



# CHURCHILL'S CUT-THROATS

While its sister unit wreaked havoc in North Africa, the fledgling Special Boat Squadron worked to break the Axis grip on the Aegean

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER

In the early summer of 1944, Simon Wingfield-Digby, the Conservative member of parliament for West Dorset, posed a question in the House of Commons to Winston Churchill. "Is it true, Mr Prime Minister," he enquired, "that there is a body of men out in the Aegean Islands, fighting under the Union flag, that are nothing short of being a band of murderous, renegade cut-throats?"

Churchill did not appreciate the question. "If you do not take your seat and keep quiet," he snapped, "I will send you out to join them." Churchill's tart response would have come as no surprise. He was, after all, indirectly responsible for the 'cut-throats' that Wingfield-Digby spoke of. In reality, they were the Special Boat Squadron, an elite unit whose origins stretched back to the early summer of 1940 when Churchill had called for Britain to raise its own commando unit, or 'storm troops', to hit back at the Germans. One of the first to answer the call was Roger Courtney, a prewar adventurer and explorer who had once canoed down the White Nile.

Courtney suggested forming a small unit of seaborne raiders who would approach enemy targets using 'folboats', folding canoes made of

wood and canvas that had been popularised in the 1930s for those of an adventurous bent.

After proving the effectiveness of his idea with a successful mock attack on a Royal Naval ship, Courtney was granted permission to launch a Folboat Troop in July 1940, and just six months later, the unit was posted to North Africa. On 21 June 1941, the section achieved their first successful operation when two commandos landed by canoe on the west coast of Italy and blew a train off a coastal railway line.

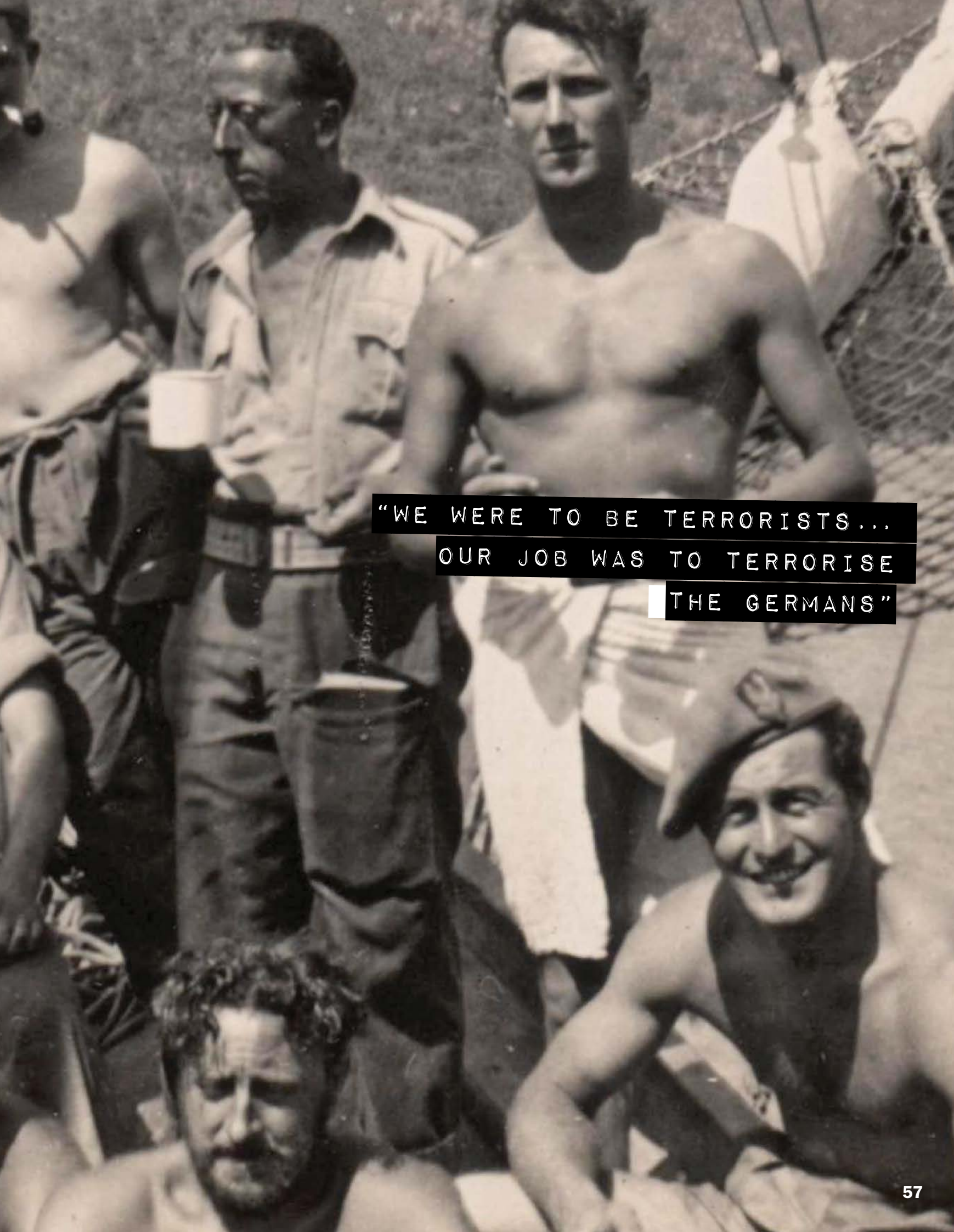
It was a triumph for the unit, whose name was soon changed to the Special Boat Section, but Courtney wasn't able to savour his success for long; he was invalided to England in poor health. The section might have withered and died had its activities not come to the attention of Captain David Stirling. The young Guards Officer had only recently formed his own special force – the Special Air Service (SAS) – but their inaugural parachute operation had ended in failure (in November 1941) and Stirling was on the lookout for innovative news ways to attack the enemy.

