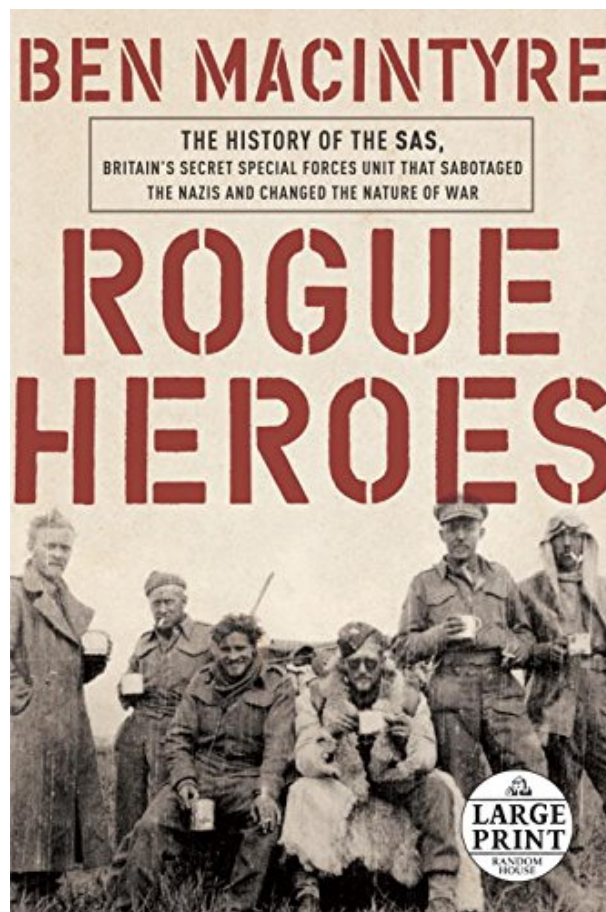


**ROGUE HEROES: THE HISTORY OF THE  
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UNIT THAT SABOTAGED THE NAZIS AND  
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**BEN MACINTYRE**

THE HISTORY OF THE SAS,  
BRITAIN'S SECRET SPECIAL FORCES UNIT THAT SABOTAGED  
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# ROGUE HEROES



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## Review

Named a "Top 10 Title for 2016" by the Washington Post and NPR

“Ben Macintyre’s suspenseful new book, *Rogue Heroes*, about the founding of Britain’s S.A.S. during World War II, reads like a mashup of 'The Dirty Dozen' and 'The Great Escape,' with a sprinkling of “Ocean’s 11” thrown in for good measure... Mr. Macintyre draws sharp, Dickensian portraits of these men, and he displays his usual gifts here for creating a cinematic narrative that races along... Mr. Macintyre is masterly in using details to illustrate his heroes’ bravery, élan and dogged perseverance... a gripping account of the early days of S.A.S.”

—Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"*Rogue Heroes* is a terrific story of human enterprise, endurance and achievement and vividly brings to life an extraordinary cast of characters.... An absorbing story of derring-do, told with skill and flair.”

—*Wall Street Journal*

“[A] riveting new history... Macintyre has produced yet another wonderful book... even minor characters bristle with life.... This is the spot in the book review where I’m supposed to find some point to quibble with, some omission, some historical inaccuracy, some flaw. Sorry to disappoint. The fact is Macintyre has produced yet another wonderful book. As Captain What What might have put it, this is a ripping good read.”

—*The Washington Post*

"*Rogue Heroes* is a thrilling saga, breathtakingly told, full of daring and heroes... One of the many virtues of this volume... is the surprising small asides tucked into these pages, tiny truths that give the book depth

along with derring-do.”

—The Boston Globe

“Rogue Heroes is the best and most complete version of the tale...a highly enjoyable and entertaining narrative.”

—New York Times Book Review

“One of the remarkable aspects of Macintyre’s authorized-if-not-official history is that he keeps a cool hand on the theatrics...while maintaining an edge-of-the-seat narrative. The exploits have an authentic feel...and it is no easy thing to capture the spell of dire circumstance and distill it in such a way to be experiential to those who’ve never spent a moment wondering where in the darkness that sniper is.”

—Christian Science Monitor

“[This] entertaining World War II history will keep you tossing and alert late into the night.”

—Florida Times-Union

“Rogue Heroes provides an inside look at an important struggle.”

—Galveston Daily News

“Mr. Macintyre demonstrates superb skill as a journalist and a writer in this riveting book that takes readers into a long-past and still-frightening world of what real war was like.”

—The Washington Times

“[A] well-written and comprehensive history . . . Macintyre uses unprecedented access to the SAS official records, along with memoirs, diaries, and interviews with the few surviving veterans, to chronicle the major operations, key personalities, successes, and failures of the regiment in WWII. He vividly captures the bravery and the sheer audaciousness of the SAS troopers and their leadership operating hundreds of miles behind enemy lines. . . . Macintyre delivers a solid history and an enjoyable read that will appeal to those interested in military history as well as readers who enjoy real-life tales of adventure.”

—Publishers Weekly

“A rollicking tale of ‘unparalleled bravery and ingenuity, interspersed with moments of rank incompetence, raw brutality and touching human frailty.’”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“A brilliant account...The author offers vivid information...The story will echo the voices of future generations of special forces hear in Marcus Luttrell’s Lone Survivor and Mark Bowden’s Black Hawk Down. Macintyre’s masterly storytelling highlights the bravery of these valiant men.”

—Library Journal (starred review)

“A superb study of wartime daring. A compelling tale full of jeopardy: bone-shattering parachute drops, terrifying night-time raids on Nazi airfields, fizzing explosive fuses, near escapes in screaming jeeps, harrowing marches through deserts, frozen forest encounters with desperate Germans and mad, edgy drinking bouts that could end with grenades being flourished.”

—Daily Telegraph

“Told with brilliance. The SAS are still about the best of their kind, and how they began to achieve this is an exotic saga indeed. No one will ever tell it better than this.”

—Evening Standard

“Follows the SAS from its early days in north Africa to the end of the war. Throughout the tales of scarcely believable heroism, derring-do, courage, camaraderie and endurance come faster than the bullets out of a Vickers machine gun. Meticulously researched. Macintyre has written about a fascinating subject in a way that would make any thriller writer proud. As a work of military history it is thorough and highly entertaining. It would be nigh on impossible to praise it too highly.”

—Daily Express

“A refreshing account of the origins of the regiment of balaclava-clad silent killers during the Second World War. Macintyre has a wonderful eye for eccentricity, and the narrative is peppered with extraordinary characters. At times there is more than a whiff of PG Wodehouse or Evelyn Waugh.”

—Evening Standard (A Book of the Year)

“Thrilling. Ben Macintyre is the ideal narrator.”

—Spectator

“Macintyre tells it with flair. A great read of wartime adventuring.”

—Richard Overy, *The Guardian*

“A master at setting the pulse racing, Macintyre relates stories of raw courage and daring.”

—Tony Rennell, *Daily Mail*

“Ben Macintyre's coverage of the SAS in north Africa and, later, Italy, France and Germany, is brilliant, blending gripping narratives of fighting with descriptions of the fears of individual soldiers before battle and their reactions to its horror. Britain's martial pantheon is full of outnumbered heroes who wouldn't throw in the sponge. Henry V's band of brothers at Agincourt, the redcoats at Waterloo, the defenders of Rorke's drift, and the paras who charged at Goose Green are part of the tradition that embraces the SAS. This book explains why.”

—The Times

“Grippingly readable. Macintyre tells the extraordinary story of the SAS compellingly.”

—Scotsman

“Fascinating, entertaining, insightful, thoughtful. Macintyre tells the story of the early years of the SAS with panache.”

—Mail on Sunday

“Macintyre writes with the diligence and insight of a journalist, and the panache of a born storyteller.”

—John Banville, author of *The Sea* and *The Untouchable*

“By far the best book on the SAS in World War II—impeccably researched and superbly told.”

—Antony Beevor, author of *D-Day* and *Stalingrad*

“We all have to come from somewhere. *Rogue Heroes* gives a glimpse deep down the rabbit hole into how the special forces world started. This is a great look at how a motivated bunch of badasses changed the tide of war and carved the path for the rest of us to follow.”

—Marcus Luttrell, former U.S. Navy SEAL and author of *Lone Survivor*

'Accessible yet authoritative. Delivers stories of tremendous adventure and derring-do, but also offers more

than straightforward military history. This book has many strengths but perhaps its greatest is how thought-provoking it is'

—Laurence Rees, author of *World War II Behind Closed Doors*

#### About the Author

BEN MACINTYRE is a writer-at-large for *The Times* of London and the bestselling author of *A Spy Among Friends*, *Double Cross*, *Operation Mincemeat*, and *Agent Zigzag*, among other books. Macintyre has also written and presented BBC documentaries of his work.

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#### Chapter 1

#### Cowboy Soldier

Five months before Operation Squatter, a tall, thin soldier lay, grumpy and immobile, in a Cairo hospital bed. The twenty-five-year-old officer had been brought into the Scottish Military Hospital on June 15, 1941, paralyzed from the waist down. A letter to his mother from the War Office stated that he had suffered “a contusion of the back as a result of enemy action.”

