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**"BUTCHER AND BOLT":  
ADMIRAL ROGER KEYES AND  
BRITISH COMBINED OPERATIONS, 1940-1941**

by  
**Glen St. J. Barclay**

"Amphibious warfare and combined operations," claimed Admiral of the Fleet Lord Roger Keyes, shortly after having been dismissed by Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill from his post as Director of Combined Operations, "is a form of warfare which is responsible for the foundation of our great world-wide Empire."<sup>1</sup> It would indeed have been difficult for an island power to have acquired an empire any other way. Combined operations of one form or another certainly constituted the most characteristic mode of warfare adopted by the British during the period when Keyes was Director of Combined Operations. They were also, under his direction, the most conspicuously unrewarding in terms of practical military results.

Keyes' own introduction to combined operations was the bloody and unsuccessful assault on Gallipoli in 1915. He later commanded the great seaborne raid on Zeebrugge in 1918. This was also categorized by British official historians

primary purpose, the closure of the German U-boat base at Bruges.<sup>2</sup> Churchill nonetheless described it as "the greatest feat of arms in the Great War and certainly . . . unsurpassed in the history of the Royal Navy."<sup>3</sup>

Before the second world war assaults of this kind, but hopefully more successful, appealed to the Commander-in-Chief Plymouth Station, Admiral Sir Reginald Ernest-Ernle-Plunkett-Drax, as an appropriate offensive strategy for the United Kingdom in a future European war. He proposed to Admiral of the Fleet Lord Cork and Orrery in September 1937 that "one or two brigades of Royal Marines should be entered and specifically trained as an amphibious striking force. It would be of great value if even one division of the British Army could be given special training in combined operations."<sup>4</sup> In February 1939 Drax composed a memorandum pointing out that "the U.S. Royal Marines [sic] are regarded everywhere as a 'corps d'elite' because they

form the spearhead of every military expedition that is to be undertaken. For the above reason I would urge that the creation of a Royal Marine striking force of not less than one brigade should be fully considered at a very early date."<sup>5</sup>

Drax's proposal was endorsed by Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond on the very civilized grounds that "otherwise our offensive (in the major category) is confined to the damnable business of air bombing."<sup>6</sup> No action had however been taken before the German invasion of Poland raised the question of British intervention on the continent as an immediate practical problem. Keyes, then in retirement, called on Churchill "to suggest the possibility of a stroke which might be delivered with great effect by the Navy and RAF within the next 36 hours or so."<sup>7</sup> His proposal was not taken up. Nor was his subsequent offer to lead an expedition to occupy Iceland, even though he claimed that "the Royal Marines . . . would go anywhere in the world for me."<sup>8</sup> The 2d Royal Marine Battalion sailed for Reykjavik on 8 May 1940, but Keyes was not with them.<sup>9</sup>

The Iceland expedition could not be termed a "raid," in any event, involving as it did the landing of a permanent occupying force. But raids became a matter for serious consideration when it became apparent that the British Expeditionary Force was going to be either expelled from the Continent by the advancing Germans or forced to surrender. Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for War Sir Henry Page Croft asked his Minister, Anthony Eden, if there were not "wonderful beach landing places all along the Belgian and French coast line? Why not," he asked, "land separate battalions with four days rations, even if you have to bring them out again at night?"<sup>10</sup>

Churchill was highly responsive. He told Secretary of the Chiefs of Staff Committee General Sir Hastings L. Ismay on 4 June, only twenty-four hours

after the evacuation from Dunkirk had been completed, that "we should immediately set to work to organize raiding forces on these coasts where the population is friendly. Such forces might be composed of self-contained, thoroughly-equipped units of say one thousand up to ten thousand when combined." Churchill had already decided where these units were to come from. He told Ismay that "when the Australians arrive it is a question whether they should not be organized in detachments of 250 . . . capable of landing on the friendly coasts now held by the enemy . . . Enterprises must be prepared with specially-trained troops of the hunter class, who can develop a reign of terror down these coasts, first of all on the 'butcher and bolt' policy; but later on . . . we could surprise Calais or Boulogne, kill and capture the Hun garrison, and hold the place until all the preparations have been made to reduce it."<sup>11</sup>

The command structure was set up at once. Adjutant-General of the Royal Marines Lieutenant General Alan G. Bourne was appointed Commander, Offensive Operations, on 11 June 1940, with a directive to "harass the enemy and cause him to disperse his forces, and to create material damage, particularly on the coastline from Northern Norway to the western limit of German-occupied France."<sup>12</sup> Bourne was confirmed as Director of Combined Operations on 20 June. He began immediately to do the best he could in terms of his directive with what he had available.

