

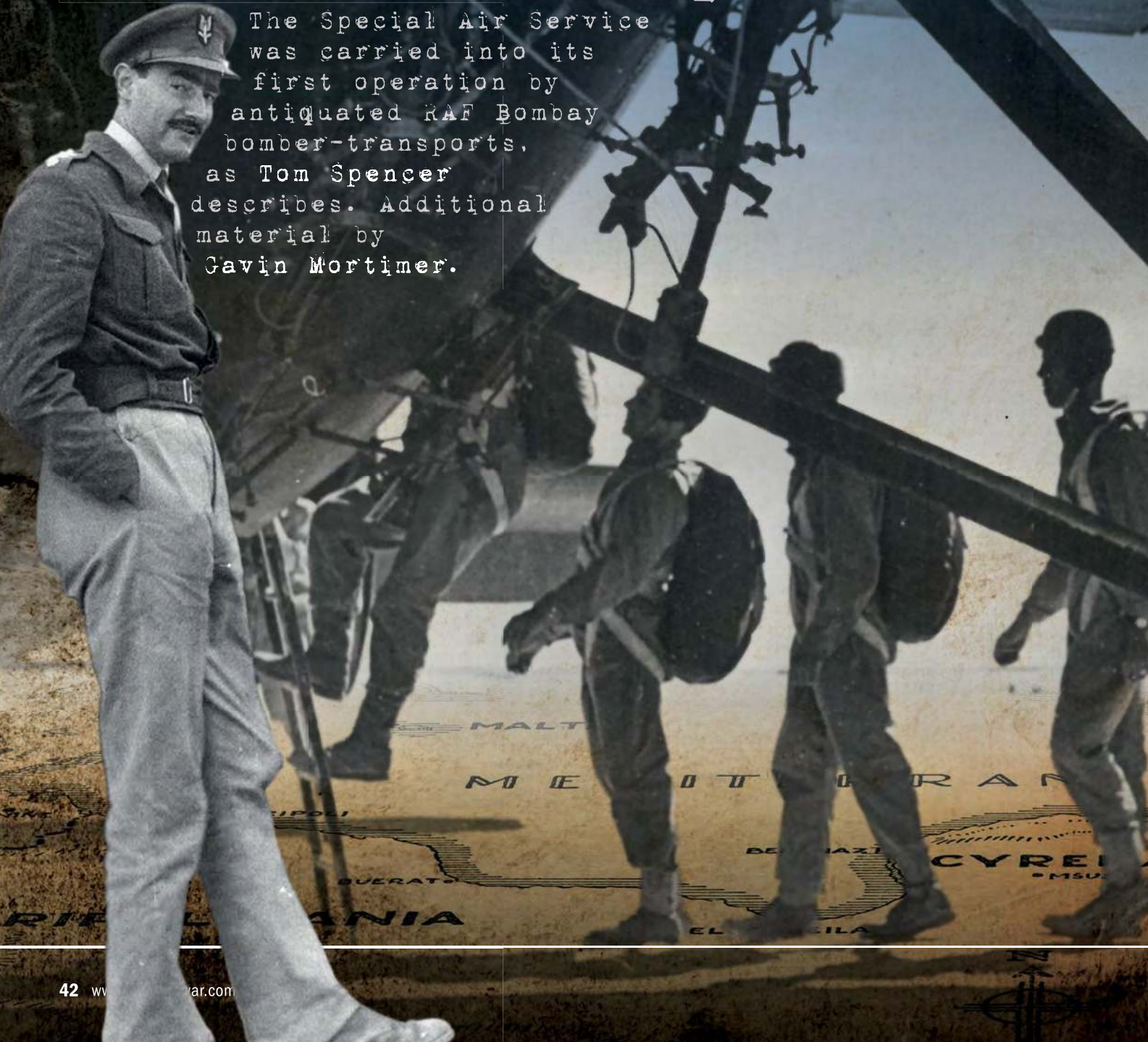
# SAS

In the summer of 1941, the British Army's Egypt-based Lt David Stirling was proposing the formation of a pioneering unit, one which would hit the enemy deep behind their lines. He knew he could find the men to carry out these hard-hitting raids on airfields, communication lines and Axis outposts – but he needed a way to get them into a position to strike. He envisaged them being delivered by parachute drop.

