

## Book Review

# Speed, Aggression, Surprise: The Untold Secret Origins of the SAS

Tom Petch

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The origins of the Special Air Service (SAS), as well as the operations and characters of this legendary and elite British army unit, have captured public imagination since the establishment of the unit in 1941 during the dark years of the Second World War (1939–1945). Recent years have seen many new publications about the SAS and its men. One thus wonders why anyone would bother to write yet another version of the by now well-known story of the origins of the SAS. The author of *Speed, Aggression, Surprise: The Untold Secret Origins of the SAS*, Tom Petch, makes a very bold statement in the introduction of his book, by claiming that the ‘Boy’s Own story’ (p. xxv) of the formation of the SAS is a myth. While the popular belief is that David Stirling was the founding father of the SAS, Petch argues that the concept behind the formation of modern-day special forces was masterminded by Dudley Clarke, a much less known or even less mentioned staff officer working in the British War Office.

It is a well-known fact that the Prime Minister of Britain during the Second World War, Winston Churchill, was probably the most enthusiastic driving force behind the establishment of modern special forces. He also cultivated a romantic and heroic image of elite warriors engaged in desperate and daring actions against Nazi-occupied Europe. It was, however, Clarke who was credited by numerous sources for lobbying that the term “commando” be used to refer to specially selected men who perform specialised and often dangerous tasks behind enemy lines. This term, which hails from the mounted Boer commandos during the South African Second Anglo Boer War (1899–1902), is today still universally associated with special forces. Ironically, Clarke is only mentioned in passing by most authors writing on the SAS. Petch aims to highlight the real role that Clarke played in deception operations and the establishment of the SAS. The book is written in a popular history format, and will appeal to any lover of military history. Tom Petch, who served as a troop commander in the SAS himself, weaves deception and special forces operations together in a book, which often reads like adventure fiction. He takes the reader from the narrow passages of the War Office in Whitehall –with its red tape, negotiations and bureaucracy –to the Western Desert and Europe, where the fighting was bloody and no quarter was given.

Petch has done thorough research in compiling the book, as can be seen in the comprehensive archival work and sources listed. He conducted many interviews with

the last surviving member of the early SAS, as well as family members of the so-called “Originals”, the first members of the SAS, and obtained previously unpublished photographs, letters and documents. Petch narrates the storyline from a third-person perspective, which gives the reader insight into the thought processes and the trials and tribulations of all the role players. The book is an easy read, and flows chronologically from the night before the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, to the day of the German surrender in 1945. Petch not only introduces Clarke to the reader, but also William Fraser, one of the most successful frontline operators who served in the SAS from its inception to the end of the war.

The book is divided into three parts, comprising 13 chapters. Part One covers the period from 1939 to 1941, and introduces the main characters in the book. The initial establishment and first operations of the commando units are discussed, as well as the first ideas of deceiving the German Army. Part Two is situated in 1941, and covers the first interaction and collaboration between Clarke and Stirling in order to establish the SAS. In Part Three, which covers the period from 1941 until 1945, the story about the birth of the “real” SAS and the commencement of operations is related. The evolution of the unit is followed until its eventual disbandment when the war comes to an end. A good balance is struck throughout in telling the story of Clarke conducting numerous undercover operations to countries such as Türkiye and Spain (where he got caught by the Spanish police dressed in women’s wear) to spread false information and mastermind deception plans, and Fraser, executing daring operations in the Western Desert and the forests of Europe. The progress of the war in general is also constantly hovering in the background to put the actions of both Clarke and Fraser in context for the reader.

As the title of the book (which cleverly plays with the abbreviation “SAS”, which could denote “Special Air Service” but also “Speed, Aggression and Surprise”) suggests, the work of the SAS entailed just that. Despite initial failures and much opposition from the conventionally minded British Army, the SAS, in conjunction with the Long Range Desert Group, another British special forces unit, achieved some spectacular successes by attacking airfields far behind the German lines. That the members of the SAS were a hard-drinking and rebellious group of strong-willed, self-selected outcasts and misfits who managed to fit together, is not disputed by Petch. Neither is it surprising that it was David Stirling’s idea to establish a small unit that would harass the German supply lines. Petch does, however, highlight that it was Clarke who initially established the SAS Brigade as a fictitious parachute force, which was trained to go after German aircraft, tanks, and armoured cars. The fake formations that Clarke created entered the battle order of the Axis powers, and ultimately led to the Axis overestimating the British strength by 30 per cent and diverting forces from other fronts to counter these non-existing forces.

Clarke was also the person who had a considerable influence on Stirling, and assisted him to pitch his idea of a special forces unit to the higher echelons. Clarke wanted real men to jump from real aircraft and conduct real operations in support of the deception plans he devised to keep German troops occupied and away from where the real fighting was taking place. He was the one who was first to realise that special forces were not just special because of selection, training, weapons or methods, but because its impact was

strategic. Together with Stirling, Clarke made suggestions about selection and training, came up with ideas to overcome the shortage in manpower, and in general assisted to allow the SAS to function without being bogged down in British Army bureaucracy. While Stirling and operators, such as Fraser, therefore conducted operations behind the German lines, Clarke operated in the background as staff officer by dreaming up new deceptions and providing a guiding hand in special forces development.

The book succeeds in telling the story behind the story of the creation of the SAS, as well as the important, and mostly unknown part that Dudley Clarke played in it. By introducing the role of William Fraser, Petch not only highlights Fraser's exploits in the SAS, but also allows the reader to get a good idea of how operations were conducted, as well as the challenges, dangers and exhilaration experienced by the operators. Petch's conclusion is that 'history is not written by the victors, but by those who write' (p. 414); hence, the need to tell Clarke and Fraser's stories and highlight the role they played in establishing the SAS. The book is well written and highly recommended to readers who love military history in general, and specifically those who have a keen interest in special forces as well as clandestine and deception operations.

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