

JOHN PARKER

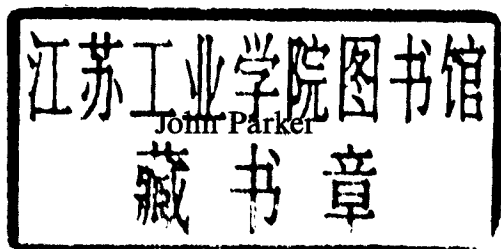


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THE INSIDE STORY OF
THE SPECIAL BOAT SERVICE

SBS

The Inside Story of the Special Boat Service



headline

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John Parker, a journalist and former Fleet Street editor, has undertaken many investigative projects in his writing career with topics ranging from the Mafia to Northern Ireland. His numerous books include several military bestsellers including *The Gurkhas*, *The Killing Factory*, *Death of a Hero*, *Commandos*, *The Silent Service*, *Strike Command* and *Task Force*.

Investigative and military books by John Parker

- Task Force: The Inside Story of the Ships and Heroes of the Royal Navy**
- Strike Command: The Inside Story of the RAF's Warfare Heroes**
- The Silent Service: The Inside Story of the Royal Navy's Submarine Heroes**
- Commandos: The Inside Story of Britain's Most Elite Fighting Force**
- Total Surveillance: Investigating the Big Brother World of E-Spies, Eavesdroppers and CCTV**
- The Gurkhas: The Inside Story of the World's Most Feared Soldiers**
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- King of Fools: The Duke of Windsor and his Fascist Friends**

'Not By Strength, By Guile'

The motto of the Special Boat Service is like a clue to a cryptic crossword: there's a hidden meaning. Its operations are spectacular and dangerous, but every one of them has a twist to it, some extra element. Everyone knows that members of the Special Forces the world over are, generally speaking, portrayed as fearless hard cases who barge in, guns blazing, where others fear to tread. Even for the most overt of these groups, such as the SAS, it is never like that, of course. The 'charge' is the last act of an operation that requires meticulous planning, days, possibly weeks, of undercover surveillance, specific pre-operational training and split-second timing for the assault – otherwise the men would be falling dead in their droves when they finally went in.

This is doubly important for operatives of the Special Boat Service because they are also waterborne, and that ingredient to their operations alone requires levels of training, fitness and real-life work-outs of an extraordinary nature, which no one ever sees, nor can anyone assess, and which makes them among the most highly skilled, technically adept and versatile units anywhere in the world. The sheer diversity of their range of skills and disciplines, which will be demonstrated throughout this

narrative, calls for dedicated proficiency in approaching their tasks by land, sea or air, and increasingly the SBS is in the vanguard of operations confronting military forces around the world.

They are skills that are applied to tackling the ever-threatening potential of today's world of localised wars and the growth of international terrorism but which are rooted in past endeavours. As will be evident from the text, the history of the Special Boat Service from its foundations onwards is comprehensively explored in these pages.

Many of the SBS's major operations are recorded and recalled, often by those who were there. In undertaking this task for the first edition of this work, in 1996, the author was given unprecedented access to former SBS personnel who traditionally have kept a low profile and are exceedingly security conscious for a number of reasons. Additional material has since been researched for this new edition, bringing the SBS story up to date.

The result is an intriguing and gripping story, already praised by former SBS officers, which respects their anonymity but which allows more than a glimpse into their ultra-secret world, which embraces everything from the safety of coastal installations around the United Kingdom, national security, counter-terrorism and intelligence-gathering techniques ahead of large-scale troop movements, which involve procedures and equipment of the highest secrecy classification.

Apart from the interests of national security and their compliance with the terms of the Official Secrets Act, SBS members must also consider their own safety. In the diversity of tasks confronting them in this modern age, they are well aware that they themselves may become targets, a fact which the author acknowledged in setting out on this project.

Even so, former members of the Special Boat Service

and its associated units of the Second World War assisted in the compilation of this work. Their first-hand recollections, reports and private memoirs form the basis for a running narrative from its beginnings in 1941. They have been quoted throughout the ensuing chapters, along with extracts from a vast collection of archive material, much of it previously classified but now accessible at the Public Records Office and published here with permission of the Crown Copyright Office.

The author wishes to record his sincere thanks and appreciation to all those who participated and gave their time and hospitality so freely during the numerous interviews, meetings and telephone conversations. Responsibility for accuracy of this work, however, rests solely with the author.