The development of airborne forces by the British was still in its infancy at that point, and there were no dedicated aircraft adapted for the

## The First Airdrop

The Special Air Service was carried into its first operation by antiquated RAF Bombay bomber-transport, as Tom Spencer describes. Additional material by Gavin Mortimer.





role. Indeed, Armstrong Whitworth Whitley bombers had delivered the first British airborne operation on 10 February 1941, when they attacked the Tragino aqueduct in southern Italy. The Whitley was far from ideal, and the paratroops had to exit the aircraft via the hatch of the redundant ventral turret. (This mission against Mussolini's war machine was codenamed Operation 'Colossus'.)

### NEEDS MUST

When Stirling assembled his small team of volunteers for rigorous training the only available aircraft in

the Middle East that could deliver them by parachute were the obsolescent Bristol Bombays of 216 Squadron. Designed against a pre-war requirement for a dual-role bomber-transport, it was a high-wing, twin-engined aircraft with a fixed undercarriage.

The Bombay featured a voluminous fuselage with a large entry door on the port side for passengers or freight, with any bomb load being carried on external racks beneath the body. Armed with manually operated nose and tail turrets, it had a cruising speed of 160mph (257km/h) and a normal range of almost 900 miles (1,448km). They

were outmoded and not ideal, but they were all there was – and they did have a roomy fuselage and exit door from which parachuting was possible, so it was a matter of 'needs must'.

Part of 202 Group, 216 Squadron was a veteran of desert transport flying, having been based in Egypt since 1920, and had helped pioneer air routes throughout the region. It had begun re-equipping with the Bombay in October 1939 but did not retire the last of the lumbering Vickers Valentia biplanes until September 1941. The squadron, which was under the command of Wg Cdr Gilbert >>

#### BELOW

'L' Detachment troopers board a Bombay named 'Bishopsgate' for a practice parachute drop at Kabrit in October 1941. (KEY COLLECTION)

#### BOTTOM LEFT

SAS founder, David Stirling. (GAVIN MORTIMER COLLECTION)







**ABOVE** Howie, left its long-time home at Heliopolis on the outskirts of Cairo on 6 October and moved ten miles north-east to El Khanka, though it had a forward detachment under the control of the Air Headquarters Western Desert.

**SAS legend, Paddy Mayne.**  
(GAVIN MORTIMER COLLECTION)

**TRAINING WITHOUT AN INSTRUCTOR**

**RIGHT** Having completed rigorous training in desert and unconventional fighting, Stirling's unit, now just over 60 strong and known as 'L' Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade, required parachute training and moved to RAF Kabrit on the banks of the Great Bitter Lake.

**Members of 'L' Detachment practise parachute landings from the back of a lorry.**  
(VIA F MACKLIN)

However, there was no qualified parachuting instructor available. Ground training was conducted and in early October five Bombays under Flt Lt T H Archbell were detached to Kabrit for live training. The other captains, all of whom were highly experienced, were Flt Lt Whitaker, Fg Off Priest, F/Sgt West and Sgt Ford. Flt Lt (later Wg Cdr) Archbell recalled many years later: "The Bombay was not designed for parachute operations so there was no static line. The troops dropped using a manually opening back parachute. The training was also for us, as this was something new." The first trial jumps were conducted by day and as

confidence and experience built, the speed of despatch increased and eventually they began parachuting at night. Sgt Ford described their charges as being "...a tough bunch of chaps though we lost one senior NCO whose 'chute failed to open on a jump towards the end of training".

**PRECURSOR TO CRUSADER**

Part of the rationale for creating the Special Air Service was for the unit to wage war behind enemy lines in support of wider Allied operations. Whilst the training of the SAS alongside 216 Squadron was continuing in October, plans for the biggest British offensive in the desert thus far were developing.



