

# Jiggered about Beyond Belief

## Layforce 1941



In Memory of 2819656 John Orton  
Seaforth Highlanders  
Haifa, June 1941

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with  
Mike Beckett

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# Preface

These pages are dedicated to the memory of my father 2819656, Private John Orton of the Seaforth Highlanders.

During the Second World War John was one of those extraordinary 'Volunteers for Special Service of a Hazardous Nature' who formed our early Commando units. He served with No.11 (Scottish) Commando, from formation in June 1940, until disbandment. On the 28<sup>th</sup> August 1941 John became an 'Original' member of 'L' Detachment Special Air Service Regiment – but that is another story.

There is comparatively little official information available concerning the activities of No.11 (Scottish) Commando during the Second World War. This is also true of the other units of Layforce, with whom No.11 (Scottish) Commando served in the Middle East. War Diaries can be found in the Public Record Office at Kew, though they are not as extensive as those of other Commando units. Most of my account is therefore based on tape-recordings; discussions and accounts prepared by veterans, sometimes many years after events took place.

A bibliography is provided, detailing the major published sources that I have consulted. As with any such history some mistakes may be found, though every effort has been made to ensure accuracy throughout.

I would like to thank Michael Beckett, a fellow enthusiast, who was intrigued with this story and has greatly assisted with editing and the provision of additional information.

Alan Orton  
May 2013

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# Introduction

Three Commandos raised in the United Kingdom were initially combined within Force Z for operations initially envisaged against Rhodes in the Eastern Mediterranean. These Commandos were No.7, No.8 (Guards) and No.11 (Scottish). Other elements of the Force included a number of men from No.3 Commando and the Canoe section of No.8 (Guards) Commando. They sailed from the Isle of Arran on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1941, and arrived at Suez on the 7<sup>th</sup> March.

A further three Commandos had been raised in the Middle East and were numbered 50, 51 and 52 (Middle East) Commandos. However these United Kingdom raised and Middle East raised Commando groups were quite distinct, operating under different commands, and having very different structures. By the time Force Z arrived at Suez it had been decided that the designation Force Z should be changed to Layforce (in deference to its Commanding Officer - Robert E Laycock) and for security reasons all reference to the word 'Commando' should be dropped.

The units were therefore renamed as follows:

No.7 Commando > A Battalion  
No.8 Commando > B Battalion  
No.11 Commando > C Battalion

Layforce was also placed under command of 6th Division (Major General JF Evetts)

Three days later the force arrived at Geneifa, the place to which No.50 and No.52 Middle East Commando had recently returned from Crete and Operations in East Africa respectively. Both of these Middle East Commandos were amalgamated and joined Layforce as follows:

50/52 Commando > D Bn Layforce.

It is noted that No.51 (Middle East) Commando was still in action in Abyssinia until October 1941; being disbanded on return to Egypt soon afterwards. By that time, the remnants of Layforce also faced reorganisation, along with those of No.51 (Middle East) Commando. This account explains, in further detail, how these circumstances arose.

Throughout this record of events relating to Layforce, it will be found that both 'Commando' and 'Layforce Battalion (Bn)' references are used - in some instances they are interchangeable, otherwise they provide a link back to the name under which the unit was originally raised.

I have tried to keep the narrative for each of the units of Layforce separate and in chronological order. However where units fought together, such as No.7 Commando (A Bn Layforce) and 50/52 Commando (D Bn Layforce) while on Crete, some overlapping is inevitable. The reader will therefore find some repetition and will I hope excuse the fact that the deeds of 50/52 Commando (D Bn Layforce) are woven in with those of the British raised Commando elements of Layforce, rather than being kept distinct. This is not intended to detract from the contribution made by men from the Middle East raised 50/52 Commando who had been involved in individual unit actions before absorption into Layforce.

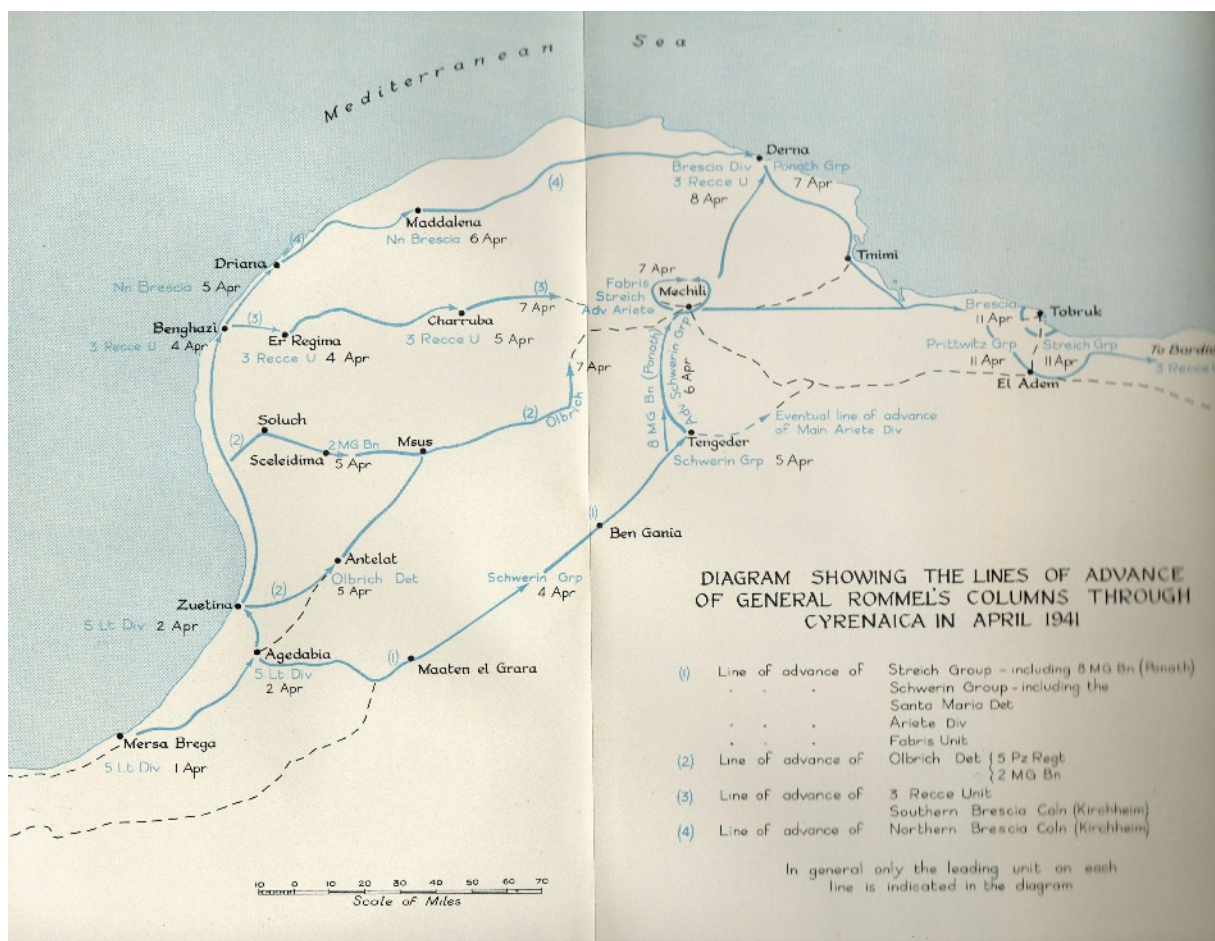
# Maps

The following maps are taken from I.S.O. Playfair, Major-General, C.B., D.S.O., M.C., The Mediterranean and Middle East vol ii, History of the Second World War, United Kingdom Military Series (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office. 1956)

Map 1: Central and Eastern Mediterranean Theatre of War



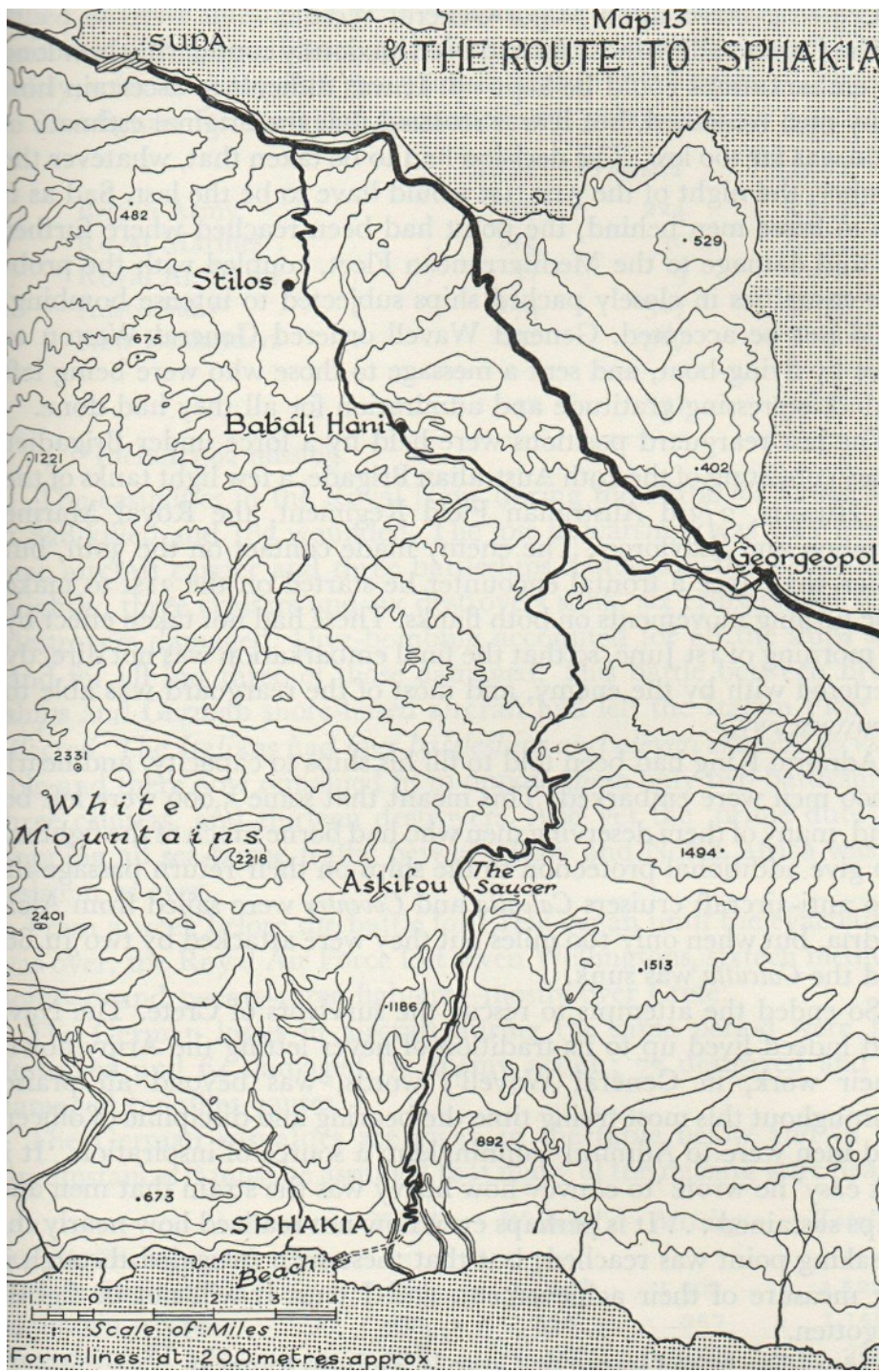
Map 2: The Advance of Axis Forces under General (later Field Marshal) Erwin Rommel – April 1941



