HMS Dorlin and the 3rd British Infantry Division.

HMS Dorlin was a wartime naval shore establishment based on six estate houses; Dorlin, Roshven, Shielbridge, Salen, Glencripesdale and Glenborrodale. They are located in the extreme south of an isolated area between Loch Hourn and Loch Shiel called The Rough Bounds, comprising Knoydart, Morar, Arisaig and Moidart. In the 18th Century it was largely Catholic and Jacobin, with ownership disputed between the Macdonals of Clanranald, whose traditional seat was Castle Tioram that dates from the 13th Century, and the Macdonells of Glengarry. Both claimants were descendants of the 12th Century King Somerled (Summer Traveller which is a kenning for Viking), whose dynasty became The Lord of the Isles, who was subservient only to the Kings of England and Scotland. The present titular holder is Charles, Prince of Wales.

After the 1745 rebellion the government recruited highland regiments who, by accepting the Hanoverian King’s shilling, were 'suborned' and lost the temptation to revolt. Like the rest of the Highlands, the Rough Bounds were largely denuded of people during the 19th Century Highland Clearances to the benefit of PEI and Nova Scotia in Canada, becoming as a result a vast sheep ranch and preserve of the rich for hunting, shooting & fishing.

The land on which Dorlin House was built belonged in 1811 to Ranald George Macdonald, 19th Chief of the Clan Macdonald of Clanranald and MP. He had become an associate of the extravagant and dissolute Prince Regent, and to fund his lifestyle sold for £213,211 all of the traditional lands he had inherited except the ruinous Castle Tioram. One of the first properties to go was Dorlin, or Lochshiel Estate as it was called, together with Eilean Shona, sold for approximately £23,000 to Alexander Macdonald of Glenaladale in 1811. His successor’s son, known locally as Lochshiel, took up residence on the estate at Dalilea, and it was then that a one-storey Dorlin House was built for occupation by Miss Bell Macdonald from Dalilea. Sometime later, Lochshiel’s relative and factor, Aeneas R Macdonald of Traigh, built a house on the site in the Georgian style in the belief that he would inherit the estate and be able to ‘improve’ it by clearing it of the tenantry and turning it over to sheep. When the Lochshiel family heard of this in 1855, one of the sisters went to Edinburgh and sold the estate, less Eilean Shona which had already been sold, to James Hope Scott for £24,000. Hope Scott was married to a grand-daughter of Sir Walter Scott, and although they owned Abbotsford, but preferred to live in Dorlin House. After his wife died in 1858, Hope Scott married Lady Victoria Fitzalan Howard, daughter of the 14th Duke of Norfolk and a God-daughter of Queen Victoria. In 1864, they built the final large three storey Dorlin House from stone quarried from the rock behind the house. For six years the house was much used for entertaining. In 1871 Hope Scott sold the estate to a relative, Lord Howard of Glossop who passed it on to his son. In 1914 the grandson was a Captain in the Lovat Scouts Yeomanry, TA, whose ‘A’ Company was recruited in Moidart and was therefore known to Lord Lovat who, as we will see below, chose Dorlin and Inverailort for Commando training. Capt Howard died of wounds in 1918, and Lord Howard died in 1924. The property was then sold to Sir Alexander Macguire, but his successor, Mr Carlett, never occupied it. The house was therefore empty when it was requisitioned by MI(R) in May 1940 as one of many outstations of Special Training Centre Lochailort, which needed it for training in small boat handling in the open sea. It was transferred to the Navy as HMS Dorlin in March 1942 when it became the HQ of a training centre that included together the other
Lochailort outstations in the area, being Roshven, Shielbridge, Salen, Glenborrodale and Glencripesdale. These were used until April 1944 when they were put into care and maintenance until November 1944. The Navy returned Dorlin House to the owners who, however, never re-occupied it. It deteriorated and was demolished in 1963 after Shielbridge House and Glencripesdale Castle had already been demolished. The site is now a car-park with a small building nearby that was part of the house. The only surviving building of HMS Dorlin is Roshven, which is being rebuilt by Angus MacDonald who has found traces of military occupation.