On 24 June, 115 officers and enlisted men of the 11th Independent Company crossed the English Channel in eight Air-Sea Rescue launches of the RAF, in clear breach of the Geneva Convention regarding the use of such vessels. They landed at three points within a 20-mile radius of Boulogne. One group found nothing of interest. Another stalked a German seaplane, which eventually flew off, unaware of their presence. The third killed two German sentries in an

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affray at Le Toquet, during which the leader of the raiders had part of his ear shot off.<sup>13</sup>

This was not a very big deal, but it was not wholly unsuccessful. Bourne's next operation achieved total failure. Churchill had been particularly aggrieved by the bloodless German occupation of the Channel Islands. "If it be true," he wrote to Ismay, "that a few hundred German troops have been landed on Jersey or Guernsey by troop-carriers, plans should be studied to land secretly by night on the islands and kill or capture the invaders. This is exactly one of the exploits for which the Commandos would be suited . . . . The only possible reinforcements which could reach the enemy during the fighting would be by aircraft-carriers [presumably meaning troop-carriers], and here would be a good opportunity for the Air Force fighting machines."<sup>14</sup> It might have seemed an even better opportunity for the Luftwaffe, as the British coast was 90 miles from the Channel Islands at the nearest point, and the coast of German-occupied France only 25 miles distant.

It was, however, exactly the kind of operation that Croft had originally envisaged. He urged Eden to advise Churchill to "shell the Channel Islands to hell . . . work out a plan for the reconquest of the Channel Ports and holding a big area of North of France or Belgium, then if you are not strong enough to advance into Germany, let the enemy attack you until he has lost two million men."<sup>15</sup> Bourne's enterprise was not on quite such a scale.

On the night of 14 July, he sent 11th Independent Company and 3d Commando across the sea in two destroyers, landing them in seven Air-Sea Rescue launches. One launch broke down and its passengers had to be reembarked; another landed on the island of Sark by mistake and found nothing; and the party which actually reached Guernsey found nothing either and withdrew, leaving three nonswimmers behind.<sup>16</sup>

It was all, as Admiral Sir Ralph Edwards, Chief of Staff to Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, declared, "quite useless in results."<sup>17</sup>

Edwards found stronger terms to describe Churchill's response to Bourne's fiasco. "Roger Keyes is to become D.C.O.," he noted in horror. "Are we all barmy—God preserve us from the 'OLD GANG!' It'll lead to disaster."<sup>18</sup>

Churchill himself had no doubts that the appointment of Keyes to be Director of Combined Operations would be a change for the better. "The idea of working all these coasts up against us by pinprick raids and fulsome communique," he told Ismay, "is one to be strictly avoided. Sir Roger Keyes is now studying the whole subject of medium raids—i.e., by not less than five nor more than ten thousand men. Two or three of these might be brought off on the French coast during the winter . . . . After these medium raids have had their chance there will be no objection to stirring up the French coast by minor forays. During the spring and summer of 1941 large armoured irruptions must be contemplated."<sup>19</sup>

The Commandos were to be increased to this end to 6,000 men and the Independent Companies to 1,750, necessarily to the detriment of preparations being made to cope with the threat of an imminent German invasion. Chief of the Imperial General Staff General Sir Edmund Ironside complained bitterly that the War Office "continually, in their efforts, skim the cream off the jug for overseas operations, Northern Ireland and the Azores. I never know what things will not be taken away from me at any moment."

There was not much to take. Ironside felt that the defending forces were "so woefully thin on the ground" that there was "no doubt that the Germans might effect a landing at any point and with little warning . . . . Every portion of the coast at which I look seems weaker

than the other and the troops less trained and more unhandy."<sup>20</sup>

It was at this point that Churchill instructed the Chiefs of Staff to prepare for an operation against the port of Dakar in French West Africa, despite their warning that "an occupation by land forces in the face of French resistance would be an operation . . . for which we have not at present the forces available."<sup>21</sup>

The proposed action against Dakar was not indeed conceived as a raid, although it was largely inspired by the need to put the new French battleship *Richelieu* out of action. Its primary purpose was to land Gaullist forces in French West Africa, in the hope that this would induce the French colonial territories to reenter the war against the Axis. It did, however, necessarily involve a massive combined operations exercise, at precisely the time when decyphered German messages indicated that the invasion of Britain itself could be expected.<sup>22</sup> It was thus not surprising that the Chiefs of Staff were bitterly unwilling to give what Keyes regarded as adequate attention to the project. "The truth of the matter," he complained, "is, the Army has raised some irregular troops, but has not equipped them yet . . . the Navy . . . has failed to provide the ships and landing-craft to prosecute amphibious warfare. The Air Ministry puts every obstacle in the way of carrying them overseas by air. It is not easy to get on with the war."<sup>23</sup> Getting on with the war was no doubt what the harassed Chiefs thought they were doing, at the very height of the Battle of Britain.

