

STIRLING

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Based on a true story.

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Who Dares Wins.

FADE IN:

A tiny speck of light in a vast, dark DESERT.

CLOSER --

A RED HURRICANE LANTERN, perched atop a sand dune, glowing like a beacon.

CLOSER --

At the edge of the light, sits a TALL MAN (20s) in a torn-up British Army uniform. He looks bruised, broken, exhausted.

He stares into the darkness.

Watching, waiting...

North African Desert

November 1941

EXT. SAND DUNE - NORTH AFRICA - DAY

A young British SOLDIER scales the dune. Like the Tall Man, he looks as though he's been to hell and back.

The Tall Man remains focused on the void in front of him. His eyes scouring the dark sands for any signs of movement, any signs of life.

SOLDIER

Taxis wanna leave, sir. S'posed to be another storm comin' this way.

The Tall Man doesn't react.

SOLDIER (CONT'D)

Sir--

TALL MAN

I'm waiting for the men.

SOLDIER

It's been two days. Some of the other lads are in piss-poor shape.

TALL MAN

(sotto; low)

We had to go.

SOLDIER

I beg your pardon, sir?

The Tall Man turns, looks up at the soldier for the first time. He rambles, almost delirious...

TALL MAN

We had to jump. They wanted to close up shop, you see. We had no choice. I had no choice.

SOLDIER

We really need to get a move on, sir. We're going to leave some tents, food, supplies...

The Tall Man looks back out at the horizon, his features a mix of defeat, remorse, and anguish.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. APARTMENT BLOCK - NIGHT

On the East side of the Nile sits the Garden City quarter of Cairo. An affluent suburb and a haven for many multinational soldiers stationed in North Africa.

Loud music and laughter spills from a flat with a roof deck.

Cairo

6 Months Earlier

INT. HOUSE PARTY - NIGHT

The apartment is packed with people. None of them Egyptian.

MOLLY (O.S.)

Tell me you didn't wear a beret.

STIRLING (O.S.)

I had too. You positively cannot become a successful artist in Paris without one.

We weave through the crowd of tipsy revellers, towards a tall imposing figure leaning against the back wall of the lounge.

DAVID STIRLING (25) is the same TALL MAN from the desert. All 6' 6" of him. He looks clean and sharp in civilian clothes, his ordeal in the sand far ahead of him.

Except he has a serious BLACK EYE and a sutured brow.

Stirling is deep in conversation with a beautiful English woman, MOLLY (20s). They're both buzzed, relishing each other's company.

MOLLY

Were you successful?

STIRLING

No. Turns out I'm not terribly good at painting.

MOLLY

(re: black-eye)

And fighting? Are you any good at that? What does the other bloke look like?

STIRLING

Can you keep a secret?

She nods, leans in close...

STIRLING (CONT'D)

(whispers)

The other bloke was a tree. He jumped out at me during a run.

Molly stifles a laugh.

MOLLY

You poor thing. Next time you're at the hospital, pop into my ward and say hello.

(off his look)

I'm a nurse on the 3rd floor.

STIRLING

I'd be delighted.

MOLLY

So wait, what happened after Paris?

STIRLING

I had other dreams.

MOLLY

Such as?

STIRLING

Climb Everest.

MOLLY

You're joking. Surely.

STIRLING

Not in the least. I spent most of last year training in Canada and America. Did a fair bit of climbing in the Rockies, sleeping outdoors in freezing temperatures.

MOLLY

So you're a painter who can't paint and a climber without a mountain. What about now? Journalist perhaps? A diplomat?

STIRLING

Well I was a Commando, but my unit's been disbanded. Not quite sure what's next to be honest.

MOLLY

You're a soldier?!

STIRLING

I'm an officer.

MOLLY

But you're so tall.

STIRLING

And...?

MOLLY

Well how do you fit in a tank?

She laughs. It's infectious.

Stirling notices a WALL CLOCK over Molly's shoulder...

STIRLING

Bugger.

MOLLY

What's the matter?

STIRLING

I'm to report back to camp at oh-six-hundred. That's not enough time to sort through the blinding hangover I'll inevitably wake up with.

MOLLY

It's this desert heat and the
dehydration. Hangovers are ten
times worse here.

Molly offers a devilish grin.

MOLLY (CONT'D)

Lucky for you, I have a magical fix.

STIRLING

Oh? Do tell...

She whispers seductively in his ear. His eyes go wide.

SMASH CUT TO:

CLOSE ON -- STIRLING

Breathing deeply through an OXYGEN MASK.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NEXT MORNING

A hand whips back a curtain to reveal Stirling lying on a
hospital bed, enjoying a few deep snifters of pure oxygen.

Molly smiles down at him. She's in her nurse uniform.

MOLLY

Steady on, don't over-do it.

Stirling pulls off the mask. He looks wide-awake, refreshed.

STIRLING

Remarkable. You're a goddess among
mortals!

She takes a bow. He jumps to his feet.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

I'd better be off.

MOLLY

See you tonight then?

STIRLING

My dearest Molly, the entire Afrika
Korp couldn't keep me away.

Stirling grabs his hat and hurries off.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY STREETS (CAIRO) - DAY

Stirling weaves through the crowded streets of Cairo. Even in 1941, it's a bustling metropolis.

Spotting a British Army truck, Stirling flags it down, hitches a ride back to camp.

EXT. BRITISH ARMY BASE - DAY

Several military bases have been built in the suburbs of Cairo. This British camp is the biggest. Rows of tents and Nissen Huts cover a vast expanse of flat, sandy terrain.

The same British Army truck rolls through the camp. Sitting in the back, by the tailgate, Stirling smokes a wooden pipe as he takes in the various roadside tableaux...

-- Young soldiers running drills.

-- Playing football/soccer.

-- Fixing vehicles, cleaning weapons.

-- A LONE SOLDIER loading a truck.

INT. ARMY TRUCK - DAY

Noticing the latter, Stirling stomps on the truck bed.

STIRLING
(calls out)
Right here is good!

The truck slows to a halt.

STIRLING (CONT'D)
Thank you kindly!

EXT. ARMY TRUCK

Stirling leaps out the back of the truck. The driver gives him a salute and continues on his way.

After a few contemplative puffs of his pipe, Stirling walks up to the soldier loading his truck with PARACHUTE PACKS...

STIRLING
Morning, Jock. What have you got going on here then?

Oxford graduate LIEUTENANT JOHN "JOCK" LEWES (28) could be a poster boy for the British Army. Serious, dedicated, tough-as-nails, and hellbent on defeating the Nazis.

LEWES

Hello, Dave. Just trying to keep the lads sharp. Ever since they disbanded Layforce, everyone's bored silly.

Lewes takes in Stirling's disheveled civilian clothes.

LEWES (CONT'D)

Been into town again, have you?

STIRLING

I was a good boy though. No gambling this time. Just a few cocktails. Met a lovely nurse. That kind of thing.

LEWES

You know the C.O. is watching you. At least toe the line for a few weeks, man.

Stirling shrugs, puffs on his pipe.

Lewes hefts another parachute into the truck. Stirling leans over, inspects the pack.

STIRLING

Parachutes, eh?

LEWES

They were meant for India but someone stuffed-up a shipping order. I convinced Laycock to let me keep fifty of 'em, to train a few chaps.

STIRLING

Right now?

LEWES

I borrowed a postal plane. Aim to get a few jumps in before dark.

STIRLING

You have an extra one for me?

LEWES

Really? You're game?

STIRLING

Absolutely. This is the future,
Jock. We both saw the limitations
of the Commandos. Hundreds of men
dependent on the Navy for
insertion. It's cumbersome, a
foolish strategy.

LEWES

So we parachute into Tobruk,
Benghazi, then what? How do we get
back?

STIRLING

(sheepish)

I'm still working on that part.

Lewes loads another parachute pack into the truck.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

So how do you do it?

LEWES

Do what?

STIRLING

Use a parachute.

Lewes shoots a glance at Stirling, sees he's deadly serious.
He shakes his head in amusement.

CUT TO:

EXT. VICKERS VALENTIA (AIRBORNE) - DAY

High over the pyramids, Lewes' borrowed Vickers Valentia
soars through a cloudless sky. It's a twin-engine biplane
built almost a decade ago.

INT. VICKERS VALENTIA (AIRBORNE) - DAY

In the back of the plane, Stirling, Lewes and several other
soldiers patiently await the drop zone.

Lewes leans across to Stirling, pulls the static line from
his parachute pack and presses it into his hand.

He points to the doorway they'll jump from...

LEWES

This old junker doesn't have the proper rigging. So make sure you tie that off on a seat support.

STIRLING

Then what?

LEWES

Well then you take a walk outside and gravity will do the rest.

Lewes receives a signal from the pilot: it's "Go" time. He turns to his men.

LEWES (CONT'D)

Alright, lads, out you go.

The soldiers shuffle towards an open door at the back of the airplane. Lewes turns back to Stirling.

LEWES (CONT'D)

Don't forget. When you hit the ground, you tuck and roll.

STIRLING

I'm six-six, Jock, we don't do those things easily.

The first soldier attaches his line to the metal leg of a built-in seat. As he steps into the blue yonder, the line tugs the chute out of his pack and it billows open.

Six more soldiers follow suit.

LEWES

Whenever you're ready, Dave.

Lewes watches Stirling tie-off the static line. He stands in the doorway, looks back with a grin.

STIRLING

See you on the ground then.

EXT. VICKERS VALENTIA (AIRBORNE) - DAY

Stirling's lanky frame tumbles out of the airplane...

The static line pulls taut, tugs the chute out of its pack...

The silk canopy catches the tail of the plane...

RIIIIPPPP!!!

Stirling's parachute billows open. He has no idea anything is wrong...

In the b.g., Lewes' parachute opens perfectly.

Stirling takes in the incredible view. Then he notices he's falling faster than the other men...

Alarmed, he looks up, sees a tear in the canopy.

STIRLING

Bugger.

The ground is coming up fast. *Scary fast...*

Stirling braces for impact...

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. MILITARY HOSPITAL - ONE WEEK LATER

Lying in a hospital bed, Stirling pulls up the covers to expose his bare feet. He stares at his toes, his face contorted with exertion.

STIRLING

It's no use, Evelyn. Can't feel a damn thing.

Sitting at his bedside is EVELYN WAUGH (38), a fellow officer from the Commando force. He's pudgy, much older than Stirling, and one of Britain's greatest novelists.

EVELYN

At least you've still got both legs. I heard the docs had to lop one off.

Stirling looks depressed.

STIRLING

Cover them back up for me, will you, old chap. There's a bit of a chill in here.

Evelyn rises from his chair to pull the bedsheet back over Stirling's exposed feet. As he does so, the big toe on his right foot wiggles slightly.

Realizing he's been duped, Evelyn scoops up a pillow and hits his friend. Stirling is laughing.

EVELYN

You bastard! When did it happen?

STIRLING

Minutes before you came. It takes some effort, but it's a start.

EVELYN

Some of the lads had already taken to calling you the "Giant Sloth." This won't help, you know.

STIRLING

There's rumblings of a court-martial investigation too. C.O. reported me as a malingerer. Can you believe that?

EVELYN

You have been in bed for six days.

STIRLING

But I've been doing a lot of thinking, Evelyn, and I might have come up with something. Look, get Jock Lewes along tonight will you. I want his opinion on a few ideas.

EVELYN

Speak of the Devil. Hello, Jock.

Stirling looks up to see Jock Lewes enter the room. He shakes Evelyn's hand.

LEWES

Good to see you, Eve.

STIRLING

Were your ears burning, Lieutenant?

LEWES

(smiling)

It's true then. You survived.

STIRLING

(to Evelyn)

"Just tie it to the seat," he said.

LEWES

Not my fault the Lord made you that tall. Lucky you didn't hit your head on the tail.

Evelyn hops out of his seat.

EVELYN

I must be off but I'll come see you again tomorrow. Keep wiggling those little sloth toes and get back on your feet.

Evelyn gives a casual salute and exits.

Lewes drops into the chair he vacated. Stirling senses something is bothering him.

STIRLING

Why the long face? Least you're up and about.

LEWES

Same old story. No one's giving us a firm direction. The lads are itching for a biff but we're all sitting on our hands while Rommel keeps advancing.

Stirling pulls himself up to a sitting position.

STIRLING

I'm glad you came by. I've had an idea and I wanted to see what you think. I believe it would be possible, not too difficult in fact, to infiltrate German positions with small numbers of men. If we sneak up on Jerry and sabotage his aircraft and fuel dumps, I suspect we could do some serious damage to his morale--

LEWES

Hold on. What you're suggesting, small teams, it's not a new concept. Rogers tried it in America, but this is Africa. The desert's too bloody big.

STIRLING

We go in by parachute. We get dropped a few miles from our target, watch it by day, then wreak bloody havoc at night and sod off back into the desert.

LEWES

Okay. How do you get out?

STIRLING

Walk.

LEWES

Are you mad? There's 45,000 square miles of sand out there, Dave.

STIRLING

Then we walk part of the way and get someone to pick us up. We can work that part out.

Stirling's eyes glimmer with hope as he watches Lewes chew on his proposal.

LEWES

The idea's got its merits. I'll give you that. Parachuting in, despite your mishap, is the best method. But all that walking in the desert? And you'd need to carry a hell of a lot of explosive to be effective. Who's going to authorise this? Who's going to pick you up?

STIRLING

Like I said, we'll work all that out. Give it some thought, Jock, won't you? You're right about the men being wasted. All that Commando training and now we'll be farmed out to other units. They'll stick us in trenches somewhere and give the Luftwaffe some target practice. Damn good soldiers are getting cheesed off out there. I think this is worth a try.

Lewes strokes his chin, contemplates Stirling's words.

LEWES

Tell you what. I'm under orders to go back to Tobruk. Sort out the details and if you manage to get anywhere, we'll talk again.

STIRLING

Fair enough. But this is going to work. Mark my words.

LEWES

Start with your legs. Get those working first and we'll go from there.

Somewhat deflated, Stirling nods.

CUT TO:

EXT. MILITARY HOSPITAL - DAYS LATER

His legs covered in a blanket, Stirling sits outside in a wheelchair, writing furiously in a notebook.

MOLLY (O.S.)

