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# **Commando Country**

**Special training centres in the Scottish highlands, 1940-45.**

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This review and the associated published work submitted (S. Allan, 2007. *Commando Country*. Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Publishing) have been composed by me, are my own work, and have not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Stuart Allan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Stuart Allan  
11 April 2011

## CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b><u>Critical review</u></b>	
<b>Background to the research</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Historiography</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Research strategy and fieldwork</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Sources and interpretation</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>The Scottish perspective</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Impact</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Appendix: <i>Commando Country</i> bibliography</b>	<b>65</b>

## **Abstract**

**S. Allan, 2007. *Commando Country*. Edinburgh: NMS Enterprises Publishing.**

*Commando Country* assesses the nature of more than 30 special training centres that operated in the Scottish highlands between 1940 and 1945, in order to explore the origins, evolution and culture of British special service training during the Second World War.

These locations were chosen by virtue of the utility of the physical environment of the highland estate, strongly influenced by associated ideas about the challenge of that environment, individual character and the nature of irregular warfare. By virtue of its Scottish geographical perspective, *Commando Country* diverges from the existing literature by looking across the training establishments used by different organisations, principally Military Intelligence, the Commandos, and Special Operations Executive (SOE), whose histories tend to be considered in isolation.

The book investigates the development and function of each category of training centre, the relationships between them, and their place in the broader framework of British and Allied special operations. Based on research in official documentary sources, unpublished and published memoirs and on fieldwork and interviews with surviving participants conducted by the author, *Commando Country* also presents rare unpublished photographs from public and private sources and artefacts assembled for the exhibition of the same name held at the National War Museum, Edinburgh in 2007.

The resulting thesis is that the philosophy and practice improvised at the original school of irregular warfare at Inverailort House in the summer of 1940 permeated the culture of the training centres that developed thereafter. Close attention is accordingly given to the circumstances, organisation and instructing personnel that created the Inverailort syllabus, and the backgrounds and skills brought to bear, some drawn from civilian professions.

The application of similar methods to the newly formed Commando forces is then traced. In this context the original operational purposes of individual aspects of the training became standardised into a general test of fitness and character designed to control admission of volunteers into the Commandos, the raiding and assault units that regarded themselves as a new military elite.

Simultaneously, the approach pioneered at Inverailort was adapted to form the paramilitary training element of SOE, the organisation that coordinated and supported Resistance organisations in enemy-occupied countries. Particular attention is paid to the dedicated training establishments for Polish and Norwegian SOE units based in Scotland.

The book concludes by considering how techniques and philosophy were applied more widely as conventional military training itself evolved, extending influence even into post-war civilian outdoor recreation.

## 1 Background to the research

*Commando Country* presents research conducted by the author in two phases, 2001-3, and late 2005-7, as part of his professional duties as Senior Curator of Military History in the Department of Scotland and Europe, National Museums Scotland. The book was published to complement and follow up an exhibition of the same name, with the author as curator, held at the National War Museum, Edinburgh Castle in 2006-8. Its publication represents a combination of the author's professional work in researching and interpreting the history, culture and material culture of war and military service in relation to Scotland and his academic training as a historian.<sup>1</sup> In researching and writing *Commando Country*, the author was also able to draw on his broader interest in the cultural history of the Scottish landscape and the recreational use of the Scottish highland environment in particular.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of the book lie in an exhibition project instigated in 2001 by the author's senior colleague Allan Carswell and delegated to the author as a priority task.<sup>3</sup> The ultimate existence of the author's book owes much to Mr Carswell's original Commando exhibition idea, and to his guidance and insight in the first stage of exhibition fieldwork. The exhibition brief as originally conceived was to encompass Scottish service in the Commandos, and the relationship between the Commandos and Scotland represented by the Commando Memorial at Spean Bridge, the well-known monumental sculpture erected close to the wartime Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry in Lochaber. Initial research was undertaken with the purpose of identifying and, where possible, acquiring for the national collection artefacts, images and information relating to the Commandos, a subject area in which the collection was not strong. Initiatives to enhance permanent collections by means of staging temporary exhibitions are established museum practice, and a precedent existed

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<sup>1</sup> The author's previous work for National Museums Scotland included working in collaboration with senior colleague Allan Carswell in curating of six new permanent galleries at the National War Museum, Edinburgh Castle in 1998-2000; the special exhibition *No Easy End in Sight: South East Asia 1945*, National War Museum, 2005-7; and developing military historical interpretation at the National Museum of Flight, East Fortune, 2004-5.

<sup>2</sup> This is a leisure interest, but years of outdoor pursuits in the Scottish highlands developed the author's knowledge of this environment and his familiarity with the historiography of these activities.

<sup>3</sup> Principal Curator of Military History at National Museums Scotland until 2005. Mr Carswell maintained active involvement in fieldwork in the first phase of the project to 2003. In 2007 he kindly contributed a foreword to the published *Commando Country*.

with successful collecting around an earlier special exhibition at the National War Museum on the subject of Polish forces in Scotland during the Second World War.<sup>4</sup>

The project which became *Commando Country* represented one initiative intended to broaden the scope of military history research and collecting at National Museums Scotland beyond our traditional concern with the material culture, identity and experience of Scottish *people* in military service. The Scottish military tradition is a powerful cultural phenomenon which has long shaped the recording, representation and popular understanding of Scottish military service, not least through commemoration and tribute in military museums. In recent years, through research, collecting, exhibition and publication, the author has worked with Allan Carswell and other colleagues in seeking to explore the nature of that culture, to promote understanding of its social and political context and meaning and, significant here, to relate cultural developments more closely to the hard facts of Scotland as *place*, considering the changing geo-strategic significance of Scotland's position on the map, and the military and economic utility of its physical geography and resources.<sup>5</sup> There can be, however, few more culturally-loaded landscapes than the Scottish highlands. *Commando Country* reflects a dynamic between the attributes of the highland environment for functional military purposes and the cultural assumptions and values that came with that environment. This relationship will be considered further in section 5 below.

Initial outline research on the subject of Commandos and Scotland led the author to investigate the process whereby the Commandos came to use the Scottish highlands for training. It quickly became apparent that while the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry dominated popular memory of the connections between Scotland and the Commandos, Achnacarry was neither the beginning nor the end of the story. Indeed the Commandos constituted only one strand of a broader and more complex development in Second World War special service training that took place in the Scottish highlands. The practical and cultural attributes of the Scottish highland environment were identified as a

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<sup>4</sup> Curated by Allan Carswell. See A. Carswell, 1993. *For Your Freedom and Ours. Poland, Scotland and the Second World War*. Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland. The present author had no involvement in this exhibition.

<sup>5</sup> S. Allan and A. Carswell, 2004. *The Thin Red Line: war, empire and visions of Scotland*. Edinburgh: NMSE Publishing, comprises four essays reflecting the nature of the national military experience, one of which 'Strategy: stands Scotland where it did?' considers these factors. Following completion of *Commando Country* the present author curated a new permanent gallery at the National Museum of Flight, *Fortunes of War*, which interpreted the history of the former Royal Naval Air Station and RAF training airfield at East Fortune. Like *Commando Country* this was a research and interpretation project concerned both with strategic issues and historical experience, based on a geographic location.

plausible link between a number of special training centres run by separate military organisations. Similarities in the approach to training and direct connections through instructing personnel pointed to the significance of the first irregular warfare training centre established in late May 1940 at Inverailort house by officers working for the Research Branch of Military Intelligence, MI(R).<sup>6</sup> A review of the secondary literature indicated that the development of special service training was a subject that hitherto had largely been considered only as a minor aspect of the discrete histories of individual special service organisations, e.g. the Commandos, Special Operations Executive, the Special Air Service. Therefore, an exhibition researched and developed for the National War Museum of Scotland, embracing Scottish service in Commando operations but incorporating the broader highland connection, was seen potentially to offer a fresh and unique perspective. A major exhibition and wider communication project, including a publication, was proposed on this basis.<sup>7</sup>

In early 2003, following a period of organisational change at National Museums Scotland and consequent uncertainty regarding the proposal, revised strategic and operational priorities placed the project in abeyance. Work on the project ceased altogether until late 2005 when the author re-started his research and submitted a proposal to stage a smaller version of the exhibition in a new special exhibition gallery that had been developed at the National War Museum in the interim. This proposal adapted and refined the earlier concept to focus on the highland special training centres, the ethos they shared, and the significance of the highland environment in relation to the developing culture of British and Allied special service organisations. A period of intensive research and further fieldwork on the special training centres followed, leading to the *Commando Country* exhibition which ran at the National War Museum from late 2006 until 2008. The exhibition displayed artefacts from the museum's own collection (a number of which were recent acquisitions) loan exhibits, photographs, and recorded film and audio interviews conducted by the author.

This second phase of exhibition work envisaged a complementary publication on the history of the special training centres in the Scottish highlands, 1940–5. In 2006, in consultation with the Museum's in-house publisher NMS Enterprises Publishing, the decision was taken

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<sup>6</sup> The author had first encountered material relating to Inverailort in a previous professional position as a regimental museum curator: the maps and photographs of Lieutenant Stuart Chant of No. 5 Commando and the Gordon Highlanders. See *Commando Country*, 116-17 and illustrations.

<sup>7</sup> 'Men bred in the rough bounds. The Scottish highlands and irregular warfare 1939-45, Progress Report December 2001', internal NMS document prepared by Stuart Allan and Allan Carswell.



that the extent of the research into historical sources carried out in support of the exhibition, the nature of the findings, and the public interest generated by the subject, merited a stand-alone book rather than a tied-in exhibition publication. National Museums Scotland's Publications Committee approved this proposal. From October 2006 the author further researched and wrote *Commando Country*, which was published to deadline in October 2007. Conforming to National Museums Scotland policy on the dissemination of research, *Commando Country* was written to present high quality scholarship to the widest possible audience.<sup>8</sup> Dealing with the history of special forces, an aspect of military history that generates strong public interest and a popular literature to go with it, *Commando Country* was written and presented as a contribution to work of academic substance on the subject.

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<sup>8</sup> 'NMS Research Framework, NMS 4 (2004)', National Museums Scotland policy document, November 2004.

## 2 Historiography

Serious enquiry into any aspect of the history and culture of irregular warfare, special forces and special operations must take account of, and relate to, a prodigious body of popular history. Public interest in the Special Air Service (SAS) in particular has remained high since the profile of the regiment was raised by media coverage of the Iranian Embassy siege of 1980, and with this interest comes an enduring market for histories of 'elite forces' of all kinds, including numbers dealing with the British Second World War experience.<sup>9</sup> Most prominent at the very outset of the research was Sally Dugan's *Commando*, published to accompany a Channel 4 television series of the same name, which mixed personal testimony with a typical excursion through the highlights of Commando operations.<sup>10</sup> The outpouring of books of this kind appealing to the popular interest comprises works of varying quality, but the presence of the more lurid end of the genre characterised by, for example, the Gulf War memoirs of SAS soldier 'Andy McNab', or a sub-group of rather dubious fitness manuals based on SAS or Commando training, does not mean the subject is altogether bereft of more considered treatment.<sup>11</sup> As noted above, there is a tendency amongst the strongest of these to present accounts of wartime special units as discrete narratives, along the lines of traditional regimental history, as exemplified by Michael Asher's (2007) history of the SAS, or to offer collections of brief unit histories of Second World War special service organisations, an approach still best represented by Julian Thompson's (1998) *Imperial War Museum Book of the War Behind Enemy Lines*.<sup>12</sup>

The literature typically deals superficially with training, and the popular works tend to accept without analysis the relationship between training and the *soi-disant* elite status of the units under study. Few attempt to relate this or other aspects of special service culture across irregular fighting organisations or to trace developments in training doctrine over time. Amongst more serious work, Terry White's (1992) assessment of the roles and techniques of

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<sup>9</sup> On the popular appeal of the SAS see J. Newsinger, 1997. *Dangerous Men. The SAS and Popular Culture*. London: Pluto Press.

<sup>10</sup> S. Dugan, 2001. *Commando. The Elite Fighting Forces of the Second World War*. London: Channel 4 Books.

<sup>11</sup> A. McNab, 1993. *Bravo Two Zero*. London: Bantam. On the fitness manuals see J. Newsinger, 1997, 87-91. A more recent example is C. Ryan, 2000. *Chris Ryan's SAS Fitness Book*. London: Century.

<sup>12</sup> M. Asher, 2007. *The Regiment. The Real Story of the SAS*. London: Viking. See also P. Warner, 1994. *The Special Air Service*. London: Warner Books, which is presented as an official history, endorsed by the SAS Regiment. Military historian Major General Julian Thompson commanded 3 Commando Brigade during the Falklands War. J. Thompson, 1998. *The Imperial War Museum Book of the War Behind Enemy Lines*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson. Other representative works include W. Seymour, 1985. *British Special Forces*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson.

British, U.S. and Soviet special forces as they stood in 1992 devoted three chapters to selection and training but with limited historical perspective.<sup>13</sup> Tim Jones' *SAS Zero Hour* (2006) offered a more convincing historical analysis which, although focussed on the SAS, shared with *Commando Country* an attention to the origins of thinking and personal associations in the earliest manifestations of British irregular warfare philosophy and practice in the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> The title and cover design of Jones' book meanwhile gives an example of the manner in which serious treatments of the subject have been presented to appeal also to the popular market, in this instance where the author has a track record of academic research into the subject which is atypical of the genre.

Perhaps reflecting wariness among academic military historians of guilt by association with the popular literature, recent academic work on British special operations and special forces has emerged principally in the related discipline of strategic studies. Works of this type have made a virtue out of not engaging with the popular works or the outstanding aspects of operational history. James Kiras' *Special Operations and Strategy* (2006) used case studies of Second World War special operations to arrive at a general theory of the strategic effectiveness of special forces in which he concentrated on the attritional impact of special operations on enemy morale.<sup>15</sup> In a foreword to Kiras' book, Colin S. Gray extolled the benefits of a strictly strategic approach,

You can regale an audience with extraordinary tales of bravery, skill and even self-sacrifice by SOF [special operations forces], but at the end of the day...what difference did these deeds make to the course, outcome and possibly the consequences of war?<sup>16</sup>

Published subsequently to *Commando Country* in 2008, Alastair Finlan's *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror* followed a similar line of reasoning to Gray and Kiras as it traced the historical development of British and U.S. special forces in relation to their growing strategic relevance in twenty-first century conflict.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> T. White, 1992. *Swords of Lightning. Special Forces and the Changing Face of Warfare*. London: Brassey's UK.

<sup>14</sup> T. Jones, 2006. *SAS Zero Hour. The Secret Origins of the Special Air Service*. London: Greenhill.

<sup>15</sup> J. Kiras, 2006. *Special Operations and Strategy: from World War II to the War on Terrorism*. London: Routledge.

<sup>16</sup> J. Kiras, 2006, xi.

<sup>17</sup> A. Finlan, 2008. *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror: warfare by other means*. London: Routledge.

