Irregular warfare in North Africa's desert drew men willing to risk all in murderous terrain. Above and below, Long Range Desert Group vehicles; at right, some of the French Special Air Service men who participated in raids involving the British Special Interrogation Group; top right, opposite, two original LRDG volunteers with neighbors.

Asking for Trouble

To undermine the Afrika Korps, Britain's Special Interrogation Group went to extremes

By Gavin Mortimer

TOP AND BOTTOM LEFT, IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM E 2298, E 12385; ALL OTHERS COURTESY OF GAVIN MORTIMER

In the high Libyan desert, a convoy of five Ford one-and-a-half-ton trucks and eight Canadian Military Pattern three-ton trucks, their beds shrouded by canvas tarpaulins, climbs atop an escarpment. Tobruk lies 20 miles north. In the valley below, the main road—a layer of pierced-metal planking that leads to the German-held port—catches the fading light. It is 6:30 p.m. on Sunday, September 13, 1942.

The Fords are painted salmon pink to blend with the haze of the sun at dawn and dusk. Their drivers and riders belong to the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), mainly Englishmen commanded by Captain David Lloyd Owen, who dismounts from the lead truck and walks to the eight larger trucks. He chats with Lieutenant Colonel John Haselden, who commands the big trucks' passengers and drivers. These 15 officers and their 77 men wear the uniforms of commandos, artillerymen, and signalers. None is armed. The only soldiers carrying weapons are 14 men clothed in the faded olive cotton tunics and shorts of the Afrika Korps. They sit in the trucks' cabs, one fellow at the wheel, the other training a Schmeisser MP40 submachine gun on his unarmed captives.

Some LRDG men join Owen on the escarpment; others wander down the line of trucks, wishing the vehicles' occupants good luck. They've spent the past week together, the LRDG transporting the other men 700 miles north from a hideout in Libya's Kufra Oasis. Now, standing by their Fords, the LRDG men watch the curious convoy descend the escarpment. Each of the three-ton trucks is emblazoned with the characteristic Afrika Korps palm-and-swastika motif.

Night has fallen by the time the vehicles reach the east gate of the perimeter fence that encircles Tobruk. A German sentry halts the lead truck. The transport's Allied origins do not faze the guard. These days most of the Afrika Korps seems to travel in British- or North American-made vehicles, spoils of war taken the June before when Field Marshal Erwin Rommel and his men seized Tobruk and swept the British 350 miles east to El Alamein. The German notes the motif on the truck's cab. He asks for the password. The driver provides it, and flashes his papers. The guard orders the barrier raised. Two more miles and they'll be in Tobruk.

The eight trucks have rumbled a few hundred yards into the darkness when the lead vehicle veers off the road, the others following. The drivers steer into one of the many *wadis*, or dry riverbeds, that fissure the Libyan desert. The vehicles jolt through the wadi and then turn northeast near the main Luftwaffe landing field at Bir-el Gubi. The commandos begin retrieving weapons hidden aboard the trucks. The men in German uniform pile out of their trucks' cabs and, lest they be shot as spies, peel off Afrika Korps tunics to reveal British battledress and the insignia of the Special Interrogation Group (SIG). Soon the raiding party is moving stealthily north on foot, toward Tobruk. Overhead, scores of British and American warplanes are making a racket. Colonel Haselden checks his watch. Right on schedule. One of the most audacious raids of the war in North Africa is underway.

THE SIG MEN, ALL DISPLACED JEWS, WERE TO LIVE, BREATHE, AND TRAIN AS IF THEY WERE SERVING IN HITLER'S AFRIKA KORPS.

Only a culture as irreverent as Britain's could have produced the SIG, with its blend of boldness, eccentricity, and ferocity. The unit was the brainchild of Captain Herbert Cecil Buck, 25, the quintessential British officer of his era: impeccably bred—his father was a retired colonel—intellectually formidable—an Oxford scholar, he spoke nine languages—and singularly brave—he already had received a Military Cross. In early December 1941 the Germans had captured Buck near Gazala, but in the confusion he escaped. Stumbling across a dead Afrika Korps officer, Buck stripped the corpse and in German drag slipped through enemy lines to British-occupied territory.

