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

With the situation in South Georgia heating up, the Argentinian military Junta decided on 24 March to enact their plans to invade the Falkland Islands. The timing of this invasion was critical; if they delayed, it would give the British time to bring in military assets to deal with the escalating crisis in South Georgia. Importantly, these forces could be diverted to resist the Argentinians on the Falklands. Furthermore, the Argentinians were aware that the British were considering sending a submarine to back up the *Endurance*. If the Argentinians were going to launch an invasion it had to be done while the islands were relatively undefended.

During these deliberations, in the backdrop was the continuing growing demonstrations that were taking to the streets in Argentina. As a result, Galtieri gambled and launched the invasion. He believed that the military intervention would distract the focus of every day Argentinians away from the existing and growing domestic problems in the country and direct their focus towards a long-standing international dispute in the vain hope that the Government could replace domestic discontent with a sense of nationalism. As it prepared for the invasion, the Argentinian Government deflected international concern by asserting that its ships were leaving for a naval exercise. The truth, however, was that they had taken live ammunition and supplies and had only one goal in mind.

Meanwhile, in Britain, the Thatcher Government remained unconvinced that war was inevitable. It suspected only that the Argentinians were testing British resolve over the sovereignty of South Georgia. It had not anticipated that the Falklands might be the actual target. The British assumed that if they avoided direct confrontation the situation could be contained. What they did not realise was that the situation had already escalated beyond a peaceful resolution. The British did not discover that the Falkland Islands were the intended target until 31 March, when it was already too late.

The first hammer fell a few days later. In the middle of the night on 2 April 1982, 150 members of *Buzo Tactico*, the Argentinian Special Forces (SF) Group landed by helicopter close to the only military barracks on the Falkland Islands. This garrison, comprised of 70 Royal Marine Commandos, called Naval Party 8901, normally consisted of 30 Royal Marine Commandos. However, the garrison was in the process of rotating the existing detachment (who had been stationed on the Falkland Islands

for a period of 12 months) with a new detachment, when the Argentinians invaded the Falklands. After a number of firefights with a superior number of invading Argentinian forces, Governor Rex Hunt, ordered the Royal Marine Commando detachment to surrender rather than risk the possibility of civilian casualties.

On 12 April 1982, the British Government imposed a Maritime Exclusion Zone (MEZ). On 23 April, the British Government clarified its position by asserting that any Argentinian ship or aircraft that was considered a threat to British forces would be immediately engaged. To ensure the message was fully understood, the message was passed via the Swiss Embassy in Buenos Aires directly to the Argentinian Government.

A Total Exclusion Zone (TEZ) was declared by the United Kingdom seven days later. This zone covered a radius of 200 nautical miles (i.e. 370 kilometres/230 miles) from the centre of the Falkland Islands. Any vessel or aircraft from “any” country entering the zone could be fired upon without prior warning. The TEZ was an extension of the MEZ, covering the same area. This declaration was significant. It meant that any Argentinian warship or naval auxiliary entering the MEZ could be attacked by British nuclear-powered submarines (SSN).

US Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, attempted to mediate between the two nations throughout the month, but on 30 April 1982, his mission was officially terminated. President Ronald Reagan declared US support for Britain and introduced economic sanctions against Argentina. Despite the efforts to prevent war between Argentina and Britain, it was inevitable that Argentina was going to occupy the Falkland Islands.

The British Foreign Office argued that the Government should try and negotiate a deal to offload the diplomatic liability of the Islands. It was at this point that Sir Henry Leach, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, decisively intervened. He convinced the Prime Minister that Britain might not be able to save the Islands from invasion, but that it had the capability of retaking them if the government acted swiftly and committed its naval assets to the task. Consequently, Thatcher gave Leach the necessary authority to organize a Task Force designed to recover the Falkland Islands.



Concurrently, Governor Hunt, just prior to the invasion of the Falkland Islands, had the foresight to dispatch a small group of Royal Marine (RM) Commandos onboard HMS *Endurance* to travel to South Georgia in an attempt to impede any future Argentinian incursion of British dependency territories. As soon as Argentina's true plans became evident to the British Government, HMS *Endurance* was ordered back to the Falklands at top speed to reinforce the Royal Navy. However, Lieutenant Mills and his Royal Marines were left on South Georgia to protect the BAS staff and resist Argentinian attempts to take the Island. Steve Martin, the BAS manager, remained in charge as long as there were no signs of "kinetic" activity (combat). In that eventuality, Mills would take command. The Government took this decision despite the fact that Mills had far from clear orders from London with regard to the level of resistance that he should provide. The RM Commandos were instructed only to remain at King Edward Point until advised otherwise. The British Government did not wish the force to accidentally escalate the situation further.

By 2 April, *Endurance* received word that the Argentinians had invaded Port Stanley. Having missed the window of opportunity in the Falklands, Captain Barker turned the *Endurance* around and headed back to Grytviken as quickly as possible. That same day, Lieutenant Commander Astiz assembled his troops and informed them that the *Malvinas* had been retaken from the British and South Georgia was from that day forward part of Argentina and was to be called *Isla San Pedro*. The Argentinian national anthem was played as their flag was raised. Astiz then radioed Steve Martin, the BAS team leader in Grytviken:

Following our successful operation in the Malvinas, your ex-governor has unconditionally surrendered the Falkland Islands and its dependencies. We suggest you adopt a similar course of action to prevent further loss of life. A cease fire is now in force.⁶

In actuality, the governor had not surrendered the dependencies, nor was there a cease-fire in effect.

ENTER "D" SQUADRON 22 SPECIAL AIR SERVICE

"D" Squadron, 22 Special Air Service (SAS) was the standby squadron for all international SF related missions. They had the responsibility of being ready

to move in a matter of hours directly to an area of operation that required the deployment of UK Special Forces. At the start of April 1982, all members of “D” Squadron were spread out across the UK either undergoing personnel skills training, or on seasonal leave. As for myself, I was working in a large hospital in northern England completing another medical refresher. Little did I realize at the time I was about to put this refresher training to some significant use during the weeks and months ahead. As we had rehearsed many times in the past, Squadron personnel were immediately contacted and given approximately five to seven hours to return to base in Hereford to be briefed before deployment.

Whilst enroute to Hereford most of the Squadron envisaged that we were being recalled primarily to provide SF assistance to support the UK Government’s intended course of action and response to the Argentinian forces that had just landed on the Falkland Islands on 3 April. What we did not realize at the time was that the UK would hastily assemble a large naval Task Force, sail almost 13,000 kilometres south and retake the Falkland Islands, by force, from Argentina.

Pre-Deployment Briefing

It was quite the sight to see the whole Squadron sitting in the regimental briefing room anticipating and surmising our future roles as a result of the recent events. Despite the fact that the Squadron had been spread out throughout the UK, the mere mention of the possibility of being involved in a major operation (albeit a conventional war setting) had all members of the Squadron streaming back to base and sitting in a briefing room at 0700 hours, on a typical cold and rainy Hereford day in anticipation of what the future held for us.

The Director of UK Special Forces took to the stage and commenced his briefing. It was obvious from the tone of the briefing that there was little available intelligence with regard to what was happening, or what our role would be in any future operation. Additionally, we were surprised to see that our Commanding Officer (CO) was not at the briefing. We didn’t realize at the time that the CO was in London attempting to convince the Government to agree to have the SAS actively involved in any future operation that was still in the initial planning stages.

The briefing itself was more about rhetoric, including who we were, our capabilities and a short history of past SAS operations. It was also suggested that ammunition

was far more important than food (go figure!). Additionally, we should not carry heavy weights whilst on operations and that we should keep our equipment weight to roughly 40 pounds. Little did we realize at the time, the weight we were going to have to carry was double the maximum suggested and on occasion, triple.⁷

At the end of the briefing, the Director wished us all good luck, said he would have our backs and that we would have his full support throughout the campaign. Unfortunately, at that time, little did we realize what he meant, but we were to learn later in the conflict that we were being signed on to execute “mission impossible” tasks, without the benefit of discussion or first refusal.

Deploying Special Forces in Support of a Conventional War Scenario

The Government made the final decision to assemble a carrier-led naval Task Force and deploy it to the South Atlantic on 31 March 1982. Five days later, “D” squadron 22 SAS departed for Ascension Island and subsequently deployed as part of Task Force 317 on 9 April.

It was obvious from the outset of the Falklands conflict that this was going to be a conventional war, yet in the years leading up to the Falklands War the SAS had not been involved in any type of conventional related operations. In fact, the last time the SAS fought in what could be argued to be a conventional type operational situation was in the early 1970s in Oman. So the question was, would this fact impede the SAS’s ability to operate in a conventional SF operational role? The obvious answer was a definitive “yes.” The next question was, could the SAS quickly adapt to a more conventional type of operation? Quite simply, they would have to, and very quickly.

Concept of SF Operations

SF operations consist of small groups of operators working behind enemy lines for weeks/months on end. A four-man SF patrol could do just as much damage as a larger military formation of regular troops. This concept of operations was refined throughout World War II and subsequent small limited bush wars throughout the world up to and including the 1980s. The actual number of SF operators and their units has always been classified, but unlike the US Special Forces, they number in the hundreds, not the thousands.

SF Conventional and Non-Conventional Roles

During the Falklands campaign the following SF roles were executed:

- Strategic and Tactical Intelligence Gathering (by conducting active fighting patrols and covert Observation Posts)
- Close Target Reconnaissance of Identified Facilities and Targets
- Direct Action Attacks against Static Targets and Opportunity Targets
- Diversionary Raids to Confuse, Delay or Inhibit Enemy Movement
- Harassment and Direct Action Attacks
- Domination of No-Mans-Land between Enemy Positions
- Sabotage or Destruction of Critical Facilities (active airfields, communication lines, fuel storage areas, command and control locations)
- Direct Forward Air Control of Fighter Aircraft and Naval Gunfire Support against Identified Targets

As the Falklands campaign was predominantly a conventional war environment, other SF skills including counter terrorism operations, kidnapping of enemy personnel for intelligence purposes, close protection and specialized training were not employed.

SF Command and Control

During World War II experience demonstrated that SF operations should always be commanded and coordinated at the highest level in whatever operational environment they were operating and not under the influence or direction of bureaucratic staff or operations officers. SF units should, whenever possible, have direct access to the top of the military hierarchy. Fortunately, for UK SF units, this level of access continues to survive today, but, unfortunately, during the Falklands campaign it severely inhibited some SF operations due to the complexity, convoluted non-SF command structures and the experience and personality of individual commanders.

SF Operating Environments

All SF operators are trained and capable of operating and surviving with a minimal amount of support in all anticipated operational environments and to this end,

they are constantly required to maintain their operational tempo by continually operating and training worldwide, in classified and sometimes high-risk environments. Without the ability to operate in all environments, the operational deployments of SF units would be severely inhibited.

SF Operations

SF operations demand a particular skill, some will say a certain amount of imagination and willpower to complete a mission. It is through the selection process that SF units hope to find the right calibre of men and women for conducting such operations.

SF Selection Processes

The majority of SF units around the world operate on the same premise: to find men and women who have initiative, self-discipline, independence of mind, stamina, patience, a sense of humour and the ability to work without supervision. In addition to these qualities, SF operators must have the personality to enable them to endure loneliness and hardship without deteriorating. An example of this was when I attended my SAS selection course in which over 185 individuals commenced selection and nine months later only eight officers and men had successfully passed the selection and continuation process that allowed them to be formally badged into the SAS.

There are many reasons why SF operations are usually successful and this is primarily due to the fact that they are the product of good intensive planning and skilful execution. SF units are unique in that they can carry out missions way beyond the capabilities of more traditional military units. This is why SF units planning and training is continually focused on asymmetric warfare tactics, usually employing small SF teams to exploit and attack identified enemy weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

The Rationale of Deploying an SAS Group to the Falklands War

When “D” squadron, 22 SAS departed for the South Atlantic, discussions were still proceeding at senior government levels regarding how the UK was going to respond

to the Argentinian invasion. It was not 7 April 1982, that Prime Minister Thatcher ordered the Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS), Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse, to plan for the recapture of the Falkland Islands and other regional British dependencies.

Interestingly, the deployment of 22 SAS to the Falklands was carried out entirely on the initiative of the 22 SAS CO, who upon hearing of the invasion of the Falkland Islands immediately commenced to lobby senior members of the British Government that he had an SAS squadron on immediate standby, ready to deploy at short notice. He also realized that this would be primarily a Royal Navy and Royal Marine Commando-focused operation, so he took the initiative to ensure that the SAS would be invited to this operation. Without this direct intervention by the CO, there would have been little chance that the SAS would have even been considered or utilized during this conflict, particularly, during the early stages of the planning process.⁸

Additionally, the CO found it necessary to communicate the specialized capabilities of his Regiment, as well as the urgent requirement to infiltrate SF operators into the Falkland Islands well in advance of any future Task Force landing. Planning for SF operations needed to begin immediately to enable SF to provide vital on-the-ground information to assist with future campaign planning processes. Without field level intelligence it would be difficult for the commanders to successfully plan for the retaking of the Falkland Islands.

It must be remembered that a significant number of senior government ministers, bureaucrats, and senior military officers within the UK government and the Ministry of Defence, did not fully understand, or were even aware of, the role and capabilities of their own SF units. This situation was unfortunately due to a number of reasons:

1. SF are predominantly utilized as strategic assets and usually operate in isolation and had been conducting covert operations globally on a need-to-know basis without the knowledge of senior members of the UK government or military;
2. SF usually reported to the highest strategic command element within their tactical area of operations;

3. SF rarely operated, coordinated or communicated with conventional forces or within conventional chains-of-command;
4. SF communications reported directly within their own communication chain-of-command;
5. SF do not get involved with the inter-service rivalry syndrome; and
6. SF do not advertise their capabilities, or operations, unless required to do so, and they always operate on a strictly “need to know” basis.

To this point, the SAS had never exercised or operated with elements of the RN or RM Commandos, as this was the domain of the Special Boat Section (SBS), now known as the Special Boat Service, and at the time of the Falklands campaign there was very little interaction between these two front line SF units. That was to change. It was obvious from the outset of the campaign that the SAS were going to be required to interact and operate with other units of the British military, which included the Army, RN, RM Commandos, and Royal Air Force (RAF).⁹ Additionally, they would be required to operate within other conventional units’ tactical areas of responsibility (TAOR). This lack of prior experience had a profound impact on the SAS’s ability to work cohesively, coordinate and operate with other units, including the SBS.¹⁰

During the initial planning phases there was a general consensus at a senior command level that the retaking of the Falkland Islands would be a joint RN and RM Commando operation, utilizing 3 Commando Brigade, consisting of 40 Commando RM, 42 Commando RM, 45 Commando RM, SBS elements, the RM Mountain, Arctic Warfare Cadre and associated logistical and air asset resources. During these early stages no consideration was given to the involvement of any British Army regiments, including the SAS.

Pre-Campaign Intelligence Failures

The Secret Intelligence Service (SIS/MI6) had failed to give any advanced warning to the Government of an impending Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands, which caught the British Prime Minister and her conservative government off-guard. The SIS had ignored its own intelligence reports and entirely dismissed any intelligence as being an Argentinian Government negotiation tactic. During an

earlier review of contingency plans, the SIS had informed SAS Group Headquarters that no scenario was being considered that would deem it necessary to deploy SF assets to the Falkland Islands. Unfortunately, less than six weeks later Argentina forces landed on the Falkland Islands.¹¹

Ascension Island

On 4 April 1982, “D” Squadron, 22 SAS flew out of the UK on an RAF Vickers VC10 aircraft to Wideawake Airfield on Ascension Island. The flight to Ascension was anything but smooth; the aircraft was crammed full of our operational equipment and stores, which resulted in it being almost impossible to move between our seats and the toilet. Towards the end of the flight, due to weight and the distance flown from the UK, the pilot announced that as we were at the extreme limit of the aircraft he was required to gain more altitude so that in the event we ran out of fuel, we could glide into Wideawake Airfield on the remaining fumes. We later learned that he was not joking.

It soon became apparent that we were going to be the first British troops on the ground following the invasion. In the absence of any formal briefings, intelligence or otherwise, we had absolutely no idea of our actual role, or even more importantly, the future intentions of the British Government and, like so many times before, we found ourselves moving into unknown waters.

Most of the Squadron had already transited through Ascension Island on numerous occasions on their way to, or returning from, other operations around the world. Due to its size and location, Ascension was eventually used as the Task Force staging area for Operation Corporate, the code name for the mission to take back the Falkland Islands from the Argentinians.

Preparation for War

Having settled in on Ascension Island, we were accommodated in a nearby school and provided with camp beds for sleeping. Absolute luxury! Almost immediately, we commenced to test fire and zero all our weaponry. As we were most likely to be infiltrated into the Falkland Islands by helicopter or boat, our boat troop commenced to reacquaint us with the Gemini inflatable boats.¹²

Due to the ruggedness of the mountainous terrain of Ascension Island, a fitness regimen was commenced immediately, which consisted of speed marching long distances carrying heavy loads in our Bergen rucksacks. Additional 7.62mm link ammunition for the General Purpose Machine Guns (GPMG), 81mm mortar bombs and 66mm light antitank weapons (LAW) were also carried during these training marches. Accompanying “D” Squadron to Ascension Island was a large detachment of regimental signalers and approximately 30 tons of operational equipment. All these assets proved to be extremely valuable as the campaign began to unfold.

During our short time on Ascension we had to rely heavily on the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other media outlets to provide us with information as to what was actually taking place on the Falkland Islands. Throughout the whole of the campaign, intelligence was a major concern at both strategic and tactical levels. As one of the SF main roles was to provide tactical field intelligence to enable ground commanders to effectively plan their actions, continual reliance on the BBC World Service for information was necessary until we could physically infiltrate SF operatives into the intended battle space on the Falkland Islands, which was not very comforting.

Due to the fact that the Squadron had been on leave for over a month, it was essential to quickly get our fitness back to the required standard, as we did not know how long we would be remaining on Ascension before deploying further south to the Falkland Islands. Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to regain any of our usual high level of fitness; within four days of arriving on Ascension the Squadron deployed onto a small Task Force of RN ships and sailed further south into the South Atlantic. What was more disconcerting was the fact that our mission had still not been clearly identified or defined.

Due to the initial size of the overall operational SF contingent, it became necessary to split SF resources amongst a number of the ships sailing south, which included HMS *Antrim*, HMS *Plymouth*, Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) *Fort Austin* (fleet stores ship) and RFA *Tidespring* (fuel tanker). Once the cross decking of troops was completed, Task Force 317 finally set sail and commenced to travel southward towards the Falkland Islands and the unknown. So we settled back and enjoyed the pre-paid South Atlantic cruise while we were still transiting through warmer climes and calmer seas.

As all these pre-operational activities were occurring on Ascension Island, the overall strategic planning process continued to be discussed and evolved in the UK. At the time we departed from Britain there was still no operational planning in place, except at senior government and Ministry of Defense levels. Once the initial plan to retake the Falkland Islands had been formulated, a realization materialized of the need for a naval Task Force to be quickly assembled and ground force units identified and made ready for immediate dispatch.



The Operational Environment

Who is the Enemy? At the time, little did anyone realize that our main enemy was not going to be the Argentinians, but rather the weather. Almost as soon as we arrived in the immediate area of South Georgia (the presence of icebergs gave it away) we realized that we were ill-prepared to conduct SF operations in terms of the operating environment. Our previous experience, training and equipment had not prepared us for what lay ahead. Like most SF units we had been thoroughly trained to operate in all types of operational environments, whether that be jungle, desert, mountain, urban or rural areas. Additionally, we were well-trained and were fully capable of operating in both extreme cold and hot environments around

the world. While we were prepared to operate and fight in this new environment, we were required to do so utilizing the same weapons, equipment and technologies we had utilized in other not so adverse operational environments.

OPERATION PARAQUET – THE RECAPTURE OF SOUTH GEORGIA ISLAND

South Georgia – where is it? And, what has it to do with the invasion of the Falkland Islands? This was the question the members of the Squadron were asking themselves when we were finally briefed on Operation Paraquet. South Georgia is approximately 170 kilometres long and 30 kilometres wide. It consists of mountainous terrain and it is in close proximity to the Antarctic which makes it geographically and climatically very different from the Falkland Islands. It is bleak and continually buffeted by 160 kilometre per hour winds carrying ice and snow particles. As soon as we arrived in the area we became acutely aware that we were neither equipped, nor trained for this type of hostile environment.

The operational plan, however, was simple enough. We were to reclaim South Georgia by deployment of a RN Task Force consisting of the destroyer HMS *Antrim*, the frigate HMS *Plymouth*, the supply ship *RFA Fort Austin* and the fuel tanker *RFA Tidespring*. The Task Force also included a RM Commando rifle company, an SBS section and “D” Squadron, 22 SAS. HMS *Endurance* was already on station in the area.

Despite the Task Force being in the area of South Georgia for a couple of days, the British Government had not given its approval for the execution of Operation Paraquet. In fact, it was not 20 April 1982, that approval was finally granted. The reason given for this delay was that the Government wanted to allow more time for ongoing diplomatic intercession to be effective. Operation Paraquet officially commenced on 21 April 1982.

The SF elements were initially tasked to carry out a series of covert reconnaissance missions to provide intelligence and support for the planning of a RM Commando operation to recapture South Georgia. The Argentinian garrison was believed to be approximately 50 strong and supposedly located in the area of the former Grytviken and Leith settlement areas. There were also intelligence reports that indicated

an Argentinian submarine, *Santa Fe*, was operating in the area. Needless to say these reports prompted the Task Force ships to rendezvous some distance from South Georgia.

Alan Bell



View from Grytviken.

The Falkland Islands themselves were not to be the first target for Task Force (TF) 317; the first phase was reserved for South Georgia. The decision to retake that island from the occupying Argentinian military was counter to the wishes of senior British military commanders as it was seen as a no-win situation. The risk of committing a small assault force to the open sea with minimal support and so far removed from the main Task Force far outweighed any strategic value. But, there was a requirement from the British Government for some kind of immediate, successful military action, and so Operation Paraquet was conceived and planned while TF 317 was sailing south towards South Georgia Island.¹³

South Georgia itself had absolutely no strategic value in the overall conflict. However, if a small Task Force could retake South Georgia successfully with minimal casualties, the resulting action could be positioned to provide a swift, relatively easy victory for the Government in advance of the arrival of the main

Task Force, which was making its way towards the South Atlantic on its epic six-week journey. As such, on 12 April, TF 317 rendezvoused with HMS *Endurance* and HMS *Brilliant* 1,600 kilometres north of South Georgia and started to move towards the objective area. At this time, all ground forces and their respective command elements had been split amongst different Task Force ships prior to the voyage south and it was now necessary to bring all these units together to enable the operational planning process to begin. This required the cross decking of ground forces between the various Task Force ships to ensure that they were all on the correct ship prior to the commencement of Operation Paraquet.

The Mission

During the voyage we were eventually advised that the TF 317 mission was “to retake South Georgia from Argentinian forces.” To achieve this mission, British SF would provide support to multiple landings by a RM Commando rifle company from 45 Commando RM. Once South Georgia had been retaken, the mission of the RM Commandos would change to preventing any further landings by Argentinian forces.

Composition Task Force 317

The naval elements included:

- HMS *Antrim* (RN Destroyer)
- HMS *Plymouth* (RN Frigate)
- HMS *Endurance* (RN Ice Patrol Vessel)
- HMS *Conqueror* (RN SSN Submarine)
- HMS *Brilliant* (RN Destroyer) joined up with Task Force 317 when it arrived in the operational area.
- RFA *Tidespring*
- RFA *Fort Austin*

Ground Forces assigned to recapture of South Georgia included;

- “D” squadron, 22 SAS
- 2 SBS
- Royal Marine Commando detachment onboard HMS *Antrim*
- “M” company, 42 Commando Royal Marines
- Approximately 65 men in total.

The Initial Planning Phases

To be effective, SF operations have to rely on a number of vital factors including command and control, communications and intelligence. Unfortunately, during most of the planning phases of Operation Paraquet we found it difficult to incorporate most of these SF principles because of the reliance on other (non-SF) entities outside of the usual SF chain-of-command. This dependency sometimes resulted in our inability to get consensus, successfully plan, coordinate and execute SF operational planning priorities.

Before any attack on South Georgia could take place, the overall commander of TF 317 urgently required information on enemy strengths and locations, particularly in the areas around the settlements at Leith, Stromness, Grytviken and King Edward Point. It was finally decided that the SAS would carry out covert reconnaissance of Leith and Stromness, while the SBS would carry out covert reconnaissance of Grytviken and King Edward Point. During the initial planning phases it was estimated that the covert reconnaissance would take approximately five to six days to complete.

We had been made aware that there was a small scientific team located at the BAS base located at King Edward Point and we were also later informed that there were two female British filmmakers somewhere in the area making a survival film for a UK television station. The RN ice patrol vessel HMS *Endurance* was permanently stationed in the South Atlantic, which had been supporting the Falkland Islands, as well as the other UK South Atlantic dependencies for many years. Just prior to the invasion of the Falklands a small RM Commando force was sent to protect Grytviken. HMS *Endurance* had remained in the immediate area monitoring Argentinian communications and sending vital intelligence back to the

UK. It was also maintaining contact with the BAS base on King Edward Point, and the two filmmakers.

Since the invasion of the Falkland Islands, HMS *Endurance* had been ordered by the British Government to keep a low-profile and to remain 50-60 kilometres out at sea. It rendezvoused with Task Force 317 on 12 April north of South Georgia.

Command and Control

The diverse command and control elements for Operation Paraquet were extremely complex. The majority of the commanders had no experience operating with, or supporting, SF operations. The overall commander of Naval TF 317, Captain Brian Young of the HMS *Antrim*, was the de facto commander of the mission to recapture South Georgia. The commander of the ground forces was Major Guy Sheridan, RM, second-in-command of 42 Commando RM.

The command and control problems as a result of having “too many commanders” in the TF had all the hallmarks of a disaster in the making. SAS assets were under the command of the “D” Squadron commander; SBS assets under the command of the officer commanding (OC) 2 SBS; “M” company was under the command of the second-in-command of 42 Commando RM; and the RM Commando detachment onboard HMS *Antrim* was under the command of that ship’s captain. The “D” Squadron commander was in reality his own boss as there were no RM or RN officers with the experience to question his decisions with regard to the deployment of SF assets. An additional command and control problem was the fact that most of the SF assets and RM Commando troops were split up amongst all the TF 317 ships. This made detailed planning and briefings very difficult.

Communications

During the early stages of deployment, all communications (except for SAS communications) were linked directly with Headquarters Commander-in-Chief of the Fleet (HQ C-in-C Fleet) in the UK. Due to the type of tactical communication equipment carried by SAS patrols, communication was directly from SAS operatives on the ground to their own operational base in the UK. This caused a significant number of problems throughout the campaign and initially the SAS had to rely on the naval ships communications systems.

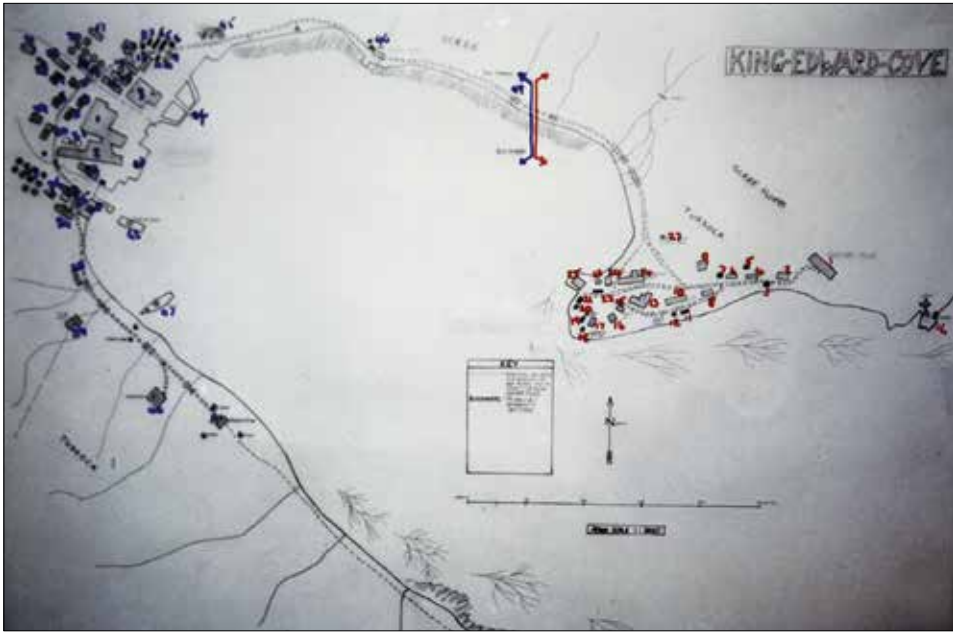
Unfortunately, communications that were passed between TF 317 ships and the separate embarked ground forces had a habit of disappearing before being read or actioned by the respective SAS sub-unit commanders. At times, this situation resulted in confusion, misdirection and a total inability to relay tactical information to SAS operators involved in the overall planning process to retake South Georgia.

With all SF communications being strategic, SF units were reporting regularly through their usual chain-of-command to their UK base. Once those messages were received they were then forwarded to (HQ C-in-C Fleet) at Northwood for dissemination to the various ship captains and ground force commanders. This sequence of information passage is how it should have worked in principle, but unfortunately information that was sent back from SF observation posts (OPs) somehow was lost, or misdirected, and was not passed on to the correct ground force commanders.

Once deployed on the ground SF teams continued to provide vital information for ground commanders, but unfortunately vital intelligence was not passed onto a number of these individuals and the information was subsequently lost in the “fog of war.” The ultimate blame for the inability of the command communication elements in the UK to forward vital intelligence finally eventually fell on the individual SF patrol commanders who were operating on the ground.

Intelligence Requirements

Intelligence is the key factor for the planning of any military operation, but unfortunately it was in short supply. Fortunately for the Task Force, the Argentinians had decided to use King Edward Point, Grytviken as their main base, the same location where the BAS station was located. This ensured an intelligence windfall for the TF 317 commander, who had access to BAS personnel and a considerable amount of local area knowledge and intelligence. This intelligence became a vital factor to the initial planning process. The majority of these individuals had recently been evacuated from the BAS base and they were able to provide a wealth of human intelligence (HUMINT). Unfortunately, a considerable amount of this local knowledge was ignored, not used or discarded as opinion.



Alan Bell

Sketch of King Edward Cove showing Grytviken and King Edward Point drawn by BAS personnel.

Intelligence reports had indicated that the Argentinian force occupying South Georgia was commanded by the naval engineering officer Lieutenant Commander Astiz and consisted of approximately 40-50 Argentinian Marines. It was obvious from the outset of the operation that there was no way this small number of Argentinian forces could possibly occupy and control the whole of South Georgia and it was more likely that all they could achieve was to maintain small garrisons at a number of the smaller settlement areas including Leith, Grytviken and Stromness. It was determined that these three locations were going to be the initial focus of SF operations upon arrival in the area.

The Plan

Before a plan could be formulated it was necessary to conduct covert reconnaissance of a number of locations. We believed that there was an Argentinian military presence at Leith and Grytviken. Additionally, Stromness was added to the list as it was reported that over 40 Argentinian scrap metal workers were still located

at this location protected by Argentinian marines. However, at that time it was also believed that the main Argentinian military garrisons would be at Leith and Grytviken.

The initial assault plan called for SF to conduct diversionary attacks against identified targets, while the main amphibious and air assault would be conducted by “M” Company, 42 Commando RM, who would launch a ground and air assault directly against the BAS base at King Edward Point, Grytviken. Unfortunately, due to a number of mitigating circumstances and questionable decisions this was not how things turned out.

PHASE ONE – INSERTION OF SF RECONNAISSANCE TEAMS

Before any of the SF reconnaissance teams could be deployed it was necessary to move SF assets between TF 317 ships. This cross-decking activity was required to ensure that the correct SF assets were co-located with the appropriate air assets. Once this had been successfully completed the reconnaissance teams could then be infiltrated into their assigned target areas. At this time, there were only two possible options for infiltrating SF reconnaissance teams into their identified target areas. Option one involved insertion by helicopter and option two involved a sea insertion by small boat.

Unfortunately, as most SF operators are fully aware, the development of a tactical plan is like a game of chess; everything is fine until your opponent makes a move that you did not anticipate that results in the plan having to be radically changed. This situation manifested itself many times during Operation Paraquet and once again highlighted the fact that SF operators must be trained to be flexible and work with whatever is available, in addition to having to deal with unexpected circumstances.

“D” Squadron mountain troop operatives had already been cross-decked onto HMS *Endurance*. This reconnaissance patrol was to be inserted by three RN helicopters directly onto Fortuna Glacier to the north of Leith to carry out a covert reconnaissance of the Leith settlement area. Simultaneously, 2 SBS personnel were to fly by helicopter, or by Gemini assault boats, into Hound Bay and make their way via Moraine Fjord to Grytviken.



Sketch of Leith Whaling Station drawn by BAS personnel.

Once again the weather played a major part in the infiltration of SF patrols into the target area as the two helicopters transporting the SBS team were unable to climb over a mountain due to a blizzard and white-out conditions, so they had to return back to the Task Force. After several hours of waiting for the weather to improve, the team decided to insert by Gemini inflatable assault boats.

The ground assault force commander decided that “M” Company, 42 Commando RM, who were located on RFA *Tidespring*, would act as the immediate Quick Reaction Force (QRF) during Phase 2, (the pre-attack reconnaissance phase) of the operation. Unfortunately, as a result of an Argentinian submarine threat, RFA *Tidespring* was forced to relocate some 300 kilometres north of South Georgia Island, which meant that all SF reconnaissance teams would be required to operate without the benefit of QRF support.

There were only limited SF assets assigned to TF 317 and most of these would be required to be deployed on reconnaissance missions. Operating without a QRF response capability to support SF teams meant that if any of the SF teams were found in a contact situation with Argentinian forces, they would be on their own. All SF patrols were briefed that they should plan to operate completely independently. Nothing new about this!

This situation, unfortunately, was to be the theme throughout the whole of the Falklands campaign; SF teams were required to operate without QRF support, and their wounded operators were not immediately evacuated despite being advised to the contrary prior to departing on each and every mission.

PHASE TWO – PRE-ATTACK RECONNAISSANCE

On 14 April, planning commenced to deploy covert reconnaissance teams into the Leith and Grytviken settlement areas to determine the strength and dispositions of Argentinian troops, if any. This operation was to be carried out by patrols from the SAS and the SBS. Utilizing local HUMINT we determined that the primary objective would be Grytviken, as this was where the BAS base was located. The RAF located on Ascension Island had carried out photo reconnaissance but, unfortunately, we did not receive any of the photographs so we were required to utilize sketch maps that had been hand drawn by BAS personnel to assist with planning.

We believed that the Argentinians could possibly have been aware of, or had anticipated, TF 317's intended mission to retake South Georgia as they immediately dispatched an additional 40 Argentinian marines onboard one of their submarines, the *Santa Fe*, to reinforce the Grytviken garrison. By the time TF 317 arrived in the general area of South Georgia, the Argentinian marines had already landed and reinforced the Argentinian garrison around Grytviken.

Due to the extreme weather conditions in and around South Georgia, SF infiltration options were extremely limited. After much reflection we determined that there were only two possible options for consideration with regards to the method of infiltration of the reconnaissance teams.

RECONNAISSANCE TEAM – HELICOPTER INSERTION – FORTUNA GLACIER

The Squadron Commander decided to insert an SAS patrol from "D" Squadron's mountain troop by helicopter directly onto Fortuna Glacier. The glacier was located approximately 711 kilometres west of Grytviken and had been reported to be an excellent position for observing the Leith settlement. Unfortunately, due to its location, the glacier had a reputation of being suddenly buffeted by extreme katabatic winds. As such, those familiar with it considered it extremely inaccessible. However, from a tactical point of view it would be a good location to establish an observation post as the likelihood of being compromised by the Argentinians was extremely low. Prior to leaving on this mission the patrol was strongly advised by BAS personnel not to attempt to land or operate on the glacier due to the likelihood of extreme weather conditions. Unfortunately, the patrol commander disregarded this advice and proceeded with the mission.



Figure 4.1 – Fortuna Glacier

The insertion of this reconnaissance team by helicopter proved to be a major and almost fatal error in judgment. Three Wessex helicopters were used to insert the team onto the glacier (Tab 1). The helicopters, having failed on numerous attempts to land, eventually managed to insert the entire reconnaissance team.

During the team's first night on the glacier it was pummelled by a major snowstorm with winds gusting between 75-100 knots. As a result of these adverse weather conditions and the wind-chill factor bordering on extreme high risk, the wind finally destroyed the majority of the team's overhead protection. After surviving for a further 24 hours in blizzard conditions the team radioed that they were unable to successfully move off the glacier and there was an extreme likelihood that they might not be able to survive the remainder of the day.

OC "D" Squadron decided to extract the team utilizing the original three Wessex helicopters. Unfortunately, the weather conditions further deteriorated and a strong driving snowstorm swept across the entire length of the glacier. Obviously, these were not the ideal conditions to conduct a helicopter exfiltration and despite these adverse and dangerous weather conditions the helicopter pilots flew in to pick up the team. After numerous attempts to land on the glacier one of the helicopters was able to land, but as the patrol attempted to enplane, the pilot became disorientated and the helicopter was blown over onto its side. There was zero visibility during the pickup with the wind and snow continuing to blow and less than a minute later a second helicopter was also blown over.

The third helicopter loaded up as many SF operatives as it could, resulting in the helicopter being dangerously over weight. The pilot managed to take off and flew back to HMS *Antrim*. As soon as the pilot disembarked his load, he immediately returned to the glacier to pick up the remaining SF operatives and aircrew. For his courage and bravery extracting not only a large SF team but also the aircrew of the two crashed helicopters, the pilot, Lieutenant Commander Ian Stanley RN was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, the only DSO awarded to a pilot throughout the entire campaign.

This reconnaissance patrol had undoubtedly lost one of their many nine lives during this mission, but they were fortunate to have not incurred any serious casualties or injuries. However, the Task Force had unfortunately lost two major air assets that could have been utilized during the later stages of the operation.

On 23 April, another attempt was made to insert a reconnaissance patrol back onto Fortuna Glacier and this time the insertion was successful. The patrol managed to get useful intelligence that was later used to formulate a plan to assist with the retaking of Leith.

RECONNAISSANCE TEAM – SMALL BOAT INSERTION

At the same time as the SAS patrol was inserted onto the Fortuna Glacier, a decision was made to simultaneously insert SBS reconnaissance teams into the area of the settlement to the south west of Grytviken, utilizing Gemini inflatable assault boats. Gemini outboard engines are known to be unreliable under normal conditions, let alone in the adverse weather conditions of the South Atlantic. The plan was to deploy five Geminis manned by both 2 SBS and “D” Squadron’s boat troop. The SBS mission was to carry out reconnaissance in the area of Hound Bay and then make their way via Moraine Fjord to the outskirts of Grytviken and set up a covert OP (Tab 2).



Figure 4.2 – Covert Observation Post

“D” Squadron’s boat troop’s mission was to move to a position on Grass Island (Tab 3), located in Stromness Bay and look for a suitable covert OP to enable them to observe and monitor any military movement around the Leith settlement. The weather was once again going to be a major impact on the SF ability to successfully infiltrate its reconnaissance teams into their specific target areas.



Figure 4.3 – Grass Island

Within 10 minutes of departing from HMS *Antrim*, “D” Squadron’s boat troop Geminis were hit by force nine katabatic winds that caused the outboard engines to stall. Without the use of their engines the SF team was required to raft up and commenced to paddle towards the nearest landfall.

Only one Gemini was eventually able to make landfall on Grass Island (Tab 3) and immediately returned to sea to assist the other unserviceable boats. This action proved to be their undoing as they were unable to find the other Geminis and their own Gemini was suddenly swamped by a large wave that disabled the engine. As with all the other Geminis, they were required to paddle towards the nearest landfall and eventually made it to the Busen Peninsula where they maintained radio silence until they heard the naval gunfire bombardment at Grytviken. They were eventually picked up by helicopter.

One of the other “D” Squadron boat troop’s Gemini was slowly drifting out to sea and just managed to make landfall on the last piece of land before the open sea and Antarctica. Such was the dedication and training of these teams that they waited for several days before switching on their Sarbe (search and rescue beacon) in case its signals put the overall operation in jeopardy.

COVERT RECONNAISSANCE FAILURES

When SF are deployed and commence to operate in an unknown hostile environment one of the hardest things for them to acquire is local knowledge of their new operating environment, enemy activity and locations, etc. During Operation Paraquet, SF and other ground forces had direct access to both HUMINT and limited intelligence.

HUMINT was provided by BAS personnel and the British film crew who had been living and working in South Georgia for a protracted period of time. Couple this with the knowledge and experience from the crew of HMS *Endurance*, who had been operating in this part of the world for many years, TF 317 had more than enough HUMINT to enable ground force commanders to effectively plan and if required, attack identified enemy positions in a number of settlement areas throughout South Georgia. Unfortunately, a significant amount of this intelligence information was either discounted or ignored and in doing so almost cost the

lives of a large number of SF operators, the loss of air assets and their crews, as well as specialized equipment.

Nonetheless, the weather was the primary enemy throughout Operation Paraquet. Weather conditions dramatically changed minute to minute, making it almost impossible to determine where and when to infiltrate SF reconnaissance teams. This fact alone severely inhibited the Task Force's ability to infiltrate SF teams, both by air and sea, onto South Georgia.

ATTACK ON THE ARGENTINIAN SUBMARINE – *SANTA FE*

On 25 April, a naval helicopter returning from a SF reconnaissance flight sighted an Argentinian submarine, the *Santa Fe*, on the surface cruising away from Grytviken, having just landed 40 plus Argentinian marines to reinforce the Grytviken settlement. The pilot made an instant decision to attack the submarine and subsequently damaged the submarine's conning tower. As a direct result of this attack the *Santa Fe* was unable to submerge and immediately attempted to return to Grytviken. Almost simultaneously, all available helicopters from TF 317 ships launched a series of attacks against the *Santa Fe*; the additional damage sustained further hindered its ability to operate. From a naval perspective the sinking of the Argentinian submarine was considered a high priority, but unfortunately from a ground force perspective this attack had given an early warning to the Argentinians that there was a British Task Force in the vicinity of South Georgia and as such, all elements of surprise for a future ground assault had been suddenly lost.

The attack on the *Santa Fe* created two major tactical problems: 1) the Argentinian garrison in Grytviken was now aware of the presence of British forces in the area; and 2) the current plan being devised envisaged a classic and well-rehearsed RM Commando helicopter and amphibious assault on Grytviken, but unfortunately, due to the loss of surprise there was an immediate requirement to maintain the momentum of the attack against the *Santa Fe* and instantaneously launch a ground force attack against Grytviken, commonly known in SF parlance as an immediate action attack (IA).

The requirement to launch an IA attack presented the ground commanders with a number of serious tactical related problems:

1. the intended RM Commando assault group was currently 350 kilometres away onboard the RFA *Tidespring* and would therefore be unable to mount an immediate direct assault against Grytviken;
2. the majority of SF assets were still spread amongst different ships, some of which did not have the capability to land Wessex helicopters on their decks;
3. an IA plan had not been considered or developed;
4. communications between all available ground force assets had not been co-ordinated, which made the execution of an IA attack difficult to synchronize; and
5. the availability of air assets to transport ground force elements ashore, particularly Wessex helicopters (that were still involved in the attack against the *Santa Fe*) required significant coordination.

PHASE THREE – GROUND ASSAULT ON GRYTVIKEN

The return of the damaged Argentinian submarine caused a considerable amount of shock to the Argentinian garrison, who appeared to become quickly demoralized. Unfortunately for us, the attack against the *Santa Fe* prompted TF 317 to launch an immediate daylight helicopter assault against the Argentinian garrison at Grytviken, which had just recently been reinforced.

The original attack plan had still not been finalized due to problems encountered during the reconnaissance insertion phase and this had resulted in the lack of up-to-date enemy intelligence. There was now an urgent requirement to act decisively and aggressively with extreme force. The SF commander was actively encouraging the Task Force commander to mount an immediate attack on Grytviken with all available ground troops, which, due to the unavailability of the RM Commando group, included all available SF assets.

This decision to attack Grytviken, the largest settlement area on South Georgia, during daylight, without the benefit of having completed exhaustive reconnaissance operations, was not easily made. The settlement was occupied by an unknown number of Argentinian military whose competency to resist an attack was

unknown. We had no information regarding possible defensive positions and the types of weapon systems that could be encountered. Worse yet, it was a mixed bag of SF operators and whatever RM Commandos were available, none of whom had ever worked together before and lacked the ability to communicate between all individual sub-units.

In order to provide some cover for the landing of ground forces the TF 317 Commander decided to commence a naval bombardment of Grytviken. The bombardment consisted of HMS *Antrim* – HMS *Plymouth* and HMS *Brilliant*. Prior to the commencement of the naval bombardment, a Naval Gunfire Support Officer (NGSO) was flown ashore into a location where he could observe the Argentinians within Grytviken. Simultaneously, the ground attack force was preparing to conduct a direct frontal assault against the well-prepared Grytviken garrison.

Once installed, the NGSO quickly directed fire from the 4.5 inch naval guns. This gunfire assisted in neutralizing the area around the identified ground assault force's helicopter landing site, as well as on the slopes of Brown Mountain, directly to the rear of the Grytviken settlement. During the bombardment over 300 rounds were fired into the area around the main BAS buildings and other identified locations. The fire plan had been devised with the intention of harassing the Argentinian forces in the settlement area while at the same time limiting the possibility of Argentinian casualties, as well as not inflicting damage to the BAS base buildings. This demonstration of firepower by the Task Force ships was self-evident and no rounds were brought down any closer than 700 metres from previously identified positions or buildings. It is believed that the Argentinians fully realized that the Task Force ships could have hit them with direct fire had they decided to do so.

On completion of this creeping naval bombardment, Grytviken was finally assaulted by two groups of SF operators supported by HMS *Antrim's* RM Commando detachment. The planned and impromptu helicopter assault proved to be tactically problematic due to the fact that:

1. the helicopter assault had to be conducted in daylight and within direct line of sight from the main target area;
2. ground troops had to be inserted at a considerable distance from the target area as it would have been difficult to insert ground forces close enough to

the final objective without sustaining unacceptable casualties, as well as the potential loss of air assets;

3. the naval bombardment was not permitted to target any of the BAS buildings in Grytviken, as these buildings were to be used by the RM Commandos once South Georgia had been cleared of Argentinian troops; and
4. SF ground forces had been informed just prior to the attack that they were not permitted to engage in house-to-house fighting or fire on any of the static buildings. Needless to say this caused significant consternation amongst the assaulting ground forces who asked, “how do we attack Argentinian forces in defensive positions inside or in close proximity to buildings, which, incidentally were made out of wood, without engaging them?” The instantaneous reply was, “assault softly.”