Yet even in their treatment of the strategic dimension, Kiras and Finlan each took notice of the culture of Second World War special forces as a necessary tool to understanding how capability in this kind of warfare has been used, underused and misused. Indeed, in considering the formation of the SAS in North Africa in 1941, Finlan followed the lead of recent American studies in borrowing from the literature of organisational culture, a body of theory employed in the fields of management and work psychology. This he employed as an aid to identify counter-cultural tendencies whereby special forces were regarded, and defined themselves, in opposition to the norms of traditional military organisations and command structures.<sup>18</sup> This theoretical framework has some application to the history of the highland special training centres and has since been explored by the present author in order to demonstrate how cultural assumptions present in the earliest formulations of special service training came to endure and evolve in different forms in British military organisation in the longer term.<sup>19</sup> Concerned less with quantifying strategic outcomes, *Commando Country* engaged directly with Second World War special service culture. The purpose was not to celebrate extraordinary people and deeds by way of tribute, but to explore how in a particular kind of setting the action and interaction of individuals, and some of their shared and imparted influences and assumptions, contributed to shaping this kind of military organisation and its approach to warfare.<sup>20</sup>

In light of the present-day strategic paradigm, strategic studies work on special operations reflects a pressing concern with the relationship between British and American approaches to this kind of warfare. The developments charted in *Commando Country* have some relevance here, since observation and emulation of British practice in organisation and training, including the training centres in the Scottish highlands, is acknowledged in American sources as an early influence in the development of a U.S. special forces capability and so is

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<sup>18</sup> Organisational culture theory was first referenced in relation to special forces training in S. Marquis, 1997. *Unconventional Warfare. Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution.

<sup>19</sup> S. Allan, 2010. 'Individualism, exceptionalism and counter culture in Second World War special service training', unpublished conference paper, *Waterloo to Desert Storm: new thinking on international conflict, 1815-1991*, Scottish Centre for War Studies, Glasgow University, 24-5 June. National Museums Scotland Research Repository <http://repository.nms.ac.uk/276/>. Accessed 10.1.11. The classic definition of the culture of a group is given by E. Schein, 2004. *Organisational Culture and Leadership*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass. The theory of subcultures is further developed in J. Martin, 2002. *Organisational Culture. Mapping the Terrain*. Thousand Oaks CA: Sage. A case study of counterculture within a large business organisation is J. Martin and C. Siehl, 1983. 'Organizational culture and counterculture: an uneasy symbiosis', *Organizational Dynamics*, 12(2), 52-64.

<sup>20</sup> For an essay with a different focus but similar aspirations see A. Jackson, 2009. 'The imperial antecedents of British special forces', *RUSI Journal*, 154 (3), 62-8.

an aspect of what Finlan called ‘a common transatlantic Special Forces culture’.<sup>21</sup> The events of 1940–1 with which *Commando Country* is principally concerned also stand out in this context, as this is the one period at which, as a matter of urgent necessity, British military thinking applied itself to irregular or guerrilla warfare from the perspective of the relatively weaker military force. It is in the nature of British military history that home-grown writing about irregular warfare has habitually had, and continues to have, the opposite perspective – the strategy of counterinsurgency applied from a position of relative military strength against a guerrilla enemy.

Summarised most recently by Alexander Alderson, much British professional military writing on guerrilla and irregular warfare therefore follows a pattern, running from Callwell's *Small Wars* of 1896 to the official studies and doctrine of the present day, whereby past experience in counter-insurgency is examined for the instruction of those engaged in current or imagined future conflicts.<sup>22</sup> In the classic international history of irregular warfare theory and practice, Walter Laqueur's *Guerrilla Warfare*, the British experience consequently takes its place only as a minor aspect of his study, and that largely in relation to this ‘colonial’ counterinsurgency context.<sup>23</sup> Even with a British historian’s perspective, Ian Beckett (2001) made only limited reference to British Second World War special service and raiding forces in constructing his historical synthesis of guerrilla warfare worldwide.<sup>24</sup> Both Laqueur and Beckett presented irregular warfare emerging as a challenge to orthodox military thought, Laqueur alluding to an in-built reluctance among nineteenth century European armies to consider the waging of guerrilla warfare, rather than the combating of it, as anything other than ‘a counsel of despair’.<sup>25</sup> That this remained true of the British position into the 1930s was indicated by the equivocal view taken of the published irregular warfare prescriptions of Colonel T. E. Lawrence, derived from his leadership of Arab irregulars in Arab Revolt of

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<sup>21</sup> A. Finlan, 2009. ‘The arrested development of UK special forces and the global war on terror’, *Review of International Studies*, 35, 971-82. For American reference to the British influence see, for example, M. Johnson, 2006. ‘The growing relevance of special operations forces in U.S. military strategy’, *Comparative Strategy*, 25, 273-96; and M. King, 1985. ‘Rangers: selected combat operations in World War II’, Leavenworth papers No.11. Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.

<sup>22</sup> A. Alderson, 2010. ‘Britain’, in T. Rid and T. Keaney. *Understanding Counterinsurgency. Doctrine, operations, challenges*. London: Routledge, 28-45; C. Callwell, 1899. *Small Wars. Their Principles and Practice*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. London: War Office.

<sup>23</sup> W. Laqueur, 1998. *Guerrilla Warfare. A Historical and Critical Study*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New Brunswick: Transaction.

<sup>24</sup> I. Beckett, 2001 *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies. Guerrillas and their Opponents since 1750*. London: Routledge, 55-6.

<sup>25</sup> W. Laqueur, 1998, 51.

1916–17.<sup>26</sup> Lawrence's military successes, his personal charisma and talent as a writer won him many admirers but, with the notable exception of the military theorist Basil Liddell-Hart, there were very few of them amongst those figures who directed or influenced British military planning.<sup>27</sup> Scepticism within the War Office over the merits of actively waging guerrilla and clandestine warfare, even against a guerrilla enemy, has also been noted in relation to operations in Palestine in 1936–9 and the hasty closing down of Major Orde Wingate's Special Night Squads amidst allegations of brutality.<sup>28</sup> The modest and peripheral pre-war status of research into guerrilla warfare doctrine within the War Office as late as 1938, as described in the first chapter of *Commando Country*, further illustrates the position.<sup>29</sup>

Post-war British professional military writing about the Second World War experience of waging and supporting irregular warfare is also sparse. An exception was one study by a serving officer, Lieutenant-Colonel C.N.M. Blair, produced by the Ministry of Defence as a restricted publication in 1957. This compared recent experience in counter-insurgency in Malaya with Second World War insurgencies supported by the Allies. The intention was to inform possible applications to a future major war in Europe, but such considerations apparently never emerged as a significant element in Cold War planning for a war of this kind.<sup>30</sup> The refashioning of the Commandos as amphibious assault infantry from 1942, the formal disbandment of the Army Commandos, Special Operations Executive and the SAS Regiment in 1945, were all indicators that the military establishment considered the circumstances of 1940–1 to have been an aberration. The link between works like *Commando Country* which deal with these circumstances, and studies of British special

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<sup>26</sup> T. E. Lawrence, 1997. *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom. The Complete 1922 Text*. Fordingbridge: Castle Hill Press. Laqueur also alludes, critically, to an essay on guerrilla warfare contributed by Lawrence to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1929, 14th ed., 950-3.

<sup>27</sup> B.H. Liddell Hart, 1934. *T.E. Lawrence in Arabia and After*. London: Cape. Liddell Hart later modified his views on the wider applicability of Lawrence's methods. See B. Reid, 1985. 'T.E. Lawrence and Liddell Hart', *History*, 70, 218-31. On attitudes to Lawrence in British military circles see J. Shy and T. Collier, 1986. 'Revolutionary war', in P. Paret ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy*. Oxford: Clarendon, 815-62.

<sup>28</sup> T. Jones, 2001, 13. See also C. Sykes, 1959. *Orde Wingate*. London: Collins, 141-56.

<sup>29</sup> See also M. Seaman, 2006. 'A new instrument of war', the origins of the Special Operations Executive', in M. Seaman, ed., *Special Operations Executive. A New Instrument of War*. London: Routledge, 7-21.

<sup>30</sup> C. Blair, 1957. *Guerrilla Warfare*. London: Ministry of Defence. Reprinted in 2005 by Naval and Military Press, Uckfield. Tim Jones has detected some activity on the part of the Secret Intelligence Service and the War Office in the late 1940s preparing 'stay-behind parties' to operate in the event of Soviet invasion, although official files on this matter remain closed. Jones considered this activity to be indicative of progress in overcoming British military orthodoxy. T. Jones, 1996. 'The British army and counter-guerrilla warfare in transition, 1944-52', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 7, 265-307.

forces in more recent conflicts, is that after 1945 British military planners chose to maintain a small special forces capability for counter-insurgency purposes.

How this was achieved, initially only narrowly, was detailed by Tim Jones' *Postwar Counterinsurgency and the SAS, 1945-1952* (2001), and Jones and others have carried forward the study of strategic and political aspects of counter-insurgency campaigns into the 1960s and 70s.<sup>31</sup> But the secrecy which necessarily surrounds this area of military activity means we must wait a little longer for definitive studies covering the special operations aspects of small wars and covert counter-terrorism activities of the later twentieth century, including detailed work on the tactical and cultural aspects of post-war special operations training.<sup>32</sup> Terry White's *Swords of Lightning* (1992) attempted something approaching this, but was of necessity based on unattributed information, secondary sources and recent articles in defence journals.<sup>33</sup> The study of British special forces training and culture therefore remains to a considerable degree the domain of the popular works and regimental histories, some of the best of which are found to be referenced in academic works on counterinsurgency.<sup>34</sup>

*Commando Country's* relationship to the popular histories of post-war 'elite forces' such as the Royal Marines Commandos is similarly explained by the manner in which the wartime British services establishment reacted to the emergence of unorthodox new special forces in their midst. This reaction was partly strategic, adapting the original raiding and covert roles towards larger-scale offensive operations to be conducted in greater integration with conventional forces. It was also partly cultural, socialising special service organisations into more orthodox military cultures, and institutionalising the idea of special training as a rite of passage denoting elite status.<sup>35</sup> Offensive commando warfare in this sense might have similar

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<sup>31</sup> T. Jones, 2001. *Post-war Counterinsurgency and the SAS, 1945-1952. A special kind of warfare*. London: Frank Cass. On the British counterinsurgency experience up to the late 1970s see T. Mockaitis, 1995. *British Counterinsurgency in the Post-Imperial Era*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, and the collected essays in I. Beckett ed., 2007. *Modern Counter-Insurgency*. Aldershot: Ashgate. John Newsinger has taken his study of the Northern Ireland conflict further, up to the ceasefires of the late 1990s. J. Newsinger, 2002. *British Counterinsurgency from Palestine to Northern Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

<sup>32</sup> Accounts of recent conflicts are characterised by reportage like C. Jennings, 2004. *Midnight in Some Burning Town. British Special Operations from Belgrade to Baghdad*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

<sup>33</sup> T. White, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Ian Beckett gives Tony Geraghty's regimental history of the SAS as a source for British special forces in the Second World War. I. Beckett, 2001, 68-9. T. Geraghty, 1980. *Who Dares Wins. The Story of the Special Air Service*. London: Arms & Armour Press.

<sup>35</sup> This reaction, and its consequences in the post-war era, is considered further in S. Allan, 2010. 'Individualism, exceptionalism and counter-culture in Second World War special service training'. Strategic theorist Colin S. Gray has also noted the gap between rigid ideas about elite

historical origins to covert special operations in post-war counterinsurgency campaigns, but the two are not the same thing, even if they are liable to be presented as such in the popular literature.<sup>36</sup> How successfully, and how quickly, the two strands evolved into what one U.S. historian and defence analyst described in 1983 as a 'mature British concept of commando warfare in conjunction with the operations of regular forces' is a matter for debate and further study.<sup>37</sup>

The history of early special service training is therefore at least as much about British and Allied adaptation to the unique circumstances of the Second World War strategic situation, as it is about the origins and ongoing history of special forces. Detailed study of military training during the Second World War is a subject which has suffered as something of a poor relation alongside the wealth of histories devoted to operations and studies of grand strategy. This is despite the fact that, as Hew Strachan has noted, 'training, rather than battle was the dominant experience of armies in the twentieth century'.<sup>38</sup> Timothy Harrison Place's *Military Training in the British Army, 1940-1944* (2000) stands out as an exception and occupies some similar ground to *Commando Country* in considering responses to the calamitous defeat of British forces in France and the Low Countries in the summer of 1940, tracing reform and development towards the successful invasion of western Europe four years later.<sup>39</sup>

Harrison Place's study is specifically concerned with the training doctrine and minor tactics of British infantry and armour and makes no reference to concurrent training developments in the new Combined Operations Command and special forces organisations. From the middle of 1941, as well as training Commandos and other special service troops, the Special Training Centre Lochailort was also training selected officers and non-commissioned officers from conventional infantry battalions as 'assault troops' with the purpose that they return to their own units to act as instructors. Although *Commando Country* touches on the contribution of the highland special training centres to the training programmes of the

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unit status and the state of mind he considers necessary for successful special operations. C. Gray, 1999. *Modern Strategy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 286-90.

<sup>36</sup> In seeking to deal with the whole picture, Terry White defined the two strands as 'Reconnaissance/Guerrilla Commando' and 'Assault Commando', T. White, 1992, 1-2. In more recent U.S. strategic studies parlance the terms 'special operations forces' and 'special forces' make a broadly similar distinction.

<sup>37</sup> D. Thomas, 1983. 'The importance of commando operations in modern warfare', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18(4), 689-717.

<sup>38</sup> H. Strachan, 2006. 'Training, morale and modern war', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 41(2), 211-227.

<sup>39</sup> T. Harrison Place, 2000. *Training in the British Army 1940-1944. From Dunkirk to D-Day*. London: Frank Cass.



conventional field army and the Home Guard, and gives detailed consideration to the purposes and operation of the Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre in particular, an assessment of how far innovation in special service training influenced the development of conventional military training has yet to be made. Harrison Place's supplementary detailed account of the growth of the Battle School system is likewise silent on the issue, and the absence of any contemporary reference to such influence might in itself be indicative of the distance between special service organisations and more conventional military structures.<sup>40</sup>

Whereas Harrison Place sought to relate doctrine and training practices to performance in the field by British infantry and armour in the north-west Europe campaign, this type of treatment is beyond the scope of *Commando Country*'s focus on special service training in the Scottish highlands. Because the highland training centres typically represented only one aspect of the training diet of a number of different military organisations with divergent operational roles, the research undertaken for *Commando Country* could only partially inform what would necessarily be a complex and wide-ranging overall assessment of operational effectiveness in British special service. Essential to the book's approach instead is the face of special service training as a cultural and moral instrument, used to test and enhance the mental and physical fitness of the individual and to define special service soldiers as a breed apart from their more conventional military counterparts. If, as Hew Strachan has argued, the main benefit of realistic combat training lay in enhancing self-confidence in battle, the principal value of special service training may have been in implanting, at individual level, self-belief in the distinctive attributes of the special service soldier as ideas about this evolved.<sup>41</sup> In its examination of special service training culture and organisation, *Commando Country* therefore sits in broadly similar territory to, for example, Jeremy Crang's (2000) work on the wartime British army as a social institution and as a functioning, changing organisation.<sup>42</sup> Valid comparisons might also be made with studies of the Home Guard, an organisation obliquely connected to special service by the shared strategic context of its origins and by its early interests in guerrilla warfare. The approach taken by S.P. MacKenzie's (1995) military and political history demonstrated how the political and cultural complexities of the Home Guard could be retrieved from behind the

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<sup>40</sup> T. Harrison Place, 2000. 'Lionel Wigram, battle drill and the British Army in the Second World War', *War in History*, 7(4), 442-62. See also B. Osborne, 2009. *The People's Army. The Home Guard in Scotland 1940-1944*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 114-9.