The origin of troop training in the Highlands was the establishment in 1938 by the War Office of MI(R) - Military Intelligence (Research) - under Lt. Col Joe Holland to study how to support resistance in occupied countries, including Britain, through 'fifth column' guerilla operations if the Germans should succeed in overrunning Europe. The concept originated with General Mola in a broadcast to the inhabitants of Madrid in 1936, when he boasted that his four columns approaching the city would be supported by a fifth column of sympathisers within the city. The term was popularised by Ernest Hemingway who used it as the title of his only play. The concept became hugely influential in the minds of Churchill, Hitler, FDR and Stalin, leading to internment of enemy aliens in Britain, Canada and the USA, and to the murder by Hitler of Jews, and by Stalin of the Polish officer class in Katyn, and to Stalin's forced population transfers. Holland recruited Lt. Col Colin Gubbins to produce a series of training manuals for Guerillas.

In 1939 the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act was passed in Westminster. To ensure naval activity went unobserved, the Home Secretary designated the whole of Scotland north-west of the Great Glen as a 'Protected Area', with checkpoints on all access roads and ferries. Entry was by permit, and locals required extra certification to pass the checkpoints. Later, the houses used by SOE (Arisaig House, Camusdarach, Inverailort, Inverie House, Meoble, Rhuibana and Traigh House) were declared 'Protected Places' under the Act with entry restricted to those with an additional permit naming the house and issued under the authority of its CO. Anyone requesting entry without a permit was detained for questioning.

Holland recruited specialists to operate abroad in the event of hostilities, and put out a request for volunteers for special service. This was initially restricted to serving Army soldiers within certain formations still in Britain, and to men of the disbanding Independent Companies originally raised from Territorial Army divisions to serve in Norway and Finland. Such a unit was 5 (Supplementary Reserve) Battalion Scots Guards, whose CO was Lt. Col Coats, 2.ic was Maj Bryan Mayfield, Assistant Adjutant was Capt Martin Lindsay assisted by Staff Sgt Freddy Spencer Chapman who designed their new ski kit. All these men were experienced mountaineers and explorers who had been training in Chamonix with the Chasseurs Alpins. Another recruited specialist was Capt Bill Stirling who happened to own land near Lochailort and was a cousin of Lord Lovat, who had recently resigned from his father's unit, the Lovat Scouts, in protest at its deployment on garrison duties.

The first CO of Special Training Centre (STC) Lochailort was Lt. Col Bryan Mayfield, who set up STC HQ in 'The Big House', which also served for officers' accommodation and lecture rooms. In September 1940, Mayfield was replaced by Lt. Col Hugh Stockwell (later General Sir Hugh Stockwell, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander of NATO 1960-64). Although controlled by MI(R), although few knew it, STC Lochailort was managed by the War Office's Director of Military Training. Establishment was 230 personnel to train 210 officers and 2,700 ORs to form 10 independent Commando companies.

Inverailort had outstations; Roshven House (requisitioned from Peter Blackburn), Dorlin House (specialist boat training), Arisaig House (requisitioned from the principal landowner, Miss Charlotte Astley-Nicholson), Achnacarry (requisitioned from Cameron of Lochiel as the commando holding camp and later commando training base), Achdalieu Lodge (also requisitioned from the Camerons as a temporary 1940 home of prototype independent companies), Torcastle Lodge (requisitioned for future use) and Inverlochy Castle (also for future use).

The first irregular commando raid was by an untrained Independent company against the Pas-de-Calais on June 24, 1940 (Operation Collar), which killed two German sentries but failed to gather intelligence or
damage equipment. This failure reinforced the need for the training which was established by the Chief Instructor, Maj Bill Stirling and his senior instructors. These were remarkable men who had previously excelled in extreme conditions to demonstrate that in a peacetime setting at least, the physically fit and daring could achieve renown. Churchill grasped their philosophy as a drowning man will grasp a straw, describing it in blood-curdling language that emphasised terror tactics that surely contravened the rules of war and were in fact modified when Hitler retaliated by shackling and then executing captured commandos for war crimes. However, in the period before Germany declared war on the USA and Britain stood alone, Churchill's strategy for retaliation against Germany relied on Bomber Command's area bombing of German cities and the fifth column activities of the Commandos to 'set Europe ablaze'. This twin-pronged strategy had priority call on all resources, but of course failed to be decisive as many said at the time but were ignored by Churchill.