That feat's ease solidified an idea Buck had nurtured since a chance 1941 encounter in Palestine. Driving from Tel Aviv to Haifa, Buck stopped for two Jewish hitchhikers. En route, one mentioned a German-speaking unit of the Palmach, a Jewish paramilitary brigade. Back in Cairo after his escape, Buck proposed that the British War Office raise a cadre of German-speaking Jews to infiltrate enemy territory and gather intelligence. In March 1942 Military Intelligence approved creation of a "Special German Group as a sub-unit of Middle East Commando…with the cover name 'Special Interrogation Group,' to be used for infiltration behind the German lines in the Western Desert, under 8th Army."

Buck was appointed commanding officer and given carte blanche to recruit approximately 30 soldiers from the recently disbanded No. 51 Middle East Commando. That unit's 150-odd men had been pursuing Italian targets in Abyssinia and Eritrea until spring 1941, when the Afrika Korps' arrival in Libya changed the nature of the war.

The men of 51 Commando—60 percent Jews, 40 percent Arabs—were bored and ripe for recruitment when on March 17, 1942, their war diary noted Buck's arrival at the unit's base in Burg el Arab "to select German speaking personnel with a view to certain work." Leo Hillman, 19, an Austrian Jew who before the war had been imprisoned for demonstrating against the Nazis, signed up. So did Maurice Tiefenbrunner,

26, an athletic, belligerent fellow who had grown up a Jew in Germany. In 1938, he had fled to British-run Palestine, where he joined the British Army. Once Buck recruited him, Tiefenbrunner changed his name to "Tiffin," perhaps at the urging of Buck, who would have known from his days with the Punjab Regiment that "tiffin" was slang among Englishmen of the Raj for the hour when all hands stopped for afternoon tea.

Buck also combed the French Foreign Legion and Free French and Free Czech forces, as well as Jewish paramilitaries in Palestine. He offered soldiers who had the background he sought little more than a guarantee of dangerous undercover work until he had 30 men. Recruits like Ariyeh Shai, a veteran of 51 Commando, traveled to a training base at Geneifa in the Suez Canal zone. "We received no promises. Captain Buck had warned that lives would depend on our ability to wear our disguises faultlessly, to learn to perfection the slang prevalent among the soldiers of the Afrika Korps, and to drill in accordance with all the German methods," Shai said. "He told us, 'If your true identity is found out, there is no hope for you.'"

To keep enemy agents from unmasking his men, Buck barred interaction with other British regiments. SIG men were to live, breathe, and train as if they were in the Afrika Korps. To reinforce the ruse, Buck issued German pay books, cigarettes, and chocolates. Into their tunics the men tucked letters and snapshots of them with sweethearts in the Fatherland—in reality, British girls driving and clerking at army headquarters in Cairo who posed with the men in their Afrika Korps uniforms against suitably Teutonic backdrops.

The final touch was recruiting German POWs Walter Essner and Herbert Brueckner. When captured in late 1941—Essner was a sergeant, Brueckner a corporal—both men claimed to be fervent anti-Nazis, leading their captors to recruit them as agents and assign them to SIG to train the Jewish volunteers in German procedures and jargon. "Brueckner was in his twenties. He was big, brash and fair. Essner was quiet, good-natured, and in his thirties," Tiffin said. "They joined us at our camp and the real German training began, including German songs. We learned German commands, how to handle their weapons and how, and to whom, to salute."

By May 1942 SIG operatives were behind enemy lines on missions that were small and unspectacular but useful. Driving German trucks and disguised as military policemen, the men set up roadblocks, stopping and questioning drivers, military and civilian. Along Libya's main coastal road, they haunted cafés, mingling with diners and subtly extracting information. Tiffin even persuaded a field cashier to advance him pay, so caught up in his performance as an Afrika Korps Landser that he hardly had time to dwell on the danger.

SIG operations might have stayed at intelligence-gathering but for Major David Stirling. Like Buck, Stirling was an upper-class maverick with ingenious ideas about making war. In 1941 he had created the Special Air Service, a commando regiment whose motto was *Qui audet vincit* ("Who Dares Wins"). Stirling, who saw in Buck a kindred spirit, invited him and his lot to collaborate with SAS troops on a pair of raids. The targets: German airfields 100 miles west of Tobruk at Derna, on the Libyan coast, and Martuba, 16 miles to the southeast and a few miles inland. Planes from the fields were harassing Allied shipping in the Mediterranean. The attack would include 15 French SAS soldiers led by Lieutenant Augustin Jordan.