Lieutenant-Colonel H. G. 'Blondie' Halser and Marine W. E. Sparks, the only two survivors of Operation Frankton, at the unveiling of a memorial to the Cockleshell Heroes at Poole. The eight who did not return were drowned or shot by the Germans.



Heroes and legends
 . . . creator of the
 wartime SBS Roger
 'Jumbo' Courtney
 with his wife Dorrise
 in their canoe
Buttercup in which
 they paddled the
 Danube for their
 honeymoon in 1938.
Left: Blondie Hasler,
 inventor of many of
 the operational
 strategies on which
 today's SBS is based,
 in classic pose.



Nigel Clogstoun Willmott, beach reconnaissance expert and founder of Lord Mountbatten's Combined Operations Pilotage Parties which guided in invasion assault troops and equipment.



Lionel 'Buster' Crabb, Britain's first frogman and scourge of the Italian underwater raiders of the Mediterranean in the Second World War, who vanished while examining the hull of a Russian cruiser for MI6 in 1956.

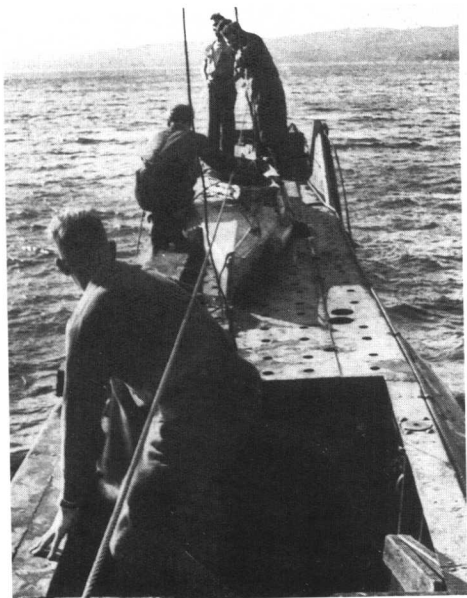


Robert 'Tug' Wilson, the Bristol draughtsman who became a courageous canoeist/saboteur.

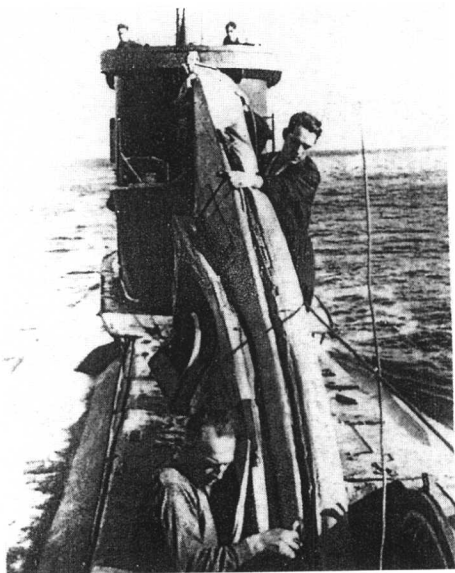


Canoe-borne raiders
Above: early exercise of
 Army Commando Folbot
 troop in 1941. *Centre:*
 swimmer-canoeists in
 action in their Klepper
 during the Indonesian
 Confrontation in 1963.
Below: a typical SBS
 beach landing, though
 normally under cover of
 darkness.