And so, with speed a necessity, all SF assets remaining onboard Task Force 317 ships hastily formed ad hoc assault teams. This period was very intense and stressful as “time was of the essence.” To ensure that the ground assault teams had sufficient supplies of ammunition to sustain this attack, the SF teams were required to load up with a considerable amount of additional ammunition to enable them to reach their respective objectives. This requirement resulted in SF operators landing with a tremendous amount of weaponry and ammunition, which included 66mm shoulder controlled LAWs and additional numbers of GPMGs. Every SF operator carried a minimum of 1,000 rounds of link ammunition for the GPMGs, a large number of L2 Anti-Personnel grenades, plus personal weapon ammunition for their AR-15s assault rifles and FNC1 self-loading rifles (SLRs).

Against all the principles of street fighting doctrine, SF teams were loaded like donkeys when they finally disembarked from the helicopters and moved into their assigned assault positions. However, there seemed to be little choice. Everyone realized that once the ground assault commenced the chances of receiving an ammunition resupply in the middle of the attack was going to be slim to none. Needless to say, this daylight assault had all the hallmarks of becoming a major military cluster f--- without all the benefits, or a happy ending.

In what was to be the shortest briefing of my entire military career, we were informed that SF teams would be landing by helicopter in close proximity to the

BAS base in Grytviken, and once on the ground they would advance-to-contact towards King Edwards Point and then finally assault the Argentinian Garrison defending the BAS base. Lacking the element of surprise, not having sufficient intelligence on the number of enemy troops, their dispositions on the ground, as well as the overriding requirement to conduct a ground assault during daylight hours, it was obvious to the assault teams that this was going to be quite a thought provoking attack; most certainly not how SF teams are usually utilized or deployed. The saying, “shit or bust,” resonated within the minds of all members of the ground attack team.

Special Forces assets and all available RM Commandos were eventually picked up by Wessex helicopters from their respective ships and flown ashore to their assigned landing sites where they quickly formed up and commenced the assault on Grytviken. As we flew ashore we could see the Task Force ships below continuing their impressive bombardment around Grytviken.

Upon landing, the ground force commander set up his tactical headquarters in the derelict and rusty buildings of the old whaling station. Simultaneously a single 81mm mortar position was set up to cover the advancing ground forces. As briefed, the mortar team had been advised that they could not engage any of the BAS buildings.

The lead SF team commenced to move tactically through the derelict buildings of the old whaling station towards the base of Brown Mountain. Upon arriving at the base of the mountain they immediately encountered a long and narrow 10 metre wide path, which led directly to the final objective: the BAS base on King Edwards Point. This track was approximately 900 metres long and anyone advancing along this track would be completely exposed to effective enemy fire from the area of King Edwards Point. Unfortunately, there was absolutely no available cover along the entire length of the track.

Having made a quick tactical appreciation it was determined that there were very few options open to the ground assault team except to advance along this exposed, long and narrow track. The ground force commander ordered the assault team to drop rucksacks with additional ammunition to enable them to be able to move very quickly along the track without being encumbered by heavy loads.

Amazingly, the ground assault team finally made it to the end of the track without coming under enemy fire, where they immediately went to ground and attempted to rationalize why their approach was uncontested. We later discovered that the Argentinians had mined this track with antipersonnel mines and the team had assaulted through an Argentinian minefield without casualties, or having detonated any of the mines. It was at this time that everyone remembered the old adage, “Time spent in reconnaissance is seldom wasted!”

Once the assault team had negotiated the track they found themselves lying on a piece of open ground. Moreover, running directly in front of them was a large expanse of even more exposed ground. In the middle of this open area there appeared to be a soccer pitch complete with goalposts. While the assault team was getting its bearings and deciding on the next course of action it suddenly became aware of a large formation of Argentinian marines in three ranks standing in the middle of this large expanse of open ground. Directly in front of this military formation was a large stockpile of weapons, which had been neatly piled up in front of their formation. The Argentinian garrison commander had decided to surrender without putting up any resistance. The BAS base was quickly reoccupied and all Argentinian troops disarmed and secured, then cleared and searched for booby traps. The Argentinian prisoners, numbering 156 Marines and 38 civilians, were secured at Shackleton House until they were later returned to Montevideo in Uruguay on 30 April 1982.

As soon as the BAS base was secured, HMS *Antrim*’s RM Commando detachment was deployed to provide perimeter protection. Once the surrender was completed and all Argentinian troops accounted for, events slowly calmed down. SF operators located the *Santa Fe*, which was tied up alongside the jetty adjacent to the BAS base and they discovered that the submarine had indeed incurred severe damage to the conning tower and was effectively inoperative.

RFA *Tidespring* eventually made its way back towards Grytviken and disembarked “M” Company, 42 Commando RM, whose mission was to garrison South Georgia to deter any future Argentinian landings. As soon as the RM Commandos deployed and took over responsibility for security around the BAS base the majority of SF assets were flown back to their respective ships to wait for future tasking.

As the sun went down at the end of this very eventful, fluid, frightening and productive day we stopped to reconsider our actions and remembered our founder’s

words, “Who Dares Wins,” and we certainly dared more on this day. Task Force 317 had been in the area of South Georgia for less than a week and SF elements had already lost three of their allotted nine lives. We hadn’t even made our way to the Falkland Islands yet.

Alan Bell



Surrender of Argentinian forces on South Georgia Island.

POST ASSAULT ACTIONS

For some reason, a decision was made to move some of the Argentinian marine prisoners onto HMS *Endurance* and upon arrival the prisoners suddenly became the responsibility of “D” Squadron’s Air Troop, which was charged with guarding all the prisoners in the ships forward anchor cable locker. This holding area was unacceptable for the confinement of 30 plus Argentinian marines and their commander, Lieutenant Commander Astiz, as this area contained numerous ships items and equipment, all of which could be utilized as potential weapons should they attempt an escape.

Unfortunately, due to the size of HMS *Endurance* there was no other location where the prisoners could be secured. To alleviate some of these concerns, 2 SF operators were required to be locked inside this holding area with the prisoners to guard them 24/7, until they could be repatriated. In order to keep the prisoners compliant with

our orders a thick red line was painted on the deck 10 feet away from where the SF operators were sitting armed with AR-15s. All prisoners were informed that should anybody attempt to cross the red line, try to escape or attack the operators they would be immediately shot dead. This approach was obviously not a normal protocol, but due to the anticipated high-level of training of the confined marines, the SF operators were not prepared to take any chances. Should any of these prisoners succeed in escaping, they could attempt to take over the ship by force so they needed to be controlled at all times. This situation was much to the chagrin of HMS *Endurance*'s captain who thought this action was totally uncivilized and against the articles of the Geneva Convention. Despite his orders to the contrary, the SF operators continued to enforce their original orders and as such the prisoners were reminded on a regular basis that any attempts to escape would result in the SF operators opening fire with automatic weapons. We eventually compromised and swapped our AR-15s for some of our silenced weapons. The outcome would be the same, but this kept the Captain happy.

Later that evening, the Captain invited Astiz to dinner in his cabin. The following day the commander of the Argentinian forces on the island signed an unconditional surrender document on board the HMS *Endurance*.

After the retaking of South Georgia, all security responsibilities were handed over to the RM Commandos and "D" Squadron was eventually cross decked to HMS *Brilliant* and for the first time since we left Ascension Island, the Squadron was finally embarked on the same ship. We were quickly moved to join up with the advance units of the main OP Corporate Task Force to enable immediate redeployment onto the Falkland Islands in advance of the main landings. Once we joined up with the Task Force, operational planning commenced in earnest.

SPECIAL FORCES OPERATIONAL COMMAND AND CONTROL PROBLEMS¹⁴

As a general principal, all SF units are usually commanded at the highest strategic level. As this was a naval led operation it was commanded and controlled by Headquarters Commander-in-Chief Fleet located at Northwood, Middlesex, in the UK. The Commanding Officer of 22 SAS, took his regimental tactical headquarters to Ascension Island where the SAS group became de facto components

of the 3 Commando Brigade. This integration of the SAS (an army unit) into the “order of battle” of a predominately naval environment was to cause many problems as the campaign progressed.

One of the first problems the SAS encountered was that they were totally unfamiliar with RN and RM hierarchy or their command and control processes. This ignorance meant that SAS operators had very little idea of how to react, liaise, or operate within a predominant RN and RM environment.

Secondly, the SAS had never trained or exercised with the RN or the RM and particularly with the Royal Marine Special Boat Section (SBS). This caused many operational problems that were to persist throughout the conflict. In turn, they were completely unaware of the expectations or SOPs of working with Special Forces.

Thirdly, not surprisingly, a significant number of the naval command hierarchy was totally unfamiliar with SF operations. They were not trained, or aware of the scope or level of support required for conducting SF operations in the field. In what was to be a historically consistent complaint, the majority of naval officers and some ground commanders simply had no idea how to utilize SF operators. Additionally, when deploying SF operators, their lack of experience in terms of how SF operations were conducted caused unwarranted problems and complications.

A fourth problem was of our own making. The Director of the SAS (DSAS) established an SAS liaison cell at C-in-C Fleet and kept the C-in-C, Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse, fully briefed on SAS capabilities, as well as his possible SF options. This situation proved to be a double-edged sword. Undoubtedly, it was essential that the planning teams in the UK be fully apprised on how to utilize and deploy their SF assets. This task rested with DSAS. Unfortunately, during the course of the campaign a number of SF operational suggestions were made to the C-in-C without having full knowledge of the “on the ground” operating conditions in the Falklands. This resulted in a number of high-ranking senior officers having a superman perception that “SF soldiers can do anything, no matter what the end result or potential cost might be.”

A fifth issue was also of our own making and it was a direct result of the SF chain-of-command and reporting structure being very confusing at times. There were ongoing operational conflicts between the CO of 22 SAS and the Commander

of the 3 Commando Brigade, as well as amongst a number of RM ground commanders, on how the ground war should be conducted. This difference of opinion resulted in the SAS being effectively closed down on a number of occasions, which in turn resulted in a lack of operational control at the command level. It is not surprising that due to the fact that units had not exercised together, the friction that ensued between the dynamic CO of the SAS and the RM ground commanders was to have an impact on SF deployments and operations. In effect, there was total confusion over who had overall operating responsibility for tasking and co-coordinating SF tasking's and missions.

Not surprisingly then, the majority of SF missions were executed with the minimum amount of intelligence. In fact, there was rarely any time for SF operators to carry out realistic reconnaissance prior to deploying on a mission. This reality was a critical flaw since SF, which are lightly armed, depend on stealth, guile and surprise for success.

Yet another problem was the fact that SF operators relied heavily on the navigational skills of the helicopter pilots using passive night vision goggles (NVG) for infiltration. While RN helicopter pilots are extremely professional, fearless and exceptionally well-trained, SF patrols were consistently being dropped in the wrong location, and often in severe weather conditions. Night navigation proved to be a major problem and in particular for SF patrols attempting to carry out rendezvous (RV) drills at night in extreme weather conditions on featureless terrain.

SUCCESS AND FAILURES

Success – The retaking of South Georgia was the first major success of the Falklands campaign. It had been achieved with no British casualties and, therefore, was a major boost to morale in the UK, as well as for the main Task Force steaming south towards the Falkland Islands. Operation Paraquet was successful, not as a result of good preparation and planning, but by good luck, quick decision-making by experienced and opportunistic SF commanders, and finally because of the ultimate bravery of individual SF operators and RN helicopter crews who were tasked at short notice with minimal planning to conduct a helicopter assault in broad daylight against an enemy garrison without the benefit of an in-depth and thorough reconnaissance. Without taking into consideration all of the above, Operation Paraquet could have been a major disaster for the British government instead of

appearing to be, in the final analysis, a major success just prior to the main landings of the Task Force on the Falkland Islands.

Failures – Most SF operators who participated in this campaign quickly became aware of the scope and magnitude of some of the major operational difficulties that lay ahead. For the first time in many years they were about to operate in support of a conventional war, in an unknown hostile environment, under extreme weather conditions, against an untried and untested, but well-equipped, modern army, navy and air force. Operation Paraquet allowed for some important lessons to be learned due to failures. These were:

1. With the final stages of preparation to execute Operation Paraquet being compromised by an unprovoked attack on the Argentinian submarine, the lack of planning became quite evident. An IA response plan should have been developed prior to arriving in the operational area in the event of an unforeseen compromise resulting in a major engagement with enemy forces. This preparation, unfortunately, was not the case and in the final analysis utilizing SF assets to conduct a full frontal, conventional ground attack against a defending force during daylight hours, and with a high risk of failure and the extreme possibility that these assets could have been either killed or seriously wounded, would have significantly diminished limited SF strategic assets.
2. The fact that SF assets were required to execute such an attack was a clear indication of a lack of operational planning. Less than 10 days later, 22 SAS lost 21 experienced SF operators in a helicopter crash on the night before they were due to mount diversionary attacks against a myriad of enemy targets all over the Falkland Islands. If the ground attack against Grytviken had failed, a whole squadron of SAS operators would have ceased to exist and the SAS would have become a non-functional unit as a direct result of poor planning. The actions and decisions made during Operation Paraquet were a clear indication of the need for SF command and control to be maintained at the higher levels of command.
3. Another SF operational command and control failure was the lack of integration and coordination between all participating military units, which was clearly evident during the initial planning and execution phases of Operation Paraquet.

4. The weather, of course, played an important role in the inability to successfully infiltrate SF reconnaissance teams during extreme and constantly changing weather conditions. This fact was not fully appreciated, but it did represent a serious flaw, as well as an inability by SF operators to successfully provide tactical on-the-ground intelligence for military planners. This shortcoming was further compounded by operators who disregarded HUMINT sources, also nearly leading to disaster. Having current and readily available information, albeit from non-military HUMINT sources, could have been better utilized. Instead, the arrogance of some SF operators who simply refuted or ignored local knowledge eventually resulted in the loss of valuable air assets and potentially SF operators' lives. Following Operation Paraquet, SF operators realized that they needed to address some of these issues prior to the main landings on the Falkland Islands, otherwise lives would most certainly be lost once the campaign started in earnest.
5. If the Argentinian garrison had decided to fight instead of surrender, the ground forces would have found it physically very demanding to fight through, and clear, the settlements around Grytviken, Leith and Stromness. This problem would raise its ugly head once again in later operations in the Falkland Islands and on the mainland.
6. In the end, the reconnaissance phase of Operation Paraquet was a failure and the daylight assault on Grytviken was successful due only to the initiative, determination and the bravery of the ground forces, coupled with an element of good luck, rather than the result of good military planning processes. Fortunately, there were no British casualties during the first operation of the Falklands campaign, but if the Argentinians had put up a formidable defense the outcome would have been significantly different.
7. Despite the high level of physical fitness usually expected of SF operators, the three to four weeks living on board ships during the long voyage south caused many fitness problems. Additionally, the weight of operational equipment that SF operators were required to carry during this operation had to be significantly modified for future SF operations in the Falkland Islands.
8. SF operators are renowned for and trained to operate in all operational environments while carrying excessive equipment loads. The weight of

the average rucksack was well over 100 pounds, not counting personal belt kit and weapons. Patrolling with these extreme weights significantly reduced the ability of the SF operators to patrol and react effectively. Much of the specialized equipment carried included Laser Target Markers (LTM). Chatelaine (heat seeking NVGs) during operations proved to be ineffective, as this type of equipment did not fare well under extreme weather conditions. Personally, I carried an LTM on almost all patrols and when I came to utilize this equipment to direct an airstrike against an Argentinian vehicle convoy the equipment did not work.

9. When “D” Squadron landed in South Georgia the majority of the SF operators were wearing tropical DPMs and jungle boots. During the early days of the Falklands campaign, some operators started to utilize the equipment and clothing of captured and dead enemy soldiers. Gortex outerwear was not issued to “D” or “G” squadrons until half way through the conflict.
10. Additionally, when “D” Squadron initially deployed to South Georgia, their weaponry consisted of SLRs, 9mm Browning semiautomatic handguns and Vietnam era, AR-15s. Eventually, Delta Force from Fort Bragg kindly donated M203s (An American M-16 automatic rifle with integral grenade launcher) as well as an unspecified number of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. Unfortunately, the SF operator who was to train “D” Squadron in the use of the Stinger was killed in the aforementioned helicopter crash on the night before D-Day.
11. Despite the lack of training in the use of the Stinger, later during the Falklands campaign the lack of training did not prevent a member of the Air Troop from shooting down a circling ground attack Pucara aircraft whilst withdrawing from a diversion raid against the Goose Green garrison.

CONCLUSION

The retaking of South Georgia Island, the preamble of the Falklands War, fell to the British relatively easily. In fact, despite the mechanical and weather problems, not a single British soldier or sailor was lost in the retaking of this remote outpost. Nonetheless, the war transformed the fortunes of the two participating governments. For Margaret Thatcher, it was nothing less than a triumph and a

vindication for her stalwart position. Doubts about the reasons for the invasion in the first place, and intended cuts to the armed services, were swept aside as people celebrated the victory. She went on to win the next general election comfortably and was elevated from the most reviled to the most revered British Prime Minister.

The Argentinian fall-out was quite the opposite. The military had demonstrated its incompetence for all of Argentina to see. General Galtieri was pushed from power within a month of the end of the war. A democratic government eventually returned as one of the unexpected benefits of the conflict. The Argentinian military lost considerable power and prestige and has been considerably downsized and reduced in capability since 1982.

Britain's defence of South Georgia and its objections to the use of force led to the passing of United Nations Security Council Resolution 502, adopted on the 3 April 1982. The Council called for an immediate cessation of hostilities between Argentina and Britain, and a complete withdrawal by Argentinian forces. The Council also called on the governments of both countries to seek a diplomatic solution to the situation free of further military action. Resolution 502 was supported by members of the Commonwealth, and by the European Economic Community, which later imposed sanctions on Argentina.

From start to finish, this undeclared war in the Falkland Islands and its dependencies lasted 72 days, claimed nearly 1,000 casualties (236 British and 655 Argentinian) and cost about \$2 billion. The majority of SF operations are usually successful because they are the product of good planning and skilful execution. This approach, unfortunately, was not the case during Operation Paraquet. It was the bravery and tenacity of the SF operator that allowed the missions to succeed in spite of the often-unwarranted risk and poor planning.

Overall the Falklands War was not an unqualified success for participating SF units, although on balance they all did make a significant contribution. When it was all over, for some unknown reason, the SAS did not debrief and discuss operational lessons learned. They simply took it for granted that they did a reasonable job and were successful. Sadly, this was not the case. Men who aspire to become SF operatives must realize that they are not perfect and, therefore, do make mistakes, and SF operators are no exception. They made many mistakes, some of which, on reflection, cost other people's lives. Strong leadership was lacking at all

levels. Some officers and senior Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) were found not willing to take chances, which resulted in a number of early retirements and a number of SF operators being returned to their units. This reality was kept very quiet so as not to dispel the popular myths of the time.

I had the privilege of serving with British Special Forces for twenty-two years and I enjoyed being a Special Forces operative serving with other true professionals. Like most people fighting for one's "Queen and Country," I learned much about my fears, my expectations of life and myself. We all lost a lot of close friends during this so-called short war, but that did not prevent us, as a unit, from successfully completing all our tasks and missions despite all the odds, utter confusion, indecision and the inevitable fog of war.¹⁵

EVENT (requiring action)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF	DECISION/ COMMENT
Directive to HMS Endurance/Royal Marines – take no action to endanger lives	British Government	High (if offensive action taken)	High Prevent a full shooting war	Avoid unnecessary confrontation with Argentinians
Avoid direct confrontation with Argentina	Whitehall (British Government)	Low – British Government Perception High – in retrospect	High Prevent a full shooting war	Avoiding direct confrontation arguably emboldened Argentina to press their perceived advantage
RM Commandos surrender on Falkland Islands	Governor Hunt	High (if RMs fight)	High Save lives and leave room for diplomacy	Avoid civilian casualties – no chance of prevailing against superior force
Implementation of a MEZ & TEZ	Whitehall	Low All non-combatants out of battlespace	High Put pressure on Argentinians/avoid collateral damage	Minimize risk – maintain first strike ability
Proposal – Offload diplomatic liability for Falklands	Foreign Office	Low	High	Avoid conflict
Refused	Thatcher	High	Low	Set dangerous precedent
Delay in authorizing Operation Paraquet	Whitehall	Low	High	Allow diplomacy an opportunity to work

CHAPTER 4

Retake South Georgia	Whitehall	Low	High	Not well defended – quick victory
	Senior Military Commanders	High	Low	Small Task Force isolated from support – objective no military value to recapturing Falklands
Deploy OP on Fortuna Glacier	“D” Squadron, 22 SAS	High Extreme conditions	High Optimal vantage point for observation	
Stranded Gemini boat crews – maintain radio silence	Boat Troop & SBS patrol leaders	High Severe survival conditions	High Maintain element of surprise	
Decision to Attack <i>Santa Fe</i> submarine	RN Pilot	Low	High	Disable submarine and threat it presents
	Ground Force	High	Low	Attack gives away British presence – element of surprise is lost
Launch ground attack despite little time to plan, recce, coordinate or assemble necessary forces	TF 317 Commander/OC “D” Squadron, 22 SAS	High	High	No plan or coord between elements but use shock and violence to further demoralize Argentinian garrison
Naval Bombardment	TF 317 Commander	High Cause civilian and Argentinian casualties causing them to fight	High Provide fire demonstration/cover for hasty ground attack	
Order no house-to-house fighting/ firing on static buildings	TF 317 Commander	High	High	Buildings required to house RM Commando garrison force

Table 4.1 – Summary of Risk and Decision-Making¹⁶

The preceding case study raises some interesting observations on risk and decision-making. It clearly highlights that decision-makers accepted risk on numerous occasions in order to complete the mission when they were faced with time

constraints and/or desperation. This driving motivation to accomplish the mission at any cost is commendable and quite frankly expected. The SF crews drifting away in a savage sea and/or stranded on cold, inhospitable islands, without calling for help because they maintained radio silence to ensure OPSEC, speaks to the courage and self-sacrificing nature of the individuals in question. But once again, the realization that individuals will take whatever risk is required to accomplish the mission (i.e. ad hoc, quick attack on exposed ground without clear understanding of the enemy position) demands that “commander’s intent” and acceptable risk are clearly articulated and understood. The retaking of South Georgia Island was a grim necessity for the British Government who needed a win. Conversely, it was seen as a side-show and inconsequential to military commanders in theatre. Had it gone wrong, it may have changed the course of the war due to domestic pressure back in England. As such, it is important to provide clear direction on the importance of a mission, as well as acceptable risk.

The case study also highlighted the dangers of overconfidence. The decisions to discount the expert advice of the BAS personnel and carry out operations on the Fortuna Glacier, resulting in the loss of two precious helicopters, underscores the importance of taking account of the optimism bias, overconfidence and listening to outside experts.¹⁷

Interestingly, the case study also demonstrates how risk aversion can actually increase risk. Throughout the narrative numerous examples of decisions (e.g. orders to surrender the garrison on the Falklands; to delay the retaking of South Georgia Island; naval fire demonstration vice fire for effect; and no first engagement/shots) to avoid conflict and thereby minimize the risk of bloodshed were taken. Yet, arguably, the failure to show resolve and make clear that violence would be met with more violence, emboldened Argentinian decisions to invade sovereign British territory under the misperception that Britain was unwilling to risk conflict to maintain its distant dependencies.

Finally, the subjective nature of risk was highlighted in the case of the attack on the Argentinian submarine *Santa Fe*. For the navy pilots the opportunistic attack was a “no-brainer.” Risk to themselves was low; risk to TF 317 from a submarine was high. Therefore, to take out the threat was a high payoff. However, for the ground assault force, the attack was seen as almost reckless. It forced their hand and required an immediate response that would require a high-risk endeavour –

a daylight airmobile attack and assault across open and canalizing terrain against an unknown enemy. Fortunately, it worked out. But, had the Argentinians resisted and repelled the assault, the consequences would have been severe. This last example, seems to underline that risk acceptance/aversion is often assessed after the fact, only once consequences become known. At that point, it becomes easy for the “Monday morning quarterbacking” to highlight the folly of the decisions made by those in trying circumstances, who must wrestle with limited time and information, as well as all the friction of war.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Margot Morrell Stephanie Capparell, *Shackleton's Way: Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2001).
- 2 Gordon Ramsey, ed., *The Falklands War Then and Now* (London: Battle of Britain International Ltd., 2009).
- 3 “The Falklands War,” <<http://www.britishempire.co.uk/forces/armycampaigns/southamerica/falklands/falklandswar.htm>>, accessed 15 March 2014.
- 4 Jack Child, *Stamps of the American Quadrant of Antarctica and the South Atlantic Islands* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2010).
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 During the Falklands campaign, the average SF operator was required to carry between 95 and 125 pounds of equipment.
- 8 The SAS CO flew directly into Port Stanley with an SAS signaller utilizing SAS strategic communications equipment to assist with the negotiation of the Argentinian surrender on 14 June 1982. Just prior to the CO departing for the surrender negotiations with General Menendez in Port Stanley, elements of “D” squadron 22 SAS and 2 SBS had just returned from conducting a diversion attack against Wireless Ridge to assist 2 Para during their final attack on the ridge. This team had just withdrawn to the north and taken the high ground on Beagle Ridge with the rest of “D” Squadron, directly overlooking Port Stanley. On 14 June 1982, while awaiting further orders, a Scout helicopter flew into “D” Squadron’s defensive position on Beagle Ridge, and to our surprise the CO disembarked. He immediately asked us, “Does anybody have an SAS regimental flag with them?” When challenged

as to why he needed a flag at this stage of the campaign, he simply told us that he was about to fly into Port Stanley to assist with the negotiation of the Argentinian surrender and he wanted to put the SAS flag on the flagpole outside Government House so that after the Argentinian surrender and all Task Force ground forces had entered Port Stanley they would see the SAS flag flying. Unfortunately, the individual who happened to be carrying our regimental flag, “D” Squadron’s Sergeant Major, had been killed in a helicopter crash along with 21 other SAS operators the night before the main landings on the Falkland Islands.

9 Editor’s Note: Lieutenant-General Cedric Delves, the OC of “D” Squadron, 22 SAS at the time later wrote: “I was conscious of the cultural differences that could ruffle relations when working alongside or with conventional forces, our apparently casual regard for rank and the use of first names between ourselves being obvious, outward social manifestations. There were other things that would grate, chief among them in planning terms the ‘Chinese parliament,’ which brought people together early in the assessment process to ensure that nobody’s relevant thought go overlooked. If you had a suggestion to make, an idea, no matter your rank, we believed it should be heard. The parliament sought to harness the power of collective wisdom, simultaneously guarding against template solutions. We were aware of the dangers of ‘group’; the parliament, comprising strong personalities, all capable of independent thought, was unlikely to commit that error.” Lieutenant General Sir Cedric Delves, *Across an Angry Sea. The SAS in the Falklands War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 27.

10 This problem tragically manifested itself later in the campaign when SAS and SBS patrols found themselves operating in the same area, which resulted in the unfortunate and untimely death of the SBS patrol commander, Kiwi Hunt, who happened to be a friend of mine, as we both attended the same SBS course in the early 1970s.

11 Intelligence and the passage of the same was to be a major and ongoing problem that haunted all ground commanders throughout the Falkland Islands campaign. Particularly, after the war was over the SAS were severely criticized for not passing tactical intelligence to ground force commanders once the Task Force landed on the Falkland Islands on 21 May 1982.

12 High surf around the island made for quite an interesting exercise, and foreshadowed later events in which our boat troop experienced significant difficulties in operating the Gemini craft during reconnaissance patrol infiltrations onto South Georgia.

13 Editor’s note: Delves later wrote: “We learnt that a task group of warships with a marine company and a small team of SBS-embarked had been despatched to take back South Georgia. It did momentarily cross our minds that this was off the main effort. However, on further thought it made political sense to demonstrate resolve with an early, elegant riposte.” He added, “There was a possibility that South Georgia affair might become drawn-out, putting at risk our availability for other work, I supposed. That seemed unlikely, the whole basis of Operation Paraquet, as it was called, being founded upon getting at the enemy hard and fast where he appeared to be at his weakest. People were looking for a quick win. The risk felt acceptable, and it felt right to pitch in.” Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 22-23.

14 Alan Bell, “Successes and Failures of SF Operations during the Falklands War,” in Bernd Horn, Paul de B. Taillon and David Last, eds., *Force of Choice* (Kingston: Queen’s University Press, 2004), 141-160.

15 Despite an Argentinian surrender on 14 June 1982, and a return of the islands to British control, Argentina continues to claim sovereignty over South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands.

16 Editor's Note: This table was created by the editor to summarize major risks and subsequent decisions.

17 The optimism bias is the tendency to be over-optimistic, over-estimating favourable and pleasing outcomes. See Dr. Emily Spencer, *Thinking for Impact: A Practical Guide for Special Operations Forces* (Kingston, ON: CANSOFCOM ERC Press, 2018), 87-102, for more on the optimism bias and other cognitive biases.

CHAPTER 5

THE SAS RAID ON PEBBLE ISLAND – OPERATION PRELIM, 15 MAY 1982

Lieutenant-Colonel (Retired) Pierre Choquette

*“...Hence, Skillful Warriors: Have devastating momentum,
and precise timing. Those who are skilled in conflict are like an arrow
on a drawn bow, ready to be released at the opportune moment.”*

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*¹

In the dark and menacing night of 14-15 May 1982, the three Sea Kings helicopters of 846 Squadron (Sqn) were flying dangerously close to the waves of the South Atlantic. Struggling against the 70 knots winds they were about half-way through their perilous journey, closing in on their critical objective on West Falklands: Pebble Island. The objective was an enemy forward airfield that constituted a major threat endangering the upcoming British landings to liberate the Falkland Islands from Argentinian forces. The cold, salty foam and spray from the eight-metre waves crashing through the side cargo door were showering the Special Air Service (SAS) troopers huddled inside, who felt like their helicopter was actually flying through the wave-caps. The darkened and tumultuous sea was almost indistinguishable from the darkened skies saturated with sleet and sea water. While the pilots and crew were flying with their newly issued precious Passive Night-Vision Goggles (PNG) that were made especially available to 846 Sqn, they were still flying in extreme conditions, with minimal ambient light even with their high-tech equipment.²

The Special Operations Force (SOF) raiders were acutely aware that they were running dangerously behind a schedule that had little margin for error, if any. It was vital that their raid be executed and completed before daylight, if they hoped to be

extracted safely. Come first light, the ships from which they launched would be out of range, steaming away at top speed to avoid being detected and targeted by the Argentinian Air Force in the constricted waters close to land.

Nonetheless, the first order of business was to make landfall intact and the SAS soldiers knew that it would be essentially due to the skillful flying of the stoic pilots of 846 Sqn. As it was, the airmen were seriously pushing their aircraft and professional limits to get their lethal cargo of SOF soldiers ashore alive, without being detected and obliterated by Argentinian anti-aircraft missiles or artillery.³

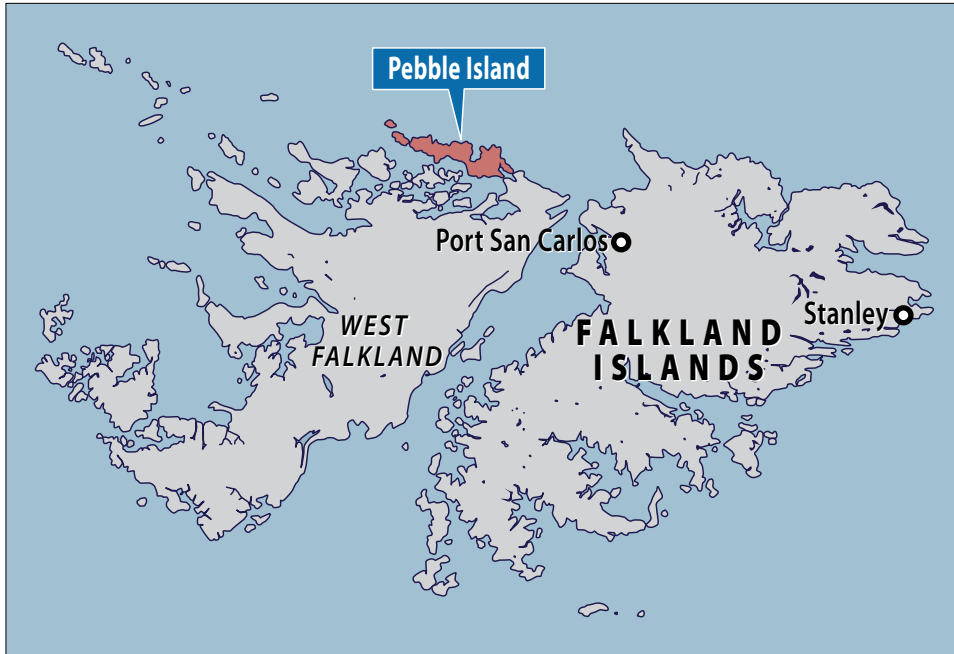
The SAS raid on Pebble Island exemplifies how the unique human qualities of SOF soldiers can overcome significant risks and adversity, and have a determining impact at the operational and strategic levels in war. Considered a feat typical of the extraordinary capabilities of one of the most famous SOF units in the world, it echoed the glorious past of the SAS when it raided German airfields in the Second World War. But, it was also a “close-run thing,” quite like many other actions and battles of the Falklands War. Ultimately, its success largely, if not solely, hinged on the moral and personal qualities of the SOF soldiers and aviators who had to execute the mission. Although critical decisions had to be made at the strategic and operational levels to develop a viable plan to address the threat, it was the decisions and actions at the tactical level, products of the human qualities characteristic of SOF, which produced success in spite of adverse odds and circumstances.

Such human qualities, also recognized as a fundamental SOF “Truth,”⁴ that “Humans are more important than hardware,” not only constitute critical components and characteristics of SOF, but are critical to enable them to accomplish their mission in spite of adverse conditions and the significant risks associated to such missions. Furthermore, Admiral (Adm) William McRaven in his seminal work *Special Operations – Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare*⁵ provides a theory that reveals how crucial such human qualities are. McRaven suggests six principles that SOF should follow to maximize their superiority over the enemy and adversity.⁶ These are: Simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose. McRaven argues that these principles are required for successful special operations, and he also convincingly highlights the human SOF qualities that contribute to the success of the operation by identifying *Purpose* as being “vital to achieving relative superiority.”⁷ Purpose is also considered by McRaven as a representing the “moral factors of courage, intellect, boldness, and perseverance” that “prevent the frictions of war...from causing defeat.”⁸

Admiral McRaven also utilizes two criteria to consider the risks when analyzing special operations. Firstly, by assessing the purpose/objectives in comparison to the risks involved and secondly, by assessing the plan's ability to maximize the SOF superiority over the enemy force and minimize the risks to the SOF element.⁹ Operation (OP) Prelim was a highly risky proposition, and with serious ramifications for the next phases of the upcoming campaign in East Falklands. The plan required flying a squadron of already scarce SOF from over 150 Nautical miles at sea, in treacherous weather conditions,¹⁰ and covertly landing them on enemy-occupied territory in spite of prevalent radar detection systems. The SOF operators were then to stealthily approach and raid an airfield protected by prepared (entrenched and fortified) positions defended by a force of unknown size and armament. And finally, not least of the challenges involved, the force had to break contact and withdraw to secure pick-up zones distant enough from the objective to not endanger the aircraft. But this all had to be accomplished before sunrise, as daylight would dangerously expose their launching and retrieving platform, *Her Majesty's Ship* (HMS) *Hermes*.

While the target and the mission were clearly relevant and necessary, the associated risks also had potentially far-reaching consequences for the upcoming campaign. The men of "D" Sqn, 22 SAS were deemed essential to the success of future military operations, and headquarters already assessed them as too few for the critical intelligence gathering tasks currently ongoing. The task force feverishly planned and tasked SOF with reconnaissance missions to maximize the chances of a successful landing on East Falklands, as well as for the subsequent advance onto Port Stanley.¹¹ Nonetheless, practically an entire squadron, close to 50 SAS operators, was being sent in harm's way against significant odds.¹² This level of commitment of precious SOF resources was precisely because the target they were ordered to eliminate had such a high operational significance, threatening the viability of the upcoming landing in San Carlos.¹³

As "D" Sqn, 22 SAS, was approaching the coast of occupied West Falklands aboard the blacked-out Sea Kings of 846 Sqn, the Amphibious Task Force was making final preparations to initiate their passage through Falkland Sound loaded with the first waves of the landing force of Royal Marines and paratroopers, which was to occur in barely five days. The landing was scheduled for 21 May, requiring the fleet to initiate the approach to Falkland Sound and its passage on the 20th.



As with any military operation planned and prepared by professional soldiers, the risks were assessed in relation to the threat(s) to be addressed, and their implication. A dozen enemy aircraft, specially designed and equipped for air-to-ground attacks, based literally across Falklands Sound on Pebble Island, would be able to strike ships operating in the close San Carlos waters. Such enemy air assets would also be able to attack land forces involved in an amphibious landing operation, or those already in the beach-head, as well as the helicopters supporting them.

Furthermore, the proximity of the Pebble Island airfield meant that enemy air assets could take-off and be in the San Carlos area within a matter of minutes, affording very minimal warning and reaction time to British forces operating in that area. Therefore, it was a threat of serious magnitude, which could jeopardize, or at least significantly hinder, the upcoming landing by inflicting grave losses. It clearly warranted the decision to allocate the challenging mission to an entire squadron of SOF, even in the bigger military context where such special, scarce assets were in great demand.¹⁴

THE OPERATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PEBBLE ISLAND

For both the British and the Argentinians, the importance of Pebble Island was mainly due to its location and the capabilities it offered as a military base benefitting from an existing airfield, even if grass-based and all the limitations that entailed. The proximity of the airfield so close to the intended landing areas represented a dangerous launching pad and refueling base for enemy aircraft. In addition, its significance in terms of electronic observation and detection (i.e. radar) had serious implications on British movements and operations on the Northern approaches to the Falklands. Moreover, its ability to potentially conduct Electronic Warfare (EW) also exacerbated its threat to British forces.¹⁵

The small settlement of Pebble Island itself was home to 19 islanders who had always maintained contact with the rest of the Falkland Islands. They were in fact resupplied from the airfield, which was situated close to the settlement. In addition, a pier could accommodate sizeable ships including cargo vessels able to serve military logistical purposes.¹⁶ Such capabilities as an airfield and Forward Operating Base (FOB) had been identified early during the initial planning efforts by the staffs of the British Task Force on their way to the area of operations (Falklands). Now used as an Argentinian FOB, it remained a concern throughout the campaign.¹⁷

In his book *100 Days*, re-telling the story of his experience of the Falklands War as Naval Task Force Commander, Admiral Sandy Woodward provides an interesting insight into particular circumstances of high-level decision-making for SOF operations.¹⁸ Woodward described how, during one of his staff meetings aboard the carrier HMS *Hermes*, when expressing his concerns with regards to the threats constituted by the Argentinian air assets based on Pebble Island, the SAS officer who was discreetly attending the staff meeting proactively volunteered the SAS as a solution.¹⁹

The existence of a dozen aircraft specially designed for ground attacks, based less than 20 miles from the intended location of the planned amphibious landing scheduled just a week away,²⁰ was an unacceptable risk to the Amphibious Task Force, which would have to make its approach literally in mere view of Pebble Island, before sailing into the bottle neck of Falkland Sound and set anchors in the area of San Carlos waters.²¹ Another issue was the anticipated existence of radar(s) on the

island, assessed as benefitting from ideal elevated points, enabling the Argentinian forces to detect and monitor air and sea movements up to 150 miles away.²²



EXECUTION

Each phase of the operation faced significant risks and challenges with immediate and serious consequences, even before the main force was able to leave the deck of HMS *Hermes* for their journey to Pebble Island. For example, not only did the weather delay the insertion of the reconnaissance element, it also almost prevented the deployment of the assault group.²³ The helicopters essential for the insertion of the assault group simply could not be brought on deck and safely prepared for take-off. The gale-force winds threatened to topple the Sea Kings and crush their attending crews under them, the decks dangerously listing as *Hermes* was being tossed by furious seas.

Successful Elements of the Raid

The main objective of the mission, the destruction of the aircraft based on Pebble Island, was totally achieved with all aircraft destroyed (i.e. Pucarás and Turbo

Mentors). In addition, although not the result of action from the raiders, the airfield itself was also rendered inoperable when the Argentinian force detonated three charges, buried under the airfield by the Argentinian engineers of the Pebble Island garrison. The exploding charges created three craters across the runway, making it impossible for any fixed-wing aircraft to land.²⁴ The damage to the airfield was accompanied by the destruction of significant resources/logistical assets capable of supporting aviation operations (e.g. fuel, ammunition, installations). This significant overall result was achieved through the undetected delivery and extraction of the SAS reconnaissance and assault force from HMS *Hermes* off-shore, at night and through dire weather conditions without losing any aircraft, ships, or personnel.²⁵

Another successful element of the raid was the reconnaissance, which was critical and achieved to some degree in spite of significant challenges (in terms of time constraints, terrain and weather). Arguably, the assault phase of the mission would not have been possible without the professional efforts, both in adaptability and resilience, of the few members of “D” Squadron’s reconnaissance element (Boat Troop), who confirmed and identified crucial objective elements (i.e. enemy aircraft) on the objective.²⁶ But, they also achieved other reconnaissance tasks of critical importance, namely, changing the landing zone (LZ) sites, identifying/testing/confirming routes to be followed by the assault force, and locating other specific supporting arms positions (such as for the 81mm mortar).²⁷

The contribution of the Royal Navy, and its air elements (i.e. 846 Sqn) were another factor for success. They effectively and securely delivered SOF elements to, and extracted them from, the objective area and provided them with effective support, on the objective and during the withdrawal, by naval gunfire from HMS *Glamorgan*, who modified its operational schedule, at increased risks of detection and thus potential enemy attack.²⁸

Finally, instrumental to success was “D” Sqn’s ability to execute their main mission, the destruction of all aircraft on Pebble Island, while in contact with the enemy. Their ability to contain the enemy reaction and still accomplish their mission was another critical factor for success. The enemy reaction, fire and attempted manoeuvres were effectively suppressed and neutralized by “D” Sqn support group, who engaged any enemy positions and personnel attempting to challenge the raiders of the assault group.²⁹

Friction & Impact

The operation faced serious challenges. The extreme environmental conditions, such as the weather, seas, tidal effects, all caused successive delays to the timetable, impacting the reconnaissance plan that could not be followed. Specifically, the original intended crossing, by canoes, to the objective area on Pebble Island as initially planned, had to be modified. Specifically, the canoes had to be transported overland, on the backs of the reconnaissance party, to another launch point for the crossing to Pebble Island. This additional and necessary action required time and caused a 24-hour delay, which gravely impacted the quality of the reconnaissance.³⁰ The limited time available for a detailed reconnaissance of the objective had potential severe consequences in the formulation of the plan, which would have to be based on minimal information. In particular, there was a lack of observation of the enemy activity on and around the target, which would have provided a better understanding of the enemy's routines, composition and organization, deployment and available weapons. All this information is a crucial element in the planning of a raid. As it was, the assault group had to formulate a plan and execute it with extremely limited information. This shortfall created a very dangerous situation indeed, and placed the assault force and the support elements of 846 Sqn at serious risk.

The severe weather conditions of the South Atlantic, as mentioned above, also caused significant delay. Particularly, the extreme winds affecting carrier-based aviation operations and the particular procedures to be followed to limit the safety risks to personnel and equipment (i.e. aircraft). On the night of 14 May 1982, the three Sea Kings tasked to carry the 58 SOF raiders of the assault force to Pebble Island took off from *Hermes* almost 90 minutes later than planned.³¹ Thus, the now compressed timetable meant an accelerated deployment of the assault group from their Landing Zone to the objective. Adding to the challenge was the lack of guides for all elements of the assault force. This absence contributed to the separation of elements of the assault force between the LZ and the objective, forcing modifications to the assault plan itself. For instance, the group initially identified and tasked to actually attack the airfield, "D" Sqn's Mobility Troop, became separated from the rest of the raiders and had to be replaced by another element of "D" Sqn, namely, Mountain Troop, who now became responsible for the principal task of destroying the aircraft.³²

Another issue caused by the compressed timetable was with regards to the direct support that was to be provided by the 81mm mortar brought along with the

assault force. Had it not been for the naval gunfire provided by HMS *Glamorgan*, “D” Sqn would have been left without significant fire support, potentially crucial for the assault and the extraction phases. The extremely limited time available to properly assess and confirm the suitability of the ground and location for the weapon rendered it useless when the first round was fired, as the mortar sank in the boggy ground almost entirely.³³

Further to the delays that afflicted the launch from HMS *Hermes* and the approach to the objective, there were command & control (C2) challenges, such as the coordination of the naval gunfire from HMS *Glamorgan* in relation to the actions of the assault group. As the gunfire was requested to close-in to the objective, the leader of the assault group had to call OC “D” Sqn to indicate that the impacts were coming dangerously close to the assaulting SOF raiders who were operating on the airfield. According to OC “D” Sqn, this issue originated from a moment of miscommunication that had occurred during the hectic moments prior to boarding the helicopters on *Hermes*.³⁴

In addition, was the issue of recall. Working with a very constrained schedule and running dangerously out-of-time, the men were repeatedly cautioned and reminded prior to the mission that it was critical that they make it to the extraction point promptly upon order to ensure the helicopters and ships would not be made vulnerable in the daylight close to the objective and the enemy they had attacked.³⁵ Despite the warning and the repeated calls and flares, many of the raiders failed to return to the extraction point in an expeditious manner.

Additionally, due to the limited time and tactical details available for proper planning, a lack of contingency plans existed to address unforeseen enemy action while on the objective.³⁶ Similarly, during “D” Sqn’s extraction, control failures in properly allocating adequate numbers of passengers for each Sea King almost resulted in having to leave members of “D” Sqn behind, or aircraft being unable to take-off. Colonel R. Hutchings, one of the Sea King pilots who extracted the raiders, described how crucial such detailed planning and coordination are for such joint operations:³⁷

...At the time of landing on Pebble Island, the aircraft had 3,500lb of fuel remaining of the original 6,000lb which, with the expected number of men to pick-up, would have resulted in a take-off mass comfortably below the maximum permitted. However, the surprise addition of

eight men – the unexpected reconnaissance team – and some heavy kit would put the aircraft at over 1,000lb above MAUM on take-off.³⁸

Yet another example of the limited intelligence gleaned through the reconnaissance due to the lack of available time pertained to the radar installations suspected to be operating on the Island.³⁹ While allegedly engaged by HMS *Glamorgan*, no proof of their presence, or of the effects from Naval Gun Fire were ever obtained.⁴⁰ Finally, another challenge for the SOF in executing the mission was the scale of the mission itself. The fact that D Sqn was having to operate together was not typical, compared to their other past special missions and tasks, such as related to counter-terrorism, which required much smaller groups and teams, usually at Troop-level.⁴¹

RISKS

“An offensive war requires above all a quick, irresistible decision.”

