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BOOK REVIEW SUPPLEMENT, Summer 2015

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

I am not sure whether it is a sign of approaching age or of a constant state of being busy, but to your Editor the quarters appear to be coming around more quickly than they did, with another array of books to be reviewed. This is no trial, however, particularly when books of the quality put up by publishers are presented. This issue is no exception, with a range of impeccably researched works reflecting some of the best current writing and research across several eras.

Of late I have found myself unfortunately apologising for some aspect of this review, usually a deficiency of some sort or other. As much as I run the risk of appearing like a broken record (or a stuck CD, or a corrupted mp3 track to the younger and more modern of our readers) circumstance strikes again. You will note a distinct absence in this edition of any titles devoted to Waterloo. This is a particularly telling irony given the position of our Vice Chairman, Sir Evelyn Webb-Carter, as Chairman of the Waterloo 200 committee, which has done such creditable work in commemorating this pivotal historic event and its enduring legacy. (It must not be assumed that I cast aspersions of any kind in his or the committee's direction!)

But the story remains constant; I am dependent on the good offices of a small number of publishers who provide review copies; attempts at casting the net towards the bigger companies and the multinationals have not always been one hundred per cent successful. This is particularly true with the mass market titles you may have seen in bookshops. The same can be true of the university presses – especially in regard to highly priced academic

titles aimed at the scholarly market (there are some, albeit few, exceptions to this). My plea therefore remains the same; if any members or readers have connections in publishing, please make the SOFNAM committee aware of any possible connections or contacts we may use to advantage. I am given to understand that this Review is well-received in circles well beyond our membership; it is to be hoped that we can help in a small way to help with publicising the museum and its work in this way.

In April, I attended the Annual General Meeting of the Society for Army Historical Research (SAHR) of which I am a member and, of course, is an organisation with close ties to our Museum. At this meeting the Templer Gold Medal for the book of the year on a British Army theme is awarded. The winner this year was Professor Richard Vinen's comprehensive study "National Service: A Generation in Uniform 1945-63" (Published by Viking-Penguin). This has been garlanded and widely reviewed already; a review will follow here in a later edition. However, the keynote speaker at the event was Professor Brendan Simms of Cambridge University, discussing his recent short work "*The Longest Afternoon: The 400 Men Who Decided the Battle of Waterloo*". This book covers the defence of La Haye Sainte by a combined British and German force right in Wellington's centre. The talk was compelling; the book is an extremely well-constructed, engrossing read. I do have some Waterloo titles promised to me, so I ask for your forbearance until they arrive and can be read.

*Phil Mc Carty*  
*Book Reviews Editor*

## A FAR FROM MODEL END

*"The Last Ironsides: The English Expedition to Portugal, 1662-1668"* by Jonathon Riley (Helion and Co, Solihull 2014) 222pp. Illus. Index. Maps. ISBN 978-1909982208 Hbk. £25

This impressive volume gives one pause in two aspects; firstly it is another nail in the coffin of that tired old saw that all history has been written, especially of the British Army and its antecedents. Secondly, one can only wonder where the author, who retired as a Lieutenant General in 2009 having been Commander of British Forces in Iraq amongst other senior postings, finds the time, space and energy to produce such a work amidst so many other demands. It would stand as a PhD thesis.

Following the Restoration, King Charles II sought to "marry well" and strengthen alliances. He married Catherine of Braganza, the Infanta of Portugal. This brought with it numerous valuable concessions (including Tangiers) . In return Charles agreed to support Portugal's war for independence from Spain. This also provided him with what seemed to be a neat solution for his problem in how to deal with the remnants of the Cromwellian Army not disbanded after the restoration; send them as an expeditionary force. A shortage of cavalry led to the force being fleshed out by Royalist regiments of horse. At first, spirits were high and there was a sense of mission; it was a multinational force with French, Spanish and Portuguese troops alongside the British (a genuine term, as many of the infantry came from Cromwell's Scottish New Model Army). Tensions of command would arise, leading to the British being placed under the charge of a French Huguenot General. The troops fought well and made a key contribution to Portugal's liberation from Spain. However, their reward was to be forgotten or posted to Tangiers (thus providing the bedrock for the modern British Army and its regiments of foot; the 2nd, later The Queen's Regiment, would trace their origins here). The latter was a virtual death sentence.