This was not, strictly speaking, true. The injured soldier had not set eyes on the enemy: he had jumped out of a plane, without a helmet or proper training, ripped his parachute on the tail and plummeted to earth at roughly twice the recommended speed. The impact had knocked him out and badly injured his spine, leaving him temporarily blinded and without feeling in his legs. The doctors feared he would never walk again.

Even before his parachuting accident, the officer’s contribution to the war effort had been minimal: he lacked the most basic military discipline, could not march straight, and was so lazy his comrades had nicknamed him “the Giant Sloth.” Since being posted to Egypt with the British commando force, he had spent much of his time in Cairo’s bars and clubs, or gambling at the racecourse. The nurses at the hospital knew him well, for he frequently popped in during the morning, whey-faced and liverish, to request a blast from the oxygen bottle to cure his hangover. Before his parachute jump landed him in the hospital, he had been under investigation to establish whether he was malingering and ought to be court-martialed. His fellow officers found him charming and entertaining; his senior commanders, for the most part, regarded him as impertinent, incompetent, and profoundly irritating. On completing officer training, he had received a blunt appraisal: “irresponsible and unremarkable.”

Lieutenant David Stirling of the Scots Guards was not a conventional soldier.

The writer Evelyn Waugh, a fellow officer in the commando force, came to visit Stirling about three weeks after his admission to the hospital. Waugh had been misinformed by the matron that one of Stirling’s legs had already been amputated, and he would likely lose the other. “I can’t feel a thing,” Stirling told his friend. Embarrassed, as Englishmen tend to be when faced with disability, Waugh kept up a steady stream of meaningless small talk, perched on the edge of the bed, and studiously avoided the subject of his friend’s paralysis. Every so often, however, he would sneak a surreptitious glance to where Stirling’s remaining leg ought to be, and whenever he did so Stirling, with extreme effort, would wiggle the big toe of his right foot. Finally, Waugh realized he was being teased, and hit Stirling with a pillow.

“You bastard, Stirling, when did it happen?”

“Minutes before you came. It takes a bit of effort, but it’s a start.”

Stirling was regaining the use of his legs. Others might have cried for joy; for Stirling, however, the first sign of his recovery was an excellent opportunity to play a practical joke on one of Britain's greatest novelists.

It would take two more weeks before Stirling could stand upright, and several more before he was able to hobble about. But during those two months of enforced inaction he did a great deal of thinking—something that, in spite of his reputation as a feckless gadabout, he was rather good at.

The commandos were intended to be Britain's storm troops, volunteers selected and trained to carry out destructive raids against Axis targets. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had decided that the ideal theater in which to deploy the commandos would be North Africa, where they could conduct seaborne raids against enemy bases along the Mediterranean coast.

In Stirling's unsolicited opinion, the concept was not working. Most of the time the commandos were inactive, awaiting the order for a great assault that never came; on the rare occasions when they were deployed, the results had been disappointing. The German and Italian troops fully expected to be attacked from the sea, and were primed and waiting. The commando forces were simply too large and cumbersome to launch an assault without being spotted; the element of surprise was immediately lost.

But what, wondered Stirling, if the combat troops attacked from the opposite direction? To the south, stretching between Egypt and Libya, lay the Great Sand Sea, a vast, waterless expanse of unbroken dunes covering forty-five thousand square miles. One of the most inhospitable environments on earth, the desert was considered by the Germans to be virtually impassable, a natural barrier, and they therefore left it largely unprotected, and entirely unpatrolled. "This was one sea the Hun was not watching," Stirling reflected. If mobile teams of highly trained men, under cover of darkness, could be infiltrated onto the enemy's desert flank, they might be able to sabotage airfields, supply depots, communications links, railways, and roads, and then slip back into the embracing emptiness of the sand sea. A commando force several hundred strong could attack only one target at a time; but a number of smaller units, moving quickly, raiding suddenly and then retreating swiftly, could destroy multiple targets simultaneously. The opportunity to attack the enemy in the rear, when he least expects it, is the pipe dream of every general. The peculiar geography of North Africa offered just such a possibility, reflected Stirling, as he lay half paralyzed in his hospital bed, trying to wiggle his toes.

Stirling's idea was the result of wishful thinking more than expertise; it had emerged not from long hours of reflection and study, but from the acute boredom of convalescence. It was based on intuition, imagination, and self-confidence, of which Stirling had plenty, rather than experience of desert warfare, of which he had none. But it was an inspired idea, and the sort of idea that could only have occurred to someone as strange and remarkable as Archibald David Stirling.

Stirling was one of those people who thrive in war, having failed at peace. In a short life, he had tried his hand at a variety of occupations—artist, architect, cowboy, and mountaineer—and found success in none of them. Privileged by birth and education, intelligent and resourceful, he could have done anything, but had spent the early part of his life doing little of any consequence. The war was his salvation.

The Stirling family was one of the oldest and grandest in Scotland, an aristocratic clan of great distinction, long military traditions, and considerable eccentricity. David Stirling's mother was the daughter of Lord Lovat, the chief of Clan Fraser, with bloodlines stretching back to Charles II. His father, General Archibald Stirling, had been gassed in the First World War, served as an MP, and then retired to Keir, the fifteen thousand-acre Perthshire estate that had been the family's seat for the previous five centuries. The general presided over his sprawling lands and unruly family like some benign but distant chieftain observing a



battlefield from a remote hill. David's formidable mother, Margaret, was the more forceful presence: her children were in awe of her. Keir House, where David Stirling was born in 1915, was a vast edifice, freezing cold even at the height of summer, filled with old hunting trophies, noise, and devilment. The Stirling parents drummed good manners into their six children, but otherwise largely left them to get on with their lives. The four Stirling boys, of whom David was the second in age, grew up stalking deer, hunting rabbits, fighting, and competing. One favorite game was a form of sibling duel using air rifles: two brothers would take potshots at each other's backsides in turn, moving closer by a pace after each shot.

Despite this aristocratically spartan start in life, David Stirling was not a hardy child. Dispatched to Ampleforth, a Catholic boarding school, at the age of eight, he caught typhoid fever and was sent home for an extended period of recovery. A speech impediment was eventually cured by surgery. He disliked sports, and did his best to avoid them. He grew at an astonishing rate: by the age of seventeen, he was nearly six feet, six inches tall, a gangly beanpole, willful, reckless, and exceptionally polite. Largely by virtue of his class, he was awarded a place at Cambridge University, where he misbehaved on a lavish scale, spending more time at Newmarket racecourse than he devoted to studying. "If there was a serious side to life it totally escaped me," he later admitted. If he ever opened a book, the event was not recorded. After a year, the master of his college informed him that he was being sent down, read out a list of twenty-three offenses that merited expulsion, and invited him to select the three that he considered "would be least offensive" to his mother.

David Stirling decided he would become an artist, in Paris. He had little talent for painting. But he did have a beret, and a yen for the bohemian life. Some have detected "a strange mixture of beauty and the macabre" in his paintings. His French art tutor, however, did not, and after a year and a half of louche Left Bank life, he was told that while he might one day make a half-decent commercial draftsman, his "painting would never achieve any real merit." Stirling was profoundly upset; his failure as an artist marked him forever, and perhaps explained the consistent ripple of insecurity that lay beneath the carapace of confidence.

He returned to Cambridge to study architecture, but soon dropped out again. A job with an Edinburgh architect was short-lived. His mother now intervened, and told her second son that he must stop drifting and do something with his life. Stirling announced that he intended to become the first person to climb Mount Everest.

Stirling was quite the wrong shape to scramble up rocks. He had little experience of serious climbing. He also suffered from vertigo. Intrepid British mountaineers had been trying to scale the world's highest mountain since 1921; dozens had perished in the attempt. Climbing Everest was an expensive, dangerous, demanding business, and Stirling was broke—none of which dented his determination to succeed where other, qualified, experienced, well-funded mountaineers had failed. He spent a year climbing in the Swiss Alps, bankrolled by his mother, before joining the supplementary reserve of the Scots Guards, his father's regiment, in the hope that part-time army training might bolster his mountaineering quest. He soon drifted out of uniform, repelled by the mind-swamping boredom of the parade ground. In 1938, at the age of twenty-three, he went to the United States with the intention of climbing the Rockies and riding across the Continental Divide. He was south of the Rio Grande, having spent several months herding cattle in the company of a cowboy named Roy "Panhandle" Terrill when he learned that Britain was at war—the run?up to which had, it seems, almost entirely passed him by. His mother sent a telegram: "Return home by the cheapest possible means." Stirling flew to Britain on a first-class ticket, and rushed back into uniform.

The David Stirling who turned up at the Guards Depot in Pirbright in the autumn of 1939 was a strange mixture of parts. Ambitious but unfocused; steeped in soldierly traditions but allergic to military discipline. A boisterous exterior belied a man prone to periodic depressions, whose extreme good manners and social

ease masked moments of inner turmoil. Stirling was a romantic, with an innate talent for friendship but little desire or need for physical intimacy. He appears to have lost his virginity in Paris as an art student. With Panhandle Terrill he had enjoyed the company of “some of those dark girls down in Mexico.” But his natural shyness coupled with a stern all-male Catholic education seems to have left him in fear of women. “The totally confused, guilt-ridden years of puberty exerted an awful pressure,” he once remarked. He spoke of “predatory females”; his few romantic encounters were described as “close escapes,” as if he feared entrapment. “Bonds of any sort are a pressure I find very difficult to bear,” he admitted. He had many women friends, and according to his biographer was “not unattracted to the opposite sex.” Yet he seemed to relax only among men, and “in wide open spaces.” Like many convivial people, he was slightly lonely. A warrior monk, he craved action and the company of soldiers, but when the fighting was over, he embraced solitude.

