

Don's Dirty Dozen

In the field with RMARG Special Ops

Narrated by Trooper X

Part I – The Training

IN EIGHT years of service with the RMARG Irregular Force (RIF) at RAF Welford (RAF), I had never been invited to join the other RIFRAF in the Special Ops Unit. So it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that I turned up at Building 229 to attend a daring escapade under the cover name of operation "Work Party".

Those of us who had heard the unit scuttlebutt knew that more was afoot than a work party to construct an Anderson shelter. For one thing there were several conspicuous changes to the normal composition of the forces mustered for these events.

Firstly, a regular Army instructor was on hand, who for the purpose of this narrative we will call Tony. Secondly, the unit was multi-national (although I didn't notice any of the famous blue berets). Thirdly, and most surprisingly, for the first time there was a member of the fairer sex in attendance with the unit. I had read about the combat-trained, hard-as-nails Amazons who now served on the frontline but never thought I would serve alongside one.

We gathered round for our pre-ops briefing. All around me was a desperate-looking crew resembling candidates of a Salvation Army drop-in shelter. Don was in sombre mood and stuck religiously to the cover story of constructing an Anderson shelter. However, it was soon apparent that the morning was to be devoted to special commando training. Teams were organised to carry huge logs on their shoulders. Others struggled under the weight of damn great concrete blocks, carried hither and thither.

One squad even dug fox holes and trenches. The female member of our intrepid unit had been allotted the most dangerous and arduous task of all and I felt a pang of sympathy for her every time I saw her emerge bedraggled from the undergrowth with yet another punnet of fresh-picked blackberries. (Not the blue berets mentioned earlier).

By midday not a single piece of the Anderson shelter was in place. But there were impressive ramparts around the base area designated for it. These fortifications resembled something between Fort Laramie and a Guy Fawkes spectacular. Finally, from our Army instructor we learned the art of placing camouflage netting to conceal earthworks and 'berms'. The result was that even we couldn't find where we'd been toiling for hours.

As we lay exhausted on the hard-baked ground we knew that the morning had been spent being honed into a steel-edged fighting force ready for what lay ahead of us. Tony summed up the mood for everyone with the succinct line "I work in an office, I'm not used to this – I'm bloody knackered." Trust the regulars to have their finger on the pulse.

As we consumed our lunch our thoughts turned to what might be in store for us after all that rigorous training. My greatest concern was ending up in Iraq, for I knew with absolute certainty that I had packed neither my Soltan lotion nor my flip flops.

Part II – The Mission

We were never told what our destination was. We were simply instructed to mount-up (I think that's what the gesture meant) and proceeded in convoy to a secret destination some miles distant. I cannot reveal its precise location, for not only would it put my life in danger but possibly the reader's as well. I will simply refer to it as "Hill 42".

We dismounted from our vehicles near a dense forest. The unit was now down to 12 men, the lady member having rushed home before the blackberries



What have we here?

spoiled. I was impressed with the quiet efficiency of these dedicated veterans. They went about their preparations with the ease and certainty of those who have done this a thousand times before. Only essential kit and tools were selected, for we needed to travel light. The signal was given, and with James on point, we moved off in single file through the fetid, tangled undergrowth. An eerie green gloom surrounded us and I began to appreciate how Wingate's Chindits must have felt in Burma.



Englishmen at work!

It took us only minutes to find THE HILL. It was impressive, its bulk rising a good two feet above our heads and stretching as far as the eye could see (without my glasses). We stopped, struck by the knowledge that this feature was both man-made and had been undisturbed for over 50 years. We may have been the first men to see this site for half a century.

We gathered round our steamed leader. In hushed tones Don gave us our SOP's for the day. We were to be split into four man units as per standard Special Ops procedure. Each unit would have one electronic warfare expert with a metal detector and three diggers. Unfortunately such was the clarity of our instructions that at first there was confused debate over who was going with whom.

At one stage all three metal detectors were in one group! However, to his credit, no tantrums were thrown by our CO, who simply muttered something about "You daft b-ggers" and eventually sorted out the muddle. One group would dig from the South, whilst a second would dig from the North. The third recce squad would be a roving patrol going where most needed.

We set to work, rigged for silent running, noise kept to a minimum. As the digging began all you could hear was the clink of steel on stone and the occasional squish of steel on flesh as someone got a foot or finger between spade and soil. Training and discipline triumphed here, and rather than agonised screams, only a few muttered oaths came forth. Within minutes, finds were coming thick and fast to the surface. Masses of broken crockery, some with dates of 1948/49. In the first few inches of soil we began to unearth not only broken glass but whole bottles, all of 1940s' design.