Churchill nonetheless called on 31 August for a plan to land Gaullist troops at Casablanca after a successful completion of the Dakar enterprise. This was followed on 2 September by a demand for "a plan for the recapture of the Channel Islands." Keyes was overjoyed. He had no doubt that "a coup de main at Casablanca could succeed under

resolute Commander." As for the Channel Islands, "promptly that [sic] the German invasion is defeated or definitely frustrated, we should seize . . . and hold them. Moon and tides are suitable between 28th Sept and 8th October," he added precisely.<sup>24</sup>

Responsibility for the Dakar venture was allotted to Gen. Noel M. Irwin of the Royal Marines as, owing to the threat of invasion, on 10 September, the Commandos themselves had been placed under the control of Commander in Chief Home Forces. Irwin's task was simply hopeless. General notice of the expedition had been given by the tendency of Gaullist officers to drink toasts *à Dakar* at Simpson's or in Liverpool bars. The Gaullists were likely to be a liability in other senses as well. They had no training at all in landing from boats, and would thus be utterly useless in the actual assault.

There were also some extraordinary logistic and administrative snafus. Chief of these was the fact that there was no overall commander of the operation, and consequently no special headquarters ship from which to command. The naval forces were under the orders of Adm. Sir John H.D. Cunningham, who flew his flag in the cruiser *Devonshire*. Cunningham was supposed to share authority equally with Irwin who was sailing in the battleship *Barham*, in company with Gen. Charles de Gaulle, who of course was in undisputed command of the Free French contingent. The *Barham's* main role was to engage the French battleship *Richelieu* and carry out long-range bombardment of the forts. So Irwin on occasion found himself sailing out to sea to avoid the very accurate French gunfire, while the troops he commanded were heading in a quite different direction.

Apart from that, equipment had been stowed in quite haphazard fashion in the transports, so nobody knew where everything was; the transports had to communicate with the rest of the

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expedition by signal lamps, as there were not enough trained wireless operators; and Irwin and his staff had one typewriter with which to make 200 copies of 140 pages of Operational Orders. But the most serious aspect of the whole affair, apart from the fact that it was a total fiasco, was that it required an aircraft carrier, two battleships, four cruisers and 10 destroyers to be absent from home waters, at a time when every man, ship, and airplane might have been needed for the immediate defense of the United Kingdom itself.

Dakar served mainly to give the British another experience of defeat when they needed it least. De Gaulle's approaches were rejected; the battleship *Resolution* and the cruiser *Cumberland* were badly damaged; and four Fleet Air Arm fighters were shot down by the defending French P-36s. A French destroyer and two submarines were sunk, but this was hardly the object of the exercise.

All this naturally strengthened the determination of the Chiefs of Staff not to allow their exiguous resources to be siphoned off to serve what had so far proved to be unrewarding operations. Chief of Air Staff Sir Cyril Newall flatly rejected Keyes' demand that 6 fighter and 4 bomber squadrons be made available at once for Combined Operations. Newall protested that the Air Force, alone of the Services, was engaged in a continuous day and night battle with the enemy and could not afford to divert squadrons for specialized training for peripheral operations.<sup>25</sup> On the same day, Keyes got himself involved in an even more unfortunate issue of inter-Service rivalry. He told Brigadier Anthony St.Clair-Montford, Bourne's successor as Adjutant General of the Royal Marines, to prepare his men for garrison duties in the Azores when the islands had been captured by the Commandos. St.Clair-Montford responded furiously to Ismay that the "whole of the training of the Brigade since its

inception had been directed towards making them capable of landing against opposition . . . and the use of other troops is the greatest blow to the pride and tradition of the Royal Marine Corps since its foundation over 250 years ago."<sup>26</sup>

Ismay referred St. Clair-Montford's letter to Churchill, who showed it to Keyes. The latter was quite unmoved. "As a marine," he commented, "he not unnaturally disapproves of my irregular troops in principle—as of course they are doing marines' work."<sup>27</sup> But he did not address himself to the real question of why the Commandos should be doing marines' work at all. Drax had certainly envisaged that soldiers should be trained in combined operations to supplement a striking force of marines. But the essence was that the Royal Marines should constitute the spearhead of any seaborne assault themselves, and should be augmented to this end. Keyes seemed rather to be thinking in terms of using irregulars to fulfill the role that Drax assigned to the marines, instead of just recruiting more marines. The logic was not clear. What was clear was that Keyes' claim that the Royal Marines would go anywhere in the world for him had just lost a lot of its credibility.