Map 3: Southern Greece and the Island of Crete

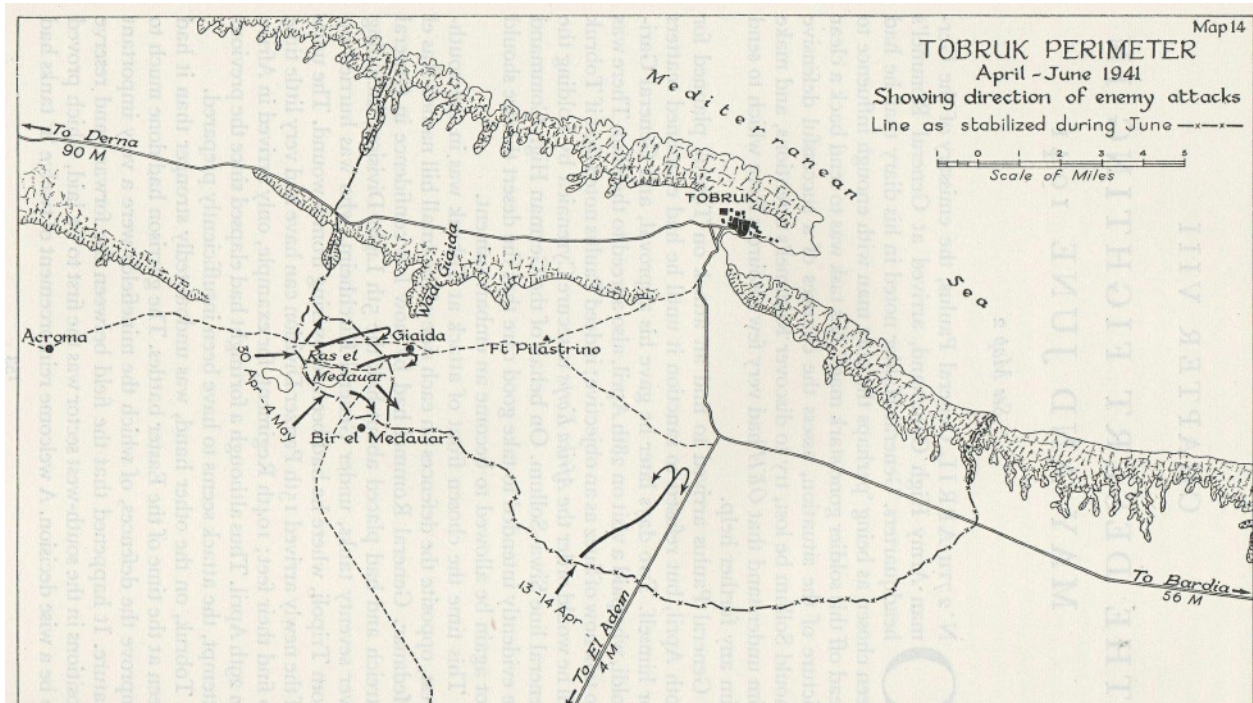


Map 4: The Allied Evacuation of Crete – Withdrawal to Sphakia





Map 5: The Tobruk Perimeter – April to June 1941



Map 6: South-Western Syria – Mid 1941



# Layforce 1941

The deployment of Layforce, those men of the three Commandos, 7, 8 (Guards) and 11 (Scottish) and 50/52 was a shambles. Woefully under employed and recoiling under the constant cancellation of so many operations, they could perhaps be compared to the modern day National Health Service.

Those operations that did go ahead were ill planned hasty affairs that would cost them dear, and ultimately bring about their disbandment

Sent to the Middle East in January of 1941 they met up with 50/52 Commando. Full of hopes and expectations they, through no fault of their own, paid the price of a command who in reality had no clear vision of their use. Due to lack of trained troops in the theatre and with so many lost in the ill fated Greek campaign, Layforce found themselves in the Army Reserve with some staff officers calling for them to be reconstituted as basic infantry soldiers.

Despite diverse employment, with one raid on Bardia, holding the line at Mersah Matruh, small scale operations within the besieged port of Tobruk, minor operations off the coast of Turkey, the covering of the withdrawal and evacuation from Crete, garrisoning Cyprus and the invasion of Syria, they had little to show for them-selves. By July 1941 Dudley Clarke, one of the founders of the Commando concept in the United Kingdom, but then posted to Egypt, wrote "I am afraid that the history of the Special Service troops out here in the Middle East has been a sad one".

Layforce, or to some Be-Layforce, was never given the real chances that they needed but did show what good trained soldiers could achieve with good leadership and high motivation.

## No.7 Commando (and Nos. 50/52 Commando) 'Colvin's Command'

In the time leading up to the loss and evacuation of Crete in May 1941, Britain and her allies from the Commonwealth and those that had escaped from German occupation had not fared well. Evacuation from Norway just after the withdrawal of the B.E.F. from Dunkirk in June 1940; further evacuations on not such a grand scale to extricate 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division which ended in failure (although some of its men were able to get away from various French ports such as Le Harve and Dieppe); and of course the eventual return of the second B.E.F. from France which had ended by the last days of summer with much loss including the sinking of the Lancastria with, according to some accounts, up to 4000 casualties. The Battle of the Atlantic, which had started on the first day of war and would become the longest campaign, was not going well. Neither was Bomber Commands attempts to bomb Germany. German wildlife and livestock had more to fear than its citizens did in these early days. There were victories though, few they may have been but victories all the same. Goering's Luftwaffe defeated over the skies of Britain thereby ending any hope of invasion. Mussolini's armies sent packing in East Africa. An 'ad hoc' force that overcame the besieging German backed Iraqi forces had relieved Habbanyia in Iraq. The war in the Western desert was not going well - all of the gains made from Wavell's advance had been lost with the introduction of the German Africa Korps, Tobruk was cut off, and to add to the problems faced by Wavell he had lost many experienced men and units to go to Greece. The reward for our intervention there was yet another evacuation, with many of those evacuated troops ending up on the island of Crete.

Crete was soon to become the centre of a further pitched battle, with the landing of German airborne troops on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1941. Towards the end of the fighting on the besieged island A and D battalions of the soon to be defunct Layforce were despatched to help hold the line pending further reinforcements being sent not only to bolster the defences but to drive out the German forces. This plan would soon change. The New Zealanders who were defending Maleme withdrew and left the way open for the Germans to make great gains. A and D Battalions would then according to the new plan retake Maleme and once the situation was stable would launch raids against the enemy forcing them back and hopefully causing them to evacuate. However, things were to turn out very differently.

A Battalion Layforce, or 7 Commando, had completed an operation in April 1941 at Bardia not truly a successful one, but certainly not a failure, and providing lessons for the future. 7 Commando had been raised from Regiments based in the eastern counties of the U.K. throughout the summer of 1940 and had gone to the Middle East in January 1941 along with 8 (Guards) Commando and 11 (Scottish) Commando along with a few other troops as part of Layforce under the command of Brigadier Laycock. Represented within their ranks were over 50 different regiments or corps.

The original plan to raid Bardia came to nothing due to adverse weather conditions, a rising sea, and the possibility that the party had been spotted by the enemy. Nevertheless, General Head Quarters of the Western Desert Force stated that their plans, conceived on the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1941, must go ahead and so a revamped set of operational orders were quickly put together and issued.

The raid on Bardia was now scaled down. It would no longer include Lt. Colonel Dick Pedder's 11 (Scottish) Commando, or the 4 troops comprising of around 150 men from 8 (Guards) Commando, under Major Lord Sudeley of the Royal Horse Guards, who would have raided Bomba. The raiding party though would involve 1 officer and 19 other ranks taken from volunteers from the Royal Tank Regiment, whose roll would be to put to use any enemy Armoured Fighting Vehicles that may be captured, and destroy them once they were ready to withdraw.

A meteorological report produced by Brigadier Laycock forecast 4 days of fine weather. The plan was postponed for only 24 hours, and would now go in on the night of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> April 1941 but with no men from the 'Scots' or 'Guards' Commandos.

7 Commando was raised in June 1940 with the first troops formed in several locations, A troop was at Gamblingay under the command of Captain Wylie, Royal Engineers, who would later become the Commandos second in command and the H.Q. troop were in and around Billericay in Essex. Some of B troop were in St. Albans whilst the rest of the troop were to be found in Newmarket under the command of Captain G. March Phillipps who would later become the officer in command of 62 Commando. The officers had been selected first and they in turn interviewed the aspiring Commando volunteers. Due to 7 Commandos dispositions they could not train in any other fashion than a rather ad hoc way. Those men who were at Newmarket trained as half a troop and engaged in marching and exercising, pretty much anything that their officers could think of to broaden their aspect, especially with sea landings expected to be at the fore front.

A pit locally known as 'The Flash' a 200 yard long piece of water was selected for the men to swim in, or to quickly learn how to swim if they could not. They all found that shortly they would be swimming in full battledress. By July of 1940 the commando had mustered at Felixstowe. Lieutenant Colonel Dudley Lister of The Buffs, took command with Headquarters based in a School in Station Road. His staff included Charles Vaughan, a Troop Captain, who later became Commandant at Achnacarry. Some men were billeted in the dance hall on the pier; all now trained on a much larger scale. Although the area was 'wired off' they gathered on the beaches for exercises in demolitions, beach landings and various forms of combat.

More troops had come from regiments stationed in the eastern counties of England to bring them up to strength. Most of the other ranks were given an allowance and were billeted with local families, who received monies from the Commandos and a ration card in return for 'Board and Lodgings'. They would parade daily in a local schoolyard for drill and Physical Training (P.T.)

From here the Commando moved to Girvan, Ayrshire in Scotland and engaged in night training, tracking and other exercises along with other Commando units. In December 1940 they moved to Inveraray for boat training. These boats were of the flat bottomed type unlike those that they would soon encounter on the 'Glen' ships transporting them to the Middle East. They trained hard in the art of landing from the sea, under simulated fire from the shore.

They learnt about a planned Operation in the Eastern Mediterranean and were given embarkation leave, but on their return they were told by Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes that 'The right time had passed' and that the operation had been cancelled. How the men felt can easily be imagined, as by this time they were actually embarked on two of the 'Glen' liners ready for the voyage. Once disembarked the men were moved to Arran. The Operation is likely to have been 'Workshop', seeking capture of the Italian Island of Pantellaria, located between Sicily and Tunisia and 150 miles north-west of Malta.

Other proposed operations in the theatre included occupation of Rhodes and actions in the Dodecanese. At this time Glenearn was undergoing trials and would not be available until 30 December. As such the Glengyle and Glenroy were proposed as transports, each with 950 troops on board. Approval, postponement, resurrection and cancellation of operations such as Workshop not only frustrated the Commandos, but also Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes, who as Chief of Combined Operations desperately sought active employment for his men.

The Middle East would soon beckon, and after a month on the Isle of Arran No.7 Commando was given 2 weeks Christmas leave. Many men, on trying to return to Arran, found that due to the weather conditions they were just unable to get there. Those that did get there found themselves now ready to go to war. To compensate for those lost due to the transport delays men from 4 Commando were brought in to flesh out their ranks. They formed part of Layforce where for security reasons they were re-designated as A Battalion in early January 1941.

They sailed as a Commando with a high morale and great pride in their unit, their officers had told them though that they should still retain their parent regimental pride and so they were a keen well spirited bunch. Along with half of 11 (Scottish) Commando they sailed to the theatre on the Glengyle, the other half of 11 (Scottish) and 8 (Guards) Commando were on the Glenroy. The Glenearn joined them and carried troops of the Royal Marine Mobile Naval Base Defence Organisation (M.N.B.D.O.).

From Scotland out into the Atlantic down to Freetown and Cape Town and Durban they sailed. The men's quarters during the voyage was the spaces normally used for cargo and these became their mess decks, they all slept in hammocks which had to be taken down when not in use to enable the men to get about. Washing and toilet facilities were most rudimentary and the food nothing much to talk about, all in all though the men were not really uncomfortable and made the best of it.

Once through the Red sea known to many of those who suffered the intense heat here as 'The Sweat Sea' and the Suez Canal the Commando disembarked and was given a short 2 day leave in Cairo before they moved off to their new home at the Commando Depot at Geneifa by the Bitter lakes. Here they were surprised to learn of the men from 50/52 Commando, more commonly known as the Middle East Commando.

After acclimatisation, the men trained in the desert adapting to the new terrain learning to use depressions and not hedges as cover and for movement. They learnt of the 'Senussi Blanket' or Jerb, a blanket they was naturally coloured but would very easily merge into the surroundings, and although hot and uncomfortable to use they proved to be well worth their weight in gold.

Vehicles they found were painted pinks and ochre's which stood out like a store thumb at 10 yards, but at a distance they blended in so well only a very experienced eye could detect them. Possibly 5827448 Private Harry Paternoster of the Suffolk regiment was their first casualty. He died on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1941, and is buried in the Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery.

As was the norm for British troops based overseas 7 Commando used the local population for the menial tasks around their camp but one enterprising individual, upholding the traditional thieving from their employers, made off with the complete contents of their medical stores. They learnt this lesson the hard way. 'Old Sweats' had told them, "Never trust the natives!". They learnt of lizards, snakes, scorpions, and then Bardia.

With the weather conditions now favourable the Glengyle weighed anchor and set sail at 02.30 hrs on the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup> April and at 15.30 hrs the operational orders were issued. The object was defined as 'harassing the enemies Lines Of Communication and inflicting as much damage as possible on supplies and material'. Bad weather on the 16<sup>th</sup> April had caused the abandonment of an earlier attempt to raid Bardia.