The Senior Instructor in Field-craft was Lt Lord Lovat, a cousin of Stirling, and many recall Inverailort as 'Lord Lovat's brainchild. After Dieppe Lovet became the most famous Commando officer and was appointed Brigadier. Lovet's first assistant was Capt Peter Kemp who had fought for the Nationalists in Spain and was later with SOE. Instructors included Capt Jim Gavrin, Himalayan mountaineer; Capt Jimmy Scott who had been on Gino Watkins British Arctic Air Route Expedition of 1931-2; Cmdr-Surgeon George Murray Levick from Scott's Antarctic expedition of 1910-13 and later author of the 1944 training manual, 'Hardening of Commando Troops for Warfare'; Staff Sgt Freddy Spencer Chapman, mountaineer, polar explorer, Gordenstoun teacher and author; Capt Martin Lindsay of the British Arctic Air Route and Trans-Greenland Expeditions of 1930-32; 2.Lt David Stirling, who later founded the SAS; Capt Ashley Greenwood, mountaineer; Capt Sandy Wedderburn, mountaineer; Capt Calvert, who later as 'Mad Mike' was the explosives expert under Maj Gavin; Johnny Ramensky, a civilian criminal safe-blower released from Barlinnie Gaol; Capt Walbridge, previously a member of the British Army's competition shooting team; Lt Tommy McPherson, game stalker; Maj Cyril Mackworth-Praed, 1924 Olympic gold medallist in rifle shooting; Maj William (Dan) Fairburn and Capt Eric (Bill) Sykes, both ex-Shanghai Police, who invented the Fairburn-Sykes method of unarmed combat and designed the F-S Commando Fighting Knife produced by Wilkinson Sword; Capt Peter Fleming, later with SOE; and others. Their remit was to construct a programme so physically demanding that those who passed and became Commandos would be able to land in the occupied territories at will, kill and destroy, evade and return. Failures were returned to unit (RTU) or, in the case of Marines, sent to man landing craft. The naivety of the programme shocked those, such as Alan Brooke, who understood warfare, but it was one of Churchill's notions that had momentum and the support of a cadre of instructors and volunteers who were convinced of its effectiveness and had found their niche. In retrospect, this philosophy of mobility and self-reliance was in conscious imitation of the elements though (wrongly) to be responsible for the success of German Blitzkrieg; the aggressive use of Storm Troopers (Commandos), Paratroops, aircraft and tanks which all claimed mobility. The corollary was to downgrade infantry as immobile, to be ridiculed when not ignored. This caused a backlash from infantry battalions who resented the poaching of their fittest and most aggressive troops, who pointed to the disappointing results achieved by Commandos and Paratroops who, lacking heavy weapons had to be rescued by the infantry from their inevitable difficulties, and who insisted that the few tasks suitable for Storm Troopers/Commandos could be done more effectively by specially trained conventional light infantry within the infantry divisions. This view eventually prevailed for the most part.

With the end of the Finnish Winter War in March 1940, 5 Scots Guards Ski Battalion returned to Britain and disbanded. Bill Stirling and Bryan Mayfield met by accident in White's Club, where they discussed the operation of special forces. The two of them then made a proposal to Holland and Gubbins, which was accepted, to act as instructors in a new training school for teaching the theory and practice of irregular warfare at a site to be identified by them. Stirling and Mayfield recruited Lord Lovat who identified Inverailort as offering isolation, few inhabitants and proximity to the west highland railway. It was the first of forty such establishments established in the UK.

Inverailort was requisitioned from Mrs Christian Cameron-Head on 30/5/1940 as Commando STC (Special Training Centre) Lochailort. Commando STC transferred to Achnacarry on 20/8/1942, and SOE took over Lochailort.
On 10/5/1940 Churchill became PM, and immediately stamped his ideas on Special Forces, saying; “Enterprises must be prepared, with specially trained troops of the hunter class, who can develop a reign of terror down these coasts, first of all on the 'butcher and bolt' policy, but later on, or perhaps as soon as we are organised, we should surprise Calais or Boulogne, kill or capture the Hun garrison.”