Stirling was also possessed of a profound self-belief, the sort of confidence that comes from high birth and boundless opportunity. He was blithely unconstrained by convention, and regarded rules as nuisances to be ignored, broken, or otherwise overcome. He was elaborately respectful toward his social inferiors, and showed no deference whatever to rank. Strikingly modest, he was repelled by braggarts and loudmouths: “swanks” (swanking) or “pomposo” (pomposity) were his gravest insults. His manner seemed vague and forgetful, but his powers of concentration were phenomenal. Despite an ungainly body and a patchy academic record, he had a stubborn faith in his own abilities, intellectual and physical. Stirling did exactly what he wanted to do, whether or not others thought his aims were sensible or even possible. The SAS came into being, in part, because its founder would not take no for an answer, either from those in authority or from those under his command.

Just as he had been bored by the logistics of mountaineering, so Stirling found the practical preparations for war indescribably tedious. Like many young men, he was hungry for the fight, but instead found himself shackled to a regime of endless marching, kit inspections, weapons drill, and all the other rote elements of military life. So he rebelled. Slipping away from the Guards Depot at Pirbright, he would frequently head to London for a night of drinking, gambling, and billiards at White’s club; just as frequently he was caught, and confined to barracks. Stirling was a nightmare recruit: impertinent, indolent, and often half asleep as a result of his carousing the night before. “He was quite, quite irresponsible,” recalled Willie (later Viscount) Whitelaw, a fellow trainee officer at Pirbright. “He just couldn’t tolerate that we were being trained along the lines of the last major conflict. His reaction was just to ignore everything.”

It was at the bar of White’s, one of the most exclusive gentleman’s clubs in London, that Stirling first learned about a form of soldiering that seemed much closer to the adventure and excitement he had in mind: a crack new commando unit intended to hit important enemy targets with maximum impact. Stirling’s cousin, Lord Lovat, had been among the first to volunteer for the commandos.

Formed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock, the force—christened Layforce—would consist of more than 1,500 volunteers formed into three commando regiments, recruited from the Foot Guards (the regular infantry of the Household Division) and other infantry regiments: an elite troop of specialized, highly trained raiders and marauders. Lord Haw-Haw, the British traitor who broadcast radio announcements into England for the Nazis, would describe the commandos as “Churchill’s cut-throats.”

Stirling immediately volunteered. Soon he found himself stomping through the wilds of western Scotland, familiar boyhood terrain and far from the parade ground he loathed. For weeks the commandos trained in the bogs and bracken of the Isle of Arran: route marches, unarmed combat, endurance, fieldcraft, navigation, and survival techniques. Even at this early stage, some of the other volunteers noticed something different about the tall young officer: Stirling was a natural leader, with an understated but adamant faith in his own

decisions, and a gentlemanly insistence on doing everything he asked of his men, and more. On February 1, 1941, Layforce sailed for the Middle East. Finally Stirling was heading into battle, leaving behind a long string of unpaid bills: from his bookmaker, his tailor, his bank manager, and even from a cowboy outfitter in Arizona, seeking payment for a saddle.

Layforce had been deployed to disrupt Axis communication lines in the Mediterranean, and to spearhead the capture of Rhodes. But by the time the commandos arrived in Egypt, the military situation had changed: the arrival in Cyrenaica (eastern coastal Libya) of the Afrika Korps, the German expeditionary force under Erwin Rommel, had transformed the strategic picture. The British were now scrambling to oppose the German advances, and the first stage of the seesaw war in North Africa was under way. Initially deployed to shore up the Italian defense of their North African colonies, the Afrika Korps moved with alarming speed, driving the British back to the Egyptian border with Libya and laying siege to the coastal town of Tobruk. Instead of storming Rhodes, the commandos were split up and variously deployed to garrison Cyprus, cover the evacuation of Crete, reinforce the defense of Tobruk, and carry out raids along the coasts of Cyrenaica and Syria. An assault on the Libyan coastal town of Bardia achieved little, with 67 of the British raiders taken prisoner. Of the 800 commandos sent to cover the evacuation of Crete in May, fewer than 200 managed to escape—among them Evelyn Waugh, who boarded the last ship to leave. In June, the commandos successfully established a bridgehead on the Litani River in Lebanon against Vichy French forces, but lost a quarter of their attacking force.

Stirling, based in Egypt with the Layforce Reserve, was bored and frustrated. He had yet to fire a gun in action. “We were involved in a series of postponements and cancellations, and that was extremely frustrating,” he later recalled. Before the departure of the commandos, the director of combined operations had told them they were about to “embark on an enterprise that would stir the world.” So far, Stirling had barely stirred. As always when he was underemployed, he turned to revelry. Peter Stirling, David’s younger brother, was serving at the British embassy in Cairo, and his comfortable diplomatic flat in the Garden City district became the venue for riotous parties and nocturnal forays into the city’s fleshpots.

Stirling began to miss parades, and make excuses. His claims of ill health were not wholly untrue. He was stricken by a nasty bout of dysentery. Then, returning from a night exercise, he tripped over a tent rope and gashed an eyeball, requiring stitches. Stirling found the American hospital particularly comfortable, and began to contrive to spend his days there, claiming to be suffering from fever. “In a sense, I was pretty ill,” he later argued. “Because I would go out in the evening, having recovered from the appalling hangover caused by the previous night’s activities in Cairo, and re-establish my illness by my activities the following night.” Alerted by the hospital matron, Stirling’s superiors began to question just how unwell he really was. He was drinking and partying himself into serious trouble when his life was changed by a conversation, in the mess, with Lieutenant Jock Lewes, a fellow officer in the commandos who was as self-disciplined and uptight as Stirling was dissolute and nonchalant.

Lewes told Stirling that he had recently obtained a stock of several dozen parachutes, destined for a paratroop unit operating in India but accidentally shipped to Port Said, where he had appropriated them. Colonel Laycock had given Lewes permission to attempt an experimental parachute jump in the desert. Stirling asked if he could come along, “partly for fun, partly because it would be useful to know how to do it,” and mostly because he was very bored. So began an important and unlikely partnership between two men who could hardly have been more different.

# **ROGUE HEROES: THE HISTORY OF THE SAS, BRITAIN'S SECRET SPECIAL FORCES UNIT THAT SABOTAGED THE NAZIS AND CHANGED THE NATURE OF WAR (RANDOM H PDF**

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The incredible untold story of WWII's greatest secret fighting force, as told by our great modern master of wartime intrigue

Britain's Special Air Service—or SAS—was the brainchild of David Stirling, a young, gadabout aristocrat whose aimlessness in early life belied a remarkable strategic mind. Where most of his colleagues looked at a battlefield map of World War II's African theater and saw a protracted struggle with Rommel's desert forces, Stirling saw an opportunity: given a small number of elite, well-trained men, he could parachute behind enemy lines and sabotage their airplanes and war material. Paired with his constitutional opposite, the disciplined martinet Jock Lewes, Stirling assembled a revolutionary fighting force that would upend not just the balance of the war, but the nature of combat itself. He faced no little resistance from those who found his tactics ungentlemanly or beyond the pale, but in the SAS's remarkable exploits facing the Nazis in the Africa and then on the Continent can be found the seeds of nearly all special forces units that would follow.

Bringing his keen eye for psychological detail to a riveting wartime narrative, Ben Macintyre uses his unprecedented access to SAS archives to shine a light inside a legendary unit long shrouded in secrecy. The result is not just a tremendous war story, but a fascinating group portrait of men of whom history and country asked the most.

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## Review

Named a "Top 10 Title for 2016" by the Washington Post and NPR

“Ben Macintyre’s suspenseful new book, *Rogue Heroes*, about the founding of Britain’s S.A.S. during World War II, reads like a mashup of 'The Dirty Dozen' and 'The Great Escape,' with a sprinkling of “Ocean’s 11” thrown in for good measure... Mr. Macintyre draws sharp, Dickensian portraits of these men, and he displays his usual gifts here for creating a cinematic narrative that races along... Mr. Macintyre is masterly in using details to illustrate his heroes’ bravery, élan and dogged perseverance...a gripping account of the early days of S.A.S.”

—Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"Rogue Heroes is a terrific story of human enterprise, endurance and achievement and vividly brings to life an extraordinary cast of characters.... An absorbing story of derring-do, told with skill and flair."

—Wall Street Journal

"[A] riveting new history... Macintyre has produced yet another wonderful book... even minor characters bristle with life.... This is the spot in the book review where I'm supposed to find some point to quibble with, some omission, some historical inaccuracy, some flaw. Sorry to disappoint. The fact is Macintyre has produced yet another wonderful book. As Captain What What might have put it, this is a ripping good read."

—The Washington Post

"Rogue Heroes is a thrilling saga, breathtakingly told, full of daring and heroes... One of the many virtues of this volume... is the surprising small asides tucked into these pages, tiny truths that give the book depth along with derring-do."

—The Boston Globe

"Rogue Heroes is the best and most complete version of the tale...a highly enjoyable and entertaining narrative."