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*⁴²

An examination of the risks associated with OP Prelim provide an insight into the moral and human qualities inherent to SOF when faced with considerable risk, as well as how SOF addresses those risks to achieve success. For example, many analysts have questioned whether this type of mission, namely a “simple” raid, could have been allocated and accomplished by troops other than SOF, such as other elite forces (e.g. the Parachute Regiment, or elements of the Royal Marines available aboard the Task Force).⁴³ The argument for using other groups was based on the very real risks of losing scarce SOF personnel, and thus, making them unavailable for future special operations of high operational or strategic value, such as intelligence gathering against Argentinian forces in East Falklands.⁴⁴

There was very limited intelligence available on the quantity and nature of the enemy forces present on Pebble Island. The operational parameters within which the operation was to be conducted were extremely restrictive, in terms of time and conditions (weather, terrain, force ratio), and contained significant risks. However, it is exactly these factors and the unknowns that made the employment of SOF essential. Arguably, the unusually high levels of required flexibility and adaptability, in terms of reaction time, planning, and execution, made the employment of other units to successfully undertake and complete such missions questionable.⁴⁵ While elite troops such as Royal Marines and Paratroopers are highly trained, and as individuals and units have the capacity to adapt their battle procedure, as well as their

planning and preparation to a degree, the level of flexibility and agility of action required in terms of time, not only during the preparation phase, but also while executing the raid, was arguably accepting more risk than acceptable even with units of that stature.⁴⁶ The lack of intelligence also raised the risk of other options such as naval bombardments or airstrikes from Harrier aircraft to unacceptable levels. Quite simply, the lack of details on the location and vulnerability of the local population, and the need to ensure the destruction of the aircraft, dictated that the only acceptable option was direct action (DA) by SOF.

A further risk was the upcoming amphibious landings themselves. The inherent risks in landing a brigade-size force (i.e. 3 Commando Brigade was to be landed first, as 5th Infantry Brigade was still on its way southwards and not yet available), on occupied territory and potentially under enemy fire, are considerable and laden with serious consequences. Both naval and army elements would be concentrated and exposed, thus vulnerable to enemy forces and the likelihood of incurring serious casualties and losses that typically have far-reaching consequences for the development of future operations. Simply put, such a landing normally constitutes a pivotal, if not decisive, moment in a campaign. At the very least, it is one of the major operational objectives in the sequencing of an expeditionary campaign. The realization of further military successes hinges on this foundational objective.⁴⁷

Consequently, specific decisions were made both at the initial stages (i.e. in deciding to consider and develop a DA option to address the risks constituted by the Argentinian FOB at Pebble Island). These decisions including specific measures in the plan that were deployed in the execution phase. For instance, significant resources and assets, such as warships including one of the two aircraft carriers deemed vital to the entire campaign, were allocated and deliberately exposed to additional risks, to ensure that the SOF raiders had the benefit of supporting fire during the raid. The perilous deployment of the ships was also essential to the operation (e.g. the HMS *Hermes*, approaching the coast much closer than initially planned) to ensure the Sea Kings transporting the main body of “D” Sqn could in fact reach the shores of Pebble Island.

The following table (Table 5.1) illustrates the mitigating effect that the Moral and Human qualities of SOF bring to bear to counteract the effects of the possible risks and real challenges that generated the friction discussed above, at the various phases of the operation.

PHASE	OP PRELIM RISK(S)/FRICTION	MITIGATING HUMAN QUALITIES
PLANNING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible compromise of operational security (indicating intentions through Intelligence collection) - Incomplete/Inaccurate Intelligence for proper planning - Insufficient time available for proper planning process - Insufficient support/commitment from Chain-of-Command to allocate resources (helicopters/fire support) due to high risks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purpose (Commitment) - Intellect (SOF and High Command) - Moral Courage (High Command) - Boldness (selection of concept of operations in spite of risks)
PREPARATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible compromise of operational security - Insufficient time available to SOF for rehearsals, coordination, adjustments - Insufficient time for support elements/logistical units to prepare & verify equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Purpose (Commitment) - Intellect (Innovative options and ideas) - high readiness/high levels of training - Flexibility of mind/adaptability - Moral Courage (Perseverance against new/increasing difficulties)
EXECUTION		
Reconnaissance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Possible compromise of operational security compromised (detection/capture of reconnaissance force) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Professionalism/Purpose - Courage/Perseverance
Insertion of Assault Force	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Failure to acquire adequate Intelligence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Flexibility/Adaptability
Approach and Assault	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - possible loss of major naval assets (e.g. HMS Hermes) - possible loss of high-value, strategic mobility assets (e.g. Sea King helicopters and aircrew) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moral courage (High Command): Selecting higher risks options - Intellect/Expertise
Extraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - possible loss of high-value SOF personnel - possible collateral casualties to local population - negative impact on home-front morale and public support for campaign if mission a failure/losses incurred - Adverse impact on upcoming amphibious landing if mission is a failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Boldness, Warrior ethos

Table 5.1 – Moral/Human Qualities versus Friction

One particular example identified in Table 5.1 pertains to the considerable difficulties and risks associated with the insertion of both reconnaissance and assault elements on Pebble Island. Not only was it vital to transport the SOF members throughout the various phases of the operation, undetected, but there were extreme risks associated with operating the Merlin HC4 Sea King helicopters at extreme ranges, particularly in the harsh climatic conditions of the South Atlantic. Furthermore, it was extremely hazardous potentially exposing important naval assets, such as the carrier HMS *Hermes*, so close to the coast putting it at risk of Argentinian air attack. Quite simply, ensuring the safety of the SOF soldiers, and the preservation of helicopters and naval assets was a major concern at the highest levels of command, particularly as operational attrition began to take its toll (e.g. helicopter losses on South Georgia Island, the loss of the *Atlantic Conveyor* which sank with its precious cargo of helicopters and other operational equipment).

Given the nature and level of risks to the British Naval and Land forces that the Argentinian FOB at Pebble Island represented, particularly in relation to the planned amphibious operation scheduled for 20-21 May 1982, it would appear that the objective of destroying even part of the enemy forces and their aircraft located on Pebble Island were justified in comparison to the risks involved. The most direct and essential objective, the aircraft, were clearly prioritized as they represented the most immediate and potent enemy capability against an attempted landing in the San Carlos area. As was demonstrated in the days that followed “D-Day,” with the mainland Argentinian Air Force inflicting serious losses to the Royal Navy and its auxiliary vessels that were involved in the landing and consolidation phases, the air threat was a severe challenge. While the stakes were quite high by risking significant casualties to highly valued SOF, already limited helicopter resources, and exposing HMS *Hermes* to the risk of detection and potential attack, the decisions were calculated risks that the Task Force Commander was willing to accept in light of the important objective in the balance, specifically mitigating a high-level threat that could inflict unacceptable losses/impact to the planned landing of 3 Commando Brigade.

The risks of mounting and conducting such a raid were many, with potential impacts at various levels. However, given the nature of the threat and its implications at the operational level, the Task Force committed valuable resources to generate the maximum chances of success for the mission and the larger operation. One significant example that illustrates the Task Force Commander’s

acceptance of considerable risk, was his decision to deploy the carrier HMS *Hermes* even closer to land than was initially planned.⁴⁸ The willingness of the most senior Commander in the theatre of operations, ultimately responsible for the outcome of the expedition in the South Atlantic, to put a carrier that he could not afford to lose or have rendered ineffective for fear of compromising the subsequent land campaign, reveals the operational, and arguably strategic, importance placed on the destruction of the airfield and aviation assets on Pebble Island.

CONCLUSION

*“In what field of human activity is boldness more at home than in War?
It must be granted a certain power over and above successful calculations...”*

Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*⁴⁹

The Raid on the Pebble Island airfield constitutes a compelling example of a mission of crucial importance, successfully executed in spite of the significant risks and considerable friction faced by SOF. OP Prelim’s successful outcome was directly related to key characteristics of Special Operations Forces, mostly pertaining to the human qualities that are inherent and unique to SOF. For example, the special selection and training of the soldiers composing the unit involved, the special abilities and capabilities of such operators, enhanced by technology, as well as their ability to adapt to circumstances on the ground were all factors that allowed them to mitigate the myriad of risks and challenges they faced.⁵⁰

With regards to the determining value that the human qualities and characteristics that SOF bring to bear to successfully execute a mission defence analyst Robert Spulak assessed:

...men emerge during war to meet immediate needs that conventional forces cannot. Some men have attributes that allow them to engage in activities that others would perceive as too risky, but which through superior aptitude, natural skill, dedication to training, or mindset (or other attributes) do not represent the same level of risk to them. When organized together, these men can execute operations to accomplish goals in ways that conventional forces cannot but without a greater risk to themselves, greater risk of failure, or greater risk of negative political consequences.⁵¹

The risks associated to the Pebble Island Raid were considerable, and of significant operational and strategic consequences. Arguably, the risks bordered on the unacceptable level. The intelligence available on the enemy forces and dispositions on Pebble Island was minimal, due to the time limitations imposed on the reconnaissance phase and group.⁵² The potential consequences, as were presented earlier, of losing assets known to play a critical role for the next phases of the campaign would have been serious. Only the level of threat that the target constituted, towards the naval (ships), aviation and land elements of the Amphibious Task Force could justify risking this type of operation. It is always easy, however, for armchair observers and critics to question and dissect such decision made by professional military men who are faced with the various pressures inherent in a combat environment, who must consider, assess and mitigate a variety of factors, under the stress of time and their responsibilities and duty to both their men and the mission.

As clearly stated by retired US Special Operations Command Commander Admiral McRaven, “Failure results when the frictions of war overcome the moral factors.”⁵³ Ultimately then, the successful execution of OP Prelim is directly due to the human qualities of the SOF operators and aircrew who conducted the reconnaissance, assault, and extraction in nearly impossible conditions during those few days of May 1982. The raid conducted by SOF on Pebble Island illustrates how the moral qualities of SOF allows them to achieve successful high-risks missions, having significant impact not only at the operational level, but also influence the strategic environment.⁵⁴ It was accomplished successfully in the face of daunting odds and friction, mainly due to the unique qualities and capabilities possessed by the SOF soldiers available, who constituted a uniquely capable operational option for the senior levels of Command.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Sainu Kainikara, *The Art of Air Power – Sun Tzu Revisited* (Canberra: Air Power Development Centre, 2009), 137. “Hence, skillful Warriors: Have devastating Momentum And precise Timing. Their Momentum is like a tautly drawn crossbow; Timing is like the release of the arrow.”
- 2 Reconstituted from participants accounts: Mr. Alan Bell, Presentation on the Pebble Island Raid to the Royal Canadian Military Institute (RCMI), Toronto, 10 April 2017. Also, Mr. Alan Bell interviewed by author, 11 December 2018; Colonel Richard Hutchings, one of the Sea Kings pilots who participated in the Raid, from his book: Colonel Richard Hutchings, *Special Forces Pilot – A Flying Memoir of the Falklands War (846 Sqn)* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, Kindle Edition, 2008), loc 2433-2445; and the recently published account by Lieutenant General Sir Cedric Delves, *Across an Angry Sea – The SAS in the Falklands War* (London: Hurst & Company, 2018), 160-161.
- 3 Francis Mackay and Jon Cooksey, *Pebble Island – The Falklands War 1982* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books, Kindle Edition, 2017), loc 965-984. See also from Hutchings, *Special Forces Pilot*, loc 2440.
- 4 Colonel (Ret) John Collins, in the report by Congressman Earl Hutto, Chairman of the Special Operations Panel, House Armed Services Committee: *United States and Soviet Special Operations*, 28 April 1987 (Washington D.C.: Congressional Research Service). The five SOF Truths are: Humans are more important than hardware; Quality is better than quantity; Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced; Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies occur; and Most special operations require non-SOF assistance. See also Robert G. Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations – The Origins, Qualities, and Use of SOF* (Tampa: Joint Special Operations University, Report 07-7, Florida), 2007.
- 5 Admiral William H. McRaven, *Special Operations – Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1996).
- 6 McRaven refers to the notion of “Friction,” famously related to Carl von Clausewitz in his seminal work *On War*, which occur during war and impacts military operations, often with determining results.
- 7 McRaven, *Special Operations*, 10. McRaven explains that the concept of “Relative Superiority” is key to understanding how smaller numbers of SOF can defeat bigger forces: “...relative superiority is a condition that exists when an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy.” (Ibid., 4.)
- 8 Ibid., 11. The role and impact of the moral factors is explained in detail through McRaven’s presentation of his “Special Operations Model” as an inverted pyramid, “...precariously balanced...”, with moral factors countering the frictions of war, and preventing them from toppling the pyramid and thus causing defeat. (Ibid., 10-11.)
- 9 McRaven, *Special Operations*. In the Analysis/Critique section of each of the case studies presented, McRaven questions if “...the Objectives were worth the risk?” and if “The plan was developed to maximize superiority over the enemy and minimize the risk to the assault force?”
- 10 In the South Atlantic, as the winter season generally beginning in June approaches (such as during the month of May, when Operation Prelim was executed) the weather conditions can include gale-force winds and high seas. Such was indeed the case in 1982, and as it was the severity of the conditions, particularly the wind, almost prevented the launch of the assault force from HMS *Hermes*.

The conditions and how they affected the launch of the assault force are well described by then Major Cedric Delves, Officer Commanding the raiding force aboard HMS *Hermes*, and Colonel Richard Hutchings a Sea King pilot. Colonel Hutchings vividly described the weather conditions as "...atrocious with a southerly gale and mountainous seas..." Hutchings, *Special Forces Pilot*, loc 2412-2440. Major Delves described the conditions as they were waiting to board the helicopters on the deck of HMS *Hermes*: "The driving spray and rain made it almost impossible to see and hear properly, the numbing combination of wind and cold near overwhelming." He continued, "The flight-deck itself was awash with water, sheeting spindrift flying from its surface. Always in the background raged the unseen, savage sea, beyond the rhythmically rising and falling edge of the deck, the ship booming as waves crashed into her. The howling, roaring wind was confusing, near deafening. Disorientation heightened the unnervingly magnetic, mesmerising menace of the deck's open edge. Certain death lay in wait for anyone falling overboard." Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 159.

11 Alastair Finlan, "British Special Forces in the Falklands War of 1982", *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (Autumn 2002): 84-85.

12 It was the first time since the Second World War that such a large contingent of SAS soldiers was operating together on the same mission, but the nature of which made them reflect on the fame earned by their founders operating against the Afrika Korps in the North-African desert.

13 Michael Clapp & Ewen Southby-Taylor, *Amphibious Assault Falklands: The Battle of San Carlos Water* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books, Kindle Edition, 2017), loc 3048. See also Stavros Atlamazoglou, *The SAS and SBS in the Falklands War – The Pebble Island Raid (Part 3)*, <<https://sofrep.com/57877/sas-sbs-falklands-war-pebble-island-raid-part-3/>>, accessed 30 June 2018, and Mr. Alan Bell, Pebble Island Raid Presentation to the RCMI, 10 April 2017.

14 The Commander of 3 Commando Brigade, then Brigadier Julian Thompson, explained that "So important was the acquisition of intelligence that Special Forces, and particularly the assets to insert them, could be spared for only one direct-action task during the run-up to D-Day (i.e. Landing in San Carlos area) – the Pebble Island raid. [...] The destruction of the Pucaras was particularly important.[...] It could carry rockets, bombs and cannon and because of its maneuverability and slow speed was considerably feared by British helicopter pilots. So, anything that reduced this threat was to be applauded." Brigadier Julian Thompson, *No Picnic – The Story of 3 Commando Brigade in the Falklands War* (Glasgow: Collins & Sons, 1985), 34-35.

15 The threat constituted by the EW dimension was not only recognized by the senior leadership of the Task Force, but also correctly appreciated at the SOF operational levels, such as by the OC "D" Squadron 22 SAS, Major C. Delves, who noted, "The Pebble airstrips had our attention. But before focusing on them we considered the island's other features. It lay close to the entrance of Falkland Sound. Roger pointed out that this made it an ideal radar site for looking out over the northern approaches to the archipelago, including the entrance to the Sound that ran north south, separating the main island of East Falkland from its counterpart, The West. It also covered the way in to San Carlos, but we were unaware of the significance of that," (Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 133).

16 Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, 266-267.

17 Julian Thompson, *No Picnic*, 33-35, 140; and Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, 146, 222, 269, 322.

18 Admiral Woodward was Commander of the Naval Task Force and senior Naval Forward Commander, appointed to command military operations against the Argentinian forces occupying the Falkland Islands.

19 Admiral Woodward described the scene as such, "...a chap materialized, whom I did not even realize was in the Op[eration]s Room." That chap happened to be the Admiral's "resident SAS officer", who had been in regular attendance to those staff meetings "...but somehow never seemed to be there." Sandy Woodward, *One Hundred Days – The Memoirs of the Falklands Battle Group Commander* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, Kindle Edition, 1992), loc 274-277.

20 There were Four Mentors, six Pucara aircraft, and one Skyvan (for transportation purposes) which were present on the airfield and which were destroyed during the raid. See Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 606-632, 1438-1462. The number of aircraft was also confirmed by the Officer commanding D Sqn SAS, as was communicated by his reconnaissance element. See Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 154.

21 This essentially provided the Argentinian forces the ability to strike naval, land and air targets (such as Sea Kings) in the San Carlos operational area within minutes from taking off from their Pebble Island airfield, with very little warning even from potential observation posts covering the airfield.

22 Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 189-198, 203.

23 The reconnaissance phase occurred from 11-14 May 1982, with the assault phase being initiated on 14 May when the assault group was launched from HMS *Hermes*, and the assault on the Objective on 15 May. Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 149-154; and Alan Bell, Presentation to the RCMI, 10 April 2017.

24 Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1556, 1562, 1635.

25 Interestingly, the Argentinian forces had allegedly detected the initial re-deployment and movements of the naval elements, at the beginning of the operation. See Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1291. Also worth noting from the same source, on 12 May the Argentinian garrison was put on "General Stand-to"/alert after a sentry reportedly spotted a flare (no further clarification of this alleged event was ever made available).

26 In order to be deployed under reasonably secure conditions, the assaulting element of "D" Sqn required adequate reconnaissance and identification of landing zones, routes, coordination points, terrain features, etc. Without such detailed information, the assault force and the helicopters carrying it would be arriving blind into extremely dangerous conditions. Typically, such conditions would have typically been considered as unacceptable risks.

27 Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 150-154, 161-165; and Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1030,1070,1321,1362.

28 Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 155; and Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1427, 1537.

29 Mr. Alan Bell, telephone interview with author, 11 December 2018.

30 Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 149-150; and Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1004, 1022, 1042. The reconnaissance element faced considerable difficulties, and had to adapt their own plan as it proved impossible to launch their Klepper canoes as intended, to paddle across Purvis Narrows, and instead carrying their dismantled Kleppers of over 50 pounds each on their back, overland, twice before being able to launch from Whale Bay instead to access Philips Cove on Pebble Island proper.

31 Hutchings, *Special Forces Pilot*, loc 2412-2440, 2443. Colonel Hutchings provides a detailed and revealing explanation on the effects and limitations of such weather conditions, such as how deploying

the blades in such extreme winds is dangerous both to technicians preparing the Sea Kings as well as to the aircraft as the blades could be tilted by the wind, causing serious damage. Also, the procedure to start the engines, normally done on decks, had to be adapted and initiated below decks, to respect the timetable and provide enough time for the attack to occur and the force to be exfiltrated before daylight.

32 Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 163; and Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1375-1390.

33 Delves, *Across an Angry Sea*, 165.

34 Ibid., 167-168.

35 Ibid., 157 & 169-170.

36 While some sources indicate that the excitement of the battle was to blame for the delayed reaction to the signal to withdraw from the objective (such as mentioned in Atlamazoglou, "The SAS and SBS in the Falklands War: Pebble Island Raid, Part 3)," a major reason is that the aircraft were considerably dispersed on the airfield, which in itself constituted a challenge for the assault force of Captain Hamilton, who wished to ensure that the main targets of the raid, the Pucaras and Mentors, were destroyed. Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 1427-1438.

37 Such as, in this case, land SOF elements (of "D" Sqn 22 SAS) requiring the support of an aviation component (Sea Kings of 846 Sqn), and of naval forces (RN vessels HMS *Glamorgan* and HMS *Hermes*).

38 Hutchings, *Special Forces Pilot*, loc 2502, 2513, 2525. This situation required the pilots and flight engineers to quickly, and accurately re-calculate the minimum amount of fuel required, taking into account the force and direction of the wind, new distance to *Hermes* for the return leg, and jettison just enough fuel to reach an acceptable weight allowing both take-off and enough range to reach the carrier safely. An interesting exercise, unexpected and accomplished in war conditions in hostile territory, with an enemy likely in pursuit and closing in on the withdrawing force!

39 Mackay & Cooksey, *Pebble Island*, loc 841. On 7 May, a brief radar emission was reportedly detected by a Sea Harrier, which was assessed to be originating from the general direction of Pebble Island.

40 Ibid., loc 1332, 1345. The radar installation was allocated Naval Gun Fire Target no. ZJ5005 on HMS *Glamorgan* fire plan code-named "Arctic Fox", with ZJ located at the North-Western edge of the Fire Plan, on First Mountain. Interestingly Mackay & Cooksey note, "The Battlefield Clearance Team did not find a radar set or even the remains of one on Pebble Island. No record of a radar set on Pebble Island has ever been located. The Argentinian FAA's Historical Branch stated, without qualification, that no radar was present at the time of the raid. The ELTA surveillance set may have been there for a short period, landed from MV Forrest during its brief call...on 28 April." Additionally, they asserted, "The Official History implies that there never was a set on Pebble Island. The surviving residents have no recollection of anything like a radar set on the island during those troubled times." Ibid., loc 1930, (1943).

41 Surprisingly, as revealed by Alan Bell (veteran of "D" Sqn SAS and the Falklands War), "During the years before the Falklands War, the SAS were not employed in the conventional sphere of operations. During the 1950s and 1960s, they fought brush fire conflicts in remote spots around the globe. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, they operated primarily in covert and undercover roles in Northern Ireland, focusing operations and training on counter-terrorism in the British Isles and

abroad. The last time the SAS had fought in what might be called a conventional war was in the 1970s in Oman...Were the SAS out of touch with conventional operational roles? Definitely, Yes!” Alan Bell, “Successes and Failures of Special Forces Operations during the Falklands War,” in Bernd Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon, David Last, eds., *Force of Choice, Perspectives on Special Operations* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 142-143. Interestingly, Bell highlighted that the SAS would have to demonstrate that they could quickly adapt to conventional operations.

42 From translated excerpts of Von Clausewitz, *On War* collected by National War College Professor Lani Kass, in <<https://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Cquotations.htm>>, accessed 14 December 2018.

43 In this chapter the term “elite” means troops and units who are traditionally known to have higher levels of training, fitness, motivation, capabilities and fighting spirit such as paratroopers of the Parachute Regiment, Royal Marines commandos.

44 Finlan, “British Special Forces in the Falklands War of 1982,” 92. While suggesting this point in the context of another planned raid, namely Operation Mikado on the Argentinian mainland, which was never executed, this comment is also applicable to Operation Prelim as it was also a raid with similar target characteristics. Finlan explains “...the idea of sacrificing an entire Special Forces squadron in an attempt to neutralize this threat is questionable. These forces are irreplaceable in terms of value (the training and experience of these soldiers alone takes years to accumulate) and perhaps such an operation was more appropriate for ‘shock troops’ like the Parachute Regiment (1 Para was available at the time). A Para battalion would have the sheer numbers/firepower to make the attack and extraction viable bearing in mind that these forces would have to make a fighting withdrawal...”

45 While raising the issue above, rightfully arguing that such SOF were a precious and irreplaceable asset to provide the Task Force with the maximum chances of success in retaking the Falkland’s, author Alastair Finlan also expresses that “In the Falklands campaign, the exceptional skill and training of such forces measurably demonstrated their worth, particularly in the inherent flexibility to accept and execute operations quickly.” Finlan, “Special Forces in the Falklands War of 1982,” 92.

46 Mr. Bell, who participated in the raid, but had served prior in the Royal Marines prior to joining the SAS, was of the same opinion. Alan Bell, telephone interview with author, 11 December 2018.

47 This is well illustrated by Commodore Michael Clapp, on whose shoulders, as Commander of the Amphibious Task Force, rested the responsibility of a successful landing. Sharing his thoughts in his book, *Amphibious Assault Falklands*, he described how a few hours prior to the Amphibious Task Force entering Falkland Sound on their way to the landing beaches of San Carlos, “During our approach to the Islands I stood for a short while on HMS *Fearless*’s port bridge wing and watched my mixed force of amphibians, merchant vessels and warships as it forged its way west-wards waiting for the expected air attack that never came. Desperately going through my mind for the millionth time were thoughts of what might occur, whether or not I had taken all the correct steps, whether or not I had the right balance of forces, whether or not my assessment of the problem was the right one. Like everyone else in the force I had never been involved in this type of confrontation before.” Clapp & Southby-Tailyour, *Amphibious Assault Falklands*, loc 3443.

48 Colonel Hutchings described, “By now (in the afternoon of 14 May, as HMS *Hermes* accompanied by her escorts HMS *Broadsword* and HMS *Glamorgan* started their approach towards Pebble Island) weather conditions were atrocious with a southerly gale and mountainous seas; progress was slow. We had another consideration: the range of the Sea Kings. The aircraft were going to be operating at close to maximum all-up mass and, with the strong headwind, we would struggle to achieve the 160 mile round-trip if launching from the position originally selected 75 miles north-

east of the island. Admiral Woodward therefore ordered that *Hermes* close to a position just 40 miles from Pebble Island, a courageous decision given that in such appalling weather the Harriers could not fly to provide top cover, and the two escorts would be unlikely to be able to protect *Hermes* against a concerted attack by the Argentine Air Force.” Hutchings, *Special Forces Pilot*, loc 2410.

49 Translation from Von Clausewitz, *On War*, provided in <<https://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Cquotations.htm>>, accessed 14 December 2018.

50 Such as the night vision goggles aptly utilized by the pilots of 846 Sqn, which allowed them to fly a tactical approach at very low levels over the sea at night, and not only safely and covertly deliver the raiders on the island for the assault phase, but also to extract them under dire time constraints.

51 Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*, 17-18.

52 Mr. Bell shared that the assault group essentially only received confirmation of the number of aircraft, their main target, but otherwise very little details in terms of their location, dispersal, and similarly only limited information concerning the location and nature of the enemy defensive positions and numbers of troops. Alan Bell, telephone interview with author, 11 December 2018.

53 McRaven, *Special Operations*, 11.

54 As demonstrated on a few occasions during the campaign, each ship damaged or worse – sunk – was susceptible to have a most significant and potentially crippling impact on the ability to sustain a viable land offensive against the Argentinian forces on East Falklands. Logistical and support elements, even once landed ashore, were also equally vital and remained vulnerable to such attacks from Argentinian air assets. Lastly, but most importantly, at this early stage of the campaign the British political leaders were acutely aware of the impact of public opinion on the upcoming campaign. A high number of casualties, incurred before the development of successful land operations, could prove disastrous and adversely impact the British public’s will to “fight it through” and completely defeat the occupying Argentinian forces. The political pressure from London, described by Brigadier Thompson before the famous battle for Goose Green, fought successfully by the Second Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, highlights how much this factor weighed on the strategic leadership back in Britain. See Thompson, *No Picnic*, 81.

CHAPTER 6

“PARTY IN TEN.” TASK FORCE NORMANDY IN OPERATION DESERT STORM

Major Jeremy Maltais

Neither ship-launched missiles, nor other standoff weapons, or for that matter traditional Special Operations Forces (SOF) operators, conducted the opening strikes and clandestine shaping fires of the Gulf War in 1991. Instead, the attack was carried out by a joint service operation consisting of United States Air Force (USAF) Sikorsky MH-53 Pave Low helicopters, from 1st Special Operations Wing (SOW), 20th Special Operations Squadron (SOS), and United States Army (USA) AH-64 Apache helicopters from 101st Airborne Division Aviation Regiment.¹ This operation designated Task Force (TF) Normandy, had the crucial objective of eliminating two key Iraqi radar sites on the border of Iraq and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The strike partially blinded the Iraqi air defence network and opened up a corridor for further penetration by coalition aircraft.

The strike marked the opening night of the coalition air campaign and the beginning of Operation (OP) Desert Storm. This strike was conducted in a matter of minutes as a precursor for the air campaign, which lasted over a month before the ground war began. A number of influences played into the construction of this mission: training, desired outcome, level of acceptable risk, lessons learned from previous failures and leadership. Although the composition of the strike package involved a limited amount of airborne SOF, the actions and outcome would demonstrate that the forces involved conducted themselves accordingly in accomplishing a SOF-like mission.²

Ultimately, TF Normandy was instrumental in ensuring the Iraqi air defence network was weakened, allowing further air attacks in the ensuing hours. TF Normandy was not without risk itself; however, the successful outcome greatly reduced the risk to conventional air forces that were designated to continue strikes against the Iraqi capital and its leader, Saddam Hussein, creating chaos with violence and overwhelming the enemy in the process.³

BACKGROUND

The Gulf War began when Iraqi forces, under the direction of the country's dictator, Saddam Hussein, invaded the bordering country of Kuwait. The invasion was prompted by an oil feud which on 17 July 1990, witnessed Iraq accuse Kuwait, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States of America, of colluding together to overproduce oil from the agreed upon amounts set forth by the Arab Nations and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), thus driving down prices.⁴ Iraq estimated its lost revenue to be in the billions, and as a result demanded that their debt, largely accumulated from the Iraq-Iran war, be erased. The debt, which was estimated to be more than \$37 billion, was not a figure Kuwait was willing to erase. Hussein also offered to forgive the perceived lost income in exchange for the annexation of part of Kuwait to Iraq, but Kuwait once again refused and was subsequently invaded in a pre-dawn attack. The powerful Iraqi Armed Forces attacked on 2 August 1990, with a sizable force, which they had been building up on the border in the two weeks prior to the invasion.⁵

Almost immediately there was international outcry condemning the invasion. The United Nation Security Council (UNSC) voted unanimously to denounce the invasion and demanded that the Iraqi Forces withdraw from Kuwait. The ultimatum was made official with UNSC Resolution 660.⁶ Trade and financial embargos quickly followed as the UNSC imposed another 10 resolutions. The final resolution prior to the war, UNSC Resolution (UNSCR) 678, passed on the 29 November 1990. Resolution 678 gave Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi Force in Kuwait an ultimatum of 15 January 1991 to withdraw from Kuwaiti sovereign territory. Otherwise, UN members were authorized to use "all necessary means" to expel Iraqi Forces, and thereby liberate Kuwait.

The US and Coalition military response and prepositioning of forces started in early August, almost immediately following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.⁷

OP Desert Shield was a United States (US)-led initiative to restore peace to the region, while attempting to militarily pressure Iraq to abandon its invasion. OP Desert Shield was also intended to deter Iraq from further military invasion in the Middle East, as Saddam Hussein's disdain for Israel provoked reasonable concern that invasion of neighbouring countries could continue beyond Kuwait and into the KSA.⁸

The posturing of forces for OP Dessert Shield ran the risk of escalating the conflict into a battle sooner than intended. Positioning numerous non-Arab forces on the border or in close proximity to Iraq was a bold move that could have triggered/prompted a seemingly war-hungry Saddam Hussein, to take further military action. For this "shield" to work best and reduce the overall risk, the coalition had to act fast and mobilize as imposing a force as possible in a short period. The coalition nations were able to build their forces relatively quickly and came under the control of American General Norman Schwarzkopf, Commander-in-Chief of US Central Command. The force consisted of approximately 190 warships from 19 coalition countries, 1,700 combat aircraft from 12 coalition countries, and 737,000 troops from 31 coalition countries.⁹

LEADERSHIP

The leadership and command of TF Normandy played a fundamental role in the formation of the TF and execution as we know it. The doctrine behind planning Airpower missions prior to Op Desert Storm was, and arguably still is, largely land-based.¹⁰ The planners themselves faced many hurdles, but one of the greatest influences in the construction of the opening strike plan was General Schwarzkopf himself. When General Schwarzkopf was presented with the initial plan to take out the two air defence sites, three options were presented to him.¹¹ One option utilized USAF bomber aircraft to destroy the targets, while another used cruise missiles to destroy the radar sites. These first two Courses of Action (COA) were not the preferred method, as they could not confirm destruction of the actual targets. The third option involved the use of SOF operators, either to laser designate the targets or plant the explosives themselves. General Schwarzkopf's open distaste for SOF immediately eliminated the option of using SOF and he sent the planners back to the drawing board.¹²

The planners eventually developed a COA where attack helicopters would slip in and strike two target areas, conduct immediate Battle Damage Assessment (BDA), and re-attack if required before returning home.¹³ The composition of the strike packages consisted of four AH-64 Apaches and two MH-53 Pave Lows to guide the armed Apaches to the target locations. This combination of six helicopters was used for both targets. Redundancy was built into each combination in that only one Pave Low was required and fewer than four Apaches were required to debilitate the radar sites.



USNA

MH-53 Pave Low Helicopter.

The redrawn plan was a completely new interpretation of how to utilize aviation assets in strategic attacks such as this.¹⁴ Although one could attribute many similarities in this plan with strategic bombing, the fact was that these aviation assets were neither proficient, nor had they been trained for, these independent strike operations.

Although many attribute the decision to reject SOF options to General Schwarzkopf's own aversion for SOF, there is likely a greater rationale behind his decision. Specifically, in light of Vietnam and the losses encountered in the not so

distant past, President George H.W. Bush, directed Schwarzkopf to keep casualties low.¹⁵ This direction from his commander-in-chief may have led Schwarzkopf to demand a better strategy, as the risk of detection with SOF operators was much higher as they would have to be inserted while remaining undetected, which increased the chance of failure before a shot was fired.¹⁶ Arguably, Schwarzkopf used this influence to easily push aside the thought of using SOF operators, which is a very likely and probable theory. However, there is no denying that the SOF operator options also possessed a high amount of risk; if the Iraqi forces discovered the slow moving SOF teams on foot, it could have resulted in catastrophe to the teams and strategically to the coalition's campaign.

REQUIREMENTS OF THE STRIKE

The required airstrike to eliminate the two Iraqi radar sites meant that the aircraft had to penetrate 140 miles inside Iraq and simultaneously strike two separate sites that were 70 miles apart. Once the planning staff had decided to use the modernized USAF Pave Low helicopters, there were a number of support pieces that had to fall into place to meet the requirements of the operation, particularly deciding which asset would be paired with the Pave Lows.

The Pave Low helicopter lacked the tactics and firepower to accomplish the mission by itself.¹⁷ Alternatively, the Apache attack helicopter had proven itself to have sufficient firepower to accomplish the task, however, it lacked the navigational ability and endurance to undertake the round trip.¹⁸ Naturally the two airframes complemented each other for the requirements of this mission. As such, the Apaches were immediately packaged with Pave Lows which had been updated with new state of the art Global Positioning System (GPS). Adding further risk mitigation was the fact that the Pave Lows were brought into theatre to provide Combat Search and Rescue (CSAR). They would not only serve the purpose of guiding the Apaches through enemy territory but would also offer those ParaRescue services to any downed aircraft during TF Normandy's mission.¹⁹

Additionally to solve the Apaches' range issues, the Americans made modifications to the aircraft by adding an external fuel tank that allowed it to travel further distances. However, even with the external fuel tanks the helicopters were not capable of carrying enough fuel to complete the round trip back to base. Therefore,

a “Fat Cow” MH-47 Chinook was made available to provide a Forward Arming and Refuelling Point (FARP). The FARP would allow the helicopters to refuel on their way back to base, on friendly territory after the strike had been conducted. Compared to alternatives, such as setting a FARP prior to the strike, the external fuel tank greatly reduced the risk.²⁰



Peter Towie / Alamy GFX3FW

AH-64 Apache Attack Helicopter.

Quite simply, through ingenuity and creative thinking by aircraft engineers the force was able to overcome and mitigate potential shortcomings. This level of commitment is not traditionally seen for conventional forces; however, this was indeed a unique mission. The advanced technology and engineering are typical of SOF who are in need of new technology and ways to adapt and overcome the enemy. This dedication of resources towards eliminating these radar sites illustrates the strategic importance of their destruction to the war effort.

Deception operations also played an important function in the strike. In the weeks prior to 17 January 1991, coalition aircraft, both fighter and helicopter from a variety of altitudes, conducted “feint attacks” against Iraqi Air Defences. In USAF circles around this period they were more commonly called “fence checks,” a technique perfected during the Vietnam War.²¹ Although these fence checks never penetrated the border with aircraft or kinetic force, they provided a decoy

leading up to the night of 17 January by keeping radar operators on edge. However, repetition of these procedures were intended to lower the guard of the radar operators who would have become accustomed to the manoeuvres that were conducted at all hours of the day, over the numerous months leading up to the launch of TF Normandy. The deception added to the level of intricacy put forth in order to keep the enemy blind to the mission. Quite simply, the deception contributed to overall security and risk mitigation.

Through initiatives like these, the risks to the attacking forces were inherently reduced when they commenced the opening strikes of OP Desert Storm. Table 6.1 not only includes factors to reduce risk to TF Normandy, but also the assessed risk of alternative options to eliminate the targets. Through this analysis, it can be deduced that although there was high risk for the unproven airborne assault force, there had been a sufficient level of risk mitigation put in place. The effort to lower the overall risk to the mission, proved rewarding and the end result was well worth the risk. TF Normandy may not have been the riskiest option to accomplish the task of destroying the radar sites; however, in this case the lower level of risk increased the overall chance of success.

For instance, the exposure time itself vastly reduced the risk to TF Normandy and the entire operation being detected when compared to the potential of inserting SOF operators. The ground forces would have had a much longer exposure time, as they would have spent time moving into place. Furthermore, there could have been complications with their insertion, and if selected to blow up the sites themselves, would have potentially put them face-to-face with the enemy. Conversely, the flexibility and versatility of airpower, allowed TF Normandy to successfully conduct the mission as swiftly as possible while conducting their own organic observation and BDA of the strike.

Nevertheless, the risk to TF Normandy was not superficial; Iraq had the fourth largest army in the world at the time, and a highly mobile air defence network that could have posed a sizable challenge to coalition aircraft.²² Moreover, the risk to both TF Normandy and coalition aircraft would have been at its highest while TF Normandy hovered in place before the radar sites were destroyed.

EVENT/ RISK FACTOR (Requiring action/ mitigation)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT (Pers & Eqpt)	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF	DECISION/ COMMENT
An analysis of risk for all the COAs to take out the radar sites will show that there was high risk involved on all accounts. Some directly to the force involved; however, the greater risk was to the follow-on coalition aircraft that did not possess stealth ability.				
SOF operators lasing targets for fighter bomber	Planning Staff/General Schwarzkopf	High+	High	General exposure time for the forces on the ground, risks not only their well-being if they were discov- ered but the element of surprise was also at stake.
SOF operators taking out targets	Planning Staff/General Schwarzkopf	High+	High	Same as above. Plus the added risk of close quarters combat with the enemy.
Cruise missile conducting strike	Planning Staff/General Schwarzkopf	High	High	Risk of using standoff long-range missiles, although relatively safe was high because of the inability to confirm the strikes.
Attack Helicopters	Planning Staff/General Schwarzkopf	High	High	Although this COA calls for millions of dollar worth of aircraft speeding to- wards the radar sites their Swift speed and stealth ability reduces their overall exposure when compared to SOF Ground Forces.

CHAPTER 6

EVENT/ RISK FACTOR (Requiring action/ mitigation)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT (Pers & Eqpt)	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF	DECISION/ COMMENT
The following are decisions taken after TF Normandy was assembled, whether they are risk mitigation factors, simple planning, or Standard Operating procedure for a mission of this calibre.				
Packaging Apaches and Pave Lows (Plus USAF ParaRescuemen on Pave Lows)	Planning Staff	Low (Pave Lows were noticeably louder than Apaches. Flight paths around known observation posts were planned, as well have the Pave Lows standoff once targets were identified.)	High	Not only was this almost a necessity to make sure the Apaches found their target, the added rescue teams on the Pave Lows reduced risk to Apache crews if they were shot down
Aircraft modifications (External Fuel tank)	Apache Engineers/ Leadership	Low	High	Fuel tank was one already used on other aircraft. Crews trained extensively with it to become familiar and it greatly extended the range reducing risk to other assets (Desert One)
CH-47 Chinook “Fat Cow” for refuelling	Planning Staff	Medium	Medium	Although adding another asset to the fold, this was do so after completion of the mission and was not complex as it was simply one aviation asset to top off the fuel
Training	Planning Staff down to Unit Leadership	Acceptable / Low	High	Taking professional crews allowing them to practice up to 700Nm from the target. While developing new ways of employing their assets not yet conceived by doctrine.
OPSEC	Planning Staff down to Unit Leadership	Medium	High	Invaluable. Assisted with ensuring zero casualties of TF Normandy and maintaining the element of surprise.

Risk to coalition Fighter-Bombers if radar sites are not destroyed	Planning Staff/General Schwarzkopf	High	High	If TF Normandy was unsuccessful in completing their mission as seen above there was potential for High casualties.
Enemy Aircraft launching on TF Normandy, prior to destruction of Sites.	N/A	High TF Normandy would have to fly low and in a riskier formation to avoid detection	High	If the enemy scrambled its fighter aircraft to eliminate TF Normandy the result would have been devastating for the mission and follow-on attack. However, the Friendly fighter Combat Air Patrol (CAP) presented enough of a safeguard that they likely would have eliminated the enemy fighters first.

Table 6.1 – Summary of Risk and Decision-Making²³

TRAINING

Once the composition, selection of pilots and team had been made, the team worked meticulously to train, practice, and master their objectives.²⁴ Any difficulties overcoming Army and Air Force doctrine were quashed; after all, they were all aviation assets. This mission was a fairly benign flight profile, however, low altitudes, darkness of night, interoperability and aircraft modifications all added to the intricacies of the mission. The harsh weather and unpredictable flying conditions that come with operating in a desert would also add to the necessity for practicing and mastering of what would seem to be basic objectives.²⁵ When all factors were weighed against each other, the significant risk to the individual aircrews and success of the mission could have put the President's mission of safeguarding American lives in jeopardy.

The Apache Regiment under the command of then Lieutenant Colonel (Lt. Col.) Dick Cody, who commanded the 1st Battalion, 101st Airborne Division Aviation Regiment, was one of fourteen American Apache aviation units in theater. Unlike the USAF Pave Low Crews, who already had credibility since they were from the USAF SOW, 20th SOS, the Apache unit was a relatively unknown entity.

What led to the selection of this particular Apache unit was their reputation for conduct and professionalism.²⁶ Since their arrival in the KSA, they had developed a reputation for readiness and reliability. The Apaches were operational within three days after being ferried to the theatre and maintained a very impressive, ninety-four percent serviceability rate; particularly given the desert climate.²⁷ This reputation and reliability gave the planners solid evidence from which to plan and encouraged decision-makers given their positive track record. Without this reliability or established maintenance dependability, the plan may have been scrapped before a training flight even had the clearance to take-off. Repeatedly asked whether his team could accomplish the mission, Lt. Col. Cody in full confidence responded, “100%”.²⁸

In the interest of operational security (OPSEC), the teams were never told what their objectives were. They were given training tasks to fly similar routes, in similar conditions, simulating the destruction of buildings or destroying busses during live fire exercises.²⁹ The crews trained 700 miles from the targets as not to alert the Iraqis to any impending air assault, or to the manner in which it would be conducted. Movements to the operational base were classified and both the Pave Lows and Apaches conducted the positioning to the staging airfield independently as not to draw attention or suspicion that they may have been working together.³⁰

The OPSEC surrounding the planning and training of the mission was of great importance. It went so far as even during daylight when the Apaches made an intermediate fuel stop as they were moving to their forward staging area, they did so without making any radio calls. Additionally, the plan had the forces stop at another active Apache base, so the TF Normandy aircraft did not draw any attention.

OPSEC helped reduce the risk to the mission and crews as discussed above. The crews’ professionalism and conduct in training preceded them, which assured that they would not discuss their training, since they all likely were aware of its importance given the level of secrecy around what they were striking.³¹ Even though the pilots themselves did not know the specific targets or area of the strike; divulging even the type of training and formation could have tipped off the enemy to the strike or at a minimum made the Iraqis increase border patrols. Ultimately the OPSEC surrounding this mission was effective and assisted in providing the enemy with the greatest surprise possible, helping to grant the successful outcome of the mission.

EXECUTION

It is important to highlight that a lot of the new tactics and techniques used during this operation were developed out of necessity and previous failures, such as the use of the external fuel tank. This lesson was a direct result of the failed 1980 Operation Eagle Claw intended to rescue US hostages held in Iran after the revolution, and is commonly known as the Desert One failure.³² This debacle still lingered in the minds of some of the planners involved with TF Normandy, including Lt. Col. Cody, who himself reflected on Desert One and was eager to avoid such a catastrophic failure. This pressure of past failures played a motivational role as personnel practiced for perfection to ensure they could deliver on their “100%” promise for success.

The evolution of the lessons learned from previous failures made continually progress during the planning of the current operation and mitigated risk aversion for TF Normandy. It would have been all too easy to attempt what had been planned in the past, with small modifications, thinking it could be done better now. The planners were accurate with their risk assessment, discarding practices from a confirmed failure and attempting new methodologies that could be practiced even if it had not been combat tested. For instance, adding a fuel tank to the Apaches was something that the pilots could practice and get accustomed to. However, as was the case with Desert One, the unpredictability of planning a dangerous desert refuelling in enemy territory prior to reaching the target location presented many risks.

Nonetheless, at 0100 hours, 17 January 1991, TF Normandy lifted off to conduct their mission after having received the green light hours earlier. This approval was given the first night after the expiration of the final UNSC Resolution, after which the coalition was authorized to use “all necessary means” to eradicate the Iraqi Forces from Kuwait. With this in mind, whether or not the Iraqi Forces were expecting an attack, or had heightened security measures searching for possible intruders, had no impact on the outcome of the mission. Just as they had practiced against similar mock-ups, TF Normandy would easily move in under the cover of darkness with complete radio silence, in two covert teams and eliminate the two radar stations. Once on-station, the signal “Party in 10” was broadcast over the radio, ten seconds later the aircraft crews commenced firing.³³

The simultaneous strikes were completed with perfect execution in under the allotted five minutes to release ordnance. The entire mission totalled four hours from take-off until they returned to base. A vast amount of munitions were expended to ensure all primary and secondary targets were destroyed beyond repair.³⁴ Once again, breaking radio silence, a transmission was made to notify command that destruction had been achieved.³⁵ The strike aircraft returned to base without receiving any effective enemy fire even after seeing numerous erratic small arms fire in their direction and what appeared to be a shoulder-fired Surface to Air Missile (SAM). The “Fat Cow” did, however, take some fire and lost the use of its rear landing gear, but all returned home safely.³⁶

Several days after the attack an AC-130 Spectre Gunship was tasked to fly over the area in daylight to destroy anything that was not taken out in the original attack that could be repaired. The gunship reported nothing was left to fire on and that TF Normandy had achieved 100 percent destruction.³⁷ This assessment endorsed the initial self-proclaimed success that TF Normandy had in their strike and highlighted the level of destruction that aviation assets were capable of achieving given their strong firepower, versatility and speed. Additionally, this verification further confirmed the ability of Airpower to be used independently, both in support, and autonomously, of SOF and conventional ground forces in deep attack operations.