He incorporated the Special Boat Section into the SAS, and throughout the summer of

Hank Hancock, right in the back row, was a talented photographer and artist, who recorded the SBS's exploits on film and in sketches







"WE WERE TO BE TERRORISTS...  
OUR JOB WAS TO TERRORISE  
THE GERMANS"



1942, they reconnoitred Syrian and Lebanese beaches, raided Cretan airfields and, on one audacious attack on Rhodes in September, destroyed a dozen enemy aircraft.

In the same month as the Rhodes operation, Stirling was authorised to expand the SAS into a regiment. He raised four squadrons – A, B, C and D, with the latter a specialist amphibious unit – but Stirling never got the chance to oversee this expansion. He was captured in January 1943 and the SAS was plunged into what one officer called “chaos”.

Middle East Headquarters in Cairo decided to carve up the SAS, sending the French soldiers of C Squadron to Britain for further training, and despatching A and B squadrons to Palestine to begin preparing for the invasion of Sicily. As for D Squadron, that was renamed the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) and placed under the command of George Jellicoe.

By the end of April 1943, the SBS had a strength of 13 officers and 118 other ranks. Many of the men were ex-Guardsmen, including Dick Holmes, a Londoner, and his great pal, Doug Wright, a farm labourer before the war who, like Holmes, stood well over six foot tall. Among the officers was Captain David Sutherland, who had gone from Eton into the Black Watch, and a 22-year-old Danish lieutenant called Anders Lassen. Tall, blond and handsome, Lassen already had a Military Cross to his name and a reputation for quick, cold efficiency. Holmes was impressed by Lassen's

“ability to transform himself into a killing machine, to perform the task with a panache that earned him the reputation of a killer of Germans par excellence.”

One of the handful of signallers in the SBS was John Waterman. He recalls that April and May were spent preparing for operations, undertaking arduous route marches and PT drills, but also more specialised tuition. “We trained in all sorts of weapons, including captured weapons,” he said. “We also were taught how to use plastic explosives and then we did our sea training. You were taken a mile out to sea in a motor dory and then you jumped into water in full kit and swam back to shore.”