This was not the only problem of logic or principle bedeviling the strategy of combined operations. Churchill and Keyes both believed that the Italian attack upon Greece opened new possibilities for sea or airborne assaults against the weaker Axis partner. They were not, however, concerned to distinguish between hit-and-run raids and orthodox landings with a view to permanent occupation, which would clearly require different tactics and different equipment.

London was seething with plans. Churchill strongly advocated the capture of the Italian island of Pantellaria, between Sicily and Tunisia. Croft came up with a proposal for an invasion of France and the Low Countries with

"twenty motor battalions, four armoured divisions and forty infantry divisions," which the British did not in fact possess at the time.<sup>28</sup> Keyes told the Prime Minister emotionally that "no doubt it was ordained on the battlefield of Blenheim that you would lead the British Empire to victory in this critical hour. But I am sure it was also ordained on the battlefield of Gallipoli that I would help you to this end."<sup>29</sup> He then stormed into the office of Assistant Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sir Henry Harwood, to tell him that what the Navy lacked nowadays was guts.

Harwood indignantly reported that event to Admiral Sir James Somerville, Commander in Chief of Force H in the Mediterranean. Somerville commented bitterly that "R.K. is another of Winston's pets. He has no responsibility and thinks only of glorifying the name of R.K. He doesn't take any long view as to what our policy should be when we're in a position to strike really hard."<sup>30</sup>

It was certainly unfortunate that the Director of Combined Operations should have succeeded in uniting the three Services only in opposition to himself, especially at a time when the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet were totally confused as to where and how to strike next.

Churchill continued to favor the occupation of Pantellaria. Keyes was enamored of raids on the Dodecanese, Rhodes, and Castellorizo, all Italian-held islands in or near the Aegean, with the option of permanent occupation. The Chiefs of Staff themselves thought that the occupation of Sicily would be "a move of great strategic importance . . . with a view to denying it to German forces."<sup>31</sup> Churchill however argued instead for the occupation of Sardinia. Finally, Hugh Dalton, Churchill's Minister of Economic Warfare, recommended a raid on Norway's Lofoten Islands "where the fishing is at its height and where there are industrial plants to convert the catch into oil,

meal and other by-products."<sup>32</sup>

While the British argued, the Germans acted. The Luftwaffe arrived in Sicily in January 1941, altering fundamentally the military balance in the Mediterranean and both forestalling any British landing on that island and at the same time demonstrating the military wisdom of such an operation, if it could have been carried out in time.

Keyes nonetheless determined to push on with his own projects and the Sardinian operation as well as with an airborne raid "for cutting off the water supply of towns in the heel of Italy by dropping parachutists to destroy the Apulian Aqueduct . . . . A submarine is to visit the coast of Italy at a prearranged position to bring off the party, using either 18-foot punts or several Berthon boats for the embarkation." Churchill noted in the margin: "I approve WSC."<sup>33</sup>

The threat to the success of any of these operations posed by German dive bombers based in Sicily was simply dismissed. "The risk of being knocked out by them is greatly exaggerated," wrote Keyes to Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal, "especially against stout hearted people like mine, who will sit down and take them on with Bren guns."<sup>34</sup> Portal referred this perception of Keyes to Commander-in-Chief Mediterranean Fleet Adm. Sir Andrew B. Cunningham, who had recent and vivid experience of the effectiveness of German dive bombers against British warships.

Cunningham wrote privately to First Sea Lord Pound, expressing the hope that Keyes would not himself be present when any of the proposed seaborne assaults against the Italian islands were carried out. Pound showed the letter to Churchill, who passed it on to Keyes, who responded by denouncing the "hostility and timidity" of Pound himself; proposed that the Chiefs of Staff and their Joint Committees be thrown overboard; and that he himself be

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appointed Under Secretary of Defense, Chief of Naval Staff, or First Lord of the Admiralty or as a last resort be dropped "out of an aeroplane in North Africa, somewhere near Weygand, and I will do my best to bring him and the French Navy in on our side."<sup>35</sup>

Churchill was initially almost as annoyed as Keyes by Cunningham's note. Pound was barely able to dissuade the Prime Minister from addressing a severe personal reprimand to the C.-n.-C. Mediterranean Fleet. Keyes' letter abruptly reminded Churchill that he could not afford to appease apparently irrational advisers at the expense of rational ones. It was, he told Keyes, "quite impossible for me to receive a letter of this character . . . . If you wish to write on matters affecting the Commandos, pray do so to General Ismay."<sup>36</sup> Keyes' response was to offer to resign. "If you cannot make a satisfactory change," he told Churchill, "I must ask you to release me. To acquiesce in the existing conditions would be to condone inefficiency which is seriously impeding the prosecution of the war and thus delaying victory."<sup>37</sup>

Effective cooperation could hardly be hoped for in such a climate of antagonism and mistrust. It was not surprising that the airborne raid on the Apulian Aqueduct proved to be perhaps the most totally mishandled operation in the unhappy history of combined operations. Two Whitley and five Bombay troop carriers dropped 36 Royal Engineers in the target area.