<sup>41</sup> H. Strachan, 2006.

<sup>42</sup> J. Crang, 2000. *The British Army and the People's War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

edifice of the organisation's place in British popular culture of the Second World War.<sup>43</sup> The same may be said of the Commandos and other special service organisations.

Because *Commando Country* is concerned with activity taking place on the British mainland during the Second World War, it bears some relation to recent work on the contemporary public understanding and popular memory of the 'Home Front' aspect of the war effort. Opened up by Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* (1990), recent studies of this subject have approached more critically the experiences of the British public during the crisis period of 1940–1 especially, in order to understand the abiding influence of sentiment and popular memory of this apparently shared experience which endured in post-war conceptions of national identity.<sup>44</sup> In *'We Can Take It!'* (2004) Mark Connelly identified the reputation of the Commandos as one plank of the popular national narrative of the Second World War, bracketing their glamorous image into one chapter of his study together with popular enthusiasm for prisoner-of-war escape stories. Both became part of what he terms 'the boy's own war', celebrated in wartime itself and continuing as a typical feature of popular culture thereafter,

The myths and legends of gallant prisoners of war making jokes at the expense of German guards, of Commandos armed to the teeth fighting like devils and then smiling cheekily to the camera are an essential part of our understanding of the Second World War.<sup>45</sup>

This popularity was not accidental, since the emergence of the Commandos into public consciousness was the result of an overt initiative in influencing British public opinion. Assessing the strength and value of popular and propaganda responses to the war situation at its nadir, Malcolm Smith's *Britain and 1940. History, Myth and Popular Memory* (2000) does not deal with special service specifically but summarised the larger story into which the birth of the Commandos was deliberately placed. Of the evacuation from Dunkirk he writes,

The escape of the army, even without its heavy weapons, gave Britain the chance to start again under a new national leadership, and the rot was stopped, firstly by 'the

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<sup>43</sup> S. MacKenzie, 1995. *The Home Guard. A Military and Political History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. The cover subtitle of the paperback edition is 'The real story of 'Dad's Army'', another example of scholarly work presented to the popular market.

<sup>44</sup> A. Calder, 1990. *The Myth of the Blitz*. London: Jonathan Cape; S. Rose, 2003. *Which People's War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; T. Ashplant, G. Darson and M. Piper, 2000. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. London: Routledge.

<sup>45</sup> M. Connelly, 2004. *'We can take it!' Britain and the Memory of the Second World War*. Harlow: Pearson Education. 228-47.

few' in the Battle of Britain, and secondly by 'the many' in the Blitz – and then the torch was handed back to the Army to carry at El Alamein and D-Day.<sup>46</sup>

Special service, and the creation of the Army Commandos in particular, was conceived by the Churchill government as an early step towards stopping the rot and was presented to the public in the light of a new beginning for the Army. From the outset, press reports of Commando preparations and, from 1941 newsreel footage of Commando raiding operations, deliberately presented the organisation playing that interim role, keeping the torch alight until major offensive operations were again possible.<sup>47</sup> As a fundamental of the idea of special service, Commando training acquired a place in that story. Training was specifically celebrated for its toughness for propaganda purposes as part of the Commando image in government publications, as in an official account of 1943,

..when they reach their Commando Units they are already hard men, physically and morally. They have need to be so, for the men they join are harder.<sup>48</sup>

This wartime representation carried through into the post-war literature of Commando training. The first published history of the Commandos, Hilary St. George Saunders' *The Green Beret* (1949), was essentially a celebration of the Commando ethos and record, carrying forth with considerable commercial success the image as it was already understood by the public.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, St George Saunders, a novelist and biographer, was identified as the anonymous author of wartime publications for the Ministry of Information, including the one quoted above.<sup>50</sup> He accorded an early chapter in *The Green Beret* to formation and training, in which the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry loomed large, by which he stressed the centrality of training to the whole enterprise,

The Commando soldier differed in no way from his brother in arms elsewhere save in his own chosen status, and in the intensity of his training, not in its quality...He who underwent the training held the implicit belief in his own powers, and a determination that his limit of endurance should always be a little higher, a little stronger than that of his enemy.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> M. Smith, 2000. *Britain and 1940. History, Myth and Popular Memory*. London: Routledge, 7.

<sup>47</sup> For example, *Lofoten*, 1941. Army Film Unit. Imperial War Museum Film and Video Archive, KY 277.

<sup>48</sup> Ministry of Information, 1943, *Combined Operations 1940-42*. London: HMSO, 14.

<sup>49</sup> H. St. George Saunders, 1949. *The Green Beret. The Story of the Commandos 1939-45*. London: Michael Joseph.

<sup>50</sup> *Life* magazine, a U.S. publication, profiled St. George Saunders' work and quoted from *Combined Operations 1940-1942. Life*, 24 May 1943, 79-80, 82.

<sup>51</sup> H. St. George Saunders, 1949, 40-1.

St. George Saunders presented the moral foundation of special training much as it was viewed by Combined Operations Command in the later years of the war. As *Commando Country* notes, this version of the Commando image was the government approved one, somewhat sanitised and removed from the tenor of Churchill's original demand for 'specially trained troops of the hunter class who can develop a reign of terror...' <sup>52</sup>

*The Green Beret* sold copiously and ran to several editions, but the Achnacarry culture that it summarised as part of the overall Commando story was yet to find its classic voice. Former Commando training instructor Donald Gilchrist supplied it with his 1960 Achnacarry memoir *Castle Commando*, fashioned as something of a romp of humorous anecdotes recalling the encounters of trainees with the character and regime of Achnacarry commanding officer Colonel Charles Vaughan and with the Scottish highland environment. <sup>53</sup> As well as being entertaining, Gilchrist achieved a measure of poignancy and a strong sense of authenticity through his personal experience and insight. Its insouciant tone and air of self-satire were firmly in tune with the popular status still being enjoyed by the Commandos twenty years on from their creation, representing what Mark Connelly called 'the embodiment of national characteristics and spirit that got Britain through the dark days.' <sup>54</sup>

Despite war memoirs having rather fallen from fashion by 1960, *Castle Commando* was a minor commercial success. This essentially Scottish publication had its third reprint as recently as 2005. The publication of this and the previous edition in Lochaber are indicative of the book's longevity in relation to local tourist interest and public commemorations at the Commando Memorial at Spean Bridge, close to Achnacarry. Gilchrist fixed the template for how Commando training in the highlands has since been remembered and articulated both in popular interpretation – including in Scotland with the 1995 Scottish Television series and book *Scotland's War* – and to a noticeable degree (in the present author's experience) by veterans. <sup>55</sup> In a sense, the collected lore of Gilchrist's book was something that the present author had to confront, and make broader sense of in *Commando Country*. In order to delineate the highland special training culture overall, the present author shifted the focus away from the behemoth of Gilchrist's Achnacarry to the earlier enterprise at Inverailort.

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<sup>52</sup> *Commando Country*, 84.

<sup>53</sup> D. Gilchrist, 1960. *Castle Commando*. Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd.

<sup>54</sup> M. Connelly, 2004, 227.

<sup>55</sup> S. Robertson and L. Wilson, 1995. *Scotland's War*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 139-46. Commando training also featured in one contribution to I. MacDougall, 1995. *Voices from War. Personal recollections of war in our century by Scottish men and women*. Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 208-59.

That something of the tone of Gilchrist came through in veteran reminiscences elicited during fieldwork, and therefore emerged in turn in *Commando Country*, might in a straightforward sense indicate that Gilchrist successfully captured something of the true flavour of the training culture as it operated at Achnacarry at least. The caveats around cultural influences on individual memory will be considered in section 4 below.

Forty years after Gilchrist, a second Achnacarry training instructor published his account of Commando training. James Dunning's *It Had to be Tough* (2000) shared some common assumptions and language with St. George Saunders and with Gilchrist, but set about recording a fuller picture of the developing content and structure of the training regime.<sup>56</sup> Dunning was the first to acknowledge the link between the Special Training Centre Lochailort, where he himself had been trained, and the content of the Achnacarry syllabus which he later taught. Indeed, his brief treatment of the background to the first developments at Inverailort pointed the way for the present author's research into the origins of the earlier training establishment. This valuable memoir-cum-history largely retained the perspective of the history of the Commandos alone, and Dunning has since added his own contribution to the numerous histories of individual wartime Commando units that continue to appear. Together with individual memoirs, and the work on Commando organisational and operational history by former Royal Military Academy historian Charles Messenger, these books offer a reasonably solid corpus of literature tracing the linear development of the Commandos within traditional military history parameters.<sup>57</sup>

Largely separate from the Commando genre is the literature on Special Operations Executive (SOE), a body of work in which special training adapted for the new organisation's needs also features. The progress of SOE history looks rather different to that of the Commandos, since SOE was a secret organisation and therefore had no profile in wartime government propaganda or popular consciousness. Cabinet Office official historian Mark Seaman has related the development of secondary literature about SOE to government policy on the release of official information, a subject which will be considered in relation to *Commando Country*'s use of primary sources in section 4 below. Seaman noted that despite efforts at censorship, public interest post-1945 was aroused by information emerging in the form of

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<sup>56</sup> J. Dunning, 2000. *It Had to Be Tough. The fascinating story of the origins of the Commandos and their special training in World War II.* Durham: Pentland Press.

<sup>57</sup> J. Dunning, 2003. *The Fighting Fourth. No.4 Commando at War.* Stroud: Sutton Publishing; C. Messenger, 1985. *The Commandos.* London: William Kimber; C. Messenger, 1988. *The Middle East Commandos.* London: William Kimber. Broader accounts of Combined Operations Command complete the picture, for example B. Ferguson, 1961. *The Watery Maze. The Story of Combined Operations.* London: Collins.

the publication of personal accounts by individual SOE agents and staff officers, some of which strayed into sensationalism particularly in relation to female agents, and by press speculation and public controversy over allegations about mishandled operations.<sup>58</sup>

The government eventually responded by commissioning official histories for publication, the first of which, M. R. D. Foot's *SOE in France* (1966) benefited from the author's doubly accredited status as a former Intelligence officer and established academic historian.<sup>59</sup>

Describing the functions and purposes of SOE, Foot set out the three-part structure of the organisation's approach to training, including the paramilitary training conducted in the Scottish highlands, as a prelude to a fuller treatment of strategy and operations.<sup>60</sup> His later works, for which he had greater access to official records, gave further consideration to the overall training regime, extending to a full transcription of one of MI(R)'s pre-war guerrilla warfare training instructions as an appendix (without close connection to the overall narrative), a document referenced in the original in *Commando Country* as guidance available to the original officers at Inverailort. Foot maintained a connection between his academic work and more popular interest, as represented by his *Special Operations Executive* (1984), a summary that accompanied a BBC television series of the same name. Initially dominated by Foot's work, the SOE field was opened up gradually from the 1980s as a degree of relaxation over official information made available to accredited historians occurred. Further official and unofficial histories of SOE country sections and operations in different theatres appeared and these were of some value in relation to *Commando Country* in connecting SOE training organisation to strategic and operational requirements.<sup>61</sup>

SOE paramilitary training itself was the particular remit of two related works, both of which were concerned with the organisation's special training centre in Canada. David Stafford's *Camp X, SOE and the American Connection* (1987) developed his earlier broader work on British relations with resistance movements in occupied Europe.<sup>62</sup> In considering the wider implications of the dissemination of training ideas, in this case between SOE and the

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<sup>58</sup> M. Seaman, 2005. 'A glass half full – some thoughts on the evolution of the study of Special Operations Executive', *Intelligence and National Security*, 20 (1), 27-43. See also J. Pattison, 2007. *Behind Enemy Lines. Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

<sup>59</sup> Foot nevertheless had limits placed on his research by his official sponsors, and the results were controversial. M.R.D. Foot, 2008. *Memories of an SOE Historian*. Barnsley: Pen and Sword Military Books.

<sup>60</sup> M.R.D. Foot, 1966. *SOE in France*. London, HMSO.

<sup>61</sup> C. Cruickshank, 1986. *SOE in Scandinavia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; C. MacDonald, 1985. *The Killing of SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich*. London: Macmillan.

<sup>62</sup> D. Stafford, 1987. *Camp X. SOE and the American Connection*. London: Viking.

American Office of Strategic Services, Stafford's Camp X book would influence the approach taken by the present author in *Commando Country*. *SOE Syllabus*, published in 2001 by the Public Record Office (now The National Archives) presented a straightforward transcription of the original Camp X syllabus, the fullest surviving record of the teaching at an SOE paramilitary training establishment.<sup>63</sup> This transcription, with an introductory essay by Denis Rigden describing the overall structures of SOE training, was one of series of SOE-related books produced by the Public Record Office in response to the staggered release of the official records into the public domain. These reflected the continuing viability of the market for 'secret war' information, following what Mark Seaman recalled as 'media frenzy' around each release of records.<sup>64</sup> The publication of *SOE Syllabus* was broadly contiguous with that of a previously restricted official history of the whole organisation, William Mackenzie's *The Secret History of SOE*, and a further wave of popular output that included the opening of the *Secret War* exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, new fictional representation in the film adaptation of Sebastian Faulks' SOE novel *Charlotte Gray*, and the publication of David Stafford's *Secret Agent*, an accompaniment to the second BBC television series about SOE.<sup>65</sup>

SOE continues to exert as strong an attraction for serious historians as it does for the popular end of the spectrum. Much work was ongoing in the period that *Commando Country* was researched and published, aided by access to a greater range of official documents than had previously been possible.<sup>66</sup> Among these were two books which concerned themselves in passing with the highland training schools, Juliette Pattison's (2007) work on female agents, and Christopher Murphy's (2006) book on the relationship between SOE and the more established security and intelligence agencies which described the function of the SOE holding establishment at Inverlair.<sup>67</sup> Reference should also be made to one amateur historian's study of SOE paramilitary training in the west highlands, a booklet privately printed in 2000 by David Harrison and sold locally at Arisaig. Although limited in its scope,

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<sup>63</sup> [Public Record Office], 2001. *SOE Syllabus. Lessons in Ungentlemanly Warfare*. London: Public Record Office.

