

## **FINDING THE BOTTOM: OF CONTEXT AND CONTROVERSY**

When British officer Nigel Clogstoun-Willmott founded modern beach reconnaissance, early in 1941, experimenting under the noses of the Germans in the Mediterranean, he had no idea that he was inaugurating a virtual inshore stampede for preeminence in the history of naval special warfare. His idea was to scout a site for amphibious assault, and to land a small party to place shaded lights marking the spot where landing craft could beach safely. His conditioning regimen began with daily dips in a pool in Cairo, working up to over 100 laps, followed by runs and exercises. Assembling his cold-water kit, he lathered periscope grease on long underwear and a seaman's jersey, further coating a hand-held compass. He stretched issue contraceptives over a flashlight to make it waterproof.

On this basis, he could be called the "father" of modern beach reconnaissance, although that is a stretch of the facts. Beach marking, itself, dates back to British operations against Napoleon, in Egypt, where a detail in small boats used flags to signal the fleet. Willmott's plan took him all the way in. While there is nothing, historically, directly connecting these two events, it is noteworthy that men living in different times arrived at similar solutions to problems. The common thread is *venue*, the point where the sea meets the land. Humanity comes and goes, while the sea remains, a steadfast barrier to be overcome, both for military and civilian purposes.

Fast-forward to the 1990s, when developments in the commemoration and publication of American naval special warfare history seemed to prompt every World War II veteran who hit the surf in swim fins to claim the title of "first frogman." The more coveted status, and as eagerly sought, was "ancestor of the SEALs." Presumed to be the result of generational activity, lending itself to representation in a "family tree," the Navy's ultimate achievement in applied intelligence actually arose from a convergence of disparate lines of development, as did their immediate predecessors, the UDTs.

Today, well into its second decade, the contest for SEAL ancestry appears to have no bounds, based in large part on assumptions about the nature and history of developments in technology. In reality, we are dealing with several trees, which can make it difficult to see the forest. Appearances can be deceiving.

Strictly speaking, special operations units do not have ancestors; they have *capabilities*. They acquire those characteristics by virtue of having to adapt to conditions in venues that call for the use of specialized techniques and equipment, whether consciously borrowed or independently devised. Material or behavioral resemblance, taken to indicate products of direct association, has more to do with a common *environment*. The necessity of survival.

Before the final quarter of the twentieth century, when field research revealed that lower primates like chimpanzees were capable of modifying tree limbs to harvest insects for food, it was thought that humans were alone in our ability to make and use tools. Given our clear

differences, we may ponder how this came about. In any case, no one has come forward to claim that he taught the chimps everything they know.

Certainly, human brains can improvise in the broader sense, using what we find at hand, a major advantage over the animal kingdom being our reach beyond the immediate, the use of imagination, synthesis and other thinking skills. Nevertheless, environment, more aptly, the *total environment*, including behavior exhibited by adversaries in open conflict, is very instructive. While special warfare units may be shepherded effectively by those we like to call “father,” they are as indebted to “Mother Nature” as to the “Mother of Invention.” It is precisely the interplay of the two that makes it difficult, if not impossible, to conceptualize a family tree for special operations. Human events do not unfold in a simple linear fashion.

Case in point: the origin of the Amphibious Scout and Raider School (Joint), that began with plans for marking assault beaches at night, to begin with because that was the time the American Army preferred to land. In 1942, as the Engineer Amphibian Command worked on designs for landing craft and trained boat handlers, looking toward the eventual crossing of the English Channel as a shore-to-shore operation, the Allied planners agreed that action against the Axis should start in the Mediterranean, which called for a ship-to-shore landing.

In theory, it was possible to land a sizeable force at night, so long as the way was clearly marked, and the opposition remained unaware of the shoreward movement. As even a tiny light was visible for miles at sea, shielded beacons, aimed from small boats, and positioned so as to delineate the landing zone, could be used to signal the fleet. American elements of the Amphibious Force and their British counterparts examined their respective resources to prepare a stealthy approach.