—New York Times Book Review

"One of the remarkable aspects of Macintyre's authorized-if-not-official history is that he keeps a cool hand on the theatrics...while maintaining an edge-of-the-seat narrative. The exploits have an authentic feel...and it is no easy thing to capture the spell of dire circumstance and distill it in such a way to be experiential to those who've never spent a moment wondering where in the darkness that sniper is."

—Christian Science Monitor

"[This] entertaining World War II history will keep you tossing and alert late into the night."

—Florida Times-Union

"Rogue Heroes provides an inside look at an important struggle."

—Galveston Daily News

"Mr. Macintyre demonstrates superb skill as a journalist and a writer in this riveting book that takes readers into a long-past and still-frightening world of what real war was like."

—The Washington Times

"[A] well-written and comprehensive history . . . Macintyre uses unprecedented access to the SAS official records, along with memoirs, diaries, and interviews with the few surviving veterans, to chronicle the major operations, key personalities, successes, and failures of the regiment in WWII. He vividly captures the bravery and the sheer audaciousness of the SAS troopers and their leadership operating hundreds of miles behind enemy lines. . . . Macintyre delivers a solid history and an enjoyable read that will appeal to those interested in military history as well as readers who enjoy real-life tales of adventure."

—Publishers Weekly

"A rollicking tale of 'unparalleled bravery and ingenuity, interspersed with moments of rank incompetence, raw brutality and touching human frailty.'"

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“A brilliant account...The author offers vivid information...The story will echo the voices of future generations of special forces hear in Marcus Luttrell’s Lone Survivor and Mark Bowden’s Black Hawk Down. Macintyre’s masterly storytelling highlights the bravery of these valiant men.”

—Library Journal (starred review)

“A superb study of wartime daring. A compelling tale full of jeopardy: bone-shattering parachute drops, terrifying night-time raids on Nazi airfields, fizzing explosive fuses, near escapes in screaming jeeps, harrowing marches through deserts, frozen forest encounters with desperate Germans and mad, edgy drinking bouts that could end with grenades being flourished.”

—Daily Telegraph

“Told with brilliance. The SAS are still about the best of their kind, and how they began to achieve this is an exotic saga indeed. No one will ever tell it better than this.”

—Evening Standard

“Follows the SAS from its early days in north Africa to the end of the war. Throughout the tales of scarcely believable heroism, derring-do, courage, camaraderie and endurance come faster than the bullets out of a Vickers machine gun. Meticulously researched. Macintyre has written about a fascinating subject in a way that would make any thriller writer proud. As a work of military history it is thorough and highly entertaining. It would be nigh on impossible to praise it too highly.”

—Daily Express

“A refreshing account of the origins of the regiment of balaclava-clad silent killers during the Second World War. Macintyre has a wonderful eye for eccentricity, and the narrative is peppered with extraordinary characters. At times there is more than a whiff of PG Wodehouse or Evelyn Waugh.”

—Evening Standard (A Book of the Year)

“Thrilling. Ben Macintyre is the ideal narrator.”

—Spectator

“Macintyre tells it with flair. A great read of wartime adventuring.”

—Richard Overy, The Guardian

“A master at setting the pulse racing, Macintyre relates stories of raw courage and daring.”

—Tony Rennell, Daily Mail

“Ben Macintyre's coverage of the SAS in north Africa and, later, Italy, France and Germany, is brilliant, blending gripping narratives of fighting with descriptions of the fears of individual soldiers before battle and their reactions to its horror. Britain's martial pantheon is full of outnumbered heroes who wouldn't throw in the sponge. Henry V's band of brothers at Agincourt, the redcoats at Waterloo, the defenders of Rorke's drift, and the paras who charged at Goose Green are part of the tradition that embraces the SAS. This book explains why.”

—The Times

“Grippingly readable. Macintyre tells the extraordinary story of the SAS compellingly.”

—Scotsman

“Fascinating, entertaining, insightful, thoughtful. Macintyre tells the story of the early years of the SAS with panache.”

—Mail on Sunday

“Macintyre writes with the diligence and insight of a journalist, and the panache of a born storyteller.”

—John Banville, author of *The Sea* and *The Untouchable*

“By far the best book on the SAS in World War II—impeccably researched and superbly told.”

—Antony Beevor, author of *D-Day* and *Stalingrad*

“We all have to come from somewhere. *Rogue Heroes* gives a glimpse deep down the rabbit hole into how the special forces world started. This is a great look at how a motivated bunch of badasses changed the tide of war and carved the path for the rest of us to follow.”

—Marcus Luttrell, former U.S. Navy SEAL and author of *Lone Survivor*

'Accessible yet authoritative. Delivers stories of tremendous adventure and derring-do, but also offers more than straightforward military history. This book has many strengths but perhaps its greatest is how thought-provoking it is'

—Laurence Rees, author of *World War II Behind Closed Doors*

#### About the Author

BEN MACINTYRE is a writer-at-large for *The Times* of London and the bestselling author of *A Spy Among Friends*, *Double Cross*, *Operation Mincemeat*, and *Agent Zigzag*, among other books. Macintyre has also written and presented BBC documentaries of his work.

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#### Chapter 1

#### Cowboy Soldier

Five months before Operation Squatter, a tall, thin soldier lay, grumpy and immobile, in a Cairo hospital bed. The twenty-five-year-old officer had been brought into the Scottish Military Hospital on June 15, 1941, paralyzed from the waist down. A letter to his mother from the War Office stated that he had suffered “a contusion of the back as a result of enemy action.”

This was not, strictly speaking, true. The injured soldier had not set eyes on the enemy: he had jumped out of a plane, without a helmet or proper training, ripped his parachute on the tail and plummeted to earth at roughly twice the recommended speed. The impact had knocked him out and badly injured his spine, leaving him temporarily blinded and without feeling in his legs. The doctors feared he would never walk again.

Even before his parachuting accident, the officer’s contribution to the war effort had been minimal: he lacked the most basic military discipline, could not march straight, and was so lazy his comrades had nicknamed him “the Giant Sloth.” Since being posted to Egypt with the British commando force, he had spent much of his time in Cairo’s bars and clubs, or gambling at the racecourse. The nurses at the hospital knew him well, for he frequently popped in during the morning, whey-faced and liverish, to request a blast from the oxygen bottle to cure his hangover. Before his parachute jump landed him in the hospital, he had been under investigation to establish whether he was malingering and ought to be court-martialed. His fellow officers found him charming and entertaining; his senior commanders, for the most part, regarded him as impertinent, incompetent, and profoundly irritating. On completing officer training, he had received a blunt appraisal: “irresponsible and unremarkable.”

Lieutenant David Stirling of the Scots Guards was not a conventional soldier.



The writer Evelyn Waugh, a fellow officer in the commando force, came to visit Stirling about three weeks after his admission to the hospital. Waugh had been misinformed by the matron that one of Stirling's legs had already been amputated, and he would likely lose the other. "I can't feel a thing," Stirling told his friend. Embarrassed, as Englishmen tend to be when faced with disability, Waugh kept up a steady stream of meaningless small talk, perched on the edge of the bed, and studiously avoided the subject of his friend's paralysis. Every so often, however, he would sneak a surreptitious glance to where Stirling's remaining leg ought to be, and whenever he did so Stirling, with extreme effort, would wiggle the big toe of his right foot. Finally, Waugh realized he was being teased, and hit Stirling with a pillow.

"You bastard, Stirling, when did it happen?"

"Minutes before you came. It takes a bit of effort, but it's a start."

Stirling was regaining the use of his legs. Others might have cried for joy; for Stirling, however, the first sign of his recovery was an excellent opportunity to play a practical joke on one of Britain's greatest novelists.

It would take two more weeks before Stirling could stand upright, and several more before he was able to hobble about. But during those two months of enforced inaction he did a great deal of thinking—something that, in spite of his reputation as a feckless gadabout, he was rather good at.

The commandos were intended to be Britain's storm troops, volunteers selected and trained to carry out destructive raids against Axis targets. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had decided that the ideal theater in which to deploy the commandos would be North Africa, where they could conduct seaborne raids against enemy bases along the Mediterranean coast.

In Stirling's unsolicited opinion, the concept was not working. Most of the time the commandos were inactive, awaiting the order for a great assault that never came; on the rare occasions when they were deployed, the results had been disappointing. The German and Italian troops fully expected to be attacked from the sea, and were primed and waiting. The commando forces were simply too large and cumbersome to launch an assault without being spotted; the element of surprise was immediately lost.

But what, wondered Stirling, if the combat troops attacked from the opposite direction? To the south, stretching between Egypt and Libya, lay the Great Sand Sea, a vast, waterless expanse of unbroken dunes covering forty-five thousand square miles. One of the most inhospitable environments on earth, the desert was considered by the Germans to be virtually impassable, a natural barrier, and they therefore left it largely unprotected, and entirely unpatrolled. "This was one sea the Hun was not watching," Stirling reflected. If mobile teams of highly trained men, under cover of darkness, could be infiltrated onto the enemy's desert flank, they might be able to sabotage airfields, supply depots, communications links, railways, and roads, and then slip back into the embracing emptiness of the sand sea. A commando force several hundred strong could attack only one target at a time; but a number of smaller units, moving quickly, raiding suddenly and then retreating swiftly, could destroy multiple targets simultaneously. The opportunity to attack the enemy in the rear, when he least expects it, is the pipe dream of every general. The peculiar geography of North Africa offered just such a possibility, reflected Stirling, as he lay half paralyzed in his hospital bed, trying to wiggle his toes.

