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SPECIAL FORCES FROM WORLD WAR II TO THE NAVY SEALS

Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Special Missions: The Memoirs of Hitler's Most Daring Commando*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 223. ISBN 978-0-7603-4034-9.

Howard E. Wasdin and Stephen Templin, *SEAL Team Six: Memoirs of an Elite SEAL Sniper*. New York: St. Martin's, 2012. Pp. xx, 331. ISBN 978-1-250-00695-0.

Chuck Pfarrer, *SEAL Target Geronimo: The Inside Story of the Mission to Kill Osama Bin Laden*. New York: St. Martin's, 2011. Pp. x, 225. ISBN 978-1-250-00635-6.

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Special forces in one form or another have existed for a long while. "Pathfinders," "scouts," "rangers," and "commandos" figure in military histories, the memoirs of commanders and operatives, global or unit histories, prescriptive handbooks and manuals, and reports about specific operations. The past decade has seen many publications devoted to this ostensibly secret world. The three books under review here take us inside two units—the Wehrmacht commandos in World War II and the present-day US Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) Teams. Two are memoirs—one by a commander and one by an operator; the third, by a former SEALs member, focuses on the successful operation to kill Osama Bin Laden.

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Otto Skorzeny's book appeared first in 1957. Nazi Germany's most famous commando, Skorzeny recounts his life from childhood to his postwar incarceration by the Allies. Growing up in Vienna, he opened an engineering business in the early 1930s and joined the Nazi Party about the same time. When the war broke out, he wanted to join the Luftwaffe but was turned down because of his excessive age (thirty-one) and height (six feet four). He was assigned to Army communications, but later joined the Waffen SS and became an officer. A Vienna friend recommended him to the head of SS foreign intelligence, who asked him to set up training schools. Later, Hitler charged him with establishing a special operations force to undertake actions that regular formations could not.

Skorzeny recounts the organizational and logistical problems involved in founding the commandos unit, their operations, and his own advancement within the Waffen SS. His first unit comprised recruits from the best soldiers of the Wehrmacht, who got training in weaponry, driving, parachuting, swimming, and communications. Many also studied foreign languages.

The unit's first mission was to parachute into Iran, contact dissidents, and sabotage American and British efforts there. Despite the lack of interest in this operation among the General Staff, Skorzeny's abilities did not go unrecognized. Later, he and his unit conducted better known operations: most notably, the freeing in 1943 of Benito Mussolini from his imprisonment by Carabinieri at the Campo Imperatore Hotel (using a daring and innovative glider rescue), for which Skorzeny received the Knight's Cross and a promotion to major; stopping the Hungarian Regent from signing a peace treaty with Stalin in 1944; and spreading rumors about an assassination attempt on Gen. Dwight Eisenhower. Later, he was instrumental in disguising a commando brigade as Americans during the Ardennes offensive. He was put on trial for this after a few years of postwar internment, but was acquitted after a British officer testified that the Allies for their part had worn German uniforms to deceive the enemy.

The book's mostly well written twenty-one chapters¹ provide a good picture of the inner workings of a special force—detailed and lengthy planning and intelligence gathering for each operation, the recruitment and training of personnel, the development of new weapons and tactics, the cultivation of intense loyalty,

1. Enhancements include some photographs and a list of German abbreviations, but not maps, a bibliography, or index.

and the organizational politics entailed by competition for resources. Skorzeny humorously relates how he learned to register with his commanders his reservations about the aims of certain missions:

But how were such negative conclusions to be brought home to ... superiors? When I had committed ... objections to paper in plain language and proposed to send them for consideration "at top level," I was simply laughed at. Anyone could see that I was a novice, I was told. I must learn the whole tricky business of handling those above me. The first thing was to display immense enthusiasm for any plan, however idiotic, which they put forward, and keep reporting progress. Only later, and then in small doses, could one inject the truth. One became a master of the diplomatic art only when one managed to allow the plan to get completely forgotten—the royal road to enrolment in the ranks of the perfect subordinates. (39)

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SEAL Team Six veteran Howard Wasdin, with his co-author Stephen Templin, an academic and bestselling writer, has written a book in the genre of memoirs by former special forces operatives. After a difficult childhood with an abusive father, Wasdin joined the US Navy and then the SEALs as a sniper. The arduous training for underwater demolition and other duties demanded physical, emotional, and academic exertions. One learns why SEALs are such highly professional and dedicated troops. Wasdin's account of Marine sniper school offers an insider's view of the technical proficiency and endless training to ensure the ever greater precision required of the marksmen. On a more personal note, the soldiers' membership in the SEALs placed considerable burdens on their families as well. Wasdin stresses that SEALs are taught to exercise restraint in their use of deadly force. He also conscientiously credits the collaborative efforts of other units—Army Rangers, Delta Force, the CIA, and other NATO country special forces.