The inaugural SBS operation ended in failure when a raid on Sardinia in early July failed due to a combination of sickness – the SBS base in Algiers was rife with Malaria – and treachery. The unit's Italian-American guide turned out to have more allegiance to Italy than America, and once on Sardinia he alerted the Italian forces to the presence of the British.

In the same week that the Sardinia operation went awry, David Sutherland and 12 men

landed on Crete. Establishing his headquarters close to the landing beach, Sutherland sent B Patrol, under the command of Ken Lamonby and consisting of lance-corporal Dick Holmes and two other men, to attack an airfield near the island's capital city of Heraklion. Meanwhile, C Patrol, led by Lassen, was to hit the airfield at Kastelli.

For most of the men on the raid, this was their first experience of guerrilla warfare, and Holmes recalled his “heart pounding like shit” as they headed inland from the beach, each man carrying about 80 pounds over rough and rocky terrain. “Our rucksacks were these big Italian packs,” recalled Holmes. “They had no framework and so we put a groundsheet between our clothes and the pack otherwise they chafed the skin.”

The unit's D-Day came on 4 July, and Lassen's patrol infiltrated their target undetected. Cretan resistance fighters had informed the SBS officer that there were eight Stuka dive-bombers on the eastern side of Kastelli airfield, and five Junkers 88 bombers and a couple of fighters on the western side.

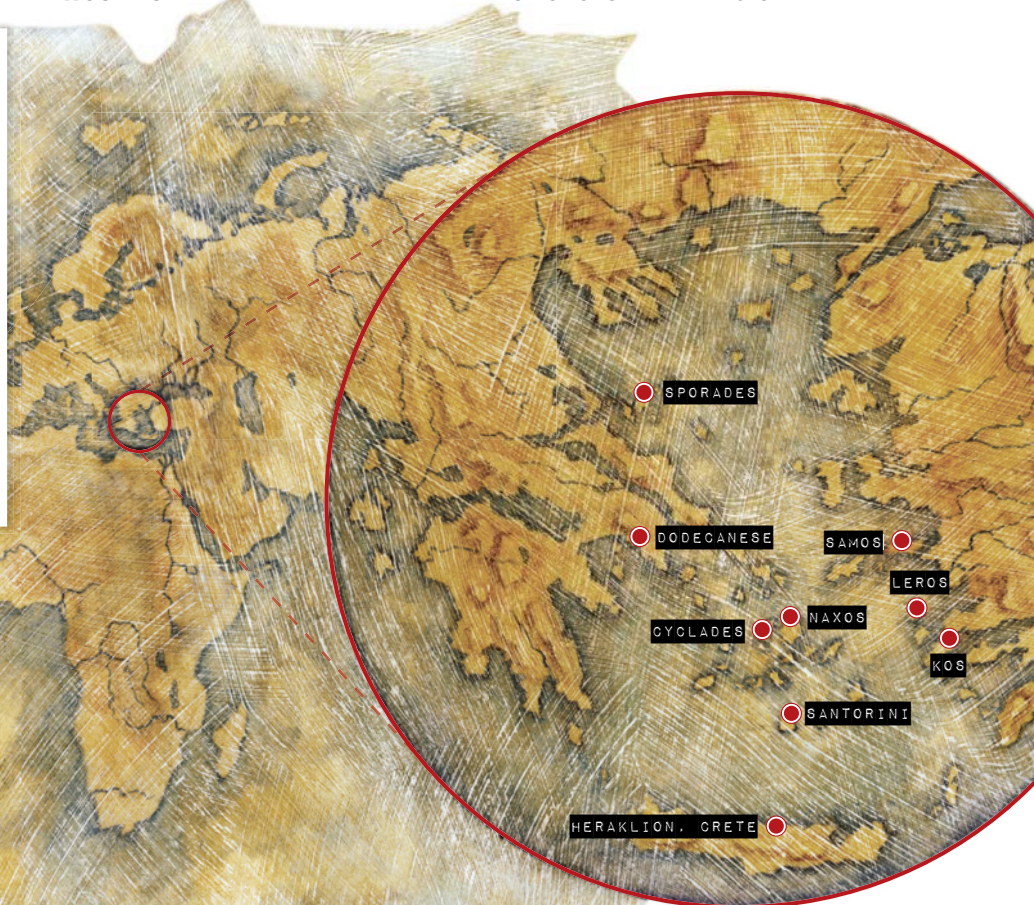
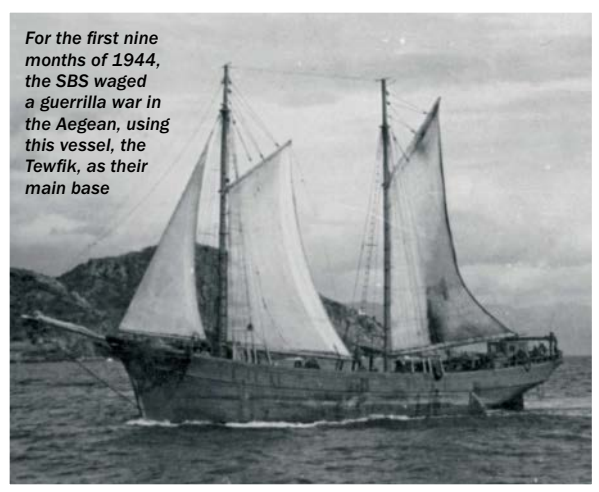
**“YOU WERE TAKEN A MILE OUT TO SEA IN A MOTOR DORY AND THEN YOU JUMPED INTO THE WATER IN FULL KIT AND SWAM BACK TO SHORE”**