Keep this up and they'll name a wing of the hospital after you.

He looks up to see Molly approaching. In a halo of morning light, she looks positively angelic.

STIRLING

Aren't you a sight for sore eyes.

MOLLY

I was worried about you. Missed you at a couple of good parties.

STIRLING

I'll wheel myself to the next one if I have to. I could murder someone for a stiff drink.

She's carrying a bagged lunch, bites from an apple.

MOLLY

So what happened to you?

STIRLING

Gravity and a faulty parachute.

MOLLY

You really jumped out of an airplane?!!?

STIRLING

I did.

MOLLY

(genuinely curious)
What was it like?

STIRLING

It was glorious. Right up until I noticed how fast I was dropping. Tore a hole in my chute so I hit the ground twice as hard as I should have. Bugged my back up quite a bit.

MOLLY

Are you going to be okay?

STIRLING

The doctors seem to think so.

MOLLY

Good. You still owe me a dance.

She glances at the notebook in his lap. He has a map too.

MOLLY (CONT'D)

Planning a holiday?

STIRLING

Trying to win a war.

MOLLY

Well hurry up. I want to go home.

STIRLING

If only it were that simple. I'm up against hundreds of years of military history and strategy. It's not easy getting an army to change its ways.

MOLLY

What do you want to change?

STIRLING

I want to use small teams of men instead of hundreds. We'll sneak up on the Germans and thump 'em when they're asleep.

MOLLY

The army doesn't like that idea?

STIRLING

I don't know yet. I need to get a meeting with the Commander-in-Chief.

She takes another bite of her apple, innocently holds her face up to the sun. Stirling is transfixed.

MOLLY
So go talk to him.

Stirling laughs.

MOLLY (CONT'D)
What's so funny?

STIRLING
Would it be easy for you to get a private meeting with the head of this hospital? Wouldn't you have to go through all the proper channels, deal with all the bureaucratic stuff and nonsense?

MOLLY
I suppose so. But I'm a nurse. You're a soldier.
(pointed)
A sneaky one.

Her words land like a grenade and Stirling's face lights up.

CUT TO:

EXT. MEHQ - CAIRO - DAY

The front gate of "M.E.H.Q.", the headquarters of the Middle East military command. A single wooden GUARDHOUSE, a GATE-ARM, and a chainlink FENCE.

Across the street, a TAXI pulls up.

INT. TAXI - DAY

Stirling is sitting in the backseat. He studies the gate, ponders how he'll get inside.

TAXI DRIVER
This where you wanted to go, yes?

STIRLING
Yes, it is. Thank you. Just...
uh... give me a moment please.

Several officers pass through the checkpoint. Some are ID'd by the TWO SENTRIES. Others are familiar enough to stroll into MEHQ unchecked.

No genius idea is coming to him, so Stirling goes with the only plan he can think of... *Bluff.*

EXT. TAXI - DAY

In his creased battledress, Stirling uses walking crutches to hobble across the street.

Middle East Headquarters, Cairo

July 1941

EXT. FRONT GATE - MEHQ - DAY

Stirling grits his teeth from the pain in his back and offers one of the sentries a vague smile.

He confidently walks past him... until...

SENTRY #1 (O.S.)

Sir! Your pass, please.

Stirling spins around, mock-embarrassed.

STIRLING

Ah, yes, of course.

(checks pockets)

Oh drat, I seem to have misplaced it. Not to worry though as I do have an appointment--

SENTRY #2

Not without a pass you don't.

Sorry, sir. Do come back once you find it though, won't you.

Stirling is smiling, but inside he's screaming.

STIRLING

Indeed I will. Keep up the good work, chaps.

As a STAFF CAR pulls up to the gates, Stirling awkwardly walks away. There's a large tree several yards from the gate so Stirling ducks behind it and continues plotting his entry.

He watches the movements of the guards as the staff car glides inside.

LATER

Another staff car pulls up to the gates.

Leaving the crutches against the fence, Stirling speed-walks as fast as his legs will move...

With the severity of his back injury, it must hurt like hell, but he puts on a brave face.

There's a narrow gap where the chainlink ends and the guardhouse begins. Stirling somehow squeezes himself through and he's inside...

BACK AT THE GUARDHOUSE

Sentry #1 frowns as he notices the abandoned crutches.

SENTRY #1
(sotto)
Crafty so-and-so.

He whistles at Sentry #2, jerks his head in the direction of the abandoned crutches...

SENTRY #1 (CONT'D)
A quid says I catch him first.

EXT. GROUNDS - MEHQ - DAY

Hands clasped behind his back, head down, Stirling blends in with a group of visitors. To an onlooker, it might even appear he's in conversation with the officer next to him.

The group moves past a staircase leading to the main office. Realizing his companions are headed to another part of the compound, Stirling doubles back and hurries up the steps.

SENTRY #1 (O.S.)
Hey, you, get back here!

Glancing over his shoulder, Stirling sees Sentry #1 headed his way. He quickly ducks inside.

INT. HALLWAY - MAIN OFFICE BUILDING - MEHQ - DAY

A hall lined with identical office doors. It seems to stretch on forever.

Stirling grimaces from pain as he moves down the corridor, reading the signs for each office.

One of them reads: "ADJUTANT GENERAL."

In the b.g., we hear Sentry #1 getting dangerously close.

STIRLING
(re: Adjutant General)
Senior enough.

With that, he knocks on the door and slips inside.

INT. ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE - MEHQ - DAY

Out of breath, Stirling leans back against the door. In front of him, a portly pint-sized MAJOR (40s) stares aghast.

MAJOR
Who the Devil are you? For God's sake, man, where are your manners?

STIRLING
I beg your pardon, sir...

MAJOR
Beg nothing. Who the hell are you and what do you want?

Remembering to salute, Stirling gives it his best shot. But it hurts to stand erect.

MAJOR (CONT'D)
What's the matter with you?

STIRLING
Sir, I do apologize for the intrusion and I respect your time, but I must speak with you urgently.

MAJOR
(curt)
Go on.

Stirling takes a deep breath.

STIRLING
I'm Lieutenant David Stirling, Scots Guards and attached to 8 Commando. Or I was anyway.

The Major stares at him with creeping recognition...

MAJOR
"Stirling" you say?

STIRLING

Yes, sir. Again, I'm sorry for bursting in but I have an idea on how we can stick it to the German coastal defences and supply depots. I only need a few men and we can--

Amused, the Major sits back in his chair.

MAJOR

You don't recognize me, do you?

STIRLING

(confused)

Sir?

MAJOR

You know why you don't recognize me? Because in almost every single class, you had your eyes closed.

The exact moment Stirling recognizes the officer is very visible in his face. It's a look that says: *oh, shit.*

STIRLING

Major Smith. Pirbright.

MAJOR SMITH

Bingo. Perhaps you also remember the day I performed a weapon inspection on the parade ground. Your rifle was filthy and when I asked if there was a clown at the end of it, what did you say...?

STIRLING

"Not at my end, sir."

Major Smith shakes his head, delighted that Stirling has been handed to him on a karmic silver platter.

MAJOR SMITH

You're an insolent and feckless, gadabout, Stirling. And now you barge in here with some lunatic plan and expect me to *help you?! Forget it.* Not only will I not help you, I'm going to send you back to the brigade with a specific recommendation that you not be allowed to command a single soldier. Now get out of my goddamned office before I have you escorted out!

Stirling salutes the Major, all too happy to get out of there as fast as he can.

A PHONE on the desk begins to RING. The Major picks it up...

MAJOR SMITH (CONT'D)

Major Smith here.

(beat)

The front gate? Just now?!?

Realizing, Smith looks up. But Stirling is long gone.

INT. HALLWAY - MAIN OFFICE BUILDING - MEHQ - DAY

The sound of multiple hurried footsteps tells Stirling he can't go back the way he came. He heads deeper into the building, reading more door signs as they whizz past.

CLOSE ON SIGN -- "DCGS"

Aware the guards are almost in sight, Stirling breathes deep and rolls the dice once again. He knocks and duck inside...

INT. DCGS OFFICE - MEHQ - DAY

Sent to fight in the First World War on his 18th birthday, GENERAL NEIL RITCHIE (44) would later be considered one of the finest officers in the British Army. Right now, he's the Deputy Chief of General Staff, the second highest ranking officer in the Middle East.

Pouring over maps and reports on his desk, he looks up at Stirling with a surprisingly muted reaction.

GEN. RITCHIE

I'd hazard a guess you took a wrong turn somewhere, lad.

His face a mask of pain, Stirling tries to straighten up as he salutes the General. Ritchie takes in his rumped battledress, his unusual posture...

STIRLING

Sir, I'm Lieutenant Stirling of the Scots Guards. Please forgive me for bursting in like this but there wasn't time to make an appointment.

GEN. RITCHIE

And what could possibly be so urgent you'd risk charging into my office unannounced?

Stirling pulls several sheets of paper from his jacket.

STIRLING

I have an idea, sir. A way of taking the fight to the Germans. I believe we could inflict great damage by attacking airfields and fuel depots from the desert, at night--

Ritchie accepts the 'memo' from the young officer, gestures for him to take a seat.

GEN. RITCHIE

(reading)

A "Special Service Unit" eh? And what makes you think you can succeed where 8 Commando has failed?

Stirling painfully lowers himself into a chair, loudly exhales with relief.

STIRLING

Numbers, sir. I always felt the sheer scale of the Commando raids was a problem. We could never enjoy the element of surprise, and using the Navy is slow and risky. Instead of attacking a single target with 200 men, I propose a force of sub-units, small teams that attack multiple objectives at the same time, on the same night.

General Ritchie is clearly intrigued. He scans the pages Stirling gave him with genuine interest.

GEN. RITCHIE

Hmmm. This may have some merit. In light of the recent setbacks we've suffered, I've been searching for a way to hit back. But you mentioned attacking from the desert. How exactly do you intend to do that?

STIRLING

Parachute.

GEN. RITCHIE

That's a one-way trip.

STIRLING

They'll be trained to withdraw on foot. After hitting their targets, my sub-units will retire into the desert and rendezvous with the Long Range Desert Group. They'll drive us back to base.

GEN. RITCHIE

Is the LRDG onboard with this idea?

STIRLING

I haven't asked them yet, sir.

GEN. RITCHIE

They're a valuable reconnaissance asset, Lieutenant. Would hate to risk them getting too close to the Germans' position.

STIRLING

If my plan gets approval for the November offensive, I've proposed an RV just south of the Trig El Abd. Fifty miles from the coast.

Ritchie lowers the memo, somewhat taken aback.

GEN. RITCHIE

Fifty miles?! At night?

STIRLING

My men will train for precisely that, sir.

The general falls silent for a moment as he skims over Stirling's memo for a second time.

GEN. RITCHIE

Ambitious to say the least. But I like it. I will need to discuss this with General Auchinleck but there's something here. In the meantime, you ought to meet my AG branch officer.

General Ritchie reaches for the phone on his desk.

GEN. RITCHIE (CONT'D)

(into phone)

Yes, come in here for a moment, will you.

Ritchie hangs up.

GEN. RITCHIE (CONT'D)
 If the Commander-in-Chief agrees,
 we'll move quickly on this. In
 which case, I want the major to
 assist you in any way he can.

Uneasy, Stirling shifts in his seat.

STIRLING
 (fishes for a name)
 Major...?

Before Ritchie can even answer, there's a *knock* on the door.

GEN. RITCHIE
 Come in.

Stirling's fear is confirmed as Major Smith enters, the same officer who just berated him down the hall.

Seeing his nemesis sitting across from the general, Smith's eyes almost pop out of his skull. He walks across the office, stands beside the general's desk.

GEN. RITCHIE (CONT'D)
 Major Smith, this is Lieutenant--

MAJOR SMITH
 David Stirling.

General Ritchie raises his eyebrows, surprised no introduction was necessary.

STIRLING
 (to Gen. Ritchie)
 We've met before, sir. In fact,
 just a short time ago we were
 talking about the good old days.

GEN. RITCHIE
 Outstanding. Major, the young
 Lieutenant here has come up with
 something rather interesting which
 might require you to take action.
 I want you to stay in contact and
 be prepared to help in whatever
 capacity is deemed necessary.

MAJOR SMITH
 (dying inside)
 Very good, sir.

The general stands up and gathers Stirling's memo. He tucks it into an attache case.

GEN. RITCHIE

I will be meeting with the
Commander-in-Chief tomorrow and
I'll run the idea of your Special
Service Unit by him then. Now if
you'll excuse me gentleman, I have
another appointment downtown. I
trust you'll see yourselves out.

(direct to Stirling)

Lieutenant, you'll hear from me
very soon.

Stirling tries to stand with great difficulty. Ritchie
motions for him to stay where he is.

GEN. RITCHIE (CONT'D)

I recognize a back injury when I
see one. How did it happen, lad?

STIRLING

Bit of a disagreement with a
parachute, sir.

GEN. RITCHIE

Well you best get it sorted out
before November. We might be
counting on you.

STIRLING

Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

With a brief salute, the general exits.

As soon as the door closes behind him, Major Smith glares at
Stirling.

MAJOR SMITH

Get this into that thick skull of
yours, Stirling. I don't like you
and I don't like whatever it is
you're up to. I will help because
I've been ordered to. But you won't
get any favors from me or my office.
Any confusion about that?

STIRLING

Not at my end, sir.

Major Smith abruptly turns and exits, leaving Stirling alone
in Ritchie's office. For the first time all day, he relaxes
and his face breaks into a satisfied smile.

CUT TO:

EXT. RESTAURANT - DOWNTOWN CAIRO - NIGHT

On the low-lit patio of a restaurant, Stirling and Molly share a bottle of wine. In the b.g., the pulse of the Cairo continues to beat.

MOLLY

So what happens now?

STIRLING

The highest-ranking officer in the Middle East Command lets me form my own unit or he tosses the whole idea in the wastebasket.

She studies him for a moment. Under the heat of her gaze, Stirling sips his wine.

MOLLY

It'll kill you, won't it? If he says no I mean. You want this more than anything else in the world.

STIRLING

I want what every enlisted man wants. I want to make a real impact on the war and prove I'm a good soldier.

MOLLY

Don't they see that already?