Understandably, the killing of Osama Bin Laden frames Wasdin's story,² since it is much the most significant event linking the SEALs to US national security in the popular mind. Because the book is aimed at an American general audience, it is regrettably tinged with quasi-religious language, with references, for example, to Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid's "evil power play" (4) and "our mission ... to stop the mob of evil Darkseekers and save the good Somali humans" (184–85). The accounts of firefights vividly evoke the ebb and flow of combat and the sniper's role in it. Relating an incident in Mogadishu when he was supporting an assault group attempting to arrest a key member of Aidid's entourage, Wasdin writes,

I saw a militiaman 500 yards away firing through an open window at the helos. I made a mental note to keep my heart rate down and centered the crosshairs on him as my muscle memory took over.... The round hit him in the side of his chest, entering his left and exiting his right. He convulsed and buckled, falling backward into the building—permanently. I quickly got back into my scope and scanned. *Game now on.* All thoughts departed my mind. I was one with my Win[chester] Mag[num], scanning my sector.... (7)

He then spotted another Somali shooting from a balcony:

From his position, I'm sure he thought he was safe from assaulters, and he probably was. He was not safe from me—300 yards wasn't even a challenge. I shot him through his left side, and the round exited his right. He slumped down onto the fire escape landing, never knowing what hit him. His AK-47 lay silent next to him. Someone tried to reach out and retrieve the weapon—one round from my Win Mag put a stop to that. Each time I made a shot, I immediately forgot about that target and scanned for another. [Elsewhere] chaos erupted inside and outside [a] garage. People ran everywhere. Little Birds and Black Hawks filled the skies with deafening rotor blasts. I was in my own little world, though. Nothing existed outside my scope and my mission. Let the Unit guys handle their business in the garage. My business was reaching out and touching the enemy. (7)

After service in Operation Desert Storm as a member of SEAL Team Two, Wasdin was selected to join the prestigious SEAL Team Six for counterterrorism, hostage rescue, and counterinsurgency operations. In clear prose, he tells of important missions aimed at capturing or killing Mohamed Aidid. During a preliminary intelligence gathering foray which led to the tragic Battle of Mogadishu, Wasdin was shot several times

2. The text comprises seventeen chapters arranged chronologically, with a helpful glossary, references, index, maps, and photographs.

but continued to fight and helped rescue one of the downed pilots.³ He was afterward airlifted to a hospital in Germany, where doctors were able to spare him the amputation of his legs. The book ends with an account of his recovery and return to civilian life.

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Chuck Pfarrer's *SEAL Target Geronimo* concerns the raid on Osama Bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan in only about a quarter of its text. The rest of the book provides background about SEAL Team Six—their selection, training, weapons, and operations in such places as Beirut, Granada, and Kuwait. One chapter, for example, describes the rescue of an American captain from Somali pirates. The background chapters also trace the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, Bin Laden's evolution into a terrorist and search for legitimization by various Muslim clerics, especially Aiman al-Zawahiri, who, Pfarrer argues, wanted his money but not his leadership. Here, too, we encounter unhelpful religious characterizations, for instance, of the "hell-spawned creation, Al Qaeda" (1).

The book's tactical chapters make for riveting reading. Although much information is still classified, the details of the raid against Bin Laden, as Pfarrer describes it, seem plausible. Upon entering their target's third-floor bedroom, the SEAL team members saw

Osama ... standing by the back wall. He dived across the king-size bed to get at the AKSU rifle he kept by the headboard. The room smelled like old clothing, like a guest bedroom in a grandmother's house, a place sort of frozen in time. Pinned in the light [of the rifles], Amal [Bin Laden's wife] lifted her hands to her eyes. She said, "It's not him" in Arabic, and then something else the operators could not hear. Four suppressed shots were fired, two rounds and two rounds. Both SEALs discharged their weapons in the same second and the reports all seemed pushed together into a single phrase. The first round sailed past Osama's face and thudded into the mattress. Osama shoved Amal as he clawed across the bed. A second bullet, aimed at Osama's head, grazed Amal in the calf. SEALs do not shoot to wound; they are trained to shoot to kill. Amal was hit because Osama placed her between himself and the men who entered his bedroom. As his wife crouched forward wounded, Osama's hand reached for his AKSU. He never made it. Two U.S. Navy M855 5.56 mm Predator bullets slammed into him. (192)

The volume includes a useful glossary, two photos facing the title page (both unrelated to the raid) and a photo of the author in the "field" with a rifle and talking on a wireless radio. No maps even of the complex where Bin Laden hid are provided nor does the book contain an index.