USAF photo / Alamy D6E862



Coalition aircraft over Iraq.

OUTCOME – IMMEDIATE FOLLOW-ON ATTACKS

Further indication that the TF Normandy assault was successful became obvious through air superiority that coalition aircraft experienced over Iraq.³⁸ Although only a portion of the Iraqi air defence network had been destroyed, the impact of the blinding was significant. The corridor allowed aircraft to reach the heart of Iraq and take out key Command and Control facilities in Bagdad. It is unlikely that Hussein, and his generals or military advisors expected this attack on Bagdad. In its place, he likely thought the initial push would come in an effort to liberate Kuwait, meaning a direct attack on the Iraqi forces within Kuwait itself. However, without the early warning that aircraft were entering Iraqi airspace, thanks in part to TF Normandy taking out the radar systems, the attack on Bagdad itself would have been extremely unanticipated.

Confirmation that the element of surprise was achieved was highlighted by the fact that the lights in the city of Bagdad remained illuminated for over an hour after the airstrikes had begun.³⁹ Generally speaking, during night-time airstrikes, the defender cuts electricity and blacks out the city, reducing the likelihood of attacking aircraft hitting their objectives. In this case, the sheer surprise of the airstrikes in the heart of the country likely led to some disorientation. This stupefaction can be linked back to the assault conducted by TF Normandy as it allowed coalition aircraft to sneak in and carry out their own strikes on Bagdad with very little to no warning to the Iraqis.

The surprise to the Iraqi forces was total. Even American planners anticipated a higher casualty rate on the opening night, which thankfully, never came to fruition.⁴⁰ The element of surprise for coalition forces that were striking the down-town targets was priceless. Not only was the threat eliminated, potentially saving many lives in the process, but it also allowed the follow-on aircraft to achieve a high percentage of success on their own targets. Arguably without the elimination of these two radar sites, the risk to the follow-on strike aircraft would have been so high that some of the planes would have been lucky to make it over their targets, let alone make it back to base intact.

The global importance of removing the two TF Normandy objectives ensured that the conventional, less covert aircraft were able to proceed with their mission. Their concern was palpable as witnessed by remarks made by crews of the less stealthy

aircraft. In one case, during the intelligence brief on opening night of Operation Desert Storm, a worried airman brought up the possible threat of the radar sites that were directly below his planned flight path. Briefers assured him not to worry and he was informed of TF Normandy's objective to eliminate the sites before the targets posed a threat to anyone. The airman was so relieved that the threat had been quelled that he penned a letter to the units who took part in the mission, thanking them for undertaking the risks that they did, to ensure the safety of others.⁴¹ Clearly, even as a psychological distraction the removal of these critical targets provided comfort and allowed aircrew to remain focused on primary objectives. Although the threat was much more than just a psychological threat, relieving this pressure for aircrews, and informing them of the sites neutralization, presented the first victory to the coalition forces in the intelligence briefs, before those fighter-bombers were even airborne.

CONCLUSION

The success of TF Normandy was not limited to simply its destruction of the assigned objectives, which rendered them inoperable. Despite numerous risks to aircrew including threat of detection, or risk of failure, which would cause great threat to the follow-on strike aircraft, TF Normandy aircrew were able to effectively accomplish their mission. A number of the risks they faced were overcome by training, discipline, and OPSEC, all of which were built on the reputation of the units involved, specifically their effectiveness, and efficiency. In the end, the force accomplished all of its assigned tasks and kept the Commander's promise for 100 percent success.

The risks that TF Normandy had to overcome to achieve success were essential to neutralizing the greater threats to the coalition writ large. Redundancy was built into the plan. Maintenance teams managed to keep all assets mission-capable and get them airborne. Likewise, the pilots conducted their mission just as planned, with new aircraft configurations and techniques never before tested in combat, without taking any human or aircraft casualties. Moreover, this relatively small force completed the mission without any additional back-up or over-watch to rapidly assist them if they encountered trouble.

Undeniably the risks were high for TF Normandy, but it was a necessary strike that only those fast-moving helicopters could execute and remain in the vicinity to verify destruction, confirm their success, and re-attack if required. This suite of capability all culminated in an effective execution of their mission, which further enabled a large strike package of coalition aircraft to fly into Iraq through the blacked out corridor and continue with unexpected bombardment of Iraq on the opening night of Operation Desert Storm, thus, striking back at Saddam and his regime with unprecedented modern airpower.

ENDNOTES

1 *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: (Final Report to Congress) Pursuant to Title V of the Persian Gulf Conflict Supplemental Authorization and Personnel Benefits Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-25)* (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1992), 152.

2 Traditionally, SOF are “specifically selected, equipped and trained for unique missions. Used when military risk is high or when extra fidelity is required. Often deployed to achieve strategic effect through tactical actions. Optimized for operating in hostile or politically sensitive areas, in times of peace or war, independently or in coordination with conventional forces.” Although the forces from TF Normandy were not labelled “special” they were selected, equipped and trained for this unique mission. Government of Canada, *CANSOFCOM Mandate, Who We Are*, <<https://www.canada.ca/en/special-operations-forces-command/corporate/mandate.html>>, accessed 11 December 2018.

3 Success for this case study is measured, twofold; first is in the 100 percent elimination of the strike objectives and safe return. Additional success is assessed by the fact that follow-on forces were able to strike with a low casualty rate against an advanced defense system. Furthermore, planners expected considerable loss amongst the TF Normandy assets; however, they all returned safely with minor damage to only one of the aircraft. For example, “Pilots reported that SAMs and AAA were fired wildly and at random, in most cases without the fire control guidance of the supporting radars, which were themselves the victims of some of the SEAD attacks.” Robert K. Simm, *Operation Desert Storm and a New Paradigm: Ground Forces in Support of Air Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff College, 4 June 1993), 31.

4 A Congressional report noted, “On 17 July, Saddam accused Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates of complicity with the United States to cheat on oil production quotas. He blamed this overproduction for driving down the price of oil, causing losses of billions of dollars to Iraq.” *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, 3.

5 A Congressional report asserted, “The three attacking armored and mechanized formations, supported by combat aircraft, linked up at Al-Jahra. The two divisions conducting the main attack continued east to Kuwait City, where they joined the special operations forces.” Additionally, it is important to note that Iraq was not a proxy state with a laughable army. Rather, “Iraq possessed the fourth largest army in the world, an army hardened in long years of combat against Iran.” *Ibid.*, ii and 1.

6 A Congressional report observed, “The nearly unanimous manner in which the UNSC and the UN membership as a whole responded during this crisis was unprecedented. Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm were conducted in accordance with UNSC resolutions and Iraq’s refusal to abide by them. On 2 August 1990, the UNSC passed Resolution 660, condemning the invasion as a violation of the UN Charter and demanding Iraqi withdrawal. The resolution passed 14-0, with Yemen abstaining. Four days later, the UNSC passed Resolution 661, imposing a trade and financial embargo on Iraq and establishing a special sanctions committee. This measure passed 13-0, with Cuba and Yemen abstaining. After these and nine subsequent resolutions failed to end the Iraqi occupation, on 29 November the UNSC authorized members to use “all means necessary” to enforce previous resolutions if Iraq did not leave Kuwait by 15 January [1991].” *Ibid.*, 24.

7 Coalition Partners throughout the war consisted of: Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Egypt, France Germany, Greece, Hungary, Honduras, Italy, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Morocco, Netherlands, Niger, Norway, New Zealand, Oman, Pakistan Poland, Portugal, Qatar, Senegal, Spain, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, United Kingdom. Contributions varied vastly from Hungary’s “40 man medical team,” to the United Kingdom’s contribution of “42,000 troops, 16 Ships and 58 Aircraft.” A number of nations contributed ships to enforce the shipping embargo. Turkey was a unique member of the coalition as they did not contribute any military forces but opened their airspace and military bases for use by other members of the coalition. Joseph P. Englehardt, *Desert Shield and Desert Storm. A Chronology and Troop List for the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf Crisis* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute US Army War College, 1991), 8-10.

8 A Congressional Reported noted, “Iraqi forces, consolidating in Kuwait, appeared to be massing for possible further offensive operations into Saudi Arabia. By 6 August, the day before the first US force deployments, 11 Iraqi divisions were in or deploying to Kuwait. Far exceeding occupation requirements, Iraq had more than enough forces to launch an immediate invasion of Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich Eastern Province.” This massing of forces put significant pressure on the Coalition and primarily American military to mobilize quickly before the whole of the middle fell into chaos. *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, 38.

9 Englehardt, *Desert Shield and Desert Storm*, 5.

10 The employment of Air Power is a highly debated subject and often comes down to either shaping fires, or Close Air Support (CAS), both in support of the Army thus often making the Air Force Commander subordinate to the Army Commander, except for in cases of air interdiction. “According to the then-current version of FM 100-5, Operations, airpower is an integrated but subordinate element of the AirLand team. Throughout the document, air operations are depicted as fire support for ground maneuver.” Edward C. Mann III, *Thunder and Lightning: Desert Storm and the Airpower Debates*, Vol. 2 (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: Air University Press, 1995), 29.

11 There is some ambiguity of the actual COA presented by the planners: “One called for using special operations forces (SOF) to hit the radar sites with missiles. The second envisioned SOF near

the sites using handheld laser designators to direct Apaches to the targets. The third option centered on using Air Force fighter aircraft to destroy the targets.” Richard Mackenzie, “Apache Attack,” *Air Force Magazine* (October 1991), <[http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/1991/October 1991/Apache Attack](http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/1991/October%201991/Apache%20Attack)>, accessed 11 December 2018. Other sources commonly reported other varied options for the strike. This representation of the three COAs seems to fit in more accurately with other reports. “COA #1 was to insert special operation forces on the ground; COA #2 was to have Air Force Pave Low helicopters attack and destroy the EW sites only using their .50-caliber machine guns; and COA #3 used cruise missiles” Paul E. Berg, and Kenneth E. Tiley. “Task Force Normandy: The Deep Operation that Started Operation Desert Storm,” in Jack D. Kem, ed., *Deep Maneuver: Historical Case Studies of Maneuver in Large-Scale Combat Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Army University Press, 2018), 142.

12 “An irate Schwarzkopf, who lambasted the notion of using special operations ground forces. A highly decorated foot soldier, Schwarzkopf had proven himself a resourceful and reliable combat leader in Vietnam. But, it was also in Southeast Asia where a string of bad experiences with special operations forces had soured the general’s opinion of such ‘hotshot’ units, and Schwarzkopf made it abundantly clear he intended to keep their numbers as low as possible.” Beth Underwood, “Blinding Saddam,” *Military History Magazine* (March 2017), <<http://www.historynet.com/blinding-saddam.htm>>, accessed 11 December 2018.

13 Initially, there were three target areas and three teams assigned to them. Those three teams were Red, White and Blue. “By early December 1990 intelligence indicated the radar installation assigned to Team Blue wasn’t linked to any air-defense operations centers, meaning the site need not be attacked. Rather than scrap a team, Cody assigned the Blue crews to Teams Red and White, though he continued to keep his men in the dark regarding mission details, including the location of the remaining targets, dubbed Objectives California and Nevada.” Ibid.

14 The term “aviation” in this paper is meant to refer to helicopter assets as a whole and not fixed-wing aircraft.

15 The Secretary of Defense at the time revealed, “The President did things of use that were enormously helpful. When it was time to double the size of the force that we deployed, it would have been a relatively simple proposition to say let’s see if we can’t do it with smaller forces. He consistently said do whatever you have to, to assemble the force and make certain in the final analysis we can prevail at the lowest cost possible.” *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, 103.

16 Mackenzie, “Apache Attack.”

17 Lieutenant Colonel Comer was not convinced of success of this initial plan because he believed “that the 50-caliber machine guns would not be powerful enough to satisfactorily destroy the sites.” Berg and Tiley, “Task Force Normandy,” 142.

18 “A review of the videotape after one live-fire training mission offered added assurance the Apaches had the AirPower to finish the job—where the buses had been, only warped chunks of smoking metal remained.” Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 David Vanderhoof, “Task Force Normandy 20 Years Ago Today,” *Hitchhiker’s Guide to Military Aviation*, 16 January 2011, <<http://hhg2ma.blogspot.com/2011/01/task-force-normandy-20-years-ago-today.html>>, accessed December 11, 2018.

21 Ibid.

22 Iraq had an extensive air defense umbrella of AAA and SAMs, which included several SA-2 and SA-3 launchers in Kuwait, which provided some protection from air attack. *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War*, ii, and 113.

23 *Joint Doctrine Manual, Risk Manual for CF Operations* (2007) B-GJ-005-502/FP-000, 43, was consulted in the creation of this table.

24 “Like many pilots involved in SOF missions their selection was not left to a rigorous selection or tryout process. More or less the fact that they were qualified on the airframe was a testament to their skill. What was a deciding factor for the Apache crews, who fly in pairs, was simply which crews had already been working with each other.” Lieutenant Colonel Cody explained, “I selected crews. I did not select individuals. I took guys who had been flying together as combat crews the whole time. I did not select my most experienced individuals and pool them all together. I actually had some twenty-two-year-olds and twenty-three-year-olds in the front seats out there.” Mackenzie, “Apache Attack.”

25 Kenneth R. Walters, *Gulf War Weather* (Scott Air Force Base, IL: USAF Environmental Technical Applications Center, 1992), 1-5.

26 Mackenzie, “Apache Attack.”

27 Vanderhoof, “Task Force Normandy.”

28 Mackenzie, “Apache Attack.”

29 “One of the final training scenarios from higher to confirm the choice of the Apache was tasked to fly a 1,000-mile specified route at night, arrive at a gunnery range undetected and blow up some targets at a precise time down to the exact second. Lieutenant Colonel Cody and his selected crews performed, unaware CENTCOM staff was present. The 1-101st battalion operations officer (S3) was in the range tower with the CENTCOM staff and with 15 seconds to go, no one in the tower could see or hear the Apaches in the darkness as they were passing the tower; a CENTCOM staff officer asked the S3 where the Apaches were; within three seconds to go the S3 said, “I guess they are not going to make it?” and instantly the area around the tower lit up as all four Apaches fired at the exact designated time.” Berg and Tiley, “Task Force Normandy.” 145.

30 Ibid., 145.

31 Ibid., 147.

32 “The planners did not want to set up a refueling point like the Desert One base used in the abortive 1980 hostage rescue in Iran.” Mackenzie, “Apache Attack.”

33 Robert Scales, *Certain Victory: The US Army in the Gulf War* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Staff, US Army, 1993), 159.

34 Berg and Tiley, “Task Force Normandy...,” 148.

35 There are a range of sources all reporting different code words. As noted earlier “Nevada” was used versus “Nebraska,” nevertheless, “Cody transmitted ‘California A-A-A’ to Comer, who then relayed the message to CENTCOM that the White Team target had been 100-percent destroyed and with no casualties. Comer reported ‘Nebraska A-A-A’ to CENTCOM to signal the Red Team had 100-percent destruction of their site and no casualties.” Berg and Tiley, “Task Force Normandy...,” 148.

- 36 Vanderhoof, “Task Force Normandy.”
- 37 Berg and Tiley, “Task Force Normandy,” 151.
- 38 Air Superiority is defined as, “That degree of dominance in the air battle of one force over another which permits the conduct of operations by the former and its related land, sea and air forces at a given time and place without prohibitive interference by the opposing force.” Department of National Defence, *Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) Doctrine*, B-GA-400-000/FP-001, October 2015.
- 39 Mann, *Thunder and Lightning ...*, 133.
- 40 Berg and Tiley, “Task Force Normandy,” 151.
- 41 “During our [flight intelligence] brief, we noticed our route of flight took us right over an active [radar] site...We were told not to worry about it...We saw the explosions and your helicopters in our FLIR [forward-looking infrared radiometer] as we flew over you; there was immense relief.” Ibid., 151.

CHAPTER 7

OPERATION GOTHIC SERPENT: AN ANALYSIS OF FAILURE

NICHOLAS RAMSAY

*“Me and my clan against my nation. Me and my family against the clan.
Me and my brother against the family. Me against my brother”¹*

Somalian Proverb

Throughout military history, societies have idolized last stands in which small groups of warriors fought against overwhelming odds. These legendary battles are still studied, analyzed, and revered today. Names such as Thermopylae, Rorke’s Drift, and the Alamo all still hold their gravitas and captivate people. Societies cling to these battles as the measure of bravery and patriotism. One such battle that has seen much fanfare over the last two decades is the events of 3-4 October 1993 in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. Commonly known as “Black Hawk Down” or “the Battle of Mogadishu,” these events were part of a larger mission code-named Operation Gothic Serpent. This operation is often referenced as the definition of American skill and capability. Though it is often hailed as an American success by the general public, once the details of the mission are examined, a much different story emerges. When analyzing the facts, one comes to the conclusion that the mission was not the heroic victory that some scholars suggest but instead it was a significant failure. Though coalition forces were able to arrest several members of General Mohamed Farrah Aidid’s inner circle, Operation Gothic Serpent was a failure on a tactical, operational and strategic level. The loss of vehicles, material and personnel combined with the residual effect on US foreign policy made Operation Gothic Serpent a resounding disaster.

It is important to define the term “failure” within this framework. In this context failure is defined as not adequately having the forethought and understanding

of the situation to make the correct decisions, leading to the injury and death of several military personnel and civilians. There are three critical levels of failure in the case of Operation Gothic Serpent: tactical, operational and strategic. Within each of these levels, there were critical breakdowns and poor decisions among all stakeholders. Failure in the case of Operation Gothic Serpent range from the platoon level on the streets of Mogadishu, to the strategic level of the President of the United States of America. These breakdowns resulted in the “bloodiest single combat episode involving US casualties since the Vietnam War.”² At the end of the battle, 18 Americans were dead, 84 were wounded, and one American pilot was captured. Moreover, an estimated one thousand Somalians were wounded or killed.³

BACKGROUND

In 1969, Somalian President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke was assassinated.⁴ A bloodless coup d'état lead by General Mohamed Siad Barre followed. Barre ruled Somalia until his ousting in 1991, when a series of loosely aligned tribal clans gained control of the capital of Mogadishu. General Aidid rose to power in this chaos. The resulting tribal infighting degenerated into all-out civil war. Several of these warring clans resorted to scorched earth tactics in an attempt to control the production and distribution of food. Combined with a biblical drought, the fighting led to the starvation and death of approximately 300,000 Somalians.⁵ Using food as a means of power, Aidid quickly gained control over a majority of Mogadishu. As the famine increased, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) could no longer turn a blind eye to the situation. Initially, 500 Pakistani peacekeepers were sent to secure the airport and they tried to distribute food to the civilian population. However, by 1992 the situation became worse. Ambushes on UN convoys increased in frequency and violence. As a result, American President George H.W. Bush approved the deployment of US military personnel and equipment under Operation Restore Hope to aid in the UN mission. This increase in personnel and equipment led to the reopening of food distribution centres and ended the humanitarian crisis.⁶ However, the peace did not last. Once most of the US forces were removed from the Somalian theatre of operation, violence once again erupted.

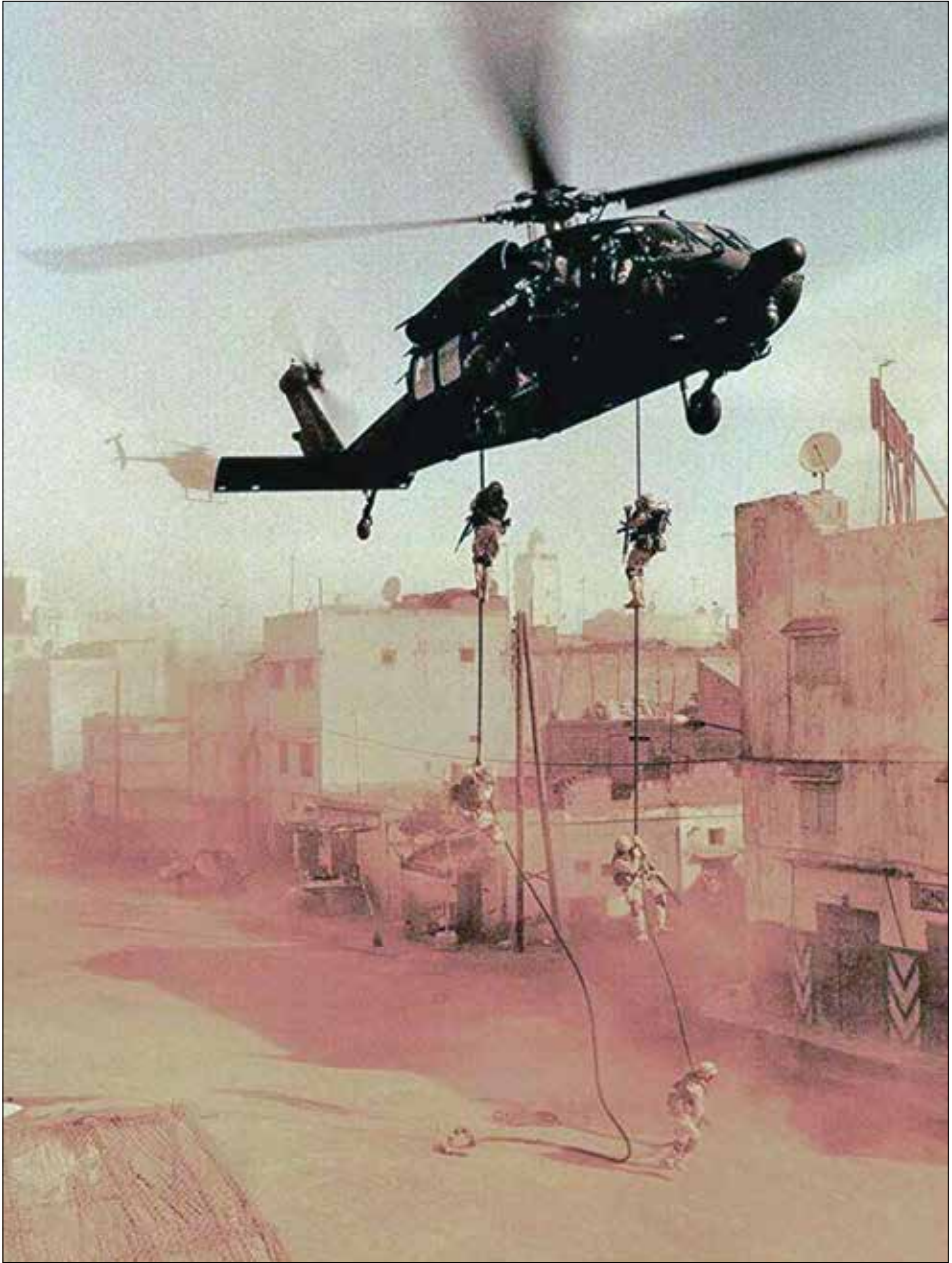
US Defense Secretary Les Aspin directed a Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF) to deploy to Somalia.⁷ Led by Major General William F. Garrison, Task Force Ranger (TF Ranger) had been given the mandate to stabilize the growing

humanitarian crisis and to disrupt the local militias by capturing high level commanders. This directive culminated with the objective of capturing General Aidid himself and his top lieutenants. As a result, Operation Gothic Serpent was born.

Operation Gothic Serpent consisted of seven major raids. On 3 October 1993, the Task Force launched the seventh mission with the aim of capturing two of Aidid's top lieutenants, as well as several other high-ranking members of his militia. This meeting took place near the Olympic Hotel in the Black Sea neighbourhood of Mogadishu.⁸ Operators from Delta Force's "C" Squadron were responsible for securing the building and its occupants, while the Rangers (Company "B", 3rd Battalion of the army's 75th Infantry, Ranger Regiment) would secure the perimeter.⁹ All personnel were to exfiltrate via a ground convoy, manned by the 10th Mountain Division, back to the Mogadishu airport. Total time on target was estimated at less than one hour. In actuality, the mission lasted seventeen hours and changed American foreign policy for decades to come.

TACTICAL FAILURE

Operation Gothic Serpent is epitomized by the raid of 3 October. Though there were six missions prior, it is the 3 October operation where all of the tactical failures would coincide. The assault was to be quick and aggressive. AH-6 Little Birds flew in at roof top level deploying Delta Force operators on the roof of the target building. As those operators began their sweep looking for high value targets, four MH-60L Black Hawk helicopters deployed the Rangers by "fast roping" around the target building to set up a security perimeter. Simultaneously members of the 10th Mountain Division would advance to the target building, load all prisoners and personnel, and exfiltrate back to their base at the Mogadishu airport. In all, this mission was to involve 160 men, 19 aircraft and 12 vehicles.¹⁰ Although the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) looked logical and extensive, the mission immediately ran into issues. Prior to the mission and during its execution there were multiple failures that lead to the resulting chaos.



Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy T52KXE

SOF Fast Roping from a Blackhawk helicopter in Mogadishu.

First, US leadership underestimated the Somali militia's ability to react to such a mission. It was believed by most under General Garrison's command that the Somali National Alliance (SNA) militias, though large in numbers, were not capable of mounting a coordinated, precise counter offensive in a short period of time. Therefore, the planners assessed if the operation could be extremely fast, the disorganized militia would not be able to mount any sort of defence. This belief was a critical miscalculation on the part of the American commanders. On missions leading up to the 3 October operation, the militia's tactics had been constantly evolving and adapting while TF Ranger's tactics remained unchanged and static. In fact, there was complacency by most of the US military personnel involved as they believed that the SNA were disjointed and their attacks loosely coordinated.

Soldiers, such as Rusty Tanner, a Para-rescueman who took part on the 3 October mission, admit to this complacency. He was expected to set up a casualty collection point in the event of wounded personnel. He recalls there was little concern as the Somalis "rarely hit anything" and that the previous missions were "a piece of cake."¹¹

Moreover, TF Ranger had a sense of elitism and even contempt for the militia.¹² Highly trained and armed with the best equipment, TF Ranger personnel had a sense of invincibility. The mission itself was quite audacious as it required over a hundred men to perform the raid in the only area of the city that could actually launch a coordinated, rapid counter-attack. Regardless of the risk, General Garrison gave the approval for the mission. He and his planners failed to appreciate that the insertion of that many soldiers into a highly populated urban environment could result in problems of getting them back out again.

This decision was taken despite the observations of junior leadership such as Lieutenant Chuck Ferry, the Company "A" Executive Officer who was attached to the ground convoy. He explained, "[The Somalis] were capable of operating in fire teams and squad-size elements and of coordinating the movement and actions of larger elements. They seemed to know when we were coming, and on which routes, and built hasty obstacles to try to slow our mounted movement."¹³

As it turns out, Aidid had organized the SNA militias into neighbourhood sectors. Each sector had set up predetermined signals that would allow them to communicate and to quickly inundate any given area. On 3 October, multiple large tire fires were lit by the SNA. This action signalled the militia to mobilize and swarm

the Black Sea neighbourhood to fight TF Ranger. This rapid mobilization resulted in their ability to swarm en masse to each Black Hawk crash site, the convoy, and the Rangers/Delta operators who were moving on foot.

Exacerbating the issue was TF Ranger's non-prioritization of disarming the local civilian population. The area around the Bakara Market in which the 3 October operation transpired had a shockingly high number of armed militias and civilians. Since the bearing of arms was not only a right, but a way in life in Mogadishu, the SNA were able to mount an effective counter offensive against TF Ranger. This "Kalashnikov diplomacy" was inherent in the cultural fabric and history of Somalia.¹⁴ The large group of armed civilians allowed the SNA to instantly field a large number of capable combatants into the battlespace. Instead of having to only fight small groups of local militia, TF Ranger would now have to fight the entire neighbourhood. Disarming the population was one of the mandates of UNSC Resolution 837.¹⁵ However, TF Ranger prioritized the capturing of Aidid instead. Had a systematic effort been made to lower the number of firearms in the Black Sea neighbourhood, TF Ranger would have encountered lower resistance on the day of the raid. The sheer scale of the opposition that TF Ranger was up against was multiplied by the urban environment they were fighting in.

Urban environments have posed a unique problem for militaries throughout modern warfare. For TF Ranger, the urban environment of Mogadishu allowed a large group of poorly trained militia and civilians to be able to sustain a prolonged engagement against American Special Forces. The US military trains for urban warfare, close quarter combat (CQB) and how to operate in a densely populated area. Although TF Ranger was highly trained in these areas, even they were not prepared for the sort of mass onslaught that erupted on 3 October 1993.

Once the Black Hawk helicopter Super Six One had crashed, TF Ranger had the perilous task of moving from the target building to secure the crash site. This deployment meant that several groups of Rangers had to navigate through dense, winding streets with which they had little familiarity. The danger was compounded by hordes of SNA militia attacking them from all directions and elevations. Once at the crash site, matters got much worse. SNA militias converged on the downed helicopter, starting an engagement that would last all of that night and into the next morning. Most of TF Ranger personnel were ill-equipped to sustain an all-night battle. Since the mission was to only last less than an hour, most Rangers

opted to leave their night vision goggles, canteens, ceramic plate armour and some ammunition behind. Failing to anticipate the inevitable Clausewitzian friction caused the Rangers to be ill-equipped for the mission.

Theodore Liasi / Alamy BHG814



Remains of the downed Blackhawk helicopter.

One oversight that came to light very quickly was the naive assumption that a downed helicopter would be in a rural setting rather than the urban setting they were operating in. Michael Durant, pilot of downed Super Six Four explains that all training for a downed helicopter had been in rural areas where reconnaissance, security and rescue were all easily done. They had not practiced preforming the same tasks in a heavily urbanized setting.¹⁶ This reality hit home when Super Six One crashed in an awkward location, in a narrow alley way up against a large wall. That position posed serious difficulty for TF Ranger as they attempted to form a secure perimeter around the down helicopter. The Rangers could not form the four-corner security pattern they had trained for. The buildings were located tightly together allowing the militia to approach the crash site under cover and unseen. The result was a less secure crash site. Furthermore, it made extracting the crew that much more difficult. Durant later stated that the “timing and location [of the aircraft’s crash] were about as bad as they could be.”¹⁷

Quite simply, TF Ranger and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) failed to alter their TTPs for the urban environment. Standard operating procedure stated that for a downed aircraft, a Combat Search and Rescue Team (CSAR) would be inserted by helicopter. Though this works well in other environments, it is the wrong deployment method in a hostile urban setting. In the case of Operation Gothic Serpent it forced the helicopters to hover for a prolonged period of time to allow the CSAR team to be inserted. In this position the helicopter was very vulnerable to incoming ground fire resulting in the loss of men and equipment. In the final analysis, the urban setting made TF Ranger's TTPs less effective and turned the battle into a fragmented melee that cost several Americans their lives.

The 10th Mountain Division did not fare any better. Sergeant Jeff Struecker, who led the small convoy of Humvees back to the airport with TF Ranger's first casualty, Private First Class (PFC) Todd Blackburn, encountered heavy resistance. Once again, the urban terrain allowed the SNA militia to attack from all directions. Roof top ambushes were constant; the narrow alleys were filled with armed militia, and the local civilian population helped set up road blocks. Routes that had been clear on the way to the target building were now blocked by burning tire barricades. At this moment, TF Ranger became drawn out, disorganized and it lost cohesion. Brigadier General Craig Nixon, who at the time was a captain with the ground convoy, later stated, "when you lose momentum in combat, you bleed to get it back. From the time of the 2nd crash to the next day, we were trying to regain the momentum."¹⁸

The chaos of the urban environment had caused a breakdown in communication with all of the fragmented groups of TF Ranger. Two different convoys raced around the city taking casualties, while some of TF Ranger were trying to make their way on foot to the downed Black Hawk helicopter, all the while still trying to maintain the initiative. The entire time there was a failure to recognize just how much an urban environment would act as a force multiplier for the SNA militia.

The original plan called for Delta Force operators to secure the target building and its occupants, at which point the 10th Mountain Division convoy would arrive to load the Delta operators, Rangers, and the prisoners and drive all personnel back to the safety of the airport.¹⁹ The convoy consisted of seven armoured Humvees, two unarmoured Humvees and three flatbed five-ton trucks.²⁰ The logic behind this method was that it was too difficult to extract the prisoners via helicopter.

Planners from the 160th SOAR that landing a Black Hawk helicopter on the roof of the target building would make too large of stationary target.²¹

Conversely, it was thought a convoy would be able to quickly approach and leave the target area before an adequate counter attack could be mobilized by the SNA. However, this method was inherently flawed. The notion that a large ground convoy could quickly navigate a hostile urban environment like Mogadishu is ignoring the abilities of the SNA and the urban topography of the city itself. The Somalian Civil War had forced thousands of refugees from the country side into the metropolitan area. The city's population swelled, creating a housing shortage. As a result, the civilian population was forced to create temporary shelters in the streets. The wide boulevards had now become cramped streets filled with dilapidated structures and thousands of people, many of whom were armed and unemployed.²² The streets and buildings themselves were crumbling and years of clan-based civil war left few buildings intact.

The cramped streets, destroyed buildings and over-population created a recipe for disaster for the ground-based convoy of TF Ranger. The narrow streets created choke points where any disruption to the lead vehicle would halt the entire convoy making it an easy target. In some areas the streets were so narrow that the Humvees could not turn around, forcing them to take longer routes and exposing them to more hostile fire. The SNA became very proficient at ambushing UN convoys prior to Operation Gothic Serpent, famously killing 24 Pakistani peace keepers in a military style attack on a UN convoy during Operation Restore Hope.²³

From the start of the operation the convoy encountered heavy resistance. While waiting in front of the target building one of the flatbed trucks was disabled by a rocket propelled grenade (RPG). When the first Black Hawk helicopter was shot down the convoy attempted to drive to the crash site to secure it. The SNA had constructed dozens of road blocks in an attempt to disrupt the convoy from reaching their objective. The column of Humvees was forced to drive through constant enemy fire in an attempt to find a clear route to the downed bird. It quickly became apparent that the commander and leadership of TF Ranger had failed to anticipate how quickly the SNA militia could set up these effective road blocks. As the convoy drove around the Black Sea neighbourhood the casualties began to mount. In the midst of all of the confusion and the lack of immediate direction, the convoy drove past the crash site on two different occasions.

Making matters worse, as the intensity of the situation increased, the convoy became disjointed with some of the Humvees becoming lost. Eventually, due to the mounting casualties and the condition of their vehicles the column became combat ineffective and retreated to the UN base at the soccer stadium.²⁴ The Task Force realized that a convoy solely consisting of Humvees could not make it to the crash site. Even the multinational UN armoured convoy that eventually assembled in the early hours of 4 October became lost and fragmented in the maze of unmarked streets.²⁵



Soldier's view down a Mogadishu street.

Clearly, a large convoy consisting only of Humvees and flatbed trucks was not an appropriate approach for this raid. Not realizing the scale of the counter offensive the SNA could mount in the form of road blocks and ambushes on the column was a tactical failure by the Americans. However, the urban situation may have played less of a role in the failure of Operation Gothic Serpent if the Black Hawk helicopters had not been shot down in the first place.

Some events in combat can be completely beyond the traditional thought of military commanders. For Operation Gothic Serpent and the actions of 3-4 October, that event was the downing of multiple Black Hawk helicopters at once. General Garrison and his subordinates failed to grasp the reality that the SNA militia had the weapons and the ability to effectively target and hit the helicopters, especially when in a hovering position. The result was a lack of training and preparation for more than one downed helicopter at a time. This failure of planning led to only one Para-rescue team within the Quick Reaction Force (QRF) being on standby.

The lack of contingency plan led to part of the QRF not even being at the airport ready to deploy, but instead at their university compound.²⁶ Ironically, TF Ranger had trained for a single downed helicopter only a week earlier, but they had failed to anticipate that there could be two crews that would need rescuing at one time.²⁷

Given that the operation entailed 19 aircraft, one would think that losing two aircraft within the context of the operation would be considered a possibility. This fact should have resonated with everyone since only a week earlier, a Black Hawk helicopter had been shot down by a RPG while flying over Mogadishu. However, this incident was seen not as the evolving ability of the SNA but rather just a “lucky shot” by a lone militiaman.²⁸ In essence, the downed Black Hawk helicopter did not provide enough shock to change American aerial TTPs. Lieutenant General Thomas Montgomery, second-in-command of all UN troops in Somalia and direct commander of the 10th Mountain Division’s QRF acknowledged, “They [Black Hawk helicopters] routinely flew in low circles above the ground force at about 500 feet, well below the burnout elevation of an RPG [...]. It was almost as if they thought they could not be hit.”²⁹

What exacerbated the issue was that the SNA militia had been given some training by Mujahideen units who had experience fighting Soviet helicopters during the Soviet-Afghan War. Clearly, more emphasis should have been placed on aircraft vulnerabilities. It was not outside the realm of possibility that the SNA would ambush hovering Black Hawk helicopters with a flurry of small arms and RPG fire while they were in these vulnerable positions. This scenario is exactly what occurred on 3 October, with devastating effect. In fact, a total of five Black Hawk helicopters were knocked out of action during the 3-4 October raid. Two crashed inside the Black Sea area of the city (Super Six One and Super Six Four), two were badly damaged but made it back to the airport and one managed to crash outside of the city.³⁰

Importantly, Black Hawk helicopters were not the only aerial asset the TF Ranger had access to. The P-3 Orion spy plane also played a crucial role in Operation Gothic Serpent. Although as previously described, the idea of the ground convoy was inherently flawed, they may have taken fewer casualties if TF Ranger had had a quicker system to relay information. Prior to the operation, Major General Garrison had decided that the P-3 Orion spy plane would provide the convoy with directions to and from the target building. This decision proved to be a fatal mistake. Although

the Orion spy plane had enhanced cameras that were able to relay a clear picture of the battlespace in real time, it failed to provide that information quick enough. Once the first Black Hawk helicopter was shot down and it was decided that the convoy would move to the crash site, it became painfully apparent the Orion spy plane was not capable of relaying the directions needed rapidly enough. The Orion spy plane relayed the information to the Joint Operations Centre (JOC) which then transmitted the information to the command helicopter who in turn radioed it to the convoy.³¹ Meanwhile, the convoy was moving at high speeds through the city due to the withering fire it was encountering. As such, by the time the directions reached the convoy, they had already missed the turn they were being told to make. The result was the convoy driving past the crash site and circling the Black Sea neighbourhood inefficiently.

Not surprisingly, a majority of the casualties sustained by TF Ranger were in the Humvees of the convoy while trying to reach the crash site of Super Six One. Eventually it was Combat Control Team (CCT) controller Dan Schilling riding in the lead Humvee who broke protocol and reached the command helicopter on a different frequency, eliminating the Orion spy plane and JOC altogether in order to speed up directions.³² By the time the convoy had reached the safety of the UN base at the soccer stadium, most of its occupants were wounded and some were dead. All the vehicles were barely running and several of the prisoners were dead as well, having been inadvertently shot by their own militia. The disastrous decision for the P-3 Orion spy plane to provide the directions for the convoy was a massive tactical failure. This failure was compounded by the time of day the raid took place.

The raid was launched at 1543 hours on a Sunday afternoon. Tactically this was arguably the absolute worst time of day for a mission in Mogadishu. Clearly, the American commanders could not choose when and where Aidid's lieutenants would meet. However, there is a level of responsibility as to when the mission itself is launched. In fact, mid-day in Mogadishu is the most dangerous time of day for an operation. The Black Sea area of the city was home to most of Aidid's militia. At that time of day, the Bakara Market is filled with pro-Aidid militia and civilians. Most of the population in this area are either part of the militia itself or are unemployed. As a result, this vast collection of people can be quickly mobilized if required. Moreover, by early afternoon most of Aidid's militia would be under the influence of khat.³³ This drug like substance enhanced their fighting capability by increasing their energy and courage and lowering their inhibitions.

Executing the operation during day light hours also negated one of the American's main tactical advantages – being able to operate in the dark. Night vision goggles (NVGs) gave TF Ranger a massive advantage on the battlefield over the SNA militia that used only rudimentary weapons and equipment. Not surprisingly, the militia became much less effective during night-time operations as they had no night vision equipment of their own. If the raid could have taken place at night, it would have given TF Ranger a significant tactical edge.

Ironically, since the operation of 3 October was expected to last only an hour at most, almost all of TF Ranger had left their NVGs behind.³⁴ This turned the already confused scene into one of chaos as darkness fell. Knowing just how crucial NVGs were, Master Sergeant Scott Fales pillaged the downed Black Hawk Super Six One taking the NVGs off the dead crew.³⁵ However, this only provided a handful of Rangers a technological advantage leaving the rest to be less effective.

Performing a daylight operation also gave the SNA time to prepare a counter attack. Aidid had observers less than one kilometre from the airbase fence, monitoring all of TF Rangers movements.³⁶ The militia had warning once the Black Hawk helicopters and Little Birds took off from the tarmac. Although the distance from the airfield to the target building was only three miles by helicopter it gave the militia time to mobilize and to begin constructing road blocks.³⁷ By the time the Delta Force operators and Rangers landed, the SNA were already converging on the target building. If the operation could have been performed during the night, this mobilization most likely would not have occurred.

Undeniably, some aspects that led to the disastrous outcome of the raid were beyond TF Ranger's control. But, others were not. One aspect that was well within the control of TF Ranger were their TTPs. General Garrison failed to change TF Ranger's TTPs throughout Operation Gothic Serpent. The SNA adapted and evolved their own tactics to counter that of TF Ranger. The US *modus operandi* quickly became apparent to SNA leaders. TF Ranger conducted their missions in a templated manner, allowing their enemy to learn and anticipate their operations. The American task force was losing its ability to achieve surprise and gain the tactical advantage.³⁸ It was this repetition that allowed the SNA militia to react to the 3 October raid with such intensity.

SNA leaders quickly recognized that American TTPs followed the same pattern. AH-60 Little Birds would perform a rapid aerial insertion on the target building while Rangers would be deployed by Black Hawk helicopters, forming a security perimeter around the target.³⁹ The helicopters would then hover over the target until the operation was complete. Knowing this, the SNA developed methods to counter act these tactics. One such practice was to flood the airspace with RPG airburst rounds.⁴⁰ The SNA realized that the helicopters were at their most vulnerable when hovering low over the area inserting TF Ranger. Rather than trying to hit the Black Hawks while they were in full flight, the SNA would wait and ambush them when they stopped to hover over the target area.

For example, earlier raids on 21 and 25 September witnessed an increase in RPG attacks both in number and accuracy.⁴¹ The militias also developed methods to slow the ground force down. Knowing that the rapid aerial insertion was always followed by a ground force via convoy, the SNA militia became very efficient at rapid road block construction. Within minutes of the forward observers at the airport warning of an American operation, a series of signals would be sent out, normally in the form of tire fires or via walkie-talkies. Utilizing these means the militia could mobilize hundreds of fighters and begin to construct make-shift barriers. These road blocks were erected at predetermined intersections to maximize disruption to TF Ranger. The use of road blocks proved extremely deadly during the 3 October operation.

Quite simply, TF Ranger preformed six missions prior to 3 October. Every one of them utilized the same TTPs.⁴² Therefore, the failure by the American commanders to alter their methodology led to the SNA begin able to adapt and evolve their own tactics.

Operation Gothic Serpent was a tactical failure. The failures outlined previously all contributed to the high American causality rate. However, the failure of Operation Gothic Serpent is not limited to the tactical level. There were multiple critical failures at the operational level as well.

OPERATIONAL FAILURE

Operation Gothic Serpent would be a stark contrast to its predecessor Operation Restore Hope, which had a clear, obtainable goal: to open up food shipments

and end the famine. Importantly, it had the personnel and the equipment to do so. Conversely, Operation Gothic Serpent had the unenviable goal of capturing or killing General Mohamed Farah Aidid. This objective was flawed from its inception and was doomed to fail. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, General Colin Powell (Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and General Joseph Hoar (Commander US Central Command (CENTCOM)) all initially opposed sending TF Ranger to Somalia, believing that capturing Aidid was not a realistic, obtainable objective.⁴³ Colin Powell recalled, “In late August, I reluctantly yielded to the repeated requests from the field and recommended to Aspin that we dispatch the Rangers and the Delta Force. It was a decision I would later regret.”⁴⁴

In essence, there was a consensus that the goal of capturing Aidid was unrealistic; however, the failure at the operational level allowed the mission to proceed regardless. Prior to the deployment of TF Ranger, retired Admiral Jonathan Howe, who led the UN mission in Somalia, decreed Aidid to be an outlaw and offered a reward of \$25,000 USD for his capture. This was a crucial error. Howe had effectively told the world, and more importantly the SNA, where the Americans would put their focus. In fact, he made this announcement several months prior to TF Rangers deployment.⁴⁵ Therefore, Aidid had time to prepare for the eventual arrival of US forces.

Knowing that he was the primary target, Aidid used this time to go underground. He had set up a network of safe houses and surrounded himself with militia loyal to him. The reward also had the opposite effect than what was intended. The sum of \$25,000 was seen as an insultingly low amount.⁴⁶ Aidid used the idea of the reward to demonstrate to his supporters that the Americans were trying to interfere in “Somalia’s internal struggle.”⁴⁷ Moreover, he argued that the Americans were a foreign invader trying to remove Aidid from power. To some Somalis, the small reward was as an insult, reinforcing their belief that the US/UN cared little about Somalia. The bounty put on Aidid actually helped unite his supporters around a concept of an “us versus them” mentality.

Additionally, by declaring Aidid an outlaw, Howe gave him folk hero status among the civilian population of Mogadishu.⁴⁸ He was able to use this Robin Hood-like persona to his advantage. By having the support of the local population, it made it extremely difficult for TF Ranger to capture him.

This approach was a failure of Howe and others who simply did not understand the Somali clan-based system. The Habr Gidr clan, of which Aidid was part, was a close-knit group of families. Any outsider was immediately looked upon with suspicion. As such, American attempts to infiltrate the group to gain intelligence became a nearly impossible task. Similarly, this clan-based system meant that any intelligence that was gained by an informant was questionable at best.⁴⁹

The lack of human intelligence (HUMINT) became the bane of TF Ranger's mission. The CENTCOM Commander, General Joseph P. Hoar, recalled:

There was a real problem with human intelligence. The people who provided information lacked credibility [...] The possibility of getting predictive intelligence on Aidid was poor.⁵⁰

Since there was a lack of credible intelligence, Aidid and his commanders were able to move among the population. The expansive Mogadishu neighbourhoods provided a maze of safe houses for Aidid to hide in. Ironically, the low-tech communication network used by the SNA militia and the complete lack of any infrastructure in Mogadishu negated the US state of the art surveillance technology.⁵¹ This urban environment provided the perfect cover for Aidid, making his successful capture all the more elusive.