Stirling's idea was the result of wishful thinking more than expertise; it had emerged not from long hours of reflection and study, but from the acute boredom of convalescence. It was based on intuition, imagination, and self-confidence, of which Stirling had plenty, rather than experience of desert warfare, of which he had none. But it was an inspired idea, and the sort of idea that could only have occurred to someone as strange

and remarkable as Archibald David Stirling.

Stirling was one of those people who thrive in war, having failed at peace. In a short life, he had tried his hand at a variety of occupations—artist, architect, cowboy, and mountaineer—and found success in none of them. Privileged by birth and education, intelligent and resourceful, he could have done anything, but had spent the early part of his life doing little of any consequence. The war was his salvation.

The Stirling family was one of the oldest and grandest in Scotland, an aristocratic clan of great distinction, long military traditions, and considerable eccentricity. David Stirling's mother was the daughter of Lord Lovat, the chief of Clan Fraser, with bloodlines stretching back to Charles II. His father, General Archibald Stirling, had been gassed in the First World War, served as an MP, and then retired to Keir, the fifteen thousand-acre Perthshire estate that had been the family's seat for the previous five centuries. The general presided over his sprawling lands and unruly family like some benign but distant chieftain observing a battlefield from a remote hill. David's formidable mother, Margaret, was the more forceful presence: her children were in awe of her. Keir House, where David Stirling was born in 1915, was a vast edifice, freezing cold even at the height of summer, filled with old hunting trophies, noise, and devilment. The Stirling parents drummed good manners into their six children, but otherwise largely left them to get on with their lives. The four Stirling boys, of whom David was the second in age, grew up stalking deer, hunting rabbits, fighting, and competing. One favorite game was a form of sibling duel using air rifles: two brothers would take potshots at each other's backsides in turn, moving closer by a pace after each shot.

Despite this aristocratically spartan start in life, David Stirling was not a hardy child. Dispatched to Ampleforth, a Catholic boarding school, at the age of eight, he caught typhoid fever and was sent home for an extended period of recovery. A speech impediment was eventually cured by surgery. He disliked sports, and did his best to avoid them. He grew at an astonishing rate: by the age of seventeen, he was nearly six feet, six inches tall, a gangly beanpole, willful, reckless, and exceptionally polite. Largely by virtue of his class, he was awarded a place at Cambridge University, where he misbehaved on a lavish scale, spending more time at Newmarket racecourse than he devoted to studying. "If there was a serious side to life it totally escaped me," he later admitted. If he ever opened a book, the event was not recorded. After a year, the master of his college informed him that he was being sent down, read out a list of twenty-three offenses that merited expulsion, and invited him to select the three that he considered "would be least offensive" to his mother.

David Stirling decided he would become an artist, in Paris. He had little talent for painting. But he did have a beret, and a yen for the bohemian life. Some have detected "a strange mixture of beauty and the macabre" in his paintings. His French art tutor, however, did not, and after a year and a half of louche Left Bank life, he was told that while he might one day make a half-decent commercial draftsman, his "painting would never achieve any real merit." Stirling was profoundly upset; his failure as an artist marked him forever, and perhaps explained the consistent ripple of insecurity that lay beneath the carapace of confidence.

He returned to Cambridge to study architecture, but soon dropped out again. A job with an Edinburgh architect was short-lived. His mother now intervened, and told her second son that he must stop drifting and do something with his life. Stirling announced that he intended to become the first person to climb Mount Everest.

Stirling was quite the wrong shape to scramble up rocks. He had little experience of serious climbing. He also suffered from vertigo. Intrepid British mountaineers had been trying to scale the world's highest mountain since 1921; dozens had perished in the attempt. Climbing Everest was an expensive, dangerous, demanding business, and Stirling was broke—none of which dented his determination to succeed where

other, qualified, experienced, well-funded mountaineers had failed. He spent a year climbing in the Swiss Alps, bankrolled by his mother, before joining the supplementary reserve of the Scots Guards, his father's regiment, in the hope that part-time army training might bolster his mountaineering quest. He soon drifted out of uniform, repelled by the mind-swamping boredom of the parade ground. In 1938, at the age of twenty-three, he went to the United States with the intention of climbing the Rockies and riding across the Continental Divide. He was south of the Rio Grande, having spent several months herding cattle in the company of a cowboy named Roy "Panhandle" Terrill when he learned that Britain was at war—the run?up to which had, it seems, almost entirely passed him by. His mother sent a telegram: "Return home by the cheapest possible means." Stirling flew to Britain on a first-class ticket, and rushed back into uniform.

The David Stirling who turned up at the Guards Depot in Pirbright in the autumn of 1939 was a strange mixture of parts. Ambitious but unfocused; steeped in soldierly traditions but allergic to military discipline. A boisterous exterior belied a man prone to periodic depressions, whose extreme good manners and social ease masked moments of inner turmoil. Stirling was a romantic, with an innate talent for friendship but little desire or need for physical intimacy. He appears to have lost his virginity in Paris as an art student. With Panhandle Terrill he had enjoyed the company of "some of those dark girls down in Mexico." But his natural shyness coupled with a stern all-male Catholic education seems to have left him in fear of women. "The totally confused, guilt-ridden years of puberty exerted an awful pressure," he once remarked. He spoke of "predatory females"; his few romantic encounters were described as "close escapes," as if he feared entrapment. "Bonds of any sort are a pressure I find very difficult to bear," he admitted. He had many women friends, and according to his biographer was "not unattracted to the opposite sex." Yet he seemed to relax only among men, and "in wide open spaces." Like many convivial people, he was slightly lonely. A warrior monk, he craved action and the company of soldiers, but when the fighting was over, he embraced solitude.

Stirling was also possessed of a profound self-belief, the sort of confidence that comes from high birth and boundless opportunity. He was blithely unconstrained by convention, and regarded rules as nuisances to be ignored, broken, or otherwise overcome. He was elaborately respectful toward his social inferiors, and showed no deference whatever to rank. Strikingly modest, he was repelled by braggarts and loudmouths: "swanks" (swanking) or "pomposo" (pomposity) were his gravest insults. His manner seemed vague and forgetful, but his powers of concentration were phenomenal. Despite an ungainly body and a patchy academic record, he had a stubborn faith in his own abilities, intellectual and physical. Stirling did exactly what he wanted to do, whether or not others thought his aims were sensible or even possible. The SAS came into being, in part, because its founder would not take no for an answer, either from those in authority or from those under his command.

Just as he had been bored by the logistics of mountaineering, so Stirling found the practical preparations for war indescribably tedious. Like many young men, he was hungry for the fight, but instead found himself shackled to a regime of endless marching, kit inspections, weapons drill, and all the other rote elements of military life. So he rebelled. Slipping away from the Guards Depot at Pirbright, he would frequently head to London for a night of drinking, gambling, and billiards at White's club; just as frequently he was caught, and confined to barracks. Stirling was a nightmare recruit: impertinent, indolent, and often half asleep as a result of his carousing the night before. "He was quite, quite irresponsible," recalled Willie (later Viscount) Whitelaw, a fellow trainee officer at Pirbright. "He just couldn't tolerate that we were being trained along the lines of the last major conflict. His reaction was just to ignore everything."

It was at the bar of White's, one of the most exclusive gentleman's clubs in London, that Stirling first learned about a form of soldiering that seemed much closer to the adventure and excitement he had in mind: a crack new commando unit intended to hit important enemy targets with maximum impact. Stirling's cousin, Lord

Lovat, had been among the first to volunteer for the commandos.

Formed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock, the force—christened Layforce—would consist of more than 1,500 volunteers formed into three commando regiments, recruited from the Foot Guards (the regular infantry of the Household Division) and other infantry regiments: an elite troop of specialized, highly trained raiders and marauders. Lord Haw-Haw, the British traitor who broadcast radio announcements into England for the Nazis, would describe the commandos as “Churchill’s cut-throats.”

Stirling immediately volunteered. Soon he found himself stomping through the wilds of western Scotland, familiar boyhood terrain and far from the parade ground he loathed. For weeks the commandos trained in the bogs and bracken of the Isle of Arran: route marches, unarmed combat, endurance, fieldcraft, navigation, and survival techniques. Even at this early stage, some of the other volunteers noticed something different about the tall young officer: Stirling was a natural leader, with an understated but adamant faith in his own decisions, and a gentlemanly insistence on doing everything he asked of his men, and more. On February 1, 1941, Layforce sailed for the Middle East. Finally Stirling was heading into battle, leaving behind a long string of unpaid bills: from his bookmaker, his tailor, his bank manager, and even from a cowboy outfitter in Arizona, seeking payment for a saddle.