# THE HUNTING GROUND OF THE SBS

**ALTHOUGH CAPTURING THE AEGEAN ISLANDS SEEMED AN UNIMPORTANT FOLLY TO MOST, CHURCHILL WAS CONVINCED THAT TAKING CONTROL OF THEM WOULD UNDERMINE HITLER AND THE AXIS FORCES IN THE REGION**

For the first nine months of 1944, the SBS waged a guerrilla war in the Aegean, using this vessel, the *Tewfik*, as their main base





# ANDY LASSEN'S VICTORIA CROSS

**THE ONLY MEMBER OF BRITAIN'S  
SPECIAL FORCES TO BE AWARDED  
THE VC WAS A DANISH OFFICER, WHO  
RECEIVED THE HONOUR POSTHUMOUSLY**

On the night of 8/9 April 1945, Anders Lassen led a ten-strong SBS patrol to attack a series of German machine-gun emplacements on the eastern shore of Lake Comacchio.

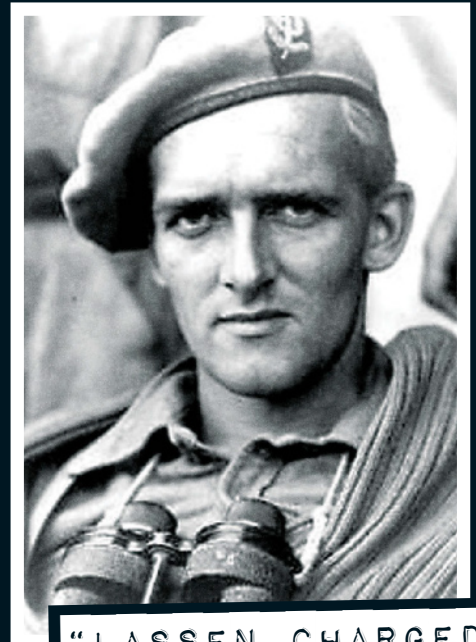
The lake, a natural obstacle to the progress of the Allied advance north through Italy, was well defended by the Germans on the north shore, and the SBS task was to eliminate the smaller force on the east, while also causing a diversion to the main assault.