The book is structured into twelve chapters; the first three set the overall political scene from 1580, the treaties with Portugal and the raising of the English Brigade. We then follow the early actions of the brigade; five chapters analyse specific campaigns in the war from 1663-1665. The war is then taken into Spain, and two final chapters examine the latter campaigns of 1667-1668. There are two appendices; one traces the British officers and their backgrounds, the other an enlightening indication of the daily pay rates. Officers suffered no deductions

(a Surgeon, indeed, received an extra two shillings and sixpence on top of his four shillings a day to allow for a horse) but private soldiers were stopped a fifth of their ten pence.

As we track through this impeccably researched work, we find that the travails of coalition warfare are far from a recent phenomenon. Under-resourced troops performing beyond shortages of supplies and war fighting materiel; diplomatic action and scheming out of touch with realities on the ground; scratch forces formed in urgent necessity from among what was available, not necessarily being the best. With "mission accomplished" with the recognition of Portuguese independence in the Treaty of Lisbon in 1668, the French commander hastily withdrew with his forces, owed considerable back pay by those he had fought for, leaving his son commanding the British brigade, a force much diminished by casualties. It was proposed, as long as deficiencies and pay were made good, that a British brigade could remain behind in Spanish service. But the strategic wheel had turned and King Charles was now looking more to alliance with France. Evacuating the Brigade from the newly independent Portugal was not straightforward; arrears of pay (some soldiers had not been paid for nearly a year) and promises needed to be made good. The final five hundred troops would not return until September 1668 – and were immediately placed into garrison duty. For the officers, opportunities were few given the contraction of the Army after the Second Dutch War and a purge of Catholic officers obliged by Parliament only added to a sense of abandonment. Without doubt, this is a neglected corner of British military history; unduly so, as the roots of the modern British Army sprang from here. The use of sources cannot be faulted; General Riley's holding of a PhD is clearly evident in the quality of the research and the writing. If one were being mischievous, one might think there is an element of an historical mirror being held up to the recent past, but that would be unfair to a work which stands squarely on its own merits. A specific area, but well worth the read. PJM

## INDIAN ARMY, INDIAN OFFICERS

*"Swords Trembling in their Scabbards: The Changing Status of Indian Officers on the Indian Army, 1757-1947"* by Michael Creese (Helion, Solihull 2015) 203pp. Illus. Index. ISBN 978-1909982819 Hbk. £29.95

The study of both the British Army in India, and of the Indian Army itself under the Raj could be

said to be enjoying a new dawn of interest amongst authors and academics. Two of the prize-winners at the Society for Army Historical Research's awards this year were for studies on such subjects. I also know personally of two PhDs being undertaken on the Indian Army in the Second World War.

Michael Creese's book, adapted from a PhD thesis for the University of Leicester in 2007, seeks to examine the role of native Indian officers across the period of the Raj. (The original thesis began after the Indian Mutiny and ends at 1918; it has been extended here to take account of the pre-1857 period and changes from the inter-war period up to 1947). Perhaps wisely the author has not sought to try and capture the entire swathe of the Indian Army but has instead used as his focus four Indian Cavalry regiments and tracked the fate and fortunes of their Indian officers. (However, some infantry regiments are used to illustrate points). There were inbuilt obstacles to native born officers in their careers; they were never permitted to command their regiments and even the most junior British subaltern had seniority over an Indian, regardless of the latter's length of service and experience.

The author notes that, in general, whilst Indian troops were recruited from the "martial" races with a reputation for being tough fighters, in parallel they were also among the less educated. This helped to reinforce a view, and later official policy, that Indian troops were not capable of senior command on this basis. However, those troops were seen to be an elite group within society and within the caste system. The author notes, however, that those Indian officers who were persuaded to join mutinous Sepoys in the 1857 Mutiny often proved more than able to command. Although a policy of avoiding recruitment from the regions from which mutineers had come, this would be unsustainable under the pressures of the First World War and again in the Second.