Layforce had been deployed to disrupt Axis communication lines in the Mediterranean, and to spearhead the capture of Rhodes. But by the time the commandos arrived in Egypt, the military situation had changed: the arrival in Cyrenaica (eastern coastal Libya) of the Afrika Korps, the German expeditionary force under Erwin Rommel, had transformed the strategic picture. The British were now scrambling to oppose the German advances, and the first stage of the seesaw war in North Africa was under way. Initially deployed to shore up the Italian defense of their North African colonies, the Afrika Korps moved with alarming speed, driving the British back to the Egyptian border with Libya and laying siege to the coastal town of Tobruk. Instead of storming Rhodes, the commandos were split up and variously deployed to garrison Cyprus, cover the evacuation of Crete, reinforce the defense of Tobruk, and carry out raids along the coasts of Cyrenaica and Syria. An assault on the Libyan coastal town of Bardia achieved little, with 67 of the British raiders taken prisoner. Of the 800 commandos sent to cover the evacuation of Crete in May, fewer than 200 managed to escape—among them Evelyn Waugh, who boarded the last ship to leave. In June, the commandos successfully established a bridgehead on the Litani River in Lebanon against Vichy French forces, but lost a quarter of their attacking force.

Stirling, based in Egypt with the Layforce Reserve, was bored and frustrated. He had yet to fire a gun in action. “We were involved in a series of postponements and cancellations, and that was extremely frustrating,” he later recalled. Before the departure of the commandos, the director of combined operations had told them they were about to “embark on an enterprise that would stir the world.” So far, Stirling had barely stirred. As always when he was underemployed, he turned to revelry. Peter Stirling, David’s younger brother, was serving at the British embassy in Cairo, and his comfortable diplomatic flat in the Garden City district became the venue for riotous parties and nocturnal forays into the city’s fleshpots.

Stirling began to miss parades, and make excuses. His claims of ill health were not wholly untrue. He was stricken by a nasty bout of dysentery. Then, returning from a night exercise, he tripped over a tent rope and gashed an eyeball, requiring stitches. Stirling found the American hospital particularly comfortable, and began to contrive to spend his days there, claiming to be suffering from fever. “In a sense, I was pretty ill,” he later argued. “Because I would go out in the evening, having recovered from the appalling hangover caused by the previous night’s activities in Cairo, and re-establish my illness by my activities the following night.” Alerted by the hospital matron, Stirling’s superiors began to question just how unwell he really was. He was drinking and partying himself into serious trouble when his life was changed by a conversation, in

the mess, with Lieutenant Jock Lewes, a fellow officer in the commandos who was as self-disciplined and uptight as Stirling was dissolute and nonchalant.

Lewes told Stirling that he had recently obtained a stock of several dozen parachutes, destined for a paratroop unit operating in India but accidentally shipped to Port Said, where he had appropriated them. Colonel Laycock had given Lewes permission to attempt an experimental parachute jump in the desert. Stirling asked if he could come along, "partly for fun, partly because it would be useful to know how to do it," and mostly because he was very bored. So began an important and unlikely partnership between two men who could hardly have been more different.

Most helpful customer reviews

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating highlights on an important era in world history

By Mal Warwick

If you find the history of World War II fascinating, you're likely to feel that *Rogue Heroes* is endlessly so. In this eminently readable book, British historian Ben MacIntyre relates the story of the Special Air Service, the unit that set the pattern for special forces around the world. From its beginnings in 1941 in the fevered imagination of a rebellious junior officer in the British Army, the SAS has taken on a larger-than-life role in the story of World War II. MacIntyre makes the most of the romance of the tale, but there's no whitewash here; the violence, the raging fury, the madness, and the evil brought out by the war figure just as prominently in the tale. But *Rogue Heroes* is not just gripping, it's also frequently very, very funny.

The Special Air Service was born in the North African desert, where an insubordinate lieutenant named David Stirling managed to charm his way into British HQ in Cairo and talk a general into accepting a plan that everyone else on the staff thought utterly mad. Stirling's notion was that a small unit of unusually brave and enterprising men could parachute behind enemy lines and do great damage to the German armed forces. He set out to make Erwin Rommel's life miserable, and he nearly succeeded.

A Scottish aristocrat who had failed at everything in civilian life, Stirling had his way at least in part because the commanding general knew his family and had actually visited the ancestral Stirling home. Thus he was authorized to give his idea a try. He began with a handful of men under the arbitrary name L Detachment of the Special Air Service. By the end of the war less than four years later, the SAS had grown into a brigade of 2,500 men consisting of five regiments. Two were British, two French, and one Belgian, but all were under British command. Operating in secrecy during most of the war, the SAS was one of the Allies' most celebrated fighting units by the time the war ended.

Together, the several thousand men who served in the SAS destroyed huge numbers of German and Italian airplanes, trains, ammunition and fuel depots, and trucks, killed hundreds of enemy soldiers, and took hundreds of prisoners. One SAS unit also opened the eyes of the world to the unspeakable horrors of the now notorious Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. In the course of these incomparably eventful four years, a great many men of the SAS died, were wounded, or captured. But the pattern was set. One after another, many of the world's nations copied the SAS model. In the United States, the first was Delta Force, formed in 1977. Special forces are now an indispensable element of virtually every one of today's armies.

MacIntyre brings the SAS story vividly to life with special attention to Stirling and a handful of other leaders, not all of them commissioned officers.

About the author

The spies and unconventional warriors of the Second World War star in four out of Ben MacIntyre's eleven

books, all nonfiction. (The others are Agent Zigzag, Operation Mincemeat, Double Cross, and Rogue Heroes. I've reviewed all but the first of these.) MacIntyre is an historian and a columnist for The Times of London.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

All blood and guts.

By Robert Seidenberg

Amazing stories about this group of fearless men as part of the SAS. Very graphic when it came to killing and being killed. I never knew this story, or the group before, but they certainly deserved higher recognition than they got. I'm sure their efforts shortened the war to some extent, in defeat of the Nazi's and Mussolini's troops. You had to be a special breed to fight with these guys. Your average soldier would not have held his own. Some amazing innovations these guys came up with to destroy vehicles, airplanes and property. Their leaders were all blood and guts. Interesting also was Hitler's order to catch these guys and kill them outright. Showed you how effective they were in setting things back for the Nazi's.

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

A band of rebel-brothers

By Longhorn Skier

Commandos, spies, statesmen, and traitors pack this historical account of British Special Forces in WW2 North Africa. The narrative reads like a Ken Follet-thriller and races from commando-operation to audacious acts of personal bravery. Extensively researched using squadron reports, personal letters and diary accounts, Rogue Heroes details the birth and development of special forces warfare through the stories of the soldiers who organized and improvised desert raids on Axis bases. Meet this band of rebel-brothers who sacrificed much and risked certain death if captured and the warfare legacies they bequeathed their nation.

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# **ROGUE HEROES: THE HISTORY OF THE SAS, BRITAIN'S SECRET SPECIAL FORCES UNIT THAT SABOTAGED THE NAZIS AND CHANGED THE NATURE OF WAR (RANDOM H PDF**

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## Review

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—Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"*Rogue Heroes* is a terrific story of human enterprise, endurance and achievement and vividly brings to life an extraordinary cast of characters.... An absorbing story of derring-do, told with skill and flair."

—*Wall Street Journal*

“[A] riveting new history... Macintyre has produced yet another wonderful book... even minor characters bristle with life.... This is the spot in the book review where I’m supposed to find some point to quibble with, some omission, some historical inaccuracy, some flaw. Sorry to disappoint. The fact is Macintyre has produced yet another wonderful book. As Captain What What might have put it, this is a ripping good read.”

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“[This] entertaining World War II history will keep you tossing and alert late into the night.”

—Florida Times-Union

“Rogue Heroes provides an inside look at an important struggle.”

—Galveston Daily News

“Mr. Macintyre demonstrates superb skill as a journalist and a writer in this riveting book that takes readers into a long-past and still-frightening world of what real war was like.”

—The Washington Times

“[A] well-written and comprehensive history . . . Macintyre uses unprecedented access to the SAS official records, along with memoirs, diaries, and interviews with the few surviving veterans, to chronicle the major operations, key personalities, successes, and failures of the regiment in WWII. He vividly captures the bravery and the sheer audaciousness of the SAS troopers and their leadership operating hundreds of miles behind enemy lines. . . . Macintyre delivers a solid history and an enjoyable read that will appeal to those interested in military history as well as readers who enjoy real-life tales of adventure.”

—Publishers Weekly

“A rollicking tale of ‘unparalleled bravery and ingenuity, interspersed with moments of rank incompetence, raw brutality and touching human frailty.’”

—Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“A brilliant account...The author offers vivid information...The story will echo the voices of future generations of special forces hear in Marcus Luttrell’s Lone Survivor and Mark Bowden’s Black Hawk Down. Macintyre’s masterly storytelling highlights the bravery of these valiant men.”

—Library Journal (starred review)

“A superb study of wartime daring. A compelling tale full of jeopardy: bone-shattering parachute drops, terrifying night-time raids on Nazi airfields, fizzing explosive fuses, near escapes in screaming jeeps, harrowing marches through deserts, frozen forest encounters with desperate Germans and mad, edgy drinking bouts that could end with grenades being flourished.”

—Daily Telegraph

“Told with brilliance. The SAS are still about the best of their kind, and how they began to achieve this is an exotic saga indeed. No one will ever tell it better than this.”

—Evening Standard

“Follows the SAS from its early days in north Africa to the end of the war. Throughout the tales of scarcely believable heroism, derring-do, courage, camaraderie and endurance come faster than the bullets out of a Vickers machine gun. Meticulously researched. Macintyre has written about a fascinating subject in a way that would make any thriller writer proud. As a work of military history it is thorough and highly entertaining. It would be nigh on impossible to praise it too highly.”