Two local fishermen guided the SBS across the lake in wooden fishing boats, and once ashore, the Dane led his men along a road that ran parallel to the water. They soon encountered the first machine-gun nest, and although that was successfully subdued, more enemy fire was poured down the road.

Two SBS men were killed, another wounded, and the attack was in danger of faltering. Seizing the initiative, Lassen charged forward, zigzagging up the road, throwing grenades and firing bursts from his Tommy gun. One, two, three German positions were destroyed, but then Lassen was mortally wounded.

His parents were presented their son's Victoria Cross by King George VI in December 1945, the citation praising their son's "high sense of devotion to duty and... magnificent courage."

*Below: After being wounded, Lassen refused to be evacuated as he said it would endanger further lives*



**"LASSEN CHARGED  
FORWARD, ZIGZAGGING  
UP THE ROAD,  
THROWING GRENADES  
AND FIRING BURSTS  
FROM HIS TOMMY GUN"**

The four raiders carried Lewes bombs (named after Jock Lewes, an SAS officer killed in December 1941), which were stodgy lumps weighing just a pound and consisting of plastic explosive and thermite rolled in motor car oil. Lassen and his men were busy planting bombs on the Junkers when they were challenged by an Italian sentry. Shots were fired and in seconds the airfield was swarming with guards. But it was dark, the Italians were nervous, and when Lassen threw a couple of grenades, pandemonium ensued. The SBS dispersed their remaining bombs on a variety of targets before withdrawing unscathed. At the same time but approximately 15 miles north, Dick Holmes was approaching his target through some olive trees. It was no longer an airfield, which had been found to be inactive, but a large petrol dump encircled by an earthen wall.

The other three men of B Patrol were dealing with an adjacent bomb dump, leaving Holmes to creep along the dozens of drums of valuable fuel, placing charges at regular intervals. Suddenly he saw no more than 30 yards away a German guard and his dog. "The sentry was about to continue his patrol," wrote Holmes in his report, "when a second guard with a dog came past the dump and the pair began a lengthy conversation." The presence of the guards caused the other SBS raiders to abort their attack on the bomb dump.

Praying that none of the two-hour fuses would go off prematurely, Holmes hid among

the barrels of oil as the two Germans gossiped, occasionally telling their dogs to stop whining. "To my apprehensive ears the dogs seemed very restless, as if they knew I was hiding just a short distance away," recalled Holmes. "But neither guard picked up on their dogs' agitation, and after half an hour the Germans moved away from the dump."

At 1.10am, Holmes's bombs exploded, causing him to perform "a little dance on the Cretan hillside." The next morning, a local informed the raiders that flaming streams of petrol had cascaded through the earthen walls and engulfed the adjacent bomb dump, blowing it sky high.

Days after the attack, the *Egyptian Mail* newspaper boasted of a "Smash and Grab Land Raid on a Crete Airfield." The SBS had even escaped from the island with a couple of prisoners from a German patrol they'd encountered on their way back to the beach. Back in Cairo, the British treated their prisoners to dinner at Groppi's, one of the city's most celebrated restaurants. Holmes (awarded a Military Medal for his part in the raid) recalled that after three weeks on Crete, the SBS were bearded, dirty and unkempt, but the stares they received as they strode into Groppi's "were nothing compared to the stares accorded the two Germans."

The collapse of Benito Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy had significant ramifications for the SBS and the islands of the Aegean,

*When they weren't raiding islands, the men of the SBS had time to relax and enjoy their surroundings*



*Above: The SBS operated from a remote base in the Gulf of Kos in Turkish waters, in flagrant breach of the country's neutrality*



*Regular resupplies were delivered to the SBS from Palestine, but they also pillaged the German garrisons they raided*



## CHURCHILL'S CUT-THROATS

hitherto an unimportant backwater in the European Theatre. The islands – to the north the Sporades, the Cyclades in the west and the Dodecanese in the east – now became of strategic importance. Most had been garrisoned by Italians, and following the Armistice in September 1943, the British moved to take over the islands, some of which contained airstrips from where they could attack the Balkans Peninsula.