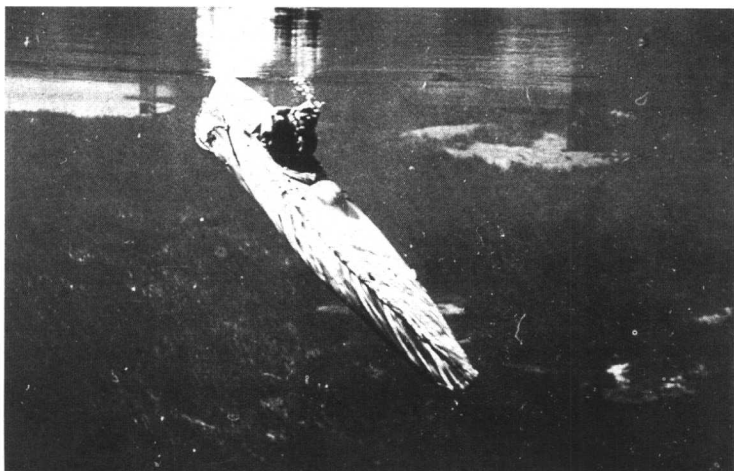


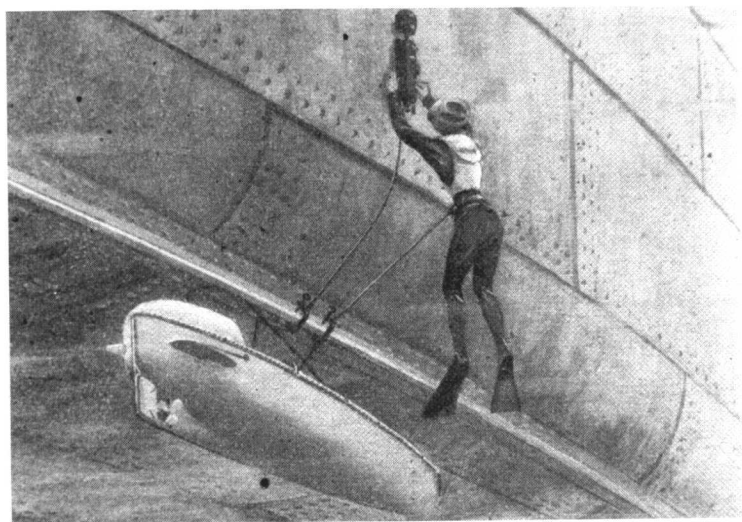
Saboteurs, reconnaissance teams and agents were often delivered to their target zone by submarine.

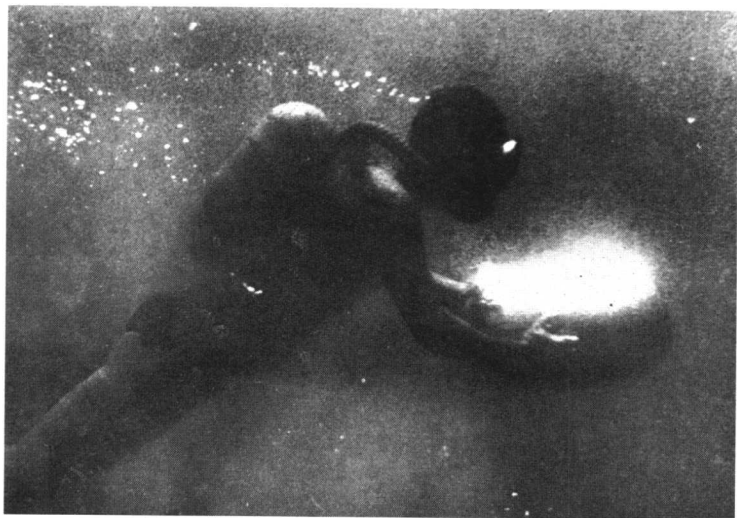




The *Sleeping Beauty*, codename for the wartime motorised submersible canoe developed from an idea by Blondie Hasler for sabotage attacks on enemy shipping. The pilot sat like a racing driver in the cockpit, with a hefty load of explosive charges secured inside the canoe. The *SB*, as it was known, was famously used on Operation Rimau, which originated from Australia for an attack on Japanese ships berthed in Singapore harbour. The raid went disastrously wrong and ten who survived gun battles with the Japanese forces were later beheaded by their captors. (*By permission of the Public Record Office*)







Wartime heroics of Buster Crabb, seen here at work, were subsequently overshadowed by the post-war drama of his disappearance. With primitive equipment, he made hundreds of dives to clear Italian limpets from Allied ships and towards the end of the war helped clear Venice of mines deposited by departing Nazis.

Precarious in the extreme, the *X-Craft* mini-submarine, often leaky and always cramped, in action with top secret COPPs teams guiding the Normandy D-Day troop landings, as they did with all seaborne invasion forces after 1942. On this vessel are Coppists Jim Booth (for'ard) and George Honour in the conning tower.



Techniques learned in the Second World War were soon being called upon.

Above: a team of divers won medals for their work clearing limpet mines from troopships in Haifa during the Israeli crisis of 1948, Sergeant 'Sticks' Dodds and Lieutenant Henry Musto (*left and centre*) were both future Officers Commanding, SBS.

Below: SBS teams joined 41 Independent Commando RM and US troops in the early stages of the Korean War to lead sabotage teams blowing up railways and vital installations, landing on a hostile coastline in their canoes and inflatables from submarines and ships stationed up to five miles offshore. (*Royal Marines Museum*)