<sup>64</sup> M. Seaman, 2005.

<sup>65</sup> W. Mackenzie, 2000. *The Secret History of SOE: the Special Operations Executive 1940-45*. London: St. Ermin's Press; Warner Bros, 2001. *Charlotte Gray*; S. Faulks, 1998. *Charlotte Gray*. London: Hutchinson; D. Stafford, 2000. *Secret Agent. The True Story of the Special Operations Executive*. London: BBC Worldwide.

<sup>66</sup> See for example M. Seaman ed., 2006. *Special Operations Executive. A New instrument of War*. London: Routledge. The papers in this collection were revisions of earlier (1998) papers supplemented by further research in official files not previously available.

<sup>67</sup> J. Pattison, 2007. *Behind Enemy Lines. Gender, Passing and the Special Operations Executive in the Second World War*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; C. Murphy, 2006. *Security and Special Operations. SOE and MI5 during the Second World War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.

this useful assemblage shared some objectives with *Commando Country* in focussing on aspects of the paramilitary training experience in the area. It included information obtained from one respondent also interviewed by the present author, as well as a unique contribution from a former Czechoslovak officer who served at the Arisaig/Morar paramilitary schools.<sup>68</sup>

In attempting to bridge a gap between the history of SOE and that of the Commandos, and treating together their developing political and strategic contexts, *Commando Country* could readily work across the close physical and cultural proximity of the training centres in the Scottish highlands. It may be that there remains scope for further comparative studies relating to training cultures across special service and intelligence organisations, which might attempt a wider reach than that of *Commando Country*, or which might explore the extent of cross-fertilisation between training deemed 'special' and the overall development of British military training and doctrine through the Second World War. Much of the training curriculum described in *Commando Country* was intended for application in the European theatre of war. There were, however, other places where the paths of SOE, the Commandos, and the SAS crossed, notably in the Middle East. Indeed, two fieldwork respondents interviewed about their experience of special service training in Scotland went on to further special training and operational service in this arena.<sup>69</sup>

Cairo in the early years of the Second World War has been described as 'an alphabet soup of secret organisations'.<sup>70</sup> While co-ordination was not a characteristic of their activities, training for the Middle East Commandos, the SAS and SOE was being run in the Kabrit area of Suez in proximity to training schools for combined operations and regular forces.<sup>71</sup> An even more fluid picture may be discerned in South and South-East Asia, where SOE and new special formations like the Chindits were preparing for operations while regular forces

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<sup>68</sup> D. Harrison ed., c.2000. *Special Operations Executive. Para-military Training in Scotland during World War 2*. Private publication.

<sup>69</sup> See D. Allardice, c.2003. 'Friendship in a time of war', unpublished typescript, National Museums Scotland Library 220919; J. Mackay, c.2007. 'My part in the downfall of Hitler or how I married a Hungarian girl in Germany', National Museums Scotland Library 116280.

<sup>70</sup> N. West, 1992. *Secret War. The Story of SOE, Britain's Wartime Sabotage Organisation*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 55-56. The complexities of SOE activities in the Middle East theatre have as yet been less well served by historians, but a sound beginning was offered by S. Kelly, 2005. 'A succession of crises: SOE in the Middle East', *Intelligence and National Security* 20 (1), 121-46. An internal official history, recently published, is light on the subject of training. [The National Archives], 2008. *Special Forces in the Desert War, 1940-43*. London: The National Archives.

<sup>71</sup> A schedule from the Commando training centre at Geneifa from late 1940 is included as an appendix to C. Messenger, 1988, 135. Further study might extend to other specialist schools like SOE's Special Training Centre 102 near Haifa, Palestine, a number of parachute schools additional to that operating at Kabrit, and to the Middle East Mountain Warfare Training Centre at the Cedars, Lebanon.



simultaneously developed their own initiatives in jungle training.<sup>72</sup> As noted in *Commando Country*, there were connections to the first days at Inverailort, in the persons of original instructors Freddy Spencer Chapman who became a moving force in SOE preparations and training in Malaya, and Michael Calvert who was a key figure in the early history of the Chindits.<sup>73</sup> Special service organisations in these theatres improvised and developed practice at something of a remove from the home version, and their histories might repay comparative treatment.

In order to place *Commando Country* in its present historiographical context, this brief review of the relevant literature includes works which were published subsequently to *Commando Country* (2007). A bibliography for *Commando Country* was prepared for publication in 2007 but, for editorial and cost reasons, was not included in the published version of the book. The original bibliography is given as an appendix to this review.

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<sup>72</sup> Much as for the training of special forces in the United Kingdom, reference in the (limited) historiography to special training centres in South and South-East Asia is largely incidental and scattered through memoirs and accounts of different organisations and operations such as those of SOE's Force 136 and of the Chindits. See also J. Cross, 1989. *Jungle Warfare. Experience and Encounters*. London: Arms & Armour Press.

<sup>73</sup> *Commando Country*, 76-7.

### 3 Research strategy and fieldwork

Born of an exhibition idea, the research strategy for *Commando Country* reflected the requirement to collect exhibits, illustrative and interpretive material, as well as documentary information, about the Commandos and Scotland. This work was begun in consultation and collaboration with senior colleague Allan Carswell and directed towards forming a pool of content, including loan material, from which an exhibition could be created for a museum audience, and to accruing material for permanent preservation in the national collection. But the purpose of research from the beginning was also to form a basis of knowledge upon which interpretation through exhibition and publication might be built. At the point of re-starting the project in late 2005 and defining its concept as a study of the special training centres, the author focussed more closely on the objective of a research publication and on work in documentary sources. The nature of the evidence sought and assessed was refined by the author in the formulation of research questions through which to address the subject:

- 1 What were the origins, organisational contexts and purposes of each of the highland special training centres?
- 2 What was contained in the syllabus, who were the instructors and who was being trained at each centre?
- 3 What was the nature of the training experience? How was it understood, remembered and commemorated?
- 4 What relationship was there between the Scottish highland environment and the practice and culture of the training centres?

With questions (3) and (4) being of a qualitative nature, concerned with culture and personal experience, it was recognised that research in formally documented information, in the form of official military records, would only partly inform such a study and that other forms of evidence would continue to constitute a fundamental element of the research. Therefore, in conjunction with a review of secondary literature and research into documentary sources in official files, the programme of exhibition fieldwork was reviewed and renewed.

From the outset in 2001, the collection of evidence was pursued by contacting organisations and individuals that were thought likely to hold relevant material or to have contacts to those individuals who might. This deliberate ‘snowballing’ approach began with some obvious organisational points of contact: the Commando Association – a (now defunct) veterans’

social organisation; the SOE Adviser at the Foreign & Commonwealth Office – a civil service post that has since been discontinued following the final release of SOE files into the public domain; and the SAS Regimental Association. Obtaining the confidence of these parties as to the credentials and purposes of the project brought forth contacts and facilitated direct approaches to surviving individual veterans and to the families of deceased individuals identified as potential sources of information. The landed and aristocratic background of prominent figures in the early history of special service made the tracing of certain key individuals and families relatively straightforward and, again, the assistance of these parties having been offered, further contacts were forthcoming. The field was widened by placing appeals in selected publications: local newspapers in the relevant areas, the serials, newsletters and notice boards of military associations such as the Guards Magazine and the Special Forces Club in London. Reflecting the wider scope of the research, certain non-military organisations such as the Alpine Club in London and the Scottish Mountaineering Club were also approached.

Simultaneously, approaches were made to peer institutions the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and the National Army Museum (NAM), and to other museums where existing collection holdings and staff expertise helped to further research and identify exhibition loan content, most notably from NAM holdings relating to the Army Commando and IWM collections relating to SOE.<sup>74</sup> A survey of smaller Scottish military museums yielded some material on Commando volunteers, while local semi-public historical collections such as the Clan Cameron Museum at Achnacarry and the Commando Exhibition at the Spean Bridge Hotel were also assessed.<sup>75</sup> Later in the project, the search extended beyond customary military collection resources into such repositories as the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge University which held information concerning the polar explorers who served as training centre personnel. As the pattern of findings emerged, the author targeted Norwegian and Polish contacts and sources through the agency of the Norwegian Resistance Museum, the *Lingeklubben* special forces club in Oslo, and the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London. The focus on these nations reflected the fact that in wartime they maintained for a period dedicated training and depot establishments in Scotland. Although within the compass of SOE, these operated with some degree of autonomy under the supervision of

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<sup>74</sup> On the Imperial War Museum and SOE, see M. Seaman, 2005. The National Army Museum built artefact and documentary collections towards realising its 1986-7 exhibition *Raiders. The Story of the Army Commandos 1940-1946*.

<sup>75</sup> The Commando Exhibition at the Spean Bridge Hotel is privately owned by the hotel proprietors and was created with the assistance of the Commando Association.

their respective governments in exile in London which also maintained substantial conventional armed forces presences in the UK.<sup>76</sup>

*Commando Country* is as much about places as it is about people, and site visits were made by the author to the relevant locations. These visits, and contacts with property owners, enhanced understanding of the training environment and in certain instances permitted comparison between testimonial evidence and the lie of the land. In the case of the Special Training Centre Lochailort at Inverailort, this permitted an attempt at sketch mapping the training facility but in the case of smaller SOE establishments the evidence from documentary and testimonial sources was too fragmentary to permit something similar.<sup>77</sup> Site information was also obtained from archive sources held at the National Archives of Scotland, the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland and, in relation to the requisitioning of and depredations upon the Inverailort estate, from family papers held by Highland Council Archives. Local knowledge also produced one valuable primary source, the wartime guest book of the Lochailort Inn, the signatories to which gave useful confirmation of the presence of certain individuals involved in, or observing, the development of the training at Inverailort.<sup>78</sup>

One option available to the author was the active pursuit of oral tradition about the training centres among present-day residents in the relevant localities. This kind of information proved limited and sketchy as a source, being only a minor strand of intertwined local stories about the war years.<sup>79</sup> That there was social contact between training centre personnel and local communities in 1940–5 was inevitable, and indeed this was reflected in the recollections of serving personnel, but, for security reasons, local people were to the greatest degree possible excluded from the military activity taking place around them and contact between civilians and military personnel, and indeed among military personnel, was strictly

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<sup>76</sup> This was also true of the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS), but the brief OSS occupation of highland properties came in 1944-5, late in the context of the training developments studied.

<sup>77</sup> A sketch map for the Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry was previously compiled by former instructor James Dunning and produced as a 'Commando Trail' leaflet by Lochaber Limited, Fort William and Lochaber Tourism Limited and Lochaber District Council, n.d. [c1998].

<sup>78</sup> Guest books of the Lochailort Inn, courtesy of Ms A.M. Keenan and Mr R. Mungin, Roshven.

<sup>79</sup> A position somewhere between the military and civilian perspectives was represented in *Commando Country* research by the contribution of Mr T. O'Donovan, who was resident locally as a child while his father served on the staff at Inverailort. One contribution compiled by David Harrison recorded first-hand memories of a local family directly affected, displaced by the requisitioning of the property they occupied. 'War time diary in Arisaig', in D. Harrison, ed., c2000. *Special Operations Executive. Para-Military Training in Scotland during World War 2*. Private publication.

controlled and monitored.<sup>80</sup> The separation was also inherited. As will be considered further in section 5 below, the setting of the training was within the rather distinct spatial and social milieu of the highland sporting estate, a form of land-holding where the absence of people was one defining characteristic. This was in essence a private realm, one that interacted with local community life but which was not fully integrated with it. Temporarily replacing the sporting guests and clients that frequented the estates in peacetime, soldiers in training were not the first outsiders to range there at the behest of distant masters.<sup>81</sup>

While local knowledge was useful to the study, particularly in relation to the history of built properties, the author took the decision to concentrate testimonial evidence-gathering on the accounts of instructors, trainees and other serving military personnel.<sup>82</sup> Where local civilian testimony was used in the book, it was in the form of information that could be attributed directly to the original source as opposed to the re-telling of inherited local memory. Where it did exist, oral tradition was found to be less verifiable and potentially less reliable. One wayward example was a local tradition that the SOE establishment at Inverlair had housed Rudolf Hess at some stage in his captivity following his flight to Scotland as a self-appointed peace emissary in May 1941. This tale, repeated in the national press in 1995, perhaps reflected a conflation of a well-known aspect of the 'secret war' in Scotland with the knowledge that something of a secret nature had taken place at Inverlair.<sup>83</sup>

The scope of fieldwork was further limited by project deadlines, although information continued to come in subsequent to publication. More significantly, natural limits on the evidence available were conditioned by what, and by who, survived. If one leaves aside the

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<sup>80</sup> Papers of Major A.A. Fyffe, private collection.

<sup>81</sup> The restriction of social access to hunting, and to ground reserved for it, was a feature of hunting in many cultures, including that of the British imperial era. J. Mackenzie, 1988. *The Empire of Nature. Hunting, Conservation and British Imperialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. The historical background to the economic and social relationship between the sporting estates and highland communities is set out in W. Orr, 1982. *Deer Forests, Landlords and Crofters. The Western Highlands in Victorian and Edwardian Times*. Edinburgh: John Donald, 90-141.

<sup>82</sup> If this represents a manifestation of what Timothy Ashplant calls the 'privileging of veteran memory', it was an approach that reflected the intention of the *Commando Country* project to explore the nature of a particular kind of military activity rather than to present a local or regional study of war experience. T. Ashplant, G. Dawson, and M. Piper, 2000. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. London: Routledge, 51.

<sup>83</sup> 'Lochaber's Secret Army', *The Scotsman*, 6 May 1995. The persistence of the Hess story brought forth a scathing response from the former Inverlair commandant interviewed by the author. Even in entertaining the raft of conspiracy theories surrounding the Hess flight, there appears to be no reason to doubt the recorded sequence of Hess's movements in the UK, for which see R. Nesbit and G. Van Acker, 1999. *The Flight of Rudolf Hess. Myths and Reality*. Stroud: Sutton. A similar story has attached itself to Cultybraggan prisoner-or-war camp near Dunkeld, another high-security establishment with no factual Hess connection.

greater proportion of trainees who underwent the more standardised versions of Commando training in the years 1943–5, then highland special training was an enterprise that only involved a few thousand people at most. The focus of research on the earliest phases in 1940 related to the experience of only hundreds, with apparently little more than a handful of key players in the first days. In seeking information through the written and oral testimony of participants, the research strategy was less a sifting and selection process than a search and recruitment exercise. The narrowness of the field was indicated by the fact that three of the author's SOE respondents had previously been interviewed, or were subsequently interviewed, about their broader war service by the Imperial War Museum as part of that institution's efforts to collect SOE sources of all kinds.<sup>84</sup>

Conducting fieldwork at more than 60 years' distance from the events concerned, the author felt fortunate to have had the opportunity to interview in person, amongst others, two former instructors at Inverailort, two Inverailort trainees of 1940, an original Commando volunteer who trained on the Isle of Arran in 1940, an SOE paramilitary school instructor, an SOE paramilitary school commandant, and such outstanding SOE trainees as Knut Haugland of the Norwegian *Kompani Linge*, who in retirement was still a celebrated national figure in Norway.<sup>85</sup> With very few exceptions, those respondents who kindly assisted the author are now (in 2011) deceased, indicating that fieldwork was conducted at the outward limit of availability of evidence of this kind. Two Second World War veterans' organisations that assisted with the furtherance of the project, namely the Commando Association and the Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre Association, were wound up shortly after its completion due to dwindling numbers and the advanced age of surviving members.

