



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

Interview Number 2. Lieutenant Colonel 'Jumbo' Courtney, MBE, MC

Interview with Jumbo Courtney by David Sheehan

Commentator (00:02):

Lieut-Colonel Godfrey Basil (Gruff or Jumbo)¹ Courtney, MBE, MC was commissioned into the Royal West Kent Regiment in October 1935 and served in India, Palestine, Malta, and West Africa before being posted to number 2 Special Boat Section (SBS) of the British Army Commandos. He was OC of Z Group SBS in the Western Mediterranean in 1942 and 1943. Z Group SBS was transferred to Force 136, SOE in Ceylon in July 1944, and it was then that Jumbo Courtney was posted to SRD, eventually becoming G2 plans at SRD Headquarters in Melbourne. He then became Officer Commanding Group 'A' SRD at Morotai and Labuan in March 1945 before returning to the UK in January 1946, after the disbandment of SOE.

After the war he returned to the United Kingdom where he was seconded to the Foreign Service. In 1955, he retired from the Army and emigrated with his family to Australia. From 1957 to 1980, Lieut.-LTCOL Courtney conducted business as an export consultant, promoting Australian products, mainly with the Middle East. In 1980 he returned to Melbourne and took up research into special operations in World War II. Lieut.-Colonel Courtney's research has resulted in the publication of two books; *SBS in World War Two* and *Silent Feet -The History of 'Z' Special Operations 1942-1945*. Lieutenant LTCOL Courtney has also maintained a close affiliation with the 1st Commando Regiment and is often called upon to lecture on his special operations experiences.

LTCOL Courtney is talking with David Sheehan.

¹ Lieut-Colonel Godfrey Basil (Gruff) Courtney, MBE, MC. His brother was Roger James Allen Courtney MC (1902 – 15 February 1946) known as Jumbo, was a British soldier who established the Special Boat Sections which saw action in World War II. These would eventually lead to the formation of the UK Special Boat Service. Roger died in 1949. See https://www.unithistories.com/officers/Army_officers_C02.html. At some time, post war veterans commenced referring to Gruff as Jumbo and this continued for the remainder of his life in Australia.



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Group from 2 Special Boat Section at Hillhead 1943

Back row l-r: (1) Sgt J. Newsome (R.A.C.); (2) Sgt. F. Preece (R.A.C); (3) Sgt J. Gilmour (79th Horse Regt RA); (4) Sgt R. Sidlow (Grenadier. Guards).

Front row l-r: (1) Capt. N.G. Kennard (Gordon Highlanders); (2) Capt. E.J.A. Lunn (RA); (3) Maj G.B. Courtney (RWK Regt); (4) F/Lieut R. Thompson (R.A.F. Medical Officer); (5) Capt. A.R. McClair (former Cpl, Essex Regt)

Photo courtesy John Robertson www.specialforcesroh.com

David Sheehan - It is my pleasure to introduce Colonel Courtney, who is going to talk on some aspects of the command and control of SRD operations during World War 2.

LTCOL Courtney² - SOA, that is Special Operations Australia, was established in Australia in March or April 1942, by General Blamey with the approval of General MacArthur, and was given the cover name of the Inter Allied Services Department, ISD for short, and its administrative wing was designated Z Special Unit, responsible for all Australian servicemen and women. A few SOE-trained British officers who had escaped from Malaya were sent to Australia to start the organisation from scratch as there was no knowledge of special warfare at that time amongst Australian Military Forces or the Americans. In order to coordinate and control the various allied intelligence organisations here, GHQ SWPA, that is Southwest Pacific Area, created the Allied Intelligence Bureau AIB in June 1942. GHQ SWPA was suspicious of SOA as a British Trojan horse, which had been established with the ultimate object of regaining British colonial possessions lost to the Japanese, rather than to assist MacArthur to return to the Philippines.

Fundamental disagreements regarding SOA's (02:28) role was to result in continued friction between SOA and GHQ through AIB and the denial to the former of long range aircraft and submarines during 1942 and 1943. This continued until the latter half of

² VB58298 AKV 309 LTCOL G.B Courtney



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1944. Only short range intelligence missions could be undertaken and GHQ showed no understanding or appreciation of SOE's proper function as practitioners in special warfare. In March 1943, the Commanding Officer, that is Colonel Mott, of SOA-ISD was sacked by GHQ and the unit was renamed the Services Reconnaissance Department (SRD), with another British officer from SOE in London sent out to command, a certain Colonel Chapman-Walker³. Friction continued and intensified thereafter, culminating in July 1944 with an attempt by GHQ SAIB to remove the then British Commanding Officer (CO). This failed through the intervention of General Blamey who acted throughout SOA's history as its great supporter.

