

75TH BATTLE OF LEROS

international meeting, municipal theater of Lakki - Leros, sept 26th 2018

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Special Force operations leading up to Leros

In March 1943, British Special Forces underwent a fundamental shift in focus and structure. They had not long since lost their founder and wartime leader, David Stirling who had been captured and imprisoned in Colditz, the war had also shifted from North Africa to the northern reaches of the Mediterranean and Europe. Normandy and Sicily had become the next two great goals.

The Special Air Service, Stirling's innovative Special Forces, had become unwieldy, unfocused and in need of new challenge. The 500 plus unit was split into two new groups, the new Special Raiding Squadron (SRS) under Paddy Mayne and the new 250-man Special Boat Service (SBS) under the command of Stirling's previous nominal No.2, Major, the 2nd Earl Jellicoe. With him went most of the old SAS D Squadron, elements of the Greek Sacred Squadron, Colonel Tsigantes' Leros Lochos and the 55 men of David Sutherland's Special Boat Section (SBS) which had incorporated the old Roger Courtney's No.8 Commando Folboat group.

The men with Jellicoe included some extraordinary individual soldiers: Andy Lassen, the Dane who would become the only non-Commonwealth recipient of the Victoria Cross, Britain's highest award for gallantry, Fitzroy Maclean, the British politician who would fight with Tito's guerillas in Yugoslavia, John Verney who would write such memorable memories as *A Dinner with Herbs* and others. Australians, Americans and Greeks like Jason Mavrikis and Stefan Casulli and Pavlides. They were a mixed bag. Little outward signs of military decorum but men of extraordinary courage, determination and "nose". His commanders, Sutherland, Lapraik, Milner-Barry were exceptional.

The new group's focus was the Aegean, their first task to create the diversionary illusion of allied intentions to draw attention from Sicily and to pin down much needed German divisions to defend islands rather than the more central European targets in Italy or France. The overall commander, Colonel Henry 'Kid' Cator, to whom not only Jellicoe reported but also other special forces groups effectively became the first Director of Special Forces (DSF) a role that Stirling had wanted to build for himself. Alongside the SBS were also the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), the Levant Schooner Flotilla, Leros Lochos and the Vladimir Peniakoff's group, nicknamed Popski's Private Army (PPA).

1942 and the first half of 1943 were focused on island raiding. In early September 1943, with Mussolini's fall and Marshall Bagdolio's decision to throw his lot in with the allies, new opportunities and priorities emerged: Churchill decided that this was the moment to use the Dodecanese as a means to encourage Turkish entry to the war or at least allied access through Turkey to new supply or assault routes. His thinking was strongly contrary to Greek interests. Special Forces would be used to pave and prepare the way for a stronger assault, first on Rhodes and then on the Dodecanese island chain. When Jellicoe failed in the almost impossible task of winning over Admiral Campioni's acquiescence, the subsequent island strategy should have been rethought. Without the air cover Rhodes could have provided,

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any under-strength assault was bound to be definitively disadvantaged from the very start.

Churchill was not to be dissuaded. The Dodecanese folly, despite the heroic efforts of all those involved in the fighting, ran its course and led to one of the last major battlefield defeats for the British army in World War Two.

The LRDG lost their leader: Jake Easonsmith was killed on the last day of the fight for Leros. Jellicoe sent his number two off the island in case the same should occur. The SBS which had been so important in setting up the initial defences and supplying continuous battlefield intelligence switched all too often to a role in which its cunning and skills were used to save what remnants from capture by ferrying troops off the fallen islands to fight another day.

One year later, on November 14 1944, after arriving on a bicycle, Jellicoe would lead his troops into Athens as the Germans pulled out and before ELAS communist guerrillas could gain a foothold in the nation's capital. Side by side with the regional Military commander, General Spiliotopoulos, he reviewed his troops from the balcony of the Hotel d'Angleterre on Syntagma Square. After the war, Greece was never far from Jellicoe's heart. In homage to the time fighting together for Greece's freedom, the wartime commander of the Leros Lochos, Christodoulos Tsigantes, lay at rest beside where Jellicoe would later be buried in a small cemetery at the latter's Wiltshire home. When Greece was free from the military Junta, Tsigantes's body was taken back to Athens by a platoon of Evzones. While Jellicoe was buried in soil that was brought from Greece by one of his Greek SBS comrades.