There were medicine bottles, (including several lung tonic bottles-?), aftershave bottles, Tizer bottles, sauce bottles, paste jars and several half-full bottles of belt blanco. One medicine bottle still had the cork inside and several others still had indeterminate fluids inside. These, and the various muddy metallic items were stacked carefully on Don's new jacket for protection (perhaps we should have cleaned them off first?)

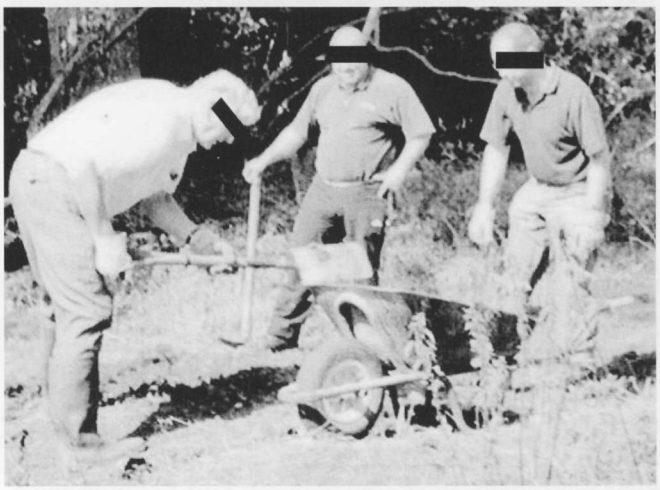


Overseeing!

Sadly, the 1948- stamped NAAFI cup fell into shards as it was lifted. But there were so many metal objects that the metal detectors proved useless. Most of these were unidentifiable as there had obviously been frequent bonfires on this site and much of the material was fused together in coagulated lumps. In some cases the heat had bent bottles into banana shapes without breaking them.

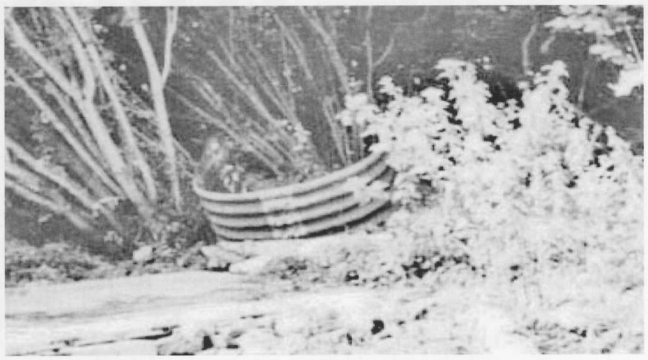
Many capacitors and other electronic components were unearthed, probably parts of radio equipment from the war and im-mediate post-war period. Practically every cubic foot of soil had some kind of find within it – a bit like a Topic bar has a hazelnut in every bite, (or is it squirrel dung?) Anyway, finds were stacked in heaps as the teams dug into the soft soil.

It was at this point that I, was selected for a separate mission. I cannot disclose details as you never know who might read this. What struck me was that as the smoking pipe stem was pointed in my direction I



Identities concealed at there own request.

realised that over the years I had changed from raw recruit to battle-scarred veteran without even realising



There, hiding in the undergrowth . . .

it. Now I was picked for elite squad activity where once I would have been discarded as a mere callow youth.

The three of us walked the short distance out of the forest into the sunlight, mounted up and drove off to complete our task. Within the hour we had returned. Now, we had walked out of the forest in a straight line for a distance of about 200 yards. On re-entering the forest it was immediately apparent that our officer had failed to mark the path. This brings me to some serious concerns about our policy of selecting leaders from the reserve lists and the mentally challenged. It really is essential on Special Ops to have officers with good orienteering skills. What had taken three minutes on the egress now took us 45 minutes on the ingress. Comments such as "I'm sure I recognise that tree" do not instil confidence in young troopers. Also, one can understand the asking of "where am I?" in these situations but "who am I?" does tend to unnerve those around. We hacked back and forth through the woods without success and eventually had to find the road and start again. Serious training needed here, certainly before our next operation. I also think we should ban Zimmer frames on active service.

By the time we had refound the unit the light was failing and rain was spattering the leafy canopy above us. We decided to call it a day, Saturday in this case.

This had been one of our most successful and rewarding operations to date.

We felt we had really achieved something that day and, as we turned to take a last look at that World War II site we realised how, in just three hours we had turned it into a close copy of a World War I battleground but the 'finds' bucket was overflowing and we had done our duty. Don can clean his own bl—dy jacket!

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