Hitler, for his part, had no intention of letting the British move in. "Abandonment of the islands would create the most unfavourable impression [among our Allies]," declared the Führer. "To avoid such a blow to our prestige, we may even have to accept the loss of our troops and material."

For the next year, Germany and Britain fought a bloody war for the possession of the sun-drenched islands that had been enticing pleasure-seekers for more than 2,000 years. Now Kos, Leros, Samos, Naxos, Santorini and Symi all became the scene of some brutal engagements. "We were to be terrorists... Our job was to terrorise the Germans," recalled Dick Holmes. British forces, the SBS among them, had been forced to withdraw from the Aegean in the autumn of 1943, when the Germans launched a major assault to retake the islands. In early 1944, Jellicoe was instructed to hit back, fighting the guerrilla war for which his men been trained. First, the SBS were to focus their attacks on shipping and harbour installations so as to reduce the enemy's

capability to move quickly from island to island; then they were to launch hit-and-run raids on the islands themselves, first in the Dodecanese and then moving further afield to the western Cyclades and the Sporades in the north. As one of their officers commented, they were to act as "legitimised pirates."

The SBS headed north west to a remote bay on the west coast of Turkey aboard several motor launches and a 180-ton schooner, *Tewfik*, which John Waterman recalled had a reputation of being temperamental. "They would have a hell of a job getting it going sometimes," he said. "So Lassen would use an explosive charge. He would open a sort of hatch, take some explosive, prime it and drop it in and then screw the thing back up, and it would get the engine going."

Once anchored in the isolated bay, with the Turks turning a blind eye to the flagrant violation of their official neutrality, the SBS began to

"ONCE ANCHORED IN THE ISOLATED BAY, WITH THE TURKS TURNING A BLIND EYE TO THE FLAGRANT VIOLATION OF THEIR OFFICIAL NEUTRALITY, THE SBS BEGAN TO TERRORISE"

*It was Churchill's vision to take control of the Greek islands with a small party of highly trained men*







# DISBANDED

**THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT DISBANDED THE SBS IN 1945 BECAUSE IT ENVISAGED A WORLD OF PEACE WITHOUT THE NEED FOR SPECIAL FORCES**

The Aegean had been the ideal theatre for the SBS, allowing them to wage a guerrilla war in which courage went hand in hand with initiative and daring. The operations that followed were less successful, although they had the honour of being the first British soldiers to liberate the Greek city of Salonika in October 1944. In Greece and Yugoslavia, they became increasingly caught up in the incipient civil wars, and by the spring of 1945, opportunities to engage the enemy were restricted to small raids against Adriatic islands off the Croatian coast. The SBS were preparing to deploy to the Far East when the USA brought the war to an end with its two atomic bombs, and in October 1945, the SBS was officially disbanded.

**"THE SBS WERE PREPARING TO DEPLOY TO THE FAR EAST WHEN THE USA BROUGHT THE WAR TO AN END WITH ITS TWO ATOMIC BOMBS"**



*Corporal Aubrey of the SBS sharpens his fighting knife as he prepares for combat*



terrorise. One patrol landed on Symi and killed ten Germans; another wrecked the cable stations on Lisso and Archi; one raiding party intercepted three enemy vessels and sent them and their crew to the bottom of the Aegean.

In the early hours of 23 April 1944, Lassen and 18 men came ashore on Santorini and made for the main German garrison. One of the raiders recalled that "Lassen's motto on prisoners that night seemed to be 'don't take any'." They entered the garrison unseen, and once inside, the killing began.

The SBS moved methodically through the building in pairs, one man throwing in a grenade, the next raking the room with machine-gun fire from the side of the door. "That was the only time I was in action side by side with Lassen and it's one of the reasons I'm trying to forget the war," recalled Sergeant Jack Nicholson years later. "It's no fun throwing grenades into rooms and shooting sleeping men. That garrison could have been captured."