There were to be 4 beaches on which 7 Commando were to be landed, these being A, B, C and D respectively. The men who were to take part in the raid were split into 7 detachments, with each detachment including 2 or 3 men of the Royal Tank Regiment, as mentioned previously.

1, 2, 3 and 4 detachments comprising 200 all ranks were to land on A beach, 5 detachment with 70 all ranks were to land on B beach. A further 70 all ranks from 6 detachment were allocated C beach and 35 all ranks from 7 detachment were to land on D beach. Including those from the Royal Tank Regiment, around 395 army personnel were to be involved in the operation.

Major Roger Courtney, Commanding Officer of a section of canoeists originally attached to 8 (Guards) Commando, was to launch a folbot party on arrival at the rendezvous in H.M. Submarine Triumph. They duly arrived at a point bearing 13 degrees and 2 and ½ miles off Bardia and were to show a fixed white light to seaward between the bearings 350 through north to 110 an arc of 120 degrees. The wind subsided, and it was deemed favourable for a landing, but it was doubted whether a folbot could be launched. Efforts were made to establish a light on an islet, and one canoe was duly lost. They were then delayed in reaching their 'flashing position', but reached it only 15 minutes late at 21.45. H.M. Submarine Triumph had also been attacked by an R.A.F. aircraft on their journey.

H.M.S. Glengyle had been escorted from Alexandria by the anti aircraft cruiser H.M.S. Coventry and the destroyers Stuart, Voyager and Waterhen. They had received air raid warnings during the voyage but had not come under any attack. Arriving at the rendezvous (which was 30 degrees 49' north, 25 degrees 08' east) on time, they waited for the signal from Triumph which they duly received, albeit 15 minutes behind schedule.

Launch time was set to occur at 22.05 hrs. Launching of the Landing Craft (L/C) caused some problems and one could not be launched at all causing a partial delay. However, the time was made up, but the one L/C designated for B beach ended up on A beach, which would cause some problems later. Those 35 men from 7 detachment landing on D beach were 10 minutes late arriving, and there were problems actually getting the men close enough to the shore, so in the end they had to wade waist deep through the sea.

The men of 1 detachment on A beach were tasked with securing and holding the beach and this was achieved with no problems. They also successfully held and covered the withdrawal, although one officer, 105317 Lieutenant Donald Percy Passmore, was killed. Fred Birch, No.7 Commando, in a recorded interview stored in the archives of the Imperial War Museum, recalled that he was shot when he failed to respond to one of the sentry's calls. He died of his wound after being evacuated to the Glengyle. Lt. Passmore, a replacement for No.7 Commando from the Northamptonshire Regiment, was the first battle casualty of Layforce.

2 detachment were to establish a block on the road triangle at point 515397 in order to intercept any enemy motor transport, but none were detected and they subsequently withdrew at the allotted time. 3 detachment were ordered to attack the 'square' camp and to destroy any enemy material they could find. The camp though was unoccupied, and the only material that they could find was a dump of motor tyres which they destroyed with incendiary bombs and left burning for many hours. On the withdrawal one of the two parties involved reached the beach but the second lost its way and found themselves on B beach; but as no L/C's had landed here they were left high and dry. A decision was made to head for Sollum, but 20 of the men found their way to C beach and were picked up there. Italian radio later stated that it had taken many prisoners from the remainder.

4 detachment were to raid Bardia itself from the south but they found the town unoccupied, and with no time to play with returned to the beach, re-embarking without incident.

5 detachment due to land on B beach landed in error on A beach and so were unable to fulfil its task of raiding Bardia from the north.

On C beach 6 detachment landed in 2 L/C's and were due to demolish the road bridge at point 51853959, destroy the pumping station and reservoir, and crater the road. They were scheduled to land at 23.30 but did not arrive until 23.50 and then with only 1 L/C. The detachment commander acted quickly and revised his plans on the spot, sending a small party to the pumping station with the remainder ordered to destroy the bridge. They arrived at 01.00 hrs but time was running out. The second party from this detachment, along with men from the second L/C, now arrived and attempted to crater the road at point 51843957. As the rock road was so hard, they only achieved a small crater.

Back at the bridge, with a small party covering the main party, preparations for demolition were made under the command of Kenneth Wylie. The bridge had a road base of 2" to 3" macadam and was carried by 12" by 12" timber baulks supported on wooden trestles. A charge of 72 lbs was set and detonated which rendered the bridge impassable for motor transport although it was still able to be crossed on foot. The demolitionists then returned and doused the remains with petrol and set fire to it. There was no time left to assess the results as they had to return to C beach for re-embarkation.

Landing on D beach, 7 detachment set out to destroy coastal defences and anti aircraft guns but none were found. This included point 52033960 at which a mobile gun had reportedly been in action just a few days earlier. However, they did find four 5.9" guns and removed their firing mechanisms before destroying the breeches with charges of gelignite. They then returned for re-embarkation.

There were problems on re-embarkation as the speed of the L/C's was reduced by sand clogging up the cooling systems, one L/C on A beach had become stranded and had to be destroyed where it lay. The fact that the L/C's had no compass's caused some delays heading back to the Glengyle lying some 4 miles offshore. One got lost on its return trip and finally landed at Tobruk at 16.05 hrs on the 20<sup>th</sup> April some 60 miles to the west. About 45 soldiers were left ashore. The Glengyle finally left for Alexandria at 05.00 hrs one hour later than scheduled.

Although not actually a failure, the operation was not deemed a great success but lessons were learned. The mother ship was thought to have been laying too far off shore. The withdrawal of the men should have taken a higher priority than it did, guides should have been left to assist in this but the priority had lain only in the finding of the targets. Reserve landing craft should have been made available to cover for any accidents or mishaps and better equipment should have been at hand including compasses.

Strategically it did have some success as the Axis forces had to divert from other duties the better part of a brigade from Sollum to Bardia, which in turn relieved pressure on Sollum.

For the men involved from 7 Commando it would have enhanced their morale, and proved they could do the job tasked to them. 11 (Scottish) and 8 (Guards) would now know this as well, although only the 11<sup>th</sup> would take part in a full scale operation, with the 8<sup>th</sup> rotating troops through the siege of Tobruk.

The papers of the day reported a well-organised and successful attack, and lavished great praise on the men who had taken part, but in reality, this was just a morale booster for the success starved civilian population at home.

## **It is now time to introduce the Middle East Commandos who were closely linked with 7 Commando during Operations in Crete**

50 Commando were originally raised from 570 volunteers in theatre during September 1940 at the recently established Combined Training Centre at Kabrit, most probably H.M.S. Saunders. On the 29/30<sup>th</sup> October 1940 there were to attack the Seaplane Base at Bomba but was called off at the last minute when the news of the invasion of Greece was published. At the end of November they went to Crete as part of the garrison. They were located on the eastern part of the island, for operations against the enemy.

On the night of 16/17<sup>th</sup> January 1941 they embarked on a raid of the Dodecanese island of Kasos (Operation Blunt), but this was cancelled just as landing vessels were being lowered into the water. A second attempt was made on 17/18<sup>th</sup> February but this was equally abortive. The island of Castelorizzo, some eighty miles east of Rhodes and just three miles off the Turkish coast was a target that appealed to Admiral of the Fleet Sir Andrew Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean. He wanted to secure it as a motor torpedo boat base in support of subsequent operations in the Dodecanese.

Operation Abstention was therefore formulated with the aim to occupy and establish a base to challenge the Italian naval and air forces operating in the area. On the 24<sup>th</sup> February 1941 200 men set off for Castelorizzo aboard H.M.S.'s Decoy and Hereward accompanied by escorts including an Australian cruiser. The gunboat H.M.S. Ladybird would also take 24 Royal Marines. Two agents from Special Operations Executive (SOE) were also included within the British forces. The initial landing posed no problems and soon the Commandos had overrun the small Italian garrison and set up positions. The Italians responded with unexpected vigour and began to shell and bomb the small British force. The British plan was to land a company of the Sherwood Foresters to form a garrison, but Italian air and naval activity soon made this impractical and forced them to return to their base in Cyprus, though they hoped to resume their quest at a later date. The Italians were able to force a landing on several beaches of this tiny island and began to put the Commandos under pressure. Air attack damaged H.M.S. Ladybird who was short of fuel, and forced her to return to Cyprus together with her small contingent of Royal Marines.

This caused the Commandos another problem, as this boat was their only radio link and they now found themselves without communication.



Bombing and shelling was causing casualties leaving 3 dead and 7 wounded after one air raid. Now cut off and isolated on a small plateau on the east of the island the decision was made that their position was untenable, and with failure of the garrison to arrive from Cyprus their only option was to withdraw. Although most men were able to re-embark some were left behind and became prisoners of war. As the men passed by the old Venetian fort on the way to the dock one of the S.O.E. operatives called it 'Confused, incompetent, inept and a mess'. The soldiers carrying their weapons and equipment awaited evacuation amidst a total breakdown of communications. This lack of success brought scathing comment from Admiral Cunningham who remarked that it was 'A rotten business and reflected little credit to everyone'.

During the operations 2 days of fighting 50 Commando lost 32 men, either killed, wounded, prisoner of war or missing.

50 Commando returning to Crete left the island in March 1941, (being replaced in the garrison by the 1<sup>st</sup> Royal Welch Regiment) and were then based at Geneifa on the Suez Canal. It is whilst here that they were amalgamated with their comrades from 52 Commando.

52 Commando (who along with 50 Commando) was known as D Battalion Layforce was formed in 1940 from troops based in the Middle East theatre of operations. Under the command of Lt. Col. G.A.D. Young of the Royal Engineers, it had an establishment of 19 officers and 361 other ranks, formed into H.Q. and 3 Troops each consisting of 4 Sections.

In December 1940 they were in camp at Tuklein near Gallabat on the Sudan - Abyssinia border roughly 100 miles North West of Lake Tana and were attached to 9th Indian Brigade. During January 1941 their task was to patrol the enemy's northern flank. On the 8th they carried out a long distance raid on the enemy's lines of communications between Khor Kumar and Khor Abd-er Razzag but due to transport problems the raid was not deemed a great success.

A further raid into this area began on the 17<sup>th</sup> January when the Italians had withdrawn and they were to attack the Gondar road but on the 18<sup>th</sup> the guide lost his way and the attack was postponed until the 20<sup>th</sup>. Casualties in the operation, which ended on the 21<sup>st</sup>, were 2 killed, 3 wounded and 1 who was wounded and missing. Returning to Tuklein on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January, they spent much of February patrolling and taking part in an aborted raid, where a further 2 men were wounded.

By March 52 Commando were in Egypt where they amalgamated with 50 Commando, combining as 5 Companies, each Company having two 50-man troops. This restructuring brought consistency with the United Kingdom raised Commandos forming other Battalions of Layforce.

Lt. Col. George Young, Royal Engineers, was in overall command of 50/52 Commando (D Battalion Layforce). His Company Commanders were:

A Company – Captain K.E. Hermon – Durham Light Infantry

B Company – Captain C Parish – Royal Sussex Reg.

C Company – Captain W.J. Burton – York and Lancaster Reg

D Company – Captain R. Boyle – Black Watch

E Company - L.N.R. Wilson – Royal Sussex Reg.

Based at Geneifa they became D Battalion Layforce. In April they moved to Sidi Bishr on the outskirts of Alexandria, and on the 24<sup>th</sup> May embarked for Crete.

## 7 Commando (A Battalion Layforce) and 50/52 Commando (D Battalion Layforce) in Crete

After Bardia 7 Commando were under strength. They had lost 68 men on the operation, there were those who were sick, and there were no replacements in theatre to cover these losses. Their number could have been no more than 350. Together with D Battalion, these men assembled for embarkation at Alexandria on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 1941 for embarkation to Crete. During the voyage to the island the weather took a turn for the worst forcing the small fleet of ships to return to Alexandria. They were due to land at Selino Castelli (otherwise known as Paleochora) in the south west of the island, but on this occasion the poor weather proved somewhat fortuitous as the hard pressed Allied defenders of Crete were being forced back. If the Commandos of Layforce had landed, disaster would have awaited them. A 200 strong advance party from A Battalion Layforce did manage to land that night at Suda Bay and would now have to wait for their comrades to arrive.

