

The Commando legend lives on

This Sunday is Remembrance Day and to mark this important date, *The Oban Times* this week features the famous Commandos. Our article has been specially prepared by ex-commando Donald Gilchrist. Donald has written several books including 'Castle Commando' and 'Don't Cry For Me'.

THE Commando Memorial, the 'Three Men on the Hill', stands above Spean Bridge in Lochaber. Three bronze figures of commando soldiers in cap-comforters and S.V. climbing boots, face up to the elements and stare down the Great Glen towards Ben Nevis, 'Beinn Nìmheis', the 'Hill of Heaven'. It is seven miles from the war-time Commando Basic Training Centre at Achnacarry.

Thousands of visitors flock to the Memorial every year. And on Remembrance Day, Commandos return to Kilmunivag. They mingle with the people of Lochaber, District Council representatives, Territorial Army units, Camerons and Lovat Scouts, the British Legion and youth organisations. In the silence, they remember.

The Lochaber Hills no longer echo to the tramp of commando boots on a speed march, or to the bedlam of a night assault landing. The Commandos have

long since gone. But the spirit of their companionship lives on. They are part of the history and legend of Lochaber, Glencoe and the Cullin.

Who are they? And why Lochaber?

Commandos were recruited from nearly every regiment of the British Army each soldier proudly wearing his own regimental cap badge on a green beret. By special permission of Sir Donald Walter Cameron of Lochiel, father of the present Lochiel, those who served for three months or more on the staff at Achnacarry wore a Cameron tartan flash behind the cap badge.

Unlike Army Commandos, who volunteered individually, Royal Marine Commandos formed their own units to train at Achnacarry and served with distinction alongside Army Commandos in Special Service Brigades. The actions of Royal Marine Commandos in the Falklands war is evidence that the commando tradition continues.

But first, the Green Beret had to be won.

In 1940, Winston Churchill recognised that the defeat of France was accomplished by a small number of highly equipped and brilliantly led stormtroopers. For this reason he wanted to develop the commando idea. Komando is a Boer name for a swift, lightly armed cavalry column. Such a force, highly trained, able to operate from the sea at night, could cause havoc, destroy enemy installations and carry out a war of nerves. Commandos, 'Bands of Brothers', he called them.

A training area had to be found. Lochaber was chosen as the perfect breeding ground for warriors whose tactics were those of speed and surprise, the overcoming of mental and physical obstacles in the face of elements often raw in the extreme. Here in the wild, beautiful, mountainous land of bracken and heather, deep fathomless lochs and rushing white water, nature could be savage. And there was Glencoe!

Commandos came from Scotland, England, Ireland,



Commando training separated the men from the boys. In this picture a young recruit is put through his paces on an assault course.

Wales, France, Belgium, Holland, Scandinavia and America. Some came from German occupied territory, eluding the Gestapo, daring inhospitable seas in small boats on perilous voyages. The glen echoed to their commands, cries and curses in a variety of languages as they were put to the test.

Independent Companies, early commando troops, camped at Inverlort Castle, the home of Colonel and Mrs Cameron-Head. The training was tough. They used the Cullin in Skye for special training.

In 1941, the success of commando raids on Vaagaa and the Lofoten Islands, along with other small raids by the SBS Special Boat Section, proved the value of super-trained assault troops. With the support of the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, the commando purpose was recognised. More units were urgently required. A production line was needed.

In the meantime many French, Dutch, Belgians, Scandinavians, Spaniards, Poles and Czechs were being sent to the STS, Special Training Schools, in the area — Inverlochy Castle, Arisaig House, Camusdarroch, Garra-

more, Rubanna, Meoble, Swordlands and Inverie. The commando type courses were the basis for training special agents like Peter Churchill and Odette. The programme included map-reading, demolitions, small arms and survival tests in the mountains where Bonnie Prince Charlie and his companions once roamed seeking an escape route.

Two British Army captains, Fairbairn and Sykes, whose initials are engraved on the Commando F.S. Fighting Knife, were specialists on silent killing.

Late in 1941, the Commando Depot, later renamed the Commando Basic Training Centre, was established at Achnacarry, the ancestral home of Cameron of Lochiel. And to the C.B.T.C. the war office appointed a Commandant, Lieutenant Colonel Charles E. Vaughan, an Englishman, a Redcoat, a one-time regimental sergeant major in the Coldstream Guards. Not since the Duke of Cumberland in 1745 had an English officer and his troops occupied Achnacarry. On that occasion they had burned and ravaged the place.

This was a country where commandolike tactics were a tradition of clan warfare.

The epic march, in February 1645, of the Great Montrose and his Highland troops to the battle of Inverlochy was the inspiration of the 36 hours scheme at the C.B.T.C. — 36 hours tramping over the Lochaber hills. In summer it was pleasant! In winter, it was hell, suffering the wind, the rain, hail and snow. Old campaigners were first to light a fire. They carried a few dry twigs in their packs, cigarettes and matches in a sealed elastoplast tin. At night bracken and heather were roasted over the fires and then used as a warm mattress while the hot stones surrounding the fires were collected as hot water bottles. With guard duties arranged troops slept under gas capes as the rain poured down.

All trainees irrespective of rank went through the three week course, officers leading, exhorting, encouraging. For the instructors there was no respite. They too were expected to lead, first demonstrating, then showing example in adversity, sharing, surviving together in a companionship bred in the hills.

The C.B.T.C. would become known as the 'School for Slaughter', the toughest battle

course in the World. Here 25,000 or so volunteers for special service in the commandos would be tested to the limit of mental and physical endurance. Some would fail and be refused. At Achnacarry the men would be separated from the boys.

The final test was the 'Night Assault Landing' at Bunarkaig. As assault craft, Goatley Folding Boats, were paddled towards the shore, Verey lights lit up a scene of battle, live tracer bullets, fired near enough to miss, whined overhead and mortar bombs exploded in Loch Lochy. On shore demolition charges erupted peat and slime while armed men, instructors, threw live grenades to add to the rattle of machine guns and the burp of Thompson sub-machine guns.

There was an old Achnacarry 'Dipping Ritual'. In olden times newborn babes were dipped in the River Roy or Spean to protect them against wind, rain, hail and snow and to harden them against wounds. As there was no hot water at war-time Achnacarry, screams of anguish heralded the dipping of newborn commandos. But later, after experiencing the icy weather on the lochs and in the glens the cold water in a bath would feel quite tepid.

Those men who were accepted into the commandos were given a prized Green Beret. At the end of each course the Commandant Charles Vaughan spoke to all assembled in the 'Big Hut'. 'When you go from here you will go to a Commando, maybe you will go on a raid. Perhaps you will be wounded, lose an eye, an arm or a leg. But, you don't have to worry — his voice became husky and emotional — 'there will always be a job for you up here, at Achnacarry'!

The Commando Association was formed by Colonel Charles Vaughan just after the war. He felt that the companionship first won in the mountains and glens and later sealed in battle should never die.