Nothing else went according to plan. One of the aircraft developed engine trouble and was forced to land, signaling as it did that "they would be at the point of embarkation and naming the place." The Vice Admiral in Charge, Malta, who was responsible for reembarking the raiders, decided that the signal would most likely have been intercepted by the Italians, and ordered the submarine not to proceed to the rendezvous.<sup>38</sup>

The raiders never got there either.

They discovered that the supports of the aqueduct were not made of masonry, as they had been advised, but of reinforced concrete, against which their charges would have been useless. They accordingly blew up the first bridge they came across, took to the hills, and eventually surrendered to the local police.

All that remained was to assign responsibility for the fiasco. This should have been easy. Faulty intelligence had made the success of the operation impossible in any event, and the commanders of the troop carriers should have been instructed under no circumstances to reveal the location of the rendezvous. Keyes however reserved his condemnations for Vice Admiral, Malta, who had taken an unpalatable but unavoidable decision, which in the event had no effect upon the actual fate of the raiders. "In view of the fact that there is 100 fathoms of water within seven miles of the rescue position," Keyes told Churchill, "I consider our failure to carry out the salvage arrangements, promised to the parachutists, amounts to a clear breach of faith."<sup>39</sup>

Churchill himself told Ismay that he did not "remember having been consulted in any way upon this proposal to land parachute troops in Italy . . . . The use of parachute troops was a serious step to take, in view of the invasion aspect here."<sup>40</sup> But Ismay, who was never just a simple soldier, produced the memorandum in the margin of which Churchill had noted his approval of just such a proposal.

This episode was followed within a fortnight by two more combined snafus. One, an attempt to land Commandos on the island of Kasos in the Dodecanese on 14 February aborted, because the tides had not been charted correctly. The other was an unqualified defeat. The cruiser *Bonaventure*, the destroyers *Decoy* and *Hereward*, and the gunboat *Ladybird* closed Castellorizo at dawn on 25 February 1941. Some 200 Commandos were landed, along with 25



Royal Marines from the *Ladybird*. The Italian opposition was quickly overwhelmed. However, the force came under air attack, during which the *Ladybird* was damaged and forced to retire. Even more unfortunately, the captain of the *Ladybird* decided to reembark his marines before sailing back to Alexandria, assuming that they had done their specific job and would not be required further.

Meanwhile the officer in charge of the operation, R. Adm. Harold T. Baillie-Grohman, had decided that the permanent garrison would have to be landed at night, because of the threat from air attack. Accordingly he ordered the rest of the squadron back to Alexandria as well, intending to return on the evening of the 26th, bringing reinforcements from Cyprus. The *Hereward* was first ordered to investigate a report that an enemy ship had entered the harbor. When no contact was made, Baillie-Grohman signaled to return to Alexandria. The following morning two Italian destroyers landed 300 troops after a brief bombardment. The Commandos were hemmed in by sundown, and forced to surrender. This seemed to Cunningham to indicate a basic weakness of Keyes' irregulars. "These Commandos we have out here," he told Pound, "are on a tommy-gun and knuckle-duster basis and can't defend themselves if seriously attacked. I had sent 25 Marines bristling with machine-guns, but some fool ordered them to re-embark." The fact that the Navy had failed to distinguish itself either he attributed to the fact that Baillie-Grohman, "though I did not know at the time was unfortunately a sick man. This accounts for much and accounts largely for lack of resolution and judgment displayed by some of those concerned in operation . . . I must admit to having underestimated enterprise of the enemy and the effort they would make to frustrate our occupation."<sup>41</sup> Having accepted responsibility

himself, Cunningham then appointed a committee of inquiry to investigate the reasons for the failure. Chairman of the committee was Admiral Baillie-Grohman, who Cunningham believed to be primarily to blame. The Navy looks after its own.

Churchill's attention was fortunately distracted at the time from this minor disaster by a minor triumph which went under the code name "Claymore." On the night of 3 March, five destroyers escorted two landing ships to the Lofoten Islands, with 3rd and 4th Commandos on board. A German armed trawler was sunk, 315 Norwegian volunteers and 225 German prisoners and collaborators were taken off, five small ships were destroyed, and 11 fish-oil factories and 800,000 gallons of oil were left on fire. For the first and only time, everything did in fact go according to plan. It was unfortunate that the full propaganda value of the affair was impaired by the difficulty of making fish-oil sound serious. The Germans themselves were in fact able to make some propaganda mileage out of the raid, claiming that "only a country which has sunk so low as England could have attempted such a Don Quixote action."<sup>42</sup>

Churchill was perfectly justified in telling Keyes that "the unqualified success of Claymore says much for the care and skill with which it was planned and the determination with which it was executed."<sup>43</sup> However, Goebbels was also right. The main reason why the British were undertaking small raids like Claymore was that they were in no position to carry out more substantial military operations.