Once the weather had abated the force set out once again and both Commando's were successfully landed at Suda Bay during the night of the 26<sup>th</sup>/27<sup>th</sup> May brought over the seas by the Destroyers H.M.S.'s Hero and Nizam, and H.M.S. Abdiel a fast mine laying Cruiser. The Abdiel, which had also transported the advance party of Layforce, would be last ship to leave Crete after the evacuation was completed. She was a very new ship and was actually engaged in her finishing exercises when pressed into service for her first task.

Layforce was designed primarily for mobile offensive purposes at close quarters; and were neither prepared nor equipped for the actions they would now have to take part in. The airfield at Maleme was already lost to the enemy, who now successfully poured in thousands of airborne reinforcements to the island. The situation of the Allied defenders had deteriorated rapidly, and restoring the situation was now not an option. The men of Layforce themselves had no heavy weapons or mortars to suppress the enemy apart from the Bren light machine guns, of which 7 Commando only had sixteen. They primarily relied on their Lee Enfield rifles. Despite these shortcomings, and with Creforce now in full retreat, the men of Layforce learned their role was to be that of covering the withdrawing army, effectively fighting a rearguard action. The goal was yet another evacuation. It was becoming a war of evacuations.

The members of the Commando's formed up and from stores that were lying about filled their pockets and pouches with as much .303 ammunition for their Lee Enfield's as they could cram in, tins of bully beef were thrust inside their shirts. Ammunition boxes containing Bren and Thompson magazines were loaded onto stretchers ready for 2 men to carry them to their positions. Many of the Commando's carried .45 Colt Automatic pistols, which had come over from America to England for use with these units. All around them, the confusion of men in retreat was all too apparent. To the men of the Commando's it seemed they were going in the wrong direction, before finally it hit them that disaster further forward was forcing men back for evacuation. The picture was grim, with battalions in the front becoming cut off and isolated ready for the Germans to finish them off.

D Battalion also known as Middle East Commando or 50/52 Commando were considered to be the better of the two Layforce units and were given the harder task in the rear guard action. No doubt, they had more experience in warfare from their time in the East African campaign, while A Battalion or 7 Commando had only their raid on Bardia to draw upon, and that was unopposed. Formed up on the Canea to Georgioupolis road they prepared to move off. After marching 6 miles to the east under constant air attack, they halted and prepared temporary positions. They then moved a further 12 miles to the south, and found themselves close to the Canea to Rethymno road near to Megala Khorion.

Here men of Young's D Battalion first engaged the enemy. This was the first part of the rearguard action they were to fight and Laycock objected that it was a poor position to defend. They were joined by 2 companies of Maoris and soon spotted a procession of motor cycle troops. They prepared to engage them, but not all of the German troops turned to attack them and the Maoris and Commandos held them up until midday. The Commando's from the mainly Spanish Republican troop of D Battalion considered this to be paramount to suicide, and fell back on some hastily prepared positions at Babali Hani.

To allow the 63 Spaniards to originally join No.50 Commando they were recruited into the ranks of the Queen's Royal Regiment (West Surrey).

Colvin's Commandos who had been left at Suda Bay to delay the enemy had by now fought 2 delaying actions with the support of 2 Matilda IIA tanks from B Squadron, 7<sup>th</sup> Royal Tank Regiment. Sadly, for the troops of 7 Commando these tanks were somewhat ineffective as their 2lb guns could only fire armour piercing shells. The strain on Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col) Colvin was telling, and Evelyn Waugh of No.8 (Guards) Commando who was acting as the Brigade Intelligence Officer reported the situation to Laycock. Consequently, Colvin was relieved of command, being replaced by Major Kenneth Wylie. Colvin was thought to be suffering from shell shock due to the almost incessant mortar fire and air attack and spent most of his time hiding away in what cover that he could find. He even ordered the withdrawal of his men for no apparent reason, which caused one of the troops from D Battalion to be cut off and either be killed or becoming prisoners of war.

In one of the actions the Commandos found the Germans positioned on a hill on their extreme left flank, which enabled them to bring down considerable fire onto the Commandos positions. To stem this problem the Commandos formed up and put in fierce counter attack primarily with the bayonet. The German defenders with no stomach for this type of fighting gave up their positions and pulled back. Leaving the Commandos the victors, but at a cost they could ill afford. Their second counter attack also went in with the bayonet, and again the German airborne troops prudently withdrew, stabilising our line temporarily.

In order to observe the fighting Laycock had set up his H.Q. at Babali Hani. However, as the situation deteriorated he and his Brigade Major, Freddie Graham, very nearly fell into German hands. Men from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Heavy Anti Aircraft Regiment, Royal Artillery were attached to Laycock's small H.Q. force to assist in the forthcoming struggle. The German mountain troops had cut the road between Stylos and Babali Hani and only the intervention of 2 Matilda tanks, which had come from Heraklion, saved them from becoming prisoners.

George Young's Commandos backed up with the remnants of the Australian 2/8 Battalion now fought an action against 2 battalions of German mountain troops. Mortared and machined gunned incessantly they held on until dusk before effecting a withdrawal to the Askifou plain where new positions were dug.

Rations were down to a quarter of a tin of bully beef and one and a half hard tack biscuits per man. A tin of 13 sausages would have to be shared between 27 men. These rations being made available by the Brigade Major Freddie Graham, water, or rather lack of it, was another problem. Foraging helped alleviate some of the hunger problems but thirst would be a constant companion as the withdrawal continued. Even the well trained Commando's were taxed by the conditions and sought a twenty minute rest each hour. With the carrying of extra ammunition and stores taking its toll on them, aching shoulders and sore feet left the men pretty much asleep on their feet. When halts were called, some fell out and instantly fell asleep, only to wake some hours later to find that their comrades had already left.

A Battalion, which had moved out on the morning of the 27th, had been dive bombed and machined gunned all the way to their positions and were relieved to be able to dig slit trenches for some protection. Soon they came under relentless mortar attack, which caused most of their casualties during the campaign apart from those unfortunate enough to be taken prisoner.

Without any air support, they courageously fought their rearguard action, as both New Zealand and Australian troops passed through their positions heading for the embarkation areas. After spending the day holding back the enemies infantry attacks and artillery bombardments they spent the night withdrawing to new positions through orange groves and passing many burnt out lorries and bodies sprawled about.

Eventually they would take up their last positions around Sphakia having covered a distance of some 20 miles from their first positions. The basic plan for the cover of the withdrawal was to initially hold a line for 24 hours, and during the night send out a few patrols to stir up the enemy who had a disinclination for any night activity. It was hoped this would then allow their withdrawal passing through the next prepared line. The following night the role would be reversed; those that had held the second line would withdraw through the line held by the men that had passed through them the previous night. It was a kind of 'leap-frogging' in reverse, as they fell back to the coast. The distance covered by each manoeuvre would be anything between 2 to 3 miles, and over the terrain that they had to cover sapped their strength considerably. The heat was intense and those who had blankets lay when possible under them, not only to keep off the heat of the sun, but also as camouflage from any marauding Luftwaffe aircraft. Much of the time, when in their positions, no lookouts were posted. Most of the men thought it wise to lay low, but this could prove costly as the enemy attempted to infiltrate their positions.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> May Major General Sir Bernard Freyberg V.C., overall Commander on Crete, spoke to Laycock - telling him that as he and his men were the last onto the island they would have to be the last off. On the 31<sup>st</sup> General Weston who gave the order for evacuation confirmed this. '(a) LAYFORCE positions not to be held to the last man and round but only as long as necessary to cover withdrawal of other fighting forces. (b) No withdrawal before order from H.Q. (c) Layforce to embark after other fighting forces but before stragglers.'

This confirmed that Laycock and his men would be the last fighting men off the island, if at all possible. However, Laycock himself was concerned that his personal capitulation, if it occurred, would leave both 11 (Scottish) Commando and 8 (Guards) Commando leaderless. In addition, he felt this would have an adverse effect on what would eventually happen to these two battalions. The Brigade Major, Freddie Graham, was summoned to the Headquarters of Major General E.C. Weston, (Royal Marines and Commander of the Mobile Base Defence Organisation) whom General Freyberg had put in command of the Forward Area. Here he was told to copy down in his Army Book 153 the orders for the capitulation of Crete with the use of carbon paper in triplicate. Weston kept 2 copies and the third went to Lt. Col. Colvin the former Commanding Officer of A Battalion Layforce. The recently relieved Colvin would be the unfortunate officer sacrificed after evacuation, and not Laycock. By 22.00hrs the staff of CREFORCE had evacuated. The last of the troops were in a position within the rearguard perimeter awaiting evacuation, and there was no contact with the enemy. Laycock therefore gave orders to Lt.Col. George Young to lead his troops down to Sphakia, avoiding the crowded main approach to the town 'To use his own personality to obtain priority laid down in Div. Orders.'

The true picture was that as the Germans did not fight at night there would be no contact with the enemy. However, either the enemy or the sea now surrounded them, and firing was still heard by dusk.

Young received his orders at 23.00hrs by which time Laycock and his Brigade staff were already on the beach waiting for a landing craft to take them to one of the waiting warships.

Nobody on the beach in Laycock's party knew where Young's H.Q. was, and a volunteer was called to take the withdrawal order to him; but most of the men present had not got boots that would stand the journey. Only one man, Ralph Tanner, a private did not raise objections and was in due course sent off with the order. He headed for the start of Sphakia ravine, which was about a mile away, but the going over rocky ground in the dark was extremely difficult. He wandered about shouting out 'Layforce' before a member of D Battalion led him to Young's H.Q., which was in a cave. Young gave Tanner a drink of sherry after he had delivered the message. Young then gave him a reply, to the effect that he would lead his men down to the beaches but those in the outlying forward positions would have to be left behind due to lack of time. By the time Tanner returned to where he had left Laycock he had gone. Laycock though remembered Tanner's efforts with a Mention in Dispatches.

There was a further twist in the tail. It would not be Colvin who offered the surrender to the Germans, but George Young. Colvin had somehow managed to leave with Laycock. Laycock had somehow managed to send Weston's order to Young, with Colvin's name crossed out, and 'senior officer left on island' added in its place. Young stoically accepted his fate as a prisoner of war. For his efforts on the island, George Young would receive a D.S.O. as would Colvin's second in command Kenneth Wylie.

The night of the 30<sup>th</sup>/31<sup>st</sup> May would be the last night for evacuation as the Royal Navy insisted that losses sustained in their efforts to vacate Crete, and those expected in continuing, were unsustainable. Therefore, any men left on the island after this last night had to be abandoned to their fate.

As the last men of 7 Commando reached what would be the last defensive line they found that they had literally run into the 'end of the queue'. There was no longer any room to manoeuvre but still they formed a defensive line as the last few Australian troops moved through them. From the near by rear area they could hear panic, there would be no more boats, talk of surrender was rife and a sort of hysteria spread through some of those on the beach or on the quay. A pitiful spectacle was now playing out. Thousands of men were milling around most of them unattached, forming what can only be described as a rabble. By midnight New Zealand troops who were holding part of the perimeter line left their positions leaving men of the 64<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment, Royal Artillery, who were totally ill prepared for such a task to cover even more of the perimeter.

No effective control was attempted or maintained for the troops awaiting evacuation. CREFORCE staff officers and the commanding officer for the defence of the island, Major General Bernard Freyberg, had left the island by flying boat the previous night. Those troops that had been given priority to leave the island including the 2/7 Australian Battalion were unable to make the embarkation areas and went into captivity, these men had been assured that they would be got away, a bitter pill to swallow indeed.

Some of the other ranks from the Commando did manage to embark, making their way through the masses of troops claiming priority, and were lucky to get away. There was a feeling amongst the large number of Commandos left behind that they had been badly let down, and that, despite their valiant rear guard actions, they had indeed been abandoned to their fate by those in command.

The vast majority of A and D Battalions not evacuated saw out the remainder of the war as prisoners. Those that did make it back did so on their own initiative and under their own steam. They had fought bravely in circumstances they were neither organised nor equipped for, ultimately being sacrificed. But their actions allowed around 16,000 troops to be saved to fight again. eventually avoiding captivity.

The losses they incurred could never be made up and in the end brought about the dissolution of Layforce despite the efforts of Laycock to find the remainder another role the die had been cast. Apart from a few wounded who had been evacuated only about 2 officers and 25 other ranks from D Battalion were able to get away. A Battalion fared better with 21 officers and 131 other ranks eventually avoiding captivity. Some had spent weeks in hiding before effecting their escape, using abandoned boats and landing craft. Overall it had been an unmitigated disaster that cost them dearly. For some of the more badly wounded there was only one escape and the Commandos medical officer was left with no option but to administer a lethal dose of morphine - thus putting some of the more extreme cases out of their suffering.