STIRLING

No. They see a man who drinks, gambles, and hates the banality of military life.

MOLLY

They'd be mad not to approve your idea. It's brilliant. Stirling's Sneaky Little Soldiers.

STIRLING

(laughing)

I like that name!

Stirling raises his glass to toast the nickname. Molly clinks her glass against his.

MOLLY

So what *will* you call them? You'll need to come up with something.

STIRLING

I must confess I was so deep in the planning, I didn't give it a thought.

MOLLY

Well you can use my idea if you like. It's there for the taking.

She's grinning, having a great time.

STIRLING

What about you, what is it you want?

The smile on her face evaporates.

MOLLY

I want this to be over with. This whole bloody thing. I want the Germans to stop bombing England and I want to go home.

(beat)

Last year I was working in a hospital in London and I persuaded my best friend Elizabeth to swap shifts with me. There was a party in Hammersmith I really didn't want to miss, and so I drove her up the wall by asking non-stop until she agreed. Sometime around midnight a V1 hit the ground floor and the entire hospital collapsed. They managed to pull out a few survivors but they never found Elizabeth.

STIRLING

I'm sorry.

MOLLY

Given the chance, I'd sign up for your little army. If the big chief says "no," perhaps we'll go fight the Germans on our own.

STIRLING

You're on.

Stirling goes to pour more wine. The bottle is empty.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Oh dear. Shall I order us another?

Molly's expression tell us it's a silly question.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NEXT MORNING

Stirling and Molly sit side by side on the same hospital bed, enjoying a few hits of pure oxygen.

Clearly, they ordered more wine.

CUT TO:

CLOSE ON -- A MILITARY MAP OF NORTH AFRICA

GEN. AUCHINLECK (V.O.)
 Rommel has his boot on our throat
 and Churchill is sending me angry
 missives day and night.

WIDEN TO --

INT. GENERAL AUCHINLECK'S OFFICE - MEHQ - DAY

A large, stately office with a view of the city. The walls are lined with shelves of old books and journals, and the air is rich with the aroma of old leather and cigar smoke.

GENERAL CLAUDE AUCHINLECK (57) stands before a huge map which almost covers an entire wall. A career soldier who spent most of his life serving in India, Auchinleck has just been appointed to the highest command of the Allied Forces in North Africa and the Middle East.

This morning, he has an audience of General Ritchie, Major Smith, and Stirling.

GEN. AUCHINLECK
 Hitler badly wants Tobruk. It's a deep port and a damn sight closer to the Libyan border than Benghazi, so it's out of range for the RAF. As you know, Rommel has waged a series of attacks in recent months and so far the city's defenders have held fast. Make no mistake, gentleman, Rommel will try again so it is imperative the 8th Army reach Tobruk. Operation Battleaxe failed but I have no intention of repeating my predecessor's mistakes.

Auchinleck circles around his desk and perches himself on the corner, right in front of Stirling.

GEN. AUCHINLECK (CONT'D)

Neil here told me about your proposal. It's an interesting idea. Very interesting. Economical in manpower, equipment, I think you've come up with something that could really get under Rommel's skin.

Stirling sneaks a glance at Major Smith, knows full well how much pain this entire meeting is causing him.

STIRLING

Thank you, sir.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

But time is not on our side. Theoretically, were an operation planned for November, do you believe you could form this Special Unit of yours and get it operational?

STIRLING

I believe so, sir. I've already made a list of men from Layforce and the Scots Guards who might be a good fit.

MAJOR SMITH

Do tell us, Lieutenant, how do you define good fit?

STIRLING

Men with endurance, patience, and a willingness to take a real crack at the Hun.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

You prove this concept works, Lieutenant, and you'll get plenty of "cracks" as you say.

(to Gen. Ritchie)

Neil, do you have anything to add?

GEN. RITCHIE

(to Stirling)

You have any officers in mind?

STIRLING

I consider Lieutenant Jock Lewes essential, sir.

(MORE)

STIRLING (CONT'D)

He's one of the best leaders I've ever served with and he's had plenty of experience conducting night-time raids behind enemy lines around Tobruk.

MAJOR SMITH

Very few men in Layforce have trained with parachutes. Look what happened to you. How on earth do you propose to select and train enough men between now and November?

Stirling looks right at Smith.

STIRLING

(pointed)

It can be done. Especially if I can count on your support and encouragement, Major.

General Ritchie and Auchinleck trade an amused look. They know Major Smith is the skeptic. That's why they included him in the meeting.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

The Major has been critical of your plans, Lieutenant. Often overly so. But I do share his concern about your means of extraction.

MAJOR SMITH

Twenty miles on foot through the desert at night. It's absurd.

STIRLING

It's actually closer to fifty, sir. We can't risk exposing the LRDG much closer than that.

MAJOR SMITH

And how do you propose to carry the equipment you'll need? Small arms fire isn't going to inflict much damage on the Luftwaffe, even if you catch them on the ground. How do you intend to have a meaningful impact on the enemy?

STIRLING

Improvisation and explosives, sir.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

You truly believe it can be done?

STIRLING

I do. Sir.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

I noticed in your memo you are adamant about operating outside the normal chain of command.

STIRLING

Being under control of the Director of Combined Operations would be...
(diplomatic)
...stifling, sir.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

I was informed you made a more colorful assessment of the AG Branch. What was it again...?

STIRLING

Layer upon layer of fossilised shit.

GEN. AUCHINLECK

That was it. Under different circumstances, I would disagree with you. But given the unique nature of the operations you intend to carry out, you will be reporting directly to General Ritchie.

Auchinleck glances at Ritchie. He nods his approval.

GEN. AUCHINLECK (CONT'D)

Very well. I'm authorizing you to recruit six officers and sixty other ranks.

General Auchinleck moves back to the map. He points to several areas along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

GEN. AUCHINLECK (CONT'D)

The night before we launch our offensive, you will conduct raids here and here. Timimi and Gazala.

(beat)

You have one week to select your personnel. Now that Layforce has been disbanded, you should have no problem finding the manpower you need. You will not poach men from any other unit. Is that clear?

STIRLING

Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

Auchinleck turns one last time to Ritchie and Smith.

GEN. AUCHINLECK
Any thing else to add, gentlemen?

Both men shake their head. General Auchinleck turns back to Stirling, who can barely contain his excitement.

GEN. AUCHINLECK (CONT'D)
One last order of business,
Lieutenant.

STIRLING
Sir?

GEN. AUCHINLECK
I hereby promote you to the rank of
Captain. Effective immediately.

Stirling and Major Smith both react with shock, two very different kinds of shock.

GEN. AUCHINLECK (CONT'D)
Don't let me down, Stirling.

STIRLING
I won't, sir. Thank you, sir.

CUT TO:

EXT. AIRFIELD - CAIRO - SUNSET

With aircraft landing and taking off in the background, Stirling walks with LT. COLONEL ROBERT "BOB" LAYCOCK (34).

LAYCOCK
That's bloody marvelous news,
David. I only wish I was sticking
around to be a part of it.

STIRLING
Where are you going?

LAYCOCK
London. The boys at the War Office
want to discuss Special Operations
in the Middle East. I aim to talk
some sense into them about
Layforce. Get them to see how we
can use the Commando effectively.

STIRLING

Churchill's on your side. You think he'll help you put Layforce back together?

Laycock turns to face him, a smirk on his face.

LAYCOCK

Possible I suppose. But it sounds like you'll have nicked my best men long before then.

STIRLING

That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Jock Lewes is at the top of my list and he returns from Tobruk tomorrow. I'm confident he'll come onboard but I need two or three more Leg Men. Anyone else you recommend?

Laycock stops walking, his face pensive as he watches another plane take off.

LAYCOCK

Jock's a fine choice. If we had a thousand more like him we would have already won this damn war. I'll send you a list of names from 7 and 8 Commando.

(beat)

Can I be blunt with you, David?

STIRLING

Of course.

LAYCOCK

You haven't seen any real combat yet and that might be a problem. If you're mobilizing in November, you need to earn the respect of your men quickly. So pick someone who's seen a fair bit of drama. Someone who's proven himself a competent leader under fire.

STIRLING

You have someone in mind?

LAYCOCK

I do.

CUT TO:

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

A unit of British soldiers, No 7 Troop, are pinned down on a beach by heavy machine-gun fire.

Litani River, French-Lebanon

June 9th 1941

Ex-pro rugby player, BLAIR "PADDY" MAYNE (26), peeks over a sand berm at a Vichy French artillery battery. Four 75mm cannons sit side-by-side on higher ground, pouring heavy ordnance on the Allied soldiers storming the beach.

LAYCOCK (V.O.)

Blair Mayne. Everyone calls him Paddy.

Paddy is a quiet man, someone who barely raises his voice, but he's strong as an ox and precisely the kind of soldier Laycock described.

PADDY

(sotto)
Sod this.

He pulls a grenade from his webbing, yanks out the pin, and lobs it at the right-hand gun emplacement. A split-second later...

BOOM!!!

The 75mm gun falls silent while its three neighbors continue pounding the beach with explosive shells.

Paddy is immediately on his feet, charging towards a wall of sand bags. Behind him, six British Commandos materialize from cover and quickly follow.

These men would follow Paddy into Hell.

EXT. ARTILLERY BATTERY - CONTINUOUS

Paddy is first over the sand bags and he finds a crew of four Vichy French ARTILLERY TROOPS wounded and dazed from the grenade. One of them is able enough to fire a few rounds in Paddy's direction until he gets a bullet in the face.

Paddy drops down into the emplacement and the six other men soon join him. One of them is LT. MCGUNN, the leader of No 7 Troop. He's bleeding from his collarbone.

PADDY

Bad, sir?

LT. MCGUNN

(gritted teeth)

Can't feel my left arm.

Nearby, the three remaining 75mm guns continue to roar, not yet aware that one of their positions has been overrun.

Paddy grabs one of his men, spins him around. He points to McGunn's wound.

PADDY

Patch up the lieutenant.

(to the others)

The rest of you, give me a hand.

Paddy is on his feet again, putting his shoulder into the 75mm as if he's back in a rugby scrum. Realizing his plan, the rest of the squad rush to help.

PADDY (CONT'D)

Come on, lads. Put your backs into it!

Slowly, the huge cannon begins to turn. Paddy and his men give it all they've got until the 75mm barrel is aimed directly at the neighboring cannon ten yards away.

Ever the leader, Paddy quickly grabs a 75mm shell and slams it into the breech. He waves one of his men over.

PADDY (CONT'D)

Say hello to 'em, Potter.

The SOLDIER grins, fires the cannon...

KA-BOOM!!!

A direct hit on the neighboring heavy-gun.

PADDY (CONT'D)

Reload!!!

Paddy adjusts the barrel, takes aim at the next target.

PADDY (CONT'D)

Fire!

Within seconds, the hijacked 75mm cannon booms again.

KA-BOOM!!!

Battery #3 is vaporized.

Paddy re-aims, his men reload...

KA-BOOM!!!

Another direct hit on the final 75mm gun emplacement.

Paddy grins, looks down at McGunn.

LT. MCGUNN

Go on then. Take the men, get
across that river.

With a brief nod and a glance to the rest of the men, all of whom are waiting for orders, Paddy is off again. He disappears into a cloud of gunsmoke, the loyal remainder of No 7 Troop at his heels...

LAYCOCK (V.O.)

I read every Operational Report
from Litani River. Paddy Mayne is
the real deal.

BACK TO:

EXT. AIRFIELD - CAIRO - SUNSET

We're back at the airfield. The desert sunset in the b.g. is stunning.

Lt. Col. Laycock has Stirling enraptured.

LAYCOCK

After he took out the artillery by
the beach, he knocked out two
machine-nests, a mortar post, and
he captured sixty prisoners. The
men under his command followed him
every step of the way.

STIRLING

Where is he now? Please don't tell
me he's still in Cyprus with 11
Commando.

LAYCOCK

(hesitant)

No. He is in Cairo. But...

Stirling raises an eyebrow.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRITISH ARMY BASE - DAY

A 1941 Willys MB tears around the roadways of the camp, kicking up a huge trail of sand...

INT. WILLYS JEEP (MOVING) - DAY

His 6' 6" frame folded into the driver's seat, Stirling is grinning ear-to-ear. Next to him, in the passenger seat, Jock Lewes hangs on for dear life.

LEWES

Do slow down, won't you, Dave.

It's unclear if Stirling is ignoring Lewes or he didn't hear him. Either way, he's not slowing down.

STIRLING

Magnificent isn't it? They even make them with gun mounts.

LEWES

It is a handsome machine, but I'd rather the Americans send troops.

STIRLING

At least the Yanks finally joined the fight. And if they build stuff like this, I quite fancy our chances.

EXT. BARRACKS - ARMY BASE - DAY

The jeep slides to a halt outside a couple of Nissen Huts. Stirling and Lewes climb out and head towards the barracks.

Lewes notes there are two MPs posted outside one of the huts.

LEWES

We're recruiting an MP?

STIRLING

A lieutenant from 11 Commando, and by all accounts exactly the kind of chap I'm looking for.

LEWES

And what kind is that?

STIRLING

An outstanding soldier who's a bit of a rascal.

INT. MILITARY POLICE BLDG. - DAY

The giant frame of Paddy Mayne sits on a cot, behind bars.

Stirling and Lewes sit in folding chairs on the other side of the bars.

STIRLING

Lieutenant Paddy Mayne, I'm Captain David Stirling, this is Lieutenant Jock Lewes.

PADDY

It's Blair, sir. My names's *Blair* Mayne.

STIRLING

Is it? Hmmmm.

(writes that down)

Now tell me, Lieutenant, do you have anything to say about the charges you're facing?

PADDY

Half of what they're claiming happened is bollocks. Sir.

STIRLING

Which half?

PADDY

I did get into a minor disagreement with a nightclub manager. But I did *not* put a bayonet to my Commanding Officer's throat.

Stirling consults the file on his lap.

STIRLING

Says here you emptied your revolver into the floor around the manager's feet. Yet you classify that as a *minor* disagreement?

PADDY

(shrugs)

He's lucky I didn't shoot him *in* the feet. So yes, I'd say it was minor.

Stirling turns to Lewes with a grin on his face. Lewes isn't smiling. He never does.

STIRLING
(to Lewes)
I like him already.