The raiders, plus Essner and Brueckner, set out on June 8 from an SAS base at Siwa Oasis, near Egypt's border with Libya, in three LRDG vehicles. The two Germans' presence disturbed the SIG men. Having the POWs as instructors was one thing, but including them in an operation was unwise, Tiffin told his superior. "Captain Buck said to me, 'Maurice, everything is all right,'" Tiffin recalled. "'They have been interviewed, interrogated, observed, they are 100 percent all right. They are really idealists, fighting the Nazis like you.'"

The French SAS men, wearing khaki overalls and blue

Maurice "Tiffin" Tiefenbrunner (far left) departed Germany in 1938 for Palestine. Initially with 51 Commando, he was among the early SIG recruits. At left, two Afrika Korps soldiers operate an American-made jeep. Combatants in North Africa used whatever vehicles they could scrounge.

LEFT, IDF ARCHIVES; RIGHT, COURTESY OF GAVIN MORTIMER

forage caps, were in two trucks bearing Afrika Korps markings and driven by SIG men armed with Schmeissers and German "potato masher" grenades. Another SIG man drove a German staff car. The convoy reached Derna's outskirts without hindrance. Late on the afternoon of June 12, Buck and Jordan reconnoitered the airfields. One held Messerschmitt 110 fighter-bombers; the other, Ju 87 Stuka dive-bombers. They returned to the rendezvous, five miles from each target, to wait for sunset. At dark, leaving Tiffin at the meeting point with the staff car, Buck and Essner drove Corporal Jean Tourneret and four men toward Martuba. A second truck, with Brueckner at the wheel and machine-gun-wielding SIG man Peter Hass—another Zionist from Palestine—as passenger, headed for Derna. In the truck bed the other French SAS men, led by Jordan, hid under a tarp with their weapons and explosives.

"The lorry kept spluttering to a halt," Jordan recalled. Each time, Brueckner ducked under the hood, coaxing the engine to life. At the airfield, the vehicle stopped yet again. Jordan, beneath the tarpaulin, heard the cab door open and close, and then footsteps. Hass whispered that Brueckner had gone to a hangar to ask a German for a wrench.

Seconds passed. Minutes. Jordan heard running. Lifting the tarp at the tailgate, he poked his head out. Hands jerked him to the ground. German soldiers ringed the vehicle. "*Heraus*!" they cried. "*Aber Schnell*!"—"Get out here! And quickly!" One by one the French soldiers jumped down, hands raised.

"The only one who stayed in the lorry was Hass," recalled Jordan. "He knew what would happen to him."

Hass fired his Schmeisser at the SAS weapons cache, blowing himself and the truck to pieces and sending the Germans and their prisoners diving every which way—all but Jordan, who sprinted into the dark, evading capture.

A German fighter pilot later captured by the British, Luftwaffe Lieutenant Friederich Korner, provided details of the double-cross. "Brueckner got out, saluted the CO and stated that he was a German soldier acting as driver of a German lorry containing a party of heavily armed English troops in German uniform with explosive charges to destroy aircraft," Korner said. "The CO was rather suspicious at first but the driver pressed him to organize as many men as possible with all speed and as heavily armed as possible to disarm the raiding party. The truck was immediately surrounded and the occupants forced to get out. A few seconds after the last one had got out, there was an explosion inside the lorry and it was completely destroyed." Besides exposing the Derna raid, Brueckner warned the Germans that Martuba was about to be hit, and showed them where the enemy rendezvous was.

From the rendezvous site, Tiffin could hear fighting at both strike locations. After dropping the Martuba raiders, Buck and Essner joined him, unaware of events at Derna. An exhausted Jordan arrived on foot. When he told of Brueckner's betrayal, Buck ordered an immediate evacuation; Tiffin trained his gun on Essner. "For me now he was a German, an enemy," Tiffin said. "I said, 'When you move, you are a dead man.'" Later, Essner did try to escape, and died in a volley of British bullets.

Violence awaited the Frenchmen at Martuba. When they found the base on high alert, they did not attack but settled in to monitor enemy activity. As they left for the rendezvous Germans spotted them, and all were captured or killed. Buck later blamed his misplaced trust in Brueckner for the debacle.