In the course of fieldwork over the whole period of the project the author corresponded with, met and interviewed numerous private individuals with personal experience of the highland training centres and their parent organisations. Close family members of deceased individuals with similar experience also provided information, and gave access to unpublished memoirs.<sup>86</sup> From among the former, five selected individuals gave formal recorded interviews conducted by the author, either as sound recordings or, in two instances, as film and sound recordings. Excerpts from the recorded interviews featured as audio-visual

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<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Imperial War Museum, 1988. *The Special Operations Executive. Sound Archive Oral History Recordings*. London: Trustees of the Imperial War Museum. Further interviews have been added to this resource since publication.

<sup>85</sup> A Mackinnon, Sir Thomas Macpherson of Biallid, Major R.F. Hall, A.R.H. Kellas, John S. Mackay, Lieutenant-Colonel E.H. Van Maurik, Major A.A. Fyffe, Knut Haugland.

<sup>86</sup> Individuals and organisations are listed in the acknowledgements pages of *Commando Country*. See also the original bibliography included as an appendix to this review.

content in the *Commando Country* exhibition, and recorded interviews were transcribed in total for research and archiving purposes. The focus of the project and the survival factor precluded the sort of systematic representative or stratified sampling approach that a broader or more recent topic might have allowed, but selection of respondents for formal interview was intended to reflect different perspectives – that of the instructor and the trainee – and key locations.<sup>87</sup> Communication with correspondents and interview respondents did not follow a rigid format, but was adapted according to the capacity and context in which each respondent experienced the training system. Questioning typically explored the respondent's reasons for volunteering for special service, descriptions of the training taught or undergone, recollections of instructors and other trainees, responses to the highland environment and attitudes towards it expressed by the respondent's fellows. Wherever possible, further evidence in the form of written memoirs, photographs and artefacts was acquired for the collection, borrowed, or copied from the individuals consulted.

The final phase of work involved a period of intensive research in archival sources. The strengths and weaknesses of this and other types of source will be discussed in section 4 below, but the official documented information which survives was sufficient not only to test understanding around the organisational context, purpose and practice of the training centres (research questions 1 and 2) but was a means of assessing and corroborating more qualitative information gathered through fieldwork.

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<sup>87</sup> Options around sampling and selecting for oral history are considered in M. Larson, 2006. 'Research Design and Strategies', in T. Charlton, L. Myers, and R. Sharpless, eds. 2006. *Handbook of Oral History*. Oxford: Almira, 105-31. Larson acknowledged the place of 'snowballing' when applied with the intention of obtaining as representative a sample as possible, but emphasised that it is less statistically sound than more systematic stratified sampling.

#### 4 Sources and interpretation

Documentary evidence relating to the development and operation of the highland special training centres is preserved in British official military files in the National Archives, principally amongst the records of the relevant military directorates at the War Office, the records of Combined Operations Headquarters, and the records of SOE and its predecessors including MI(R).<sup>88</sup> With the exception of SOE papers, these formed part of the bulk of official records of the Second World War released into the public domain in 1972.<sup>89</sup> The records tend to be concerned largely with policy and direction at high command, directorate and headquarters level. Minor administrative records, such as those that would have been generated in the running of individual special training centres, did not in the main survive the process of selection for permanent preservation.<sup>90</sup> The process of record destruction perhaps represents a greater obstacle to researchers interested in military training than it does to the more conventional study of military operations, the preservation of detailed information regarding the latter on the grounds of historical value being more likely. Policy documents at higher command level, together with the war diaries of individual special service and home forces units, did nevertheless provide the means of tracking the development of the training centres in relation to the strategic context.

The records of SOE were preserved, or otherwise, under a different system proceeding from the organisation's separate, and temporary, existence as an independent government agency responsible to the Minister for Economic Warfare. The record preservation outcome was not substantially less selective and destructive than was the case with military records. A series of initiatives to rationalise and reduce SOE paperwork, both in the lead up to agency's closure in 1945 and in the years following, took a heavy toll on the survival and coherence of documentary information. In describing the overall state of the SOE archive passed over to the Public Record Office (now The National Archives) in a series of releases from 1993, the last SOE Adviser Duncan Stuart referred to an estimate that 87% of SOE records were destroyed between 1945 and 1950. Commenting on an institutional bias against keeping inessential papers, common to most secret services, Stuart went on to note,

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<sup>88</sup> These and other documentary sources are listed in the original (unpublished) bibliography to *Commando Country*, given as an appendix to this review.

<sup>89</sup> J. Cantwell, 1993. *The Second World War. A Guide to Documents in the Public Record Office*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: HMSO.

<sup>90</sup> For the War Office rules that governed the elimination of routine administrative records of military units and formations see. M. Roper, 1998. *The Records of the War Office and related departments 1660-1964*. London: Public Record Office, 284-7.



...there were known end-of-War bonfires of virtually all the records of the British Security Organisation in New York (carried out at Camp X in Canada) *and of the Special Training Schools in the UK.*<sup>91</sup>

Although this situation represented an obstacle to research into the finer detail of training practices, surviving official files nevertheless included documents that gave a necessary factual basis for *Commando Country* research, supplying hard information relative to the establishment of individual training centres. These included original pre-war MI(R) guerrilla warfare training pamphlets, the first general orders for Commando training in 1940, and unpublished official historical summaries such as that of Commando training in Scotland written at Combined Operations Headquarters at the end of the war, and that of SOE's Training Section which included statistical information on the overall scale and spread of the enterprise.<sup>92</sup> In the case of SOE, the files of the relevant Country Sections (e.g. Polish, Scandinavian, Czechoslovak) contained some useful information specific to the administration of individual training centres or groups thereof.

The records preserved at the National Archives fortunately were not the only source of relevant official military documents. Reflecting different practices in preservation of records by Allied governments, more detailed information about the administration and activity of special training centres on British soil was to be found in overseas archives, including material in Norwegian, Polish and U.S. collections. Significantly, official material was also found in a number of collections originally preserved by individual officers and veterans' organisations. Some of these remained in private collections, others had been donated later to public archives. It was from these sources that much detail was obtained as to the content of the training syllabuses, along with evidence as to other key issues such the sequence and timing whereby highland properties were requisitioned. The fact that individual officers chose to preserve training material of a kind that was largely discarded from the official record created a vital research asset. Its existence reflected the extent to which training dominated the thoughts and activity of those individuals involved in shaping the development of special service at unit level.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> D. Stuart, 2005. 'Of historical interest only'; the origins and vicissitudes of the SOE Archive', *Intelligence and National Security*. 20 (1), 14-26. Present author's italics. In a later, slightly modified version of this paper, in M. Seaman, ed., 2006, Stuart modified this sentence to read '...and of the records of the *Beaulieu* Training Schools' (present author's italics), referring to the SOE training establishments in Hampshire. The implications for the survival of the records of the paramilitary special training schools in Scotland are much the same.

<sup>92</sup> All quoted and referenced in *Commando Country*.

<sup>93</sup> Those who preserved original training material in this way ranged from influential senior Commando officers like Major-General Sir Robert Laycock, to relatively minor figures like 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant ARH Kellas of No. 10 Independent Company.

A salient, and indeed crucial, example of this was the content of the papers of General Sir Hugh Stockwell, who in 1941 as a Lieutenant-Colonel commanded the Special Training Centre Lochailort. It was in Stockwell's collection that the earliest training schedules from Inverailort were located, one of which referred to having been copied in part from notes written by the original instructors in June 1940.<sup>94</sup> The fact that Stockwell kept this material, and later donated it to a public collection, was not a casual act or merely a piece of good luck for the author. Stockwell's papers reflected a career in which both in conventional military employment and, briefly, special service, his developing ideas about training were of ongoing professional importance. As a memorandum quoted in *Commando Country* demonstrates, in the crisis period of 1940 Stockwell was pressing for a review of training in the army as a whole as a matter of urgency.<sup>95</sup> Attention to training at a strategic as well as a tactical level would prove to be characteristic of his whole career.<sup>96</sup> In the case of Stockwell and others, the papers they preserved demonstrated that training was a matter of importance to them, not only in day-to-day matters but representing something that, with the benefit of hindsight, remained significant in relation to their war service as a whole, or indeed to a military career of greater duration. For military officers involved in special training, its content and evolution represented much more than routine administration, and by their own judgements over the historical value of information they partially offset the destruction wrought in the preservation practices of the official record.

Official files and administrative records found to have survived in scattered collections therefore yielded much regarding the organisational context and purposes of the training centres (research question 1) and about the relationships between the syllabuses taught at different centres to different trainees (research question 2). But the questions of origins, experience, culture and environment required a broader approach involving testimonial sources of different kinds. Memoirs, published and unpublished, were an important tool to the more qualitative aspects of the research, which aspired to building an understanding of the inside story of the training centres. Albeit intended for different audiences, and written at different removes of time from the experiences described, these memoirs were broadly of a similar character in tending to deal with the subject of the special training centres as but one

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<sup>94</sup> Stockwell collection 3/10, Trustees of the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, King's College, London. No earlier syllabuses are known to exist and this reference to earlier training notes might indicate that the keeping of records at the earliest stages was haphazard.

<sup>95</sup> *Commando Country*, 69-70.

<sup>96</sup> See J. Riley, 2006. *The Life & Campaigns of General Hughie Stockwell. From Norway through Burma to Suez*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military.

phase in a chronological narrative of the individual's war service, or indeed life to that point, building towards the account of operational service, and viewing the experience from the individual's own standpoint as a record of his or her own contribution.

In dealing with sources of this kind, consideration of the nature of narrative memoir is a necessary discipline for the historian, and for the military historian in particular given the ubiquity of the war memoir as a genre.<sup>97</sup> Created at distances of time and place from the experiences they describe, written memoirs are typically the product of reflection. They entail the shaping of meaning and narrative out of memories of past events in a way that make them something other than a record of the experience as it happened in the reality of the moment. Some, potentially, might be found to be less factually reliable than others – where, for example, published personal narratives may have been dramatised or even fictionalised with a view towards the popular taste or with greater regard to quality in writing than to accuracy.<sup>98</sup> However, whether written for a wide audience through publication or, as was the case with a number of memoirs which were important sources for *Commando Country*, originally written only for the information of the writer's family and the writer's own satisfaction, they are equally likely to carry a natural concern for accuracy. As one participant's view of past events, they have a straightforward claim to authenticity, even if only in the most subjective sense. Every historical source required interrogation, and if it is understood that memoir is not simply hard fact, then war memoirs, truthful to their own purposes, can give a picture of events and their subjective meanings which builds substantially on what may be available from other kinds of source. The utility of this combination is particularly true in a study of the nature of *Commando Country* which set out to explore questions of culture and experience in the framework of an objective factual narrative.

As a key example, the circumstances whereby the small MI(R) Operation *Knife* team came to set up at Inverailort in May/June 1940 was referred to in the published war memoirs of four members of the original instructing staff (Peter Kemp, Lord Lovat, Freddy Spencer Chapman, Michael Calvert) all of whom became prominent for their later distinguished war

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<sup>97</sup> S. Hynes, 1999. 'Personal narratives and commemoration', in J. Winter and E. Sivan, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 205-20.

<sup>98</sup> Mark Seaman noted this as a feature among the memoirs of certain SOE officers intended to appeal to the popular fascination for secret agent stories. M. Seaman, 2005.

records.<sup>99</sup> Each narrator recorded the same events as remembered at a distance and from a different personal perspective, and indeed there was contradiction in certain detail, but the sequence of personal connections and decisions, and a sense of the thinking behind the idea, was conveyed by these memoirs in combination. They offered something more than the simple fact that MI(R) headquarters in London authorised the setting up of the centre by this team, as confirmed by the official MI(R) war diary in the National Archives.<sup>100</sup> These accounts, as for most other memoirs, noted the training experience only in passing on the road to the fighting, but in other instances, as in the published memoir of Independent Company officer Arthur Kellas, whom the author also had the opportunity to interview, the level of impressionistic content relating to cultural and environmental aspects of the training experience was considerable.<sup>101</sup> With a different emphasis, the unpublished memoir of a sergeant instructor at the Special Training Centre Lochailort took the outward form of a personal history of the establishment which, although viewed through the writer's experience, and not infallible as to accuracy in its entirety, sought to include from memory as much information as possible about the personnel and organisation of the centre.<sup>102</sup>

Reflections on the nature of war memoirs are found to be redoubled in the historiography of oral history, another kind of war story employed as a source in *Commando Country*. The recording of oral history tended, from its emergence into the mainstream of historical discourse in the 1960s and 70s, to be associated with the 'hidden' or 'forgotten' voices of labour history and women's history. However, the practice has a longer track record of application in relation to warfare. From as early as the Second World War, public money and official licence was on occasion made available to military and non-military agencies to record and compile the individual experience of this most extreme area of human behaviour.<sup>103</sup> Assessments of oral history in relation to military subjects have reflected on both the strengths and the weaknesses of this type of source, which again relate to subjectivity and to the construction of narratives influenced by later experiences and perspectives additional to the original experience as it actually happened. Fred Allison

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<sup>99</sup> P. Kemp, 1958. *No Colours or Crest*. London: Cassell, 12-20; Lord Lovat, 1976. *March Past*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 175-80; F. Spencer Chapman, 1950. *The Jungle is Neutral*. London: Chatto & Windus, 5-7; M. Calvert, 1964. *Fighting Mad*. London: Jarrolds, 48-9.

<sup>100</sup> MI(R) unit war diary, National Archives HS8/263.

<sup>101</sup> A. Kellas 1990. *Down to Earth [or Another Bloody Cock-Up]. A parachute subaltern's story*. Edinburgh: Pentland Press.

<sup>102</sup> A. Austen, 'The Special Training Centre Lochailort, Inverness-shire. A personal memoir', Royal Signals Museum, 936.4

<sup>103</sup> P. Thomson, 2000. *The Voice of the Past*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 74-7; R. Sharpless, 2006. 'The History of Oral History', in T. Charlton, L. Myers and R. Sharpless, eds. 2006, 19-42.

