

The Royal Society of Edinburgh
Captain Chris Air and Lance Corporal Jason Hare,
45 Commando Royal Marines
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Arbroath High School

The Commandos from Arbroath – Famous Campaigns

From the frozen wastes of Norway to the deserts of Afghanistan, this two-part lecture looked at the history and present-day reality of one of the most famous units in Britain's armed forces. Capt Air and LCpl Hare provided a vivid account of the role that the Arbroath-based 45 Commando has played in many parts of the world. In some cases they have played a crucial part in fighting wars, at other times they have been peace-keepers, or brought relief in the wake of natural disasters.

The brainchild of Winston Churchill, 45 Commando began life in 1943 as a unit designed for raiding the Nazi-occupied ports of Continental Europe.

Capt Air described many of the conflicts with which they had been involved from World War II through to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and more recently in Iraq.

Their reputation as an elite force was established from the very start, when those who wanted to join faced a major challenge to even get inside the Commando training base at Achnacarry.

"It was six miles from the railway station at Spean Bridge to the base. They got off the train in boots and carrying full kit and had exactly one hour to run to the base. After 60 minutes the gates were shut and anyone arriving after that time would be denied access," said Capt Air.

Members of the unit, known as '4-5 Commando', rapidly earned a reputation for personal courage as well as toughness. One example was from Monforterbeek, in Holland, in 1945, when medical orderly LCpl H E Harden was awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross after crawling 120 yards through the snow to dress the wounds of three comrades, and carrying one of them back under heavy mortar fire.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century there were deployments in many of the world's trouble spots. These included conflicts that shaped the political map of the world such as Korea and Suez.

Since 1972, each tour of duty has meant a return to home base in Arbroath, a town from where the captain said they drew enormous tremendous strength and support.

During the Cold War 45 Commando became renowned as Arctic Warfare specialists, with all members undergoing extensive training in the mountains of Norway. This tradition is maintained to the present day as superb preparation for anything else a Royal Marine is likely to encounter.

Capt Air said: "We still train there because it is so demanding and prepares you for extreme conditions anywhere in the world. It teaches you to survive anywhere and gives you that mental toughness that you need."

This was displayed in 1982 when 45 Commando were pivotal in the liberation of the Falkland Islands. After a long march through a hostile environment they took key Argentinean positions on high ground known as the Two Sisters during a rapid night attack. Soon afterwards they were welcomed by islanders as they marched victorious into the capital of Port Stanley.

In the 1990s, following the first Gulf War, they found themselves in very different circumstances, when they protected Iraqi Kurds.

"We were part of Operation Safe Haven, providing a safety zone in Northern Iraq for the Kurds when Saddam Hussein's police were slaughtering all the refugees," said Capt Air.

In the years since the 11 September attack on the World Trade Center, 45 Commando have been closely involved with the UK's anti-terrorism operations. Members of the unit were involved in the Second Gulf War and contributed to the swift defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces.

They were also active in Kosovo, at that time a province of Serbia, where they helped keep peace between rival Albanian and Serbian factions. In Nicaragua and Honduras they were able to bring aid to the victims of Hurricane Mitch.

“We don’t just fight wars. We provide help and support in many different situations, whether it’s peacekeeping in areas of human conflict or relief work after natural disasters,” said Capt Air.

In the second part of the lecture LCpl Hare described his own experiences during two tours of duty in Afghanistan.

This was accompanied by footage of comrades on patrol, in bases, enjoying meals with local people, and under enemy fire.

In 2002 45 Commando conducted Operation Jacana, which was designed to force out Taleban and Al Qaeda fighters and destroy their weapons caches.

“The type of work involved going into villages, having a sit down with the local warlords and tribal leaders; we also gave medical treatment, and were gathering a bit of intelligence at the same time.

“It was harsh terrain and a harsh climate that we were soldiering in as we searched for the Taleban, who had basically done a runner into the mountains of Pakistan,” said Cpl Hare.

The unit’s training in Scandinavia proved enormously valuable in Afghanistan, as did its experience in presenting itself as a force for peace.

Past experience in politically tense areas like Northern Ireland has provided a vital understanding of the need to win hearts and minds – especially among people living in fear of reprisals from the other side.

“Most of the Afghans welcomed us, they wanted us there. But they were afraid, especially after all those years living under the Taleban, and with all the propaganda and not knowing who to believe,” said Cpl Hare.

More recently, he has served as part of Operation Herrick in Helmund Province, where 45 Commando has been engaged in heavy fighting to oust the Taleban and help the democratically elected government establish control.

“The tasks we had saw groups of our lads in Military Operation Liaison Teams working with the Afghan National Army. We were showing them how to patrol and police so they can learn to handle these problems for themselves. And then we were giving them a bit of advice on how to handle the enemy.”

Apologising in advance for the language used by some of the troops in a recording of engagements with the Taleban, Cpl Hare said: “We are boys, and we do get a bit excited. But this shows the nitty gritty of it, out there taking the fight to the enemy.”

He again emphasised that modern conflict situations are highly complex and are as much about supporting local populations and rebuilding infrastructure as they are about fighting.

“We have to be prepared for anything, any kind of incident at any time. The situation you find yourself in can change completely from day to day.”

The Lance Corporal also highlighted the importance of relationships between 45 Commando and the people of Arbroath as vital to troops’ morale.

“When we came home there were no big parades through the town or anything. But we felt our efforts were appreciated. People sometimes stop you in the street, shake your hand and say ‘well done Royals’, or even do what we like the best and buy us a pint,” said LCpl Hare.

Following the lecture there was a vote of thanks by the Rector of Arbroath High School and an open question and answer session.

Asked if they had learned anything from the tactics of Taleban and Al Qaeda, LCpl Hare said British forces have been involved in conflicts in Afghanistan a number of times and were always aware that Afghans are hard and resilient fighters.

The Royal Marines responded to a question about whether the local community could do more to support them by thanking people for their efforts and saying they felt highly valued – which was why so many chose to settle in the town after returning to civilian life.

Asked about the reaction they got from ordinary Afghans, LCpl Hare said it tended to be very positive and supportive, with most wanting peace, stability and reconstruction rather than a return to Taleban rule.

Questioned about how Northern Ireland had contributed to 45 Commando's skills, Capt Air said that the unit always tried to learn from experience of previous generations. He added that working in Northern Ireland, and other places, had taught them the value of trying to earn the trust of civilians.

On the issue of equipment levels for front line troops the soldiers said that these are improving. And they added that the way the British Army operates relies as much on high-quality intelligence, and superb training as on having the latest equipment.

Final thanks to the speakers was offered by Sue Black OBE, Professor of Anatomy and Forensic Anthropology at the University of Dundee, who had chaired the lecture.

She added that her own experience of working in Iraq had shown her just how accomplished British forces are at winning the confidence of local people.

Professor Black expressed appreciation for the work 45 Commando does on behalf of the British people saying LCpl Hare's modest comments were "among the greatest understatements" she had heard at an RSE lecture.

Matthew Shelley

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