A few of those who escaped would be selected to join David Stirling's L Detachment, others would volunteer for a Military Mission to China and help train the Chinese against the Japanese Forces, though most returned to Infantry Base Depots and a few returned to England on compassionate grounds.

There was though a strange request for volunteers received by Captain Jocelyn Nichols, Royal Artillery, and A Battalion Layforce, who was now commanding 'Layforce Details'. This formation comprised the few men from both A Battalion and D Battalion who had evaded capture.

With the fall of Crete, Commander-in-Chief Middle East feared an assault on Cyprus was imminent. The Scots of C Battalion, who had garrisoned the island, were held for operations in Syria, and it was unclear when their part in that invasion would cease. So a call for volunteers from A Battalion went out. These men were to go to Cyprus and base themselves around Nicosia where they thought the Germans would start to land their forces. They would remain concealed until the opportunity arose to destroy as many enemy aircraft as possible, engage enemy troops, and escape as best they could. These were desperate measures for desperate times.

Twelve men came forward and were duly dispatched to the island. They were to be known as 'The Pencil Party' as pencil fuses would detonate the explosives that they were issued with. On arrival though, they found that 11 (Scottish) Commando (C Battalion Layforce) had returned from Syria and were again garrisoning the island. With the losses that 11 (Scottish) Commando had sustained at Litani River during Operation 'Exporter' the volunteers from 'The Pencil Party' were retained.

For those of the Commandos who remained on Crete the officers warned their men to get rid of their 'fannies' this being the knuckle duster come knife that had become the emblem of the Middle East Commandos. To be found with one would have brought swift retribution and possible execution. Most of these knives were discarded down wells. For the Spanish Republicans from D Battalion capture was unthinkable, with the fear of being returned to Franco's Spain where without doubt they would have faced the firing squad. Fortunately, Captain A.L. Cochrane, Medical Officer of D Battalion, came up with a plan. He had previously served in Spain with the International Brigade and told the men that if captured they should say that they were Gibraltarians.

Army losses on Crete were 1751 killed or missing, a further 1738 wounded, and 12,254 becoming prisoners of war. The Royal Navy lost 3 Cruisers and 6 Destroyers along with 17 other ships damaged. They had more losses than the Army with 1,828 killed, and 183 wounded.

All of the Commandos Glen ships took part in the evacuation but they paid the price of losing some of their landing craft especially the Glengyle. In June this would have repercussions for 11 (Scottish) Commando and their operation in Syria. The Glenearn took a bomb down one of her funnels needed extensive repairs. The Glenroy was probably the unluckiest. Having struck a rock outside of Alexandria on her way to the evacuation of Greece she again had to return to port for repairs having suffered damage from air attack during the evacuation of Crete.

## No. 8 (Guards) Commando. Laycock's Guards

**Born in a bar.** The legend has it that when the Guards regiments were given permission to raise their own Commando Bob Laycock recruited many of his officers from the bar in White's Club in London, how true this is not sure; for the other ranks, their recruitment depending on passing an interview with the newly appointed Troop Commanders. Raised in early June 1940 those selected were sent to Burnham on Crouch, a small town in the Maldon district of the Essex, lying on the northern bank of the river Crouch. One Troop had its H.Q. in one of the local public houses in the area 'The Welcome Sailor', J Troop were those lucky men. It was not though a truly Guards Commando as men were recruited from London Military District as well as the Household Division. Units forming 8 (Guards) Commando therefore not only included the Guards and Household Cavalry, but also men from the Devonshire Regiment, Somerset Light Infantry, various cavalry and rifle regiments and even some Royal Marines. Artillery men and Royal Engineers were also recruited. Their official title of No.8 (Guards) Commando is a bit of a misnomer.

No.1 Troop came from the Horse Guards and Troops 2 through to 4 followed the Army order of precedence for Guards regiments of Grenadiers, Coldstreams, Scots, respectively, with 5 Troop being a mixture of both Irish and Welsh Guardsman. No.6 Troop, or the 'Buffalos' as they were known, was a composite troop under the command of Toby Milbanke. No.7 Troop was formed from The Somerset Light Infantry, and again a composite troop was found in No.8 Troop under the command of Captain Godfrey Nicholson. No.9 Troop came from Cavalry of the Line and finally specialists such as engineers and artillery made up No.10 Troop, which also included Royal Marines. There were also 3 Liaison Officers on the establishment.

The Commando immediately set about getting in shape, with vigorous exercise and forced marches to toughen them up. Their syllabus included night training exercises, evasion, and training on the water with the use of a local cutter the 'Playmate'. Tasks were set to test the intelligence and ingenuity of the men. Examples of this requiring those taking part to return to their base with a bowler hat, a ladies bicycle, a cockerel and hen, and even a motor vehicle. This scheme met with great success when passengers on a bus found themselves delivered to the local pub - one intrepid commando had spotted the driver stopping to call in a shop, leaving him no option but to requisition it!

As you would expect, morale was high within the Guards. The volunteers revelled in their new found freedom, a complete change from the mind numbing boredom and bullshit of the Depot. Very few dropped out. As was to be expected many of the Guards officers came from the aristocracy and included include politician's sons and even a Davis Cup tennis player Ian Collins of the publishing family, who after the demise of Layforce acted as David Stirling's P.A. for a short period as he got his fledgling L Detachment off the ground.

Along with all Commandos at this time much of the specialist training was carried out in Scotland, with Officers, and some selected NCO's, being sent to Special Training Centres. Along with other locations, the Government had requisitioned Lord Brockett's estate for this purpose. Here they would spend 2 to 3 days at a time in the hills and the mountains, often living off the land, learning the skills such as Field Craft, that they would later pass on to their fellow Commandos. They were taught these skills by men such as Lord Lovat, along with Bill Stirling the brother of David Stirling (an Officer in 8 (Guards) Commando and subsequent founder of the Special Air Service Regiment) and even a Hollywood actor David Niven who'd recently appeared in Clark Gable's Hollywood blockbuster 'Gone with the Wind'." Some deer stalking and poaching of rabbits was an inevitable part of what went on, and made for a nice meal!

Eventually 8 (Guards) Commando would find themselves posted up to Scotland where the real training would begin. At Inveraray near Loch Fyne they learned about assault landings, were introduced to new weapons, and underwent specialised training - especially in the use of the Thompson sub machine gun. Eventually they would go to the Isle of Arran off the west coast of Scotland. The troops excelled at drill and in smartness, the other ranks did not endure the arduous of guard duties and the officers were well liked and respected by the men.

On the Isle of Arran, they found themselves billeted in and around the small town of Lamlash. The officers were billeted in the comfort of Marine House Hotel, and some lived up to the name given to them in some quarters as 'Good time Charlie's'. Once winter had turned, the Commandos trained each day in seaborne landing and rock climbing, new skills they soon became proficient at. Some officers appeared to only keep 'office hours', rarely completing their administrative troop duties, with required returns rarely making an appearance at the Orderly Office. In fact one troop did not cut the mustard, and Laycock was forced to disband it and return the men to their units. Captain Nicholson and his 8 Troop was replaced with one of the troops from No.3 Commando (A Troop) commanded by Captain Mike Kealy of the Devonshire Regiment).

Each Troop now operated as an individual unit within the Commando. The Commando itself being a diverse mix of volunteers from the Guards or County Infantry Regiments, Armoured formations, Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers, Royal Army Service Corp, Royal Army Ordnance Corps, Royal Corps of Signals and Royal Army Medical Corp amongst others.

From November 1940, No.8 (Guards) Commando was involved in a reorganisation affecting most United Kingdom raised commandos. It was decided that a Special Service Brigade should be formed to bring together Commando formations, and Independent Companies within five Special Service Battalions. Ten Independent Companies had been raised in April 1940, each from a distinct Infantry Division. They were formed as guerrilla units for operations in Norway, but only the first five had seen action. A composite 11 Independent Company had been formed, in June 1940, from the five units left at home, and had participated in early abortive raids South of Boulogne on the French coast (Operation Collar), and on Guernsey (Operation Ambassador).

Reorganisation as a Special Service Brigade saw No.8 (Guards) Commando paired with No.3 Commando as the two Companies within 4 Special Service Battalion. The Special Service name or abbreviation 'S.S.' was universally disliked by all, with its reference to the German S.S. These battalions of 1000 all ranks soon proved too unwieldy, and duly reverted back to their original status in March 1941. However, the experiment did provide some benefit to those Commandos who departed for the Middle East in January 1941, later forming 'Layforce'. The advantage they gained was that the pairing of Commandos allowed some drafting between units. Thus, those about to undertake offensive operations were brought up to strength before departure. Certainly, No.7 Commando was enhanced in this way through drafts from No.4 Commando, this pairing having formed 3 Special Service Battalion.

While on the Isle of Arran, Lt. Roger Courtney experimented with canoes and formed a Folbot section of twelve men. These specialists departed for the Middle East with the rest of 8 (Guards) Commando in January 1941,

Away from the boredom and repetition of normal barrack life, the commandos immersed themselves intensive training. Learning to fend for themselves, living off the land, and undertaking small-scale exercises they craved what they had originally volunteered for, action. However, during 2 night time exercises they did appear to be lacking tactical ideas. Hopefully this would be remedied once they actually got into the action they had been promised when joining the Commando. Volunteers had been told they would be joining the fight against the enemy within 6 months.



Active service would soon come their way. After a false start affecting them and other commandos they sailed for the Middle East in January 1941. Together with No.7 Commando and No.11 (Scottish) Commando Roger Courtney's Folbot section and elements of No.3 Commando they departed as part of Force Z, later being designated Layforce.

These units would eventually join up with the locally raised 50/52 or Middle East Commando in Egypt. Laycock, promoted to Acting Colonel from the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1941, was given overall command of the force. Lt. Col. Dermot Daly assumed command of the Guards Commando.

The Guards Commando sailed on the Glenroy as Lt. Col. Laycock, the senior military officer, was under the misapprehension that he was on the flagship. However, the claims of Captain Petrie prevailed concerning the Glengyle. The journey to the Middle East was a long one. To pass the time the men attended lectures, trained on the ships Lewis guns and manned the ships defensive armament. They endured physical training and also kept the ship and their quarters clean, but in comparison to 11 (Scottish) Commando they did very little on the voyage with some officers rarely leaving their cabins. By the 10<sup>th</sup> February they arrived off Freetown in Sierra Leone and Cape Town was reached by the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Here they were able to enjoy a brief period of shore leave, and on arrival at Durban they were again able to go ashore. After leaving Durban they sailed towards Mombasa and through the Straits of Madagascar. On 1<sup>st</sup> March they were off the coast of Italian Somaliland, with a possible danger of bombing. The 2<sup>nd</sup> March saw them passing the Isle of Socotra, and entering the Gulf of Aden.

To the disappointment of all ranks they were told that they would not be stopping. Continuing the voyage they passed the Straits of Djibouti and the Yemen before entering the Red Sea. They were still 4 days from Port Said, and on arrival the men on board mustered on deck and gave a rousing 3 cheers for Captain Sir James Padget Bt. and his crew for their safe passage.

Once again the men found that they wouldn't be going ashore as the ship weighed anchor and retired to the Red Sea to seek a safer anchorage at Ras Baku Rock, 80 miles from Suez. German air attacks had dropped several mines and sunk several ships in recent assaults.

Major General Sir John Evetts the officer commanding 6<sup>th</sup> Division, to whom the whole of Layforce would be attached, spoke to the combined officers of the commandos promising that they would soon have a bellyful of fighting. Once they were safely disembarked they formed a Guard of Honour for General Wavell and the then Chief of the Imperial Staff Sir John Dill.

One of the proposed plans involving Nos. 7, 8 (Guards) and 11 (Scottish) Commandos was capture of the island of Rhodes. For years to come this remained high on the list of priorities set out by Churchill, but he was always worried that the fighting could resemble the failure he helped to engineer at Gallipoli in 1915, during the Great War. During April 1941, German intervention in the theatre put any thoughts of this operation on hold for some time to come.

Their period of acclimatisation began in Geneifa where they set up camp, proofed their tents against sand, repaired barbed wire fences, and undertook physical training. By early April morale had dropped alarmingly and on the 9<sup>th</sup> the Commandos embarked on the Glenroy at Port Said, but nothing came of this and they travelled from the railway station to Sidi Bishur in the Nile Delta. Here they prepared to take up a role defending Alexandria if necessary.