He turns back to Paddy.

STIRLING (CONT'D)
There was an earlier incident.
Something involving a grenade.

PADDY
Just messing with some heads, sir.
My men saw real fighting at the
Litani River. I was trying to help
them blow off some steam.

STIRLING
You pulled a pin from a live
grenade in a crowded restaurant and
placed it in the middle of your
dining table.

PADDY
I'd taken the detonator out.

STIRLING
That may well be, but it makes you
sound reckless. I'm looking for
men of discipline.

PADDY
I was off-duty, sir. When I'm
soldiering, you don't need to be
worrying about me.

Stirling snaps the file closed, discards it on the floor.

STIRLING
I'm putting a special unit
together. L Detachment. You want
to mess with heads, we're going to
parachute into enemy territory and
run sabotage missions.

Paddy glances at Lewes, as if to silently ask whether or not
Stirling is for real.

PADDY
Sabotage what? How?

STIRLING
Aircraft. Fuel dumps. We'll run
night operations, blow up whatever
we find.

PADDY

You're going to jump out of a plane carrying explosives?

STIRLING

Wouldn't be the most foolhardy thing I've done.

LEWES (O.S.)

It can't be done right now. Bombs are too big to jump with.

Stirling and Paddy both turn to face Lewes. This is the first time he has spoken.

LEWES (CONT'D)

We need a blast-incendiary device that will be safe and small enough to carry, but powerful enough to cripple a Stuka and set it on fire.

He notices the two men staring at him.

LEWES (CONT'D)

What? I told you I spent a lot of time thinking about your idea in Tobruk. I'm confident it can be done, I just need to conduct a few experiments. If you can get me some plastic explosive, maybe some thermite, and a few other ingredients, I want to try a few combinations--

PADDY

(incredulous)

You know how to make bombs?

LEWES

My brother and I always had a keen interest in chemistry. I've been blowing things up since I was 10 year-old.

This time, Paddy looks to Stirling.

PADDY

I like him already.

Lewes almost seems embarrassed.

STIRLING

I'm recruiting sixty men and I need five more officers.

(MORE)

STIRLING (CONT'D)
Laycock recommended you. Swore
you'd be a good fit.

PADDY
Soon as I get out of this place, I
have plans to go to the Far East.

STIRLING
(genuinely surprised)
What the Dickens for?

PADDY
I applied for a Commando mission to
teach guerilla-warfare to the
Chinese Army.

STIRLING
Wouldn't you prefer to keep
fighting the Hun?

PADDY
This scheme you're proposing,
sneaking around in the desert at
night. I can't see any prospects
of real fighting.

STIRLING
And you suppose you'll see action
training the Chinese?!

PADDY
Permission to speak freely, Captain.

STIRLING
Please...

PADDY
You're my age. You just got handed
your own army unit. It reeks of
Old Boy's club.

Lewes stiffens. As always, Stirling stays cool.

STIRLING
Two men in this room have been
threatened with a court-martial.
(points at Lewes)
He isn't one of them.

Paddy looks askance at Stirling.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Now listen here. L Detachment is going to stick it to the Germans and stick it to them hard. While the War Office is trying to figure out where to deploy an entire army, we'll have the cream of the crop from Layforce and we'll be making Rommel's life an absolute misery. We're going to destroy his air force, his fuel supply, we're going to bugger up his runways, and we're going to scare the living shit out of the men in his command. So you can go and teach the Chinese how to hide in a bush, or you can come with us and give Hitler a bloody nose.

(beat)

What do you say?

Paddy looks between these two unusual visitors.

PADDY

All right. You find a way to get me out of here, I'll come along.

He extends his huge hand. Stirling shakes it.

STIRLING

Welcome to L Detachment, Paddy.

PADDY

It's Blair, sir.

STIRLING

Of course it is.

(calls out)

Guard!

EXT. MILITARY POLICE BLDG. - DAY

Stirling and Lewes emerge from the Nissen hut where Paddy is being held. The captain looks excited as he marches back to the jeep.

LEWES

You sure about this chap, Dave?

STIRLING

I am. Laycock's word goes a long way and I like his spirit.

LEWES

And you really can spring him out of there?

STIRLING

Ritchie already agreed. He said he's happy for me to take as many bad apples as I can find. Makes everyone's life easier.

Both men climb into the jeep.

LEWES

What about the four men I recommended? If you're going to take Mayne then--

Stirling begins to pack his pipe.

STIRLING

Riley, Almonds, Lilley, and Blakeney? They're already en route from Tobruk.

(lights pipe)

You think I'd be foolish enough *not* to recruit names you put forward.

LEWES

You won't be disappointed. How many more do we need?

STIRLING

I have twenty committed so we need forty more.

(beat)

But not to worry. We shall have plenty more men to interview after tomorrow.

LEWES

How so?

STIRLING

You and I are going to have a little recruitment drive, see if we can't get some of these gents excited about L Detachment.

Stirling fires up the jeep and hits the gas. Lewes appears to be questioning what he's gotten himself into.

CUT TO:

INT. MILITARY TENT - GENIEFA - THE NEXT DAY

Approximately one hundred British soldiers, of varying rank, are gathered in a large mess tent. There's an excited buzz in the air, as if they're all waiting for a cabaret to start.

At the front of the tent, Stirling and Lewes squeeze through a flap in the canvas and climb onto a makeshift stage. Paddy Mayne is right behind them, but he hangs back, stage left.

The crowd goes quiet as the troops notice Stirling's lanky frame take center stage. He still walks with a limp but there's an unmistakable magnetism about this gentle giant.

STIRLING

Be seated, gentleman. Thank you. My name is Captain David Stirling. As many of you may have heard, I'm putting a new unit together and we need a few good men. I'll keep this brief as any interested men will be granted an interview with myself...

(points to Lewes)

...Or my right-hand man, Lieutenant Jock Lewes.

(beat)

L Detachment is a Special Service unit. We will not be operating under the normal chain of command, nor will we carry out operations like a typical force in the British Army. Recruits will undergo additional, rigorous training which will include parachute work. If you are scared of jumping out of a perfectly-good airplane, do not apply. We will be undertaking long marches in the desert, with heavy equipment. If you do not like walking, do not apply. L Detachment will operate mostly at night, performing raids on German positions deep in enemy territory. If you get nervous in the dark, do not apply.

That elicits some good-natured ribbing among a couple of soldiers in the front row. Stirling smiles, unfazed by the interruption.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

To be clear, our standards of dress and discipline will be every bit as high as the Brigade of Guards. I want a high-grade of performance in everything we do.

(beat)

Now, if you're wondering what L Detachment will contribute to the war effort, let me assure you this. We intend to be a bloody nuisance to Jerry and you *will* see action. We aim to keep as many of his planes out of the air as possible by attacking them on the ground. To cripple those aircraft we will use every means at our disposal, even if that means taking them apart with our bare hands.

Stirling turns to Lewes.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Is there anything you'd like to add, Lieutenant?

Lewes shakes his head. Stirling covered it all.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Very well then. Lieutenant Lewes and Lieutenant Mayne will be compiling a list of applicants. Anyone interested can line up at the tables outside and throw their name in the proverbial hat. Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all.

Stirling limps offstage and the crowd noise picks up again as the troops discuss what they've just heard.

As he descends the wooden steps at the back of the stage, Stirling finds Mayne with his arms folded, a bemused look on his face.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

You didn't care for my speech?

PADDY

It's not that. It's the name. L Detachment sounds so dull and bureaucratic. The lads seem enthusiastic about the work but...

STIRLING

But our unit needs a proper name.
You're not the first person to
mention that.

Stirling turns to Lewes.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Jock? Any input?

LEWES

You've got an opportunity here to
get the lads excited about being a
part of something. Some of them
rather liked calling themselves
Commandos.

PADDY

What does the 'L' even stand for?

STIRLING

At this stage, Learning. Very
well, Paddy--

PADDY

Blair.

STIRLING

You fancy a pint or two in Cairo
tonight? I know someone who might
be able to help.

PADDY

As long as you're buying, sir.

CUT TO:

EXT. STREETS OF CAIRO - NIGHT

Amid the bustling crowds on the sidewalk, Stirling is
literally head and shoulders above everyone else. Paddy
Mayne walks beside him, his own herculean frame resembles
that of a bodyguard.

PADDY

I'm surprised Jock didn't join us.

STIRLING

(amused)

The only time you'll see him off-
base is during an operation.

(MORE)

STIRLING (CONT'D)
 You won't see him drinking or
 taking a flutter at the racecourse,
 He's a good church-going lad.

PADDY
 You're not a religious man?

STIRLING
 Oh I was raised that way. I simply
 prefer women and horse-racing.

INT. SUPPER CLUB - NIGHT

At a small round table, Stirling and Paddy sit with drinks
 and observe the patrons of this smoky nightclub. It's packed
 with Caucasians, an equal mix of genders.

Stirling gestures with his pipe.

STIRLING
 Do be a good fellow and avoid
 shooting the floor tonight.

PADDY
 I'll do my best.

Paddy glances over his shoulder as a WOMAN (40s) takes a seat
 at the table directly behind them.

PADDY (CONT'D)
 Are we still meeting someone?

STIRLING
 Brigadier Dudley Clarke. He's in
 Cairo to set up 'A' Force, a
 special unit of his own.

PADDY
 Anything like ours?

STIRLING
 Not at all. Clarke works for MI9.
 He was tasked with escape and
 evasion training but these days
 he's focused on disinformation and
 deception.

The "Woman" turns around in her chair and leans close to
 Stirling. It's BRIGADIER DUDLEY WRANGLE CLARKE (42) dressed
 in drag. He doesn't make the prettiest woman but he can
 certainly pass for one.

BRIG. CLARKE

Do keep your voice down, my dear David. Walls have ears, and all that jazz.

Stirling can't help but laugh.

STIRLING

Bloody hell, Dudley. You've outdone yourself this time. I've a friend with almost the exact same dress.

BRIG. CLARKE

If she's in Cairo, I'd wager I know where she bought it.

Clarke slides his chair around to sit at their table. He grins in the candlelight at Paddy.

BRIG. CLARKE (CONT'D)

Who are you then?

STIRLING

Allow me to introduce Lieutenant...

(off Paddy's stare)

...Blair Mayne. Paddy, meet Brigadier Dudley Clarke.

Mayne raises a hand to salute, but Clarke extends a dainty hand with painted fingernails and stops him.

BRIG. CLARKE

Probably best not to salute a young lady in public, eh Lieutenant.

PADDY

Of course, sorry... ma'am?

BRIG. CLARKE

Ma'am. Yes, I like it.

STIRLING

So what have you been up to, Dudley? How's 'A' Force coming along?

BRIG. CLARKE

Swimmingly, old chap. I've got the Afrika Korps convinced they need to worry about three brigades that don't even exist.

PADDY

How do you manage that?

Clarke brushes his wig's hair out of his eyes and glances around the room to ensure nobody is close enough to eavesdrop.

BRIG. CLARKE

Simple lad. Park a few mock-gliders in the desert so Jerry's reconnaissance planes can snap photos of 'em, and drop a couple of dummies wearing parachutes in the right spot. Works like a charm.

Clarke sips from a very feminine-looking drink. With a raised eyebrow, Mayne reaches for his beer.

BRIG. CLARKE (CONT'D)

I've also got several lads in fake uniforms walking around the ports and talking very carelessly. You wouldn't believe how many spies the Hun has down there.

MAYNE

And that works?

BRIG. CLARKE

The Germans are tough fighters, but let me tell you, they're as gullible as children. If I tell my operators to walk around talking about a fake planned offensive, I'll be hearing about it in radio communiques for the next two weeks.

STIRLING

Oh, before I forget, I have to thank you for getting word out about L Detachment. We had quite the turnout this morning. Must have been a hundred lads at Geneifa. They all seemed quite keen too.

BRIG. CLARKE

Get this unit of yours operational, Dave, and you'll have plenty of opportunities to make it up to me. So what else is it I can do for you?

STIRLING

We need a name. At least that's what everyone keeps telling me.

BRIG. CLARKE

Ooh that's easy.

Clarke sits back in his chair with a giant grin.

BRIG. CLARKE (CONT'D)
The Special Air Service.

Stirling puffs on his pipe, says the name back to himself to get a better feel for it.

STIRLING
Special Air Service.

Mayne looks bewildered.

MAYNE
But we're soldiers! Not pilots!

Stirling knows how Clarke's mind works.

STIRLING
That's precisely the point.

Clarke turns to Mayne, explains...

BRIG. CLARKE
You're sixty men looking to make trouble in the desert. Rommel won't lose sleep over rumors of a new infantry brigade. He *will* toss and turn all night if he believes another Allied air division has joined the party.

MAYNE
That's bloody clever. I like it.
(beat)
The Special Air Service. Yeah, that's a good name.

BRIG. CLARKE
Of course, if I were you I'd just call it the S.A.S.

Now it's Stirling's turn to smile.

CUT TO:

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT - DAY

A flat, featureless, arid landscape stretching as far as the eye can see. This is Kabrit, a village located 100 miles outside of Cairo, on the western shore of the Great Bitter Lake, in the Suez Canal Zone.

It's not the most habitable place on Earth for humans, but the flies love it.

CLOSE ON -- A WOODEN SIGN: "L DETACHMENT"

This sad little hand-scrawled sign sits near three ragged TENTS, a scattering of wobbly chairs, and a battle-scarred 3-ton ARMY TRUCK.

In the b.g., the sound of more trucks approaching...

Stirling emerges from the largest tent and puts on his Captain's hat. Jock Lewes and Paddy Mayne appear behind him.

STIRLING

Here they come.

A half-dozen army trucks rumble across the desert.

LEWES

This is it, Dave. All that scribbling and daydreaming in the hospital. It's finally come to fruition. Your own unit.

Stirling looks conflicted, excited for what the future holds, but not yet ready to feel pride.

STIRLING

It's a start. But let's see some action first.

When the trucks reach the "camp," soldiers of varying ranks pour out of each vehicle, totaling 60 MEN.

Stirling climbs onto the hood of the resident truck.

Lewes leans in towards Mayne.

LEWES

Think we can make professional soldiers out of this lot?

MAYNE

If the flies don't kill us first.