The chapter on the First World War indicates that some Indian officers could perform acts of initiative and courage despite their supposedly inferior education; the author also disputes some critical accounts which suggest that the Indian Corps 'failed' on the Western Front in 1914-15. However, after the Indian Army moved to climates it was more attuned to, such as the Middle East, it was found that what in peacetime was a realistic act of religious and cultural tolerance, allowing differing ways of preparing food, would cause logistical nightmares. Post-war, the relationship between the British and

Indians would require greater "Indianisation" of the Army, which would in turn require better training of Indian officers, including admission to Sandhurst, until an Indian Military Academy could be founded. Of course practical experience was constant, due to the continuing battles on the frontiers of India, especially in the North West.

The author transmits well the code of honour and loyalty felt by both officers and men to their regiments, their group and caste, and their British seniors. He also points out that the Indian Army had a sophisticated system for rewarding officers and men for gallantry long before the British Army had something comparable. He is also strong on the dynamic tension between those realising the need for reform and the reticence of the powers back in London. There are, however, some issues to this reviewer; as this is an expanded work in places it does not reflect some of the latest work on the development of the Indian Army, especially on the 1930s and the Second World War, as reflected in the work of the likes of Alan Jeffreys, Ashley Jackson and so on, although the bibliography does in fairness include sources written in India in recent times. In places the value of active service seems underplayed, especially in the inter war period. The feeling of this reviewer was also that the key source running through the book, a hitherto unpublished diary by Amar Singh, an Indian officer, was a slightly dual edged sword. It is a rich resource, written by an observant and cultured man with extensive field experience (he first saw action in China in 1900) and who happened to be associated with many of the key developments in the evolution of the officer corps. But this is the issue; in some ways he was quite atypical and in places is spikily hypercritical. Nonetheless, this volume is an important contribution to the canon which is developing and expanding and for that is welcome. PJM

### **CHARGING FOR WELLINGTON**

*"Gallantry and Discipline : The 12th Light Dragoons at War with Wellington"* by Andrew Bamford (Frontline Books, Bradford 2014) 256pp Illus. Index. ISBN 978-1848327436 Hbk. £25

Dr Andrew Bamford is an historian of Wellington's army who in his post-doctoral career has already produced four books on the subject – this is the third of them. (The fourth is an edited collection of an officer's letters which appeared soon after) . The 12th Light Dragoons (later the 12th Lancers, the 9th/12th Lancers and since May, The Royal

Lancers) had fought through the Peninsula with Wellington and were at Waterloo. This book draws on the regimental correspondence and the Standing Orders of the Regimental Colonel, General Sir James Steuart, who had striven to rebuild the regiment after the 1801 campaign and retained his interest in it (Steuart had had a lengthy career as a cavalry commander in Ireland). The Standing Orders had been recovered from a junk shop in Ireland by an officer in the regiment.

Throughout, Steuart would take his regiment seriously, often equipping the regiment and making good deficiencies occurred on service from his own pocket, incurring not inconsiderable costs. Losses due to action should have been made up by the War Office and the regiment reimbursed – but this was often an interminably slow process. Steuart was regimental colonel for over twenty years, even as his own career advanced to the rank of General. It is clear from the narrative that this consistency had its advantages, for all of Steuart's personal foibles and political battles.

The book has ten chapters, but falls generally into two halves. The first five set the scene for the regiment, its officers and men, ending with its early actions overseas. The second half covers its service under Wellington, including his great victory at Salamanca, through the Pyrenees and on to Waterloo. Dr Bamford calls the 12th's experience at Waterloo as "one of the great epics" of the day and portrays it vividly, challenging in places some criticism levelled at the regiment. The 12th would not return home until 1818.

Dr Bamford has compiled an account which will be of value not just to those with connections to the regiment as it gives a good sense of the issues and problems of recruiting, equipping and training all ranks in a late Georgian regiment, and backs it with carefully compiled statistics. It is all done in a lively writing style which constantly engages and shows the author's familiarity with his sources and his subject. Lesser authors would have rested on the laurels of the Steuart papers, but not here – primary sources have been used extensively. All in all a very rounded work and a very good read. PJM

### REVISING REVISIONISM?

*"Mud, Blood and Determination: A History of the 46th (North Midland) Division in The Great War"* by Simon Peale (Helion, Solihull 2015; Wolverhampton War Studies Series) 240pp. Illus. Index. Maps ISBN 978-1910294666 Hbk. £25