(2006) compared two recorded interviews with a U.S. Marine about a combat experience in Vietnam, one conducted two days after the event in 1968, the second conducted in 2002, and presented the reassuring conclusion that, for all the processes of reflection and narrative construction which had accrued in the intervening decades, the story told was the same in its essentials.<sup>104</sup> A more cautionary tale is the study of Australian First World War veterans by Alistair Thomson (2006) where the interviewer tested the relationship between public and private memory and found the power of what he called ‘the Anzac legend’ to be a factor distorting testimony,

The interviews did reveal many differences between their lives and the legend, but I was also struck by the extent to which memories were entangled with the myth; for example, some men related scenes from the film ‘Gallipoli’ as if they were their own.<sup>105</sup>

Working in a field replete with its own legends, the present author had to be conscious of this kind of external influence on the shaping of narratives in using oral testimony interviews recorded by others, as in the SOE and other sound recordings preserved at the Imperial War Museum, and in the course of conducting interviews in person. Certain respondents were found to phrase their testimony through similar forms of expression describing the toughness of training in the highland environment and their enjoyment of it, and expressed their memories with a vein of humour similar to that which emerges in the popular Commando literature described in section 2 above. Negative responses to the training experience were notable by their absence.<sup>106</sup> These shared forms of expression were conceivably influenced by a tacit common assumption about what might be expected of such testimony by the interviewer, by posterity and indeed by the respondents’ peers. Equally, even at the remove of decades, these ways of remembering may be taken to have borne some relationship to the group culture and expected behaviours that were in operation in the training centres at the time.<sup>107</sup>

Mindful of this, the most likely weakness in oral testimony seemed to the author to be the possibility of embellishment or selectivity on the part of the respondent in order to make a

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<sup>104</sup> F. Allison, 2006. ‘Remembering a Vietnam war firefight. Changing perspectives over time’. in P. Perks and A. Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. London: Routledge, 221-9.

<sup>105</sup> A. Thomson, 2006. ‘Anzac memories. Putting popular memory theory into practice in Australia’, in P. Perks and A. Thomson, 2006, 244-54.

<sup>106</sup> Negative comments about the training and the environment were however found in other sources, such as the papers of Independent Company officer Major A.D.C. Smith, and the published memoir of SOE recruit Pieter Dourlein, and were quoted in *Commando Country* as being of interest in this respect.

<sup>107</sup> Similar issues around shared memory and public expectations were considered by Juliette Pattison in relation to her conduct of oral history interviews with female SOE agents. J. Pattison, 2007.

good story and meet the perceived expectations of the interviewer. In only one instance the author registered a sense of the presentation of personal memory having been rehearsed in relation to the respondent's marked knowledge of and enthusiasm for aspects of the historical context, and previous experience of the interview process. This did not render the testimony invalid, but required care to keep the focus on what the respondent had experienced in person. In contrast was an interview with another respondent, unused to being interviewed, and seeking to recall impressions and episodes that evidently had never been rehearsed into a sequential narrative. Memories out of order or uncertain in minor detail nevertheless offered insight into the nature of the experience. Both interviews provided material that was informative and that was used in the finished book.<sup>108</sup>

Whether in the form of oral testimony or written memoir, and given careful handling, war stories were therefore a meaningful basis upon which the research questions, especially questions 3 and 4, could be addressed. Extended quotations from sources of this kind were employed by the author as a feature throughout *Commando Country*, and not merely as a stylistic device to illustrate or enliven the narrative. Quotations were selected less with a view to recounting anecdote and incident, though excerpts of this kind were also used, but rather with the purpose of giving a strong sense of what was distinctive and memorable about the training experience, and about the places where it was conducted. The selections were intended to offer multiple perspectives from those who encountered the training centres in different capacities, cutting across the divide between the experiences of staff instructors and trainees, of different nationalities, of gender in one instance, and also between the experiences of officers and other ranks. Indeed, the use of unpublished memoir and oral testimony allowed the author to offset an imbalance in published sources towards the perspective of officers.<sup>109</sup> Although officers were clearly the crucial actors in some of the theoretical and practical innovations of special training, and officers were also as likely to be trainees as they were to be found on the staff, the responses of other ranks to the training experience was also an essential part of the record. Non-commissioned officers were an integral part of the training centre staff structure, and the testimony of sergeant instructors was another voice that needed to be heard in this context.

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<sup>108</sup> The oral history interview is a situation that entails mutual trust, for which reason it would not be appropriate to identify individual respondents in this critical context.

<sup>109</sup> Due to the nature of military organisations and their recruiting profile, this imbalance is an issue that is all but inevitable in military historical sources of different kinds, not least in museum collections.

Essential also to the qualitative aspects of the study was the evidence found in the form of photographs and artefacts. The collecting and exhibition origins of *Commando Country* meant that the photographs and artefacts included in the art sections of the finished book represented more than a selection of illustrations chosen as an afterthought to complement the written narrative. Integral to the research in certain instances, specific objects and images are referred to in the text for the insight they offered in relation to the research questions. The location of photographs was a challenge in the project, since with the exception of official photographs of Commando training taken for publicity and propaganda purposes, and a wealth of photographs acquired from the Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre Association, wartime security considerations meant that there was no other official photography. Scarcity of surviving images suggests amateur photography was very rarely permitted at the special training centres.<sup>110</sup> The publication in *Commando Country* of rare images from private collections, such as those of the original Operation *Knife* team taken at Keir in May 1940, or those of military infrastructure at Inverailort taken in 1941 by the eleven year-old son of a staff officer, represented evidence as well as illustration.

More than one kind of photograph appears in *Commando Country*. Official photographs (credited to the Imperial War Museum, which ultimately received Second World War official images from the Ministry of Information for preservation as part of the national record), are alluded to in the text, and were originally created with overt public relations and propaganda purposes, and a view moreover to presenting images of ‘the sturdiest, toughest types’ to the British public.<sup>111</sup> In *War and Photography. A Cultural History* (1997) Caroline Brothers contended that propaganda images speak as much about the mind-set of the society that consume them as they do about the people, places and events they depict.<sup>112</sup> The official photographs of Commando training were part of the officially-sanctioned Commando image propagated in war-time, intended to reassure the British public in the wake of military defeats, and ahead of major offensives. They consequently fit well with the post-war popular narrative of the war considered above in section 2 of this review. In contrast, the inclusion in *Commando Country* of private, amateur photographs of Inverailort and other establishments, and reference to them in the text, was intended to be suggestive of the manner in which,

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<sup>110</sup> The group photographs of staff at Inverailort and Inverlair reproduced in *Commando Country* were rare examples of photography sanctioned locally by commanding officers. Military personnel were not permitted to carry cameras and private citizens were also subject to legislative restrictions over photography.

<sup>111</sup> *Commando Country*, 133. Instructions to Army official photographers issued in 1942, quoted in J. Carmichael, 1992. ‘Army photographers in North-West Europe’, *Imperial War Museum Review*, 7, 15-22.

<sup>112</sup> C. Brothers, 1997. *War and Photography. A Cultural History*. London: Routledge, 14-31.

within the strategic and official context, the training establishments developed under the more immediate influence of individuals and collections of individuals on the spot, an important theme running through the book. Like memoir and testimony, those images located in private collections were representative of the nature of the training experience in the subjective sense, being a form in which individual and collective experience was recorded and remembered privately, at least in the first instance.

The place of material culture in *Commando Country* is likewise closely related to the question of how the training experience was understood, remembered and commemorated (research question 3). That individuals and groups are disposed to keep and create artefacts as mementoes of war and military service is the life-blood, and in some respects the *raison d'être*, of military museums.<sup>113</sup> Among the most emotionally-loaded of these are of course objects that relate to the experience and commemoration of combat. It was therefore instructive to find a small number of artefacts preserved, created or modified for their association with the experience of training instead of, or as well as, the experience of fighting. From public commemorative art, most obviously in the creation of the Commando Memorial at Spean Bridge, through personal artistic expression such as Maurice Chauvet's Achnacarry watercolours, to the acknowledgement of the town of Rothesay, a Scottish training location inscribed on a Commando combat souvenir from the Italian campaign, the centrality of the training experience to the idea of special service was found to be manifest in the material culture. In the most symbolically powerful of these, as in the signed volume presented to an SOE instructor by his Czechoslovak students, the relationship between training and the seriousness of the tasks which lay ahead is embodied. In this example, the later fate of the trainees who signed the book altered the meaning invested in the artefact in its personal and later museum context.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Describing the collecting practices of the Imperial War Museum, Paul Cornish noted the primacy of objects which through their provenance are 'possessed of symbolic significance', a counterpoint to the collecting of examples of type. P. Cornish, 2004. 'Sacred relics': objects in the Imperial War Museum 1917-39', in N. Saunders, ed. *Matters of Conflict. Material culture, memory and the First World War*. London: Routledge, 35-50. For aspects of the Scottish context see S. Allan, forthcoming, 'Scottish military collections', in J. Crang, E. Spiers, and M. Strickland, eds. *The Military History of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>114</sup> *Commando Country*, 182. The copy of Karel Capek's *Letters from England originally* presented to Lieutenant (later Lieutenant-Colonel) Ernest Van Maurik was presented by the latter in turn to the Imperial War Museum. Its inclusion in the *Commando Country* exhibition elicited further information about its context, establishing the subsequent deaths or capture on service of a number of the signatories. For inter-disciplinary efforts to establish biographies of military artefacts see N. Saunders and P. Cornish, eds, 2009. *Contested Objects. Material Memories of the Great War*. London: Routledge. A useful case study of a Second World War gallantry decoration is J. Jody, 2002. 'Biography of a medal: people and the things they value', in J. Schofield, W. Johnson and C. Beck, eds. *Matériel Culture. The Archaeology of Twentieth-Century Conflict*. London: Routledge, 132-42.



Military artefacts are typically collective, organisational and functional in their purposes before they are personal, and the distinctions of the material culture of special service in dress, insignia and weapons are already well recorded in the traditional typological study of military collections.<sup>115</sup> Reference to such artefacts in *Commando Country* was more concerned with their meaning, with the cultural function of objects in the context of special service training. The two artefacts that stood out in this respect, the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife and the Commando green beret, were introduced in the text as markers for the new culture of special service training, helping to define what was different about this new endeavour in contrast to traditional military practice and organisation. The function of artefacts in distinguishing military group identity is overt, so much so that this is usually taken for granted in the traditional literature.<sup>116</sup> The place of artefacts in creating and perpetuating subcultures and counter-cultures defined in response to dominant or traditional organisations is also referenced in the literature of organisational culture theory, and this cross-disciplinary approach has since been explored further by the present author in relation to the production of the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife and the training culture at Inverailort in 1940.<sup>117</sup>

In extracting and drawing together artefacts from a range of collection contexts, both public and private, the *Commando Country* exhibition applied to them a conceptual context which presented these objects as an embodiment of individual and collective experience in relation to the Scottish highland environment. This imposing of different meanings is part of the ongoing museum business of collecting and interpreting military artefacts, where they may be understood and adapted conceptually in changing ways.<sup>118</sup> The temporary nature of any special exhibition means that its most lasting legacy conventionally lies in the publication of an exhibition catalogue or associated book. Intended as more than a record of the exhibition, the publication of *Commando Country* incorporated material culture as one form of

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<sup>115</sup> For example, M. Chappell, 1994. *Army Commandos, 1940-45*. London: Osprey; F. Stephens, 1980. *Fighting Knives. An Illustrated Guide to Fighting Knives and Military Survival Weapons of the World*. London: Arms and Armour Press.

<sup>116</sup> A more anthropology-based approach to military dress distinctions is explored in A. Jeffreys, 2009. 'Distinguishing the uniform. Military heraldry and the British army during the First World War', in N. Saunders and P. Cornish, eds. 2009, 119-29. Cultural as well as technical aspects of specialist irregular warfare weaponry are considered in P. Cornish, 2006. 'Weapons and equipment of Special Operations Executive', in M. Seaman, ed. 2006, 22-46.

<sup>117</sup> S. Allan, 2010. 'Individualism and exceptionalism'. The relationship between artefacts and the creation and maintenance of subcultures is set out in J. Martin, 2002. *Organisational Culture. Mapping the Terrain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 47.

<sup>118</sup> N. Saunders, 2005. 'Culture, Conflict, and Materiality: The social lives of Great War objects', in B. Finn, *et al*, eds. *Materializing the Military*. London: Science Museum, 77-94.

evidence, equally as valid as documentary sources, integrated into a format that presented a fuller historical investigation of the subject.

## 5 The Scottish perspective

*Commando Country* is concerned with the culture of Second World War special service, a subject with British and international military historical dimensions. As discussed above in section 2, special forces capability became an established feature of the armed forces of many nations after the Second World War and the British improvisations of 1940–1 may be seen to have had a lasting influence. Training, furthermore, retained its place as one element defining the difference between special forces and conventional forces.<sup>119</sup> The formative culture of special service, with its characteristic traits of individualism, class profile, and claim to exceptional and elite status, has been celebrated in the popular histories rather more than it has been subjected to academic scrutiny, and *Commando Country* was intended to help fill that gap. That it sought to do so with particular reference to the Scottish setting was the essential point of the book. While the connection between environment and the conduct of warfare is obvious, military geography is usually explored only in relation to fighting and the field of operations.<sup>120</sup> The author chose instead to focus on the training centres and their environment and so to explore some place-specific influences on the idea of special service. Examining the development of special training centres in the distinctive historical and cultural context of the Scottish highlands, *Commando Country* touched on the links between military history and some of the intellectual territory occupied by historical geographers and environmental historians.

In work produced for National Museums Scotland, a cultural institution with a national and international remit, a Scottish perspective on world events like the Second World War might reasonably be assumed to be a given. But the intention was not to present a national or regional study of this subject as an end in itself, legitimate as such an approach might have been.<sup>121</sup> The fact that the military agents of the British government should have sought to extract short-term benefit from the Scottish highland environment in wartime was not in itself remarkable. It was the business of government to mobilise all available resources for

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<sup>119</sup> A. Finlan, 2008. 'The (arrested) development of UK special forces and the global war on terror', *Review of International Studies*, 25, 2009, 971-82.

<sup>120</sup> Topography is a necessary element of campaign and battle studies. For an overview, see H. Winters *et al*, 1998. *Battling the Elements. Weather and Terrain in the Conduct of War*. Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press.