On 5/6/1940, Lt.Col Dudley Clarke drew up the outlines of a special force, called Commandos, to carry out raiding operations. Churchill approved the plan on 8/6/1940. Under increasing pressure from Churchill to make an appointment, the Chiefs of Staff appointed Lt-General Alan Bourne on 14/6/1940 to the position of ‘Commander of Raiding Operations on coasts in enemy occupation and Adviser to the Chiefs of Staff on Combined Operations'. Bourne was a Royal Marine Commander with experience of both land and sea operations. The proposal was for the 'hunter class' troops to be seconded from their regiments, which would remain responsible for their pay and providing a billeting allowance for living in private houses. Their commanding officers would select and train the groups which would exist without an administrative tail. The Commandos would form for training and operations, travel light and fast, disappear after pulling the trigger or exploding the demolition charge, and rely for survival on never offering themselves as a target and their skills in evasion.

Commandos were formed in the first weeks of July 1940. Some had a distinct geographical base as Army volunteers came forward. Nos 3 and 4 Commandos were formed from Southern Command, Nos 5 and 6 from Western Command, No 7 from Eastern Command, No 8 mainly from the London District and the Household Division and Nos 9 and 11 from Scottish Command. No 1 Commando was formed from disbanded Independent Companies whose members were trained to fight as irregulars and not as part of a formed military unit. Initially designated the No 1 SS Battalion, by March 1941 it was renamed No 1 Commando.

14/7/1940 saw the first Commando mission, which was against Guernsey by 3 Commando from Plymouth, and judged unsuccessful.

On 16/7/1940, Churchill appointed Hugh Dalton to head SOE, saying, “And now, go and set Europe ablaze”. SOE’s remit was to “Foster passive and active resistance to enemy occupation forces by the inhabitants of lands which were overrun.” Both Dalton and Churchill believed the Germans had overrun Europe easily in part because of the action of Fifth Columnists, and believed uprisings would begin against the Germans by the end of 1940. Fifth Column influence, however, had always been a myth, and in any case it was not until early 1942 that agents and active underground cells could be established throughout the occupied territories. Eventually SOE employed or controlled about 13,000 people, and supported a million worldwide.

On 17/7/1940, Churchill sacked Bourne, and appointed Admiral Sir Roger Keyes to command a new Combined Operations HQ (COHQ) within the Directorate of Military Operations but under the Royal Navy

Inverary opened as Number 1 Combined Training Centre (CTC), HMS Quebec, in October 1940. By the time it closed in 1946 over a quarter million personnel had been trained in a technique for landing infantry on a hostile shore and fighting to secure a lodgement.

In 1941 home defence ceased to be a priority when the Germans attacked Russia, so Commandos were freed for offensive operations. In February 1941 the Commandos were reorganised in accordance with a new war establishment. Each Commando unit now consisted of a Headquarters and six troops (instead of the previous 10). Each troop comprised three officers and 62 ORs designed to fit into two Assault Landing Craft, with two complete Commando units carried in the 'Glen' type landing ship and one unit in the 'Dutch' type landing ship. The successful Lofoten raid on 13/3/1941 was unopposed, and successfully destroyed fish oil installations, captured Enigma rotors, brought back POWs and forced the Germans to increase garrison numbers. Lack of consultation, however, and German reprisals upset the Norwegian government in exile who subsequently took over responsibility for Norwegian raids. Raids in any case were only pinpricks, leading the CIGS, Alan Brooke, to argue that Commandos were squandering resources and would be more effective if integrated into the infantry force. This view was reinforced by the successful attack on
Spitzbergen in August 1941 by Canadian infantry trained at Inverary. In June 1941 the Commando Special Canoe Troop moved from Arran to the STC Boat Station at Dorlin for training. In September 1941 as a result of the Chiefs of Staff being given some control over Commando operations, Keyes resigned to be replaced by Mountbatten as Chief of Combined Operations. He put on the opposed Vaagso raid on December 27, 1941. This operation led to a battle with defending German troops and that effectively marked the end of the Commando ethos of butcher and bolt.