While Lassen was wiping out the garrison on Santorini, Lieutenant Kingsley Clarke was sent on a tour of the islands with instructions from David Sutherland to spread alarm and despondency at every opportunity. With him went some of the most experienced men in the squadron, including Dick Holmes, Doug Wright and Duggie Pomford.

First they hit Kos, destroying the island's telegraph station and killing a number of Germans. They then set sail for Amorgos, 15 miles east, having learned that approximately 30 Germans had recently left the island for Santorini – they were despatched to help hunt

for Lassen and his men, who had already escaped. "We were armed to the teeth, bearded and a pretty frightening sight," recalled Holmes. There were ten Germans still on the island and the SBS were told by locals that they were billeted in the village school.

The SBS launched the attack on the school with a single grenade. Then Doug Wright opened up with his Bren from a roof overlooking the building. "I fired ten Bren gun magazines loaded with a good mixture of ball, tracer and incendiary and armour piercing," he remembered, "raking all the windows and doors of the building."

Immediately Wright ceased firing, Pomford dashed forward, throwing a grenade through a window and then firing a quick burst from his Tommy gun. Clarke called on the Germans to surrender. Instead they chose to burst out of the building, guns blazing as if they were Wild West bandits fleeing a botched bank raid. Two of the ten escaped in the darkness; the rest were killed. "It wasn't possible to take many prisoners," reflected Wright, who was awarded the Military Medal for his part in the attack.

Attacking the islands was the easy part for the SBS. It was the voyage back to their hideout in Turkey that was fraught with danger. Returning from Amorgos, the engine blew on their wooden fishing boat, so they reverted to sail. "On a couple of occasions German aircraft came in low to investigate us," recalled Holmes. "Fortunately some of the boys had taken to wearing the German peaked caps and we carried a lot of German weapons so that fooled the pilots. It was pretty nerve wracking."



## CHURCHILL'S CUT-THROATS

An SBS patrol completes its tour of the Acropolis during their posting to Athens in the late autumn of 1944



At the end of May, S Squadron received orders to return to Palestine. Sutherland, who, not wishing to miss out on the action, had led a raid against the island of Lesbos, totted up the squadron's scorecard in the previous two months: three caiques (local wooden fishing boats used by both sides) captured and 12 sunk or damaged; three wireless stations destroyed and 11 more captured; three cable stations destroyed and dozens of enemy soldiers killed or captured. In addition, 25 tons of much needed food had been distributed to the malnourished inhabitants of the islands. "I reflected as we sailed quietly south back to Beirut how special these officers and men were," recalled Sutherland. "The

operations were well planned and carried out in a highly professional way at all levels."

Donald Grant, an American war correspondent who had accompanied the SBS on one raid to see first hand their skill in guerrilla warfare, subsequently recounted the experience in a radio broadcast on 22 May 1944. Having described a typical raid, he concluded: "There is considerable variation in uniform, but all are dirty, greasy and torn. About the only common garment to all Raiding Force men is a strangely hooded jacket, which makes them appear to be a band of Robin Hood's merry men, stepped out of a story book, complete with knives slung at their belts."