In the b.g., the half-dozen trucks that brought them out here turn around and head back to Cairo.

STIRLING

Gather round, men. You are now recruits of the Special Air Service.

This is the first time the men have heard the new name of their unit. The excitement is palpable.

Stirling sweeps his arm around the camp.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

For the next few months, you will be calling this home.

The "SAS Originals" take in their bleak surroundings. They appear unimpressed with their new base camp.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Unfortunately, we do not have any friends in the Adjutant-General's Office. I was informed that the Q could not find much equipment for us and it will be a long time before that changes. That's military speak for "piss off."

(beat)

So she's not much to look at now but after you've finished carrying out your first mission, she'll be a sight to behold.

Stirling points to the South.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Two miles that way, there's a huge camp of Commonwealth units. Indians, Brits, and a particularly well-equipped New Zealand Division. Lieutenants Lewes and Mayne joined me on a little sortie last night and we were quite impressed with the Kiwis' camp. Better yet, I've learned the entire division is on manoeuvres for the next two days.

(beat)

Any questions?

One of the soldiers raises his hand. This is SGT. JOHN ALMONDS (20s), aka "Gentleman Jim." He's one of the Tobruk Four, a serious pro like Lewes.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Sergeant Almonds.

SGT. ALMONDS

Are you really suggesting we steal their equipment, sir?

STIRLING

Officially, no. Unofficially, the keys are in the truck I'm standing on and Lieutenant Mayne has kindly offered to drive.

(beat)

Any other questions?

Another young soldier raises his hand, PVT. FRED "TUBBY" TRENFIELD (20s).

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Private.

TUBBY

Did you see the New Zealand camp yourself, sir?

STIRLING

I did.

TUBBY

Any requests then, sir?

Stirling smiles.

STIRLING

The bar. Make sure you get the bar.

Lewes shakes his head in disapproval. His polar opposite, Mayne is nodding, grinning.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Good luck, gentleman. Dismissed.

Stirling salutes his men, hops off the truck.

CUT TO:

EXT. MILITARY BASE - KIBRIT - NIGHT

The ancient 3-ton truck lumbers towards the neighboring camp Stirling described. It's a seemingly endless sprawl of tents, large and small.

At the entrance, two INDIAN SENTRIES man a checkpoint.

INT. ARMY TRUCK - NIGHT

Mayne is driving, GERRY WARD (30s) rides shotgun, and Tubby sits in between. Another half-dozen men sit in the back.

GERRY
 (re: Sentries)
 How we supposed to get past these
 fellas then?

Mayne leans out of the truck as it rolls up to the gate. He feigns his best New Zealand accent.

MAYNE
 New Zealand division, mate! How
 are you tonight? You good?

The two Indian Sentries wave the truck through the checkpoint, saluting as it rumbles past.

Tubby and Gerry trade a look, stunned by how easy that was.

MAYNE (CONT'D)
 (shrugs)
 Worked last time too.

EXT. MILITARY BASE - KIBRIT - NIGHT

The truck drives deep into the camp. Slivers of light are visible among tents, the shadowy figures of troops getting ready to turn in for the night.

EXT. NEW ZEALAND CAMP - NIGHT (MINUTES LATER)

The truck stops next to THREE LARGE TENTS and a DOZEN SMALL TENTS. Mayne kills the engine and shuts off the headlights.

The rest of the lads jump out the back and begin to explore the New Zealand camp. It's deserted.

INT. LARGE TENT #1 - NIGHT

Mayne and Gerry enter, shine their flashlights around. There's a large polished table, wicker chairs, and a carpet.

GERRY
 Blimey! All the comforts of home.

MAYNE
 Speak for yourself. My home ain't
 this nice.

INT. LARGE TENT #2 - NIGHT

Tubby's flashlight illuminates a "Rec Room." There's the bar Stirling requested and more wicker chairs. In the opposite corner, there's even an upright piano.

TUBBY
 (to the bar)
 There you are.

Tubby runs a loving hand across the top of the bar.

EXT. NEW ZEALAND CAMP - NIGHT

Mayne and Gerry regroup with the rest of the raiding party, including KERSHAW, WARBURTON, and SGT. RILEY (all 20s).

MAYNE
 (to the others)
 What did you lot find?

KERSHAW
 Some good cooking kit in the mess tent. Pots, pans, utensils.

MAYNE
 Take every last spoon.

KERSHAW
 What about the stove?

MAYNE
 That too.

SGT. RILEY
 We can't leave them with nothing...
 can we?

GERRY
 The Captain said the Kiwis have a good relationship with their Q. Anything we steal, their supply department will replace.

MAYNE
 Then let's take it all. Let's take the whole camp.

SGT. RILEY
 You're taking the piss.

MAYNE

No I'm not. I reckon we could do it
in four loads. Maybe less.

They're interrupted by Tubby, who sticks his head out of
Large Tent #2.

TUBBY

Somebody give me a hand with the
bar. The big man will have my head
if I don't bring that back.

GERRY

We're taking everything.

TUBBY

(exasperated)
Everything? There's a bloody piano
in 'ere!

SMASH CUT TO:

EXT. NEW ZEALAND CAMP - NIGHT (LATER)

Three of the lads push the PIANO into the back of the old
army truck. It's already filled floor to ceiling with
furniture and equipment.

With the help of Private Warburton, Sgt. Riley slams the
tailgate closed.

SGT. RILEY

Hopefully none of the men know how
to play the bleedin' thing or we'll
have Bennett singing every night.

WARBURTON

(sheepish)
I can play. I was learning piano
at university.

SGT. RILEY

You play one song Bennett knows and
I'll put you on toilet duty.

WARBURTON

His tonsils that bad?

SGT. RILEY

Sounds like a dying cat.

The young Private laughs.

GERRY (O.S.)
 (alarmed)
 Look lively, lads.

The raiding party freezes at the sight of a British MILITARY POLICEMAN (MP) walking towards them in the moonlight.

If the MP looks in any of the large tents, which are now half-empty, the whole operation could be blown.

MP
 Evening. Got a light?

Half the SAS men respond far too quickly. Mayne is first to offer a lit match...

MAYNE
 Course. Here you go.

The MP leans in, lights his cigarette.

MP
 Cheers. So what are you chaps up to this time of night? Bit late to be movin' house, isn't it?

It's hard to tell in the moonlight, but every last soldier's face drains of color.

MAYNE
 Tell us about it. We ain't getting paid overtime either.

Out of the MP's eyesight, Mayne signals for Tubby to climb into the truck's cab while he keeps the MP talking.

MAYNE (CONT'D)
 Won't be half-glad to get back home and have a decent night's kip. Our C.O. ain't a bad bloke but he's got us working twenty-five hour days.

MP
 Ha! I know the type!

Behind the MP, the others quietly slip into the back of the truck by climbing the sides and squeezing under the canvas.

When the MP turns around, he's a little taken aback to find that he and Mayne are suddenly alone.

The truck roars to life. Mayne's cue to wrap it up...

MAYNE

Well, nice chatting with you, mate,
but it's time we pushed off and
reported back.

The MP waves at Tubby who's leaning out of the cab.

MP

Thanks for the light!

MAYNE

You bet!

Mayne steps up into the truck's running board...

MP

You know the trouble with the
Army...?

Mayne freezes, turns back...

MP (CONT'D)

They're just never satisfied with
an honest day's work.

Mayne exhales with relief.

MAYNE

(coolly)
Ain't that the bloody truth.

He salutes the MP and the 3-ton truck lurches away.

CUT TO:

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT - NEXT MORNING

Stirling and his officers tour their newly-furnished camp.
Compared to before, these new digs are downright luxurious.

In addition to Lewes and Mayne, the officers include
BONNINGTON, THOMAS, FRASER, and MCGONIGAL. Bonnington is in
his late 20s and *he's the oldest*.

The rest of the ranks stand at attention, hoping they passed
their first test. Today, they are all clean-shaven and wear
crisp uniforms. That will change.

STIRLING

Well done. We now have a
respectable camp. I don't ever
want to see it at a lesser standard
than it is now.

(MORE)

STIRLING (CONT'D)

We are here to do something special but we are under the eyes of MEHQ and they don't like us. We will give them no excuse to criticize us while we are in Kabrit. During operations there will be far less formality, but we'll get to that later on.

(beat)

There will be no bragging or swanking in the Cairo or Alexandria bars. Jerry has spies everywhere. There will be no scrapping. Any energy you have for fighting will be directed at the enemy. Make no mistake, anyone who doesn't fit in here will receive an RTU. There will be no second chances.

That warning visibly impacts a few soldiers.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Now unfortunately, I have to return to Cairo for the next several days. But I'm leaving you in the very capable hands of Lieutenant Lewes.

Stirling beckons Lewes forward.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Jock... they're all yours.

LEWES

In three months time, we will be making the first operational parachute drop in the Middle East. So get a good night's sleep. First thing tomorrow, we're going for a little walk.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The entire SAS brigade, sans Stirling, is marching through the featureless desert carrying full gear.

Lewes leads the way and he's barely breaking a sweat. The rest of the men are obviously suffering in the brutal heat.

One young private, CHESWORTH (22), vocalizes his misery...

CHESWORTH

Jesus H. Christ! Where's he taking us? We're walking in circles.

MAYNE

Put a sock in it, Chesworth.

CHESWORTH

At least let us stop and take on water. At this rate, he'll kill the whole regiment before Jerry even gets a crack at us.

In a blur of motion, Mayne grabs Chesworth and drags him out of the line. Several of the men stop and watch the scene play out, shocked by Mayne's sudden explosion.

MAYNE

You want to go back to your old unit, is that what you want? Eh?

Mayne pushes Chesworth over the edge of an escarpment and holds him there with one hand. The terrified soldier peers at the drop below him. If Mayne lets go, he'll be dead or seriously injured.

CHESWORTH

No, sir!

MAYNE

Anymore out of you and that's your lot. You understand?

CHESWORTH

Yes, sir! Sorry, sir!

Mayne swings Chesworth around and drops him into the sand. Jock Lewes has circled back from the front of the line.

LEWES

Everything alright, Lieutenant?

MAYNE

Just admiring the view. Weren't we, Chesworth?

Still shaken, Chesworth isn't about to cross Mayne.

CHESWORTH

We were indeed, sir. Lovely it is.

MAYNE

Back on your feet, man, let's go.

As Chesworth awkwardly stands up with his heavy pack, Lewes gives Mayne a subtle nod of approval.

Mayne notices Lewes remove a small pebble from one pocket and transfer it to the other. Before Mayne can ask, Lewes walks off, back to the front of the line.

Chesworth noticed the odd behavior too.

CHESWORTH

What's with the stones?

Mayne shrugs.

Up ahead, Lewes sees a man sneaking water from his canteen.

LEWES

No water yet. We've got another five miles and we must condition ourselves to take on less.

The soldier freezes. With a stricken look on his face, he puts the cap back on his canteen.

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - LATER

If the men appeared tired before, they look downright beaten now as they stumble into camp and drop their packs. They're sunburned, dehydrated, and mentally-drained.

Even Mayne looks exhausted.

In stark contrast, Lewes appears fine.

LEWES

Listen up. If your canteen is empty, hold it above your head.

To a man, everyone holds up their bottles.

LEWES (CONT'D)

You need to conserve. Tomorrow, I want you to push yourselves harder. Don't drink any water unless you are literally dying of thirst, and even then just take a sip.

(beat)

That was the short route. Tomorrow, we go the long way.

Off a sea of demoralized faces...

BEGIN "TRAINING MONTAGE #1":

- It's still bone-bitingly cold as the sun starts to rise. Mere hours after the last gruelling march, the SAS recruits set off on another one.
- A night march under the moonlight.
- Physical training under the midday sun.
- Another day march.
- Men learn how to conceal themselves in the desert.
- More marches. Relentless, never-ending marches.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Stirling's SAS recruits look fitter, stronger.

Lewes walks among the men.

LEWES

Canteens out. Do not drink a single drop of water until I've checked the level.

Lewes moves among the men, dips a finger into each open canteen to determine how much water they consumed during the long march.

LEWES (CONT'D)

Almost every single canteen is empty. What would you do if you found yourself another day's walk from camp or an RV?

Chesworth mutters under his breath.

CHESWORTH

(low)

Someone check his friggin' bottle.

Lewes spins around and Chesworth grimaces. Unfortunately for him, the Lieutenant heard every word.

LEWES

Are you thirsty, man? Here, you can finish what's left of this.

Lewes tosses his water canteen at Chesworth and walks off. In his wake, the young soldier opens the canteen and looks stunned.

CHESWORTH
Bloody hell...

He notices the other recruits looking at him, curious.

CHESWORTH (CONT'D)
He didn't touch a drop.

Even Mayne looks impressed.

BEGIN "TRAINING MONTAGE #2":

- The men practice stripping down a variety of weapons, both Allied, German, and Italian.
- Another gruelling march through the desert. (Lewes transfers another stone from one pocket to the other.)
- Hand-to-hand combat. Mayne relishes taking on any and all opponents. The men clearly respect him and cheer for another victory.
- A night march in the desert. Lewes instructs the men on basic navigation techniques.
- First-aid training.
- Radio training.
- Another day march. Another water-check. This time Lewes is pleased to discover most have full bottles.

END MONTAGE:

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT - DUSK

A jeep rolls into camp and Stirling climbs out. He waves his thanks to the driver and the jeep speeds away.

September 1941

Mayne emerges from a tent.

MAYNE
Welcome back. Fruitful trip?

STIRLING

Same old bollocks. Smith remains insufferable in his opposition. How are things going here?

MAYNE

Not bad. Jock and I have been whipping the lads into shape. We put in twenty miles today and just got back so most of the men are eating, resting.

Stirling looks around the quiet camp.

STIRLING

Where is Jock?

MAYNE

Went back out. Said he wanted to get another ten miles in.

Stirling smiles.

MAYNE (CONT'D)

He's a machine.

STIRLING

Indeed he is. How's morale?

MAYNE

So far, so good. We did RTU Private Kauffman and we had a moaner on the first march but I straightened him out.

STIRLING

Very good. Do me a favor will you, Paddy...

Mayne is about to correct Stirling on his name again. At this juncture though, he can't be bothered.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

...When Jock returns, gather the rest of the officers. We've a few things to discuss.

