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Andrew L. Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Warfare.*

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The history of special operations, especially during World War II, has long appealed to American readers. Organizations like the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Merrill's Marauders, and the US Army Ranger Battalions have, unfortunately, been the subject of many memoirs and poorly researched popular accounts, but not much in the way of scholarly histories. In *Special Operations in World War II*, Andrew Hargreaves (Boston College) provides a welcome, carefully documented critical analysis of the topic. He goes beyond the sexy and exciting aspects highlighted in popular literature to discuss the sometimes tedious and complex administrative and planning processes of special operations.

Hargreaves stresses the interdependence of Allied special operations during the war, especially the relationship between the United States and Britain. He describes what any historian of the Second World War understands: the great influence of British thinking on the development and organization of American special operations. Avoiding such concepts of special operations as Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations, he focuses on what he terms "Ranger and Commando-like forces," including, for example, British Commandos, US Army Ranger Battalions, First Special Service Force, US Marine Corps Raider Battalions, and Merrill's Marauders, as well as "Special Forces" like Detachment 101 and the Operational Groups (OGs) of the OSS, the Alamo Scouts, and British forces like the Special Operations Executive (SOE), Long Range Desert Group, and Special Air Service.

Hargreaves divides his work into seven chapters, each constituting a discrete article. Chapter 1, "The Inception and Employment of Commando and Ranger Formations," establishes that such units were initially designed as a desperate means to raid enemy areas: "Nothing spurred the creation of specialist formations within the first years of the Second World War ... so much as exigency" (17). As the Allies developed more combat power and improved their strategic situation, these forces evolved into elite light infantry.

Chapter 2, "The Inception and Employment of Special Forces," treats the development and evolution of "special forces"—a term Hargreaves uses to describe units smaller than Commando or Ranger formations, operating with greater independence and capable of a "more diverse range of specialized tasks" (54). As with Commandos and Rangers, their origins were problematic and even more complicated. As Hargreaves shows, British special operations units were often the brain child of lower-ranking officers with the political support or patronage of a superior officer or government official. By contrast, American units were conceived of and created to begin with by high-ranking advocates. Like Commandos, these smaller units were better suited than larger formations to conduct raids. Regardless of the circumstances of their origin, by the end of the war they were increasingly working alongside partisan forces.

In his third chapter, Hargreaves describes "Anglo-American Cooperation and Interdependency" in the development of special operations units. In short, although the United Kingdom was the junior military partner in the alliance, it had had the additional time and experience to formulate the concepts and organizational models for special operations, which the American military then adopted, albeit with changes. "Simply put, the Anglo-American alliance was an essential factor in forging the manner and extent to which both nations adopted, developed, and utilized specialist formations and waged irregular warfare" (141).

Chapter 4 explores "Command and Control" mechanisms of Anglo-American special operations units—"a uniquely difficult prospect" (143), since too much control could stifle the units' desired independence, while too little might limit their efficacy. However, after some trial and error, appropriate systems were calibrated to ensure both scope for autonomous action and the ability to coordinate with conventional forces.

In chapter 5, “Misapplication, Misuse, and Disuse,” Hargreaves argues that the ill use of special operations units during the war was understandable, given the “evolutionary processes governing their application” (180). Some went underused because commanders refused to deploy them for anything but the exact situation they had been so well trained for. Others were poorly used as shock troops, though they later became adept in that role.

Chapter 6, “The Impact of Specialist Forces,” assesses the need for and effect of Allied special operations units in the war. Hargreaves acknowledges that conventional warfare overshadowed any contribution made by special operations units to winning the war. However, they did have a cumulative effect and provided valuable intelligence and strategic advantages.

In his seventh and final chapter, “Cost-Effectiveness,” Hargreaves considers the efficiency of special operations, particularly in terms of manpower costs and the diversion of enthusiastic and skilled soldiers from conventional formations. Even though specialist formations were not always cost effective, “Simply put, their return was greater than their investment” (268).

Although *Special Operations in World War II* is an instructive and well argued study, it causes a good deal of confusion by attempting to accomplish too much. Hargreaves would have done better to explore Rangers and Commandos on the one hand and Special Forces on the other in separate volumes. As it is, he glosses over the service of many units and simply ignores others, like the Burma-based MARS Task Force (Rangers) and Philippine Guerrillas (Special Forces). And, too, he seems more familiar with the British military than with some of the less-publicized American formations.

The breadth of his work often forces Hargreaves to rely on a synthesis of secondary sources. Among primary sources, he overuses after-action reports, which often omit key details and perpetuate errors of fact. As an example, regarding the OSS alone, Hargreaves incorrectly states that the OSS concept of special forces arose independently from the British (68). But, in fact, the British heavily influenced OSS founder Maj. Gen. William J. Donovan during his trips to the United Kingdom, where he closely observed British commandos and the SOE. Hargreaves writes that Donovan only assumed responsibility for special operations after the creation of OSS, when he had already sent two organizations overseas before that (70). He says Detachment 101—formed in April 1942 and already in Burma by July—was activated only in September (88). He incorrectly asserts that there were OGs in Albania (224) and that Merrill gave Detachment 101 credit for helping to take Myitkyina (226), when it was Col. Charles N. Hunter. Finally, trying to make a point about their cost effectiveness relative to their numbers, he claims that fourteen separate OGs went into France (254); this accounts only for OG teams based out of North Africa and not eight additional operations from the United Kingdom. He also states that the OGs were thirty-man elements, when it was thirty-four (70). Admittedly, some of these errors are minor, but taken together, they suggest a lack of critical primary source research.

Stylistically, the book betrays its (King’s College London) doctoral dissertation origins in its dense syntax, suspended predicates, and paucity of clear paragraph transitions. For example: “Also of great significance was the United States providing Britain with welcome reinforcement in aircraft, supplies, and resources; furthermore, when the Americans were sufficiently experienced, their contribution to developing and providing new tactics and equipment such as firearms, explosives, radios, swim fins, breathing apparatus, and small surface and submersible craft was highly valued” (140). He means the British welcomed the material contributions the Americans provided later in the war.

The author also sets up arguments that he himself then undermines. For instance, in discussing “Command Application,” he remarks that special operations unit leaders were often appointed based on nepotism or cronyism (86), but never says what the consequences of this were for their effectiveness. Again, after detailing at length the success of Detachment 101, he makes the claim (based on a secondary source) that Force 136’s Operation Character in February 1945 was far more effective in a much shorter time, without any further elaboration whatever.

Despite these criticisms, Hargreaves is to be commended for taking on a difficult and expansive subject. While he does not manage to fill the gaping hole in the historiography of special operations in this single

volume, academic historians seeking an analytic survey of the subject should not overlook *Special Operations in World War II*. General readers, too, will find it a good starting place for learning about a pivotal period in the development and organization of special operations, one free of the mystique and mythology featured in popular accounts.