—Daily Express



“A refreshing account of the origins of the regiment of balaclava-clad silent killers during the Second World War. Macintyre has a wonderful eye for eccentricity, and the narrative is peppered with extraordinary characters. At times there is more than a whiff of PG Wodehouse or Evelyn Waugh.”

—Evening Standard (A Book of the Year)

“Thrilling. Ben Macintyre is the ideal narrator.”

—Spectator

“Macintyre tells it with flair. A great read of wartime adventuring.”

—Richard Overy, *The Guardian*

“A master at setting the pulse racing, Macintyre relates stories of raw courage and daring.”

—Tony Rennell, *Daily Mail*

“Ben Macintyre's coverage of the SAS in north Africa and, later, Italy, France and Germany, is brilliant, blending gripping narratives of fighting with descriptions of the fears of individual soldiers before battle and their reactions to its horror. Britain's martial pantheon is full of outnumbered heroes who wouldn't throw in the sponge. Henry V's band of brothers at Agincourt, the redcoats at Waterloo, the defenders of Rorke's drift, and the paras who charged at Goose Green are part of the tradition that embraces the SAS. This book explains why.”

—*The Times*

“Grippingly readable. Macintyre tells the extraordinary story of the SAS compellingly.”

—*Scotsman*

“Fascinating, entertaining, insightful, thoughtful. Macintyre tells the story of the early years of the SAS with panache.”

—*Mail on Sunday*

“Macintyre writes with the diligence and insight of a journalist, and the panache of a born storyteller.”

—John Banville, author of *The Sea* and *The Untouchable*

“By far the best book on the SAS in World War II—impeccably researched and superbly told.”

—Antony Beevor, author of *D-Day* and *Stalingrad*

“We all have to come from somewhere. *Rogue Heroes* gives a glimpse deep down the rabbit hole into how the special forces world started. This is a great look at how a motivated bunch of badasses changed the tide of war and carved the path for the rest of us to follow.”

—Marcus Luttrell, former U.S. Navy SEAL and author of *Lone Survivor*

'Accessible yet authoritative. Delivers stories of tremendous adventure and derring-do, but also offers more than straightforward military history. This book has many strengths but perhaps its greatest is how thought-provoking it is'

—Laurence Rees, author of *World War II Behind Closed Doors*

#### About the Author

BEN MACINTYRE is a writer-at-large for *The Times* of London and the bestselling author of *A Spy Among Friends*, *Double Cross*, *Operation Mincemeat*, and *Agent Zigzag*, among other books. Macintyre has

also written and presented BBC documentaries of his work.

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## Chapter 1

### Cowboy Soldier

Five months before Operation Squatter, a tall, thin soldier lay, grumpy and immobile, in a Cairo hospital bed. The twenty-five-year-old officer had been brought into the Scottish Military Hospital on June 15, 1941, paralyzed from the waist down. A letter to his mother from the War Office stated that he had suffered “a contusion of the back as a result of enemy action.”

This was not, strictly speaking, true. The injured soldier had not set eyes on the enemy: he had jumped out of a plane, without a helmet or proper training, ripped his parachute on the tail and plummeted to earth at roughly twice the recommended speed. The impact had knocked him out and badly injured his spine, leaving him temporarily blinded and without feeling in his legs. The doctors feared he would never walk again.

Even before his parachuting accident, the officer’s contribution to the war effort had been minimal: he lacked the most basic military discipline, could not march straight, and was so lazy his comrades had nicknamed him “the Giant Sloth.” Since being posted to Egypt with the British commando force, he had spent much of his time in Cairo’s bars and clubs, or gambling at the racecourse. The nurses at the hospital knew him well, for he frequently popped in during the morning, whey-faced and liverish, to request a blast from the oxygen bottle to cure his hangover. Before his parachute jump landed him in the hospital, he had been under investigation to establish whether he was malingering and ought to be court-martialed. His fellow officers found him charming and entertaining; his senior commanders, for the most part, regarded him as impertinent, incompetent, and profoundly irritating. On completing officer training, he had received a blunt appraisal: “irresponsible and unremarkable.”

Lieutenant David Stirling of the Scots Guards was not a conventional soldier.

The writer Evelyn Waugh, a fellow officer in the commando force, came to visit Stirling about three weeks after his admission to the hospital. Waugh had been misinformed by the matron that one of Stirling’s legs had already been amputated, and he would likely lose the other. “I can’t feel a thing,” Stirling told his friend. Embarrassed, as Englishmen tend to be when faced with disability, Waugh kept up a steady stream of meaningless small talk, perched on the edge of the bed, and studiously avoided the subject of his friend’s paralysis. Every so often, however, he would sneak a surreptitious glance to where Stirling’s remaining leg ought to be, and whenever he did so Stirling, with extreme effort, would wiggle the big toe of his right foot. Finally, Waugh realized he was being teased, and hit Stirling with a pillow.

“You bastard, Stirling, when did it happen?”

“Minutes before you came. It takes a bit of effort, but it’s a start.”

Stirling was regaining the use of his legs. Others might have cried for joy; for Stirling, however, the first sign of his recovery was an excellent opportunity to play a practical joke on one of Britain’s greatest novelists.

It would take two more weeks before Stirling could stand upright, and several more before he was able to hobble about. But during those two months of enforced inaction he did a great deal of thinking—something that, in spite of his reputation as a feckless gadabout, he was rather good at.

The commandos were intended to be Britain's storm troops, volunteers selected and trained to carry out destructive raids against Axis targets. Prime Minister Winston Churchill had decided that the ideal theater in which to deploy the commandos would be North Africa, where they could conduct seaborne raids against enemy bases along the Mediterranean coast.

In Stirling's unsolicited opinion, the concept was not working. Most of the time the commandos were inactive, awaiting the order for a great assault that never came; on the rare occasions when they were deployed, the results had been disappointing. The German and Italian troops fully expected to be attacked from the sea, and were primed and waiting. The commando forces were simply too large and cumbersome to launch an assault without being spotted; the element of surprise was immediately lost.

But what, wondered Stirling, if the combat troops attacked from the opposite direction? To the south, stretching between Egypt and Libya, lay the Great Sand Sea, a vast, waterless expanse of unbroken dunes covering forty-five thousand square miles. One of the most inhospitable environments on earth, the desert was considered by the Germans to be virtually impassable, a natural barrier, and they therefore left it largely unprotected, and entirely unpatrolled. "This was one sea the Hun was not watching," Stirling reflected. If mobile teams of highly trained men, under cover of darkness, could be infiltrated onto the enemy's desert flank, they might be able to sabotage airfields, supply depots, communications links, railways, and roads, and then slip back into the embracing emptiness of the sand sea. A commando force several hundred strong could attack only one target at a time; but a number of smaller units, moving quickly, raiding suddenly and then retreating swiftly, could destroy multiple targets simultaneously. The opportunity to attack the enemy in the rear, when he least expects it, is the pipe dream of every general. The peculiar geography of North Africa offered just such a possibility, reflected Stirling, as he lay half paralyzed in his hospital bed, trying to wiggle his toes.

Stirling's idea was the result of wishful thinking more than expertise; it had emerged not from long hours of reflection and study, but from the acute boredom of convalescence. It was based on intuition, imagination, and self-confidence, of which Stirling had plenty, rather than experience of desert warfare, of which he had none. But it was an inspired idea, and the sort of idea that could only have occurred to someone as strange and remarkable as Archibald David Stirling.

Stirling was one of those people who thrive in war, having failed at peace. In a short life, he had tried his hand at a variety of occupations—artist, architect, cowboy, and mountaineer—and found success in none of them. Privileged by birth and education, intelligent and resourceful, he could have done anything, but had spent the early part of his life doing little of any consequence. The war was his salvation.

The Stirling family was one of the oldest and grandest in Scotland, an aristocratic clan of great distinction, long military traditions, and considerable eccentricity. David Stirling's mother was the daughter of Lord Lovat, the chief of Clan Fraser, with bloodlines stretching back to Charles II. His father, General Archibald Stirling, had been gassed in the First World War, served as an MP, and then retired to Keir, the fifteen thousand-acre Perthshire estate that had been the family's seat for the previous five centuries. The general presided over his sprawling lands and unruly family like some benign but distant chieftain observing a battlefield from a remote hill. David's formidable mother, Margaret, was the more forceful presence: her children were in awe of her. Keir House, where David Stirling was born in 1915, was a vast edifice, freezing cold even at the height of summer, filled with old hunting trophies, noise, and devilment. The Stirling parents drummed good manners into their six children, but otherwise largely left them to get on with their lives. The four Stirling boys, of whom David was the second in age, grew up stalking deer, hunting rabbits, fighting, and competing. One favorite game was a form of sibling duel using air rifles: two brothers would take potshots at each other's backsides in turn, moving closer by a pace after each shot.

Despite this aristocratically spartan start in life, David Stirling was not a hardy child. Dispatched to Ampleforth, a Catholic boarding school, at the age of eight, he caught typhoid fever and was sent home for an extended period of recovery. A speech impediment was eventually cured by surgery. He disliked sports, and did his best to avoid them. He grew at an astonishing rate: by the age of seventeen, he was nearly six feet, six inches tall, a gangly beanpole, willful, reckless, and exceptionally polite. Largely by virtue of his class, he was awarded a place at Cambridge University, where he misbehaved on a lavish scale, spending more time at Newmarket racecourse than he devoted to studying. "If there was a serious side to life it totally escaped me," he later admitted. If he ever opened a book, the event was not recorded. After a year, the master of his college informed him that he was being sent down, read out a list of twenty-three offenses that merited expulsion, and invited him to select the three that he considered "would be least offensive" to his mother.