"Nonetheless, with the offensive imminent and pressure to prove the SAS concept, after speaking with his lieutenants, Stirling decided to continue. Operation Squatter was on!"







meteorological forecast was for severe storms in the target areas with gales, heavy rain and thick cloud, and the surface wind for the parachute landings in excess of 30mph. Nonetheless, with the offensive imminent and pressure to prove the SAS concept, after speaking

**LEFT**  
An SAS soldier leaves the side door of a Bombay during the training period before the first operation. (216 SQUADRON RECORDS)

Operation 'Crusader' was to open in mid-November and the SAS was to play a part in reducing the capacity of the Luftwaffe and Italian air force by destroying aircraft at their aerodromes in Libya.

Intelligence had identified a number of key airfields and those at Gazala, near the coast about 25 miles west of the port of Tobruk, and Tmimi a further 30 miles west and a few miles inland, were selected. To ensure the Bombays had sufficient range they were fitted with additional petrol tanks as Sgt Ford later described: "To obtain the necessary endurance for these flights we had installed in the cabin a 180-gallon auxiliary fuel tank. As fuel was used from the main tanks they were topped off from the auxiliary by 'Zwicky' hand pumps."

The offensive was due to begin on 18 November, and so on the 16<sup>th</sup> five Bombays with the SAS detachment moved forward to Maaten

Bagush, Egypt, ready for the first operation of its kind in the Middle East. There the final preparations and briefings were conducted, though the news was not promising. The



**LEFT**  
Taken some time before the operation this view shows the interior of the Bombay looking forward to the cockpit. Fitted with an additional fuel tank, space was at a premium. (AUTHOR'S COLLECTION)

with his lieutenants, Stirling decided to continue. Operation 'Squatter' was on!

After a final brief the troops and aircrew had a cooked meal and at 7pm loaded onto the aircraft. Each Bombay carried one 'stick' of men; three teams that were for Gazala and the other two for Tmimi. The Gazala assault force was Lts 'Paddy' Mayne and Jock Lewes, each with 11 men, and Lt Eoin McGonigal with 12, whilst the Tmimi force comprised Capt David Stirling with a stick of nine and Capt Tommy Thompson with 12. They had ➤

**BOTTOM LEFT**  
Although obsolescent, the large Bombay bomber-transport of 216 Squadron were the only suitable aircraft available for the SAS to use on 'Squatter'. (VIA J J HALLEY)



SAS troops preparing for a raid. Johnny Cooper is second left and Reg Seekings far right. (GAVIN MORTIMER COLLECTION)



**RIGHT**  
*A Bombay was shot down by Otto Schulz, who was to claim 51 victories before his own loss.*  
 (VIA C F SHORES)

**BELOW RIGHT**  
*The LRDG came to the rescue of the SAS survivors. Illustrated are members of G Patrol in 1941.*  
 (GAVIN MORTIMER COLLECTION)

**BELOW**  
*The one aircraft lost fell victim for a Messerschmitt Bf 109F of 4./JG 27 from Gazala, ironically one of the target airfields.*  
 (VIA C F SHORES)

all trained with the aircrew and later Lt Charles Bonington (who was part of the team assigned to hit Tmimi) commented that the pilots and crew knew them well.  
 At 7.30pm the first of the Bombays lifted off and headed for their targets over 300 miles to the west, anticipating landing back eight hours later at

difficult with only occasional sight of the ground and strong headwinds. Eventually the aircraft, estimating their locations, where possible disgorged their paratroops and stores containers over what were hoped to be the drop zones. In reality, they were well off course and the men landed in conditions of wind, rain and mud.



leg," he wrote. "When I saw the rocky ground I'd travelled over, I thanked my lucky stars that I was alive."

Because of the style of parachute used the men could only carry very limited equipment, so weapons and supplies were to be dropped at the same time in containers. These were carried on the Bombays' external bomb racks, though in the storm-force winds just two of the 11 canisters dropped were recovered. One of the survivors said afterwards that trying to release the harness of the parachute after landing was "a job for Houdini".

Two of the aircraft hadn't been able to jettison their paratroopers and of the SAS men who had landed, several were now carrying injuries. One, Sergeant Jock Cheyne, had broken his back and his best friend, Jimmy Storie, had no choice but to shake his hand and wish him well as the able-bodied men pressed on with their mission. Cheyne was never seen again.

around 3.30am on the 17<sup>th</sup>. Heading for Gazala was Flt Lt Whitaker's crew in L5825, Sgt Ford in L5838 and F/Sgt West in L5847, whilst the Bombays of Flt Lt Archbell and Fg Off Priest flew towards Tmimi.

**JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN**

Heavily laden transports flew along the coast in inky blackness as there was no cloud, but in the distance flashes of lightning were visible. Accurate navigation was

The SAS men jumped into the teeth of a storm, described by locals as one of the fiercest to hit the region in years. In his operational report 'Paddy' Mayne called the landing "unpleasant", an understatement if ever there was one. The ground wasn't only rock hard, it was studded with stones and thorny bushes. Jeff Du Vivier told his diary how the wind dragged him for 150 yards across the desert. "When I finally freed myself, I was bruised and bleeding and there was a sharp pain in my right







West then started the engines and took off but the plane was seen and chased by two Messerschmitt Bf 109s that had just taken off. They soon caught the lumbering Bombay and, making two attacks, the fire of Ofw Otto Schulz of 4/JG 27 made strikes all over it. With his aircraft badly damaged and the port engine ablaze, West had to crash-land into some sand dunes at Tawilat al Ghazala, about ten miles from the airstrip and barely 500 yards from the coast; it was Schulz's 16<sup>th</sup> victory.

**ABOVE**  
Seen after a successful strafe by RAF fighters, Tmimi landing ground was one of the target airfields for Operation 'Squatter'.  
(VIA C F SHORES)

**LEFT**  
Jeff Du Vivier, left, who survived the first SAS raid.  
(GAVIN MORTIMER COLLECTION)

Soon the rain started; a torrential downpour that transformed the dried river beds into raging waterways. The temperature plummeted and a commando raid became instead a fight for survival. "It continued to pour in buckets for about 30 minutes and by the end of this time we were sitting waist deep in a swirling tide of water," wrote Du Vivier. "I was shivering, not shaking. All the bones in my body were numbed. I couldn't speak, every time I opened my mouth my teeth just cracked against one another." Paddy Mayne and David Stirling, both of whom had landed in one piece, realised that the only option was to abort the operation and make for the rendezvous with the vehicles of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) 40 miles to the south.

## DOWN IN THE DESERT

Having dropped their loads where possible, the bulk of the Bombay force flew individually back to Maaten Bagush where they arrived during the early hours of the 17<sup>th</sup>, unaware of

the drama unfolding in the desert to the west. Not only were the troops on the ground in trouble, so was the fifth Bombay, L5847 'Bermondsey'. The aircraft in question was being flown by F/Sgt Charlie West, who was relatively new to the desert. As they flew along the coast towards Tobruk they saw flashes in the distance, and the crew then heard what sounded like cannon fire and a stream of tracer went under the aircraft. They had almost certainly been intercepted by a night fighter, which they evaded before continuing on their journey west.

Around the estimated area of the drop zone and with the troops still aboard, they hit thunderstorms and very low visibility. They became short on fuel and West decided to land. Despite the pitch black and in heavy rain, he made a perfect landing in the open desert. At first light it was realised that they had come down just half a mile from their target at Gazala airstrip and a curious Italian soldier, who wandered across to see this strange aircraft, was promptly captured.

The inside of the aircraft was a bloodied shambles. West had been knocked unconscious and had a fractured skull, Plt Off Donald Martin, the 24-year-old co-pilot, was dead, as was Sgt John 'Yabbie' Pott, the Australian wireless operator, whilst AC 1 Bill Humphries, the fitter and part-time air gunner, was badly wounded and died ten days later. Several of the troops had also been hurt and 31-year-old Sgt Sid Stone also died of his wounds on 5 December. The other two crew members, Sgt Ray Heard (the navigator) and LAC Rusty Gowling (the rigger), survived and they and the remaining troops were captured by nearby Italian forces.

It had been a chastening experience, an abject failure from which only 21 of the 54 men who parachuted into Libya returned. Stirling gathered the survivors and with characteristic confidence promised them they would have better luck next time. "I don't fancy a next time if this is what it's going to be like," remarked Du Vivier to his diary. Operation 'Squatter' had ended in tragedy, but the SAS went on to achieve legendary status. ☉