MAYNE

Yes, sir.

INT. STIRLING'S COMMAND TENT - LATER THAT NIGHT

Stirling is holding court with his officers: Lewes, Mayne, Bonnington, Thomas, Fraser, and McGonigal.

STIRLING

Operation Crusader is a "go" for November. It is imperative the men are ready as we may not be given another opportunity to prove ourselves. That brings us to the issue which concerns me the most. Very few of the men have had *any* parachute training.

FRASER

By my count, only fourteen of the men. And half of those have only made a single jump.

STIRLING

Then we have a little under two months to teach every last man how to jump out of an airplane. As most of you know, I can attest to the perils of inexperience.

THOMAS

There's an RAF base back home that specializes in parachute training--

STIRLING

Yes, Ringway. But they've been less than helpful. Most likely thanks to MEHQ sniping us again.

(beat)

No. We must devise our own methods. Any ideas?

MAYNE

Do we at least have an airplane we can borrow?

STIRLING

For now, no.

MCGONIGAL

Candidly, sir, how the hell can we teach the men to jump out of a plane if we don't have one?

FRASER

There's just no way.

Stirling looks frustrated.

LEWES (O.S.)
Perhaps there is.

Everyone turns to Lewes, who has been quietly sitting in the corner.

LEWES (CONT'D)
Might hurt a bit though.

Stirling raises an eyebrow, intrigued.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Six men are lined-up wearing jumpsuits and helmets. Initially, it's unclear where they are, yet they appear to be moving through a cloudless sky.

PULL BACK TO REVEAL --

The men are standing in the back of the old 3-ton army truck as it speeds across a flat, desert plain. A wooden platform has been constructed on the back of the truck.

Several more trucks drift into view, all of them doing 20mph across the sand, all of them carrying a half-dozen men.

EXT. ARMY TRUCK - DAY

As usual, Lewes intends to make himself the guinea pig. He steps onto the wooden platform.

LEWES
(loud)
When you impact, tuck and roll.
Don't tense up.

The other men look positively terrified, but they trust Lewes and his willingness to go first has earned him deep respect.

LEWES (CONT'D)
Jump when ready, chaps.

With that, Lewes jumps off the back of the moving truck. He hits hard, throws up a big cloud of dust.

In his wake, two men trade a look. One of them shrugs and copies Lewes by stepping backwards off the truck...

Seconds later, the rest of the men follow, one by one. The troops in the other vehicles do the same.

All across the desert, small impact clouds of dust and sand burst into the air. Men groan with pain, one even screams.

LATER

All of the men are lined up and Lewes inspects their ranks. They look as if they've been into battle already: bruised, bleeding, filthy.

LEWES

Alright. That worked okay. Let's increase the speed to 30 mph.

The men react in horror.

LATER

The men are lined up again. Those who can still stand anyway. One man is on walking crutches.

They look thoroughly demoralized. Mayne whispers to Lewes.

MAYNE

30 might be too fast.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

A huge stand-alone wooden platform has been constructed at the edge of the camp. One-by-one the men leap from the gantry and roll in the dirt.

Off to the side, Lewes and Mayne observe the recruits.

MAYNE

Roll, Chesworth, you pillock! Yes, Tubby, excellent! Come on, Evans, you lily-livered mummy's boy, JUMP!

Mayne notices a couple of the men staring across the camp to where Stirling sits alone in his tent. The flaps are rolled up and he's visible at his desk, buried in papers.

Mayne frowns, concerned.

INT. STIRLING'S COMMAND TENT - NIGHT

It's pitch black outside his tent but Stirling is still hard at work in the light of a Hurricane lantern. He puffs on his ever-present pipe.

Mayne appears at the "doorway."

MAYNE

May I, sir?

Without looking up, Stirling beckons him inside. Mayne sinks into a chair across from Stirling's desk.

STIRLING

(preoccupied)

Smith just doesn't get it. Small is beautiful. Four-man teams, each man with a different skillset. Maximum speed of deployment and operational flexibility--

Mayne cuts him off.

MAYNE

You need to spend more time with the men, sir.

Caught off-guard by that statement, Stirling drops his pen and sits back in his chair.

STIRLING

Go on.

MAYNE

What you've been doing, your work in Cairo, with MEHQ, it's important, but the men know you've never fired a single bullet in combat. They haven't seen you on a single march. They haven't seen you jump off the back of a lorry.

STIRLING

I don't have their respect. That's what you're telling me, isn't it?

MAYNE

I'm afraid so, sir.

STIRLING

And you. The other officers. Do the men--?

MAYNE

Yes, sir. Lieutenant Lewes especially. They would walk through fire for him.

Stirling takes a contemplative draw from his pipe.

STIRLING

Hmmm.

(beat)

The RAF are loaning us a transport plane and crew tomorrow. Make sure there's a parachute for me.

MAYNE

Have you jumped since--

STIRLING

You know what they say, when you fall off a horse... jump out of a bloody airplane.

CUT TO:

EXT. BRISTOL BOMBAY (FLYING) - DAY

A twin-engine Bristol Bombay soars through the sky. It's a medium range bomber capable of carrying 24 soldiers.

INT. BRISTOL BOMBAY - DAY

In full parachute gear, Stirling is sitting among his men. Across the aisle, Mayne gives him a slight nod, acknowledging the effort he's making to bond with the recruits.

A CREWMAN emerges from the cockpit, yells over the roar of the engines to Stirling.

CREWMAN

We're approaching the Drop Zone, Captain.

STIRLING

Very good. Here we go, lads. Every completed jump gets you a beer in the mess tonight.

A cheer goes up.

The Crewman opens the door, filling the cabin with a howling wind. A RED LIGHT on the ceiling flickers GREEN.

Stirling whispers to Mayne.

STIRLING (CONT'D)
 Make sure there's a case of beer
 with my name on it, will you.

With a grin, Mayne leaps out the door. Stirling closes his eyes for a brief moment then jumps after him.

EXT. BRISTOL BOMBAY / SKY - DAY

This time, Stirling's descent is textbook. His parachute opens perfectly and he savors the view.

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT - LATER

Stirling hits the ground and rolls. It's a flawless landing. He pulls off his helmet and spots Lewes approaching.

LEWES
 All in one piece then, Dave?

Stirling looks deliriously happy.

STIRLING
 My word. This parachuting lark is
 rather invigorating when it works
 properly.

LEWES
 I'm taking the next group up. You
 coming?

STIRLING
 Oh, go on. One more then.

EXT. BRISTOL BOMBAY / SKY - LATER

Stirling makes his second jump of the day.

He looks back up at the plane, watches the rest of his men leaping into the bright blue void, their chutes billowing open behind them.

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT - LATER

On the ground, Stirling sits with Mayne under a canvas canopy, a makeshift observation post. They watch the Bombay make another approach.

He's swapped his jumpsuit for his standard desert uniform: shorts, short-sleeved shirt, and cap.

STIRLING

Let's have a chat with the crew before the next run. I've been thinking that if the aircraft reduces altitude between the first man and the last, and the pilot can get the timing just right, the men could land simultaneously.

MAYNE

(nods)

Could keep the unit closer together upon landing too.

(checks watch)

How much longer do we have the Bombay?

STIRLING

I'd say we can get another three or four jumps in today. I've pulled some strings to get the RAF boys back here tomorrow too.

INT. BRISTOL BOMBAY (FLYING) - LATER

As before, the Crewman emerges from the cockpit and moves to open the door. The jump-light flickers to GREEN.

CREWMAN

Jump when ready.

Lewes stands by the open door.

LEWES

You heard the man.

Warburton is first out the door. As he leaps from the plane, Lewes looks horrified. Warburton's static-line slides right out of the rail's snap-link, so his chute doesn't open...

Before Lewes can react, PVT. DUFFY (20) follows Warburton and the same malfunction occurs...

LEWES (CONT'D)

Stop!

Lewes grabs the third man in line, yanks him off his feet by his parachute pack.

For Warburton and Duffy, it's too late.

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT

Stirling and Mayne have a clear view as the two men plummet from the aircraft, their parachutes unopened.

STIRLING
(utter horror)
Dear God.

Duffy is desperately trying to manually release his chute but it's futile. He SCREAMS in terror.

Seconds later, both men slam into the ground. Two audible THUMPS and two small bursts of sand.

It's disturbing to say the least. Stirling closes his eyes.

INT. BRISTOL BOMBAY (FLYING) - DAY

Lewes and the Crewman slide the door closed.

The men sit in silent shock.

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT

The men disembark the bomber to find Stirling and Mayne waiting for them.

They're all deeply shaken by the tragedy.

STIRLING
Training is cancelled for today.
Once we identify what went wrong,
we will fix the problem and pick up
where we left off. Go relax any
way you see fit and be ready to
start again tomorrow morning.

FADE TO BLACK.

A SUDDEN BURST OF LIGHT...

INT. BRISTOL BOMBAY (FLYING) - THE NEXT DAY

The Crewman opens the door for another "stick" of parachutists...

Stirling is first in line to jump. Lewes and Mayne are right behind him.

LEWES

You don't have to go first, Dave.

Stirling glances back at the rest of the men. They're watching closely, scared shitless they'll meet the same fate as Warburton and Duffy.

STIRLING

These are my men. I want them to know what they mean to me.

A split-second later, he's out the door. The rest of the men follow suit.

EXT. BRISTOL BOMBAY / SKY - DAY

Every single chute opens perfectly.

Once he's landed in one piece, Stirling watches in delight as the rest of his men land safely all around him.

INT. MESS TENT - NIGHT

A raucous celebration. Almost 60 men drinking, singing.

Two jump helmets sit on the piano, a pint of beer in front of each. A makeshift memorial for two absent brothers.

CUT TO:

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT

A lone oil drum sits in a clear patch of desert.

BOOM!

The lid explodes, hurtling 30ft into the air.

October 1941

Some distance away, Lewes, Stirling, and an explosives expert, a SAPPER (30s), pop-up behind a wall of sandbags.

LEWES

You see? The fuel at the bottom won't ignite. We need the bombs to be explosive *and* an incendiary.

SAPPER

It's impossible. The combination you want doesn't exist.

(MORE)

SAPPER (CONT'D)

We've tried everything: thermite, gelignite, ammonal... They either explode or ignite, not both. You've been at it for weeks and my team's been experimenting for months. I'm telling you it cannot be done.

LEWES

I disagree. It *can* be done, I just haven't found the right balance.

SAPPER

You fellas want the moon.

STIRLING

No, we want to blow-up the moon.

LEWES

And make it catch fire.

SAPPER

(frustrated)

My advice is to make the best of what you've got and stop dreaming. When we get something better, we'll let you know.

STIRLING

Perhaps you'll manage that in time for the *third* World War.

The Sapper walks off, fuming.

Stirling looks to Lewes.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

You really believe it's possible?

LEWES

I do.

STIRLING

Then keep at it. I'll have Paddy handle the PT.

BEGIN "EXPLOSIVES MONTAGE":

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

-- Lewes conducts test after test. Either an explosion sends the oil drum lid high into the air, or it pops off in unspectacular fashion and the barrel bursts into flames.

-- Lewes mixes different compounds, shapes them into charges.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

-- Explosion or fire. Never both.

-- Lewes sits in his "workshop," deep in thought, playing idly with a lump of plastic dough. He stares out at the rifle range, at a bottle of discarded oil.

-- Lewes grabs the bottle, pours some oil into the plastic, adds thermite, and kneads it together into a small lump the size of a tennis ball.

-- The lump is attached to the oil drum lid. Lewes sticks a fuse in the top and hurries back to the sandbag wall.

KA-BOOM!!!

-- A loud explosion, then a flash as the gasoline in the bottom of the oil drum bursts into flames.

-- Lewes pops up from behind the sandbags, a wide smile on his face. Stirling, Mayne and the invited-back "expert" emerge from their shelter too. Stirling smirks at the Sapper and the poor man has to acknowledge Lewes' success with a reluctant nod of approval.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT

Stirling, Lewes, Mayne and the other officers watch from the ground as the men make another flawless parachute jump.

A STAFF CAR parks nearby and GENERAL NEIL RITCHIE and an RAF OFFICER emerge. Stirling waves them over, whispers out the corner of his mouth to Lewes and Mayne.

STIRLING

Look lively, gents. Ritchie's on our side but we need to make sure it stays that way.

General Ritchie and the RAF Officer join the trio and gaze up at the paratroopers' descent.

GEN. RITCHIE

Morning, Dave. Lieutenants. This is Group Captain Townsend. I've been telling him about our little outfit and thought I'd bring him here to see it first-hand.

Stirling salutes, shakes the RAF Officer's hand.

STIRLING

Captain Stirling. This is
Lieutenants Lewes and Mayne.
Welcome to Kabrit.

RAF OFFICER

I've been hearing about your
Special Air Service. Quite a
concept.

STIRLING

Thank you.

RAF OFFICER

I'll be honest with you, Captain, I
told Neil here I don't fancy your
chances. Parachuting isn't new and
it's not even difficult. But
infiltrating enemy aerodromes is a
whole different story. That's where
you'll fail I'm afraid.

Stirling bristles. The RAF Officer has clearly been talking
to the skeptics at MEHQ.

STIRLING

With all due respect, sir. We
believe access to the airfields
will be the easiest part of our
task. The biggest challenge will
be making sure your people drop us
in the right spot.

The RAF Officer twitches. The gauntlet has been thrown.

RAF OFFICER

I admire the audacity but what
makes you think getting onto the
airfields will be easy?

STIRLING

Because Jerry won't be expecting us
and airfields are always poorly
guarded. Even ours.

This visit has evolved into a full-blown pissing match.
General Ritchie tries to hide his amusement.

RAF OFFICER
 (derisive laugh)
 I can assure you that no raiding
 party would find it easy to access
 our airfields.

STIRLING
 Nonsense. I'll bet you ten pounds
 we can infiltrate Heliopolis any
 night we like. Don't worry though,
 we'll put labels on your planes
 instead of bombs.

With a glance to Ritchie, the irked RAF Officer sticks out
 his hand.

RAF OFFICER
 I'll take that bet.

They shake.

STIRLING
 We'll even make it easier for you.
 You can tell Heliopolis to expect a
 visit around the end of October.