(03:44) In fact, they were very much helped by General Herring and General Steele as well. It became evident that successful development and survival of a special force unit requires a big daddy at the top of the military tree, who has a thorough appreciation of its correct use and potential. It was not until the beginning of 1945, that SOA/SRD came under control of the AMF (that's the Australian Military Forces) in direct support of their plans for coping with bypassed Japanese garrisons in New Guinea, the Halmahera's⁴, Celebes and British and Dutch Borneo. Thereafter it was better supplied, with long range aircraft and submarine transport, and able to carry out the tactical intelligence in guerrilla warfare roles, for which it had been trained and intended. Problems we encountered - as white faces amongst the brown population, intelligence parties could only operate among friendly natives. In Dutch colonial territories (04:48) the natives generally betrayed them to the Japanese, while in others the result was similar after a year or two of brutal Japanese reprisals.

Lack of fluency in the local language by most Australians resulted in inaccurate and incomplete intelligence gathering, and the position improved only after recruitment into the AIF of Malay pearl divers. The goodwill of the natives was of paramount importance to survival. And each operative was equipped with a basic medical pack for treatment of local villagers, as well as for his own health needs in a hostile climate. And he was given some simple medical training. It was found that many signallers were insufficiently trained in how to repair and maintain their WT⁵ sets under the extremely difficult conditions experienced in jungle warfare, when easy replacement of damaged sets or parts was often difficult or impossible. There were advantages in amalgamation of roles. In the United Kingdom and Europe, special warfare roles such as beach reconnaissance, coastal sabotage and ferrying of secret agents were carried out by the Special Boat Section, the SBS. The SAS carried out small scale raiding on enemy installations, such as airfields, and SOE, the encouragement and organisation of resistance movements and guerrilla warfare in enemy-occupied territories.

(06:22) - This division into three separate and competing organizations was wasteful of manpower, stores and operational transport. However, in Australia, all roles were carried out by one and the same unit, that is SOA, which was a great advantage. But

³ VB70576 Captain J. Chapman-Walker joined SOA 1 May 1943 on operations and later Director SRD

⁴ Halmahera, formerly known as Jilolo, Gilolo, or Jailolo, is the largest island in the Maluku Islands. It is part of the North Maluku province of Indonesia and Sofifi, the capital of the province, is located on the west coast of the island.

⁵ Wireless transmitters



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specialised roles require men of a particular temperament and (it) was important to fit the man to the job and not to select for an operation by rule of thumb. For instance, a good SBS operative was generally not fitted for SAS work, being often a loner and not a team player. Then we come to the question of command and control. During the later stages of the war when SRD was at its most effective, its staff was organised in a number of Directorates headed by a Director, the Commanding Officer, and Deputy Director. It was divided into Directorates of Signals, Intelligence, Planning, Technical Research, Training, Stores, Finance, Medical, and Administration.

(07:27) - These Directors administered and controlled the Directorates of the Air, Navy and Operations. From November 1944, the latter was divided into four operational groups, that is Group A covering Borneo and the China seas, including Malaya; Group B covering the Celebes and Moluccas; Group C covering the North-eastern area of New Guinea; and Group D covering all islands south of the Java, Flores and Banda Seas. Now to operational transport. The most significant factor limiting SRD operations during the first two years was that of transport. Distances in the SWPA were much greater than those in Europe and long distance transport by air or submarine was almost unobtainable during this period, owing to differing American priorities and shortage of existing resources. SRD was therefore obliged to confine its operations to the near north of Australia in New Guinea and Portuguese Timor, using Royal Australian Navy motor launches and United States PT boats, and with occasional sorties by Catalina aircraft.