Martin Middlebrook's ground-breaking "The First Day of the Somme" is still, rightly, a best-selling book over forty years since its first appearance. As good as it is, however, historical research moves on and scholarship moves forwards. In particular, and a trigger for this book (adapted from the author's recent PhD thesis from the University of Birmingham ) is Middlebrook's acceptance that the performance of Major General Stewart-Wortley that day reflected his view that the attack was futile and wanted to protect his men from further slaughter. This, of course, is meat and drink to the "lions led by donkeys" school of thought and Haig's eventual dismissal of him used to underline the point that the latter was a dogged obstinate who refused to alter plans. However, those who think that this volume is simply another step along the path to restore Haig's reputation should be disabused; it is far more nuanced.

This book has eleven chapters and two appendices; the first three chapters review the division's working up for war and initial experience on the Western Front in 1915. Its brief sojourn in the Middle East is touched on in one chapter and then its return to France and service there for the rest of the war. 46th Division was made up of Territorial Force battalions from across the Midlands, but in its early formation suffered in some ways due to shortages of equipment and experienced troops to train it. It also had among its ranks a disproportionate number of coal miners. Regular NCOs with battle experience tended to be posted to the New Army divisions, given their mainly complete lack of experience.

The author's intent is to use 46th Division as a case study for the premise that the British Army embarked on a "learning curve" from 1915-1918 which saw it evolve from a massively expanded force taking its lessons, as it were, "on the job" to the homogenous, all-arms force which broke the German Army in the late summer of 1918. For this Division, the curve was steep at first; its attack on the Hohenzollern Redoubt in October 1915 did not go well, and animus between Haig and Stewart-Wortley took root; something the author suggests at least initially the root cause was misunderstanding by Haig. Furthermore, he asserts that Stewart-Wortley served under Corps commanders who personally "hated" him – unlikely to lead to a dispassionate assessment of his actions or worth. The Division's performance on the Somme – which the author treats with admirable balance – was perceived to be wanting and the divisional commander's fate was sealed.

However, by 1918 the division was functioning more successfully and was commended for its crossing of the St Quentin Canal.

The author draws his conclusions together at the end; that this division, a not particularly high-performing one at first, but perhaps not as bad as it has been portrayed, learnt, adapted and improved. By 1918 it was Territorial virtually in name only, looked more like a New Army Division and benefitted from officers with fighting experience. Many of these were likely to be commissioned from the ranks. He does not paint a picture where the Division was transformed into unremitting success by Stewart-Wortley's successor, Thwaites – he is cognisant of his failings also. (For the final drive to victory from September it was commanded by Maj Gen Boyd). Dr Peuple does not place Haig on the learning curve, asserting that he remained wedded to the idea of a breakthrough, rather than the developing “bite and hold” strategy.

As one would expect from an adapted PhD thesis, there is extensive use of primary sources to good effect; use of county record offices is a particular element here. The mapping is also particularly well done, by one of the country's best military cartographers. This reviewer found a couple of small irritations; the use of nouns as verbs in places jars, as do some patches (very few, however) of rather purple prose and some unnecessarily caustic phrases. Again, we have a short final passage tilting at the former Education Secretary's stance on the First World War (in his day job the author is a Head Teacher). Passages such as these, whatever their justification or merit, will only serve to date a book in the future. Nonetheless, this is an accomplished piece of research which works very hard to remain objective whilst making a case for the Division; again, commendations to Helion for making research of this quality available at a price accessible to all with an interest. PJM

## **THE FALKLANDS? AREN'T THEY OFF SCOTLAND?**

*“British Campaigns in the South Atlantic, 1805-1807”*  
by John D Grainger (Pen & Sword, Barnsley 2015)  
224pp. Illus. Index. Maps. ISBN 978-1783463640  
Hbk. £19.99

I hope those of you who are 1982 Falklands veterans are not offended by that light-hearted cross header; this was the genuine reaction of a colleague in the Military Studies Department at Manchester University on hearing of the Argentine invasion. I suspect he was not alone; and this was indicative of

how historically overlooked the South Atlantic had been. The author, another former teacher, will I hope not be offended when I say that he is possibly one of the most prolific writers of history of whom I had not heard; but when one considers much of his previous work has focussed on antiquity, this advance to the nineteenth century is not unwelcome.