Stirling smirks at the riled-up officer.

CUT TO:

EXT. L DETACHMENT CAMP - KABRIT - DUSK

Forty men are geared up with full kit. Paddy Mayne is
 dressed for the exercise too.

Stirling and Lewes are staying behind.

MAYNE
 Sure you don't fancy coming, Jock?
 You could do ninety miles in your
 sleep.

LEWES
 I'd love to--

STIRLING
 Except he's got a few hundred Lewes
 Bombs to make.

LEWES
 Here...

Lewes hands Mayne a fistful of small pebbles.

MAYNE

I've been meaning to ask--

LEWES

Every hundred steps transfer a stone from one pocket to the other. Assuming an average pace is thirty inches, each stone represents eighty-three yards. It's not absolutely accurate of course but it's a damned good guideline.

MAYNE

I'm a rugby player, mate, not a bloody mathematician. Almonds is the same height as you, I'll have him do the counting.

They share a smile and Mayne pockets the stones.

STIRLING

One last thing, Paddy. When our RAF friend was here... do you happen to remember the staff car they arrived in?

MAYNE

Aye. I do.

STIRLING

A little birdie tells me it belongs to him and he's rather fond of it.

Stirling gives him a wink.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Godspeed, Lieutenant.

Mayne salutes them both then leads the SAS into the desert.

CUT TO:

EXT. ROYAL AIR FORCE BASE "HELIOPOLIS" - DAWN

At first light, a pair of RAF PILOTS, in full flight gear, walk towards a row of aircraft.

Three Days Later

When they reach their aircraft, they notice something strange and stop in their tracks.

PILOT

What the bloody hell is that?!

REVEAL -- several BRIGHT-COLORED STICKERS have been affixed to the plane. A few on the fuselage and the wings, and one prominently placed on the cockpit.

EXT. OFFICERS QUARTERS - MINUTES LATER

The RAF Officer, clearly having been woken unexpectedly, stumbles out of his sleeping quarters. A GUARD is waiting for him outside.

RAF OFFICER

What the devil is so important, man?

GUARD

Sorry, sir, but I thought you'd want to know...

The Guard leads him around the corner of the barracks. What the RAF Officer sees makes his face flush red with anger.

REVEAL -- the STAFF CAR he took to Kabrit is completely covered in those same colorful stickers.

Furious, the RAF Officer kicks over a trash can.

SMASH CUT TO:

CLOSE ON -- A TEN POUND NOTE

It's being pinned above the bar in the mess tent by one of Stirling's men.

Stirling himself is standing on a chair, the rest of his men gathered around him, beers in hand. He reads from a letter.

STIRLING

(reading)

In light of your impressive victory, steps have been taken to remedy the defense system of Heliopolis and all Allied airfields in North Africa and beyond. That leaves only one thing left to say. When your Special Air Service becomes fully operational, I wish you the best of luck and good fortune. Sincerely, Group Captain Townsend, 208 Squadron.

Stirling raises a glass of beer and a cheer goes up.

He hops down from the chair and seeks out Lewes and Mayne. Behind them, the men break into song.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

I received another communique today. From The Auk. Operation Squatter is on for the 16th. Let the lads enjoy tonight. We'll tell them in the morning.

Lewes isn't drinking, but Mayne breaks into a grin and slams his glass into Stirling's.

CUT TO:

EXT. BAGOUSH AIRFIELD - DAY

The camp is quiet. In the distance, DARK BLACK CLOUDS dominate the horizon.

216 Squadron, Bagoush Airfield

November 16th, 1941

Five Bristol Bombay aircraft are parked near a large hangar.

INT. HANGAR - DAY

The entire SAS brigade is staged here in anticipation of their first real mission. There's palpable excitement in the air as the men make last-minute weapon and equipment checks.

INT. OFFICE - HANGAR - DAY

Stirling and his officers are gathered in a small office: Lewes, Mayne, McGonigal, Thomas, Fraser, and Bonnington.

On a chalkboard, there's a map of the region and two prominent targets: Timini and Gazala airfields.

The officers appear to be in good spirits, but not Stirling. He slams down the telephone...

LEWES

Bad news?

STIRLING

The Brigadier. His advice is to call it off.

(MORE)

STIRLING (CONT'D)

But he's leaving the final decision
up to me and he wants my answer
within the hour.

The air is sucked out of the room. Surprise turns to anger.

MCGONICAL

Call it off?!

FRASER

What the hell for? The men are
ready to go!

STIRLING

The weather might be nice here, but
make no mistake we'll be flying
into a war zone, into winds that'll
rip a plane apart.

LEWES

So long as it's under twenty knots
we can account for the wind. It
might take a little longer to
regroup but--

STIRLING

The forecast is *thirty knots*.

That news gives the men serious pause.

MCGONICAL

Christ.

STIRLING

Personally, I would like to go
ahead regardless of the risk. The
men are committed and I fear it'll
shake their confidence if we fold
this late in the game.

LEWES

I'm with you. Conditions will
never be ideal--

Stirling looks to Fraser. He nods his assent. So does
McGonigal.

THOMAS

I don't like it one bit. But we've
trained too hard for this
opportunity.

STIRLING

And we may not get another. If we abort the mission, I can promise you Smith will pervert my reasoning and push for us to be disbanded.

THOMAS

Damn that man to hell. Let's go.

Stirling and the four other officers look to Mayne.

MAYNE

Don't look at me. I joined this unit to fight Germans and I'm ready for a punch-up.

STIRLING

That settles it then. The operation is on. We will take off at 7:30 as scheduled.

INTERCUT:

INT. BOMBAY BRISTOL (VARIOUS) - NIGHT

Stirling, Mayne, Lewes, McGonigal, and Bonnington are each in command of an airplane. Fraser and Thomas will serve as seconds-in-command.

The men squeeze into the five aircraft. There's even less room as each plane has been fitted with a long-range fuel tank which stretches the entire length of the cabin.

Irrked by the cramped conditions, Tubby kicks the tank.

TUBBY

What is that thing? Wasn't there during training.

GERRY

Long-range fuel tank.

TUBBY

(pales)

We expecting any ground fire?

GERRY

Hope not or it's gonna get a bit toasty.

Tubby is the opposite of reassured.

EXT. BAGOUSH AIRFIELD - NIGHT

The five Bristol Bombay aircraft of the 216 squadron taxi to the runway.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BRISTOL BOMBAY (STIRLING'S) - NIGHT (LATER)

Stirling's ten-man SAS unit sit huddled in their seats, nervously eyeing the huge fuel tank. It's cold and uncomfortable, and the ride is getting bumpier by the minute.

Stirling sticks his head into the cockpit.

INT. COCKPIT - NIGHT

The PILOT and CO-PILOT are using their instruments to fly as visibility is near-zero out the window.

PILOT

Weather's deteriorating. Can't see a damn thing with all this sand blowing about.

STIRLING

How long?

PILOT

We have a fix on the coastline so now we turn inland. Six minutes to the drop zone.

At that moment, anti-aircraft fire begins to explode outside the airplane.

CO-PILOT

We're at five hundred feet and the wind is twenty-seven knots. You still want to jump, sir?

STIRLING

Just get me over that drop zone.

EXT. BRISTOL BOMBAY - NIGHT

The airplane is barely visible as it bounces around in the storm. Every few seconds, it lights up with a flash of anti-aircraft fire.

The jump door slides open...

INT. BRISTOL BOMBAY (STIRLING'S) - NIGHT

Stirling stands next to the door, across from a CREWMAN eyeing the red jump-light. TEN MEN stand in silence, ready to follow their leader into the black void.

STIRLING
(to Crewman)
Thanks for the lift.

CREWMAN
Pitch black out there, sir. Can't even see the ground.

STIRLING
(sardonic)
Oh, I'll find it.

A few seconds later, the jump-light turns GREEN.

Stirling turns to his men.

STIRLING (CONT'D)
See you down there, chaps.

With that, he steps into the darkness...

EXT. SKY - NIGHT

Stirling's chute opens smoothly but his descent is surreal. It's as if he's completely blind. Despite the winds, it's eerily quiet too.

Stirling looks down past his feet, but the Crewman was right. It's impossible to see the ground. Only pitch black.

All at once, the peace and tranquility of the drop is shattered as Stirling SLAMS VIOLENTLY into the ground.

EXT. LANDING ZONE / DESERT - MINUTES LATER

Knocked unconscious by the impact, Stirling wakes up to find himself being dragged FAST over rough ground. Sharp rocks tear at his battledress and he struggles to reach the release harness.

Finally free of his chute, Stirling rolls onto his back and grimaces in pain. Blood trickles down his face but he checks his limbs and nothing appears to be broken.

Stirling gets to his feet, braces himself against the raging wind, and yells out for his men. He pulls a flashlight from his webbing, waves it around.

STIRLING
Hello!!! Anyone out there?!

Stirling walks in circles. After a few minutes, he hears more yelling, sees a light blink in the distance.

Sergeant Bob Tait lumbers out of the darkness supporting another soldier with a busted ankle.

SGT. TAIT
You alright, sir?

STIRLING
Not the prettiest landing but
nothing appears to be broken.

More flashlights appear in the black desert.

LATER

Stirling takes stock of his unit. Only NINE MEN have regrouped and they're poring through two supply parachutes.

STIRLING
(bleak)
One missing, seven injured, and
only two of ten supply packs.

Tait is one of the men going through the equipment.

STIRLING (CONT'D)
What do we have to work with,
Sergeant?

SGT. TAIT
Six blankets, twelve canteens, a
day's supply of food for all, and a
half dozen tins of Lewes Bombs.

STIRLING
At least we didn't lose the bombs.

Tait's face suggests there's more bad news.

STIRLING (CONT'D)
What is it, man?

SGT. TAIT

The fuses, sir. They were in another container.

Stirling visibly swallows his rage.

Another soldier, SGT. YATES speaks up.

SGT. YATES

We could expand the search. If Smith is still alive--

STIRLING

No. We've already lost two hours. Smith was probably knocked out cold and dragged for miles. The supplies are long gone too.

Stirling looks around at what's left of his parachute stick. Sgt. Tait is the only man not nursing any real injuries. It's blatantly clear -- Operation Squatter has become an unmitigated disaster.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Without fuses, we cannot do any damage to enemy aircraft and are therefore non-operational. Yates, you will take the men to the RV. Tait and myself will proceed to the coastal road for reconnaissance.

Stirling uses a commando knife to draw a "map" in the hard-packed sand.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

(to Yates)

If we've been dropped in the right place, you should only be thirty miles from the RV.

He draws a long line in the sand.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Head South. Once you hit the Trig el Abd, turn right. The RV is on a small hill and the LRDG have said they'll put out a beacon.

(to Sgt. Tait)

Up for a bit of a walk, Bob?

The two groups -- Stirling and Sgt. Tait vs Sgt. Yates and seven injured men -- shake hands and part ways.

Sgt. Yates watches Stirling and Tait push north. They're immediately swallowed by the darkness.

HOURS LATER

All things considered, Stirling and Sgt. Tait are moving at a clipped pace.

STIRLING

I hope the other units are in better shape than we are.

SGT. TAIT

Couldn't be any worse off.

STIRLING

Sun will be up in another hour or so and we should sight the coast. If the RAF did their job right, we have another five miles ahead of us.

HOURS LATER

At first light, Stirling and Tait find themselves in a huge expanse of featureless desert. Using field-glasses, Stirling looks to the horizon.

STIRLING

Nothing. They dropped us well outside the zone.

SGT. TAIT

We have no bombs, only our revolvers. Perhaps we should--

STIRLING

There's nothing to do but keep going. We have to hit the coast sometime.

Stirling continues North. Tait resigns himself to Stirling's wish and quickly follows.

LATER

STIRLING'S POV -- THROUGH FIELD-GLASSES --

A hazy, rough line on the horizon.

STIRLING

Looks as though we're nearly there.
About four miles I should think.
We'd better hide up until dark.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

- The two men lay-up in a wadi-bed. They drink water, munch a few biscuits.
- The two men sleep in their "shelter."
- By mid-afternoon, the light is fading. Stirling is on his feet, restless to keep moving. He nudges Tait with his foot to wake him.
- They trek across the flat landscape.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. ESCARPMENT - LATE AFTERNOON

Finally, Stirling and Tait reach the escarpment. They take cover behind a cluster of rocks at the edge. In the distance lies the Mediterranean, and below them the coast road.

Sparse traffic moves along the road and Stirling notes a few scattered huts and tents. It's a windswept and barren vista.

Tait consults a map.

SGT. TAIT

I reckon we must be east of Gazala.
Not far from Tobruk.

Stirling turns away from the view, slumps against the rocks.

SGT. TAIT (CONT'D)

You okay?

STIRLING

You know what this means...

SGT. TAIT

Sir?

STIRLING

(anguish)
We made it to the coast undetected.
(MORE)

STIRLING (CONT'D)

If we hadn't been scuppered by the goddamn weather, it would have worked.

Tait slumps down too and both men sit in silence, contemplating what could have been.

MINUTES LATER

Footprints from the cluster of rocks leading back into the desert. Stirling and Tait are heading back to the RV.

A journey of *fifty miles*.

Against the setting sun, dark clouds roll in.

HOURS LATER

Stirling and Tait find themselves in a torrential downpour.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

- Stirling and Trait march through driving rain.
- The desert wadis turn into raging rivers. The two men carefully cross in waist-deep water. One wrong step and they'll be swept away.
- They climb to higher ground but still the rain comes down.
- Stirling and Tait seek shelter under a rocky outcropping. They dig through their rucksacks, scarf down chocolate. Stirling is dismayed to find his cigarettes are water-logged.
- The rain has stopped so their trek continues.
- Stirling and Tait have reached an old desert track, known as the Trig el Abd. Using a flashlight, they check their map. Stirling points to the right and they move off.
- In the distance, a speck of light. That sight alone lifts the spirits of the two men.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. RV - NIGHT

As Stirling and Tait get closer to the lantern, a hurricane lamp, they begin to make out the vehicles of the LRDG (Long Range Desert Group) sitting atop a small hill.

A friendly face appears out of the darkness. This is CAPT. OWEN, a navigator for this New Zealand unit of the LRDG.