Linda Robinson, the senior international policy analyst at RAND, explains that it is easy for policy-makers to make missions all about the individual high value target.⁵² A single “bad guy” is something tangible and can be easily explained to a politician's constituents. However, this type of policy is extremely dangerous. By making the capture of Aidid the primary objective, it limited TF Ranger from pursuing other, possibly more effective assignments. It forced TF Ranger into situations that had a high probability of failure, such as performing a daylight raid instead of a night-time mission.

Additionally, when the objective was not achieved and TF Ranger failed to deliver Aidid, it appeared as a failure of American arms on the international stage. The sad reality is that even if Operation Gothic Serpent had resulted in the killing or capture of General Aidid, the odds of that success creating any sort of stability in Somalia were small. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that Aidid was eventually killed in 1996. His death did nothing to create greater stability in Somalia.⁵³ Simply put,

the focus on capturing Aidid set Operation Gothic Serpent up for failure before TF Ranger had even landed in Mogadishu.

The objective of capturing Aidid was not the only operational failure of Operation Gothic Serpent. There was doubt at all levels of the military and political hierarchy with regard to whether the mission was even required. Smith Hempstone, the outspoken US ambassador to Kenya at the time of Operation Restore Hope/Operation Gothic Serpent, stated in a diplomatic cable:

It would take five years to get Somalia not on its feet but just on its knees. I do not think Somalia is amenable to the quick fix so beloved of Americans. If you liked Beirut, you'll love Mogadishu. Leave them alone, in short, to work out their own destiny, brutal as it may be. Think once, twice and three times before you embrace the Somali tarbaby.⁵⁴

However, American political and military decision-makers did not heed Hempstone's advice. They returned to Somalia without a clear mandate. There was not a consensus on what type of mission Operation Gothic Serpent really was. Admiral Howe declared that the capture of Aidid was TF Ranger's top priority. However, UNSC Resolution 837 asserted that TF Ranger would disarm all warring factions, neutralize radio broadcasting systems, set up talks between all parties, restore normalcy to the people of Somalia, and restore law and order throughout the country. General Anthony Zinni, Director of Operations for the Unified Task Force in Somalia, conceded, "The U.S. and U.N. [got] into this quasi sort of environment of thinking we're still doing some humanitarian and peacekeeping, peace enforcement, [and] at the same time [go] into these battles on the streets of Mogadishu."⁵⁵

It was in this grey area in which TF Ranger had to operate. Since the mission objectives were not fully defined, there was little chance of actual victory. The confused and unclear directives meant that the allocation of resources was also poorly handled. How was TF Ranger, a group of approximately 450 personnel, supposed to achieve all the goals of Resolution 837?⁵⁶ Which of the UNSC resolution objectives were they to achieve first? How were they to kick in doors, kill the SNA militias, and capture Aidid while at the same time creating a peaceful environment where democracy could thrive? Given these muddled conditions it seems inevitable that Operation Gothic Serpent would fail.

Further adding to the confusion was a lack of intelligence sharing. TF Ranger, the UN and the QRF all withheld information from each other. General Garrison was concerned that individuals within the UN Task Force would leak information back to the SNA. Therefore, they did not inform them of an operation until that operation was already underway. Similarly, the UN did not inform General Garrison of where their people would be within Mogadishu at any given time. This withholding of information led to embarrassing events such as TF Ranger raiding a building and arresting UN personnel by accident.⁵⁷

There was even poor intelligence sharing between TF Ranger and their own QRF. Since TF Ranger had to act so quickly on the intelligence they received, they often would not notify the QRF of a pending operation. Colonel Lawrence Casper, the QRF Commander, recalled, “I was astounded by the lack of information. We were the reinforcements for every US and UN force in theatre, and we didn’t know what was occurring in our backyard.”⁵⁸

The cause of the intelligence breakdown was multifaceted. Inherent in the breakdown was the fact that Special Operation Forces (SOF) in themselves are very secretive.⁵⁹ At the time of Operation Gothic Serpent, many in the military still did not understand SOF. The QRF were seen as outsiders to TF Ranger and were kept at a distance. This approach was exemplified during the raid when the QRF were not given any warning. When Super Six One was shot down, the QRF were still on partial standby at the University. If they had been at the airport ready to deploy, they could have been inserted at the crash site before the SNA militia numbers became unmanageable.⁶⁰

Additionally, the friction of command was also exacerbated by the multiple channels of operational hierarchy. General Garrison, commander of TF Ranger, reported to CENTCOM and only had to “consult” with Lieutenant General Montgomery, who was second-in-command of all UN troops in Somalia and direct commander of the 10th Mountain Division’s QRF. The Clinton Administration dictated that it did not want US forces to be commanded by the UN, so a separate chain-of-command was created. Since US Force Somalia did not have an official headquarters in Somalia, all information had to be relayed through UN channels and infrastructure.⁶¹ This necessity created three parallel chain-of-commands. To further complicate matters, these three command chains were multinational, each with their own TTPs, terminology, languages, cultures, and directives. All of these factors led to operational failure on a massive scale.

From an operational level, most of the failures stemmed from the American military command simply not grasping Somali culture. As previously explained, the lack of credible human intelligence originated from the tight-knit clan and sub-clan system. Howe and others underestimated Aidid's link to the community in Mogadishu. Labelling him an outlaw angered the civilian population.⁶² Allowing Aidid to gain sympathy among the locals made it even harder to capture him. If US commanders had had more of an understanding of Somali history, and specifically that of Aidid himself, they would have realized that Aidid's sub-Habr Gibr clan was well entrenched in Mogadishu society.⁶³

In essence, the clan-based system created a network of support for Aidid. As the search for him grew and became more violent, so did the support for Aidid. Quickly, any Habr Gidr moderates were turned into full Aidid supporters, drastically limiting the number of credible intelligence sources.⁶⁴ General Zinni, Director of Operations for the Unified Task Force in Somalia in 1993, later wrote, "The U.S lacked the ability to penetrate the faction leaders and truly understand what they were up to, [to] understand the culture, the clan association affiliation, the power of the faction leaders, and maybe understanding some of the infrastructure."⁶⁵

The clan culture and clan association General Zinni is referring to was something that US commanders had a hard time comprehending. The Americans viewed Aidid as a warlord and a tyrant. The Clinton Administration assumed that if they took his power of starvation away, the people of Mogadishu would see him in the same light. The reality on the ground was that no matter if the civilian population or rival clans disagreed with Aidid, they hated the US even more.

One example clearly illustrates the Somali clan-based relationship versus acceptance of TF Ranger's help. Prior to the operation of 3 October, a Black Hawk helicopter was monitoring a clan-on-clan skirmish in the Black Sea area of Mogadishu. However, when the helicopter manoeuvred to gain a better vantage point, both warring parties stopped firing at each other and opened fire on the helicopter instead.⁶⁶ The hatred against the Americans was greater than their hostility towards each other. As such, TF Ranger was not just fighting one sub-clan group, they were fighting the entire Somali clan-based system.

STRATEGIC FAILURE

The tactical and operational failures of Operation Gothic Serpent are significant. However, most of these failures were derived from actions, or lack thereof, prior to the 3 October raid. The most significant failures occurred after 3 October and would shape US foreign policy for the next two decades. Operation Gothic Serpent directly caused the Clinton Administration to create Presidential Decision Directive 25 (PDD-25). This directive added a series of criteria that must be met before the US will commit ground forces to a UN operation.

This directive was informative since most Americans did not understand why their soldiers were being put in harm's way for a people that appeared to not want their help in the first place. The images of dead American soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu shocked the nation. The outcry from the American people for action forced the Clinton Administration to not only pull their forces out of Somalia but to change their entire foreign policy strategy regarding nation building and UN peace keeping missions.⁶⁷ The essential conditions put in place were:

1. any US participation in a UN operation must advance US interests;
2. the threat to international peace and security [must be] considered significant for US involvement;
3. US participation is necessary for success; and
4. the role of US forces [must be] tied to clear objectives and an endpoint before US participation can be identified.⁶⁸

With the creation of PDD-25, American foreign policy literally changed overnight. Major General Paul Eaton, who served with the 10th Mountain Division in Somalia as a lieutenant colonel revealed, "The punch in the nose that we got, the loss of 18 soldiers in Somalia, basically set us back on our heels as a country. It contributed to a reluctance to engage for purely humanitarian reasons where there was a reasonable risk of combat."⁶⁹

The Clinton Administration, not wanting to risk any more American lives on UN missions that did not advance American security, began to withdraw forces or refuse to send forces altogether. The new strategy was implemented immediately. In fact, only one week after the failed 3 October operation the first example of its use became evident. The *USS Harlan County* was withdrawn from the harbour of

Port-au-Prince in Haiti. Its mission had been to provide aid to the struggling island nation.⁷⁰ After a small crowd of 200 lightly armed protestors gathered at the port, the mission was called off and the *USS Harlan County* redeployed.⁷¹

Following the failure of Operation Gothic Serpent both the US and the UN were apprehensive about getting into another battle with a local population. They began to avoid any direct confrontation wherever they could. This cautious approach was only the beginning of the new US policy. Due to PDD-25's criteria, the US opted to not intervene in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Since the small African nation had few historical ties to the US, the Clinton Administration did not attempt to convince the American public to put their soldiers in harm's way again. Particularly, for another struggling African nation that at least appeared on the surface not to want any foreign involvement. The death of 18 Americans was still far too recent of a memory. Operation Gothic Serpent singlehandedly led to the change in American foreign policy, which in turn led to a lack of US involvement in Rwanda. The events on 3-4 October seemingly secured the fate of 800,000 Rwandans and would be a stain on the record of Western nations for decades to come. Assistant Secretary of State, John Shattuck later recalled "PDD-25 was the US equivalent of the withdrawal of Belgian forces after the killing of the peacekeepers, in the sense that it gave a 'green light' to the genocide planners."⁷² The Battle of Mogadishu and Operation Gothic Serpent essentially convinced the US policy-makers not to insert American military assets in Africa.⁷³ Effectively, the world watched as the US and the UN began to back out of every humanitarian incident that developed throughout the 1990s.

The limitation of US involvement on the international stage after Operation Gothic Serpent was not limited to the African continent. After the fall of the Soviet Union, former Eastern Bloc countries posed a new problem for global stability. Bosnia proved to be especially violent and destabilizing. After Operation Gothic Serpent, the rules of engagement were instantly changed for the US troops stationed overseas responsible for trying to keep the peace. No commander wanted to be responsible for "crossing the Mogadishu line."⁷⁴ US Congress, prior to 3 October 1993, had argued against any American involvement in Bosnia. After 3 October and with the implementation of PDD-25 they now had the ability to abstain.

Unfortunately, however, the resistance of US troops and a robust UN ground force mandate, paved the way for the civil war in the Former Yugoslavia to escalate into ethnic cleansing including such atrocities as the massacre of Srebrenica.⁷⁵ Arguably, the death of so many Americans in Somalia during Operation Gothic Serpent

forced the hand of the Clinton Administration to act. Unfortunately, this led to the creation of PDD-25 and the American refusal of committing troops to peacekeeping missions. The new foreign US policy was not limited to one term of the Clinton Administration. The reluctance of American involvement in Darfur by President George W. Bush can also be linked back to Operation Gothic Serpent. The sight of dead Americans being dragged through the streets still haunted American foreign policy throughout the 1990s.⁷⁶

The failures of Operation Gothic Serpent were also felt in the political hallways of Washington. Questions were immediately raised by the US Congress and Senate on how the most powerful nation in the world was hurt so badly by a starving, ill-trained Somali militia. In 1994, The Senate Armed Services Committee began its investigation into Operation Gothic Serpent and the 3 October raid. During the proceedings it had come to light that General Garrison had requested AC-130 Spectre Gunships and M-1 Abram tanks to accompany Task Force Ranger to Somalia. Lieutenant General Montgomery, had himself requested M-1 Abram tanks and M-2 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles (IFV) one week prior to the now infamous mission. Both Garrison's and Montgomery's requests were denied by Secretary of Defense Les Aspin.⁷⁷ Aspin's concern was that these weapons were too high profile and that they could cause a large amount of collateral damage and civilian death.⁷⁸

Aspin's decision would prove to be a tragic mistake. Ironically, AC-130 Gunships had already been deployed to Somalia as part of Operation Restore Hope but were redeployed to nearby Kenya. The denial of AC-130 aircraft cannot be understated. The AC-130 had already been approved in the force package for the Somali mission. That platform had also been used in all of the training and preparation up to the start of Operation Gothic Serpent. By denying those assets, Aspin broke the cardinal rule of military doctrine, "you fight as you train."⁷⁹ The AC-130 Spectre Gunship would have been able to apply constant, accurate fire for the ground force around the Black Hawk crash sites. It could have also provided real time intelligence and directions to the ground convoy that would have limited their casualties,⁸⁰ all the while being able to fly out of the range of the Somalian RPGs. Since this aircraft was not available, it forced TF Ranger to use their only aerial assets, the helicopter. However, unlike the AC-130, the Black Hawk helicopter flew much lower to the ground, putting it well within the capable range of the militia's RPGs.

The M-1 Abrams tank could have also changed the fate of the raid. TF Ranger had initially requested that all search and rescue operations in the city of Mogadishu be performed by armoured vehicles. Aspin's decision meant that Black Hawk helicopters had to be used instead. The result forced the helicopters to hover low to the ground for prolonged periods of time to deploy the search and rescue teams. M-1 tanks are heavily armoured and if need be, could have made their own path through the poorly built dilapidated buildings Mogadishu.⁸¹ Additionally, the multitude of road blocks that crippled the original ground convoy of Humvees would have not impeded the tanks. Consequently, by not having any US armour in the battlespace, TF Rangers was forced to rely on Pakistani tanks and Armoured Personnel (APC) which were outdated and unreliable.⁸²

In the end, the Senate Armed Services Committee concluded that if M-1 Abram tanks, M-2 Bradley IFV or AC-130 Spectre Gunships had been available, there would have been fewer casualties and fewer helicopters being shot down.⁸³ Colin Powell acknowledged, "The commander in the field is always right, and the rear echelon is always wrong unless proven otherwise."⁸⁴ General Garrison and General Montgomery understood what tools were needed to complete their task. However, due to political aspects beyond their control, they were limited in what was available to them. As a result, Secretary of Defense Aspin's decision caused American casualties. On 15 December 1993, President Bill Clinton announced the Aspin would step down as Secretary of Defense stating personal reasons.⁸⁵

Aspin would not be the only political casualty as a result of the failure of Operation Gothic Serpent. President Clinton's popularity was also affected directly after the raid. The repeated televised images of dead Americans being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu sparked an uproar, especially from the Republican opposition. Michael Durant, the captured downed Black Hawk helicopter pilot, initially refused to meet with President Clinton stating that he had not forgiven the administration for denying TF Ranger the equipment that would have saved lives.⁸⁶ However, President Clinton's popularity rating eventually recovered. The massive change to American foreign policy that President Clinton initiated, as well as the fact that Aspin accepted full responsibility for the refusal of deploying AC-130s and M1 Abram tanks, helped ease public outcry.⁸⁷

The fallout from Operation Gothic Serpent did not only effect Americans. It also impacted the Somali people. After the US and UN withdrew their ground forces from the country, it quickly reverted back to warlord control and chaos. The

inter-clan fighting returned and caused even more starvation and death. Between 1991 and 1999 there were twelve attempts to unite the warring clans and create a single Somali government. Each attempt failed and only drove the clans further apart. Today, there is a federal government in Somalia. However, the control it has over its country is fragile at best. Inter-clan rivalries are rampant, piracy is the main source of income for many, and Islamist extremists are gaining more influence than ever before. Groups such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab have taken advantage of the lawlessness and lack of a strong central government. Thanks to the intelligence gathered during the Afghanistan War, it is now known that Al-Qaeda had been involved in Somalia throughout the 1990s. One document captured from an Al-Qaeda base in Afghanistan summarizes US policy regarding Somalia: “[America] fears getting bogged down in a real war that would reveal its psychological collapse at the level of personnel and leadership. Since Vietnam, America has been seeking easy battles that are completely guaranteed.”⁸⁸

The results of Operation Gothic Serpent and the coinciding change of US foreign policy bolstered Al-Qaeda’s resolve. If one could inflict enough public damage to US forces, then US public opinion would push their political leaders to withdraw. Al-Qaeda was very much aware of this “Vietnam Complex” and was hoping to capitalize on it. Even in the late 1990s when Osama bin Laden was well known to US authorities, he was not pursued. Professor Richard Schultz, an expert on insurgencies states that the Clinton Administration was “spooked” into not pursuing Bin Laden due to the Mogadishu disaster.⁸⁹

Despite this evidence, it is hard to quantify Al-Qaeda’s full role in any attacks on the US or UN in Somalia. Nonetheless, parallels can be drawn between TTPs used in Afghanistan and those in Somalia. For instance, the manner of ambushing helicopters with the same weapon profiles (i.e. air burst RPG rounds) that were used to bring down the Black Hawk helicopters were very similar to the Mujahideen methodologies used against the Soviet Union’s HiP Mi-17 and Hind Mi-24 helicopters.⁹⁰ In 2001, an Al-Qaeda “lessons learned” document was captured in Afghanistan which stated: “Effective human and economic losses were not inflicted on them [the US]. All that happened was that the Somali battle revealed many of their psychological, political, and perhaps military weakness.”⁹¹ It is logical to conclude that the failure of Operation Gothic Serpent and the subsequent changing of American foreign policy emboldened Al-Qaeda to focus their attacks on the US. After seeing the Americans withdraw from many parts of the world, it would have confirmed Bin Laden’s belief that the US was a colossus with feet of clay.⁹²

Though Al-Qaeda has been drastically reduced in the twenty first century, a new group has taken its place, Al-Shabaab. An Islamist extremist group, whose goal is to create a united Islamic Somalia based on Sharia law.⁹³ This group has thrived in the chaos of Somalia. The lack of a cohesive central government or a strong military has allowed this group to go unchecked. They now conduct an insurgency throughout Somalia. This new level of aggression has made a bad situation even worse. Thousands are now displaced and fleeing into neighbouring Kenya, Djibouti and Ethiopia.⁹⁴ Arguably, the failures of Operation Gothic Serpent have helped turned Somalia into a fertile part of the world in which Islamic extremists can thrive. Like Afghanistan, Somalia could turn into the next battlefield for the war on terror.

CONCLUSION

The failures of Operation Gothic Serpent are many. From a tactical level, TF Ranger suffered a fifty-percent casualty rate; five aircraft were knocked out of service and there were approximately 1,000 Somali casualties.⁹⁵ From an operational standpoint, the goal of capturing Aidid was heavily flawed. It was doomed to fail as the US commanders did not fully understand Somali culture or their clan-based system. Finally, on the strategic level, American moral standards and responsibilities were heavily damaged by a refusal to intervene in both the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian civil war. With the creation of Presidential Decision Directive 25 the US seemingly shirked its duty from future nation-building missions for over a decade. Moreover, the failure of Operation Gothic Serpent and its consequences turned a bad situation even worse in Somalia.

EVENT (requiring action)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT (Perceived)	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF (Perceived)	DECISION/ COMMENT
Assessment of Enemy Capability	Planners/ Operators	Low Low probability of rapid or substantive resistance	High Ability to use standing TTPs and attain objective	No change to TTPs
Insertion of TF personnel into highly populated urban area	Comd TF Ranger	Low Low probability SNA capable of responding quickly	High Ability to capture target- ed leadership	Overconfidence in capability and under assessment of enemy

CHAPTER 7

Not disarming the local population	Comd TF Ranger	Low Under-estimation of opponent capability	High Avoid difficulty of time consuming disarmament allowing focus on capturing leadership	Disarming would be a nugatory exercise as individuals would cache their weapons and/or resist causing additional violence
Key equipment and material (NVGs, ceramic plates, water) left behind	Operators	Low Mission would last less than one hour	High Lighter weight/more manoeuvrability	
Rehearsals for a downed helicopter practiced only in rural settings	Commanders/operators	Low Low SAM threat environment/ Optimism bias (won't happen)/ belief always able to direct damaged aircraft to rural setting	High Rural setting allows for easy protection and extraction	Failure to prepare for worst case scenario
Extraction of TF personnel and prisoners by vehicle convoy not helicopter	TF Commander/160th SOAS	Low Helicopter extraction was seen as too high a risk – too large a high-value stationary target on a rooftop	High No risk of losing a helicopter asset	A vehicle convoy was seen as a low risk compared to helicopter extraction due to quick approach and departure
A single para-rescue team on stand-by for the mission	Commander	Low No expectation of a loss of one, much less two helicopters due to enemy capability	Medium Maintain sustainable tempo of personnel	Low assessment of enemy capability
Earlier downing of a Black Hawk helicopter over Mogadishu – failure to adjust TTPs	TF Commander/160th SOAS	Low Assessed as a lucky shot	Low No need to adjust TTPs	Complacency/low assessment of enemy
Use of P-3 Orion aircraft for communications and observation	Commander	Low High altitude – good observation and communications suite	High Real time observation/tracking/reporting	Time delay due to relay sequence – Orion to TOC to Command Helicopter to ground convoy

PDD-25 / nation building / peace-keeping	Clinton Administration	High High probability of casualties in far off lands with no clear US interest apparent to US population	Low Domestic population fail to understand why US lives lost in countries that appear not to want US assistance	Avoidance of intervening in foreign instability
Refusal to deploy AC-130 Gunships & AFVs into Somalia with TF Ranger	Secretary of Defense	High High probability of massive collateral damage and negative international press	Low Opposition was seen as low threat	Risk to force elevated for political concerns

Table 7. 1 – Summary of Risk & Decision-Making⁹⁶

This case study provides a number of interesting observations on risk. The first nine entries in the chart demonstrate a low risk assessment on specific actions that were all seen as providing a high pay-off. However, the risk acceptance was clearly flawed. And, much like previous examples in this volume, the errant risk acceptance was due to classic perspectives or behaviours. For instance, the assessment of enemy capability, as well as the decisions to insert in a highly populated area, or bring all necessary mission essential equipment was due to over-confidence and an underestimation of enemy capability.

Equally, complacency played an important role in risk acceptance. Contempt for the opposition, as well as the previous factor of over-confidence bred from previous success, training and reputation, led to complacency in changing TTPs, or planning for worst case scenarios.

The optimism bias also raised its ugly head.⁹⁷ The optimism bias is the tendency to be over-optimistic, over-estimating favourable and pleasing outcomes. In the case of Operation Gothic Serpent, TF Ranger assessed their probability of success extremely high. As a result, members failed to bring mission essential equipment due to their assessment that the mission would take less than an hour and they would meet minimal resistance. In addition, their belief that the mission would be easy and that their ability to prevail against any opposition led them to have only one para-rescue team on stand-by, not inform their QRF in a timely manner and only practice downed aircraft drills in rural settings.

Their risk assessment was also flawed. The decision for a ground convoy of unarmoured vehicles in the narrow, crowded streets of Mogadishu belies logic. If helicopter extraction was deemed too risky because of possible enemy action, how does a ground convoy of unarmoured vehicles winding through the constricted urban terrain make sense? In addition, how then do you rationalize not having a QRF and an adequate number of rescue teams available and on stand-by?

The last two entries show examples of both risk acceptance and risk aversion, largely for political reasons. The refusal to deploy the necessary armaments for force protection demonstrates on one level risk acceptance, to the deployed force, by decision-makers who do not have to face the direct risk. However, the decision also displays risk aversion, in the form of risk (political) to themselves should the need to use the heavy firepower result in massive collateral casualties, which in turn would bring censure from domestic and international critics. Ironically, the decision actually created the exact scenario the Secretary of Defense wanted to avoid. The lightly armed Task Force was attacked creating a running gun-battle for hours that killed and/or wounded an estimated 1,000 Somalis. Arguably, had TF Ranger had access to armoured vehicles and an AC-130 Spectre gunship the show of force and firepower may have inhibited such a violent response by the Somalis.

Finally, the decision to implement PDD-25 indicates a classic risk assessment – decision paradigm. The Clinton Administration assessed that committing troops to UN peace stability operations/nation building was a high-risk endeavour that had very low pay-off. Their experience indicated that the American population did not understand or accept risking American lives to assist nations that did not seem to welcome or support their presence if there was no clear American national interest at stake. As such, the decision to simply opt out seemed prudent.

Once again, the issue of risk is a subjective one. However, understanding some of the pitfalls and traps one can fall into (e.g. overconfidence, complacency, optimism bias) can assist in ensuring sound decisions are made, particularly in crisis situations or in ambiguous, complex and hazardous environments.

ENDNOTES

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- 3 Benjamin Runkle, “The Lost Lessons of ‘Black Hawk Down,’” *War on the Rocks*, 3 October 2013, <<http://warontherocks.com/2013/10/the-lost-lessons-of-black-hawk-down/>>, accessed January 31, 2019.
- 4 Forrest Marion, “‘Heroic Things’: Air Force Special Tactics Personnel at Mogadishu, October 3-4, 1993,” *Air Power History*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (2013): 34.
- 5 Dotson, 180.
- 6 John Hirsch, “The Black Hawk Down Effect,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/08/12/the-black-hawk-downeffect/?wp_login_redirect=0>, accessed 31 January 2019.
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- 8 The Olympic Hotel is often referenced as it is a unique landmark in Mogadishu. Though most buildings in the capital are small houses damaged by the civil war, the Olympic Hotel is five storeys tall and painted bright white. This easily spotted landmark was used by TF Ranger as a way to get their bearings in the confusing streets of Mogadishu. Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Storey of Modern War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), 12.
- 9 Ibid., 5.
- 10 Robert F Baumann and Lawrence A. Yates, *My Clan against the World: U.S and Coalition Forces in Somalia 1992-1994* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 142.
- 11 Cited in Marion, 34-35.
- 12 River, 17.
- 13 Cited in Baumann, 152.
- 14 River, 11-12.
- 15 UNSC Resolution 837, 6 June 1993, 1.
- 16 Michael Durant, lecture at the US Army War College, 15 February 2011.
- 17 Cited in Marion, 37.
- 18 Cited in “The Hero Summit Panel: Black Hawk Down 20 Years Later,” 13 October 2013.
- 19 Marion, 36.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Durant, lecture.

- 22 Modern War Institute West Point Academy, 25th Anniversary of the Battle of Mogadishu Guest Panel, 3 October 2018.
- 23 Ibid., 71.
- 24 Baumann, 150.
- 25 This new convoy was led by four Pakistani tanks and included 28 Malaysian APCs, US Humvees, and various other vehicles. Marion, 40.
- 26 River, 36.
- 27 Durant, lecture.
- 28 Baumann, 143-144.
- 29 Cited in *ibid.*, 144.
- 30 Durant, lecture.
- 31 Dotson, 183-184.
- 32 Marion, 36.
- 33 Khat is a hyperactive drug that comes in the form the khat plant. In Somalian culture adult males chew this plant in large quantities. It gives the user a sense of euphoria, energy, fearlessness, lowered inhibitions, and insomnia. Kamaldeep Bhul, "Drug Consumption in Conflict Zones in Somalia," *Pols Medicine Journal*, Vol. 4, Issue 12 (December 2007): 1866.
- 34 Bowden, 6.
- 35 Marion, 39.
- 36 The city of Mogadishu is at a higher elevation than the airport. This geographic advantage allowed Aidid's militia to easily watch the air base. Baumann, 149.
- 37 Dotson, 184.
- 38 Baumann, 149.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 River, 22.
- 41 Marion, 35.
- 42 Durant, Lecture.
- 43 Baumann, 139.
- 44 Cited in *ibid.*
- 45 Durant, Lecture.
- 46 Bowden, 92.
- 47 Dotson, 182.
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CHAPTER 8

THE 2005 IRAQI SUNNI AWAKENING IN AL ANBAR: THE YIN AND YANG OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

Dr. Bill Knarr

These operations will be riskier because our teams will be a greater distance from our bases...Fewer conventional forces exist to act as quick reaction forces if operations go sour. I'm going to send us out there in greater numbers, and I think it is going to be very dangerous. I think it is going to be bloody. So I am steeling everybody for greater casualties.

Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal¹

Lieutenant General Stanley McChrystal, Commander, Task Force 714, in a message to his boss, General John Abizaid, Commander, US Central Command (CENTCOM), explained that his decision to support the Coalition's push west into Al Anbar and specifically along the Western Euphrates River Valley (WERV) would be risky, bloody and dangerous. What was the nature of the mission that compelled Lieutenant General McChrystal to send such a note? As indicated, this was part of a larger coalition effort led by General George Casey, Commander, Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I) and would include other Special Operations Forces (SOF) from the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Arabian Peninsula (CJSOTF-AP) as well as the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). What was the overall mission and how did SOF contribute? What were the associated decisions, risks and mitigation strategies?

This chapter addresses those questions, as well as the outcomes at the tactical through strategic levels. First, it will frame the mission at the strategic level in terms of guidance and authorities. It will then provide background, to include events leading up to the “surge of forces,” both conventional as well as SOF, into the WERV. Next, it will discuss risks associated with the major decisions, to include advantages, disadvantages, and mitigation strategies. Lastly, it will tell the “rest of the story,” that is, those actions, as well as their impact on the mission at the strategic level. The chapter will end with a discussion of the “Yin and Yang” of Special Operations as it pertained to the 2005 Iraqi Sunni Awakening in Al Anbar.

FRAMING THE MISSION: GUIDANCE AND AUTHORITIES

General Casey, Commander MNF-I, used three key documents to help frame the mission in Iraq:

- The 11 May 2004 National Security Presidential Directive (NSPD);
- President George W. Bush’s 24 May 2004 speech at the Army War College; and
- The 8 June 2004 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1546.²

The NSPD established US government operations and organizations upon termination of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), and the “re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and a sovereign Iraqi government.” Upon termination of the CPA:

[T]he United States will be represented by a Chief of Mission, who on my [the President’s] behalf and under the guidance of the Secretary of State, shall be responsible for the direction, coordination and supervision of all United States Government employees, policies and activities in country, except those under the command of an area military commander, and employees seconded to an International Organization.³

The NSPD also indicated that the USCENTCOM Commander “under the authority, direction and control of the Secretary of Defense, shall continue to be

responsible for U.S. efforts with respect to security and military operations in Iraq.” Additionally, it charged the USCENTCOM Commander and the Chief of Mission to work together and mutually support one another.

The second “key” document was President Bush’s 24 May 2004 speech at the Army War College where he listed five steps “to help Iraq achieve democracy and freedom.” Briefly, those five steps included:

- The transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqi Interim Government;
- The commitment of Coalition forces to help establish stability;
- A pledge to help rebuild Iraq’s infrastructure;
- The solicitation of additional international support for Iraq’s transition; and
- Support to the Iraqi national elections to be held no later than January 2005.⁴

However, according to General Casey, “perhaps the most important document in framing the mission was UNSCR 1546.”⁵ In accordance with Chapter VII of the UN Charter, it provided the “MNF-I the authority to take all necessary measures to contribute to the maintenance of security and stability in Iraq.”⁶

Additionally, UNSCR 1546 provided the timetable for Iraq’s political transition to a democratic government. It stated that by 31 January 2005, Iraq was to elect a Transitional National Assembly responsible for “forming a Transitional Government of Iraq and draft[ing] a permanent constitution for Iraq leading to a constitutionally elected government by 31 December 2005.”⁷ Implicit in the UNSCR, and explicitly detailed later, was that the elections and the constitutional referendum would adhere to international electoral oversight and rules. The political process was driving the military mission – the country had to be secure/stable in order to conduct credible elections.

THE MISSION(S)

With those documents and the assistance of a Red Team assessment to define the nature of the threat, General Casey and Ambassador John Negroponte developed their joint mission statement: “To help the Iraqi people build a new Iraq, at peace

with its neighbors, with a constitutional, representative government that respects human rights and possesses security forces to maintain domestic order, and deny Iraq as a safe haven for terrorists.”⁸ But, what were the decisions and risks at the strategic through tactical levels associated with successfully achieving the political transition timelines, particularly as they effected Al Anbar?

This mission was not just a conventional force (CF)/MNF-I problem. General Casey described the mission as a partnership with Prime Minister Ayad Allawi and unity-of-effort with the Ambassador. But the command relationship was also a unity of effort with SOF since neither TF 714, nor theatre SOF, worked directly for Casey at the MNF-I (see Figure 1).⁹

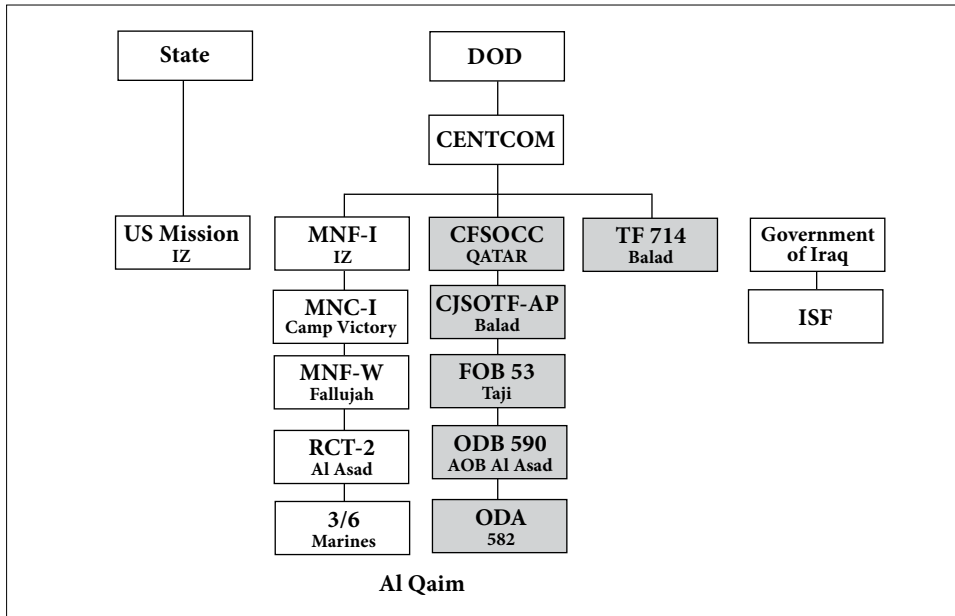


Figure 8.1 – Command Relationships

The five relevant organizations/agencies in Iraq were the US Mission (Embassy), the MNF-I, the CJSOTF, TF 714 and the Government of Iraq (GoI). The associated in-country decision-makers were Ambassador Negroponte (who was replaced in June 2005 by Zalmay Khalilzad), General Casey, Colonel Kevin McDonnell, Lieutenant General McChrystal and Prime Minister Allawi (who was replaced in May by Dr. Ibrahim al-Jaafari) respectively.



Dr. Ibrahim al-Jaafari was the first president of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in 2003, the first vice president of the Iraqi Interim Government (IIG) from June 2004 to March 2005, and the first prime minister of the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) from March 2005 to May 2006. He is seen here with the author.

Importantly, the 5 August 2004 MNF-I Campaign Plan, which was subtitled “Partnership: From Occupation to Constitutional Elections,” and the MNF-I mission statement, make it clear that the UNSCR 1546 timelines were driving military operations:

In partnership with the Iraqi Government, MNF-I conducts full spectrum counter-insurgency operations to isolate and neutralize former regime extremists and foreign terrorists, and organizes, trains and equips Iraq security forces in order to create a security environment that permits the completion of the UNSCR 1546 process on schedule.¹⁰

However, their approach to the Iraq war had to change. As an example, the Task Force tactics of “direct action, raid, and capture/kill” were essentially the same, but the target set was broader and the enemy, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), was able to quickly regenerate. According to Lieutenant General McChrystal, “We were losing.”¹¹ That is, the Task Force couldn’t keep pace with AQI.¹²

Dr. Richard Shultz’s monograph entitled *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization: A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq*, provides an excellent discussion on how TF 714 changed as an organization to meet the operational challenges posed by AQI. Essentially, they had to change their culture. They had to become a network to defeat this AQI network. They had to flatten the organization to enable quick communications and allow decisions to be made at

lower levels. Intelligence became critical. Not only during the “find and fix” phases, but also during “exploitation.”

Additionally, operators were talking directly to analysts and, “We had to share information...We used to have a culture [of] ‘Who needs to know?’ We had to change our culture to ‘Who doesn’t know; we need to tell them right now.’”¹³ Although this description does not do it justice, changes enabled the Task Force to increase their operational tempo from 15-20 raids in August 2004 to 300 raids per month by August 2006.¹⁴ It was during this metamorphosis that the below events occurred.

The CJSOTF’s mission was to support the MNF-I counterinsurgency effort by working “by, with and through,” indigenous forces in Al Anbar communities, as well as training and advising Iraqi Security forces. In 2004, they had Operational Detachment Alphas (ODAs) in the WERV working with the tribes. At the time, ODA 555 had made tremendous inroads with the Albu-Nimr tribe in the Hit area to the extent that Major General James Mattis, Commander of the 1st Marine Division, credited Major Adam Such and ODA 555’s efforts as the beginnings of the Awakening movement. One research report explained:

The Army Special Forces, Major Adam A. Such came in, linked up with us. I believe it was in December, before we deployed ... Adam would be the one who, with his guys out in the Hit/Haditha area, made initial contact with the Abu Nimer tribe and actually began what eventually morphed into the Anbar Awakening. This is, by the way, in April-May-June of 2004.¹⁵

However, by late summer of 2004 the ODAs were withdrawn from the WERV to support operations around Baghdad. Baghdad was, and remained, the highest priority.¹⁶ Additionally, the city of Fallujah, 40 miles west of Baghdad, was deemed a major threat to Baghdad security.

SANCTUARY CITIES: FALLUJAH

According to Casey, “One of the objectives we set for ourselves in the campaign plan was the elimination of safe havens inside Iraq prior to the January elections.”¹⁷ Fallujah was part of the seven-city program, a city that had to be eliminated as a

safe-haven for insurgents prior to the elections. Initially, however, General Casey wasn't convinced that a conventional assault on Fallujah was necessary because of the work SOF was doing.

And frankly, I went through a metamorphosis in my own thinking here. When I first got there, we were having pretty good success with attacking discrete targets inside Fallujah with some of our Special Operations Forces. And I wasn't sure that I couldn't just keep on doing that, because we were getting a lot of leaders in Fallujah.¹⁸

During the summer months the insurgents took control of the city and made life miserable for the residents, targeting those perceived to have worked with the Coalition and demanding all residents live under their strict interpretation of *Sharia*. Notable residents such as Farhan de Farhan, later to become the mayor of Al Qaim, fled the city with his family prior to the big battle and carried the message that AQI was the enemy of the Iraqi people and did not have their best interests at heart. This recognition that AQI was not their friend was the first phase of the Anbar Awakening.

In late September/early October Casey talked with Ambassador Negroponte and Prime Minister Allawi about Fallujah. After the Samarra operation his staff put together a

...military advice briefing about the challenges in Fallujah. It was basically a Leavenworth-style decision brief...here's the situation, here's the pros, here's the cons, here's the risks, here's what you've got to do.... the bottom line was I became convinced and I convinced Allawi that to have successful elections, Fallujah needed to go.¹⁹

Operation *Al Fajr* was executed in November 2004. Although brutal, it was seen as a success. It eliminated Fallujah as an insurgent sanctuary and reduced the insurgents' ability to generate improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and transport fighters to the Baghdad area. As such it opened the window for what were considered successful elections with 58 percent country-wide voter turnout. However, voter turnout in Al Anbar was dismal with only 1 percent of the registered voters participating.²⁰

SUNNI OUTREACH AND TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT

The failure of voter turnout in Al Anbar was a stark indicator of Sunni non-participation in the political process for whatever-the-reason: discontent, non-support, insurgent intimidation. Alternatively, it emphasized the importance of Sunni outreach, that is, of bringing the Sunnis into the political process as an alternative to supporting the insurgency.²¹ This approach really was a wake-up call and not the first time it was suggested. As early as April 2004, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld encouraged Sunni outreach. In a “snow flake” to Paul Bremer the lead for the CPA, Rumsfeld urged the CPA to pursue tribal engagements to include using Special Forces teams to build relationships.²² However, the CPA encouraged/directed the Coalition forces to work through government structures to promote security, governance and development.

Unfortunately, there were few, if any functioning government structures in place to work through. That is, the only available structures were the tribes. But, what was the Coalition’s policy towards the tribes? An anonymous source accused the CPA of being anti-tribal: “The standard answer we got from Bremer’s people was that tribes are a vestige of the past that they have no place in the new democratic Iraq.”²³ Although Bremer denied the accusation, there are examples to the contrary where the tribes submitted proposals to secure their areas in Al Anbar but were ultimately denied. As an example, the Albu-Nimr proposed that they secure areas near Hit. The proposal/contract was supported by the multi-national division in the area as well as by the CPA coordinator for the area, however, it was turned down by the CPA in Baghdad.²⁴

In May 2005, three months after the election, the Iraqi Transitional Government was approved by the Transitional National Assembly with Dr. Ibrahim al-Jaafari selected as the Prime Minister. Additionally, Dr. Saadoun al-Dulaimi was approved as Minister of Defense. Al-Dulaimi, a Sunni from the Albu-Risha tribe and uncle to Sheikh Sattar Albu-Risha, played an important part the upcoming events. According to Brigadier General Daniel Bolger, Dr. al-Dulaimi spent a lot of his time talking to tribal leaders in Al Anbar. He also reminded General Casey, Lieutenant General Petraeus (then-commander, Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq), and others of the importance of tribal outreach. As a social psychologist, Dr. al-Dulaimi understood that engaging the Sunnis was critical to driving a wedge between the AQI/insurgents and the Iraqis, and to changing the balance of popular support.²⁵

Even more sensitive than Sunni outreach and engaging the tribes was the topic of “militias.” That will be discussed more during the risk assessment.

THE WESTERN EUPHRATES RIVER VALLEY BECOMES UNCONTROLLABLE

Meanwhile out west along the WERV, AQI was active, in particular in Al Qaim. As indicated earlier, residents fled Fallujah during the summer and fall of 2004 and carried the message to communities along the Western Euphrates, as far as Al Qaim, that AQI was the enemy.

Author



“Body Wadi.” There were several major terrain features in the Al Qaim area. The first was the Euphrates River. Another was the high escarpment on the north side of the river and extending several miles to the east into Iraq. The third was the “Wadi al-Jabariya” know by Americans as the Emerald Wadi and described by Master Sergeant Steve Bleigh (ODA 594 in early 2004 and responsible for the Al Qaim area) as “Body Wadi.” As he described it, “if you talked to anyone and they talked to you, they got killed and ended up in Body Wadi. There wasn’t a week that didn’t go by.”

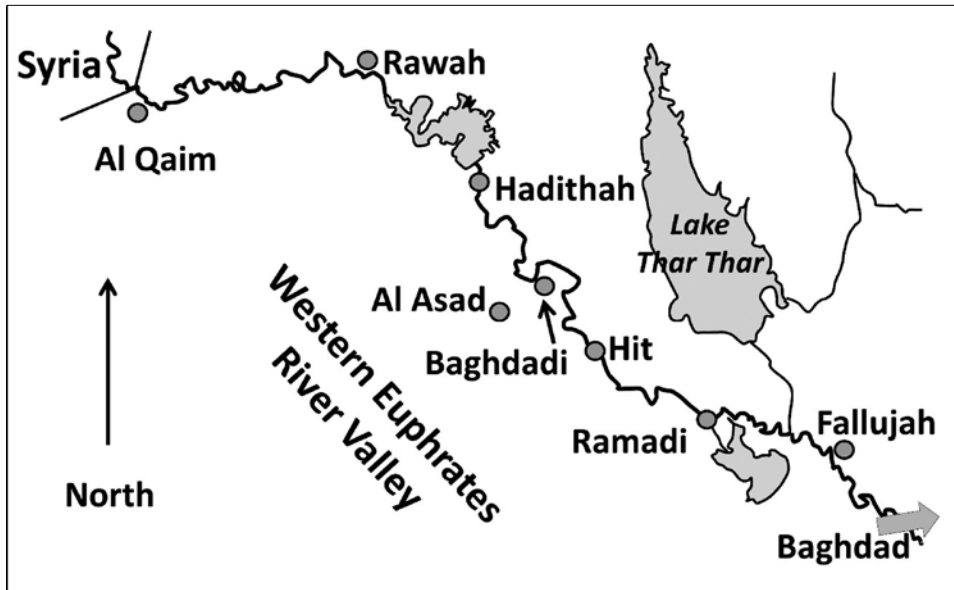


Figure 8.2 – The Western Euphrates River Valley

In April 2005 AQI struck Camp Gannon, located in Al Qaim at the border crossing of Iraq/Syria, with a triple suicide bombing, the third being an explosive-laden fire truck. The camp, occupied by 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment (3/2 Marines), miraculously lost no Marines and successfully fended off the attack. However, the insurgents prematurely posted a video announcing the attack as “a victory for Allah ... a victory against the coalition ... a victory in which we free Iraq from the American oppressors.” The townspeople learned that the Marines lost no forces and some made fun of the insurgents. The insurgents did not see the humor and killed the locals. The Marines became aware of the incident through a source. It was apparent that there was building resentment between the townspeople and the insurgents.²⁶ But, it was much more than resentment.

AQI had not allowed the tribes to secure their communities. Regardless, the Albu-Mahal selected their own tribesmen to police their areas. On 2 May, the new al-Mahalawi chief of police was walking through the market place in Husaybah when he was shot and beheaded.²⁷ AQI was reinforcing its mandate that they/AQI would be in charge of security. That was the final straw. The Albu-Mahal revolted against AQI.²⁸ The same Hamza battalion that the Albu-Mahal recruited from the tribe to fight the Americans turned on AQI, and drove them

from Husaybah. Impulsive? Maybe. And, in after-thought they feared brutal retaliation; knowing that they could not defeat AQI on their own, tribal leaders contacted both the Iraqi government and the Coalition for help.²⁹ This outreach was the start of the second phase of their awakening – a realization that they could not defeat AQI on their own.