Commando raids were essentially in the same category as *guerres de course* or guerrilla warfare. They were the recourse of the weaker side, adopted because of the impossibility of adopting the methods of the stronger. They could never be more than pinpricks, possibly irritating or distracting the Germans, but utterly ineffective in terms of

military significance. They could in fact be positively counterproductive. One of the major objectives of the raids was to enhance British morale. But this could obviously be the case only when the raids were successful. Most of the raids before Claymore could only have improved German and even Italian morale.

Far more serious was the danger that the strategy of combined operations was drawing away resources for trivial purposes which were desperately needed by the conventional Services to stave off the imminent danger of total defeat.

British military prospects had indeed never seemed more depressing than in the spring of 1941. Keyes had nonetheless never been more euphoric. On 11 April, two days after the Germans had broken through the Greek defenses at Salonika and trapped the Australian 9th Division in Tobruk, he suggested that it was "an excellent opportunity to give the German defence in the Channel a real good run for their money . . . we might have a free-for-all of everything that can hit on the South Coast and count the bag in the morning!" The Director of Combined Operations did not seem to know that the British simply did not possess enough landing craft to transport a force across the Channel that could cause any real concern to the German forces awaiting them. Nor did he seem able to appreciate even a military reality so tangible as the effectiveness of German dive bombers. The "fear of air attack," he told Churchill, "has been the keynote of the 'NO' mens' [sic] strategy."<sup>43</sup>

But even Keyes' sympathizers must have been having serious doubts as to his complete rationality. He informed Eden that "the Almighty has given me an instinct for war and the vision to see what is essential in its prosecution! I could give many proofs. Moreover I have always been lucky. Winston would be wise to make me C-in-C and

Governor-General of the Atlantic Islands."<sup>46</sup>

This was ominous indeed. The Prime Minister did, however, give Keyes one more chance to employ his Commandos. This was to be a combined operation in support of the Australian 7th Division, which had just been sent into Syria. A force of 420 Commandos, including Keyes' own son, Maj. George C. Keyes, was to land north of the Litani River, while the Australians attacked from the south. It was Murphy's Law in untrammelled operation once again. Everything that could go wrong, did. Major Keyes' own party landed south of the Litani, and had to be ferried across by the unimpressed Australians, for whom they were supposed to have secured bridgeheads. The two groups which landed north of the river as planned were promptly taken prisoner by the French. The irrepressible D.C.O. claimed that "the success of this operation . . . illustrated the value of the Commando troops and this form of warfare."<sup>47</sup> But the Australian official historian seemed to be on safer ground in describing the raid as "ill-arranged," and insisting that the eventual victory of the Australians was gained "despite the . . . ill-planned and costly landing by the Commandos."<sup>48</sup>

Litani would certainly have done nothing to enhance Keyes' credibility in the eyes of the Chiefs of Staff, or to make them more sympathetic to the general concept of combined operations. They were outraged beyond measure when Keyes then attempted to detach units of the Canadian divisions in the United Kingdom for specialized training with the Commandos, without consulting the Commander in Chief Home Forces Gen. Sir Alan Brooke.<sup>49</sup> The Chiefs protested bitterly to Churchill. Keyes defended himself by claiming that he was "now in a position to prevent the Chiefs of Staff from losing the war, but they will certainly postpone victory . . . Their chief objective seems to be to array all

the difficulties and dangers of any offensive operation."<sup>50</sup>

When this brought no response except a violent personal confrontation with the harassed Prime Minister, Keyes pleaded that: "I hope you realised that I am trying to serve you and the country by pointing out how damnably you are being let down in connection with the conduct of amphibious warfare."<sup>51</sup> But Churchill had finally been driven to the conviction that it was impossible for Keyes and the Chiefs of Staff to work together harmoniously, and impossible for him to go on supporting Keyes against the opposition of all three conventional services. "Your title of 'Director,'" he told Keyes cuttingly, "does not correspond with the facts . . . I am convinced that excursions from this country to the continent, unless entrusted to specially chosen commanders, must have behind them the authority and resources of G.H.Q. Home Forces . . . I should find it very hard to resist the advice of all my responsible experts."<sup>52</sup>