After being involved in several exercises 4 Troops of 8 Commando were picked for the Raid on Bardia, Operation Addition. However, after setting sail, the raid was temporarily postponed due to deteriorating weather conditions and the possibility that the fleet had been spotted. and the force duly returned to port. Along with the 11 (Scottish) Commando, 8 (Guards) Commando would not participate in the raid when it went ahead the following day. 7 Commando would have that honour.

The role of Layforce was now changing, with the requirement to form an Army Reserve, as no other troops were available to fill this position. Morale was now poor and the discipline of the men was falling. No.8 (Guards) Commando was split in two, with half of the men going forward to Mersah Matruh under the command of Lt Col D.R. Daly; whilst the second half led by 'Bones' Sudeley (who would later die in the Red Sea) went to assist the besieged garrison at the port of Tobruk as Operation Battle axe got under way.

Various staff in the Middle East proposed operations for the Commandos, Lt. Col. Maurice Hope formulated several with codenames taken from theatrical farces, including: 'Rookery', 'Nook' and 'Walls'. However, none got further than the planning stage. The idea was to land men behind the enemy lines to ambush vehicles, put oil into water, destroy aircraft on the ground and generally disrupt their lines of communications.

In mid April a raid was launched against enemy lines of communication at Bomba. This saw men of 8 (Guards) Commando board the destroyer HMS Decoy at Alexandria and sail to Tobruk. They landed at Tobruk during an air raid, but travelling further west to Bomba that evening. Once again bad weather intervened with HMS Decoy running aground at the mouth of the harbour, damaging her Anti Submarine Detection equipment (A.S.D.I.C.) causing a return to Alexandria.

Further raids planned for the Commandos included a proposed operation against a German aerodrome 30 miles west of Tobruk at Gazala. On 21<sup>st</sup> May, commandos boarded HMS Aphis, an old gunboat which had seen previous service with the Royal Navy's 'China Station' on the river Yangtze. They were attacked by a large number of Stukas and Italian high level bombers over a period of 2 days. Damage was caused to the Aphis and her engines stopped. Luckily they were restarted, but amidst heavy weather the party returned to Mersa Matruh. A second attempt was made on 27<sup>th</sup> May, but with further air attack. A terrific barrage of anti-aircraft fire inflicted losses on the enemy; however the Aphis was leaking steam badly with her boilers ruptured by near misses. The operation was again aborted, with a further return to Mersa Matruh.

Also during May, an advance unit of men under the command of Lt. Gordon Alston landed at Tobruk followed by a further 100 men under the command of Lord Sudeley. (Lt. Alston, originally from the Royal Artillery, would later join L Detachment, and then the SAS, after the disbandment of Layforce early in 1942). There were plans to land these men behind the lines approximately 18 miles east of Tobruk, but a German attack rendered the plan impractical and these men returned to Alexandria.

Others of the Commando found themselves at the Salt Lakes, where they trained at an R.A.F. base on various weapons and were paraded for Major General Arthur Smith, Chief of Staff, Middle East Command.

By Late May those Commandos at Mersa Matruh were very nearly rebellious, rarely doing much in a military sense. Most men spent their time swimming and fishing. A Scots Guard sergeant even paraded carrying his fishing rod!

Lieutenant Colonel Daly sought out both Major General Smith and General Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, at Cairo. His intention was to get his men moved from Army Reserve and into some sort of action, before it was all too late and discipline disappeared. He

All Lt. Col. Daly gained was an instruction in three parts: firstly, that special units in the Middle East could return to their units if based in the theatre; secondly if their units were not in situ they could go to the various Infantry Base Depots but should retain some men to form a Long Range Desert Patrol. Thirdly came the killer punch, 'Special Service was off'. Daly now knew they were nearing the end.

The Coldstreams were the first to go to the Guards Base Depot followed by those from the County Regiments who went to Infantry Base Centres. Some officers joined the Cheshire Yeomanry. Several others returned to England.

During June, Sir Carol Mather (Welsh Guards) and Lord George Jellicoe (Coldstream Guards) both planned their own small scale raids on the German and Italian airfields. Having taken the nightly destroyer to Tobruk, they met General Morshead, Commander of the Garrison, and secured the use of a very fast landing boat, the Eureka. In late June they made several attempts to conduct their private operations, but none succeeded.

Also in June 1941, another party of volunteers formed under the command of Major Mike Kealy of the Devon's, with Captain Philip Dunne of the Royal Horse Guards as his second in command. Accompanied by 3 further officers and 70 other ranks they went to Tobruk. Once disembarked, they found their orders had been cancelled and the fate of Layforce was being discussed at General Head Quarters in Cairo. Nevertheless the Garrison Commander refused to release Mike Kealy's party. Their job would now be to patrol the perimeter and generally assist in the defence of Tobruk. Here the men learnt quickly what operating in the desert was like.

A scheme was planned for the night of the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> July to attack on a position which overlooked the forward placements of the Indian 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment. They were to attack Point 3995, 4395 near the North West corner of the Tobruk perimeter, around 2000 yards from the coast. The plan was to infiltrate the enemy positions south of the perimeter and locate a track used by the Italians for bringing supplies forward. From here they would advance, and attack the enemy from the rear. The Indians would assist the raid by mounting a feign attack on the Italian forward positions 3 minutes before the raid was due to go in .

The raiding party consisted of Major Kealy leading 8 Troop, Captain Dunne in command of 6 Troop and Lt. J.S. Lewes of the Welsh Guards leading 4 Troop and would initially be guided by officers from the Indian cavalry. Half of the men were armed with Thompson sub machine guns whilst the rest had their .303 Lee Enfield rifles. Each man carried grenades and every third man would carry a groundsheet to help carry any casualties that may arise. They moved in single file through their forward positions some 1200 yards from the enemy lines, and split into three columns with Kealy in the centre, Lewes to the right and Dunne to the left. Intervals of just 15 to 20 yards were left between the troops. Each party included 2 or 3 Australian Sappers to help with any demolitions. The night was dark, but starlit, and the ground was well known to the guides whose movement was quick and silent.

The commandos passed through the Italian forward positions which consisted of slit trenches. They reached the track - easily recognisable by the wheel marks - ahead of time, and halted for 5 minutes. Now they turned north along the track and approached their target the 'Twin Pimples' on its western side. At 00.57 hrs the Indians started their diversion and 5 minutes later the Commandos were challenged by an Italian sentry some 30 yards away. Firing began and the Italian defenders were forced into dugouts, but were quickly bombed out by the Commandos. However the Italians returned to their dugouts, where most of them met their end by either bomb or bayonet.

The sappers completed their demolitions which included an ammunition dump, and at least one mortar position. The whistle then blew for them to retire. The withdrawal was a simple manoeuvre move south for a ¼ of a mile, before heading straight for their own forward positions where an officer from the Indian troops would fire a white Very Light at intervals of 15 minutes to help guide them in. The Commandos with the North Star over their left shoulders headed back as the Italians started to shell the area. They finally reached the safety of their forward positions with only 5 casualties. Sadly, Cpl. Maynard would succumb to the wound he sustained in the attack, being shot through the body just below his heart. One Italian prisoner was also brought back but he had been mortally wounded and died before he could be questioned.

At least 2 further raids of this nature were subsequently planned but neither was successful. After a reconnaissance for one of these the chief guide revealed enemy defences were too strong to infiltrate. Alternative approaches were tried without success. A further attack on an enemy salient west of Tobruk was also called off as it was believed the raiding party had been compromised by an enemy aircraft patrol.

More patrolling and reconnaissance work was undertaken by the Commandos as they settled into life in the perimeter. The boredom and short rations of both food and water sapped the energy of the men, but they were able to find some respite in a small rest camp set up within the perimeter. By the end of August though their time was up in more ways than one; and the men returned from Tobruk in H.M.S. Hasty a most appropriate name for a destroyer leaving the port. Layforce was now at an end.

A few of the Guards Commando had acted as Brigade H.Q. during the battle of Crete alongside 7 Commando and 50/52 Commando. 11 (Scottish) Commando was back on Cyprus after their role in Operation Exporter the invasion of Syria in June. Half of 8 (Guards) Commando had served in the Tobruk defence, with the other half at Mersah Matruh. The dice was now cast and they were disbanded. Most of No.8 (Guards) Commando was returned to Geneifa and the Brigade of Guards Infantry Depot who were most glad to receive them. They would provide well trained replacements for the casualties they had sustained. The commandos soon found themselves run ragged as they were re-acclimatized to the ways of the Guards Brigade.

Others from the Commando were given the option of staying on as volunteers for further special duties, or they could return to their parent regiments stationed in the theatre. Others languished in the base depots awaiting postings, but they would not get a home posting as they had hoped - they would continue their service abroad. However, many of the former members of 8 (Guards) Commando carried on with service in Special Forces. Their options included service with the Long Range Desert Group (L.R.D.G.) Special Boat Squadron (S.B.S.) and of course David Stirling's fledgling L Detachment Special Air Service Regiment (S.A.S.).

## No.11 (Scottish) Commando.

**"Never have so many been buggered about by so few"**

2819656 Private John Orton of the Seaforth Highlanders rejoined the Colours on the 13<sup>th</sup> January 1940. Five days later he was posted to the Infantry Training Centre at Fort George in Scotland.

While he completed his Infantry Training, the 51st Highland Division - which included his original Battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> Seaforth Highlanders) - was in France with the British Expeditionary Force (B.E.F.) They manned positions in the French Maginot Line, and took part in the fighting and withdrawal from the line.

Falling back past the River Somme they took up their final positions in and around St. Valery en Caux on the coast. Here it was hoped they would be able to be evacuated, but as events turned against them they were subsequently surrendered *en masse* to General Erwin Rommel, a man that they would meet again later. The Division was however reformed in England and went on to fight with great distinction in the Middle East, Sicily and North West Europe, they became known as "Monty's Highlanders".

Having become Prime Minister on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1940, Winston Churchill requested the formation of raiding forces of up to 10,000 men, to keep a large number of German Forces all along the coast of the counties they occupied. This 'Commando' concept gained momentum when on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1940 General Dill, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, gained support for related proposals formulated by his Military Assistant, Lieutenant Colonel Dudley Clarke.

The resultant call for Volunteers to undertake 'special service of a hazardous nature' appealed to Private John Orton, seeking travel and adventure he volunteered. Lucky enough to be accepted, he was posted to 11 (Scottish) Commando on the 9<sup>th</sup> August. This Commando recruited from all Scottish Cavalry and Infantry regiments and consisted of ten troops each of 50 all ranks. Their numbers were filled up from The Wiltshire Regiment and also the Manchester Regiment, the regiment his father had transferred to after four months service in the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the North Staffordshire Yeomanry thirty seven years previously.

At the time they were being mustered at Netherdale Mills in Ayrshire, being billeted in an old disused mill, where conditions were extremely Spartan. There was no running water, heating or similar facilities. Most considered the food appalling, but they settled down and began training. This consisted of route and speed marches to meet required levels of physical fitness. Night exercises were undertaken, and much emphasis was put on weaponry.

By September the unit was ready for a move and so debussing at Galashiels the volunteers were told they would have to march to Ayr, which as the crow flies was about one hundred miles away. Trucks were provided but anyone using this option was returned to unit. They also had to carry their own kit but any unwanted items could be left at the railway station. With bagpipes playing they began their march and it would not be until the sixth night that they finally bedded down at Ayr racecourse. Each troop took the lead in rotation, while the pipers which had been borrowed from the Cameron Highlanders piped them along.

All there was to feed them was the staple diet of bully beef and biscuits. Water for washing and drinking was taken from streams. Sleeping arrangements were quite simply 'bed down where you can', which meant that most nights they would sleep in the open air taking whatever cover they could find, including sleeping in the hedgerows. Some fell out during the march, used transport and laughed and jeered at the marching men; but now they received travel warrants and returned to their parent units as unsuitable material. John was now to become a member of 6 Troop, which was also known as the Seaforth Troop and commanded by Captain David Blair. Most troops were made up of members from each regiment, the 4<sup>th</sup> being The Wiltshire's, 8 Troop known as the Gordon Troop and The Cameron's being 10 Troop although men from many other regiments filled out the ranks, some coming from The London Rifle Brigade, The South Lancashire Regiment, The Kings Own (his father's second regiment) the York and Lanc's, the Lincolnshire's, Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, Royal Artillery and of course all the support units, so it wasn't as the name suggests purely a Scottish Commando.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> September they all moved to Lamlash on the Isle of Arran by special train. Soon they boarded the Glen Sannox, at Fairlie, North Ayrshire, to begin amphibious training under the command of Lt. Col. R.R. (Dick) Pedder of The Highland Light Infantry.