Largely overlooked in the chronicles of the Napoleonic Wars, this volume examines the efforts made between 1805 and 1807 to apply what Liddell-Hart would call an “indirect approach” to weaken Napoleon's Dutch and Spanish allies by attacking their holdings of territory in southern Africa and South America. By attacking the Dutch colony in the Cape of Good Hope, it was felt that the sea lanes to India could be secured. Having taken the Cape, the Army commander General David Baird was prevailed upon by the Naval commander, Captain Home Riggs-Popham, to launch an expedition against the River Plate colonies of Spain. After initial success a small force which had taken Buenos Aires was besieged and forced to surrender, and its commander court-martialled. A later attack on Montevideo was successful, but an attempt to rescue those captured at Buenos Aires thereafter collapsed in the face of heavy resistance and led to the loss of Montevideo – and another court-martial. However, the recourse to military justice was not just the price of failure; both expeditions were essentially unauthorised actions by their commanders.

As one might hope or expect from an accomplished author, the organisation and style of the narrative is assured and highly readable. The sense of disorder when matters took a turn for the worse is palpable; the story of the surrender of the 71st Foot at Buenos Aires – where the British believed surrender would lead to evacuation, whereas their opponents had very different ideas indeed, is but one example. A simple narration of events would have been more than adequate, but the author is to be commended for taking the wider approach. Both commanders were Scots, Scottish regiments featured heavily in the actions, and the Scottish connection is examined. The appendices tracking the recruitment routes of the 71st and its activities are illuminating – there is even a graph listing average heights of its soldiers. The final chapters discuss how these actions lead to unforeseen consequences; the attacks in the River Plate lit a spark of liberationist fervour in South America, where former British prisoners would change sides to fight. An influx of Scottish Calvinists would,

the author contends, lead ultimately via a complex path to apartheid. The irony being that neither expedition was ultimately necessary; both were costly in terms of men, material and treasure and ruined two officer's careers.

Regular readers will know that one of my yardsticks in reviewing is the attention paid to primary historical sources. Secondary accounts have their place, but can lack authority. No such fear rests with this. The author has consulted widely in official records, private papers and academic works in constructing this book, including an article written by the author for the late and lamented *Army Quarterly* in 1993. Although one should not seek to assign excessive importance to these operations set against the wider canvas of the Napoleonic Wars, this is a welcome casting of light into a more obscure, if scandalous, corner of history. PJM

### **TOWERING WORK OF RESEARCH**

*"A Moonlight Massacre: The night operation on the Passchendaele Ridge, 2 December 1917 – The Forgotten Last Act of the Third Battle of Ypres"* by Michael LoCicero (Helion & Company, Solihull 2014: Wolverhampton War Studies Series, No.5) 517pp ISBN 978 1909982925 Illus. Index. Maps. Hbk. £29.95

This book, based on the author's PhD thesis but the product of a decade's work, is an excellent example of the possibilities opened by fastidious use of a wide spectrum of sources. Regular readers will again be familiar with this reviewer's disdain with terms such as "secret" or "forgotten" in book titles but the operation described here deserves the latter label.

The Third Battle of Ypres, or Passchendaele as it is more popularly known, raised the bar for losses and grinding struggle in a campaign that had already seen enough of both. The public perception tends to focus on the early stages of the battle in the summer when initial success, albeit partial, bogged down in mud. The British eventually dominated the Passchendaele Ridge by October, and the capture of Passchendaele village itself by the British and Canadians on 6 November, and the opening of the Battle of Cambrai on 20 November had allowed Haig to declare the offensive over and a success. That is where the conventional narrative ends, but it overlooks this final set-piece operation to secure the Salient. The author admits that this book is in an "unapologetically atypical format" for a battle narrative, and adds that his first encounter with it was in an unusually bitter description of it in a divisional

history written in the 1920s which described the operation as "futile" attacks for "meaningless pieces of trench". Language the post "Oh What A Lovely War" and "Blackadder" generations will be too familiar with, but for the time, astonishing.