When this failed to subdue Keyes, Churchill took the final step on 4 October 1941, replacing him as Director of Combined Operations by Commodore Lord Louis Mountbatten. "I have to consider first my duty to the State which ranks above personal friendship," he wrote. "In all the circumstances I have no choice but to arrange for your relief."<sup>53</sup> Keyes seemed incapable of comprehending the situation. "Make me C.N.S. [Chief of Naval Staff]," he begged the Prime Minister. "If Alexander won't take me as First Sea Lord, for the second time! Why not make me First Lord. What is the use of having a first lord in war time like Alexander?— who understands *nothing* about war."<sup>54</sup>

No answer was possible. None was given. There was still a tragic final scene to be played. Six weeks after Keyes had been sacked, his son led a Commando raid on Beda Littoria on the Libyan coast, in an attempt to assassinate

German General Irwin Rommel. The raid was a total failure. Fifty-seven out of 59 men of 11th Commando were lost, including Maj. George Keyes, who was killed in action.

The appointment of Keyes as Director of Combined Operations seemed inspired at the time. It proved to be both a personal and military disaster. Two fundamental weaknesses can be identified, apart from the very serious question of the mental or emotional stability of Keyes himself.

Combined operations required by definition the harmonious and mutually supportive cooperation of the three conventional British Services. Keyes, however, deliberately went out of his way to offend or intrigue against the very people upon whose good will his own success totally depended. Still more serious was his failure to recognize the essential difference in tactical doctrine between raids and invasions.

This was not indeed a failing unique to Keyes himself. The British had traditionally conceived of amphibious warfare essentially in terms of landing an army for continental service on a friendly or at least neutral shore. The Royal Marines had never been developed like the U.S. Marines as a permanent self-sufficient invasion force, with its own artillery, armor, and air arm. The prospect of having actually to assault unfriendly shores left the British with two obvious alternatives. They could expand the Royal Marines to take on a vastly more ambitious role. Or they could train units of the Army to act in the seaborne assault capacity normally

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## BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

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regarded as appropriate to Marines. They chose a third alternative, the Commandos.

But the Commandos were in fact trained as raiders rather than as assault troops. They relied on surprise and evasion, rather than on their capacity to storm defended positions and hold them against an organized counterattack. There is nothing surreptitious or

evasive about a seaborne invasion. A totally different tactical doctrine was required. The fiascos of the Channel Islands, the Apulian Aqueduct, Castellorizo, the Litani River, and Beda Littoria were merely underlined by the final catastrophe of Dieppe. The most important military lesson to be learned from Commando raids was how not to invade enemy-occupied Europe.<sup>55</sup>

### NOTES

1. Lord Roger Keyes, *Amphibious Warfare and Combined Operations* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. 7. No fully documented study of British combined operations has yet been published. The most useful works available to date are: Loben E. Maund, *Assault From the Sea* (London: Methuen, 1949); Sir Bernard Fergusson, *The Watery Maze* (London: Collins, 1961); and James Ladd, *The Royal Marines, 1919-1980* (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1980). Sir Basil Liddell Hart provides a characteristically perceptive overview in his foreword to Robert D. Heinl, *Soldiers of the Sea, the United States Marine Corps 1775-1962* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, 1962). For what might be termed the philosophy of combined operations, see Kenneth J. Clifford, "On Parallel Courses: An Analysis of British and American Amphibious (Combined) Operations, 1932-1940," Unpublished thesis, University of London; and Sir Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911), of which Churchill was an enthusiastic reader.

2. Zeebrugge is assessed as a failure by Admiral Sir William Jameson, *The Most Formidable Thing* (London: Hart-Davis, 1965); Sir Ernest L. Woodward, *Great Britain and the War of 1914-1918* (London: Methuen, 1967); and by the official historian Sir Henry Newbolt, *Naval Operations* (London: Longmans, Green, 1931). Nobody ever suggested that Gallipoli was a success.

3. Winston S. Churchill, *The World Crisis, 1918* (London: Butterworth, 1927), v. II, pp. 370-371.

4. Sir Reginald Albert Ranfurly Ernest-Plunkett-Drax to Lord Cork and Orrery, 3 September 1937, Drax Papers, file 2/8, Churchill College Archives Center (hereafter cited as CCAC).

5. Memorandum by Drax, "Royal Marine Striking Force," February 1939, Drax Papers, file 2/9, CCAC.

6. Sir Herbert Richmond to Drax, 4 January 1939, Drax Papers, file 2/8, CCAC.

7. Sir Roger Keyes to Winston S. Churchill, 7 September 1939, Keyes Papers, file 13/12, CCAC.

8. Keyes to Churchill, 26 April 1940, Keyes Papers, file 13/13, CCAC.

9. Donald E. Bittner, "The British Occupation of Iceland 1940-1942," Unpublished thesis, University of Missouri, part I, pp. 171-182.