(08:40) - The only exception was the insertion into and eventual evacuation from the northeast tip of British Borneo of an intelligence party between late 1943 and the middle of 1944 by routine US submarine patrols, supplying their guerrillas in the Southern Philippines. However, from the middle of 1944 US and British submarines operating from Fremantle carried parties as far afield as Borneo and the South China Sea. From the beginning of 1945, six Liberator bomber aircraft modified for dropping troops and stores by parachute were made available to the AIB for sorties, of which SRD got its share⁶. The most useful and consistent maid of all work was the Catalina seaplane for middle distance operations, landing on lakes, rivers, and estuaries, and close inshore off island beaches. From early in 1945, these were supplemented by Australian built country craft and 40-foot workboats operating from forward bases.

(09:50) - Now, the conclusion on 31st of August 1945, SRD numbered 1,700 officers, men and service women, of which 1,250 were Australians. SRD had accounted for 1,806 Japanese dead and 45 taken prisoner. With its own casualties, 71 dead and missing and seven who had been taken prisoner but were subsequently recovered. 550 officers and men had been trained for operations, of which 380 had actually landed in Japanese-held territories before the end of hostilities. It was not until 1945 that SRD would operate directly in support of the AMF and in consequence be employed in its proper special warfare roles. Its greatest successes and the final justification for existence came with the organisation of resistance amongst the warlike tribes in the interior of Sarawak and British North Borneo before the assault on Brunei

⁶ 200 Flight RAAF



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Bay by the 9th Australian Division on the 10th of June 1945 and the waging of guerrilla warfare against the Japanese garrisons in the coastal areas thereafter. After the end of hostilities in August, the maintenance of law and order in the interior and the restoration of the civil administration in both liberated territories, devolved upon the SRD parties. They were withdrawn to Labuan in October after handing over to the officers of the British Borneo Civil Affairs Unit and returned to Australia.

David Sheehan (11:35) - On the various operations, for example, on SEMUT 1 in Borneo, at what level was the tactical planning made at? For example, did the team leaders on SEMUT 1 and the other SEMUT operations have any great say in the planning of the operation?

LTCOL Courtney (11:55) - The operations in Sarawak and British North Borneo, the party leaders who were chosen were actually men who had had previous experience in those territories before the war, either in a private capacity or as government servants. And they not only knew the area and many of the people, but they also knew the language. So, they were involved in the detailed planning, right from the very start because they, who knew the conditions had to say, what was the safest method of getting into the territory, whereas nobody could do that who had not had experience in those territories themselves. When you came to the short term intelligence party, it's going in for a few days or even a few weeks into areas where the party leader had no knowledge of the local people or the language, then they were not involved in the final planning until the end of the pre operation final lined up period of training, for purely security reasons. Because obviously it was bad security to tell people where they were going until you need to do so and having no local knowledge of the place or the people there was no need to tell them where they were going to at that time.

David Sheehan (13:14)- Yes and once they landed in the country, how much leeway did they have in their actions? Were they directed from Australia to follow a set plan? Or did they make decisions on what they found on the spot?

LTCOL Courtney (13:31)- The overall set operational plan was according to the orders of GHQ. There were two or three or four particular headings that they would have to carry out in the way of intelligence or of organising the local warlike tribes for guerrilla warfare, which was laid down beforehand. How they did it was very much their own affair because they were the men on the spot. I was nominally Commanding Officer of all those operations from Labuan, but in fact, my command was extremely nominal because all the party leaders were men of considerable experience, character, and I might say bloody-mindedness. And they were not going to take orders from anybody sitting in Labuan, which of course was quite sensible. And they really carried out the details of the battle, according to their own knowledge of the situation at the time. And our job daily in Labuan was to get as much help in the way of stores and so on as they possibly wanted and support at any particular time.

David Sheehan (14:39) - That's as far as we were planning to go, but if I can ask some additional questions and just keep going. The present teaching, if there are several parties in the same location or in the same country, as the SEMUT parties



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were in Borneo, is to have a separate command and control party placed in the country to control both parties or three parties or however many parties there are there. Was that ever considered during World War II or was it tried and not found practical?