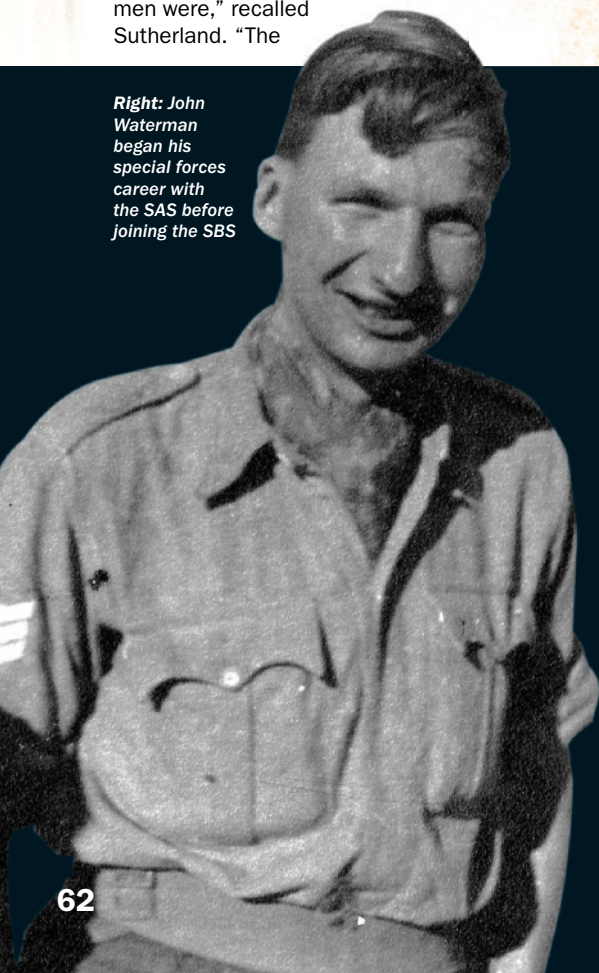
Such melodramatic broadcasts alarmed not only the Germans but also one or two Britons

— like Simon Wingfield-Digby, the Conservative MP who simply couldn't comprehend what was required to defeat a military machine as savage as the Nazis. Churchill, fortunately, wasn't so naive, and it was thanks to his 'cut-throats' that in May 1944, the Germans drafted in another 4,000 troops to garrison the Aegean Islands at a time when their resources were already desperately thin.

"We didn't do anything that affected the war in any great way," reflected Dick Holmes. "But I think we slowed them down in the Aegean and we also tied up quite a few thousand of their troops when they would have been better deployed in Russia or France, and we were doing that with only a few dozen men of our own. So we felt we were doing something necessary."

Images: Getty, Textures.com; Thinkstock

Right: John Waterman began his special forces career with the SAS before joining the SBS



## JOHN WATERMAN

**AN SBS SIGNALLER FROM 1943-45, WATERMAN IS ONE OF THE LAST REMAINING VETERANS OF THE ELITE UNIT**

A Kentish man, Waterman joined the SAS in 1942 and transferred to the SBS shortly after, serving with them until their disbandment in October 1945. He saw action in the Aegean campaign, the Balkans and Italy, and a few years after the war he emigrated to Canada where he still lives.

"I joined the Special Boat Squadron when it was formed in 1943 as one of the unit's four signallers and I worked closely with Major George Jellicoe, our CO. In early 1944, the SBS assembled a small force working in the Aegean islands from a base on a remote stretch of Turkish coastline. The Germans had kicked us out of the likes of Leros and Samos the previous autumn so our role was to cause as much trouble as possible on the Dodecanese islands. Our base was a large wooden schooner, and from there we sailed into the Aegean in small wooden fishing boats to attack the islands. A lot of the time I was on the schooner, maintaining radio communication with Jellicoe in Palestine, but I went on one raid to Nisyros. The sole Italian on

the island was on the side of the Germans, but the moment he saw us landing, he took to the hills.

"Not all the islands were garrisoned by Germans but on the ones that were, we would raid their billet and destroy any communications we found. By the summer of 1944, the Germans had reinforced the islands in the Aegean with thousands more troops, at a time they could ill afford to.

"From the Aegean we moved into Greece, in the van of the invasion force, and we liberated the port of Patras in the south of the country, before chasing the Germans as far as Lamia, before returning to Athens. In the spring of 1945, we started to raid the islands off the coast of Croatia, crushing the last German resistance.

"Reflecting on my years in the SBS, I did feel I was among exceptional soldiers. We had a confidence in our own ability and we were expected to display initiative and have an independence of thought that wasn't that common in the British Army of the time."