

No 3 (“Jewish”) Troop, No.10 Commando.

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During the First and Second World Wars, British and Allied nations Jewish Servicemen and Women played a part in those struggles in excess of the proportion to their numbers in the general populations. Many will know of the Zion Mule Corps (1915-16), the Jewish Legion (38th-42nd battalions, Royal Fusiliers - 1917-19) in the First War, and the Jewish Brigade (1944-46), the 51st (mainly Jewish Palestinians) Middle East Commando, the SIG Commando in North Africa, the Jewish members of SOE, and other Jewish groups of World War Two.

One of the best kept secrets of WW2, however, has been the nature of the existence of No. 3 (Miscellaneous or "X" Troop) of the unique No. 10 (Inter-Allied) Commando/Special Services Brigade. The reason? They were virtually all (95%) German speaking Jewish refugees mainly from Germany and Austria (but also some from Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other European countries).

The excellent books by Ian Dear – a seminal work on No 10 Commando ("Ten Commando 1942-45", published by Leo Cooper Ltd 1987) – and Peter Masters (see below) are the only thorough, published studies of this amazing group of men of the famous "Jewish" No. 3 Troop¹. Before this, virtually nothing had been published about them. It is not my aim therefore to repeat what Ian Dear and Peter Masters have so wonderfully and ably already researched.

Suffice to say that there were French, Dutch, Belgian and other "National" Troops (totalling at its largest about 1000 men altogether), and then the Jewish Troop. Even now many of 3 Troop cannot speak for a variety of reasons, of the nature of their exploits, and others have of course died. But X Troop were, even by the standards of No 10 Commando, a particularly extraordinary bunch having, as well as the normal skills of all Commandos, in explosives, parachuting and so on, extremely high intelligence and education, and were indeed by far the most highly trained group in the British Army, especially in fieldcraft, camouflage, compass marching, street fighting, housebreaking and lockpicking ("One Day in York" Michael Arton, Hazelwood Press, 1989). Many were attached to the SSRF (Small Scale Raiding Force, part of SOE), SBS and SIS and most files on this aspect of the war remain closed.

All together 88 men passed through their ranks, of whom 19 became officers - many commissioned in the field for specific acts of bravery - and the rest sergeants and above. Twenty one (24%) were Killed in Action and at least another 22 wounded (of the 44 men from No 3 Troop who fought in Normandy, 27 were killed, wounded or taken prisoner!). They won one MC, one MM, one Croix de Guerre, one MBE, one BEM, one Certificate of Commendation and three Mentioned in Despatches. The numbers of awards are derisory considering their exploits and the inevitable death sentence they faced if captured - not to mention the danger to any of their surviving relatives in Nazi Europe. Many details of the men were known to the Gestapo and reprisals would have been immediate.

But this paucity of decorations is explained by the fact that the Troop never fought as a unit; they were often detached to serve with other Special Forces in order that they could use their special skills (in silent reconnaissance, capturing and interrogating prisoners in the most hazardous of situations, often alone behind the lines and usually at night. They also were particularly knowledgeable about German military units and training, as well as weapons). For this reason, a Commanding Officer was loath to recommend for awards men who did not belong to HIS unit, and especially as there was probably an unwritten "ration" of awards per raid or per unit (letter from Lt. Peter Masters aka Arany, No 3 troop, to the author 25/1/95).

¹ The Title "Jewish Troop" is an unofficial one and coined only after the war when it was safe to offer this apt description of this unit after the real facts became known on the release of papers at the National Archive (formerly the Public Records Office). To have called these men the Jewish Troop in war time would of course have been fatal for any captured.

However, at Ashton Wold in Northamptonshire the Hon. Miriam Rothschild planted a grove of trees in the grounds of her beautiful house in memory of those of No 3 Troop who were killed, for her husband, George Lane aka Lanyi, was the first officer and MC of No. 3 Jewish Troop, 10th Inter-Allied Commando.

The 3 Troop CO was a quiet Welsh, Cambridge languages graduate, Capt. Bryan Hilton Jones (later promoted to Major and 2 i/c of the whole of No 10 Commando but tragically killed in a road accident in 1970) and son of a doctor from Caernarvon. All his men came as volunteers from the Alien Companies of the Pioneer Corps from July 24th 1942, arriving for training at Irvine in Ayrshire (many had been interned in 1940 following the "anti-alien"/invasion hysteria, but later released to serve in the forces, some in France at Dunkirk). As Peter Masters wrote, "Getting back at the Nazis was an ever present motivation " in No 3 Troop "...our Jewish Commando was the very antithesis of the 'lambs to the slaughter' allegations".

Volunteers reported to the Grand Central Hotel, Marylebone for selection, and thence to No 10 Pioneer Corps training centre in Bradford. From Autumn 1942 they trained at Aberdovey, Wales, or Achnacarry (Scotland) then Eastbourne and Littlehampton, men being detached as required to go on raids with other Commandos, SOE, SIS, etc.

The men had to take English "Nombres de Guerre" and new identities, false personal histories, regiments, next of kin, and so on (most chose to keep the same initials, though) to at least have a chance of not being found out if captured by the Nazis, as being Jews. The casualty officer at the War Office (Dawkins, a senior Civil Servant) was one of very few who knew their real and assumed identities and kept parallel lists of the names of 3 Troop.

They wore the No. 10 Commando shoulder title (or sometimes the No. of the Commando to which they were attached) and the Combined Operations arm flash. On their green berets they could not wear the Pioneer Corps badge as this would have betrayed their origins, so they wore the badges of the Queen's Own Royal West Kents, East Kents (Bufs), Royal Sussex, Hampshire Regiments or the General Service badge (letter to author from Ian Dear 28.10.94).

In "Top Secret" letters from Combined Operations HQ (Defence 2/780 - PRO) Major General R G Sturges, GOC Commandoes and Special Service Group, wrote in April 1944 and February 1945 that No 3 Troop had been "trained for and employed on work of a highly combatant nature and are volunteerstheir behaviour and work has always been most satisfactory....this is a good sub group, well able to look after itself, and has done excellent work".

Writing a Secret report on No 3 Troop after the war from his home at Crug, Caernarvon in April 1946, Bryan Hilton-Jones said that No 3 Troop "were conspicuously successful and earned high praise all round, the best illustration of which is that many were Commissioned as officers into the Commandoes to which they had been attached..... They were the most interesting and worthwhile branch of No 10 Commando". After D-Day, Capt. Griffith (aka Glaser) became the first Jewish CO of the Troop until he was killed at the River Aller crossing on 11.4.45.

In September 1945 the whole Commando was disbanded, but many of No 3 Troop continued in sensitive and secret work in the Occupation Forces, tracking Nazi Resistance groups, war criminals, translating captured documents etc. Perhaps the last word should go to Major Hilton-Jones when he wrote, "Despite many and serious difficulties, this band of "enemy alien" volunteers earned for itself a not unflattering reputation, the achievement of which was in no small measure due to the sincerity and wholeheartedness put into his service by every member of the troop. For them perhaps more than for any others it was a question of self-respect and self-justification".

Below, then published for the first time, is the No 3 (Jewish) Troop, No 10 Commando, muster roll. Long may they be remembered.

(Note - I wish to specifically and sincerely thank both Ian Dear and especially Peter Masters, formerly Sgt. (later Lt. in West Africa) in No 3 Troop and author of the definitive work on 3 Troop, "Striking Back - A Jewish Commando writes" - Presidio Press, 1997 - for their generous help in compiling this list, and Michael Arton for allowing me to use his research in his book).