Where this work is atypical is that it manages to be a rare thing – a genuinely operational study. Usually the gulf between the strategic end - the default setting of histories until the 1970s – and the tactical, focussed on soldiers rather than generals – the vogue since then - is a difficult one to traverse with any success. Dr LoCicero shows why; it takes a lot of sheer ruddy hard work. This attack lasted less than ten hours and employed tactics never used before on the Western Front but was an abject failure. It took place at night – a first - in bright moonlight with an alert enemy and no preparatory barrage. The attack ignored realities on the ground and reports from intelligence; was wasteful in lives and materiel and achieved little. Yet the author has managed judiciously to represent the viewpoints of the very senior down to the very junior and weave them into a tight narrative. At one end it sees the sufferings of individual soldiers and junior officers; at another he produces a balanced assessment of one of the Divisional commanders, Major General Cameron Shute – a fearsome martinet more recorded in the memory for AP Herbert's poem railing against "that s\*\*t Shute" .

There are six main chapters, each divided in sub-chapters (e.g. 1.2, 2.3 and the like); twenty one appendices, a large number of illustrations, a seventeen page bibliography and a multi-faceted index which breaks down units, people and places as the most useful do. There are also, in the book's centre maps which are a model of clarity (produced by the same cartographer as in Dr People's work on 46th Division mentioned above).

Perhaps the greatest success of this book, notwithstanding its deft mastery of narrative and sources both well-known and obscure is that the author always maintains balance. On the surface, this operation is perfect fodder for the "lions led by donkeys" lobby but only if they use this work in a highly subjective manner. My only word of reservation is that you should not expect this, as well written as it is, to be a light bedtime read. It demands – and deserves - your close attention. At the risk of sounding evangelical or repetitive, again Helion bring the best modern research to market at an accessible price and beautifully produced. Wholeheartedly recommended. PJM

## **SUPERIORITY OF FIRE**

*“Destructive and Formidable: British Infantry Firepower”* by David Blackmore (Frontline Books, Barnsley 2014) 217pp. ISBN 978-1848327689 Hbk. £25

When accepting this book for review, I was not aware that it was another publication derived from a Doctoral thesis – making this a running theme in this issue of the Supplement. Dr David Blackmore, formerly a Curator at the Royal Armouries, completed a PhD on this subject at Nottingham Trent University in 2012. We can therefore assume that it is based on thorough and innovative research – and closer reading affirms this.

From the period of the English Civil War, to the end of the Seven Years’ War in 1763, British infantry firepower developed and evolved to become the most effective on the battlefield. In the main, this would be used against the French, or opponents favouring French tactical methods. At the core of this success was the process of firing by platoons. Although tactical studies of separate periods within the timeframe of this book are not unknown – especially of the Marlburian period – this is the first title I can recall where an holistic approach is taken to the whole arc.

The central contention is that platoon firing did not simply emerge in the latter half of the seventeenth century and remain static until the 1740s, through the War of the Spanish Succession. Rather, it evolved gradually over the whole period, even if the underlying core tactical doctrine did remain constant, as technology changed. The author also argues that misconceptions have developed over the subject and seeks to address them. This has been done by comprehensive reference to contemporary manuscripts, personal accounts and regulations.

There are nine, mainly chronologically based, chapters. For this reviewer the stand-out chapters were those on the Seven Years’ War in Europe, and its contemporary on the French and Indian Wars in North America. The first notes the impression made on the British by the tactics of Frederick the Great and his Prussian Army, and how Wolfe developed combat power in the infantry. Yet in the latter chapter the author challenges blanket assessments giving universal credit to Wolfe – most of which are hinged on the conduct of the Battle of Quebec – and draws attention to the development of irregular warfare. This campaign also saw the beginnings of light infantry development. A final note in the conclusion draws the thread of history to the present,

comparing infantry “debussing” under fire in Iraq in good discipline. This, Dr Blackmore asserts, is due to the infantryman’s belief in the system and in themselves, which has endured. An important review recommended to those who study doctrine and tactics. PJM

## **INTO THE SEA OF SAND**

*“The Eyes of the Desert Rats: British Long-Range Reconnaissance Operations in the North African Desert 1940-43”* by David Syrett (Helion and Company, Solihull 2014) 330pp. Illus. Index. Maps. ISBN 978-1907677656 Hbk. £35