On the night of 7/8 November 1942, in Operation Torch, the Allied landing at Morocco, British Combined Operations Assault Pilotage Parties (COPPs), skimming along in Folboats on the Mediterranean side, let go kedge anchors and hove-to, 200 meters from shore, where they used a signal light and infra-red beam to mark the flanks of assigned landing zones. It was decided that permitting them to go ashore, as they preferred, would hazard the element of surprise.

A month earlier, COPP personnel had reconnoitered the landing beaches for two weeks, making profile drawings of the hills behind the target area, as seen through the periscope of a submarine. The drawings, or silhouettes, were critical to locating the beaches in the dark.

On the other side of the Atlantic, the Americans looked for someone with the experience and ingenuity to carry off a similar operation, proceeding in from the western approaches to North Africa. Army Lieutenant Lloyd E. Peddicord, formerly the junior intelligence officer under Marine Corps General Holland M. Smith, got the nod. While at Quantico, Peddicord had formed a beach reconnaissance group that made significant strides in developing useful techniques and equipment. With the breakup of the Amphibious Corps, Atlantic, he moved to Norfolk, while his Corps “kids” went to the West Coast, eventually taking their expertise into the Pacific. At Norfolk, the concept for the recon group acquired the famous joint title, and training commenced with coastal silhouettes, and boats equipped with infrared lights.

Pre-assault onshore reconnaissance did not figure in plans for Torch. The task was to locate a landing site, using the silhouettes, and to hold station, offshore, aiming the lights seaward at the right time. It was all about precise navigation by stealth.

In his capacity as an intelligence officer, Lloyd Peddicord took a post-assault gander at the situation on the beach. In light of conditions that had an adverse effect on the landing, the upper echelon decided to reconfigure the joint amphibious school, providing for beach reconnaissance. That led to relocation to Ft. Pierce, Florida, where the initial purpose was to train specialists for the army. Cross-training of army and navy personnel, brought in as boat handlers, primarily, was modeled on British Commando experience.

In British military parlance, "Commando" referred to a unit, and not a man. One was a member of a commando. The term entered the popular lexicon as referring to anyone who exhibited unconventional warfare technique. Small boats, the rubber variety in particular, came to be associated with it so extensively that the term was applied to anyone who used them. When the Navy decided to move all small-boat training to Ft. Pierce, soon after the base was established in January 1943, within months, it was crawling with "commandos."

Due largely to postwar media hype, the word had an aura of excitement that the public found irresistible. Comic books featured stories about the daring "undersea commandos," complete with aqualungs. Nevermind, the UDTs of WW II did not have them.

The postwar era was not kind to the real-life Teams, struggling to remain an active part of the Amphibious Force. Material support was in short supply, and officers faced a bleak outlook for promotion. The war in Korea renewed the Navy's interest, briefly.

In the wake of Korea, the UDTs kept up the momentum, experimenting with improved aqualungs and new exposure suits. The wartime efforts of the Committee on Amphibious Operations Panel on Underwater Swimmers, National Research Council, and specifically, the report prepared by Christian J. Lambertsen, MD and W.A. Hahn, ushered in a current of scientific support.

By 1961, when the SEALs acquired the imprimatur of the White House, the UDTs had already begun the transition to insertion by air and inland operations. Borrowing on Army manuals and weapons, as in the earlier wars, personnel were well on the way to fashioning a future for themselves. Navy Lt. James R. Hazelwood, veteran of World War II ships, and later UDT, moved on to SEAL Team 2. Among the books in his service library was a manual for the Pathfinders.

The army had been in the forefront from the beginning. In the early 1950s, soldiers hit the silk back in the Carolina hills, pushing the envelope in rough terrain, self-identified by headgear they selected, a *green beret*.

What of the Engineer Amphibian Command, designing and building landing craft, and training handlers? One can almost hear a voice booming at the Navy Department. "Great day on the Delaware! Who ever heard of soldiers piloting boats?!"

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For further reading: James Douglas O'Dell, "Joint-Service Beach Obstacle Demolition in World War II," *Engineer*, April-June 2005, 36-40; accessible online, PDF/Adobe Acrobat, [www.wood.army.mil/engrmag](http://www.wood.army.mil/engrmag)