Sons of the Desert: How Britain's Irregulars Came to Be

In mid-1940, with only desert separating 50,000 British troops in Egypt from 425,000 Italian soldiers in Libya, the British Army needed to patrol the intervening 750,000 square miles of sand. The Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), the Special Air Service (SAS), and the Special Boat Squadron (SBS) got the same assignment: monitor and harass the foe. SAS men were twenty-somethings, eager for action. Desert-savvy LRDG men—older, perhaps veterans of the last war, sometimes fluent in Arabic—looked on the SAS as older brothers do younger brothers. Gradually the units began to collaborate, with the LRDG supporting missions like those chronicled here. By May 1943, when the war in North Africa ended, the LRDG moved to the Mediterranean and Adriatic; the SAS, to Europe. After the war the army disbanded both, but later revived the SAS—now among the world's premier special ops units.

Condenser tanks and radiator grilles hacked to boost air flow are hallmarks of jeeps run by British irregulars. These Special Air Service men are embarking on a raid.

Tempted to disband the SIG, the army instead gave Buck a final chance—the raid on Tobruk. The aim was to cripple key supply ports ahead of an Allied offensive at El Alamein. The SAS would attack Benghazi. The LRDG would hit Barce, 160 miles east of Tobruk—itself the target of a commando force, artillerymen, Royal Marines, British infantry, and the SIG. Lieutenant Colonel Haselden would command the attack. The commandos and the SIG were to bluff their way into Tobruk to silence the port's coastal batteries, allowing Royal Navy destroyers HMS *Zulu* and HMS *Sikh* to land a battalion of marines. An infantry force in 20 Motor Torpedo Boats would swoop in as well.

On Sunday night, September 13, the commandos penetrated Tobruk, heading for the coastal guns on the eastern outskirts. Haselden and Buck, with five SIG men including Leo Hillman, the young Austrian, seized a small house and established a command post. But the operation began to unravel. The man assigned to lead the infantry ashore got lost. As the landing boats circled, enemy gunners spotted the British vessels, eventually sinking both destroyers. The Germans surrounded Haselden, Buck, and their little force. "It was too dark to see the enemy but they were about 10 yards away," recalled Hillman. "We continued to hold back the enemy for another 10 minutes until we ran out of ammunition."

At this, Haselden charged singlehandedly. Before the others could use the distraction to get away, the Germans killed him. They captured all but Hillman, who stumbled through the night until he encountered seven British soldiers led by a commando, Lieutenant Tommy Langton. Hillman had lost a boot and badly cut his foot, but surrender was not an option; he limped on. By the time the group reached their rendezvous east of the city their LRDG transport, as arranged, had left. Hillman and accomplices set off on foot for the British lines 400 miles east. Friendly Arabs guided the soldiers to Bardia. For four weeks they hid in a wadi, with Arabs providing food and water. When they reached British lines on November 13, Hillman found Tiffin, who had good news and bad news.

The British Army had succeeded with its attack on El Alamein, but was dissolving the SIG. With Buck a POW, the group had no commander—and the Germans had withdrawn hundreds of miles west, leading the army to conclude that there was no role in the Desert War for Tiffin, Hillman, and cohort. Headquarters folded the SIG into the SAS, ending brief months of activity during which, despite doing little physical damage, the Special Interrogation Group rattled the Germans. In a June 1942 message to Rommel that British code breakers intercepted, Hitler, calling the SIG "German political refugees," demanded they "be mercilessly wiped out."

The British Special Operations Executive recruited Hillman to organize anti-Nazi partisans in Austria. He emerged from the war with a Military Cross. In December 1942, Italian troops captured Tiffin and other SAS men bound west for American lines. "We broke down," said Tiffin. "We were spotted from an Italian outpost in the Benghazi area, and they sent an armored car to find out who we were." Convincing his captors he was Canadian, he spent 10 months as a POW in Bari, Italy. When Italy surrendered in September 1943, he was transferred to a German camp near Hanover. After the war, Tiffin reclaimed his surname. Tiefenbrunner learned that his parents had perished at Auschwitz. After participating in the 1948 war that established the state of Israel, he and his wife raised four children in London. He spent his final three decades in Israel, working as a bookbinder until he retired in 2011.

In 2013, Tiefenbrunner gave an interview about one of the war's most secretive, shortest-lived units. The SIG "did the job they were asked to do and a bit more," he said. "We fulfilled a duty that could not have been done by a whole regular army because we could spring a surprise and carry out an action which was a complete surprise of our enemy." Soon after, Maurice Tiefenbrunner, the last SIG man, died at 97. ✭

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