LTCOL Courtney (15:26) - And as far as SEMUT was concerned, that was the original conception, that all the three parties should come under one particular head who was the commander finally of SEMUT 2, a fellow called Major Carter⁷. But in actual fact, because of the mountainous nature of the country and the extremely difficult conditions, climatically speaking, from the point of view of maintaining wireless communication, it was found that he could not control from any central point within the country because the communications would not work. So, it was decided that they would have to have their own wireless communication straight back to Darwin and then of course, to Melbourne and over to Morotai also when the advanced headquarters had been established there. We did find that communications were a very great limiting factor in the success of these operations, because it's all very well to test a set when you're on the barrack square sitting somewhere in Melbourne, in nice comfortable conditions, or even when you're on manoeuvres somewhere, (but) when you're all sitting underneath a bush being shot at by Japanese and there's considerable humidity, or you may have dropped your set in the river because you had to get out rather quickly, or your set had been dropped on its head when the parachute dropping stropedo came down, you had to be a radio technician as well as a competent operator (16:57) and we found half the way through that competent though our wireless operators were, they were not sufficiently technically trained or experienced to enable to maintain their sets and repair their sets when they were sitting in the middle of jungle and they couldn't get replacement sets dropped in and so on and halfway through the operation, we had to drop in two technical officers into various areas in order to repair the sets and get them on the air again. And in fact, one of our great weaknesses operationally and quite a proportion of the operations overall were either aborted or made very much less useful, because the wireless communications quite often just didn't work, for that reason. So that is why your wireless communication in these things is absolutely vital to special operations and they've got to work, otherwise you might as well not be there.

David Sheehan (17:55) - The only alternate communications you had apart from wireless was runners between the various locations

LTCOL Courtney (18:02) – We had small local sets ATR 4AA, which didn't get back to Darwin. They were only for local. Again, you had your very difficult conditions there and quite frequently and, in particular, just after the assault by the 9th Division, on the 10th of June 1945 on Brunei Bay, they were dependent upon us to a certain degree for up-to-date tactical information on the movement of Japanese troops within the mainland, Brunei. And when they got it a week late, because it had come by cleft stick and a runner, naturally they got very upset and I was pig in the middle of the general rightly to say, this is not good enough. And it wasn't until our parties each got a decent

⁷ QX 48608 and AK 247 Major Gordon 'Toby' Carter.



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wireless set later on, that communications really improved, but it is vital and (inaudible) the cleft stick is not good enough.

David Sheehan (18:56) - But I think that if parties were in a similar area these days, they'd probably have similar problems with communications by radio and by runner.

LTCOL Courtney (19:07) - Well, I mean the equipment may change and improve, but the basics don't, of jungle warfare and conditions in jungles are up against the same difficulty.

David Sheehan (19:18)- And also with the teams when they went in, was there a set initial plan to have the team work as a team, or was it always intended for the various teams to land together, but then work as individuals as the parties in SEMUT found out?

LTCOL Courtney (19:40) - No, they would be actually directed by their party leader as a team, as a particular party, but they would be sent out individually, and were, to individual areas themselves to develop those areas and to train and recruit and train guerrillas, armed guerrillas, for action against the Japanese when the time came in support of the assault by the 9th Australian Division and there you had one man, he might be a driver, he might be a private soldier, anything up to a Warrant Officer sitting by himself in a portion of British North Borneo or Sarawak, surrounded by his own bodyguard, of possibly up to ten armed and semi-trained soldiers. Quite a lot of Dutch Javanese from the Dutch army there, they came over to our side and their job was to train and arm these warlike head-hunting tribes to rather restore their stock of old heads for ritual purposes, which made them very keen.

(20:45) - They were awfully bad shots with rifles. They were far better with blowpipes and parangs of course as you'd understand. In fact, they were more dangerous to themselves with rifles, than they were to anybody else. But our people were right out on their own and they had these extraordinary responsibilities. And after the war hostilities were over, when the Australian troops were not allowed to advance further inland by order of Canberra, it devolved purely upon our people in the middle to try and disarm these tribes for one thing, and to stop these roving bands of Japanese running about, who were shooting people up and stealing all their food and try and get them to surrender. And it devolved entirely upon these people, I was saying private soldiers upwards and (there were) some incredible stories, things that went on.

David Sheehan (21:32) - So, it was important for every man involved to be a cross-trained to the extent that they could carry out the same functions?

LTCOL Courtney (21:39) - Every man had to be fully trained in all these aspects, which I mentioned earlier on a. for hearts and minds of the locals, upon which his survival let alone his usefulness depended and they all had to know it, they were quite an extraordinary bunch.

David Sheehan (21:56)- Yes. Thank you.



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LTCOL Courtney - All right.

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