The Unit claimed to be the first operational Commando, although not the first Commando to be engaged against the enemy. Billeted with the islanders, each man received a daily allowance of six shillings and eight pence to cover the cost of food and lodgings. Officers received an allowance of thirteen shillings four pence. The men were billeted in individual dwellings and were extremely well looked after by their landladies, who provided them with up to four meals a day. They could have a bath at least once a week and their clothes, almost permanently sodden after days in the field, would be dried. The training was intense incorporating map reading, route marches both day and night, mock exercises, weapons training, climbing on Goat Fell, cross country runs, demolition, field craft, unarmed combat, and lessons on how to pick locks and to blow safe's. Of course their syllabus also included seaborne landings, speed marches and route marches, and swimming in full kit.

At one stage it did appear they would be used on an operation. They were even embarked aboard a vessel, but this in turn was cancelled for one reason or another, this could possibly have been Operation "Brisk" which was to seize The Azores. During the autumn, with the threat of invasion from Norway, the Commando was moved to the area of Falkirk to defend it from any Axis attack. However, apart from a few air raids nothing came of this, and they soon returned to the Isle of Arran where they continued the training programme set down by Lt. Col. Pedder.

There was to have been another operation which was called "Workshop", a proposed attack and capture of the Mediterranean island of Pantelleria which was situated between Tunis and Sicily. As its position controlled the Gibraltar, Malta and Alexandria convoy routes Axis occupation could become a serious thorn in the sides of Allies. The island was approximately ten miles long and five miles wide, boasted its own airfield with underground hangars, and held about eighty aircraft. Bays were also created for a flotilla of German E-Boats. It was protected by about eighty guns of various calibres, and garrisoned by around eleven thousand Italian troops. The commando was taken from Lochranza on Arran by the Royal Scotsman.

Rumours were rife, one being they were heading for Norway. The authorities told them it was only an exercise, but with the preparation they had gone the men severely doubted this. However, they returned to Arran and disembarked. The operation did eventually go ahead, but not until 1943.

The wheels were indeed turning, and on hearing of the Commandos General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander-in-Chief Middle East, devised a plan to utilise them. This would have been the proposed plan to invade Cyrenaica, which due to the success of Operation "Compass" was again cancelled.

Wavell was later to claim, on eventual arrival of the Commandos, that he did not know why these men had been sent to his command. But indeed they did go to the Middle East, 7, 8 (Guards), and 11 (Scottish) Commandos were joined together to form "Layforce" under the command of Brigadier Laycock the officer commanding 8 (Guards) Commando. 7 Commando was drawn from Eastern Command and by the time it reached full strength there were 58 different Corps or Regiments represented within their ranks. They became known as an undisciplined unit, the opposite to 11 (Scottish) Commando, who were deemed in some quarters to be over disciplined. While the Guards Commando were The Guards, although some thought that their officers were included quite a few 'good time Charlies', who seemed to be part of a 'club' who spent much of their spare time drinking and gambling.

On 21<sup>st</sup> October John Orton was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal (Unpaid), and on the twenty-fourth of the same month 11 (Scottish) Commando were included in a reorganisation of Special Service troops, which paired them with 9 Commando as 2 Special Service Battalion of the short lived Special Service Brigade. They were joined by two of the Independent Companies formed in April 1940 for guerrilla operations in Norway. Both had Scottish origins and neither had departed for Norway. They were 6 Independent Company, formed from the 9th (Scottish) Division and 7 Independent Company found from the 15th (Scottish) Division. Together these units formed the second of five Special Service Battalions, each having two Companies of five hundred men. When the Special Service Brigade was reviewed in March 1941, Commando designations were again resumed. Though for some Companies events intervened, with departure for the Middle East in January 1941. Their Scottish origins were further enhanced by the wearing of a Black Hackle on their headdress, this signified that "They had a quarrel with someone".

On the 14<sup>th</sup> January they were given one weeks leave and during the week of their return they planned and carried out a successful mock raid on an aerodrome. The guards were distracted by two commandos dressed as women, while others cut the perimeter fence and gained entry to the site. They then carried out a simulated attack on the Officer's Mess with un-primed Mill's bombs.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1941 they set sail from Gourock on the Firth of Clyde with the commando split between the Infantry Landing Ships Glenroy and Glengyle, The Glenearn carried further personnel. These three Landing Ships Infantry (L.S.I.) were former passenger-carrying cargo liners constructed for Messrs. Alfred Holt's Far East trade. They had been built between the years of 1938 and 1939.

Armament was added, for example the Glenearn was equipped with one 8-barrelled and one 4-barrelled pompom, and two 0.5 inch quadruple guns, all of which were for defence against air attack. Offensive capacity was limited to four 12-pounder guns.

The Glenearn also carried two Landing Craft Motor (L.C.M) and twelve Landing Craft Assault (L.C.A.). Deck stowage was also required for a Landing Craft Support (L.C.S.) and a 'whaler' rowing boat. Each 'Glen' liner had a troop carrying capacity of 36 Officers and 500 Men.

The whole force consisted of the Glengyle, Glenroy, Glenearn, the Cruiser Kenya and an anti-submarine escort of four destroyers from the 5<sup>th</sup> Destroyer Flotilla, HM Ships Restigouche, Ottawa, St Laurent, and Skeena.

Leaving the Firth of Clyde they steamed west out into the Atlantic and into a Force 9 gale, most of the occupants suffered accordingly. On the 1<sup>st</sup> February the convoy was joined by the Cunard White Star S.S. Georgic and on the seventh Force Z was joined by the Cruiser HMS Dorsetshire, and on the ninth the destroyers Forester and Faulkner provided a further escort. They sailed way out into the Atlantic to avoid known German U-Boat patrol areas. After three days steaming with the Queen Mary also in the convoy they finally headed south.

Having picked up supplies at Freetown in Sierra Leone, they departed and found themselves in much calmer waters. They saw dolphins, flying fish and even an albatross; arriving off Table Bay, with their escorts, on the nineteenth of February. Meanwhile, General Head Quarters, Middle East Forces had received orders that for security reasons the Commandos with Z Force were to be renamed. Numbers 7, 8 (Guards), and 11 (Scottish) Commando were to be designated "A", "B" and "C" Battalions of Layforce respectively. On arrival at Cape Town, Lt Col Pedder, commanding 11 (Scottish) Commando / C Battalion Layforce put his men through a four hour route march in full kit.

After spending so many weeks on board ship, where exercise was limited to confines of the ship, this would be a blessing in disguise with solid earth under foot, and not a rolling ship. I imagine they felt one hundred percent, and could show their swagger to crowds who came to watch them march to the swirl of the pipes. Nevertheless, an outbreak of diarrhoea swept through the ranks. The other two commandos, 7 and 8 (Guards), were allowed a period of liberty to enjoy the city and all it had to offer. However, Pedder's lapse of discipline never bent this far.

Leaving Cape town, on the 21<sup>st</sup> February, they continued their journey, with its final destination - Suez. Before they arrived here they received a report that the Admiral Scheer, a German pocket-battleship was operating in the area. The convoy swiftly headed for Durban, and sent H.M.S. Dorsetshire to join H.M.S. Glasgow, so that the two Cruisers could investigate. Two light cruisers also went to assist H.M.S. Glasgow, whose aircraft had spotted the German raider. Subsequent pursuit proved unproductive. Force Z continue their voyage, arrived off Durban on the 23<sup>rd</sup> February, and received orders not to enter the port. After a short delay the convoy continued on its way. On the 1<sup>st</sup> March they passed the coast of Italian Somaliland, two days later they sighted Socotra Island and on the seventh they finally arrived at Suez.

Here the men mustered at Geneifa on the Sinai Peninsula, before being billeted at Abbassia Barracks. They were immediately granted leave and by the 28<sup>th</sup> March acclimatisation had been completed. Laycock hoped his men would join an Expeditionary Force being formed from experienced members of the Western Desert Force to go to Greece as part of Operation Lustre, to assist Greek forces. Wavell and his staff had other ideas for Layforce, which had moved to Port Said by the 9<sup>th</sup> April. Prior to this, orders were received on the second of April concerning the 'Racecourse Plan', which was a brigade exercise involving A, B, C and D Battalions of Layforce. This was successfully completed by lunchtime on the fourth of April although it only lasted several hours. A further scheme was scheduled for the 5<sup>th</sup>, within the framework of the 'Racecourse Plan'. However this was cancelled. On the 6<sup>th</sup> April Layforce received orders to move from Camp 42 to Camp 47 but, as was the norm, this was duly cancelled. It would not be until the seventh that the move actually took place, transport difficulties were cited as the reason for the delay. Only six 15cwt trucks could be found, and after a short time that reduced to two. Also during this period many Officers and men endured illness, more serious than the usual 'gippy tummy', which most had the misfortune of contracting. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Lancaster was diagnosed with spinal meningitis and was immediately quarantined in hospital; a reminder to all that service abroad held its dangers, not only from enemy action.

Several nights were spent on the Glenearn, in and around Port Said and Alexandria, On the 16<sup>th</sup> April, 11 (Scottish) Commando embarked on their landing ship at Alexandria, for a proposed raid on Bardia, which had been given the codename 'Addition'. They were with four troops of 8 (Guards) Commando. Again, due to adverse weather conditions, the raid was cancelled en route, and they returned to port. Had the raid gone ahead, the tasks assigned to 11 (Scottish) Commando (known as "Project B") would have required them to attack the Sollum – Sidi Barrani highway east of Tobruk. It was also hoped that they would attack and destroy any motor transport they came across and take prisoners. It was intended that they would be in a position to destroy a stores depot which lay in the vicinity to the west, the duration of the raid was planned to last around three hours.

Following cancellation, 6 Troop were given the task of unloading all of their stores from the landing ship into lighters ready for transport to the dock front, a job that was completed by 20.30 hrs. Lt. Col. Pedder marched the men around the dock area, whiling away the hours until transport could be found to return to camp. They also had the first post delivered from home, an extremely welcome, and a timely reminder that they were not forgotten now they were on active service.

A few days later the raid did take place but was somewhat scaled down and No.11 (Scottish) played no part in it. The raid, undertaken by 7 Commando, was not deemed a great success.



After debussing from their transport they moved to Alexandria via the transit camp number 3 at Amiriya. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> April they travelled to Haifa crossing the Suez Canal at Kantara, entraining again at Kantara East and proceeding to Haifa in Palestine. They crossed the frontier at 19.30 hours, and on the 29<sup>th</sup> they embarked for Cyprus on the S.S. Warszawa. Arriving at Famagusta on 29<sup>th</sup> April. From here, 6 Troop was sent to Larnaca to guard the coast against a half expected Axis attack. They set up fields of fire, dug slit trenches, and prepared buildings for demolition. Along with a battalion of the Norfolk Regiment, and the usual ancillary units, 11 (Scottish) Commando would be the only defence available if an attack did come. Fortunately, all that the invasion scare amounted to was a considerable number of nuisance raids by the Axis air forces.

On 4<sup>th</sup> May, five hundred troops from the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, which arrived after the Greek debacle, were offered the chance of joining the Commando to bolster their numbers - but only one officer accepted, and he duly joined on the 18<sup>th</sup> May.

On 14<sup>th</sup> May His Excellency The Governor of Cyprus inspected the Commando, with 9 Troop acting as the Guard of Honour. They were also preparing for another of Wavell's plans; this was Operation Cordite, the proposed capture of the island of Rhodes. Shipping had been gathered at Alexandria but due to the deteriorating situation in Greece and resultant evacuation of the Expeditionary Force by 28<sup>th</sup> April (in which all three of Layforce's Landing ships were actively involved) another cancellation arose. By this time the troops had become bored. They were also deemed 'over disciplined' as throughout their voyage and time on land they had trained indefatigably. The promise given by Churchill in his request for volunteers had contained the line "to Butcher and bolt" ... in reality this had become "Chibble and meander".

After nine months of false promises many men had requested to be returned to their parent unit, or posted to a battalion in the front line. The bars and brothels of Nicosia and Famagusta faced more trouble than the Axis forces did. One thing though could not be denied under the leadership of Lt. Col. Pedder and his junior officers - whose average age was only twenty one - the welfare of the rank and file was of paramount importance, and they were well looked after. However, all this could not hide the fact that due to the lack of activity morale was low.

Plans were now being made for the invasion of Syria, which at this time was controlled by the Vichy French who were allowing the Germans use of their airfields and airspace. The attack was to be made by an Australian division aided by Yeomanry regiments of the Cavalry Division, some of whom retained their horses at this time.

