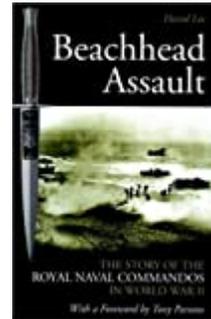




David Lee. *Beachhead Assault: The Story of the Royal Naval Commandos in World War II.* London: Greenhill Books/Lionel Leventhal, 2004. 272 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85367-619-2.



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Paving the Way

Many great works have been written about the amphibious invasions of World War II, covering the intricacies of operations like Torch, Husky, and Overlord. A missing element in many of these histories, though, is the preparation that happens before the first wave of landing craft hits the beaches. David Lee has written a book that helps fill that niche. *Beachhead Assault* tells the story of the Royal Naval Commandos whose job it was to prepare the beaches, paving the way for allied invasion forces.

Although not as famous as their army and marine counterparts, the Royal Naval Commandos were as highly trained and as courageous. Raids early in the war by the British against German-occupied France convinced Combined Operations command that specially trained naval commandos were needed to reconnoiter, map, mark, and direct landing craft during an amphibious operation. In addition, these commandos had to destroy beach obstacles, conduct fire support, direct the unloading of craft, and defend themselves from enemy fire. *Beachhead Assault* traces the evolution of the naval commandos from recruitment to their training at HMS *Armadillo* and numerous operations in which they were in-

involved. During the war, twenty-two commando groups were created, and they participated in all major and minor amphibious operations in the European theater, including some in the Pacific. Lee does a wonderful job showing how the commando groups perfected their methods and craft, from the awkward and unorganized Mediterranean landings in 1942 to the heroic efforts at Normandy and Elba.

Beachhead Assault weaves numerous oral history interviews with a traditional history narrative. Lee had the enviable and unique opportunity to interview hundreds of naval commando veterans through his contact with the Royal Naval Commando Association. Those interviews, letters, and discussions provide the lifeblood of this book. The stories of these men offer insight into their daily lives as soldiers in training and in war, recounting the humor, idiocy, horror, and courage that war brings to the lives of those who live it. For the historian and World War II buff, this book explains the procedures taken to secure and clear a beach for assault, the importance of having an organized method of debarkation, and the role of naval commandos in providing fire support for inva-

sion troops. The bravery of these men is documented in the pages of the text and a lengthy appendix listing all known medals awarded to naval commandos.

While the eyewitness accounts are insightful and refreshing, the accompanying historical narrative is, in places, too brief and does not offer enough support to truly understand the role of the naval commandos. While the author does a nice job of describing how the operational practices of the commando groups changed and improved as the war progressed, he does not present enough background on the various battles to provide context for understanding the more focused role of the naval commandos. The reader is occasionally confused by the flow of the book and the significance of some oral history excerpts, because the accompanying narrative lacks specificity or description. In contrast, the final

chapter on Operation Brassard, the invasion of Elba Island, was particularly good, offering the right mix of oral history with historical narrative. The book is targeted for a popular audience, since it does not have any footnotes or even a listing of veterans who contributed oral histories, making this book less useful than it could be to a historian doing research on amphibious operations.

The Royal Naval Commandos were disbanded toward the end of the war as a result of the Admiralty's decision to assign all responsibilities for naval beach preparation and debarkation to the Royal Marines. The short lifespan of the Royal Naval Commandos does not diminish their importance. The lessons learned by them have had an impact on the training, planning, and execution of amphibious operations over the past sixty years. *Beachhead Assault* is a compact, readable account of their exploits.

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