Both Lieutenant General John Vines, Commander, Multi National Corps Iraq (MNC-I) and Colonel Kevin McDonnell, Commander, CJSOTF-AP sensed this growing rift between the tribes and AQI in the Al Qaim area and saw this as an opportunity.³⁰

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS DURING MAY/JUNE 2005

There were a number of significant events during May and June of 2005. At the tactical level the Albu-Mahal tribe turned against AQI; at the operational level the MNC-I and CJSOTF recognized the changing environment in Al Qaim; and at the strategic level they (McChrystal and Casey) understood the importance of the WERV. As sanctuary cities were marginalized, routes from Syria to Baghdad became increasingly important. Additionally, McChrystal reports that “by May 2005, which alone saw more than 60 suicide bombers, Casey was increasingly convinced that the foreign fighters flow [down the WERV] was a strategic vulnerability.”³¹ General Casey provided context:

Right after Jaafari took power [May 2005], the suicide bombs just started going...My view is the Jaafari Government was seen for what it was, unrepresentative of the Sunni interests...It's a classic example about the impact of governance on a counterinsurgency campaign. The Sunnis felt they were disenfranchised. It was their own fault they didn't vote to begin with, but that's where it started. So, the suicide bombers started coming.... And so then we were looking forward to the December '05 elections. We said if we didn't restore Iraqi control to that western border by the elections then these suicide bombers were still going to be going through there and that would be a problem. We decided that in the May/June timeframe, and that led to the WERV campaign.³²

Reinforcing the Sunni dislike for the installation of the Jaafari government, a poll in May reported that a large segment of the Sunni population realized, in

hindsight, the missed opportunity in their boycotting, rather than participating, in the January elections.³³ This was an indication that – maybe – a segment of the Sunni population was willing to consider a political alternative to the insurgency.

By June 2005, Zalmay Khalilzad arrived in Iraq, replacing Negroponte as the Ambassador. With the change of Ambassador, Sunni outreach got a boost. According to Casey:

For the longest time we kept telling the ambassador, “We need a Sunni engagement strategy.” At that time, folks were very nervous, because they didn’t want to alienate the Shia population. As long as John Negroponte was there, there really wasn’t any kind of Sunni engagement efforts broadly at the national level...And so when Zal got there [June 2005], we started doing things.³⁴

The picture was starting to come together. In summary:

- Assault on Fallujah. The Coalition’s assault on Fallujah in November 2004 denied its use as an insurgent sanctuary and forced AQI/insurgents to flee to other areas along the WERV. Additionally, AQI had over-reached on their brutality towards the Iraqi Sunni population. As such, the Anbaris realized that AQI was the enemy (the first phase of the Awakening).
- January 2005 Elections. While the elections were generally considered successful, turnout in Al Anbar was dismal. From that, the Coalition recognized the Anbaris needed to be brought into the political process as an alternative to the insurgency. The Sunni Outreach program was seen as a starting point, but not everyone in the Coalition or GOI supported it (discussed during the risk assessment).
- April 2005 suicide bombing at Camp Gannon. Per Colonel Steve Davis, Regimental Combat Team Two (RCT 2) commander, responsible for most of the WERV, “Ok, got it. We know what’s happening here...[Although] the name Zarqawi wasn’t big on our radar at that point, those bombings against Camp Gannon were his work.”³⁵
- Seating of the Iraqi Transitional Government in May 2005. Specifically, the seating of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari was followed by an immediate

increase in the number of suicide bombers and other incidents attributed to Terrorist and Foreign Fighters (T&FF) along the WERV. Casey read that as Sunni disenchantment with the new government.

- Al Qaim in May 2005. For survival, the Albu-Mahal turned on AQI. However, the tribe suddenly realized, in a flashback moment of “What have I done?!” that in the long term they couldn’t beat AQI without the help of the Coalition (hence, the second phase of the Al Qaim awakening, and re-introduction of ODAs in the WERV).
- Threat. While the Sunni Arab phenomena was the major long-term threat, the immediate threat to Baghdad and the upcoming constitutional referendum and December election was the T&FF/insurgent network along the WERV.³⁶
- Coalition realization. The threat along the WERV as well as the changing dynamic of the relationship (growing rift) between AQI/insurgents and the Anbaris was seen, at least in part, at the tactical (Captain Diorio, USMC, company commander at Camp Gannon), operational (Lieutenant General Vines, MNC-I and Colonel McDonnell, CJSOTF) and strategic levels (General Casey, MNF-I, Ambassador Khalilzad, Dr. Saadoun al-Dulaimi, Minister of Defence (MOD) for the GOI, and Lieutenant General McChrystal, TF 714).

So, what were the decisions and associated risks?

DECISION-MAKING AND ASSOCIATED RISKS

There were a number of major decisions during 2005. The three addressed here are:

1. To commit SOF, conventional forces, and ISF to the WERV;
2. To support Sunni outreach, especially in Al Anbar; and
3. To recruit local tribesmen for community defense to establish the Desert Protectors.

Each one will be analyzed using a modified and very abbreviated version of the Chairman’s Joint Risk Analysis Manual (JRAM) process.³⁷ The advantages of

referring to the JRAM is a common lexicon and the linkage of the issues in the first and second steps of the process to the strategic interests. This modified process uses six steps:

1. Risk to what?
2. Risk from what?
3. The course of action (COA)/decision;
4. The advantages;
5. Disadvantages; and
6. Mitigation strategies.

The first step, “Risk to what?” frames the problem by:

...identifying the item or idea which is “valued” and has the potential of being “harmed.” Protecting national interests, successfully executing a strategy or plan, or maintaining a viable ready force are examples of relevant risk topics with which the military is concerned.

In this case it is the risk to the political process of a successful constitutional referendum in October 2005 and national elections in December 2005. These were identified in UNSCR 1546, as well as at the joint and MNF-I mission statements at the beginning of this chapter. The three decisions are in support of “Successfully achieving political objectives within transition timelines.” Hence,

Step 1. Framing the problem (Risk to what?): Successfully achieving political objectives within transition timelines.

The JRAM and Joint Publication 5, *Joint Planning*, discuss strategic and military risk. The problem statement above addresses strategic risk. However, embedded within that is military risk which is composed of risk-to-force and risk-to-mission.

Although the JRAM addresses risk-to-force in terms of the military services generating and providing forces, it was also relevant at this level. As an example, it considers the potential that the MNF-I, TF 714, CJSOTF, and GoI might commit their forces to include any reserves in such a way that it would be difficult to react to a crisis in another area.

Lieutenant General McChrystal addressed risk-to-force in two ways. One of the ways was as defined here. He knowingly committed his forces realizing that they might not be available later but assessed that the risk was worth it when considered in the larger context. As an example, in *My Share of the Task*, he discusses the angst and dissonance he went through as he decided whether-or-not he should bring forward/commit another battalion to the current fight.³⁸ He realized that this could upset rotational cycles which might place his people at risk in terms of health and welfare, that is, morale, exhaustion, etc. He also addressed risk-to-force as it related to the mission, “I think it is going to be very dangerous. I think it is going to be bloody.” In these regards he is addressing the source of the risk, as a hazard (the former) and threat (the latter) which are discussed in the next step – the risk assessment.

Step 2. “Risk from what?” What are the sources of risk in terms of threats and hazards as they “related to achieving the political objectives within the transition timelines (Step 1)?”³⁹ A threat is defined as a “state or non-state entity with the capability and intent to harm.” A hazard is defined as a “security, environmental, demographic, political, technical, or social conditions with potential to cause harm.”⁴⁰

There were a multitude of risks, three of them (associated with the three decisions) are listed here:

1. Threat: The greatest threat to Baghdad, the referendum and election was the T&FF networks/insurgents along the WERV.
2. Threat and Hazard: Continued Sunni disenchantment – an underlying motive for them to support the insurgency and boycott the election.⁴¹
3. Hazard: Lack of community security to counter AQI intimidation at the local level.

Although expressed as decisions, during the military decision-making process, those decisions were really courses of action (COA). Through the luxury of hindsight and backward engineering, the author has posed those decisions as COA (Step 3) and provided the advantages (Step 4), disadvantages (Step 5) and mitigation strategies (Step 6). Those are mapped at Figure 8.3 below and will be discussed in terms of the decisions.

DECISION 1. TO COMMIT (OR NOT) SOF, CONVENTIONAL FORCES, AND ISF TO THE WERV

Step 1. Framing the problem, risk to what? Achieving political objectives within transition timelines.

Step 2. Risk assessment, risk from what? The threats to achieving the political objectives within the given milestones are the T&FF and Sunni Arab rejectionists. The greatest/immediate threat was located along the WERV.

Step 3. COA/Decision. The decision they faced at the MNF-I, TF 714, CJSOTF and GOI was to (or not) move/allocate forces into the WERV to address the threat.



Figure 8.3 – Risk Assessment Mapping

Step 4. Advantages.⁴² The advantage of committing forces to the WERV was that it focused efforts/resources against the most likely and dangerous threat: T&FF. As such it disrupted T&FF’s use of the WERV in Al Anbar as an infiltration route for

suicide bombers, IED production and transport, and foreign fighter travel into the heart of Iraq towards Baghdad.

Step 4. Disadvantages. What if the threat analysis was wrong and the MNF-I, TF 714, CJSOTF and ISF misallocated forces? They would be creating an opportunity for AQI and Sunni Arab Rejectionists (SAR) to wreak havoc in other areas and place the strategy at risk. How much risk was okay is reconciled in the next step via mitigation.

Step 5. Mitigation strategies – “What should be done about the risk (disadvantages) if we focus our attentions and forces on the threat in the WERV?” Mitigation Strategies included:

- Continuous assessment of the threat, the development of fusion cells, increased intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and the further development and implementation of the F3EA (Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze) model to more accurately and efficiently assess/address the threat.⁴³
- Develop and execute the Sunni Outreach program to attract the “reconcilables” (those on the fence and those that would consider an alternative to the insurgency) into the political process.
- Pursue a community defense system via the tribes to counter AQI intimidation at the local level; implement the Desert Protectors program.

Note that the last two “mitigation strategies” are the next two decisions and, as such, become part of the risk assessment process.

DECISION 2: SUPPORT SUNNI OUTREACH; SERIOUSLY ENGAGE THE TRIBES, ESPECIALLY IN AL ANBAR.

Step 1. Framing the problem, risk to what? Achieving political objectives within transition timelines.

Step 2. Risk assessment, risk from what? What are the sources of risk in terms of threats and hazards? Anbaris joined the insurgency and boycotted the elections

because they were disenchanted with the GoI and Coalition. This Anbaris action was listed as both a threat and a hazard: a threat because they were part of the insurgency, but a hazard because their reason for remaining with the insurgency was (pick one) “security, environmental, demographic, political, technical, or social conditions with potential to cause harm.”⁴⁴ Security is probably the most important aspect. They were reluctant to be seen supporting the Coalition or GoI because that would place themselves and their families at risk. Until the GoI or Coalition could convince them otherwise, they were more secure if, from an insurgent perception, they supported the insurgency.

Step 3. COA/Decision. Sunni outreach.

Step 4. Advantages. It was suggested/encouraged as early as April 2004 by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, but it was ignored by the CPA. General Casey and the MoD Saadoun al-Dulaimi recognized that the Sunnis, at least the reconcilables, needed to be brought into the political process as an alternative to the insurgency. They realized that the insurgency would never end if the Iraqis were not provided an alternative.

Step 4. Disadvantages. The US and GoI opposed Sunni outreach for political reasons: They perceived all insurgents as having blood on their hands, i.e., that they had killed Coalition members and Iraqis.

Step 5. Mitigation strategies. The MNF-I campaign plan with “Al Qaeda out – Sunni in” drew a distinction between the irreconcilables and reconcilables.⁴⁵ TF 714 would focus on AQI/T&FF, the irreconcilables. MNF-I, GoI and the CJSOTF focus was on population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) (however, they would not pass up the irreconcilables if given the opportunity to kill or capture).

They would encourage Anbari participation in the political process and convince the naysayers that instituting some type of amnesty/reintegration program was the only option towards peace. A vetting process as well as reintegration programs became extremely important to minimize recidivism. Community security became extremely important. This realization leads into the next, and probably most difficult decision.

It is important to note that this last decision is actually a subset of the previous. It takes engagement a step further by bringing the tribal militias into government forces.

DECISION 3: IMPLEMENT COMMUNITY DEFENCE; SPECIFICALLY, IMPLEMENT THE DESERT PROTECTOR PROGRAM

Step 1. Framing the problem, risk to what? Achieving political objectives within transition timelines.

Step 2. Risk assessment, risk from what? A lack of security at the community level.

Step 3. COA/Decision. Implement the Desert Protectors program.

Step 4. Advantages. As long as the residents felt that they and their families were at risk, i.e., unsecure, they would opt for the side that allowed them to feel safer for a longer period of time. They did not trust the Coalition or the GoI because too often they felt abandoned. A good example was when Coalition's forces departed Hit in 2004 to fight in Fallujah. The Albu-Nimr were massacred by the insurgents.

The solution was to allow and support the tribe in defending their own community in the form of the Desert Protector Program. The incentive for the Albu-Mahal tribe was that they would be defending their own community.

Step 4. Disadvantages. What are the sources of risk in terms of threats and hazards? Enlisting, training and arming tribal militias to provide local security was one of the hardest courses of action to broker among the major players because of the equities and associated risks on all sides. As an example, General Casey and Prime Minister Al Jaafari were concerned (taking risk) with the perception that they were legitimizing a militia. Prime Minister Al Jaafari was additionally worried that he was arming a militia that would later turn on his government.

The Albu-Mahal tribe was taking risk in the eyes of other Sunni tribes that they would be supporting an illegitimate Shia government. The tribesmen and tribal leaders were also concerned (risk) that if they joined the Iraqi army that they could be deployed out of area (this is counter to their reason for joining the

Desert Protectors in the first place: to defend their homes). Worse yet, they might be deployed into a Shia area where they might be targeted. Additionally, association with the Iraqi Army or Iraqi police was an anathema since they disliked the Iraqi Government.

The US Embassy was taking risk in that the US policy until that time, albeit unwritten, was to work through government institutions and not the tribes. Would this decrease the incentive to build government institutions?

Step 5. Mitigation strategies. Despite Prime Minister Al Jaafari and General Casey's skepticism, the MoD, Dr. Saadoun al-Dulaimi stepped forward with a proposal: That they (al-Mahalawi tribesmen) be vetted and enlisted into the Iraqi armed services like any recruit. However, they would be called the Desert Protectors without named affiliation to either the MoD or Ministry of Interior (MoI). Additionally, they would also be deferred from deploying outside the Al Qaim area. Al Jaafari agreed and General Casey signed the memorandum of understanding with Dr. al-Dulaimi on 15 September 2005.⁴⁶

Coalition forces realizing that they needed to work with the tribes to provide local security was the third phase of the Awakening. According to Lieutenant General John Allen:

The third awakening was our own. Our own awakening to the fact that there was the opportunity with the tribes that we hadn't really anticipated I think, in allying ourselves with them ultimately to accomplish our objectives, vis-a-vis Al Qaeda, and in places where battalions were on the ground...Making those early connections with the tribes at the local level took entire chunks of the map out from underneath of Al Qaeda. [It] Didn't give them a place [where] they could bed-down, plan, rest, and recuperate, to then attack either Anbaris or attack us.⁴⁷

THE REST OF THE STORY

The first phase of Operation *Sayaid* or Hunter was initiated in July with the movement of a Stryker unit into Rawah north of the river and a battalion of the 1st Iraqi Brigade south of the river. The purpose of the operation was to set the conditions for a constitutional referendum in October and the national elections in December.⁴⁸ More forces were on their way.

In August, Colonel McDonnell redeployed Special Forces operational detachments into the WERV to work with the tribes. Specifically, Major Martin Adams deployed his Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB) headquarters to Al Asad; ODA 545 to Hit, where the previous ODA worked with the Albu-Nimr tribe; ODA 555 to Hadithah; and ODA 582 to Al Qaim to work with the Albu-Mahal tribe. As indicated, the Albu-Mahal tribe was driven out of Al Qaim in August. Those that could afford it went to Syria or Jordan, but most fled to Akashat, an area about 100 miles south of Al Qaim where a Coalition and GoI team met them to vet and recruit tribesmen into government service. Captain Joe Connolly and ODA 582 would train, advise and assist the Desert Protectors.⁴⁹

At the regimental level, Colonel Steve Davis saw his force of 3,200 Marines and Sailors as an economy of force effort in February 2005, grow to 14,000 by September 2005. It was comprised of US Marine, US Army, and Iraqi security forces. The GoI committed an experienced Iraqi Brigade, the 1st Iraqi Brigade, to Al Qaim and then started deploying the newly commissioned 7th Iraqi Division to Al Anbar.⁵⁰

Lieutenant Colonel Dale Alford with 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment (3/6 Marines) replaced 3/2 Marines in August and executed Operation Iron Fist in early October. The next assault, Operation Steel Curtain in November was regimental and included the Desert Protectors who were now embedded within the force as scouts. Accompanied by ODA 582 they were very effective in tracking and identifying AQI/insurgent forces. Because the Desert Protectors were locals, insurgents' attempts to blend in with the population was difficult, if not impossible.⁵¹ However, there was a negative side to that. According to Connolly the Albu-Mahals were massacred by AQI. The Coalition had to be very sensitive to any inclination of retribution on the part of the Desert Protectors. Additionally, they had to be sensitive to any sense, or perception, of entitlement on the part of the Albu-Mahal:

You also want to make sure that there's no perception that these guys are the new ones in charge and you guys [the other tribe] are going to be squeezed out. A lot of times in dealing with tribes, there is a zero sum game. [They think] that the Albu-Mahals are doing well at the expense of the Karbulis and Salmanis. It's definitely a matter of appearing to be doing the right thing and not just doing the right thing. Perceptions go a long way.⁵²



Courtesy of Major Mukhlis

Desert Protectors' victory celebration post-Operation Steel Curtain in Al Qaim, November 2005. Written on the right as you are looking at the photo: "The heroes who liberated/freed Al Qaim," and on the left: "Long live Iraq". It is a celebration honoring the heroes of the Awakening.

The MNF-I October 2005 Strategic Planning Directive, subtitled "Making the Elections Decisive," based on early success, directed the expansion of the Desert Protectors program, as well as political outreach and Anbari inclusion to drive a wedge between them, AQI and insurgents.⁵³

Additionally, TF 714 operation, dubbed Snake Eyes, was in full swing generally targeting the AQI network north of the river as conventional forces and elements of the CJSOTF, supported by the Desert Protectors worked south of the river.

The situation changed dramatically during 2005. In terms of the number of suicide attacks, there were 299 reported on Election Day in January 2005. Those attacks dropped to 90 for the referendum in October and 80 for the 15 December national elections.⁵⁴ The drop in attacks made it possible for more Iraqis to vote

if they wished, and they did. Nationwide there was a 63 percent voter turnout for the October referendum and a 75 percent turnout for the December national elections. In Al Anbar it was 38 percent in October and 86.4 percent in December. Both were deemed successful by international standards.⁵⁵

Yin and Yang:



A Chinese symbol originating from a Chinese belief system called Taoism. It is supposed to represent the idea that everything in nature should be viewed as part of a whole, and that opposites are complementary forces that balance themselves out.⁵⁶

There are a several references to opposing yet complementary forces in this chapter. That is, those seemingly opposite forces that in reality are complementary and balance themselves out. As an example, some may consider civil-military actions to be “day and night” as far as their approach to the problem set, in this case counterinsurgency. While one addresses the governance and development aspects of COIN the other addresses the security aspect. Both capabilities are needed to conduct the mission.

Another example is CF/SOF integration. According to General Casey:

The operations in the west required careful integration of the actions of our special operations task force, which was targeting the al Qaeda leaders of the facilitation networks, with conventional forces, which were attacking network sanctuaries and freedom of movement and reestablishing the ISF presence along the border. The task force had established its own country-wide intelligence collection and operational network to go after al Qaeda in Iraq. Its efforts were focused on AQI leadership, and it conducted several operations a night across Iraq in pursuit of al Qaeda targets. It coordinated its efforts with local commanders in whose areas it operated. This coordination improved over time as the conventional and special operations forces became more comfortable working together.⁵⁷

As previously indicated by Lieutenant General McChrystal, the targeting process was maturing and proved very effective for hunting down terrorists. That targeting process expanded. During 2005, TF 714 worked with the US divisions to develop intelligence fusion centers. Those centers allowed the divisions to access

information from national sources, as well as work with the Task Force to quickly act on the intelligence. According to Casey, “These centers greatly increased our ability to attack Al-Qaeda and insurgent leadership and were instrumental in our long-term success.”⁵⁸

That wasn’t always the case. There were a number of conflicts between SOF, and specifically Task Force 714 and conventional forces. McChrystal characterized it as “ground-holding commanders’ occasional annoyance with TF 714—over disruptive targeting in their domain.”⁵⁹ The “ground-holding commanders” were more visceral in their descriptions of SOF (TF 714) conducting raids in their areas of operations for which they had to “clean-up” afterwards with resident tribes.⁶⁰ As indicated by Casey, this relationship improved with time.

The last example demonstrates what some have called the Yin and Yang of special operations. The complementary effects of surgical strike (TF 714) and special warfare (the CJSOTF). One being short-term, raids, direct action, hostage rescue and the other being longer duration operations such as foreign internal defence, counter-insurgency, and unconventional warfare.⁶¹ In this case it was aptly demonstrated by the CJSOTF working by, with and through the Albu-Mahal tribe to develop the Desert Protectors to work as scouts for the conventional forces as TF 714 surgically targeted the AQI/T&FF. The real success of these operations was the balance, Yin and Yang, or unity-of-effort that had to take place among conventional forces, SOF, the embassy and GoI.

It was this 2005 maturity of civil/military, CF/SOF, Special Warfare/Surgical Strike as complementary operations in which the Awakening or *al Sahawa* was born in Al Anbar.

ENDNOTES

- 1 General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 180.
- 2 General George W. Casey Jr., *Strategic Reflections: Operation Iraq Freedom, July 2004 - February 2007*, (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, October 2012), 6.
- 3 President George W. Bush, “The United States Government Operations in Iraq,” National Security Presidential Directive/NPSD, 11 May 2004.
- 4 President George W. Bush, Remarks at the U.S. Army War College, “Steps to Help Iraq Achieve Democracy and Freedom,” (Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 24 May 2004), <<https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/32743.htm>>, accessed on 16 January 2019.
- 5 Casey, *Strategic Reflections*, 9.
- 6 United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1546, 8 June 2004. 2-3; and Casey *Strategic Reflections*, 9.
- 7 UNSCR 1546, 4.
- 8 Ambassador John Negroponte and General George Casey, “Multinational Force – Iraq/Embassy Joint Mission Statement,” 18 August 2004, declassified on 29 September 2009.
- 9 Both worked for the USCENTCOM Commander, TF 714 directly and Theater SOF indirectly through the CFSOCC.
- 10 “MNF-I Campaign Plan: Operation Enduring Freedom, Partnership: From Occupation to Constitutional Elections,” 5 August 2004, declassified on 29 September 2009.
- 11 Richard Shultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization: A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq*, (Tampa, FL: Joint Special Operations University, JSOU Report 16-6, July 2016), 1; General Stanley McChrystal, USA, Retired, “My Share of the Task,” presented at Pritzker Military Library, 25 March 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7k9hZDCj8I>>, at 29:52, accessed on 21 January 2019.
- 12 Shultz, 20.
- 13 McChrystal, Pritzker Military Library, 2013, 25:50-29:45.
- 14 Shultz, 59; McChrystal, Pritzker Military Library, 30:17.
- 15 Colonel Gary W. Montgomery and Chief Warrant Officer-4 Timothy S. McWilliams, Editors, *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume II, Iraqi Perspectives, from Insurgency to Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004-2009* (Quantico: Marine Corps University, 2009).
- 16 “MNF-I Campaign Action Plan for 2005: Transition to Self-Reliance,” 22 April 2005, declassified on 29 September 2009, 6.
- 17 General George Casey, interview by Dr. William Knarr, at Casey’s American Embassy office in Baghdad, 6 February 2006, transcript, 4.

18 Ibid., 4.

19 Casey, Interview, 2006, 4, and General George Casey interview by Dr. William Knarr and Colonel Dale Alford, USMC, at Casey's Pentagon office, 16 December 2010, transcript, 9.

20 William Knarr, *The 2005 Iraqi Sunni Awakening: The Role of the Desert Protector Program* (Tampa, FL: JSOU Report 15-4, October 2015), 18.

21 "MNF-I Campaign Progress Review, December 2004-June 2005," 27 June 2005, declassified on 29 September 2009. 11. This lack of participation also meant that the Sunnis would not be equitably represented on the Transitional National Assembly since the elections determined the ratio of seats. Fortunately, with encouragement from the Coalition, the Iraqi Transitional Government took steps to include/increase Sunni representation.

22 Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Memorandum for Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, Subject: Sunni outreach, dated 12 April 2004, declassified 7 July 2009. Rumsfeld was famous for generating short notes to his staff. They were referred to as "snowflakes.," Knarr, *Desert Protectors*, 9.

23 Joe Klein, "Saddam's Revenge," *Time* (8 September 2005). This was the response from an anonymous intelligence officer when asked about working with the tribes, 50.

24 Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe* (Random House, 2008); also Mr. Keith Mines discussion via telephone with Dr. William Knarr, 13 March 2011. Mines went on to say that this wasn't so much an awakening as it was a simple business deal; also Sheikh Bezi Majil Nijris al-Gaoud interview by Dr. William Knarr, Lieutenant Colonel David Graves, USMC, and Ms. Mary Hawkins, at Bezi's office in Amman, Jordan, 3 February 2011.

25 Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger, formerly deputy commander, MNC-I from February to June 2005 and commander of the Coalition Military Assistance Training Team, Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq (MNSTC-I), from June 2005 to June 2006, interview by Dr. William Knarr, at Bolger's office, North Carolina State University, 17 September 2014. Also Dr. Saadoun al-Dulaimi, former minister of defense, interview by Dr. William Knarr, Colonel Dale Alford and Lieutenant Colonel David Graves, in al-Dulaimi's home, Baghdad, 24 April 2010. The significance of Dr. al-Dulaimi's relationship with Sheikh Sattar is that Sattar coined the term "*al Sahawa*" and started the major Awakening movement in Ramadi.

26 Knarr, *Desert Protectors*, (2015), 28.

27 Mahalawi refers to a tribal member of the Albu-Mahal.

28 Knarr, *Desert Protectors*, (2015), 28-29.

29 Ibid., 31-33.

30 Colonel Kevin McDonnell, USA retired, telephone discussion with Dr. William Knarr, 8 August 2014.

31 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 179.

32 Casey interview, (2010), 10.

33 MNF-I "Campaign Progress Review, December 2004-June 2005," 27 June 2005, 12.

34 Casey interview, (2010), 2.

35 Colonel Steve Davis interviewed by Dr. William Knarr and Colonel Dale Alford, USMC, at Davis' office, Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command (MARSOC), Camp Lejeune, 25 May 2010.

36 MNF-I September 2005 Assessment, 23 September 2005, declassified on 29 September 2009, 5.

37 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Manual, CJCSM 3105.01, 14 October 2016. "The Joint Risk Analysis Methodology enables the Chairman...to make consistent, timely risk assessments and provide best military advice on risk management in support of title 10 responsibilities." Although at a much higher level it was used here to help guide the analysis and for its common lexicon. The first two steps here remain the same as the JRAM. However, for brevity the last two steps of the JRAM were heavily modified (into steps 3-5).

38 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 180.

39 Actually, it's much more complex than that. The JRAM discusses linkages to harmful events (sources and risks) and their consequences and probabilities.

40 JRAM, B-3.

41 Nathan Bos, Editor. *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds and Insurgencies*, second edition, (Fort Bragg, NC: The United States Army Special Operations Command, 2013). As pointed out by Bos in Chapter 2, "Underlying Causes of Insurgencies," there is normally more than one reason. He discusses eight potential risk factors for political violence. Two of them, "marginalization or persecution of identity groups and lack of government legitimacy (which includes factors such as the security, economic needs and justice) are probably major contributors in this case.

42 Step 3 is where this process deviates from the JRAM.

43 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 153.

44 JRAM, B-3.

45 MNF-I Memorandum, Strategic Planning Directive: "Making the Elections Decisive," 30 October 2005. Declassified on 29 September 2009, 1-2.

46 Dr. al-Dulaimi interview, 24 April 2010; "Memorandum of Understanding between the Multi-National Force-Iraq and the Iraqi Ministry of Defense Concerning Training and Equipping the 'Desert Protectors,'" signed by General Casey and Dr. al-Dulaimi on 15 September 2005. Hereafter referred to as the Desert Protectors 15 Sep 05 MOU. According to Captain Joe Connolly, Commander, ODA 582, interview by Dr. William Knarr and Ms. Mary Hawkins, IDA, 26 November 2010, despite the façade of the name "Desert protectors," in reality they were in the Iraqi Army.

47 Lieutenant General John Allen interview by Dr. William Knarr, Colonel Dale Alford, USMC, and Major General Tom Jones, USMC retired, all from IDA, at Allen's office, USCENTCOM, 16 March 2010.

48 Operation Sayaid was preceded by Operation Restoring Rights in the Tal Afar area to secure the Tigris crossing areas in the north. MNF-I September Assessment, 7.

49 Lieutenant Colonel Martin Adams, interview by Dr. William Knarr and Lieutenant Colonel David Graves, USMC, Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), Alexandria, VA, 21 December 2010.

50 Davis, 25 May 2010.

51 Captain Joe Connolly, Commander, ODA 582, interview by Dr. William Knarr and Ms. Mary Hawkins, IDA, 26 November 2010.

52 Connolly, 26 November 2010.

53 MNF-I Memorandum, Strategic Planning Directive: Making the elections Decisive, 30 October 2005. Declassified on 29 September 2009, 3.

54 Casey, *Strategic Reflections*, 71.

55 Electoral Geography 2.0, Iraq Legislative Election 2005 (December), <<http://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/iraq/iraqlegislative-election-2005.html>>, accessed 23 January 2019. According to the Electoral Geography 585,249 votes were cast of 677,821 registered voters for 86.4 percent of the vote. The referendum vote was 259,919 votes cast with 7,908 “yes” votes and 252,011 “no” votes. This reflects 38 percent of the vote. <<https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/iraq/iraq-referendum-2005.html>>, accessed on 23 January 2019.

56 “Yin and Yang,” *Wikipedia*, <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yin_and_yang>, accessed on 27 January 2019. Also, the figure credited to By Gregory Maxwell – From Image: Yin_yang.png, converted to SVG by Gregory Maxwell., Public Domain, <<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=364239>>. Additionally, Admiral Eric Olson expressed Yin and Yang in terms of special operations by Associated Press, “Special Ops Chief Warns of Al-Qaida 2.0,” (Thursday, 28 July 2011), <<https://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/SpecialOperations-al-Qaida/2011/07/28/id/405095/>>, accessed on 10 May 2018.

57 Casey, *Strategic Reflections*, 70.

58 Ibid., 70.

59 McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 175.

60 William Knarr and Mark Nutsch, *Village Stability Operations and the Evolution of SOF Command and Control in Afghanistan* (Tampa: JSOU, 2019).

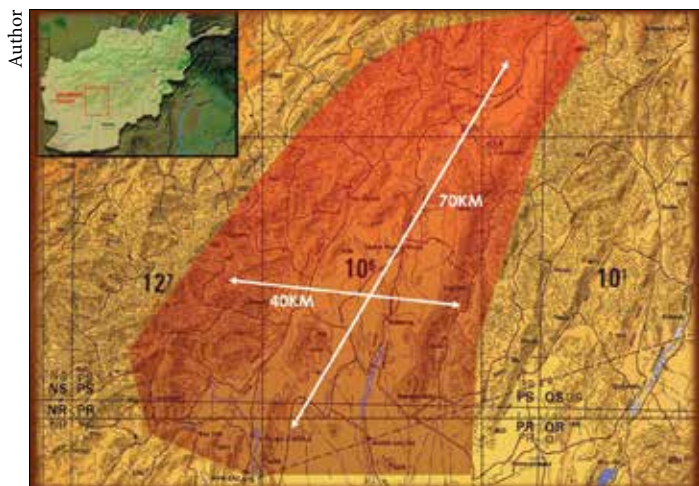
61 Surgical strike and special warfare are described in Army doctrine as “two mutually supporting core competencies.” *Army Doctrine Publication 3-05, Special Operations*, ii.

CHAPTER 9

MITIGATING RISK: BAGHRAN VALLEY

Lieutenant-Colonel Chris Allen

Risk is inherent to all military operations and mitigating risk is naturally at the forethought of all commanders regardless of their rank or scope of operations with which they are faced. Throughout their careers, leaders are introduced to the types of risk they may encounter, how to assess these risks and how to analyze methods of mitigating these hazards. This chapter will examine tactical level risk management, including the analysis and identification of hazards, mitigation measures, and decisions made during the planning and execution of what turned out to be an almost three-week mobility-based reconnaissance operation within the Baghran Valley, in the north of Helmand Province in Southern Afghanistan in the late spring of 2006.¹



Baghran Valley.



Throughout this chapter risk management will be addressed through deliberate planning. In the case of time critical situations, vignettes from the operation, with some of the decisions made through a lens of either Risk to Force or Risk to Mission and why each was made with this focus will also be covered. Additionally, through the vignettes additional factors, such as physiological² stressors, are identified that biased our perspectives of threats.

Spring 2006 witnessed efforts by the coalition in Afghanistan to expand the Government of Afghanistan's influence and control into many districts that had previously come under the control of opposition forces. Operation Mountain Thrust, a theatre-level operation being planned and conducted by Combined Joint Task Force-76 (CJTF-76) throughout southern Afghanistan, had this expansion of Afghan governance, disruption of enemy operations and the setting of conditions for NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to take responsibility for southern Afghanistan as key components of its end-state.



Operation Mountain Thrust.

As part of Phase 0 Shaping Operations, the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan (CJSOTF-A) directed the Canadian Special Operations Forces (CANSOF) Task Force to conduct reconnaissance operations in the Baghran Valley in northern Helmand Province in order to set the conditions for follow-on forces within Operation Mountain Thrust. In this case, the designated force was the 2nd Battalion, 87 Infantry Regiment with attached Afghan National Army (ANA) and United States Special Forces (USSF) personnel. The CANSOF ground force was made up of an Assault Troop and Squadron Headquarters (HQ) elements from Joint Task Force Two (JTF-2) with the addition of an ANA Reconnaissance platoon with two US facilitators deployed from a forward operating base near Kandahar City. It conducted reconnaissance operations within the Baghran Valley for nineteen days during May-June 2006.

The general concept of operations had the force move directly west into Helmand Province and then manoeuvre north past the city of Musa Quala (most northern extent of Coalition presence in Helmand) and patrol along the west side of the Baghran Valley. Once the force had pushed half way up the valley, the old district centre, Baghran City, would be visited and assessed prior to the move north to identify and secure the tentative insertion location for the conventional forces.

Once a battle handover was conducted, the force was to investigate ingress routes along the east edge of the valley as it moved south and eventually move back to our base of operations in Kandahar. Continued contact with opposition forces and a change in Operation Mountain Thrust's scheme of manoeuvre would, in the end, dislocate the overall plan.

Utilizing ground-based mobility, the Squadron had to take into consideration a plethora of issues within the initial risk analysis prior to execution of the operation. While the squadron had conducted sub-unit level mobility training at Fort Bliss in the early spring of 2005 prior to deploying to Afghanistan, and troop level patrols had been conducted in the fall of 2005 by one of the Assault Troops in Urōzgān Province, this mission would be the first time it had deployed with such a size of force and for such a duration.

To shape the decisions that had to be made in regard to planning the operation, a number of risk factors were looked at within the following areas:

- Opposition forces. The Baghran Valley had historically been a hot-bed of opposition to any central authority and the majority of the clans still in the region had caused the Soviets a great deal of casualties and loss of material during their occupation. It was anticipated that the force would be closely monitored and if the local warlords felt they were threatened, or had the forces readily available, the task force would be engaged to deter further penetration into the north of the valley. Accurate intelligence was not available on the possible use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in the valley, but with the proliferation of use of IEDs into southern Afghanistan since the fall of 2005, it was taken into careful consideration for movement of the force.
- Coalition and friendly Afghan forces. There had not been a permanent presence from either the ANA or the Coalition north of Musa Qala, with only sporadic forays into villages by Afghan National Police (ANP). Unfortunately, these forays were seen more as raids by the local population as the ANP reportedly routinely extorted and abused villagers. North of Highway One, the only permanent Coalition presence was a US Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) within the city of Musa Qala.

- Terrain and weather. Operating in May/June, the weather was dry with moderately hot days and cool nights. This weather allowed for good movement through the wadis that criss-crossed the valley and provided some relief at night from the heat which helped conserve water. It was anticipated that the ground itself would be a constant challenge to our vehicles with rocks and vegetation destroying tires and the off-road movement playing havoc with vehicle suspension systems.
- Lines of communication. The golden 60-minute rule for medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) would have to be forgotten. Unless prepositioned, MEDEVAC could take well over two hours to reach the Squadron once up in the northern reaches of the valley. This factor was the same for expectations of a quick reaction force or bulk resupply.

In the planning phase of a deliberate operation there is the luxury of taking the time to work through the phases of the risk management process as set out in US Army *Techniques Publication ATP 5-19*³, specifically, identifying hazards, assessing the hazard's risk, developing mitigation strategies (controls) allowing for the development of solid contingency plans and identifying areas critical for conducting rehearsals and liaison. Looking closely at the broad risk areas above and working out scenarios, the force was able to identify:

- routes;
- areas of concern to movement and enemy activity;
- requirements for prepositioning bulk stock for aerial resupply; and
- required additions to the organization within the Squadron to include a mechanic, medics, communications personnel, interpreters and electronic warfare experts.

All of these considerations were aimed at trying to mitigate as much risk as possible at the front end. Building on this analysis, conducting rehearsals and developing solid contingency plans allowed for quick decision-making by leadership at all levels once deployed on the operation.

Nonetheless, even after calculating hazards and putting measures in place to attempt mitigate risk, it does not mean that all risk can be alleviated. No more than a few kilometers from departing the forward operating base in Kandahar, the squadron was ambushed resulting in one member shot in the head and one vehicle becoming a mobility kill.



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Mobility patrol navigating an Afghan town.

The opposition broke after the first volley of return fire from the lead elements and the Squadron was able to quickly return to the base to have our wounded operator looked after by our medics and have a replacement vehicle cross-loaded, but it did force the Squadron on to a longer alternate route, which meant we lost time getting into Helmand Province.

As with this example, throughout the operation decisions had to be weighed based on challenges that emerged from enemy contact, terrain and lines of communication. The friction of Risk to Force and Risk to Mission considerations were consistently challenged, and additional factors such as physiological degradation over time had to be taken into account by leaders at all levels as the operation drew out over the three weeks.



The formidable Baghran Valley.

Contact with forces in opposition to our presence in the region occurred each day, be it in kinetic or non-kinetic form. The key to mission success and to mitigate the risk to the force from enemy action, was to not become decisively engaged with potentially large enemy forces that could be quickly brought to bear on us within this area. To counter the growing IED threat, the Squadron remained off of established roads and tracks unless forced onto these due to the canalized ground. The vehicles were driven to their limits on many occasions, with the risk of casualties from an accident being weighed against the risk of enemy-inflicted casualties.

The risk to the force through direct enemy contact was additionally mitigated through deception. This decision to work the force through the valley off-road, combined with deception through messaging (i.e. giving them false information as to routes and destinations) to local elders, allowed the Squadron to retain the initiative and move around armed groups that were attempting to position themselves against the force on a number of occasions.



CANSOFCOM

In one instance, Taliban leaders purporting to be local elders boldly approached the force and leaders spent some time discussing why the force was in the area and in the dialogue the conversation was shaped to imply that the force was to take a very prominent route from its current location into the main part of the valley below. The opinion of the “local elders” was requested on the route and if they could facilitate the force’s movement so it could depart the next day. While they set up an anticipated sizable ambush along this route for our departure, a deliberate plan was designed and set in motion that saw the squadron move out early and cut straight across the main wadi into some very suspect mountainous terrain. The going was somewhat dangerous as it tested the limitations of both the vehicles and drivers, but it allowed the force to remain disengaged from the local fighters and the Squadron disappeared off their “radar” for the next twenty-four hours, arriving safely into the more open and defendable bottom of the main valley.



Arriving at Baghran City.

Decisions to take some risk to the force were carefully weighed where information collection was required to achieve the reconnaissance aspects of the mission. For example, on arrival in the vicinity of Baghran City, I made the decision not to push the Squadron into the built-up area so as not to place them and their vehicles in a position of vulnerability and to avoid being seen by the inhabitants as an “invading force.”



As the patrol neared the city, surrounding the built-up area were old Soviet-era trench systems, emplaced to protect the city and their installations during their occupation. As this would be an important piece of ground to hold when the ANA and Coalition forces came into the valley, I decided to risk conducting a patrol to both the north and south of the city to determine the extent of the defensive works, if they were being occupied and what areas would have to be occupied by friendly forces to deny vital ground to opposition forces that could be used to fire down into the city. Although according to enemy chatter we had driven through an old mine field on the northern boundary, the patrols were conducted without incident. After a Squadron laying-up-point (LUP) was established to the south of the built-up area, the ANA were sent into the city to conduct a patrol to the district centre buildings to determine their condition. Their presence was not opposed and they returned to the LUP for the night.



CANSOFCOM

LUP for resupply and rest.

Remaining outside of the built-up area paid off as the local fighters attempted to conduct a raid early the next morning on the LUP with small arms and RPGs from the north-west. Fortunately, the terrain that we chose did not provide them with good fields of fire and the attack was thwarted with only one casualty taken within the Squadron.

Considering Risk to Mission, I not only weighed my decisions with regard to the risk to the Squadron's Operation Mountain Thrust task, but also risk to potentially vulnerable and newly established Canadian Special Operations Forces Command (CANSOFCOM). This dynamic could be considered either institutional or political risk. One can only imagine the potential repercussions if there were mass collateral civilian casualties due to the force's actions, rightly or wrongly, during operations. In one instance the Squadron took heavy machine gun fire from a position on the edge of a village, with fighters observed moving back into the village during the engagement. While under the rules of engagement (ROEs) the area could have been neutralized by close air support, I made the decision to only engage the isolated enemy positions outside the village and I sent a portion of our force in a flanking move to clear through the village and into the enemy positions.

CANSOFCOM



Neutralizing the enemy.

Once this contact was neutralized and the force consolidated, we found that there were almost 300 civilians huddled in the village. The use of heavy ordnance restricted to only outside the village, as well as the conduct of our operators when clearing through the homes must have made an impression on the village elders whom provided the force with key information for the Squadron's next bound.



Afghan village.

Scholar C.W. Johnston, in his book *Military Risk Assessment: From Conventional Warfare to Counter Insurgency Operations*, explains that bias caused by a variety of physiological stressors can have a potentially important ability to affect decision-making under extreme conditions.⁴ General George S. Patton also speaks to a number of these factors in *War As I Knew It*, describing throughout the European campaign his focus on front line Corps and Regimental commanders.⁵ He knew how hard he was pushing them during the offensive through France with limited resources, and understood the affect this was having on their decision-making. He believed that lack of sleep, stress of command and the weather would begin to make his subordinate commanders risk adverse. As such, he consistently travelled along the front to aptly encourage forward movement.

While the CANSOF-led force was by no means under such harsh conditions, it was evident that as the weeks wore on the weather, lack of sleep and nutrition, not to mention the constant enemy contact, were slowly taking their toll. While the fitness level of the CANSOF operators was advantageous, the key to mitigating the effects of these factors was the quality of leadership down to the detachment

level in the Squadron. When time permitted, a quick feedback loop on options and considerations, allowed for reflection and better decisions under these stressors.

CANSOFCOM



Patrolling with ANA partner force.

At times a commander must quickly weigh the overall risks and make decisions that may turn out to be the best of the worst that is on offer. The time-critical risk management process as described in *Marine Corps Risk Management – USMC 3500.27C* does not allow for in-depth critical analysis, as a commander must weigh the readily available facts to assess the situation, balance their resources, communicate the plan to subordinates and commit the force to action in a very limited time frame.⁶ On 2 June 2006, with the cancellation of the insertion of the 2/87 Infantry Regiment due to information leaked to the Taliban leadership about the date and location of the operation, as well as local sentiment beginning to turn very negative based on rumours of civilian casualties caused by CJTF-76 kinetic strikes in the valley targeting key leaders, the Squadron leadership became aware of the danger these events presented to the force, as it was the sole Coalition presence in the northern reaches of the Baghran Valley.

Quite simply, opposition forces that were to be used against the 2/87 Infantry Regiment insertion to our north could now be focused directly on the Squadron. Additionally, there were very few options to break through to the south of the valley where there were safer areas of manoeuvre for the Squadron. Understanding the speed at which the local forces could assemble and set-up, I made a quick decision to turn south and take a direct route down the main prominent wadi that doubled as the main local route that would allow travel up through the main mountain pass into the south reaches of the valley.



CANSOFCOM

Vulnerable Ground.

This area and its routes through the east-west mountain range were death traps for the Soviets as evidenced by the display of legacy armoured vehicles littering the sides of many wadis in the valley. However, I assessed there was greater risk in delaying by making a deliberate plan that would include dedicated air cover in our attempt to break through to the south. Rather, I believed we would face less risk by using our speed to hit whatever could be emplaced in front of us in the limited time the local forces now had as the force moved. While the Squadron did get hit at the exact position on the map where it was anticipated, local forces could only bring approximately a hundred fighters and they did not have time to either emplace IEDs or to set up good fields of fire, especially for their RPGs which they fired from

too close a range to arm most of the projectiles. After breaking the ambush, the Squadron was able to push its way during the night across the passes to set up a defensive position in the southern valley by first light.



The Ambush.

With the insertion of a large conventional force to hold ground in the Baghran Valley not being realized, the effects of the Squadron's movement through the area was short-lived. There were the expected questions in regard to the utility of placing a SOF sub-unit in harm's way when the operation's end-state was not achieved, but those were of course asked in hindsight. Combat operations are always fraught with risk. It is the nature of the business, but with prudent planning and timely decisions by leaders, some amount of risk can be diminished. Within this particular operation it could be stated that CANSOF learned a great deal about conducting extended mobility operations. This knowledge allowed the Command to formulate and/or modify tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) regarding movement, enemy engagement, use of various technical systems, use of bulk aerial resupply and engagements with local Afghan leaders. It was also a validation of the requirement for support and specialist personnel within a SOF organization to be trained to a higher level than their conventional counterparts,



Leaving the Valley.

In conclusion, when looking at the outcome and lessons learned from this particular operation, one can see that working through a set of processes for operational risk management during the deliberate planning phase of an operation to identify hazard, assess the hazard's risk, and develop mitigation strategies (controls), allows for the development of solid contingency plans. It also allows for the identification of areas critical for conducting rehearsals and liaison.⁷ This knowledge in turn allowed leadership at all levels the space to make the quick decisions required once deployed on the operation. On the spot, leaders have to implement a time-critical risk management process that does not allow for in-depth critical analysis.⁸ Rather leaders must weigh the readily available facts to assess the situation, balance resources, communicate the plan and commit to the action.