<sup>121</sup> Books concerned with Scottish dimensions of the Second World War experience have been conventional since the early 1990s and, in the context of Scottish historical studies, may require no further justification. Relevant recent examples include B. Osborne, 2009. *The People's Army. The Home Guard in Scotland 1940-1944*. Edinburgh: Birlinn; and a collection of oral history testimony about the Women's Land Army in Scotland, E. Edwards ed., 2010. *Scotland's Land Girls. Breeches, Bombers and Backaches*. Edinburgh: NMSE.

the war effort and in this respect the Scottish highlands were no different from the rest of the United Kingdom, or indeed from the British empire as a whole. In this utilitarian sense, the adapting of highland sporting estates into temporary military training grounds may be viewed alongside other extractions and contributions such as the concerted harvesting of timber from highland woodlands which, under the planned wartime economy, was achieved using a supplement of quasi-military labour in forestry, or the exploitation of natural assets for strategic naval purposes, such as convoy assembly anchorages and experimental submarine training establishments in the sea lochs of the west coast.<sup>122</sup>

Clearly, the topographical attributes of the Scottish highland environment were an essential factor determining the location of so many special training centres in the region. Highland estate settings were chosen for the proximity between mountain country and shoreline, for remoteness, seclusion, access by rail and so on. In addition, the specialist requirements of establishments like the Combined Training Centre on Loch Fyne, which offered a large-scale amphibious warfare training environment suitably accessible from existing naval infrastructure in the Firth of Clyde, or of the various Cairngorm training centres intended to cater for troops preparing for operations over similar terrain in Norway, were for environmental assets of a quite specific nature. But inherent in the approach taken in *Commando Country* was recognition of a further Scottish cultural dimension, the influence of a distinctive heritage of highland Scotland which merited a different treatment. At the root of this was the fact that the Scottish highland sporting estate was originally chosen as a special training ground not by the anonymous hand of monolithic military authority, but, through circumstance, by a small collection of officers with a class background that meant they were steeped in the sporting culture of that unique environment.

The highland sporting estate has been described as unique, at least in the context of industrialised western countries, being a sizeable portion of the total land area of Scotland, owned, traded and set aside for private recreational hunting purposes dominated by social elites.<sup>123</sup> Within the complex historical patterns of land ownership and tenantry, social

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<sup>122</sup> W. Wonders, 1991. *The 'Sawdust Fusiliers'. The Canadian Forestry Corps in the Scottish Highlands in World War II*. Montreal: Canadian Pulp and Paper Association. The paths of the foresters and special training centres crossed in such places as Torwood camp in Glenfeshie, where the former gave way to accommodate the latter. On strategic naval assets see B. Lavery, 2007. *Shield of Empire. The Royal Navy and Scotland*. Edinburgh: Birlinn, 321-54.

<sup>123</sup> A. Wightman *et al*, 2002. 'The cultural politics of hunting: sporting estates and recreational land use in the highlands and islands of Scotland', *Sport in Society*, 5 (1), 53-70. The moorland estate reserved for game bird shooting was more commonplace, but only in Scotland were such extensive and consolidated private holdings dedicated to the pursuit of deer to be found. The most reliable inter-war figures date to a 1922 official report which calculated the total area of

relations and values surrounding the existence and operation of these estates, there were two strands particularly relevant to the events studied in *Commando Country*. The first was the conception of the highlands as wilderness, a landscape with associations of the sublime that had made highland Scotland a draw for tourists since the late eighteenth century.<sup>124</sup> Arguably less meaningful in relation to those who actually resided and sought to make a living there, this view prevailed in the perspective of outsiders, visitors who beheld, admired and in some cases actively tackled the highland landscape. As Kathleen Grenier (2005) found in studying Victorian and Edwardian tourist literature, the vocabulary used to extol this environment not only described aesthetics and atmosphere, it was characterised by expressions of manly endeavour and personal challenge,

Renditions of parts of the Highlands, such as the Cuillins, as ‘desolate’, ‘sterile’ and ‘inaccessible’ implicitly elevated the achievements of those who went there. If by climbing, hiking or hunting one conquered so terrible an environment, then one demonstrated a strength equal to that of the elements.<sup>125</sup>

It is in relation to hunting, the last of the three manly pursuits listed in this quote from Grenier, that the second cultural strand influencing the developments described in *Commando Country* is to be found. Prime movers in creating the first training centre at Inverailort, the Frasers of Lovat, the Stirlings of Keir, and their MI(R) associates, understood without tourist sentiment the true nature of much of the highland landscape by virtue of their land-owning and sporting background. If wilderness it appeared to be, it was a carefully reserved and managed one shaped by human hand for the rearing and hunting of deer. This exclusive physical and social setting became widespread in the highlands from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>126</sup> The historiography of highland deer-stalking demonstrates how a set of values and traditions emerged among land-owning elites whereby prowess in field sports was associated with spiritual renewal, virility and the individual worth of men.<sup>127</sup>

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deer forest (defined as the area devoted exclusively or mainly to deer) in 1920 at 3,432,385 acres. 'Parliamentary Papers, 1922. Report of the Departmental Committee, appointed in November, 1919. To enquire and report with regard to lands in Scotland used as deer forest', Cmd. 1636.

<sup>124</sup> T. C. Smout, 1985. 'Tours in the Scottish highlands from the eighteenth to the twentieth century', *Northern Scotland*, 5, 99-121.

<sup>125</sup> K. Grenier, 2005. *Tourism and Identity in Scotland 1770-1914. Creating Caledonia*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 110.

<sup>126</sup> The remarkable expansion of sporting estate land in the Scottish highlands during the nineteenth and early twentieth century is analysed and set out in statistical detail in W. Orr, 1982, 28-51, 168-80.

<sup>127</sup> H. Lorimer, 2000. 'Guns, game and the grandee: the cultural politics of deer-stalking in the Scottish highlands', *Ecumene*, 7(4), 431-59.

The relationship between hunting, elite social status and readiness for war was of course one with a universal and ancient cultural heritage, and it was a value system that by the twentieth century had developed a distinctly British imperial version to which Scottish highland field sports were connected.<sup>128</sup> The introductory section of *Commando Country* notes the precedent of the Lovat Scouts, recruited from among highland estate workers for service in the South African War, and there is more work to be done on the contribution of the Lovat Scouts to sniper training during the Second World War, and indeed on the wider relationship between field sports and military marksmanship.<sup>129</sup> But, as *Commando Country* demonstrates, the influence of highland sporting culture in the special training centres was not limited to the practical matter of applying the skills of hunting and highland fieldcraft to the requirements of military training. It lent something of its values to the idea of training as initiation, testing men against the challenge of the environment in order to develop and assess their fitness as individuals for the new, self-defining elite of special service.<sup>130</sup> The ability to read and cover difficult ground undetected by the quarry, care and skill with weapons, willingness to take responsibility for the clean kill and not shirk its visceral aftermath, all this had a moral and ascetic as well as a practical dimension. Like the highland sportsman, the individual special service soldier was meant to aspire to mastery of his own body and mind. The culture of deer-stalking and highland fieldcraft permeated the special training culture in ways that echoed some of the defining characteristics of the celebratory literature of the hunt. In the training centre, as in the sporting field, the professional stalker, although an employee, was elevated as a paragon of skill and manly virtue, a source of experience and wisdom from whom men of any class might learn. Prodigious and courageous individual deeds in hunting were lauded, like the story of the Danish commando

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<sup>128</sup> J. Mackenzie, 1988, 7-53.

<sup>129</sup> Major the Hon F.A.H. Mills (later Lord Dulverton) and a selected group of Lovat Scouts formed the Army School of Fieldcraft, Observation and Sniping in 1943, training snipers throughout 21 Army Group. M. L. Melville, 1981. *The Story of the Lovat Scouts, 1900-1980*. Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 116. Selected Lovat Scouts marksmen were also prominent in British sniper training during the First World War, an initiative that owed much to the big game hunter Vernon Hesketh-Pritchard. M. Pegler, 2008. *Sniping in the Great War*. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 113-4, 127-31.

<sup>130</sup> The gender-specific noun is used here deliberately because this was, almost by definition, a culture of men. Female participation was exceptional and attracted comment. It is interesting however to compare Kathleen Grenier's observations about the relationship of women to highland sporting culture with reflections on paramilitary training and gender in Juliette Pattison's works on female SOE recruits. K. Grenier, 2005, 116-8; J. Pattison, 2008. "Turning a pretty girl into a killer": women, violence and clandestine operations during the Second World War, in K. Throsby and F. Alexander, eds., *Gender and Interpersonal Violence. Language, Action and Representation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 11-28.

Anders Lassen bringing down and killing a stag with a knife, a feat of a kind classically attributed to the heroic Gael in the romanticised chronicles of deer-stalking.<sup>131</sup>

The idea of setting a demanding physical assessment test for selection and initiation into special service is one that remains today as part of the culture of British special forces, and was an approach widely adopted by other nations who subsequently developed special forces on the British model. It typically uses hard country, though rarely now in the Scottish highlands, and characteristically it is concerned with developing and assessing the potential of the individual.<sup>132</sup> *Commando Country* relates how, in its origins, this practice also borrowed something from a new strand of thinking about wider access to outdoor pursuits and wilderness environments that had come to prominence in civilian life in the inter-war years in parts of Europe and North America. Recent scholarship on the highland sporting estate has explored the influence of such ideas in Scotland. In the 1930s the exclusive realm of the Scottish highland estate was increasingly breached by the growth of climbing and walking clubs among the working and lower middle classes, encouraged by patrician interests that saw such activity as the antidote to their notion of a social malaise associated with industrialisation.<sup>133</sup>

While not sharing the elite profile of the sporting estate proprietors, sporting tenants, shooting syndicates and their guests, recreational walking and climbing in the remoter parts of the highlands had first developed as a distinctly upper middle class pursuit.<sup>134</sup> By the inter-war period, the profile was changing. Geographer Hayden Lorimer contends that during the 1930s highland estate proprietors gradually became reconciled to the idea that such endeavour might safely extend to the urban masses, for their own and for the greater good, as they came to realise it did not challenge, indeed it tended to reinforce, the ‘wilderness’ status of the landscape and their continued husbanding of it in private

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<sup>131</sup> The Lassen story is referred to in *Commando Country*, 185. See also K. Grenier, 2005, 110-8; and H. Lorimer, 2000.

<sup>132</sup> On the post-war practice of selection by special training see A. Finlan, 2008; and S. Allan, 2010.

<sup>133</sup> H. Lorimer, 1997. ‘Your wee bit hill and glen’: the cultural politics of the Scottish highlands, c1918-1945’, unpublished PhD thesis, Loughborough University, 93-174; and H. Lorimer, 1997. ‘Happy hostelling in the highlands: nationhood, citizenship and the Scottish inter-war youth movement’, *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 113(1), 442-51.

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Smout has demonstrated that appreciation for, and exploration of, natural environments among the urban working class was evident from the late eighteenth century, but largely limited to areas relatively close to urban centres. T. C. Smout, 2000. *Nature Contested. Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 147-50.

ownership.<sup>135</sup> This vision of young men improved by contact with the highland environment was entirely in keeping with the ethos of the first wartime special training centres.

*Commando Country* demonstrates how, in a military context, sporting values which had previously been the preserve of a select few were transmitted to a wider social base, falling under the patrician purview that this was what was required for the national good in a time of crisis. The non-military experts cast as the instructors included individuals drawn from the realms of mountaineering and exploration and, as the study relates, a number had pre-war and post-war connections with formal outdoor education.<sup>136</sup>

Although historians in this field have tended not to address the influence of wartime training and military service in the outdoor recreation boom of the post-war years, *Commando Country* is not entirely alone in suggesting that, far from representing an interruption to the popularising of the highlands as a place for outdoor pursuits, the short-term imperatives of the Second World War were in harmony with, and possibly encouraged, an existing trend.<sup>137</sup> This is not a point of mere antiquarian interest, since that trend has continued to the point where activities such as hill-walking and climbing have become a mainstay of the highland tourism economy of the twenty-first century, heavily promoted by publicly-funded tourism agencies.<sup>138</sup> Although in recent years the personal development aspects have increasingly been merged with conservation-focussed environmental education, structured outdoor training activities retain a place in formal and informal education for young people, and professional practice in this area has become a subject of academic study in its own right.<sup>139</sup> Today's adventure tourism sector is as redolent as Scottish highland tourism ever was with the language of individual challenge and reverence for a majestic natural environment.<sup>140</sup> Meanwhile, despite land reform legislation and a small number of high-profile community buy-outs in recent years, the highland sporting estate remains more or less un-assailed in its

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<sup>135</sup> H. Lorimer, 1997.

<sup>136</sup> *Commando Country*, 238-241. The author has since developed some ideas about this connection in an as yet unpublished conference paper, 'The Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre: outdoor education in war and peace', *The Education of Armies*, International Committee of Museums of Arms and Military History (ICOMAM) conference, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, 13-17 June 2010.

<sup>137</sup> In his case study of development, recreation and conservation in the Cairngorm mountains, Robert Lambert alluded to the wartime operation of the Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre. R Lambert, 2001. *Contested Mountains. Nature, Development and Environment in the Cairngorms Region of Scotland*. Cambridge: White Horse Press, 106-7.

<sup>138</sup> S. Page, W. Steele and J. Connell, 2006. 'Analysing the promotion of adventure tourism: a case study of Scotland', *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 11 (1), 51-76.

<sup>139</sup> Edinburgh University is one academic institution offering post-graduate degrees in outdoor education. See also P. Higgins, 2002. 'Outdoor education in Scotland', *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 2 (2), 149-68.

<sup>140</sup> R. MacLellan, 2003. 'Tourism and the Scottish environment', in R. MacLellan and R. Smith, eds., *Tourism in Scotland*. London: Thomson Business Press, 112-34.



position as a dominant form of land-holding. Landed interests now sit in uneasy accommodations with conservation and tourism lobbies that seek to define the environment as something requiring specialised stewardship.<sup>141</sup> The thinking that underpinned the wartime special training centres, that which Christopher Smout called the ‘temple and obstacle course’ view of the highland environment, is still one live factor among ambivalent and competing visions of the future of land use and ownership in the Scottish highlands.<sup>142</sup>

One criticism that has been levelled against such notions is that they rely on highland landscapes as places where people are largely absent. This was certainly also true of the wartime training centres. In this attribute they related to a pattern of land ownership and use which is strongly associated in the historiography with past injustices. The relative emptiness of the highlands remains an emotive subject, and the prevalence of recreational land ownership stands further accused of implication in environmental degradation.<sup>143</sup> Rights to land, the survival of the crofting economy and traditional community life are the central concerns in the historiography of the Scottish highlands of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But unlike the First World War, where locally recruited battalions and formations, concentrated losses and the involvement of returning soldiers in land raiding are part of popular memory of the highland land question, the Second World War rather lacks a specifically highland narrative.<sup>144</sup> The 1930s and 40s were decades when the land question temporarily receded from prominence in political discourse and, despite the national controversy over the ‘Seven Men of Knoydart’ land raid of 1948, the period is principally associated in the historiography with government-supported efforts to stimulate and diversify the highland economy through the development of hydro-electricity and other light industry.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> A. Wightman et al, 2002.

<sup>142</sup> T.C. Smout, 2009. ‘The highlands and the roots of green consciousness’, in T.C. Smout, *Exploring Environmental History, Selected Essays*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 21-52.

<sup>143</sup> James Hunter is one strident critic of the patterns of highland land ownership on this as well as on other more traditional counts. J Hunter, 1995. *On the Other Side of Sorrow. Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 155-64. For a more detached assessment see T.C. Smout, 2000, 116-41.