Pfarrer is a man with missions—to write a "true" account of the Osama Bin Laden raid and to refute claims that no weapons of mass destruction were found in Iraq. He contends that Saddam Hussein had such weapons until his fall from power and that, after the invasion of Iraq, Bin Laden procured some of them. He believes that cowardly political leaders and the acquiescent media concealed or downplayed these facts. Not a shred of evidence is cited for such assertions. Pfarrer also seeks to counter a *New Yorker* article which argues that the SEALs assassinated Bin Laden. He is more convincing here, showing that Bin Laden in fact reached for a weapon and that the SEALs did not kill women and children during the raid.

Finally, Pfarrer wishes to correct the misimpression given by the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012; dir. Kathryn Bigelow), which credits the CIA with finding Bin Laden, while minimizing the role of the ground forces that carried out the raid. His case is damaged by the vitriol directed against all actors besides SEALs, whether other special forces or security services; he notes, for example, that Joint Special Operations Command planners refer to the NSA, CIA and FBI as the "three stooges." The book is rife with egregious errors, such as locating Al Qaida's Kenyan attack in Mombassa rather than Nairobi and declaring that there is no indigenous cinema in Arab countries (Egypt is home to one of the world's largest motion picture industries). Nor does the author make it clear just how many individuals within or apart from the SEALs he interviewed, whether in casual conversations or formal investigations. In short, much in the book simply cannot be taken seriously.

3. This battle was the subject of Mark Bowden's bestselling *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1999) and the 2001 film of the same name directed by Ridley Scott.

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These three volumes together provide fascinating insights into the character, dynamics, and organization of special forces in general. Five common attributes are evident. First is the presence of a charismatic founder and an institutionalizing commander. Otto Skorzeny, for instance, through his forceful personality, leadership abilities, and acquired mastery of military politics succeeded in setting up a unit of loyal commandos within an existing military hierarchy. Cdr. Richard “Dick” Marcinko played the same role during the initial stages of creating the SEALs. Both leaders also built coalitions outside their units, recruited troops based on personal connections, and were succeeded by leaders who consolidated their successes in administrative and doctrinal terms.

Second is the deliberate fostering of brand recognition. As Pfarrer observes, such branding is achieved through effective early missions, official and especially unofficial marketing, and the steady enhancement of the unit’s reputation. Once recognized by their brand, special forces are trusted with the testing of the latest equipment, the newest technology, and innovative tactics; they are the source of novel methods that spread into more conventional armed forces. Branding also requires the designing of missions that will ensure the continued good name of units. Pfarrer stresses the effect of political intrigue and the concern for proper images in the mounting and execution of special forces operations. Thus the actual killing of Bin Laden was not filmed through helmet cameras, because the SEAL operators, not being “politically naïve,” did not want Washington “armchair commandos” to spend weeks critiquing split-second decisions made in the heat of the action (195–96). The intent is always to forestall external meddling and second-guessing in order to keep control of the final narrative after any given mission.

Third is that the “special” quality of the forces consists in their position “outside” the regular military hierarchy, resourcing, and procedures. This distinction has advantages and disadvantages. Skorzeny and Pfarrer both document the benefits of direct funding and access to senior commanders and top political decision-makers. And, too, special units often enjoy longer planning cycles, away, as Skorzeny puts it, from prying eyes. A disadvantage is the frequent side-stepping of special forces in more conventional operations. Wasdin, for example, believes the SEALs should have been in charge of protecting the oil fields of Kuwait during the first Gulf War, but senior allied commanders chose not to use them. And Skorzeny’s plans for deploying his unit in the Ardennes foundered because it was hard to integrate into the wider offensive.

Fourth is that the political maneuvering typical of any large-scale organization, including the military, is heightened in the case of special forces by fierce competition for status and reputation. The SEALs initially served under Army officers and were not particularly valued by the Navy, but eventually their successes secured their prestige and priority in the procurement of resources. The same was true of Skorzeny’s commandos. This competition for status plays out on both the national and international levels. Wasdin notes that the SEALs often train with and learn from rival European special forces, though their most serious challenger is the US Army’s Delta Force. Symptomatic of this competitive spirit is Pfarrer’s blatant championing of the SEALs and denigrating of all other special force organizations.

Fifth is that the successful branding of special forces depends on popular culture to reinforce the image of specific units. The very aura of mystery surrounding these supposedly secret organizations has made them attractive subjects for many popular books and films; in Hollywood, Delta Force and SEALs Team members are known as “Jedis.” The three books reviewed here are best seen as part of this process of creating and recreating the “specialness” of special forces.