Behind the lines operations in the Western Desert can hardly be described as an overlooked field in the literature of the war. A great many volumes have appeared and continue to do so, attracted by the unconventional nature of the special forces war conducted across vast distances in difficult and trying conditions, often in the face of official disregard. (Montgomery, for example, refused to allow any of the reconnaissance or raiding forces to recruit from across Eighth Army when he took command). The quality can hugely variable; from personal accounts focussed on derring-do published when the official records were still closed, to more modern, considered accounts. Yet most of them are stove piped; the Long Range Desert Group. Or the Special Air Service. Or No.1 Demolition Squadron – better known as “Popski’s Private Army”. I recall in my teens having both Peniakoff’s account of his PPA and Roy Farran’s “Winged Dagger” passed on by my father, a “desert” veteran of Palestine after the war’s end. But for all these works, few have taken the efforts of these special forces in the round; Professor Syrett’s book does just this.

Firstly, however, we are fortunate to have it at all. Professor Syrett passed away at the tragically early age of 65 in 2004. Whilst he held a visiting professorship at the US Army Command and General Staff College, the majority of his writing concerned naval matters, and the history of the Royal Navy in particular. In 1990, he started working on the manuscript of this book – originally conceived as a study purely of the LRDG, later expanded, but it was unfinished at his death. We owe thanks to his widow Elena and a former colleague, Colonel David Glantz (perhaps better known to some as the doyen of Soviet Army studies) for its completion.

An early chapter reminds us of an all too common historical phenomenon in British military endeavour; the acquisition of skills during war for

them to be forgotten or lost in the peace. During the First World War, the British had had experience of using vehicles in the desert with Light Car Patrols against the Turks and in post war campaigns in Iraq with Armoured Car Companies of the Royal Tank Corps. In between the wars, Army officers took part in expeditions across the deserts under the auspices of the Royal Geographical Society. One of these officers, Major Ralph Bagnold of the Royal Signals, would become one of the great desert explorers - and have the basic idea for long range desert patrolling. (Bagnold also developed a sun compass vital for desert navigation which bears his name). The LRDG's early endeavours through 1940 and 1941 are comprehensively documented, warts and all, as it engaged in not only patrolling and road watching - lying in wait surveying enemy traffic (much hated by the men) , but also in geographical intelligence as maps were ancient or non-existent and there was little local knowledge by the indigenous population to assist. There was also a constant struggle to man the unit with soldiers and officers of sufficient calibre.

The SAS makes its appearance in Chapter Six, and in fairness there is little here that is new, but it does successfully outline the differences in approach; it also has a more measured view of the senior SAS figures than one may find in the more 'popular' end of the market. The author also remarks on the business of raising mayhem in the enemy rear may be the stuff of films and fiction, but this often obscures its serious purpose and the skill in its execution. From here, the author expresses well how the LRDG and the SAS complemented each other's operations especially as 1942 moved towards Montgomery's El Alamein and the end game in Africa.

In his conclusions, Professor Syrett touches on the inherent contradiction of the special forces war in the Western Desert. The intelligence gained and the destruction wreaked on the enemy's lines of communication was out of all proportion to the numbers of men involved in its execution, yet the Germans never really diverted front line troops to prevent or interdict LRDG/SAS operations, suggesting lack of concern at the strategic level. One unit which did appear to have a mission to disrupt their activities appears to have been ineffectual whilst putting the British on guard. This is not a starry-eyed analysis; in the final sum Professor Syrett states that whilst the ability to gather intelligence, acquire skills in navigation which aided the conduct of wider offensive action, and to insert and recover

intelligence agents from behind enemy lines, senior commanders never fully appreciated their capabilities or formed a coherent policy for their use. Montgomery, for example, forbade the SAS in particular from recruiting widely across Eighth Army after he assumed command, though "the boy Sterling" to be mad – but was happy to accept the results if they helped his offensive plan.

This is the well-researched, rounded and balanced account of long-range reconnaissance and raiding in the Western Desert that has been needed and lacking for a long time. Unfortunately a couple of regrettable typos have snuck into the text which do not detract from its value, but do jar on the eye – the El Alamein battle ended in November 1942, not 1943, for instance. Some commentators decry the disproportionate commitment of scarce resources and better quality manpower to such "private armies" in World War Two, suggesting it was to the detriment of the Army as a whole. This account suggests that the LRDG's contribution to the desert victory should not be so casually dismissed. It is difficult to foresee this work being bettered. PJM