David Stirling decided he would become an artist, in Paris. He had little talent for painting. But he did have a beret, and a yen for the bohemian life. Some have detected "a strange mixture of beauty and the macabre" in his paintings. His French art tutor, however, did not, and after a year and a half of louche Left Bank life, he was told that while he might one day make a half-decent commercial draftsman, his "painting would never achieve any real merit." Stirling was profoundly upset; his failure as an artist marked him forever, and perhaps explained the consistent ripple of insecurity that lay beneath the carapace of confidence.

He returned to Cambridge to study architecture, but soon dropped out again. A job with an Edinburgh architect was short-lived. His mother now intervened, and told her second son that he must stop drifting and do something with his life. Stirling announced that he intended to become the first person to climb Mount Everest.

Stirling was quite the wrong shape to scramble up rocks. He had little experience of serious climbing. He also suffered from vertigo. Intrepid British mountaineers had been trying to scale the world's highest mountain since 1921; dozens had perished in the attempt. Climbing Everest was an expensive, dangerous, demanding business, and Stirling was broke—none of which dented his determination to succeed where other, qualified, experienced, well-funded mountaineers had failed. He spent a year climbing in the Swiss Alps, bankrolled by his mother, before joining the supplementary reserve of the Scots Guards, his father's regiment, in the hope that part-time army training might bolster his mountaineering quest. He soon drifted out of uniform, repelled by the mind-swamping boredom of the parade ground. In 1938, at the age of twenty-three, he went to the United States with the intention of climbing the Rockies and riding across the Continental Divide. He was south of the Rio Grande, having spent several months herding cattle in the company of a cowboy named Roy "Panhandle" Terrill when he learned that Britain was at war—the run?up to which had, it seems, almost entirely passed him by. His mother sent a telegram: "Return home by the cheapest possible means." Stirling flew to Britain on a first-class ticket, and rushed back into uniform.

The David Stirling who turned up at the Guards Depot in Pirbright in the autumn of 1939 was a strange mixture of parts. Ambitious but unfocused; steeped in soldierly traditions but allergic to military discipline. A boisterous exterior belied a man prone to periodic depressions, whose extreme good manners and social ease masked moments of inner turmoil. Stirling was a romantic, with an innate talent for friendship but little desire or need for physical intimacy. He appears to have lost his virginity in Paris as an art student. With Panhandle Terrill he had enjoyed the company of "some of those dark girls down in Mexico." But his natural shyness coupled with a stern all-male Catholic education seems to have left him in fear of women. "The totally confused, guilt-ridden years of puberty exerted an awful pressure," he once remarked. He spoke of "predatory females"; his few romantic encounters were described as "close escapes," as if he feared entrapment. "Bonds of any sort are a pressure I find very difficult to bear," he admitted. He had many women friends, and according to his biographer was "not unattracted to the opposite sex." Yet he seemed to

relax only among men, and “in wide open spaces.” Like many convivial people, he was slightly lonely. A warrior monk, he craved action and the company of soldiers, but when the fighting was over, he embraced solitude.

Stirling was also possessed of a profound self-belief, the sort of confidence that comes from high birth and boundless opportunity. He was blithely unconstrained by convention, and regarded rules as nuisances to be ignored, broken, or otherwise overcome. He was elaborately respectful toward his social inferiors, and showed no deference whatever to rank. Strikingly modest, he was repelled by braggarts and loudmouths: “swanks” (swanking) or “pomposo” (pomposity) were his gravest insults. His manner seemed vague and forgetful, but his powers of concentration were phenomenal. Despite an ungainly body and a patchy academic record, he had a stubborn faith in his own abilities, intellectual and physical. Stirling did exactly what he wanted to do, whether or not others thought his aims were sensible or even possible. The SAS came into being, in part, because its founder would not take no for an answer, either from those in authority or from those under his command.

Just as he had been bored by the logistics of mountaineering, so Stirling found the practical preparations for war indescribably tedious. Like many young men, he was hungry for the fight, but instead found himself shackled to a regime of endless marching, kit inspections, weapons drill, and all the other rote elements of military life. So he rebelled. Slipping away from the Guards Depot at Pirbright, he would frequently head to London for a night of drinking, gambling, and billiards at White’s club; just as frequently he was caught, and confined to barracks. Stirling was a nightmare recruit: impertinent, indolent, and often half asleep as a result of his carousing the night before. “He was quite, quite irresponsible,” recalled Willie (later Viscount) Whitelaw, a fellow trainee officer at Pirbright. “He just couldn’t tolerate that we were being trained along the lines of the last major conflict. His reaction was just to ignore everything.”

It was at the bar of White’s, one of the most exclusive gentleman’s clubs in London, that Stirling first learned about a form of soldiering that seemed much closer to the adventure and excitement he had in mind: a crack new commando unit intended to hit important enemy targets with maximum impact. Stirling’s cousin, Lord Lovat, had been among the first to volunteer for the commandos.

Formed under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock, the force—christened Layforce—would consist of more than 1,500 volunteers formed into three commando regiments, recruited from the Foot Guards (the regular infantry of the Household Division) and other infantry regiments: an elite troop of specialized, highly trained raiders and marauders. Lord Haw-Haw, the British traitor who broadcast radio announcements into England for the Nazis, would describe the commandos as “Churchill’s cut-throats.”

Stirling immediately volunteered. Soon he found himself stomping through the wilds of western Scotland, familiar boyhood terrain and far from the parade ground he loathed. For weeks the commandos trained in the bogs and bracken of the Isle of Arran: route marches, unarmed combat, endurance, fieldcraft, navigation, and survival techniques. Even at this early stage, some of the other volunteers noticed something different about the tall young officer: Stirling was a natural leader, with an understated but adamant faith in his own decisions, and a gentlemanly insistence on doing everything he asked of his men, and more. On February 1, 1941, Layforce sailed for the Middle East. Finally Stirling was heading into battle, leaving behind a long string of unpaid bills: from his bookmaker, his tailor, his bank manager, and even from a cowboy outfitter in Arizona, seeking payment for a saddle.

Layforce had been deployed to disrupt Axis communication lines in the Mediterranean, and to spearhead the capture of Rhodes. But by the time the commandos arrived in Egypt, the military situation had changed: the arrival in Cyrenaica (eastern coastal Libya) of the Afrika Korps, the German expeditionary force under

Erwin Rommel, had transformed the strategic picture. The British were now scrambling to oppose the German advances, and the first stage of the seesaw war in North Africa was under way. Initially deployed to shore up the Italian defense of their North African colonies, the Afrika Korps moved with alarming speed, driving the British back to the Egyptian border with Libya and laying siege to the coastal town of Tobruk. Instead of storming Rhodes, the commandos were split up and variously deployed to garrison Cyprus, cover the evacuation of Crete, reinforce the defense of Tobruk, and carry out raids along the coasts of Cyrenaica and Syria. An assault on the Libyan coastal town of Bardia achieved little, with 67 of the British raiders taken prisoner. Of the 800 commandos sent to cover the evacuation of Crete in May, fewer than 200 managed to escape—among them Evelyn Waugh, who boarded the last ship to leave. In June, the commandos successfully established a bridgehead on the Litani River in Lebanon against Vichy French forces, but lost a quarter of their attacking force.

Stirling, based in Egypt with the Layforce Reserve, was bored and frustrated. He had yet to fire a gun in action. “We were involved in a series of postponements and cancellations, and that was extremely frustrating,” he later recalled. Before the departure of the commandos, the director of combined operations had told them they were about to “embark on an enterprise that would stir the world.” So far, Stirling had barely stirred. As always when he was underemployed, he turned to revelry. Peter Stirling, David’s younger brother, was serving at the British embassy in Cairo, and his comfortable diplomatic flat in the Garden City district became the venue for riotous parties and nocturnal forays into the city’s fleshpots.

Stirling began to miss parades, and make excuses. His claims of ill health were not wholly untrue. He was stricken by a nasty bout of dysentery. Then, returning from a night exercise, he tripped over a tent rope and gashed an eyeball, requiring stitches. Stirling found the American hospital particularly comfortable, and began to contrive to spend his days there, claiming to be suffering from fever. “In a sense, I was pretty ill,” he later argued. “Because I would go out in the evening, having recovered from the appalling hangover caused by the previous night’s activities in Cairo, and re-establish my illness by my activities the following night.” Alerted by the hospital matron, Stirling’s superiors began to question just how unwell he really was. He was drinking and partying himself into serious trouble when his life was changed by a conversation, in the mess, with Lieutenant Jock Lewes, a fellow officer in the commandos who was as self-disciplined and uptight as Stirling was dissolute and nonchalant.

Lewes told Stirling that he had recently obtained a stock of several dozen parachutes, destined for a paratroop unit operating in India but accidentally shipped to Port Said, where he had appropriated them. Colonel Laycock had given Lewes permission to attempt an experimental parachute jump in the desert. Stirling asked if he could come along, “partly for fun, partly because it would be useful to know how to do it,” and mostly because he was very bored. So began an important and unlikely partnership between two men who could hardly have been more different.

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