The mission further demonstrated that the aforementioned processes can also be affected by physiological stressors that can bias a leader's ability to make the most efficient decisions.⁹ With adequate education and training on the various risk management processes, and keeping to proven cognitive and physical standards, tactical SOF leaders will be equipped to identify risk, weigh the options and make sound and timely decisions under the most arduous conditions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a detailed account of the mission see Colonel Bernd Horn, *No Ordinary Men. SOF Missions in Afghanistan* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2016), 131-176.
- 2 C.W. Johnston, *Military Risk Assessment: From Conventional Warfare to Counter Insurgency Operations* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press, 2012), 104-112.
- 3 Department of Defense (DoD), *Risk Management ATP 5-19* (Washington D.C.: Army Techniques Publication, Headquarters Department of the Army, 2014), Chapter 1.
- 4 Johnston, 104-112.
- 5 George S. Patton, *War as I Knew It* (New York: Bantam, 1947), 100-101.
- 6 Department of the Navy, *Marine Corps Risk Management, USMC 3500.27C* (Washington D.C.: 2014).
- 7 DoD, *Risk Management*, Chapter 1.
- 8 Department of the Navy, *Marine Corps Risk Management*.
- 9 Johnston, 104-112.

CHAPTER 10

UNFATHOMABLE RISK: THE HUNT FOR BIN LADEN

Colonel (Retired) Bernd Horn

The five helicopters cut through the thick, hot, moonless night flying nap-of-the-earth around and between contours to avoid Pakistani radar. The four MH-47 Chinook medium lift and two UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters flew in formation until they hit an invisible marker in the sky, when the Black Hawk and two Chinook helicopters broke away. The two Black Hawk helicopters, which were heavily modified, particularly the design of their tail rotors, as well as a special rotor hub cowling designed to muffle the tail rotor and engine noises to cut down on their acoustic signature, thundered off to rapidly close the distance to their target.¹ Two Chinook helicopters waited at the border, while the other two landed in a remote, barren field outside Abbottabad.

As the lead Black Hawk helicopter approached its objective, the pilot provided a quick warning over the intercom, “four minutes out!” In the back, members from the US Navy’s Special Warfare Development Group (DevGru), also commonly referred to as SEAL Team 6, made their final equipment checks.² They could not chance any failure – this could be one of their defining missions.

The lead aircraft banked sharply and began its final approach. It flared as it closed in on the objective. As it cleared the high compound walls it immediately ran into problems. The pilot had no choice but to exercise a controlled crash landing. The helicopter hit hard as the nose dug into the hard earth, its tail crashing into the high wall and shearing off. The main body of the Black Hawk shuddered violently as its life ebbed from its frame. The SEALs immediately spilled out of the damaged Black Hawk helicopter and adapted their plan to the new reality they faced on the ground.

Meanwhile the second assaulting helicopter abandoned its intended approach and landed its lethal cargo of SEALs outside the compound. They too rapidly adapted their plan and began to breach the target compound.

Now it would only be minutes before all their preparation would be realized; it would be mere moments until they determined if they had finally found their long sought-after target: Osama bin Laden.

BACKGROUND

The Americans had a long history with regards to Bin Laden. Since the early 1990s they had been aware of him, although they were initially slow to fully appreciate the threat he posed. At first it was clear he was a person of interest but there was neither sufficient evidence, nor political resolve, to prompt a presidential order to detain or kill him.³

This absence of urgency is not surprising as Bin Laden's clash with the Americans took some time to surface. Osama bin Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in 1957. He was the son of Mohammed bin Awad bin Laden, a wealthy building contractor who had close ties to the Saudi Royal Family. Purportedly, the Bin Laden family made as much as \$5 billion dollars in the construction industry. In 1967, when Osama's father died, he inherited an estimated \$25-30 million.⁴

In 1979, Bin Laden joined the jihad against the Soviet invaders in Afghanistan. He used his wealth to support the mujahideen. Although he saw limited fighting, he was instrumental in raising money, recruiting fighters and providing a pipeline to bring them to Afghanistan to fight. By 1988, he had formed Al-Qaeda (AQ). He returned to Saudi Arabia in 1990 as a hero for his role as an Islamic warrior in the jihad against the Soviets.⁵

In the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on 2 August 1990, Bin Laden offered the services of his Arab Legion to defend the border of the Saudi Kingdom. King Fahd declined Bin Laden's offer and instead requested the assistance of the Americans. The idea of non-Muslims protecting the holy land was unacceptable to Bin Laden. Shortly thereafter he began to publicly denounce the Saudi Kingdom. Moreover, he and his Al-Qaeda network began to plot attacks against the West.

Osama Bin Laden and AQ's jihad against the US was based on the belief that American foreign policy was responsible for the oppression, death and subordination of Muslims in the Middle East. Bin Laden was also convinced that the restoration of Sharia law was the only means to correct the faults existing in the Muslim world. In his fight to right the wrongs in the world, Bin Laden came to the conclusion that innocent civilians, including women and children were legitimate targets of jihad.

By 1992, the Saudi Government had had enough and exiled Bin Laden for his continuing criticism of the Kingdom. As a result, Bin Laden fled to Sudan to live in exile. Once in Khartoum, he quickly established a terrorist training camp.⁶ However, he was still not considered a real threat. Billy Waugh, a former Special Forces (SF) soldier who became a CIA contractor, while working in the al-Riyadh section of Khartoum, Sudan, in February 1992, was given the mission of keeping Bin Laden under surveillance. At the time, according to Waugh, "Bin Laden was not considered an especially high assignment."⁷ Waugh remembered, "The CIA noted his arrival in Sudan, and we targeted this soft-spoken Arab as a potential threat to our interests." Waugh noted, however, "his [Bin Laden] war declaration was not treated with a great deal of seriousness."⁸ In fact, on Waugh's arrival, he was directed by his CIA chief of station, "Keep an eye on him [Bin Laden]. We don't know what he's up to, but we know he's a wealthy financier and we think he is harbouring some of these outfits called al Qaeda." As such, his CIA handlers told Waugh to "See what you can find out."⁹

In the interim, Bin Laden's continuing criticism of the Saudi royal family and promotion of violent jihad resulted in the loss of his Saudi citizenship. In addition, his wealthy family was also finally forced to disown him. In 1995, under pressure from the international community, particularly Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United States, Sudan began efforts to expel Bin Laden.¹⁰ By this time he was increasingly being linked to terrorist attacks around the world, particularly in the financing of the actions. For instance, Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were connected to the attack on the Gold Mihor Hotel in Aden on 29 December 1992, several bombings of US installations in Saudi Arabia and they were eventually connected to Ramsi Yousef and his 26 February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in which six people died and 1,042 were injured.

In fact, it was this attack that finally caused the Americans to focus on Bin Laden. In addition, Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were also implicated in the financing of the “Luxor massacre” on 17 November 1995 in Egypt. Meanwhile, equally worrisome, CIA operatives discovered that Bin Laden had hired a physicist to work on chemical and nuclear projects in Sudan.¹¹

As the pressure mounted, Bin Laden feared that Sudan would no longer protect him, so he left the country in May 1996 and fled to Jalalabad, Afghanistan. He quickly felt that he had found his home as he believed Afghanistan, under the rule of Mullah Omar and the Taliban, was the only truly Islamic country in the Muslim world. In August, he declared war on the United States by publishing his first fatwā.¹²

In Afghanistan, Bin Laden raised money, opened a number of terrorist training camps and continued his jihad against the West, particularly the United States.¹³ In February 1997, he issued his second fatwā against the Americans.¹⁴ The CIA later acknowledged, “what Bin Laden created in Afghanistan after he relocated there in 1996 was a sophisticated adversary - as good as any the CIA ever operated against.”¹⁵ However, they did not push for covert action against Bin Laden, other than intelligence collection until the end of 1997.¹⁶

The full threat that Bin Laden and AQ represented finally hit home on 7 August 1998, when a series of attacks utilizing truck bombs hit the US embassies at Dar es Salaam in Tanzania and Nairobi, Kenya, killing hundreds of people. The attacks finally brought Bin Laden to the full attention of the Americans. Within days of the embassy bombings, President Bill Clinton signed a top secret “Memorandum of Notification” that authorized the CIA or its agents to use lethal force if necessary in an attempt to capture Osama Bin Laden.¹⁷

On 20 August 1998, the US Navy launched 75 Tomahawk cruise missiles at a suspected Al-Qaeda training camp at Zawhar Kili, Afghanistan after tracking the satellite phone of one of Bin Laden’s associates. Unfortunately, Bin Laden did not appear. However, after that strike, Bin Laden no longer used phones.¹⁸ The United States also sought international assistance in closing down Bin Laden and AQ, as well as other terrorist factions. Eight days later, on 28 August 1998, the Americans were able to convince the Security Council to pass United Nations (UN) Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1193 that demanded that “Afghan factions ... refrain from harboring and training terrorists and their organizations.” More specific

UNSCR 214, passed on 8 December 1998, affirmed that the Security Council was “deeply disturbed by the continuing use of Afghan territory, especially areas controlled by the Taliban, for the sheltering and training of terrorists and the planning of terrorist acts” and reiterated that “the suppression of international terrorism is essential for the maintenance of international peace and security.”¹⁹

The Americans continued their UN offensive. On 15 October 1999, the US secured the adoption of UNSCR 1267, which expressed concerns about the “continuing violations of international humanitarian law and of human rights [in Afghanistan], particularly discrimination against women and girls,” as well as “the significant rise in the illicit production of opium.” Importantly, the Resolution specifically criticized the Taliban for offering “safe haven to Osama Bin Laden and to allow him and others associated with him to operate a network of terrorist training camps ... and to use Afghanistan as a base from which to sponsor international terrorist operations.” Subsequently, the Security Council demanded “that the Taliban turn over Osama Bin Laden without further delay” so that he could be “effectively brought to justice.” The council also instituted the same economic and financial sanctions on the Taliban regime that had already been recently imposed by the United States.

The Taliban failed to comply and on 12 October 2000, the AQ attacked the USS *Cole* in the harbour at Aden, killing 17 US sailors and wounding 39. To exacerbate the looming showdown, Bin Laden took full credit for the operation, prompting the Security Council to pass UNSCR 1333 on 19 December 2000. This resolution reaffirmed the charges made just a year earlier and added the stipulation that the Taliban were to ensure the closing “of all camps where terrorists are trained.” In addition, economic sanctions were strengthened, Taliban offices were to be closed in the territory of member states, landing rights for Afghan national airways was revoked and all assets linked to Osama Bin Laden and AQ were frozen. Once again, the Taliban regime did nothing. As a result, yet another UNSCR was passed on 30 July 2001, which described “the situation in Afghanistan as a threat to international peace and security in the region.”²⁰

Events quickly took a cataclysmic change. In the early hours of the morning on 11 September 2001 (9/11), any hesitation in capturing or killing Bin Laden came to an end. The brazen AQ planned attack, conducted by AQ operatives, who, armed solely with cheap 99 cent box cutters, hijacked fully fuelled commercial airliners and used them as precision munitions to strike not only the two

separate towers of the World Trade Center in New York, but also the Pentagon in Washington D.C. changed everything. A fourth hijacked jetliner heading for Washington D.C. slammed into the ground in Pennsylvania short of its objective due to the bravery of its passengers. In total, almost 3,000 people were killed in the first attack on the American homeland since the attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941.²¹

Not surprisingly, Washington responded quickly to the 9/11 attacks in order to protect the American homeland and US facilities and installations abroad. The Americans suspected Osama bin Laden and his AQ terrorist network immediately. After all, a Presidential Daily Brief a month prior to 9/11 revealed that “Bin Laden [was] Determined to Strike in U.S.”²² The Bush Administration now realized that they would need to finally strike their antagonists in his safe haven in Afghanistan. As such, on 14 September, the American Congress authorized President George W. Bush to “use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons [who] planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attack on September or harbored such organizations or persons.”²³

The Americans also called on their NATO allies for help. As a result, NATO’s North Atlantic Council met on 12 September to discuss the US request to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty that defines “an armed attack against one or more of the Allies in Europe or North America” as “an attack against them all” and thereby, requiring each ally to “assist the Party that has been attacked by taking such action as it deems necessary.”²⁴ This would be the first time that the Article 5 clause was invoked.

By 2 October the Americans provided their allies with “clear and compelling evidence” that AQ had in fact been behind the 9/11 attacks. Therefore, two days later NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson announced that the Alliance would indeed take collective actions to assist the United States.²⁵

In addition, NATO, in accordance with Treaty requirements, also notified the UN that it intended to invoke Article 5 under the framework of the United Nations Charter provision affirming the inherent right of member states to individual and collective defence. The UN Security Council had come to a similar conclusion having also met to address the 9/11 attacks on 12 September. They subsequently urged all states to work together “to bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers,

and sponsors of the attacks.”²⁶ Then, on 7 October 2001, the United States and the United Kingdom informed the Security Council that they were taking military action in self-defence, specifically that they were undertaking operations to strike at AQ and Taliban terrorist camps, training and military installations in Afghanistan. On that day, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) commenced with the heavy bombing of Taliban bases and infrastructure throughout the country, as well as the 50,000 Taliban troops outside of Kabul manning the frontlines against the Northern Alliance (NA), which was a loose coalition of Afghan forces that were opposed to the Taliban.

Approximately four weeks of bombing finally created the necessary effect. On 9 November 2001, the NA, who were now supported by US Special Forces (SF) and CIA operatives, as well as American air support, broke through the Taliban lines at Mazar-e-Sharif. The Taliban collapsed and were totally routed. Within the next three days all of northern, western and eastern Afghanistan fell to the NA. The remaining Taliban forces fled south to Kandahar, the birth place and headquarters of the movement. Throughout, they were harassed and pounded by US air power.²⁷ On 5 December, Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader, surrendered Kandahar and fled to Pakistan.

Nonetheless, some hold-outs remained. Bin Laden and his senior AQ leadership and a large number of his forces dug-in at Tora Bora in the mountains in eastern Afghanistan. However, a concerted US offensive forced them to abandon their positions and escape into eastern Pakistan. By early 2002, the Taliban and AQ in Afghanistan were largely defeated. Military estimates put the Taliban losses at 8,000-12,000 men, 20 percent of their total force. In addition, the number of wounded were estimated to be twice as many with a further 7,000 taken prisoner.²⁸ In the end, the Taliban lost over 70 percent of their strength. Importantly, however, their entire leadership structure remained intact and was safely ensconced in Pakistan.

Although intelligence analysts were convinced that he was trapped in the mountain complex at Tora Bora during Operation Anaconda, in the end Bin Laden escaped. The failure to ensure the cordon was properly closed created the opportunity for the terrorist leader to escape into Pakistan. The Americans had depended on their NA allies and the Pakistani military to shut off the escape routes. However, both were found wanting. Hundreds of AQ fighters, including Bin Laden were either allowed to escape, or paid money for free passage to Pakistan.²⁹

Having lost their quarry at Tora Bora, the Americans pursued Bin Laden, often chasing ghosts, in the hinterlands of Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) in Pakistan. Despite the \$25 million bounty the FBI placed on Bin Laden's head, nothing was forthcoming. The trail had dried up.³⁰

Not to be defeated, the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) and the Director of the CIA created a special cell devoted to capturing or killing Bin Laden. President George W. Bush set the last year of his administration as the deadline for completing the mission. Bush famously said, "I want him."³¹ Years later, finally, from the bowels of secret CIA prisons in Eastern Europe and the depths of Guantanamo Bay came leads that would provide pay dirt.

THE INTELLIGENCE NEXUS

The trail that led to Bin Laden started several years earlier when the Americans seized Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the self-confessed mastermind of the 9/11 attacks, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan.³² Leon Panetta, the Director of the CIA revealed, "We theorized that bin Laden operated within a very tight circle of trust, communicating to his forces through people he personally knew and had confident in. That helped shape our efforts."³³ So when Khalid was taken to CIA prisons in Poland and Romania and water-boarded, his subsequent confessions revealed the name of Bin Laden's most trusted courier, namely Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti (also known as Sheikh Abu Ahmed and Arshad Khan).

CIA Analysts discovered that the former trusted Bin Laden aide and courier, who used the pseudonym Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti was actually a Pakistan national named Ibrahim Saeed Ahmed. Wiretaps eventually captured a call between Ahmed and an old Al-Qaeda acquaintance. The conversation led to a break in the hunt. Ahmed revealed, "I'm back with the people I was before."³⁴ The trail now became hot once again.³⁵

Panetta described the CIA's next steps:

What followed was a methodically constructed attempt to figure out where Ibrahim lived and worked, a plan designed with utmost care to minimize the possibility of tipping off the courier that we were on to him. We knew that Ibrahim periodically arrived in a certain city, but we didn't know where he was coming from. We considered following him, but he

was careful and alert to any hint of surveillance. Finally, we tracked him all the way to a dead-end street on the outskirts of Abbottabad. That seemed to be the end of the line, so we dispatched an agent to see what lay at the end of that road.³⁶

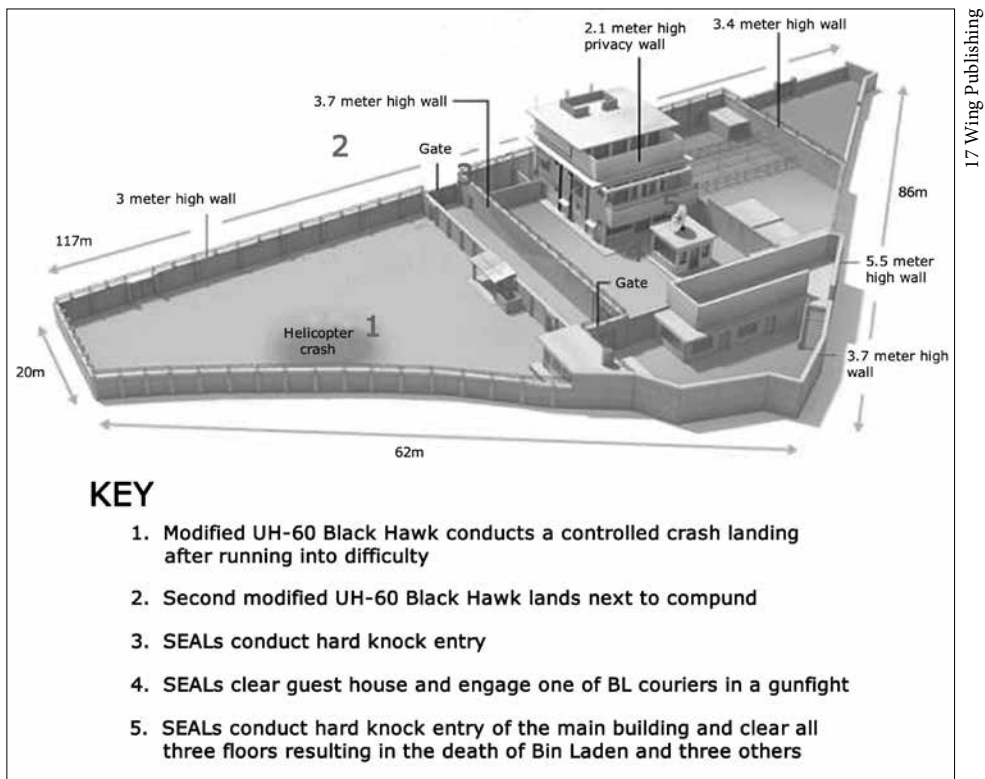
The full suite of tools available from National Security Agency (NSA) communication intercepts, to satellite imagery, to US Air Force stealth drones and CIA surveillance teams equipped with sophisticated video equipment and powerful telescopes now focused on the compound in Abbottabad. What raised interest was the fact that the compound had no phones or internet, garbage was burned in the courtyard rather than being collected on the street, and couriers drove at least 90 minutes from the compound before they turned on their cell phones.³⁷



The Americans had remained patient. They had discovered the courier's identity in 2007 and his residence in Abbottabad in August 2010. This latest discovery now triggered the start of the mission.³⁸ American officials, as well as most analysts, were convinced that Bin Laden was hiding in the FATA on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, rather than finding the terrorist leader in a cave, they found him approximately 160 kilometres away in a three-story mansion in Abbottabad, specifically in a residential district called Bilal Town, a wealthy suburb and home to many retired senior Pakistani military officers.³⁹

The residence was built in 2005 by outsiders who had come from the north. The compound was largely self-sufficient and neighbours only ever saw two people, Ahmed and his brother. The compound itself contained a large three-story villa and a smaller out-building. The outer compound walls varied from 12-18 feet high and were topped with wire. There were only two gates that permitted entry into the complex.⁴⁰ No one was ever permitted inside. The local rumour was that the compound belonged to smugglers.

Not surprisingly, the CIA's initial examination of the compound created suspicion. Things just did not add up. The compound, which was eight time larger than its surrounding neighbours, was valued at \$1-million. Yet the owners, Bin Laden's courier and his brother, had no explainable source of income or wealth. Moreover, as mentioned, the occupants burned their garbage and they had no telephone or internet.



Bin Laden's Compound.

The CIA quickly followed up the lead by establishing a safe house in Abbottabad in a building adjacent to Bin Laden's compound. Thermal imagery and listening devices were used in an attempt to confirm whether or not the compound belonged to the terrorist chieftain. The CIA knew that the occupant of the compound was a high value target but they were not sure if it was the most wanted man in the US.

In December 2010 Panetta briefed President Barrack Obama on the collection effort in Abbottabad. Obama was far from convinced. "For all we know," he grouched, "this could be some sheikh hiding from one of his wives."⁴¹ The fact of the matter was that, according to Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State, "Some of the intelligence analysts were highly confident they finally had their man. Others were far less confident, especially those who had lived through the failed intelligence process that concluded that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction."⁴² Tony Blinken, Vice President Joe Biden's top national security advisor, acknowledged, "There was always the tension between wanting to be more certain about bin Laden's presence and the danger that pushing the envelope on trying to establish his presence beyond a reasonable doubt would compromise what we were doing."⁴³

By mid-February 2011, the CIA believed they had found Bin Laden, who was living in the compound along with several family members, including his son Khaled and his most favoured wife. "The intelligence services deserve a lot of credit. They built a mosaic of information, piece by piece," lauded former President George W. Bush.⁴⁴

Despite the strong hunch. The CIA could not confirm Bin Laden's presence. "It was far from certain, and it took many months to run this thread to ground," conceded President Obama.⁴⁵ There were mixed recommendations among his senior advisors and staff. Hillary Clinton confided, "It's a very close call, but I would say: Do the raid." Obama's CIA director agreed. Panetta asserted, "if you told the average American – we have the best intelligence we've had since Tora Bora, we have the chance to get the number one terrorist in the world who attacked us on 9/11 – I think they would say 'we gotta go.'"⁴⁶

On 14 March, the president held the first of a series of national security meetings that would be held over the next six weeks with his innermost cabinet to formulate the necessary plans to conduct an operation. Obama was considering two

options. Option 1: two stealth B-2 bombers would drop sixteen precision-guided, two-thousand-pound bombs on the site – overkill to ensure whoever was there would be killed. Option 2: SEALs would conduct a helicopter-borne assault. Obama was leaning toward the bombing but had not decided.⁴⁷ Clinton observed that the briefings to decide on a bombing mission or to use Special Operations Forces (SOF) were exhausting.⁴⁸ “Everybody left those meetings,” she confided, “totally drained because of the consequences and the stakes that we were dealing with.”⁴⁹

President Obama anguished over the decision to send a team in. There were huge risks involved with sending in a team without knowing what was actually there. Obama’s biggest concern was “if I send them in can I get them out?”⁵⁰ Clinton assessed, “There was no doubt that this option [heliborne raid] posed by far the greatest risk, especially if our men ended up in conflict with Pakistani security forces, hundreds of miles from a safe haven.”⁵¹

Despite the risk, James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, pushed for the raid option instead of sending a drone or aircraft to strike the target. He argued that it was better “Skilled human beings making decisions, not dumb bombs.”⁵² In addition, bombs could cause extensive collateral damage and there would be no way to confirm they got their man.

Although not fully convinced yet, Obama directed Admiral Bill McRaven, the commander of the Joint Special Operations Command to develop an action plan. On 10 April 2011, McRaven designated members from SEAL Team Six, officially designated The Naval Special Warfare Development Group based in Dam Neck, Virginia to undertake the mission if it was approved.⁵³

The approval was not long in coming. The director of the CIA revealed:

On April 19, the president reviewed the rehearsals. He was as impressed as the rest of us, but worried about what might happen if the teams were caught on the ground and had to fight their way out of the country. Based on those concerns, which Bob Gates [the Secretary of Defense] echoed, the president suggested adding two backup helicopters to the mission. They were to cross the border with the strike teams and then land nearby, to be called upon only if something went wrong.⁵⁴

Based on the successful rehearsals and the fact that the President had concluded by this time that the intelligence case was never going to be certain, as well as the

reality that the circle of individuals knowing about Abbottabad had expanded, he was concerned that there was a tangible risk that a further delay could compromise the mission. This risk would be particularly exacerbated if they waited for the next favorable lunar cycle to mount the raid. If word got out and Bin Laden disappeared, he feared that there might not be another opportunity to locate Bin Laden.⁵⁵ As a result, on 19 April 2011, Obama gave the provisional go-ahead for the SEAL raid.

Notwithstanding the provisional approval there remained considerable debate. Michael Leiter, the head of the National Counterterrorism Centre, believed the Bin Laden case was far from a “slam dunk.”⁵⁶ Nonetheless, at a meeting on 28 April, he counselled the President stating, “Even if you’re at the forty percent low end of this range, Mister President, that’s still about thirty-eight percent better than we’ve been for ten years.”⁵⁷ The 40 percent confirmation was disconcerting to some in the room. Ben Rhodes, presidential speech writer, recalled, “there was a deflation in the room, because what you’re looking for as you’re getting closer to the call is greater certainty, not less. So essentially it played into all the fears that people had about what could go wrong. Is it worth the risk?”⁵⁸

However, with regard to the exact percentages, James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, revealed:

In the end it was subjective. It didn’t matter whether the percentage of confidence was 40 percent or 80 percent. It seemed like the closer you were to working the problem, the in-the-trenches analysts who were really doing the legwork here, doing the grunt work, were very confident. And as you got concentric circles away from them, the confidence sort of went down.⁵⁹

The dithering was counter-productive. The Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton shared, “I came to the conclusion that the intelligence was convincing and the risks were outweighed by the benefits of success.”⁶⁰ As a result, Clinton revealed:

I concluded, the chance to get in Laden was worth it. As I had experienced firsthand, our relationship with Pakistan was strictly transactional, based on mutual interest, not trust. It would survive. I thought we should go for it.⁶¹

Panetta agreed. “We have enough information,” he asserted, “such that the American people would want us to act.”⁶²

Events began to spool up. At 0820 hours, on 29 April, President Obama convened his National Security team in the Diplomatic Room at the White House and issued the formal order to execute the raid. Although Bin Laden was never sighted with 100 percent fidelity, Obama took the executive decision to launch the raid, fearing if they hesitated, the best opportunity they had had in almost a decade would be lost. Panetta conceded, “we were never certain; we were never able to verify it was him [Bin Laden].”⁶³ He added, however, “this [was] the best chance we [had].”⁶⁴ Insiders felt the odds were no better than 50/50 that they had located America’s most wanted criminal, but the President felt they had to try.

Obama affirmed, “Even though I thought it was only fifty-fifty that Bin Laden was there, I thought it was worth us taking a shot....And the reason that I concluded it was worth it was that we have devoted enormous blood and treasure in fighting back against al-Qaeda, ever since 2001.”⁶⁵

The Pakistanis, however, were not brought into the operation. Panetta, responsible for the operation, stated pointedly, “It was decided that any effort to work with the Pakistanis could jeopardize the mission.”⁶⁶ He explained, “They might alert the target.”⁶⁷ He was not alone in his concern. Michèle Flournoy, undersecretary for policy at the Pentagon confirmed, “At the end of the day, this was such a critical objective, and there’s such a vital interest at stake, and the risk of Pakistanis either losing control of the information or choosing to oppose it because of sovereignty concerns – it was too great.”⁶⁸

The consensus was overwhelming. FBI special agent Brad Garrett, who had tracked down a number of terrorists, counseled the CIA that you cannot trust the Pakistanis. He elaborated, “Every time we had a conversation with the Pakistanis the information just immediately leaked.”⁶⁹ Even a former Pakistani chief of intelligence, Hamid Gul, who was fiercely critical of America’s presence in the region, conceded that for Bin Laden to be in Abbottabad unknown to authorities “is a bit amazing.” He noted, aside from the military “there is the local police, the Intelligence Bureau, Military Intelligence, the ISI [Inter Service Intelligence], they all had a presence there.”⁷⁰

In the end, the Director of the CIA explained, “Our friendship [with Panetta’s Pakistani counterpart] would never recover, and relations between our countries were undeniably strained, but it was a price we had to pay for an action we had

to take.”⁷¹ He emphasized, “there was simply too much risk at stake to trust an untrustworthy partner.”⁷²

THE PLAN

Once the President decided to conduct a direct action mission, code-named Neptune Strike, the subsequent plan was actually relatively simple – a quick in and out. Five aircraft, three Chinook MC-47 helicopters and two modified Black Hawk UH-60s would depart from Jalalabad, Afghanistan and fly nap-of-the-earth through the hilly terrain to exploit gaps in the Pakistani radar system. The three Chinooks with a small reserve force of approximately two dozen SEALs from DevGru were to land in a deserted area approximately two thirds of the way to the objective. The two Black Hawk helicopter carrying 23 SEALs, an interpreter and a tracking dog named Cairo, would fly to the objective.

The aircraft were to drop the SEALs in less than two minutes and then depart. The hope was that locals would assume the helicopters arriving in the dead of night were actually Pakistani aircraft visiting the Pakistan Military Academy that was nearby.

Specifically, the plan called for one Black Hawk to hover over the compound to allow the SEALs to fast rope into the open courtyard. Meanwhile, the second Black Hawk would hover over the main building to allow SEALs to fast rope onto the roof, thus allowing the SEAL teams to clear the building from both the top and bottom. After dropping the SEALs on the roof, the second Black Hawk would then land in the courtyard to unload some SEALs, the tracking dog and an interpreter so they could quickly track anyone who tried to escape the compound. In the event Pakistani troops arrived on scene, the plan was to hunker down in the compound and avoid armed confrontation so that officials in Washington D.C., could negotiate their passage out.⁷³

As part of the preparations the US National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency assisted JSOC by creating mission simulators for the pilots. They also analyzed data that was gathered using drones. Moreover, they created three-dimensional models of the house, created schedules detailing the pattern of life and assessed the residents of the compound by providing numbers and gender of the occupants.

The SEALs rehearsed the plan numerous times in life size mock-ups. SEAL Team 6 had been mobilized in late-March for an undisclosed mission and initially trained on mock-ups of Bin Laden's compound on both coasts in continental USA. In April they moved to a one-acre replica of the compound that was built inside Camp Alpha, a restricted section of the Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan.

The clearance drills were exactly that – drills – executed in the Close Quarter Battle (CQB) ranges on bases and in the real two-way ranges in Afghanistan on numerous occasions. Few had concerns about the actual building clearance. However, there were multiple unknowns, including whether Bin Laden was actually at the site and how would the Pakistanis react. All knew this was a “one-shot” deal. If they failed, it would be impossible to try again as the violation of Pakistan sovereignty would be difficult to achieve again.

EXECUTION

At 1322 hours, on 1 May 2011, the Director of the CIA ordered McRaven to conduct the raid. As a result, the helicopters lifted off precisely at 1400 hours, 2230 hours in Afghanistan, flying low and fast to the east. The total distance of the flight was 274 kilometres. Only approximately the first twenty minutes were in Afghanistan airspace, after which the two Black Hawk helicopters carrying the assault party crossed into Pakistan, followed by two back-up MH-47 Chinook helicopters that would land and wait in fields outside Abbottabad. They would only proceed to the compound in an emergency. The other two additional helicopters stood by at the border, “prepared to enter Pakistan if our teams needed to battle their way out.”⁷⁴

The assault party was not alone. General David Petraeus, the Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Commander US Forces in Afghanistan, watched the raid in isolation in the operations centre at NATO headquarters in Afghanistan. He was prepared to order American aircraft in Afghanistan to respond to Pakistani jets if they tried to intercept the helicopters.⁷⁵



The raid on Bin Laden.

Only a very small group within the US Government knew of the operation.⁷⁶ As always, Clausewitzian friction took hold almost immediately. As the first Black Hawk of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment helicopters attempted to hover over the compound at approximately 0030 hours, 2 May, to disgorge its load, it began to flail around uncontrollably. The high 3.6 metre compound walls and the warmer than expected temperatures created an air vortex. In the heat-thinned air the pilot fought a losing battle to control his aircraft. Then his tail and rotor hit the wall and he quickly buried the nose of the Black Hawk into the dirt to prevent it from pitching to one side.

One of the participating SEALs recalled:

When the helicopter rotated ninety degrees, the tail rotor barely missed the wall on the south side of the compound. I could feel fear grip my chest as the ground rushed toward me. I had no control, and I think that scared me most of all. I always figured I would probably die in a gunfight, not in a helicopter crash. We were all used to stacking the odds in our favor. We knew the dangers. We did the battlefield calculus and we trusted our skills. But clinging to a helicopter, there was nothing we could do.⁷⁷

The SEALs then quickly clambered out of the destroyed aircraft into an outer courtyard and began to break the walls to gain access to the inner compound and main residential building. The second helicopter reacted immediately and did not even attempt to hover to allow the SEALs within to fast rope down onto the objective. Rather, it landed outside of the objective compound and unloaded its lethal cargo.

Within the compound with the element of surprise apparently lost, the SEALs quickly began to break the mud concrete-like walls with explosives blowing holes in the wall and disintegrating doors, to reach their target. Panetta acknowledged the SEALs, “had to breach about three to four walls in order to get in” to the compound.⁷⁸ The Director of the CIA explained:

Undeterred by the rough landing and change in plans, the SEALs adjusted and moved to blast their way inside from the street. Six members of the team went to the guesthouse, six to the main house, and six to the north entrance of the main house. ... One of the first people they encountered at the guesthouse was the courier who had led us there. Ibrahim fired on one of the team members and was killed instantly. At the main house, other women and children were moving about in confusion....The courier’s brother suddenly appeared with something in his hand. He and a woman next to him were shot and killed....As the teams moved up the stairs of the main house, they encountered gates at each level and broke them down to move on up the stairs. Between the second and third floors, a bearded young man whom the assaulters recognized as Khalid Bin Laden, Bin Laden’s son, was shot and killed. As the SEALs moved to the third floor, a tall, bearded man poked his head out of a doorway. A member of our team, recognizing him shot and missed. The man disappeared back into the room, and an AK-47 was visible in the doorjamb. Team members moved toward the door. As they moved inside the room, two young girls and an adult woman rushed the SEALs. Our operator grabbed the girls and shoved them to the side as they screamed in fear. ...Our team members saw the bearded man and shot him twice, once above the left eye and once in the chest.⁷⁹

Another version of the event, given by White House spokesman Jay Carney, described,

Bin Laden stood in the middle of the room, unarmed but shielded by two women. One was screaming in Arabic. She rushed the US assaulter. One SEAL shot her in the calf and then in a moment of selflessness, wrapped his huge arms around both of the women to shield the rest of the room in case anyone detonated suicide vests. A second SEAL then shot bin Laden in the chest and in the head above the left eye.⁸⁰

Although most narratives of the assault resonate with Panetta's description, the version given by SEAL Mark Owens (a pseudonym) in his book *No Easy Day* differs slightly from the mainstream descriptions. He recounts:

We were less than five steps from getting to the top when I heard suppressed shots...The point man had seen a man peeking out of the door on the right side of the hallway about ten feet in front of him. I couldn't tell from my position if the rounds hit the target or not. The man disappeared into the dark room...The point man reached the landing first and slowly moved toward the door...The point man kept his rifle trained into the room as we slowly crept toward the open door... We could see two women standing over a man lying at the foot of a bed.... the point man grabbed both women and drove them toward the corner of the room...With the women out of the way, I entered the room with a third SEAL. We saw the man lying on the floor at the foot of his bed. The point man's shots had entered the right side of his head.⁸¹

Concurrently, outside the compound the SEALs had an interpreter who, speaking in Pashto, counselled civilians gathering outside "Brothers, please go back inside. This is government business. Please go back in your home."⁸² The SEALs believed this ruse would buy them enough time to conduct the raid and depart before local authorities or civilians could intervene.

Throughout, the raid was being watched in real time back in Washington.⁸³ White House counterterrorism adviser John Brennan noted, "The minutes passed like days." He revealed that the raid was "probably one of the most anxiety-filled periods" in the lives of the president and his national security team.⁸⁴ Once Bin Laden had been killed, the SEAL team relayed the code word all were waiting for: "Geronimo – KIA."⁸⁵

The President had received an update of the mission at 1532 hours local time in Washington D.C.. Eighteen minutes later he was informed that Bin Laden was “tentatively identified” as among those killed in the operation. At 1900 hours, it was confirmed, after a series of DNA tests that he was dead.⁸⁶ The hunt was finally over.

The “Direct Action” component of the raid took only approximately 15 minutes from landing to the killing of Bin Laden. The next 23 minutes were spent photographing the bodies, identification, blowing up the downed helicopter and collecting documents, computers, disc drives and any other material that could provide intelligence. In the compound were a total of nine women, five of them Bin Laden’s wives, and 18 children. Among the items found were a number of weapons, notably an AK-47 and a Russian made Makarov pistol that was on a shelf by the door through which Bin Laden had run.⁸⁷

Once the SEALs had gathered all the material, including the body of Bin Laden, a Chinook helicopter was called forward to remove the material and the SEALs from the objective. The helicopter then flew to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and the body of Bin Laden was flown to the aircraft carrier USS *Carl Vinson* where his body was prepared in accordance with Islamic custom for burial. According to White House Press Secretary Jay Carney, “His [Bin Laden] body was washed, wrapped in a white sheet and placed in a weighted bag. A military officer read prepared religious remarks, which were translated into Arabic by a native speaker. The bag was then placed on a flat board that was tipped up, and Bin Laden’s body was eased into the North Arabian Sea.”⁸⁸

AFTERMATH

American officials revealed that the contents of Bin Laden’s residence represented the “largest intelligence find from a terrorist leader in US history. It was a veritable treasure trove of material including documents and videos.”⁸⁹ An entire task force was assigned to mining the windfall. What became evident immediately according to the CIA was the fact that Osama Bin Laden was still “acting as the CEO of terror.” In fact, plans were found to poison drinking water and to bomb rail lines.⁹⁰

Importantly the second and third order of effects were not entirely clear at the time but the consequences of the intelligence bonanza was substantial. Although the US had made it a focus to pursue terrorist financing after the 9/11 terrorist

attacks because they determined up until that point Al-Qaeda had been reaping up to \$30 million a year in donations to finance their operations, they had not totally shut off the valve. As such, the files captured at Bin Laden's residence revealed key donors, particularly Persian Gulf financiers.⁹¹

Another immediate outcome of the direct action raid was the confirmation that Bin Laden was still a player. A peripheral scan of the captured material, according to one US intelligence official, revealed that Bin Laden continued to provide strategic guidance and direction to Al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Therefore, Bin Laden's death provided another set-back for the terrorist network. Although new leadership arose, the raid created immediate confusion and damage that had a significant impact on AQ's ability to mount new complex operations in the near future. Moreover, their ability to replace Bin Laden with an equally enigmatic, charismatic and widely accepted leader that held the same credibility and respect by Muslim people has proven difficult.

SUMMARY

Former President, George W. Bush captured the essence of the US sentiment when he remarked, "America has sent an unmistakable message: no matter how long it takes, justice will be done."⁹² In the end, SOF played a critical role in this outcome. Once again, a small team, empowered by intelligence, conducted a highly risky tactical action and delivered strategic effect.

The Bin Laden raid once again underlined the reality of SOF's powerful impact in the contemporary operating environment. Enabled by precise intelligence and the latest technology, a small team of highly-trained SOF operators, despite the overwhelming risk, can deploy into hostile or politically-sensitive environments and conduct with surgical precision actions that achieve strategic results with minimal collateral damage.

In this case, the strategic results were significant. The 40-minute raid brought closure to a nation. The most wanted terrorist leader in the world, seen by Americans as responsible for the atrocity on 9/11 was brought to justice. Moreover, as former President Bush articulated, they sent a message to the rest of the world. Aside from the important victory to the American psyche, the small team action also dealt a severe blow to AQ and its terrorist network. Regardless of whether Bin Laden

was still an influential leader in the planning and conduct of terrorist operations or not, he was an important spiritual and symbolic leader to Islamic radical fundamentalists. As such, his death at the hands of the Americans dealt a blow to the stature and image of Al-Qaeda.

Finally, the bonanza of information recovered in the sensitive site exploitation advanced Western understanding of AQ's organization, planning and financing. This knowledge was a major victory in its own right.

Once again, SOF punched above its weight and proved itself an economy of effort resource. By deploying a small, highly trained team, enabled by intelligence and technology, it was able to turn a high-risk tactical action into a high-value strategic success. The speed and agility of employment, coupled with the adaptability and skill sets of SOF, made it the force choice for this no-fail mission.

SUMMARY OF RISK AND DECISION-MAKING

EVENT (requiring action)	DECISION- MAKER(S)	RISK ASSESSMENT	PERCEIVED PAY-OFF	DECISION/ COMMENT
Target Bin Laden early 1990s	CIA/NSC	LOW BL not seen as a major player	LOW Waste of resources	Person of interest but failed to be recognized as a real threat
Cruise Missile strike on AQ training Camp	CIA/NSC	LOW Long-range ordnance / remote site	HIGH Kill BL	BL not at training camp. Result was he no longer used phones making it more difficult to track him
Strike Decision a. Bombing b. Heliborne Raid	President/NSC	LOW Aircraft or Drone easier for infiltration/ strike and exfiltration HIGH Greater chance of Pakistani reaction/ Troops engaged in a firefight with Pakistani forces/trapped	LOW Difficult to determine if BL was killed HIGH Able to deter- mine that BL was killed or captured	Either option would do irrep- arable damage to US/Pakistani relationship

Conduct a joint operation with the Pakistanis	President/NSC	HIGH Experience had shown the elements within Pakistan intelligence/security apparatus were duplicitous and would warn the target	LOW Working with the Pakistanis would lower the risk to forces but inevitably compromise security	Complete consensus by senior advisors that a unilateral action was best course
Desired Outcome Capture BL Kill BL Capture BL Kill BL	President/NSC Troops on the Ground	HIGH Subsequent actions – court trial/lingering symbol to followers HIGH If kill deemed an assassination will spur revenge attacks/international condemnation HIGH High probability he/sup-porters would fight to the death/would be wearing suicide explosive vests LOW Minimize ability for BL to strike back	LOW Could fuel revenge attacks/plat-form to spout his ideology HIGH Retribution for 9/11 in eyes of American electorate/removes ideological head of AQ HIGH Capture BL HIGH Kill BL	Either option had negative consequence. The “kill option” was arguably the best of possible bad outcomes.

Table 10.1 – Summary of Risk and Decision-Making

The raid to capture/kill Bin Laden was fraught with risk at both the tactical and strategic level. The low risk options, namely the use of a drone strike or aircraft bombing, failed to yield the “high reward” namely the ability to confirm his death and conduct a sensitive site exploitation to glean possible intelligence. The bombing/drone strike also had the possible consequence of extensive collateral damage that could detract from any possible declaration of victory or justification for the action.

As such, the raid option, while extremely risky on a number of fronts (e.g. SOF operators deep behind “opponent” lines, possible conflict with an ally, violation of sovereignty) it provided the best potential for high reward. In this case, the high-risk option was taken because of the desire for the high reward (both political and military) and a belief/confidence in American military prowess, technology and capability.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Gareth Jennings, “Classified Helicopter Probably Used,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 May 2011, 5.
- 2 DevGru was established in 1987 as the successor to SEAL Team 6, although it is still commonly referred to as such, as the Navy’s dedicated counter-terrorist unit. It recruits its approximate 200 personnel from the existing eight SEAL teams. Alexander von Rosenbach, “DevGru: Bin Laden’s Ultimate Nemesis,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 May 2011, 5.
- 3 For a detailed history of Bin Laden, the AQ and the American nexus, see Steve Coll, *Ghost Force. The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan and Bin Laden, From the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004); Jane Corbin, *Al-Qaeda* (New York: Thunder Mouth’s Press, 2003); and Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda. Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003).
- 4 Gunaratna, 21-23.
- 5 Coll, *Ghost Force*, 204; Gunaratna, 21-31; and Corbin, 19. Al-Qaeda translates to “the base” in Arabic.
- 6 Gunaratna, 44-47.
- 7 Billy Waugh with Tim Keown, *Hunting the Jackal* (New York: Avon Books, 2004) 178.
- 8 Ibid., 184. Waugh asserted that “You have to remember, Bin Laden was next to nothing at this time. We didn’t have any reason to believe he was capable of mass destruction against the United States. We knew he was angry, we knew he hated us, and we knew he was moving a lot of money around. Those facts were enough for the CIA to find out what he was all about.” Ibid., 203.
- 9 Ibid., 193.
- 10 Corbin, 60-63.
- 11 Corbin, 45-49, 59, 86-89.

- 12 Ibid., 66; and Gunaratna, 9.
- 13 Bin Laden and his Arab fighters also assisted the Taliban in killing thousands of Hazaras who threatened to overrun Mazar-e-Sharif during the civil war between the Taliban and what would become known as the Northern Alliance – a loose collection of warlords opposed to Taliban rule.
- 14 Gunaratna, 56.
- 15 Cited in Corbin, 70.
- 16 Coll, *Ghost Force*, 343.
- 17 Ibid., 403-405, 423. The FBI placed him on their Ten Most Wanted list on 7 June 1999.
- 18 At the same time the Americans also launched 13 cruise missiles into a chemical factory in Khartoum, Sudan suspected of developing chemical weapons. Two years later CIA-contracted foreign fighters attempted an ambush on a Bin Laden convoy also in Afghanistan but failed to hit the vehicle Bin Laden was riding in. Ibid., 411.
- 19 See *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1193*, 28 August 1998; *Resolution 1214*, 8 December 1998; *Resolution 1267*, 15 October 1999; *Resolution 1333*, 19 December 2000; *Resolution 1363*, 30 July 2001; and Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 80; Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), xiii and 289.
- 20 Ibid., all.
- 21 Journalist and author Bob Woodward discovered that “After examining its vast files and computer storage, the NSA had discovered two intercepted foreign language messages on 10 September 2001, in which suspected terrorists said: “The match is about to begin” and “Tomorrow is zero hour.” The messages were not translated until 12 September. Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Shuster & Shuster, 2004), 215.
- 22 Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (New York: Shuster & Shuster, 2010), 122. Woodward assessed, “As a result, the attack on the Twin Towers appears to be an inescapable legacy of the Bush administration with critics arguing he failed to act quickly enough or seriously enough against the threat.”
- 23 Quoted in United Kingdom, Parliament, House of Commons Library, International Affairs & Defence Section, Research Paper 01/72, 11 September 2001: the response, 31 October 2002, 17. <<http://www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/re-search/rp2001/rp01-112.pdf>>, accessed 7 March 2007.
- 24 North Atlantic Council Statement, 12 September 2001, Press Release (2001), 124, <<http://www.nat.int/docu/pr/2001/p01-124e.htm>>, accessed 7 March 2007; and NATO, *NATO Handbook* (Brussels: NATO Office of Information and Press, 1995), 232.
- 25 Statement by NATO Secretary General Lord Robertson, 4 October 2001, <<http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/2001/s011004a.htm>>, accessed 7 March 2007. See also Tom Lansford, *All for One: Terrorism, NATO, and the United State* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2002), 126.
- 26 See *United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1368*, 12 September 2001 and *UNSCR 1373*, 28 September 2001. Interestingly, the UN had already in essence given its approval to NATO on 28 September when they invoked Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter, which authorized the use of military force.