1942

In February 1942 the Commando Basic Training Centre was established at Achnacarry, the former holding wing of Lochailort. The green beret was introduced and given to everyone who completed the course. In April 1942 RM Commando were training at Dorlin for Dieppe, but stayed offshore and never landed. The Dorlin establishment was detached from STC Lochailort on 20/8/1942 and transferred to the Royal Navy as HMS Dorlin, No 3 Combined (Operations) Training Centre (CTC). It was supported by accommodation and stores at Shielbridge, Salen, Glenborrodale, Glencripesdale and Roshven. Its function was to train infantry in seaborne assault operations and in personal fitness and weapon training, but not to the extreme level practised at Achnacarry. That regime was receiving criticism from Levick as being too strenuous since all who undertook it were fit but even so lost weight.

At this stage in 1942 there were four CTCs and an HQ;
CTC 1, HMS Quebec at Inverary
CTC 2, HMS Brontosaurus at Castle Toward
CTC 3, HMS Dorlin, Shielbridge
CTC 4, HMS Warren, Largs
HQ CTC, HMS Monck, variously at Largs, Port Glasgow, and Roseneath.

In addition there were eight other military training establishments, excluding SOE;
CTC Achnacarry, Commando Training Centre
HMS Armadillo at Glenfinnart for RN Beach Commandos
HMS Lochailort at Lochailort for RN junior officers to man landing craft
HMS Pasco at Strachur for RN signal-men
HMS James Cook at Tighnabruich for navigation officers
HMS Dundonald at Troon for holding RN Beach Commandos and CTC staff
HMS Dinosaur at Troon for Tank Landing Craft
HMS Roseneath at Roseneath for engineers.

In 1943, the formation of the Commando unit was changed. Each Commando now consisted of a small headquarters group, five fighting troops, a heavy weapons troop, and a signals platoon. The fighting troops consisted of 65 men of all ranks divided into two 30-man sections which were subdivided into three 10-man subsections. The heavy weapons troop comprised 3-inch mortar and Vickers machine-gun teams. Commandos were also provided with their own motor transport, which gave them an administrative tail and completed their transformation from Special Service troops to quasi infantry. As such they took their place in the line like infantry.

Lochailort/Achnacarry training was too specialised for an effective infantryman, but ideal for training the SOE agent in individual resourcefulness along guerilla lines of butcher-and-bolt and evasion. By 1943 there were a dozen highland properties providing special training in conditions of high security and secrecy. These were called the Goup A Schools.

Churchill regarded SOE as so important that he kept it separate from the FO and WO, and in late 1940 gave it its own constitution and made it part of Hugh Dalton’s Ministry of Economic Warfare. Its constituent parts came from the FO’s Section D and what was left of MI(R) after Lochailort/Achnacarry was spun off into the WO’s Director of Military Training.

Gubbins transferred to SOE in November 1940 as Brigadier Director of Operations and Training. He had incompatible objectives; to form secret armies, which meant avoiding attention, and to act offensively which of course stirred up a hornets’ nest. Training was of supreme importance and comprised three stages;
1. Prelim Schools for vetting and basic training
   Paramilitary Schools on the Commando model
   Finishing Schools specific to each nationality.
   The need to keep everyone separate and to impart knowledge only on a need-to-know basis meant many small training bases were needed.
   Commando training was a useful cover. Lochailort took responsibility for the Paramilitary training. Polish forces had their own instructors and occupied Inverlochy which reported administratively to Lochailort. In September 1940, Jack Wilson established the organisation of Group A Schools in Arisaig House. Coming under it were Meoble Lodge, which was inaccessible by road, Rhubana Lodge, Inverie House, owned by Nazi sympathiser Lord Brocket, Camusdarach and Glaschoille, also belonging to Lord Brocket. IN early 1941 Garramor and Swordland were requisitioned. SOE's para-naval training was done on Loch Morar, at Tarbet Bay and Glasnacardoch Lodge, which was later a foreign weapons training school. These schools together could train 75 agents at a time with 44 instructing staff. Only a handful of women were trained in Group A Schools, but these included Yvonne Rudellat at Garramor, Nancy Wake/Fiocca at Inverie, and Violette Szabo also at Inverie. Both Rudellat and Szabo died in concentration camps. Czech troops trained at Camusdarach, including Kubis and Gabcik who killed Heydrich in Prague which led to the death of 5,000 civilians in reprisals.