10. Sir Henry Page Croft to Anthony Eden, 28 May 1940, Croft Papers, file 2/4, III/2/1, CCAC.

11. Churchill to Sir Hastings L. Ismay, 4 June 1940, in Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* (London: Cassell, 1951), pp. 204-207.

12. Directive to General Bourne, "Raiding Operations," 17 June 1940, Keyes Papers, file 13/1, CCAC.

13. Fergusson, pp. 48-49; British Ministry of Information, "Combined Operations 1940-1942." (London: Her Majesty's Govt. Print. Off., 1943), pp. 24-25.

14. Churchill to Ismay, 2 July 1940, in Churchill, *Their Finest Hour*, p. 504.

15. Croft to Eden, 28 June 1940, Croft Papers, file 2/4, III/12/1-7, CCAC.

16. Fergusson, p. 49.

17. Sir Ralph Edwards Diaries, 15 July 1940, Edwards Papers, file 1/2, CCAC.

18. *Ibid.*, 18 July 1940.

19. Churchill to Ismay, 27 July 1940, Keyes Papers, file 13/1, CCAC.

20. Roderick Macleod and Denis Kelly, eds., *The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940* (London: Constable, 1962), pp. 372-374.

21. Chiefs of Staff to War Cabinet, 29 July 1940, War Cabinet Papers, C.O.S. (40), 585, Public Record Office (hereafter cited as PRO).

22. Frederick W. Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (New York: Harper, 1974), p. 69.

23. Keyes to Ismay, 27 August 1940, Operational Papers of the Prime Minister's Office, Premier 3/330/7, *Correspondence with Sir Roger Keyes*, PRO.

24. Keyes to Churchill, 6 and 11 September 1940, Premier 3/330/7, PRO.

26. Anthony A. St.Clair-Montford to Ismay, 16 October 1940, Premier 3/330/7, PRO.
27. Keyes to Churchill, 31 October 1940, *ibid.*
28. Croft to Sir Robert Haining, 29 November 1940, Croft Papers, file 2/4, III/19/8, CCAC.
29. Keyes to Churchill, 16 December 1940, Premier 3/330/7, PRO.
30. Sir James F. Somerville to Lady Somerville, 31 December 1940, Somerville Papers, file 3/22, CCAC.
31. Sir Dudley Pound to Andrew B. Cunningham, 31 December 1940, Premier 3/350, *Picket Operation (attack on Tirto Dam)*, PRO.
32. Hugh Dalton to Churchill, 17 January 1941, Premier 3/328/7, *Clamore Operation (Lofoten Islands)*, PRO.
33. Ismay to Churchill, 28 January 1941, Premier 3/100, *Colossus Operation (Raid in Italy)*, PRO.
34. Keyes to Sir Charles Portal, 25 January 1941, Keyes Papers, file 13/5, CCAC.
35. Keyes to Churchill, 4 February 1941, Paul G. Halpern, ed., *The Keyes Papers, Vol. III, 1939-1945* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 147-152.
36. Churchill to Keyes, 6 February 1941, Premier 3/330/7, PRO.
37. Keyes to Churchill, 6 February 1941, *ibid.*
38. Sir Wilbraham T. Ford to Cunningham, 13 February 1941, Premier 3/100, PRO.
39. Keyes to Churchill, 13 February 1941, *ibid.*
40. Churchill to Ismay, 15 February 1941, *ibid.*
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42. Nigel Nicolson, ed. *Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters, 1939-1945* (London: Collins, 1965), v. II, p. 151.
43. Churchill to Keyes, 7 March 1941, Premier 3/328/7, PRO.
44. Minutes of Conference in Upper War Room 1130 Friday, 11 April 1941, *ibid.*
45. Keyes to Churchill, 30 April 1941, Keyes Papers, file 13/9, CCAC.
46. Keyes to Eden, 12 May 1941, Keyes Papers, file 13/15, CCAC.
47. Keyes, *Amphibious Warfare and Combined Operations*, p. 92.
48. Gavin Long, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1939-1945: Greece, Crete and Syria* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1962), p. 367.
49. Sir Leslie C. Hollis to Keyes, 1 July 1941, Keyes Papers, file 13/8, CCAC.
50. Keyes to Churchill, 2 September 1941, Premier 3/330/7, PRO.
51. Keyes to Churchill, 5 September 1941, *ibid.*
52. Churchill to Keyes, 30 September 1941, Keyes Papers, file 13/13, CCAC.
53. Churchill to Keyes, 4 October 1941, *ibid.*
54. Keyes to Churchill, 6 October 1941, *ibid.*
55. Admiral Maund actually claims that no worthwhile lessons at all were learned from the early Commando raids, either because what was learned was inappropriate, or because the real lessons were forgotten. See Maund, p. 112.