27 Maulvi Mohammad Haqqani, a Taliban fighter at the time conceded, “I never thought the Taliban would collapse so quickly and cruelly under U.S. bombs.” He lamented, “The bombs cut down our men like a reaper harvesting wheat.” Maulvi Abdul Rehman Akhundzada cited in Sami Yousafzai and Ron Moreau, “The Taliban in their Own Words,” *Newsweek.com*, 5 October 2009, 36.

28 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban. Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 220.

29 Corbin, 269-273.

30 Years later with no further results as to the whereabouts of Bin Laden, Obama’s chief of staff (CoS) exacerbated by the failure to locate him demanded, “What do you mean you don’t know where he is?” After spending \$50 billion a year on intelligence the CoS lamented, “and you don’t have a clue where the most wanted man in the history of the world is?” Cited in Woodward, *Obama’s Wars*, 103.

31 Cited in *Ibid.*, 18.

32 Anderson Cooper 360, CNN, 6 May 2011. See Corbin, 362-367 for information on the capture of Khalid.

33 Leon Panetta, *Worthy Fights. A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), 291.

34 Steve Coll, *Directorate S. The CIA and America’s Secret Wars in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 555; James Kitfield, *Twilight Warriors. The Soldiers, Spies, And Special Agents Who Are Revolutionizing The American Way Of War* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 248; and David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal* (New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2013), 71.

35 Sonia Verma, “The intelligence trail that led to the killing of the al-Qaeda kingpin,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 2011. The year al-Libi was captured, 2005, was the same year construction on Bin Laden’s compound began. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/americas/the-intelligence-trail-that-led-to-the-killing-of-the-al-qaeda-kingpin/article2007202/>>, accessed 5 May 2011.

36 Panetta, 295; and Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo, “One unwary phone call led US to bin Laden doorstep,” *Associated Press*, 2 May 2011, <http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20110502/ap_on_re_us/us_bin_laden_hunt_for_bin_laden;_ylt=AhGOTXditSwDlRwYZH7rZzQUewgF;_ylu=X3oDMTNoOWs1ZTFhBGFzc2V0A2FwLzIwMTEwNTAyL3VzX2Jpbl9sYWRIbl9odW50X2Zvcj9iaW5fbGFKZW4EY2NvZGUDb2ZmcHpmMzAEY3BvcwM1BHBvcwM1BHNlYwN5bl90b3Bfc3RvcmlldW53YXJ5cGhv>, accessed 5 May 2011.

37 Sanger, 73.

38 Aleem Maqbool, “Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, dead – Barack Obama,” *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256676>>, accessed 6 May 2011. Abbottabad derives its name from British Major James Abbott who founded the town in 1853 after he annexed the Punjab region. It is known as the “city of pines.” It is a small agricultural community that is nestled in the lush, green hills of northwest Pakistan. It has a population of approximately 120,000 people and is home one of Pakistan’s most prestigious training academies.

39 Steve Coll in his well-researched book *Directorate S* conceded, “How the CIA discovered Ibrahim Ahmed’s true name and that he was living in Pakistan remains unclear. CIA state it was a matter of assistance from other intelligence services, cell phone intercepts and street work by CIA agents in Pakistan who identified Ibrahim’s jeep and followed it to Abbottabad.” Coll, *Directorate S*, 556.

- 40 “The Death of Bin Laden,” *CBC Passionate Eye*, 14 May 2011.
- 41 Cited in Peter L. Bergen, *Man Hunt. The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Anchor Canada, 2012), 163.
- 42 Hillary Rodham Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Shuster Paperbacks, 2014), 180.
- 43 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 187.
- 44 Associated Press, cbc.ca, “Bush wasn’t overjoyed by bin Laden death news,” <<http://news.ca.msn.com/top-stories/cbc-article.aspx?cp-documentid=28722511>>, accessed 14 May 2011.
- 45 Aleem Maqbool, “Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, dead – Barack Obama,” *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256676>>, accessed 6 May 2011.
- 46 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 201.
- 47 Coll, *Directorate S*, 541.
- 48 “Michael Scheuer, head of the bin Laden unit at the CIA recalled that whenever President Bill Clinton requested the military to use Special Operations Forces to kill bin Laden, “...General [Hugh] Shelton, who was the chairman of the Joint Chiefs at that time, always brought him plans back for those operations that looked like the invasion of Normandy!” President Clinton wanted a cover operation, not a large-scale military assault. Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 150.
- 49 Cited in *Ibid.*, 178.
- 50 “Inside the Mission – Getting Bin Laden,” *CNN*, 14 May 2011.
- 51 Clinton, 180.
- 52 Cited in Sanger, 89.
- 53 Sonia Verma, “The intelligence trail that led to the killing of the al-Qaeda kingpin,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 2011, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/americas/the-intelligence-trail-that-led-to-the-killing-of-the-al-qaeda-kingpin/article2007202/>>, accessed 5 May 2011.
- 54 Panetta, 316.
- 55 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 204.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 191.
- 57 Cited in *Ibid.*, 196.
- 58 Cited in *Ibid.*, 196.
- 59 Cited in *Ibid.*, 197.
- 60 Clinton, 181.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 182.
- 62 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 199.
- 63 “Inside the Mission – Getting Bin Laden,” *CNN*, 14 May 2011.

64 Ibid.

65 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 204.

66 Panetta revealed, “The risk to our forces could of course be vastly reduced if we conducted this as a joint operation with Pakistan. With that in mind, we thoroughly discussed whether to involve Pakistani authorities. But the ISI’s [Inter-Service Intelligence] reputation for leaks and divided loyalties – many ISI agents had ties to the Taliban – made it difficult to trust other with this information.” Panetta, 300.

67 James Hardy, “US, Pakistan Split Over Raid,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 May 2011, 5. This decision was not surprising since US officials believed that Pakistan continued to support militants who attack US troops in Afghanistan and actively undermine US intelligence operations targeting AQ inside Pakistan. The Pakistan Foreign Minister in turn condemned the US raid on Abbottabad as an “unauthorized unilateral action” and expressed “its deep concerns and reservations on the manner in which the U.S. carried out this operation without prior information or authorization from the Government of Pakistan.” Ibid. In the aftermath of the raid Pakistan came under immense criticism. Either their intelligence organ was incompetent or playing a “double game.”

68 Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 180. On 7 October 2008, President Bush had already declared during a debate, “If we have Osama Bin Laden in our sights and the Pakistani government is unable or unwilling to take them out, then I think that we have to act and we will take them out. Soon after I [Panetta] was confirmed to my position, the two of us met, and he stressed that he’d meant what he said. He was emphatic and unambiguous; killing or capturing Osama Bin Laden was to be the single most important mission for the CIA.” Panetta, 290.

69 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 88.

70 Paul Koring, “Clinton says Pakistani co-operation helped lead to bin Laden compound,” <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/americas/clinton-says-pakistani-co-operation-helped-lead-to-bin-laden-compound/article2006541/page3/>>, accessed 5 May 2011.

71 Panetta, 328.

72 Coll, *Directorate S*, 541.

73 Media reported that “the SEALs were ready to shoot their way out of Pakistan.” *CNN Live*, 9 May 11.

74 Panetta, 321.

75 Cited in Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 216.

76 Aleem Maqbool, “Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, dead – Barack Obama,” *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256676>>, accessed 6 May 2011.

77 Mark Owen with Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day. The Firsthand Account Of The Mission That Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Dutton, 2012), 214.

78 Daniel Wasserbly, “Uncovering the Mission,” *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 11 May 2011, 4.

79 Panetta, 323.

80 Cited in Sanger, 100-101. Author James Kitfield described: "The lead commandos spread out to secure the second floor, brining up from the rear two SEALs who continued the assault up the third-floor staircase. At the top of the staircase, the lead SEAL snatched back a curtain obscuring a doorway and immediately tackled two women in robes that he assumed were wired with suicide vests, clearing the way for his teammate. At that moment Navy SEAL, Robert O'Neill turned to his right and looked down the barrel of his weapon at Osama Bin Laden. Tall and with a bushy beard, Bin Laden had his hand on the shoulder of his wife, Amal, pushing her forward, not surrendering. Either of them could have been wearing a suicide vest. O'Neil shot Bin Laden in the face and then administered two more killing shots to make sure." David Sanger in his book *Confront and Conceal*, explained: "Then, the teams joined forces and they started to clear the floors of the main house. After checking the ground floor, they blasted their way through a gate on the stairs that blocked off the entrance to the second floor. At the top of the landing was Khalid, Bin Laden's 23-year-old son, firing an AK-47. He was quickly shot. The lead SEAL heading up the stairs was stepping around Khalid's body when he spotted a man peering out from behind a bedroom door. He was tall, bearded, and wearing a tan salwar kameez and prayer cap. It certainly looked like "Crankshaft," the code name JSOC had given Osama bin Laden." Bergen's account was the same as the White House account only he stated there were only two shots to the head. Coll recounted, that Bin Laden was shot "in the head and several times in the chest." Kitfield, 253; Sanger, 100; Coll, *Directorate S*, 556; and Bergen, *Man Hunt*, 224.

81 Owen, 236.

82 Panetta, 324.

83 CIA officials had turned a windowless seventh-floor conference room at Langley, Virginia, into a command centre for the operation, from where Leon Panetta passed on details to the president and his advisers.

84 Sonia Verma, "The intelligence trail that led to the killing of the al-Qaeda kingpin," *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 2011, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/americas/the-intelligence-trail-that-led-to-the-killing-of-the-al-qaeda-kingpin/article2007202/>>, accessed 5 May 2011.

85 Each phase of the operation was given an alphabetical descriptor so those monitoring the progress of the raid could determine its progress. The letter 'G' represented the phase that indicated the capture or killing of Bin Laden.

86 Sonia Verma, "The intelligence trail that led to the killing of the al-Qaeda kingpin," *Globe and Mail*, 2 May 2011, <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/americas/the-intelligence-trail-that-led-to-the-killing-of-the-al-qaeda-kingpin/article2007202/>>, accessed 5 May 2011.

87 The White House originally reported that the raid involved a 40-minute firefight and that Bin Laden had resisted. They corrected the story within 48 hours. There has been some debate as to whether this was a clear "kill" mission. Most official spokesmen have stated the mission was a "kill or capture" mission. CIA director Leon Panetta stated clearly during a *PBS NewsHour* interview, "The authority here was to kill bin Laden." However, he did clarify, "Obviously under the rules of engagement, if he in fact had thrown up his hands, surrendered and didn't appear to be representing any kind of threat then they were to capture him. But they had full authority to kill him." Panetta elaborated, "Assuming we found bin Laden, we were prepared to take him prisoner, but we anticipated resistance and were prepared to capture him only if he conspicuously surrendered. This was a military raid, not an arrest." A lawyer in response to a question by a SEAL operator on the team whether or not this was a kill mission, clarified, "If he is naked with his hands up, you're not going to engage him... What we're saying is if he does not pose a threat, you will detain him." Nonetheless, other US officials who have

remained anonymous have insisted that it was a kill mission with no desire to try and capture bin Laden. This is actually not surprising as a captured Bin Laden provides the terrorist king-pin a stage to continue his attack against the West and would invite protests and attacks in his name. Panetta, 322; and Owens, 177.

88 Alister Bull, "Factbox: Details of the Osama bin Laden Raid," <http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2011/05/13/Helmet-cams-reveal-bin-Laden-raid-details/UPI-74431305315597/>, accessed 28 May 2011.

89 Pornographic material was also discovered, but its presence was played down. American officials felt that there was nothing to be gained by trying to discredit Bin Laden in this manner. In fact, they believed it would back-fire as a large segment of the international audience would accuse the Americans of fabricating the story.

90 CTV News, 7 May 2011; and "The Death of Bin Laden," *CBC Passionate Eye*, 14 May 2011.

91 Stephen Braun, "Needy Al Qaeda turns to ransoms," *Toronto Star*, 21 June 2011, A16.

92 Aleem Maqbool, "Osama Bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, dead – Barack Obama," *BBC News*, <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-13256676>>, accessed 6 May 2011.

CHAPTER 11

RUSSIAN RISK, HYBRID WARFARE, AND THE GRAY ZONE

Dr. Christopher Marsh

The concept of the gray zone to describe the area of competition between peace and all-out war is losing its popularity, coming to be replaced by “competition short of conflict.” But when it comes to Eastern Europe and the hybrid warfare environment there, the concept retains great utility. It describes an environment in the greater global competitive space that is short of war but where tensions may be extremely high and war may even be imminent. Of course, other non-kinetic activities may be occurring at the same time, such as training of separatists or resistance fighters and “active measures” (i.e. malign activities aimed at promoting disinformation). For Russia, operating in the gray zone is a way of mitigating risk. If Moscow can keep its actions – and those of its proxies – short of war, and engage in persistent denial, then the risk is low that they will face retaliation. As retired US Navy officer Philip Kapusta put it, “adversaries can use ambiguity to avoid accountability for their actions” in the gray zone.¹ Moreover, antagonists such as Russia “typically choose to work in the gray zone precisely because they want to avoid full-scale war and its potential to trigger an overwhelming US military response.”² In short, operating in the gray zone is part of Russia’s risk calculus.

In this chapter, I argue that Russia is choosing to operate in the gray zone as a way to mitigate risk. Coupled with persistent denial, the ambiguity of the gray zone gives Russian forces and proxies the ability to act without provoking a direct and potentially overwhelming US military response. I begin by arguing that the gray zone is a valuable concept for describing Russian military strategy and that it is distinct, though closely related, to the concept of hybrid warfare. Continuing,

I then look at both the US and Russian conceptions of risk and how they relate to strategy. Next, I look at three case studies that illustrate my argument: the annexation of Crimea; the support of unconventional warfare in eastern Ukraine; and Russian military intervention in Syria. Finally, I offer some conclusions on how President Vladimir Putin and Russian military strategists might think about risk.

THE GRAY ZONE AND HYBRID WARFARE

To some, the concept of the gray zone has little utility and the environment it seeks to illuminate is better described by other terms such as irregular warfare. Or, as Professor John Arquilla phrases it, if “we are to have a fresh definition for war in this era...let it be ‘hybrid warfare.’”³ As he continues, our adversaries “see no gray zone ‘between war and peace.’ They see all as war. So must we.”⁴ Here I disagree with Professor Arquilla, for when it comes to Russia and its actions in Crimea, eastern Ukraine, and Syria, I believe Moscow does see a gray zone, and that they are using this to their advantage. If Moscow can stay short of being implicated in all-out war, operating in the gray zone becomes a way of mitigating risk. Risk is less if it’s not an all-out kinetic conflict and is coupled with persistent denial. Is this simply part of what is now being called “competition short of conflict”? Certainly there is space in the gray zone for that, but the three case studies selected here are better described as hybrid warfare as they are fully kinetic, but they are not cases of all-out war. The third case, that of Syria, is kinetic as well, but not fully hybrid, rather it is ostensibly an intervention to assist President Bashar al-Assad’s regime in its fight against the Islamic State.

The authors of “Unconventional Warfare in the Gray Zone” define the gray zone as a space in the peace-conflict continuum characterized by intense political, economic, informational and military competition more fervent in nature than normal steady-state diplomacy, yet short of conventional war.⁵ The authors, moreover, suggest that special operations forces (SOF) are the preeminent force in the gray zone. As Kapusta states, “Traditional war might be the dominant paradigm of warfare, but gray zone challenges are the norm.”⁶

The Russian military does not use the term “hybrid warfare” (though some Russian journalists do in reference to US operations). Instead, they use the phrase “indirect and asymmetric methods.”⁷ Nevertheless, the environment the gray zone concept

is meant to describe is certainly being identified by Russian military leaders. As Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, asserts, “In the 21st century, a tendency toward the elimination of the differences between the states of war and peace is becoming discernable. Wars are now not even declared, but having begun, are not going according to a pattern we are accustomed to.”⁸ Clearly Gerasimov, who penned these words prior to the Western concept of the gray zone being coined, is clearly identifying what Kapusta defined as the gray zone.

RUSSIAN CONCEPTS OF RISK

According to US Army doctrine, the philosophy of mission command is guided by six interdependent principles, the last of which is the acceptance of prudent risk.⁹ Likewise, one of the best definitions of strategy accounts for risk as well, that offered by retired US Army officer John Valledor, who states that a strategy is the alignment of “ends, ways, and means—informed by risk—to attain goals.”¹⁰ According to the US Army War College model of strategy:

risk explains the gap between what is to be achieved and the concepts and resources available to achieve the objective. Since there are never enough resources or a clever enough concept to assure 100% success in the competitive international environment, there is always some risk. The strategist seeks to minimize this risk through his development of the strategy – the balance of ends, ways, and means.¹¹

By encouraging the strategist to use the term “strategy” correctly while applying the strategy model and its four parts – ends, ways, means, and risk – this model provides a viable theory of strategy.

As Chuck Bartles and Les Grau of Fort Leavenworth’s Foreign Military Studies Office point out, the Russian way of war is very different from the Western way of war, and this holds true for concepts of strategy and risk. For one, there is no military decision-making process (MDMP) or anything like mission command.¹² Secondly, the concept of risk is absent from Russian military doctrine and field manuals, not to mention various Russian military and defence doctrines and strategies (at least at the unclassified level). It is present, however, in the 1983 Soviet Military Encyclopedic Dictionary, where it is defined as “the possible

danger of failure of a launched operation; the actions themselves associated with such a danger.”¹³ Also mentioned in the same source is “reckless risk,” when “hope is placed on a successful outcome, and the risk is conscious, with the basic calculation resting on the belief in success.”¹⁴

In officer education, however, soldiers are taught about risk and the commander’s role in accepting risk. In a major military education text on the subject, risk is defined as “an activity of the individual, realized, despite the perceived danger or the possibility of failure in an uncertain situation, in the hope of success.”¹⁵ Moreover, risk “appears as an activity associated with overcoming uncertainty in a situation of choice.” Moreover, war – “despite the laws determining its outcome, leaves much room for risk. In risk, Clausewitz saw one reason for victory, as well as the price of the great hope of any military leader. Without risk, the activity of a military leader is impossible.”¹⁶

Not to leave the last word to the great Prussian theorist, the text concludes with the words of the famous Russian military leader and theorist M. Dragomirov: “by taking risk, the commander freely directs the troops, and this ability to take great risks is...the result of ‘great understanding’. That is why the ability to take risks at the right time is one of the most important moral-combat qualities of a soldier.”¹⁷

If international affairs is all about strategy, and strategy incorporates the assumption of prudent risk in order to align ends, ways, and means, then risk itself must be balanced against the military objective being pursued by strategy. In the cases that follow, Moscow’s strategy differed considerably in each of the three campaigns (though aligned under its grand strategy), and in each case, too, the risk varied. By examining these three cases and the objective/risk calculus for each, I hope to shed light on the role of risk taking and mitigation in Russian military strategy.

	VALUE OF OBJECTIVE	RISK	DECISION CALCULUS
<i>Crimea</i>	High	Moderately high	Prudent risk
<i>Eastern Ukraine</i>	Moderately high	Moderate	Prudent risk
<i>Syria</i>	Low	Low	Low risk

Table 11.1 – Objective/Risk Calculus

THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

Doubtless the most risky military endeavour the Russian military has entered into beyond its borders in the post-Soviet period has been the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula. The military occupation of Crimea began on 27 February 2014 by “little green” – and polite – men. There were Russian armed forces (most likely special operators¹⁸) in sterile uniforms that descended upon Crimea days before military operations began, most likely on the 24th (we know, for example, that the 45th Airborne *Spetsnaz* Unit from Kubinka was airlifted to Sevastopol on that day). The 27th, however, is the official date of Crimea “rejoining” the motherland, and to commemorate the role of Russian SOF, President Putin named the day the official day of Russian Special Operations Forces (in line with the official day of other units, such as the day of the Airborne troops, August 2nd, commemorating the first Soviet airborne forces’ parachute jump in 1930).

The plans for the practically bloodless seizure of Crimea were based largely on those drawn up by the General Staff's Main Operations Directorate, the *Glavnoye razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye* (GRU), relying heavily on GRU intelligence assets. The GRU had completed its intelligence preparation of the battlefield and was constantly monitoring Ukrainian forces on the peninsula, as well as intercepting their communications. According to Mark Galeotti, an expert on the Russian *spetsnaz*, the GRU did more than provide intelligence and cover for the “little green men,” who were able to quickly seize control of all strategic points on the peninsula. In fact, many of those very operatives were current or former GRU *spetsnaz*.¹⁹ Others were members of the naval *spetsnaz*, primarily from the 431st Independent Special Purpose Naval Reconnaissance Point, based out of the Black Sea Fleet (located in Sevastopol, Crimea).²⁰ In a matter of a few days, Russian forces were able to seize power, block, disarm and even win over significant portions of the Ukrainian military. Subsequently, they went on to legitimize their presence, all the while conducting information operations and working to integrate the region back into the Russian Federation.²¹

In many ways their method was a covert unconventional warfare operation. After identifying sympathetic locals (mostly disenfranchised ethnic Russians), they put together a proxy force comprised of a variety of groups consisting of local hooligans, want-to-be political leaders, and even Russians from Russia. Then, when the moment was right (and this moment came quickly), “unidentified men in

black uniforms” seized government buildings, including the Crimean parliament. An “emergency session” of the parliament was then held and Sergei Aksyonov was chosen as the new prime minister of Crimea. Aksyonov claimed the men were part of Crimea’s self-defense forces and under his personal command (but they were most likely Russian special operators).

These special operators, reportedly from squad 0900,²² seized important buildings (including the Crimean Parliament). SOF operators, perhaps from other units, seized other strategic infrastructure, including the headquarters (HQ) of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastapol, the HQ of the 204th Tactical Aviation Brigade in Belbek (they were joined by the 810th Marines Brigade in this operation), and the 1st Independent Marines Battalion in Feodosia. *Spetsnaz* personnel were also involved in several of these operations.²³

The rest is history. Crimea then voted to join the Russian Federation, and the Russian parliament voted to accept Crimea into the Russian Federation. Finally, Russian forces seized all military bases and infrastructure on the peninsula. Within a few short weeks, an entire territorial objective had been seized and politically integrated into the Russian Federation, almost with no shots fired, the acme of Sun Tzu’s prescription for warfare.

Moscow’s flouting of international law and annexation of territory of a sovereign nation-state must be considered a moderately high-risk operation, but not due to the military might of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which although significant, are no match at all for Russia’s military. The risk calculus must have weighed the objective of retaining Crimea as a home for the Russian Black Sea fleet against the potential risk of Western intervention. In December of 2013, the Ukrainian parliament, the *Verkhovnaya Rada*, brought up the issue (not for the first time) of canceling or not renewing Russia’s lease on the Black Sea port of Sevastopol. Russia could have maintained its naval operations without Sevastopol (by relocating them to Novorossiysk), but the Maidan uprising and the removal of power of Ukrainian President Yanukovych changed the situation dramatically. It now became very possible according to Moscow’s “crystal ball” that the Ukraine could join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Sevastopol would thus end up being a NATO port, thereby, putting Moscow in an even greater NATO encirclement, approaching a stranglehold in Moscow’s eyes. There was great risk, therefore, in *not* doing anything and allowing such a scenario to unfold.

On the other side of the coin was the potential for Western intervention, which could have ranged from the imposition of no-fly zones and the supply of lethal weapons to Kiev all the way to direct involvement on behalf of the Ukrainian government (most likely in a coalition), similar to Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, implemented for the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi aggression approximately 25 years earlier. The Western response, however, was simply condemnation and eventually economic sanctions, but no direct military response (other than a small number of US Special Forces being deployed to Kiev as trainers and advisors). In this case, the risk calculation was one in which the stakes were very high and the risk was moderately high.

EASTERN UKRAINE AND THE “NOVOROSSIYA CAMPAIGN”

Juxtaposed to the quick and nearly bloodless seizure of Crimea, the battle for eastern Ukraine has become a protracted one, claiming over 9,000 soldiers, and continues to this day. From February 2014 to the present, *spetsnaz* and SOF, alongside conventional forces, have participated in the fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine against Kiev government security forces. Additionally, they have probably operated outside of that area as well. Both *spetsnaz* units and Russian SOF are deployed in the region, along with conventional forces, though it is unclear exactly who is doing what. Given their mission sets, it is highly likely that both *spetsnaz* and SOF are organizing local insurgent forces, engaging in train and equip missions, and serving as military trainers in general, both to organized militias and proxy forces. Additionally, it would be naïve to think that they are not also engaged in direct action.

One group Moscow has been working with is led by Igor Girkin, who is there under the alias Igor Strelkov (from the Russian word for “shooter”). Strelkov made no efforts to hide the fact that he was engaged in unconventional warfare, with the goal of triggering an armed uprising and separatist movement that would ultimately allow eastern Ukraine to join Russia.²⁴ This retired *Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti* (FSB), or Federal Security Service, colonel, leads a 50 plus-member strong group of fighters, many of whom had been active in Crimea before showing up in eastern Ukraine. While not all had formidable fighting experience, the majority did, with several members even coming from the elite *spetsnaz* GRU.²⁵

Immediately following the seizure of Crimea, separatist movements emerged in eastern Ukraine, particularly Donetsk and Luhansk, in concert with the proclamation in April 2014 of the People's Republic of Donetsk and the People's Republic of Luhansk. This mobilization came immediately on the heels of the announcement of the "Novorossiia Project." As part of Putin's information operations campaign, he himself explained:

I would like to remind you that what was called Novorossiia (New Russia) back in the tsarist days – Kharkov, Lugansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev and Odessa – were not part of Ukraine back then. These territories were given to Ukraine in the 1920s by the Soviet government. Why? Who knows. They were won by Potyomkin and Catherine the Great in a series of well-known wars. The center of that territory was Novorossiysk, so the region is called Novorossiia. Russia lost these territories for various reasons, but the people remained.²⁶

This was more than a political statement or part of an information operation. It was the launching phase of a military campaign, one which I label the Novorossiia campaign.²⁷ Like any well thought-out campaign, it contained phases and even branches and sequels. The goal was to use unconventional warfare methods in the region to mobilize the ethnic Russian population, train, arm, and equip them, and the guide them in a "war of liberation" from Ukraine, all the while maintaining persistent (if not plausible) deniability of Russian government and military involvement. In the end, it proved to be a failure, and apparently Moscow abandoned the "project."

The first phase, and this phase very much predates the launching of any military action (and would equate to what Americans label shaping operations), was to infiltrate Ukrainian political and military structures, not just in the eastern Ukraine region, but in all of Ukraine, including in the government and the military. Along with this phase were inform and influence activities aimed at developing sympathy for the plight of ethnic Russians in Ukraine and dissuading those who would support war with Russia. This phase not only predated the initiation of military operations, it continued throughout them, and indeed continues today.

The second phase began with the initiation of military operations, starting with the seizure of Crimea, discussed above. At this point *spetsnaz* and SOF presumably began to organize and enable proxy forces in target regions, with Russian forces

operating covertly in Ukraine. This phase is where more little green men were spotted along with those in sterile uniforms claiming not to be from the Russian Federation Armed Forces, despite sometimes very convincing photographic evidence identifying them as precisely that (again, followed with persistent denial). This phase was crucial for organizing those who would do the majority of the fighting and would put a local face on the conflict.

The second part of this phase began in June, when Russian conventional forces began to assemble along the Russian-Ukrainian border, including motorized-rifle brigades, artillery units, and armored brigades. This mobilization was mostly a show of force but could have been a preparatory move for a possible invasion had things in eastern Ukraine gone differently. Another aspect of this phase was the beginning of internationally-organized negotiations in Minsk in order to arrive at a ceasefire agreement. Of course, this agreement would be nothing more than a delaying tactic on the part of Russia, allowing *spetsnaz* and SOF more time to organize, train, and equip the proxy forces. This ploy became compromised by the shooting down of a Malaysian airliner in July 2014, most likely by Russian-trained separatists.

As the fighting continued, more and more conventional forces began appearing in the target regions of eastern Ukraine, even while Poroshenko and Putin were meeting in Minsk to negotiate a second ceasefire agreement. Then, in late May of 2015, the “Novorossiya Project” was brought to a close, apparently with Moscow giving up on a quick victory in the east and settling for a frozen conflict that leaves the region neither fully under the control of the Ukrainian government, nor a part of Russia.²⁸ Given the standards for NATO admission, which require the applicant state to be at peace and in control of its sovereign territory, keeping eastern Ukraine in a frozen conflict keeps NATO from spreading to Ukraine, and thus secures Moscow’s western flank.

The actual objective of the intervention in eastern Ukraine remains unclear. On the one hand, perhaps it was an unconventional warfare campaign with the objective of separating off various regions and cities, including Kharkov, Donetsk, and Luhansk and having them join the Russian Federation, as was the case with Crimea. On the other hand, perhaps it was simply to stir up conflict so as to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. Whatever the actual objective, the risk was largely the same. Once again, Moscow was interfering in the internal affairs

of a sovereign state, though this time while consistently denying any involvement (despite more than sufficient Western intelligence proving direct Russian involvement). The risk was approximately the same as for Crimea in terms of what responses were possible, although at a lower level since Moscow was not actually occupying and annexing Ukrainian territory.

INTERVENTION IN SYRIA

Russia surprised the world in September 2015, as it launched without warning an intervention into the civil war in Syria. In a matter of weeks, Russia went from supplying some weapons, equipment, and naval infantry to an outright intervention on behalf of Assad and his regime, ostensibly supporting the regime in its fight against the Islamic State.²⁹ While largely a conventional air campaign, both *spetsnaz* and SOF were involved in the operations, although according to Galeotti, Russia's elite units were kept from getting involved in major combat operations, which fell to conventional units.³⁰ That left special operators to deal with the other two core missions – battlefield reconnaissance (which in Syria especially involved guiding Russian artillery fires and air strikes)³¹ and special security missions.

Of course, it would be naïve to think that *spetsnaz* and SOF were not involved prior to the intervention, providing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR), as well as some training of Assad regime forces.³² The Russian news media even highlighted the achievements of their “train and equip” mission in Syria, stating that “our military experts and advisors have achieved significant success in the training of the Syrian military.”³³

Additionally, they provided enhanced security for the Russian embassy and other facilities. The “Zaslon” (screen) force, for example, deployed some of its men in their usual role of VIP protection, hostage rescue, and reinforcing embassy security,³⁴ though they are also known to conduct security force assistance training. This *spetsnaz* unit does not report to the GRU, but reports directly to the Foreign Intelligence Service.

As Russia began its intervention in Syria, Russian SOF and *spetsnaz* were involved in securing the Hmeimim airbase at Latakia and the Tartus naval facility on the Syrian coast. They were then subsequently involved in providing some limited reconnaissance to assist in the targeting of airstrikes.³⁵ According to Galeotti,

the majority of target sets came from the Syrians (which may help explain the concentration not on the Islamic State and its forces but on other rebel groups posing a more immediate threat to the Assad regime).

At the peak of the deployment, there was a detachment of approximately 250 GRU *spetsnaz* soldiers, probably drawn from several units, including Naval *spetsnaz* from the 431st Naval Reconnaissance Point.³⁶ There was also a team of SOF operators from the Special Operations Forces Command (KSSO – *Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii*), reportedly mainly snipers/counter-snipers and scouts.³⁷

Conducting force protection missions in an environment such as Syria is as dangerous as operating in any conventional battlefield. Again according to Galeotti, *spetsnaz* may have already been in Damascus as a contingency in the event of a regime collapse. This seems to be the case in terms of trainers, who were there to train local military on the equipment that they were being provided. For Western forces operating in an environment like Syria, this is almost always a SOF mission, but it is unclear whether the Russian trainers were SOF, *spetsnaz*, or conventional forces.³⁸

One *spetsnaz* unit that was most likely there was Zaslon, which makes perfect sense since they are tasked not just with VIP protection and security, but also with “clean up” operations in events such as regime collapse. This is reportedly precisely what they did in Iraq immediately upon the fall of the Hussein regime, removing sensitive materials and documents Moscow did not want falling into US hands.

According to Galeotti, who reportedly had a conversation with a serving officer before the drawdown in Syria began, the officer pointed out that “this is the kind of war for which the *spetsnaz* have been training for thirty years.” He was referring to the Soviet experiences in Afghanistan, which very much set the tone for their operations in Syria. The officer concluded by adding, “if we wanted to fight the war [in Syria], we’d be using *spetsnaz*.”³⁹ Galeotti takes this to mean that there was no willingness on the part of the Kremlin to deploy SOF and *spetsnaz* in the kind of “tip of the spear” assault and interdiction missions for which they train, and is also taken to mean that Moscow had no intention of being sucked into a ground battle in Syria (but where it would eventually use private military contractors to negative effect). As such, the numbers of SOF and *spetsnaz* have been kept relatively low and they apparently remain focused on their ISR, training, and security missions.

Of the three case studies here, Syria was the lowest risk, since they were ostensibly allied with US and coalition forces against the Islamic State. According to journalist Damien Sharkov, the real reason Russia got involved in the Syrian civil war was not to support its long-time Soviet-era and post-Soviet-era ally, Bashar al-Assad, but to test its latest equipment and military hardware, as well as its commanders and officer corps.⁴⁰ According to General Gerasimov, Russia's commanders from all its military districts have spent "quite a while" in Syria at one point or another.⁴¹ As Gerasimov explained in the pages of *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, other than operations in Cuba in 1962, "we practically had no experience of deploying the army and armed forces at such a distance, on the territory of a country that does not border" our own. Indeed, during the course of the intervention, the command of 90 percent of divisions and over half of brigades and regiments underwent battle-testing in the deserts and cities of Syria.⁴² Moreover, the Russian military gained significant insight into US military tactics, according to a US intelligence general officer.⁴³ While perhaps not part of the initial objective, this certainly was a benefit reaped by Moscow in the course of their operations in Syria.

RISKY BUSINESS

The three case studies examined here shed significant light on the way Moscow perceives risk in terms of its overall military strategy, and perhaps even as part of its grand strategy. In all three cases the value of the objective outweighed the risk being assumed by the operation. Moreover, that risk each time was mitigated by various measures, such as the use of proxy forces and irregular troops, persistent deniability, and the cover of such operations as something other than what they truly were.

There is also an iterative aspect to Russian risk assessment and decision-making during these three case studies. By beginning with the highest risk operation and finding it to be at acceptable cost, Putin and military planners must have concluded they were assuming lower risk in the subsequent, lower risk operations. After all, if Moscow could annex Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and only get slapped on the wrist with sanctions, how risky was the operation in eastern Ukraine where they could deny involvement and in Syria where they were ostensibly allied with US and coalition forces against the Islamic State? So while not a central part of their military doctrine, risk appears to be something calculated into Russia's military strategy, by its planners and – given the nature of the regime – by Putin himself.

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CHAPTER 11

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

ALLEN – Lieutenant-Colonel (LCol) Chris Allen joined the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in 1985 as a reservist. He later transferred to the Regular Force as an Infantry Officer in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI). He served in 3 PPCLI until 1992, at which time he was posted to the Canadian Airborne Centre (CABC) in Edmonton, Alberta. While at CABC, he was seconded to 2 PPCLI out of Winnipeg, Manitoba as the Battle Group Senior Liaison Officer for their tour in Croatia from February to October 1993 as part of UNPROFOR. In 1994, LCol Allen was selected for employment in JTF 2. In 2001, he returned to 3 PPCLI and deployed to Afghanistan with the 3 PPCLI Battle Group in early 2002. Returning to JTF 2 in 2004 as a Squadron Commander, LCol Allen deployed on a number of tours into Afghanistan with his Sabre Squadron, during which time he was awarded the MSC and a MID for leadership in combat. In 2007, he was posted to USSOCOM HQ in Tampa, Florida, and completed the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. On return to Canada in 2011, he completed a year of Second Language training prior to being posted into the CANSOFCOM HQ as the J3, Director for Operations between 2012 and 2014. From 2014-2017, LCol Allen was appointed as the Commanding Officer for the Canadian Special Operations Training Centre. He is currently the Senior Special Operations Liaison Officer to USSOCAFRICA in Stuttgart, Germany.

BELL – Alan Bell served with the British Armed Forces for 22 years, ten with the Royal Marine Commandos and twelve with 22 SAS Regiment. His combat experience includes the Falkland Islands, Northern Ireland and other classified areas. He is currently the president of "Globe Risk Holdings, Inc.," a security consulting business based in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

CHOQUETTE – Lieutenant-Colonel (retired) Pierre Choquette has served as a CAF (Primary Reserve) infantry officer for 23 years, deploying on operational missions with the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and NATO in the Balkans. He has worked in a variety of analytical, research and field roles pertaining to National Security for the Canadian Federal Government for the past

20 years. He is a graduate (B.Sc) of the University of Montreal, in Political Science (International and Strategic Studies program) and is currently working towards his MA in War Studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. He is a graduate of the Canadian Forces Land Force Command and Staff College (Kingston) and the Canadian Forces College (Toronto). LCol Choquette maintains a keen interest in military affairs and history, as well as national security and defence matters.

DAWE – Major-General Peter S. Dawe is the Commander of the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command. He joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1990 as an artillery officer. Following a tour to Cyprus as a troop commander, he reclassified to the infantry and joined the Second Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (PPCLI). Major-General Dawe has commanded at every level from platoon to brigade to include 3 PPCLI (2009-2011) and most recently 2 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group (2013-2015). His extra-regimental employment has included tours at the Canadian Forces Leadership and Recruit School as a recruit and basic officer training company commander; Land Forces Central Area Headquarters as the G3 Operations; the Canadian Special Operations Regiment as the Operations Officer; Canadian Special Operations Forces Command Headquarters as the J3 and Deputy Commander. His operational tours include Cyprus, Bosnia, and two tours to Afghanistan. In 2002, he served as the 3 PPCLI Battle-Group Operations Officer for Operation APOLLO in Kandahar, Afghanistan, for which he was awarded the United States Bronze Star Medal. From May 2011 to March 2012, he served as the Deputy Commander of Canada's Contribution to the Training Mission in Afghanistan and was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal. Major-General Dawe is a graduate of the National Security Programme, the US Capstone Programme, and the Coalition Joint Forces Special Operations Component Commander Course. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Military Arts and Science, a Master's degree in Defence Studies, and a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Royal Military College of Canada. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of Military Merit in 2015.

HORN – Dr. Bernd Horn is a retired infantry colonel who has held key command and staff appointments in the Canadian Armed Forces, including Deputy Commander of the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion, The Royal Canadian Regiment and Officer Commanding 3 Commando, the Canadian Airborne Regiment. Dr. Horn is also an adjunct professor of history at the Royal Military College of Canada and

a non-resident senior fellow at the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU). He is currently the Command Historian at the CANSOFCOM Education and Research Centre.

KNARR – Dr. William (Bill) Knarr is a non-resident Senior Fellow at JSOU where, on a part-time basis he supports their research program and teaches/leads seminars on irregular warfare. He also serves as an Adjunct Research Staff member with Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA) where he leads projects on counterinsurgency for training and education. Prior to joining JSOU and IDA, Dr. Knarr served in the U.S. Army, retiring in 2002 as a colonel. His operational experience includes Intelligence, Aviation and Special Operations. He has a Doctorate in Education, and a Master's degree in National Security Strategy and Systems Management. His projects and publications include *The 2005 Iraqi Sunni Awakening: The Role of the Desert Protectors*, JSOU monograph 15-4, and *Mazar-e Sharif: First Victory of the 21st Century*. In April 2019, he was inducted into the Infantry Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame.

MALTAIS – Captain Jeremy Maltais is a Captain in the Royal Canadian Air Force. An Air Combat Systems Officer by trade, specializing in Search and Rescue, he has been employed in multiple combined Exercises and Operations as an aviator. Including a deployment to the Al Udeid Air Base, Combined Air and Space Operations Center in Qatar, where he served as a planner within the Combat Plans Division. He is currently a Master's student in the War Studies programme at Royal Military College of Canada.

MARSH – Dr. Chris Marsh is a senior fellow at JSOU where he conducts research on global special operations forces with a particular focus on Russian SOF, including strategy and foreign policy. He also serves as editor of *Special Operations Journal*, published by Routledge. Prior to joining JSOU, Marsh was a Professor of National Security and Strategic Studies at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS). Dr. Marsh holds the PhD in political science from the University of Connecticut, in addition to having completed graduate studies at Moscow State University. Dr. Marsh is the author of five books, including *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors*, co-authored with Nikolas Gvosdev of the Naval War College. He is currently writing a book on Russian grand strategy.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

RAMSAY – Nicholas Ramsay is currently enrolled in the Master of War Studies program at RMC. With degrees from Carleton University and Nipissing University, military history has always been a key fascination of his life. This love for anything history has spanned decades and has included multiple awards and accolades. This lifelong work is intended to turn into a career teaching military art and science.

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

Adm	Admiral
AFV	Armoured Fighting Vehicle
ANA	Afghan National Army
ANP	Afghan National Police
APC	Armoured Personnel Carriers
AQ	Al-Qaeda
AQI	Al Qaeda in Iraq
BAS	British Antarctic Survey
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BDA	Battle Damage Assessment
BUD/S	Basic Underwater Demolition / SEAL
CANSOF	Canadian Special Operations Forces
CANSOFCOM	Canadian Special Operations Forces Command
CAP	Combat Air Patrol
CAS	Chief of the Air Staff or Close Air Support depending on context
CCT	Combat Control Team
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff
CENTCOM	Central Command
CF	Conventional Forces/Coalition Forces dependent on context
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CINCCENT	Commander-in-Chief US Central Command
CJSOTF-A	Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan

GLOSSARY

CJSOTF-AP	Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Arabian Peninsula
CJTF-76	Combined Joint Task Force-76
CLE	Central Landing Establishment
CO	Commanding Officer
COA	Course of Action
COIN	Counter-insurgency
COS	Chief of Staff
CPA	Coalition Provisional Authority
CQB	Close Quarter Battle
CSAR	Combat Search and Rescue
DA	Direct Action
DCO	Director Combined Operations
DD Plans	Deputy Director Plans
DevGru	Special Warfare Development Group
DNI	Director of National Intelligence
DoD	Department of Defense
DSAS	Director of the Special Air Service
EW	Electronic Warfare
FAA	Federal Aviation Administration
FARP	Forward Arming and Refuelling Point
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FSB	<i>Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti</i> (Federal Security Service)
FSSF	First Special Service Force
GHQ	General Headquarters
GoI	Government of Iraq
GPMG	General Purpose Machine Gun

GLOSSARY

GPS	Global Positioning System
GRU	<i>razvedyvatel'noye upravleniye</i> (General Staff Main Operations Directorate)
HMS	Her Majesty's Ship
HQ	Headquarters
HUMINT	Human Intelligence
IA	Immediate Action
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IFV	Infantry Fighting Vehicles
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISI	Inter Service Intelligence
ISR	Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance
JOC	Joint Operations Centre
JRAM	Joint Risk Analysis Manual
JSOTF	Joint Special Operations Task Force
JTF 2	Joint Task Force Two
KSA	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
KSSO	<i>Komandovanie sil spetsial'nalnykh operatsii</i> (Special Operations Forces Command)
LAW	Light anti-tank weapon
LCol	Lieutenant-Colonel (Canada)
Lt. Col	Lieutenant Colonel (United States)
LTM	Laser Target Markers
LUP	Lying Up Point
LZ	Landing Zone

GLOSSARY

MDMP	Military decision-making process
MEDEVAC	Medical Evacuation
MEZ	Maritime Exclusion Zone
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service
MNC-I	Multi National Corps Iraq
MNF-I	Multinational Force Iraq
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoI	Ministry of Interior
NA	Northern Alliance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCAC	Northern Combat Area Command
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
NGSO	Naval Gunfire Support Officer
NSA	National Security Agency
NSPD	National Security Presidential Directive
NVG	Night Vision Goggles
OC	Officer Commanding
ODA	Operational Detachment Alpha
ODB	Operational Detachment Bravo
OP	Observation Post or Operation depending on context
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
OPSEC	Operational Security
OR	Other Rank
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PDD	Presidential Decision Directive
PNG	Passive Night-Vision Goggles
PoW	Prisoners of War

GLOSSARY

QRF	Quick Reaction Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RFA	Royal Fleet Auxiliary
RM	Royal Marines
RN	Royal Navy
ROE	Rules of Engagement
RPG	Rocket Propelled Grenade
RV	Rendezvous
SAM	Surface to Air Missile
SAS	Special Air Service
S-Boat	Schnellboot
SBS	Special Boat Section/Special Boat Service
SEAL	Sea Air Land
SF	Special Forces
SHAEF	Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service
SNA	Somali National Alliance
SOAR	Special Operations Aviation Regiment
SOE	Special Operations Executive
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOS	Special Operations Squadron
SOW	Special Operations Wing
SQN	Squadron
SS	<i>Schutzstaffel</i>
SSN	Submarine, Nuclear
T&FF	Terrorists and Foreign Fighters
TAOR	Tactical Areas of Responsibility
TEZ	Total Exclusion Zone

GLOSSARY

TF	Task Force
TTPs	Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSCR	United Nations Security Council Resolution
US	United States
USAF	United States Air Force
USSF	United States Special Forces
VIP	Very Important Person
WERV	Western Euphrates River Valley
WWII	World War II
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army

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Instinctively, everyone comprehends the idea of risk. In the simplest of terms, it is the probability of positive or negative consequences stemming from a given action or decision as weighed against the perceived benefit. The consequences can be in the form of a reward (e.g. fame, fortune) or damage or injury (e.g. physical harm, financial loss, damage to reputation) to individuals, groups or organizations. Importantly, the perception of risk varies from person to person. In short, risk assessment is very subjective.

For SOF, the concept of risk is an extremely important issue. SOF normally operate in small teams, often far from supporting agencies or organizations. They often work in chaotic, dangerous environments that are ambiguous and complex (i.e. constantly changing). As a result, risk is ever present. As such, SOF leaders and operators must ensure that they fully understand risk and the factors that lead to risk adversity and risk acceptance.

It is for this reason that this volume, *Risk: SOF Case Studies*, examines risk based on a series of historic case studies from World War II, the Falklands War, the first Gulf War, to the counter-insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq. The authors analyze specific actions in each of these conflicts, identifying the risks and how they impacted decision-making. As such, this publication provides a window into the nebulous concept of risk. It illuminates the concept and provides insight into how individuals can better identify and mitigate risk in order to accomplish their missions.