3 Division started its invasion training in the spring and summer of 1942 when a plan to invade France was considered and rejected by General Freyburg and Admiral Ramsey, and replaced with the North Africa and Sicily projects in 1943. In May and June 1942, 3 Division (with only two brigades as 7 Guards Brigade had transferred into the new Guards Armoured Division and 185 Brigade had not yet arrived) trained at CTC 1, Inverary; 8 Brigade trained in May and 9 Brigade (Kings Own Scottish Borderers (KOSB), Royal Ulster Rifles (RUR), and Lincolns) in June 1942.

3 Division was chosen for the Sicilian invasion (Operation Husky) for which the division again trained at CTC 1 Inverary in March-April 1943, but at the last moment was replaced by 1 Canadian Division. The CIGS, Alan Brooke, then announced that 3 Division would be the British assault division for D-Day, and would land alongside a US and a Canadian division. 3 Division returned for training at Inverary from May to July 1943. Fin preparation for D-Day the infantry of 3 Division trained at;
(a) 3 Div Battle School at Moffatt in Dumfriesshire through much of 1943. By the autumn every unit had completed training in battle drills. With the sappers they attacked concrete and steel obstacles the Sappers had built, and with the artillery they perfected the drill for calling up artillery concentrations and for following closely behind creeping barrages when attacking trenches and strong-points

CTC 1, Inverary by battalion during March to July 1943 (March - South Lancashire, Suffolks, East Yorkshire; April - RUR, KOSB; June – Norfolks, Kings Own Scottish Light Infantry (KSLI), Middlesex; July – Lincolns, and again KOSB). Here they practised loading and unloading vehicles into landing craft, manning assault landing craft, and making sea-borne assaults with live ammunition and air support in Loch Fyne

CTC 3, Dorlin by battalion. They moved by vehicle from Inverary to Dorlin although East Yorkshires chose to march the 100 miles carrying full equipment. At Dorlin troops were subjected to a reduced commando type training of forced marches and assault courses, together with sea-borne assaults on Kentra Bay, Rum and Eigg (see 2 Lincolnshires' War Diary)

Kilbride Bay where there were more landings in September 1943 with live artillery, anti-tank and tank fire support (and where Jim Bush famously landed with his gas cape inside his trousers)

Stobs Camp near Hawick in January 1944 where the officers of 9 Brigade under Brigadier Cunningham held Exercise 'Euclid', a four-day TEWT (Tactical Exercise Without Troops) to decide the Q (supply) side of D-Day down to the smallest detail

Inverness on the Moray Firth as a division in December 1943 in Exercises 'It' and 'Grab'. The Commanders were by then the ones who would command on D-Day, being Maj-Gen Tom Rennie commanding 3 Division, General Dempsey commanding 2 British Army, Gen Montgomery commanding 21 Army Group, and (in January) Eisenhower who was the Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force. They practised with Naval Force 'S' (Rear Admiral A.S. Talbot) and all supporting forces (Tanks, RN Beach Commandos, AckAck, Medium artillery, Commandos, RE Assault troops, specialist Engineers, 2TAF). Every aspect of the full scale D-Day landings were covered in 7 separate exercises in often vile weather. Lybster to Burghead is 90 miles across the Moray Firth and the same distance as between the departure port of Portsmouth and the
The fourth exercise, 'Grab', took place in a bitterly cold Force 6 gale, but Rennie refused to cancel it. Lt.Col Goodwin, the Suffolks CO, said; “I have never in my life seen troops so tough and fit. Despite the extreme cold and wet, their enthusiasm on these exercise was quite outstanding”. When Montgomery arrived he changed the D-Day plan from a 3-divisional to a 5-divisional assault. The last exercise at the end of March, Exercise ‘Leapyear’, was successful, and the division moved south by land in April to their concentration area around Portsmouth, while Force 'S' sailed down the east coast to Portsmouth.

There followed a month of waiting with two exercises off the Isle of Wight, while the two additional divisions (50th and 4th US) needed for a 5-divisional assault completed training.

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