By this time 11 (Scottish) Commando had reverted back to its original title. Its role in Operation "Exporter" was to be a seaborne landing at the mouth of the Litani river and seizure of bridges at Kafr Badda and Quasmiye. This would allow the advancing 7th Australian Division to cross the river, and continue their attack.

On 5<sup>th</sup> June they embarked aboard the Glengyle, having sailed to Port Said in Destroyers overnight. Each man wearing khaki shirts and shorts, rope soled boots and camouflaged steel helmet. Those with the Lee Enfield rifle carried a hundred and ten rounds of ammunition, with grenades and spare magazines for the Bren light machine guns.

During the afternoon of 8<sup>th</sup> June, the force set sail, escorted by the destroyers H.M.S's Hotspur and Ilex who had provided transport from Cyprus. Landing craft were manned and heading to their designated landing area when they were intercepted by Lieutenant Richards of 11 (Scottish) Commando, who had reconnoitred the beach. He reported very high breaking waves for almost 300 yards off shore. After consultation aboard the Glengyle, and amidst deteriorating weather, the operation was cancelled. It would have been too perilous to launch the landing craft as the heavy seas would have swamped them, endangering lives unnecessarily.

The Vichy navy was also spotted on the horizon and it was assumed that the Glengyle and her escorts had also been observed, as information suggests that Vichy forces had gained knowledge of the impending attack. The landing force which now included the 15th Cruiser Squadron which consisted of H.M.S's Ajax, Phoebe, Coventry and H.M.A.S. Perth along with the destroyers H.M.S, s Kandahar, Kimberley, Janus and Jackal steamed to Port Said and here Lt. Col. Pedder successfully argued the case to proceed again with the operation. The land forces had started the operation on time, and were at a disadvantage, as the plan would be twenty four old when 11 (Scottish) Commando would now become engaged.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> June they set sail again but due to a shortage of landing craft 6 troop were to remain aboard the Glengyle and control the anti aircraft duties using Bren guns and Lewis guns. Others did the same task on the landing craft, but contrary to the official War Office (W.O.) report many from this troop, my father (John Orton) included, were crammed aboard the available craft and did indeed take part. Some of this troop did pay the ultimate price for this action, and remain in Syria to this day. The landing craft were lowered at 03.00 and headed for shore into the rising dawn giving the advantage to the defenders. The defences to be overcome included barbed wire, concrete pillbox's seventy five millimetre guns and upwards of two battalions of colonial troops comprising of Senegalese Tirailleurs. While on board the landing craft a rum ration was issued and finally they hit the beaches between 04.20 and 04.30, and advanced through the dunes under enemy fire. This would have been where John saw Lt. Col. Pedder wading ashore with his service cap, Sam Browne belt and swagger stick. The Kafr Badda bridge spanned a stream about two miles to the north and a party of men headed off in this direction to take it, sadly though they had no communications due to the radio becoming damaged during the landing. Therefore Headquarters (H.Q.) party was out of contact with other groups throughout the action. The Commando also came under some inaccurate shelling from three Vichy French frigates off the coast.

Those from 6 Troop who took part in the operation were attached to Z Party which was attacking the Kafr Badda bridge and by around 17.30 they were holding the left flank. They were attacked by eight armoured cars and came under mortar fire. Another six armoured cars then joined in the attack on the commandos. Under this pressure the members of 6 Troop were forced to withdraw, leaving the flank open and causing considerable problems to 10 Troop. Within the hour 10 Troop were also forced to withdraw, eventually reaching the beach with some of 4 Troop as well. They had difficulties cutting through the double apron of barbed wire but were eventually able to continue, although somewhere in the region of twenty four officers and men were forced to surrender.

Due to poor naval navigation, and inadequate maps of the area, some of the troops actually landed on the wrong side of the river and the bridge at Quasmiye was destroyed by the defenders when the Australians were around fifty yards from it. Some commandos were able to cross the river, using boats supplied by the advancing Australians, and the area was secured. Back on the other side of the river the Commandos faced some stiff resistance, which included the defenders using Armoured Fighting Vehicles (A.F.V's) to which the commandos had no effective answer. Nevertheless, with the help of some captured artillery pieces, manned by some former Royal Artillery troops, they were able to exact a heavy toll on the defenders. Grievous losses were suffered, and prisoners were taken by both sides as the fighting ebbed and flowed. Some of the captured Vichy defenders asked why they were so late landing, as they were waiting for them having spotted them during the first attempt to land on the night of the 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> June.

Many of the prisoners were held in the artillery compound, and were shelled by their own side. This caused many dead and wounded amongst them. Heavy fighting continued, during which the attackers only had their .303 Lee Enfield Rifles, Bren Guns, Thompson sub-machine guns and the obsolete Boys anti tank rifles (which were surprisingly good at clearing out snipers).

Eventually, some commandos were able to withdraw through Australian lines at 18.30 hours. With the Australian's continue their advance. The price paid by the attacking Commandos was a heavy one. One hundred and twenty five would not return, and the already under strength unit would not be able to replenish its losses. The survivors rendezvoused at Mount Carmel just outside of Haifa and were finally able to assess the damage inflicted on them.

By 23.00 on the 10<sup>th</sup> June, 11 (Scottish) Commando were in Haifa itself after their successful withdrawal from the action. In due course they were granted leave, and by 15<sup>th</sup> they were ready to return to Cyprus. Here they were to continue their garrison duties, and 'stand to' ready to defend the island from Axis attack. Prior to departing, a salvage squad under the command of Captain Glennie, returned to the site of the recent operation to salvage what they could of the abandoned equipment - arms and ammunition and any other effects that could be found. Departing at 08.30 hrs they completed their task and had returned by 18.30 hrs.

Due to the losses incurred the commando was reorganised as a Headquarters and three companies, each company having three troops, each troop consisting of three sections. Previous troop allocations were resumed, and guard duties continued. Further training was also undertaken, which helped them come to terms with the losses of their friends and comrades. On the 21<sup>st</sup> June Captain Ian Glennie, Gordon Highlanders and the officer commanding 8 Troop, was detached and sent to the Cyprus Regiment Base Depot to organise the digging of defences on the Gata Peninsula. This was in accordance with plans laid down by 7<sup>th</sup> Division for the defence of the island.

At 13.00 hrs on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June Brigadier Laycock arrived from General Head Quarters (G.H.Q.) in Egypt, and spoke to the assembled men congratulating them on their recent operation.

The island was under regular bombing raids during their last days as a unit on Cyprus in fact Nicosia airfield was under attack, causing twelve servicemen to become casualties, either killed or wounded. Paphos, Famagusta and Nicosia all received attention from the axis air forces, creating damage, though casualties remained light. The pattern continued, and on the first of July the destroyer H.M.S. Hyacinth ran aground south of Famagusta harbour and was attacked, but with no casualties or damage.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> July the headquarters and administration of 50<sup>th</sup> division came to the island, ready to bolster the defences. Two days later further elements arrived at Famagusta. 11 (Scottish) Commando supplied two companies, each consisting of sixty men, to help with unloading. They worked eight hour shifts until the task was completed.

In the meantime the authorities at Middle East Command, who had never been able to come to terms with the use of Special Service Troops, took the decision to finally disband Layforce. Although Colonel Laycock did travel to London to argue against the decision it was upheld, and so on the 6<sup>th</sup> August 1941 the men made their final journey to Abbassia Barracks in Cairo, where John Orton saw a request for volunteers for further "Special Duties". He applied to join the fledgling Special Air Service (S.A.S.) and passed a brief interview with David Stirling, formerly of No.8 (Guards) Commando and now Commanding Officer of the new unit. On the 28<sup>th</sup> August John was posted to "L" Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade to be based at Kabrit. As was common on joining this unit he relinquished his unpaid rank of Lance Corporal. He saw the war out as a prisoner of war being captured by an Italian patrol when he and the rest of the men who made up his stick were heading for the L.R.D.G. rendezvous during L Detachment's first operation codenamed Squatter.

The story of 11 (Scottish) Commando though did not end here. An ad hoc and transitional formation remained in the Middle East, with the name The Middle East Commando. This was in effect a holding formation for several special service troops. The newly constituted 'Middle East Commando' was organised as six troops: The Head Quarters and Depot Troop was based at Geneifa, No.2 Troop was the newly formed 'L' Detachment SAS, under David Stirling. No.3 Troop comprised some remnants of Layforce (numbering 60 all ranks), under command of Geoffrey Keyes (promoted to Lieutenant Colonel in place of his former Commanding Officer in 11 (Scottish) Commando Dick Pedder, who was killed at Litani River). Nos.4 and 5 Troops were formed from No.51 Middle East Commando, which had fought in Abyssinia and unlike 50 and 52 (Middle East) Commandos had not been part of Layforce.

It will be recalled that 50 and 52 Commando formed D Battalion of Layforce, and had been virtually lost on Crete. The final troop, No.6, was formed from the former canoeists of 8 (Guards) Commando. This final troop is also known as Special Boat Section (S.B.S.) but must not be confused with a further Commando Special Boat Section raised in the United Kingdom. Robert Laycock held overall command of these diverse units.

In November 1941, 3 Troop and other elements of this Middle East Commando, including some canoeists, took part in the raid to kill Rommel. Operation "Flipper" was a failure with only three men, Laycock, Jack Terry, and John Brittlebank (S.B.S), making it back to the Allied lines. Jack Terry, awarded the D.C.M. for his gallantry during the raid, would later join the Special Air Service. The rest were either dead or prisoners of war. Although Lt Colonel Geoffrey Keyes was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross, the raid merely delayed the inevitable. Disbandment followed soon after.

Some remnants of Layforce briefly formed a reconstituted Middle East Commando and continued to operate in this theatre. They often worked in partnership with the Long Range Desert Group (L.R.D.G), and one squadron of this reconstituted Middle East Commando subsequently transferred to the L.R.D.G.

Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.) became increasingly involved in related work, the nature of the Commando changed, and the Special Air Service developed further responsibility for previous Commando activities.

In early April 1942, during this transition, Major Ian Glennie (formerly of No.11 (Scottish) Commando) left Siwa with a further 2 officers and 12 Other Ranks of the reconstituted Middle East Commando for operations in the area of Ghedir bu Ascher.

The party was dropped at Hagfet Gelgaf where they met a Special Air Service party of Lt. Roy 'Bobby' Dodd and six men, Charlie Cattell, Pat Riley, Jimmy Brough, Arthur Warburton, Jeff DuVivier and Jimmy Storie. This SAS party had been assigned to a separate operation against Slonta Airfield during March but due to unforeseen occurrences had to be left to fend for themselves at a new rendezvous as they waited for a patrol from the L.R.D.G. to come and take them back to Siwa. This patrol was the one that took Glennie's party out, but as the S.A.S. party had grown somewhat in the period of waiting, they had to return without Glennie's party as there would be no room for them within their transport. The S.A.S. returned to Siwa on the 13th of April and Glennie's party arrived back late on the 15th.

Membership of the SAS party was diverse – with representatives from the former No.7, No.8 (Guards) and No.11 (Scottish) Commandos. Neither Glennie's operation nor the SAS attempt against Slonta was successful.

All in all Layforce was not a resounding success; a large proportion of 7 Commando had become prisoners of war when they covered the withdrawal on the island of Crete, along with many from 50 and 52 Commando. In contrast, only about two hundred officers and men from 8 (Guards) Commando saw any action when they were shipped into Tobruk to take part in patrolling activities. As for 11 (Scottish) Commando, they virtually ceased to exist after the rigorous and costly action at Litani River.

Lessons were learned though.

What became of the thirty three officers and five hundred and thirteen other ranks of 11 (Scottish) Commando that sailed away in January 1941 so full of hope?

Some went on to the Special Air Service as "The Originals". After their first mission others joined them to fill in the ranks of those who lost their lives or were taken prisoner. Some members of 11 (Scottish) Commando went, with other former members of Layforce, to the Special Boat Squadron under command of Lord Jellicoe. Others joined the British (Military) Mission 204 which encountered many trials and tribulations in the Far East, in their quest to assist Chinese Guerrillas fighting the Japanese.

Existing commando units also gained additions from the ranks of Layforce, as did organisations such as Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.). One Officer after escaping from Germany joined the Jedburghs, but on the whole many went back to their parent units or other regiments.

By the end of hostilities in 1945, it is said only approximately sixty of the Original No.11 (Scottish) Commando came through unscathed, the rest being either killed in action, wounded or taken prisoner of war.

## We shall remember them



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