<sup>144</sup> On the connection between First World War military recruitment and the land question see E. Cameron and I. Robertson, 1999. ‘Fighting and bleeding for the land: the Scottish Highlands and the Great War’, in C. Macdonald and E. McFarland, eds., *Scotland and the Great War*. East Linton: Tuckwell Press, 81-102. In popular syntheses of highland history proceeding from rather different perspectives, neither James Hunter nor Michael Fry make much of the Second World War. J. Hunter, 1999. *Last of the Free. A Millennial History of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland*. Edinburgh: Mainstream; M. Fry, 2005. *Wild Scots. Four Hundred Years of Highland History*. London: John Murray.

<sup>145</sup> E. Cameron, 2002. ‘The seven men of Knoydart and the Scottish highlands in the 1940s’, *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Inverness*, 62, 156-83; and E. Cameron, 1997. ‘The Scottish highlands as a special policy area, 1886-1965’, *Rural History*, 8, 195-215.

Similarly, in the broader historiography of Scotland in the years of the Second World War, a strong theme of the literature is the extension of British state power into the active management of the economy and of society as a whole, with consequences that are traced into the nationalisations and other planned economic development efforts of the post-war years.<sup>146</sup> In this context the phenomenon of the highland special training centres sits in a rather ambiguous position. The arbitrary military requisitioning of private property, the damage caused to those properties, the Protected Area and Protected Place restrictions on movement and information, the influx of military personnel, the operation of live firing and demolitions exercises, and indeed the use of the natural environment as a tool to improve the fitness and character of a young generation, all these incursions seem firmly to belong to a war characterised by the mobilisation of society. On the other hand, wartime special training in the highlands is paradoxically found to originate as something quite of the opposite. This was a small-scale initiative proceeding from a conservative idea of what the highlands represented, improvised with a marked degree of local freedom and only gradually subjected to increased management by centralised structures of military authority.<sup>147</sup>

As observed in section 2 above, the wartime propaganda message about the Commandos was strong enough for the presence of the highland special training centres to remain as part of the popular memory of the Scottish experience of the Second World War, at least in its distilled version as the story of the Commandos and Achnacarry. It is noteworthy therefore that in reality this was a phenomenon somewhat detached from the contemporary concerns and from the dominant historical traditions of the people who actually lived in the areas concerned. The people conducting and undergoing the training were not, in the main, highlanders themselves, nor were they even likely to be Scottish. Those civilians locally who were most directly affected were a small number of proprietors and their estate employees. For highland communities, the Second World War was affecting them in other ways, and highlanders were experiencing military service in different and diverse ways much further from home. The salient artefact in the story, the Commando Memorial at Spean Bridge, in itself says something about the obliqueness of connection between the training centres and highland history. Like anywhere else in the country, highland communities had their own

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<sup>146</sup> E. Cameron, 2010. *Impaled Upon A Thistle. Scotland Since 1880*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 175-97; R. Finlay, 2004, *Modern Scotland 1914-2000*. London: Profile Books, 162-97; T. Devine, 1999. *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000*. London: Penguin, 545-73.

<sup>147</sup> The training centres were however quick to make use of industrial installations like the 1929 aluminium smelter at Fort William as dummy targets for sabotage exercises. See *Commando Country*, 51,163.

war memorials, and many local names were added to them as a result of the Second World War. The Commando Memorial was something else, raised with the support of local people but not at their instigation. This was the work of the Commando Association, a national veterans' organisation that wished to make more public and lasting its members' temporary, and usually short-lived, wartime connection with that part of the country.<sup>148</sup>

A distinctively Scottish historical narrative of the Second World War can be difficult to define, so much were the experiences of Scottish people part of a centrally-organised mobilisation and world-wide distribution of human and economic resources by the wartime British state. But one feature of it was certainly the influx of substantial numbers of British and foreign Allied troops into Scotland for concentration, home defence and training.<sup>149</sup> For Scotland the foreigners were not the Americans, the presence of whom is part of the shorthand of the remembered war experience of other parts of the United Kingdom.<sup>150</sup> In central and eastern Scotland it was the Poles, and in the south-west it was the Norwegians.<sup>151</sup> For the highlands and parts of the Ayrshire coast, the most notable military incomers were the special service volunteers, and the influx began earlier in the war than was the case in many other parts of the country. It was the purpose of *Commando Country* to examine what it was they were doing, and how they came to be doing it there.

In *The British Army and the People's War, 1939-45*, Jeremy Crang observed that the bulk of the army typically spent far more time in the United Kingdom, training and waiting, than it did on active service overseas.<sup>152</sup> It is a weakness in the historiography of the Second World War that the military presence at home can be overlooked, falling into a gap between the socio-economic, political and cultural elements which are habitually the preserve of social historians, and the strategic and operational concerns which traditionally lie in the domain of

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<sup>148</sup> A Commando Association booklet of 1965 recorded that 'money was most generously subscribed by towns, villages and hamlets throughout Scotland, all of whom showed their great regard for Commandos'. *The Commando Memorial, Spean Bridge: and a Short History of the Commandos, 1940-45*. London: the Commando Association.

<sup>149</sup> A detailed academic study of Scotland in the Second World War has yet to be published, perhaps for this reason. For a sketch of some of the salient military and strategic features see S. Allan and A. Carswell, 2004. *The Thin Red Line. War, Empire and Visions of Scotland*. Edinburgh: NMSE Publishing, 72-80.

<sup>150</sup> The relative scarcity of U.S. troops in Scotland is set out statistically in D. Reynolds, 1996. *Rich Relations. The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-45*. London: Harper Collins, 110.

<sup>151</sup> For the Polish experience see A. Carswell, 2005. 'Poles in Scotland', in D. Stefancic, ed. *Armies in Exile*, East European Monographs, 666. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 171-90. Norwegian forces in Scotland await a similar treatment in English, but see J. Holmås, 1997. *Historien om Skottlandsbrigaden 1940-45*. Porsgrunn: Forlaget Grenland.

<sup>152</sup> J. Crang, 2000. *The British Army and the People's War, 1939-45*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2.

military history. There is much in the wartime military organisation of Scotland that merits further scrutiny, from the functioning of Scottish Command and its strategic relationship to Norway, including further manifestations of specialised training in mountain warfare, to the myriad naval and air installations that brought service personnel to Scotland for quite specific purposes.<sup>153</sup> And this is no truer of Scotland than it is for the United Kingdom as a whole. As a study with a Scottish perspective, *Commando Country* seeks to be the opposite of parochial. It examines a new development in military practice and culture that in certain aspects was influenced by conditions peculiar to Scotland, and places that development in the international currents of a global conflict.

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<sup>153</sup> On the former see S. Ashley Hart, 2001. 'The forgotten liberator: the 1939-45 military career of General Sir Andrew Thorne', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 79, 233-49; and Sir Peter Thorne, 1995. 'Andrew Thorne and the Liberation of Norway', in P. Salmon ed., 1995. *Britain and Norway in the Second World War*. London: HMSO, 206-20.

## 6 Impact

Now, in 2011, in its third re-print, sales of *Commando Country* have exceeded expectations and suggest that its publication has gone some way towards meeting National Museums Scotland's policy commitment to high quality research combined with public engagement. Reviews in academic, military and popular constituencies have recognised the intended purposes and value of a study devoted to training rather than operations.<sup>154</sup> And the relevance of the events and experiences it describes to contemporary military practices and culture has not gone unnoticed. Since publication, the author has lectured on the subject to present-day practitioners including, at the invitation of the Commandant, the staff of the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines, and to other serving personnel and veterans of the Royal Marines and the SAS.<sup>155</sup> These lectures and discussions have been more than antiquarian in purpose, considering issues raised by the author's research in relation to today's training and selection culture, and the changing commando role in the post-Cold War period. Two papers derived from *Commando Country* research have been contributed by the author to academic and museum conferences, one focussing on the long-term implications of training and selection culture in British special service, the other on the links between military training and outdoor education.<sup>156</sup>

It is posited that *Commando Country* advances historical knowledge of the development of special service training and organisation 1940–5, and that it has added something to the understanding of Scotland's domestic experience of the Second World War. It is not however the case that *Commando Country* has somehow debunked or displaced popular appreciation and celebration of the relationship between the Commandos and Scotland. Reception of the book doubtless owes something to the same interest that still sustains sales of Gilchrist's *Castle Commando* and that has seen the present author invited to contribute to

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<sup>154</sup> *War in History*, 15(4), November 2008, 502-4; *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 86(346) summer 2008; *Guards Magazine*, July 2008; *Scots*, 39, February 2008, 71-7; *Amazon*, URL <http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/1905267142/> Accessed 12.11.10. NMS Enterprises Publishing sent out review copies only by request.

<sup>155</sup> The initial lecture at the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines preceded The King's Squad Pass Out Parade of 22 February, 2008, Commandant Brigadier (now Major-General) Andy Salmon. Other post-publication lectures included Fleet Protection Group Royal Marines, 45 Commando Royal Marines, Royal Marines Reserve Scotland, SAS Regimental Association.

<sup>156</sup> S. Allan, 'Individualism, exceptionalism and counter culture in Second World War special service training', *Waterloo to Desert Storm: new thinking on international conflict, 1815-1991*, Scottish Centre for War Studies conference, Glasgow University, 24-5 June 2010; S. Allan, 'The Highland Fieldcraft Training Centre: outdoor education in war and peace', *The Education of Armies*, International Committee of Museums of Arms and Military History (ICOMAM) conference, National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, 13-17 June 2010.

numerous UK and Scottish national media broadcasts concerned with the subject.<sup>157</sup> If these have permitted the author to air the Inverailort and SOE dimensions, and to offer necessarily superficial expositions of the relationship between military training and highland sporting culture, straightforward tales of toughness at Achnacarry have proved still to be very much on the popular media agenda. As *Commando Country* hopefully demonstrates, the two versions are not incompatible.

The author has also been invited to give a number of informal lectures to local history and community groups in the highlands.<sup>158</sup> These occasions appear to the author to represent a desire among interested parties to connect local knowledge and heritage with the national narrative of Second World War memory and commemoration. There is one codicil to the research and publication of *Commando Country* which further suggests the entanglement of historical knowledge, popular memory and commemoration of twentieth-century conflict. During the course of his research, the author was grateful for assistance received from the Honorary Consul of the Czech Republic in Scotland, Dr Paul Millar, who advised on Czechoslovak sources and translation. Dr. Millar's involvement in the project and consequent growing interest in the wartime training of Czechoslovak forces at SOE paramilitary schools in Morar led to his initiation of a project to create a substantial memorial locally. This objective he rapidly achieved by creating associated charitable trusts in Scotland and the Czech Republic, endorsed by the Czech government and funded by private subscriptions. On 11 November 2009, a monument by Czech sculptor Josef Vacje was unveiled on a prominent site in Arisaig village, in the presence of senior representatives of the Czech government and the Scottish Parliament, of local government, the local community and attended by a handful of returning Czechoslovak veterans trained locally by SOE.<sup>159</sup>

As an addition to the memorials at Spean Bridge, Glenmore, Glenfeshie and smaller commemorations at other special training sites across the highlands, this new monument is unusual in having been brought about at a remove from the agency of the veterans themselves. Unlike other monumental projects realised amidst highland communities in more recent decades, which tend to commemorate events associated with the highland land

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<sup>157</sup> Most recently, *Scots at War*, STV, February 2010; *The One Show*, BBC, April 2010; *Countrywise*, ITV, August 2010; *Great British Railway Journeys*, BBC, forthcoming (scheduled for February 2011).

<sup>158</sup> Most recently at Roy Bridge, Pitlochry and Kinloch Rannoch.

<sup>159</sup> The connection between the *Commando Country* project and the Czech Memorial was acknowledged in the unveiling formalities and elsewhere, <http://www.czechmemorial.org/homepage.html>. Accessed 11.9.2010.

question, this one is again the work of outsiders.<sup>160</sup> The creation of the Czech Memorial at Arisaig represents an act of national and international commemoration and remembrance as much as it does an expression of local collective memory, warmly welcomed by the local community as it was.<sup>161</sup> Commemoration of the highland special training centres, especially at Spean Bridge and Achnacarry, had already assumed a place in the itineraries and promotion of highland tourism.<sup>162</sup> In seeking to elucidate the subject of these commemorations through research, and so drawing attention towards Inverailort and the other training centres, the author may simultaneously have compounded the effect. The second (2008) edition of *Commando Country* included an additional note to the maps which advised readers that many of the training centre locations are private residences and requested that they be mindful of the owners' privacy.<sup>163</sup>

In *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (2000), Ashplant, Darson & Piper considered the role of historians, archivists and museum curators as professional mediators of war testimony, and their agency in shaping popular memory and public commemoration:

Arguably, the historian has a place in the commemorative culture of the late twentieth century as privileged as that of the war poet or monument designer in mid-century.<sup>164</sup>

Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (2000) similarly observed the distinction between historical knowledge and collective memory of twentieth century warfare, and stressed the limits on the historian's power over the latter:

Collective memory is not historical memory, though the two usually overlap at many points. Professional history matters, to be sure, but only to a small population. Collective remembrance is a set of acts that go beyond the limits of the

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<sup>160</sup> C. Withers, 1996. 'Place, memory, monument: memorializing the past in contemporary Highland Scotland', *Ecumene*, 3 (3), 306-44.

<sup>161</sup> There is an extensive literature on war memorials which considers their political and cultural purposes as well as their aesthetic and emotional values. The works tend to be principally concerned with First World War commemoration. For reflections on memorials and remembrance which include some reference to Scotland see, for example, W. Kidd and B. Murdoch, eds, 2004. *Memory and Memorials: the Commemorative Century*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

<sup>162</sup> See, for example, R. Humphreys and D. Reid, 2008. *The Rough Guide to Scottish Highlands and Islands*. London: Rough Guides Travel Guides, 209-11. The level of tourist traffic at the Commando Memorial has in recent years required the construction of an extensive car park. Meanwhile the Land Sea and Isles Centre at Arisaig already featured a graphic display about SOE created in consultation with amateur historian David Harrison.

<sup>163</sup> This waiver was added despite an initial concern to ensure that the maps in the original edition of the book would not be sufficient to direct visitors to individual locations without reference to other published maps.

<sup>164</sup> T. Ashplant, G. Darson and M. Piper, 2000. 'The politics of war memory and commemoration. Contexts, structures and dynamics', in T. Ashplant, G. Darson and M. Piper, eds. 2000. *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration*. London: Routledge, 47-9.

professionals. These acts may draw from professional history, but they do not depend on it.<sup>165</sup>

Having unwittingly set in motion the train of emotional response, international engagement and local participation that created the Czech Memorial at Arisaig, the present author experienced directly the validity of these reflections.

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<sup>165</sup> J. Winter and E. Sivan, 2000. 'Setting the framework', in J. Winter and E. Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 8.



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## APPENDIX

### Original *Commando Country* bibliography prepared for publication, 2007.

#### Documentary sources

##### **Clan Cameron Museum, Achnacarry**

Photographs, Commando Basic Training Centre, Achnacarry 1942-45.  
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