Combined Operations and Raiding, Part I (1940–41)

The birth of Combined Operations

Four days before the British, French and Polish troops withdrew from Narvik, the last evacuation ships left Dunkirk on the night of 3–4 June 1940. The Norwegian debacle had been preceded by a far more serious crisis. Although the French continued to fight for another two weeks, the British Army had been effectively ejected from mainland Europe. Churchill subsequently wrote of the ‘feeling of the intense relief, melting almost into triumph’ that the ‘safe homecoming of a quarter of a million men, the flower of our Army’ engendered. Yet essentially the situation was bleak. The British strategy for the defeat of Germany that had rested on the alliance with France was utterly destroyed. Lieutenant-Colonel Dudley Clarke, a senior staff officer to General Sir John Dill, the newly appointed chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), recalled that

The mind of the entire Nation – and above all of the Army – had been turned violently to defence to the exclusion of all else. The defence of Great Britain, urgent and immediate was the one thought in everyone’s mind and there were few who paused a moment to think in terms of offence on the hundreds of miles of defenceless coastline which lay between Narvik and Biarritz.

Dill was one of the few. He told Clarke to come up with some ideas to distract the Germans from their invasion preparations and ‘to restore the offensive spirit to the British Army’ which had known little but defeat thus far. Clarke had read Commando, Deneys Reitz’s book on the Boer War, which provided the inspiration both for the method of taking the war back to the Germans and the name for the soldiers who would do so. The Boer Commandos provided a model for the highly mobile and lightly armed raiding force that Clarke envisaged. He had also experienced guerrilla warfare first-hand while serving in Palestine during the Arab Revolt of 1936. He had
seen how ‘a handful of ill-armed fanatics’ could ‘dissipate the strength of more than an Army Corps of regular troops’. He took his ideas back to Dill on 5 June. The CIGS spoke to the prime minister who unsurprisingly expressed enthusiasm for these ‘specially-trained troops of the hunter class, who can develop a reign of terror down on these [enemy-occupied] coasts’, and thus Clarke rapidly received approval for his scheme. He was told to form Commando units and launch cross-Channel raids as quickly possible. The Royal Marines, the natural choice for amphibious operations, were otherwise engaged manning the Navy’s coastal defences and ships, or involved in the formation of the Royal Marine Division. No existing Army formations were available, so Clarke launched a recruiting drive for volunteers.

On 14 June, Lieutenant-General Alan Bourne, Adjutant-General of the Royal Marines, was appointed Commander of Raiding Operations and Advisor to the Chiefs of Staff on Combined Operations. He was instructed to develop inter-service training methods and was given control of the Independent Companies that had operated in Norway, and the newly created parachute unit, as well as setting up the Commandos. ‘The object of raiding operations’, his Chiefs of Staff (COS) directive ran, ‘will be to harass the enemy and cause him to disperse his forces, and to create material damage particularly on the coast line from Northern Norway to the western limit of German occupied France’. The hastily planned and prepared first such operation, code-named Collar, was launched a few days later on the night of 23–24 June.

Collar was hardly an auspicious start. The fighting patrols landed between Etaples and Boulogne resulted in two German deaths and the first Commando casualty. Bourne recounted that a German patrol ‘opened fire and Colonel Dudley Clarke was hit behind the ear’. Bourne had only allowed Clarke to accompany the raid if he did not go ashore. This had not prevented Clarke from being wounded. The following raid on Guernsey was largely uneventful if incompetently executed and so ended Bourne’s brief tenure as advisor on Combined Operations (ACO).

Churchill, initially a keen exponent of a ‘butcher and bolt’ policy, had a change of heart. Admittedly, there had been more ‘bolting’ than ‘butchery’ thus far, but nonetheless he considered that it was ‘unworthy of such a large entity as the British Empire to send over a few cut-throats’ as its sole offensive riposte in Europe. He had larger aspirations for the young organisation and felt that it needed to be headed by someone with similarly grandiose ambitions. Therefore Churchill appointed Admiral of the Fleet Sir Roger Keyes as director of Combined Operations (DCO) since, ‘owing to the larger scope now given to these operations, it is essential to have an officer of higher rank in charge’. Keyes had planned and led the Zeebrugge Raid of 1918 and was regarded by Churchill as an expert on amphibious warfare. However, the admiral was not a popular choice. The COS were not