STIRLING

I'm Stirling. Have you seen any of my chaps?

CAPT. OWEN

A few are here. Right this way. Let's get you a warm brew.

Behind the hill, more LRDG trucks sit in a ravine, covered with camouflage nets. There are several fires burning and men clustered around them. A few are drinking tea and eating rations, most are sleeping.

LEWES (O.S.)

Dave!

Stirling makes out Jock Lewes sitting by a fire.

STIRLING

Jock! My word, it's good to see you.

Lewes hands Stirling a hot mug of tea.

LEWES

(concerned)

Where are the others?

Stirling glances around the camp, realizing nobody from his own unit has arrived.

STIRLING

You mean Yates isn't here? Every last man but Tait and I got banged-up on landing, so I told them to head to the RV. They should have beaten us. Easily.

SGT. TAIT

They'll show up, sir.

CAPT. OWEN

If they're not here by morning, we can send one of our trucks out to look for 'em.

STIRLING

Thank you.

Stirling settles by the fire.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

(to Lewes)

How bad was it for your lot then?

LEWES

One man went missing during the drop. Another broke both legs so we had to leave him behind. Fraser and I made it back with eight men.

STIRLING

No sign of the other units?

Lewes shakes his head. Everyone is silent for a few moments.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

I think that's the end of parachuting for us.

CUT TO:

EXT. RV - DAWN

At first light, Paddy Mayne and nine men walk into the LRDG camp. Stirling is thrilled to see them and he greets Mayne with a handshake and a slap on the back.

STIRLING

Good to see you, Paddy. Any sign of Bonnington or McGonigal?

Mayne's face falls.

MAYNE

I'd hoped they were here already.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RV - MORNING

Stirling sits alone atop the small hill, scans the horizon with his field-glasses.

A small LRDG truck appears in the distance.

MINUTES LATER

The truck pulls up to the RV and Capt. Owen climbs out. Stirling is first there to meet him.

CAPT. OWEN

We found a lot of footprints, tire tracks. 12-13 miles down the Trig el Abd. I'd wager they were picked up by a German patrol.

STIRLING

(crestfallen)

They turned left when they hit the road. My God, such a simple error and now--

CAPT. OWEN

What's the total number of missing?

STIRLING

Thirty three.

LATER

Stirling is back on the hill, desperately searching the landscape for any sign of his men.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. RV - NIGHT

We're back at the opening scene, with Stirling sitting in the soft red glow of the Hurricane Lantern, still waiting in the darkness for the rest of L Detachment to return.

Sgt. Tait approaches

SGT. TAIT

Taxis wanna leave, sir. S'posed to be another storm comin' this way.

Stirling doesn't react.

SGT. TAIT (CONT'D)

Sir--

STIRLING

I'm waiting for the men.

SGT. TAIT

It's been two days. Some of the other lads are in piss-poor shape.

EXT. RV - EARLY DAWN

The LRDG convoy begins to roll out. In the rear bed of a truck, a depressed Stirling looks back at the RV.

A pile of supplies has been stacked in the ravine and the lantern still glows atop the hill.

EXT. LRDG CONVOY - DAY

Six vehicles (mostly CMP Ford F30s) navigate their way through the rugged desert.

INT. LRDG TRUCK - DAY

Riding in one of the middle trucks, Stirling smokes a cigarette. He seems lost in thought as he gazes at the vehicle following behind.

Capt. Owen rides shotgun.

STIRLING

Say, how long is Long Range exactly?

CAPT. OWEN

Long as it needs to be. Command has us doing reconnaissance of the whole desert these days. We usually stay out here for weeks.

Stirling looks back at the trailing truck. It's a bit of a eureka moment.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. MEHQ (MIDDLE EAST HEADQUARTERS) - ONE WEEK LATER

Stirling limps through the main entrance and approaches a STAFF OFFICER at a desk.

STIRLING

Captain Stirling. I have a meeting with General Cunningham.

STAFF OFFICER

I'm afraid that's not possible, sir. The General left this morning.

STIRLING

(confused)

But I received orders this morning to immediately report to the Commander of the 8th Army.

STAFF OFFICER

Then that could explain it. We've got a new one.

STIRLING

Who?

STAFF OFFICER

Ritchie.

Stirling pales. He was hoping he didn't have to face his old friend in the wake of such a disastrous mission.

GEN. RITCHIE (V.O.)

Rotten bloody luck, Dave.

INT. GENERAL RITCHIE'S OFFICE - MEHQ - MINUTES LATER

Ritchie is sitting behind his desk, the strain and fatigue of war etched on his face.

GEN. RITCHIE

If it weren't for that storm, I believe you would have given Rommel a real kick in the arse. Heavy losses?

STIRLING

We lost one plane. Radio intercepts tell us another unit was captured. Given the weather and the RAF missing the drop zone, we're fortunate it wasn't worse.

GEN. RITCHIE

I understand you were on the escarpment overlooking the Gazala-Tobruk road a few days ago. Can you give me any idea what reinforcements were coming up? Rommel flanked us at Maddelena.

(MORE)

GEN. RITCHIE (CONT'D)

The Auk thinks it's a gamble and we have the edge, so I need to know Rommel's tank strength. If he has nothing in reserve, we might turn this thing around.

STIRLING

We watched the road for about half an hour. Didn't see any armor. Only a few supply trucks.

GEN. RITCHIE

That's good to hear.

(beat)

So what's next, Dave? While HQ is busy, I suggest you get stuck back in before Smith makes some noise about your setback. You need anything from me?

STIRLING

I did have one idea I wanted to discuss with you...

GEN. RITCHIE

Spit it out, man.

STIRLING

The LRDG...

CUT TO:

EXT. JALO OASIS - NEXT DAY / DAWN

The "Jalo Oasis" sits on the edge of the Great Sand Sea, several hundred miles Southeast of Benghazi.

Only recently taken from the Italians, Jalo resembles a Foreign Legion Outpost.

Jalo Oasis

December 7th, 1941

Stirling is briefing his SAS unit and the LRDG Specialists.

Of the original 55 men who took part in "Operation Squatter," only 18 men and 4 officers made it back.

The SAS look different, hardened by their experience. Their bodies, beards, and uniforms have evolved for desert warfare.

STIRLING

The good news: for now at least,
our parachuting days are behind us.
The bad news: we have a 250 mile
drive ahead of us.

Stirling uses a "swagger stick" to draw a map in the sand.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

As every man here knows all too
well, Operation Squatter was a
tragic failure. But it *did* prove
my original theory -- the Germans
are vulnerable to sneak attacks
from the desert.

Stirling draws a row of circles near the coast.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

These are the airfields we'll
target, in the Gulf of Sirte. The
plan is for our LRDG friends to
drop each sub-unit within striking
distance of a different airfield.

Stirling points at two of the LRDG men: HOLLIMAN and SADLER.

STIRLING (CONT'D)

Unlike the RAF, Gus Holliman and
Mike Sadler here will drop us
precisely where we need to be. Once
we get close to the airfields,
we'll hoof it the rest of the way
and make a few things go boom in
the night. Our main objective is
to destroy as many aircraft on the
ground as possible. Our success
will significantly help the 8th
Army advance on Benghazi and it
could convince Command to keep and
rebuild our regiment.

(beat)

So let's show Rommel and MEHQ exactly
what the SAS are capable of.

CUT TO:

EXT. DESERT - DAY

An iconic shot of the SAS and LRDG speeding across the
desert. They look like a band of desert buccaneers. Grizzly
beards, grubby uniforms, sand goggles, and heavy firepower.

The EIGHT VEHICLES are piled high with "Jerry cans," spare tires, water, blankets, camo nets, food, and ammunition.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

After dark, the LRDG vehicles pull up for the night.

The LRDG Specialists use this downtime to service the vehicles and mend tires. Even these tough military vehicles take a beating from the desert.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

The LRDG convoy cross another flat, endless vista of sand.

Stirling watches a speck in the sky. As it grows larger, an Italian reconnaissance plane becomes visible. It's a "Gibli," a light aircraft with one machine gun and two bombs.

A few commands are shouted...

The LRDG gunners OPEN FIRE...

The Gibli drops its bombs. Both explode but not close enough to hurt. Struck by a few rounds, the airplane peels off and limps for the horizon.

EXT. DESERT - NIGHT

The four officers: Stirling, Paddy, Lewes, and Fraser. Each will command a sub-unit of four or five men during the raids. Tonight, they sit by a campfire and study the map.

STIRLING

In light of the Gibli pegging our position, our escorts have suggested a change of course so we're going to split up earlier than planned tomorrow. The latest intel report indicates security has been heightened at Sirte, so Paddy's unit and my own will continue Northwest and hit Tamet as one. Lewes and Fraser, you will cut directly North and strike Agheila and Agedabia on the night of the 14th-15th.

(points to map)

On the 16th, we'll rendezvous here and return to Jalo. Any questions?

FRASER

Is there a prize for the unit that
takes out the most aircraft?

That draws a smile from the men.

STIRLING

No prize. But I'll buy a round for
every plane we blow up.
(points at Lewes)
And you'll have a beer with us
whether you like it or not.

In good spirits, the officers clink their mugs of tea.

EXT. DESERT - DAY (AERIAL)

The LRDG convoy from high above. It gracefully splits into
two columns and one veers away from the other.

EXT. LRDG DROP-OFF LOCATION - NEAR TAMET - NIGHT

Stirling's half of the fleet, FOUR VEHICLES, have pulled up
for the night.

Stirling, Mayne, and ten SAS men are tooled-up and ready for
business. Each man carries a satchel of Lewes Bombs, a
Thompson SMG ("Tommy gun"), revolvers, grenades, and a
commando knife. They all wear menacing black facepaint.

Sadler, Holliman and the rest of the LRDG watch, in awe, as
Stirling and his desert raiders vanish into the darkness.

CUT TO:

EXT. COASTAL ROAD - NIGHT

A German supply truck speeds along the narrow coastal road.
Once it's passed, the SAS unit materializes from a ditch and
scurries across the road.

EXT. BLUFF - TAMET AIRFIELD - NIGHT

Stirling's unit is hunkered down on a ridge overlooking the
Tamet Airfield. Aside from a chain-link fence, there's no
visible security.

Beyond the fence, there are a dozen or so buildings and 24
aircraft, including Stukas JU 87s, ME 109s, and JU 88s.

STIRLING
 Prioritize fighter planes over
 bombers, German planes over Italian.

Mayne looks over with a mischievous grin.

MAYNE
 Sod it. Let's blow all of 'em.

STIRLING
 (shrugs)
 Who dares wins.

Stirling and Mayne trade an excited glance and the unit splits into three teams of four.

CUT TO:

EXT. TAMET AIRFIELD - NIGHT

Stirling and three men move stealthily to the chain-link fence and quickly cut a hole big enough to squeeze through.

They keep to the shadows and approach the aircraft lined up alongside the runway.

Two men keep watch while the other two pull Lewes Bombs from their gear and affix them to the wings and fuselage. Once they've set the fuses, they move to the next plane and swap roles -- one keeps watch, the other plants bombs.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

- Stirling's men, all three four-man units, move from plane to plane, positioning their bombs to inflict the most damage.
- CLOSE ON: Lewes Bomb slapped on a Stuka's wing.
- Another bomb is attached to a large FUEL TRUCK.
- Mayne sneaks up behind a German SENTRY and drags him to the ground. With a hand over his mouth, Mayne repeatedly stabs the sentry with his commando knife. It's a silent and brutal flash of violence.
- More aircraft, more bombs attached.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. TAMET AIRFIELD - NIGHT

A German emerges from a hangar doorway and lights a cigarette. He freezes as he spots movement in the shadows. Suspicious, the German steps forward, squints into the dark.

Mayne and his four men are frozen in tableau around the base of a German bomber. They're in shadow but still exposed.

The German edges further forward and spots Mayne shaking his head. For a brief moment, the German doesn't move and the cigarette dangles from his shocked open-jaw...

Mayne shakes his head: *don't do it.*

A split-second later, the German is sprinting back towards the hangar sidedoor. Mayne gives chase but the German has already slipped inside...

EXT. HANGAR - NIGHT

Mayne presses his back against the exterior wall of the hangar, right next to the door. He can hear MUSIC inside; some kind of party is underway.

The door re-opens and two German Airmen appears. One of them, the whistleblower, is pointing towards the aircraft.

Mayne doesn't skip a beat. Tommy Gun slung across his back, he puts down both men with his revolver then pulls the pins of two grenades and throws them through the door.

BOOM!

ON STIRLING

He sees Mayne storm inside the hangar, Tommy Gun blazing. Stirling turns to the three members of his unit.

STIRLING

Proceed as planned. As many planes
as you can.

Gripping his own Tommy Gun, Stirling starts running for the hangar. GUNFIRE is roaring inside.

EXT. HANGAR - NIGHT

Mayne backs out of the doorway, guns blazing. He quickly reloads. A pair of GERMAN SOLDIERS appear but Stirling lets rip with his Thompson and they go down in a hail of bullets.

Mayne hurries to Stirling's position.

MAYNE

Cheers, Dave. That one made us.
Didn't see a choice.

STIRLING

How many inside?

MAYNE

Twenty. Mostly pilots.

In the b.g., SHOUTS and YELLING. More Germans responding.

STIRLING

Time to go.

They sprint across the runway, rejoin the others...

EXT. RUNWAY - NIGHT

The SAS regroup and withdraw along the runway. Behind them, muzzle flashes and the *POP POP POP* of small arms fire...

One group returns cover fire, the second group plants explosives on planes, the last group advances.

Rinse and repeat.

There are only a couple of aircraft left. Mayne digs into his own rucksack for Lewes Bombs. He only has one left.

While the other men hold off the Germans, Mayne runs towards the last plane and slaps a bomb on the engine bay. He climbs up to the pilot canopy and prepares to spray the cockpit with bullets. When his gun clicks *empty*, *Mayne starts ripping at the instruments with his bare hands...*

STIRLING

(urgency)

Move your arse, Paddy!

Firing controlled bursts, the SAS withdraw from the runaway and disappear like ghosts in the night.

In their wake, the Germans run in every direction, unsure if there's a full-scale assault underway.

Nobody notices the Lewes Bombs planted on the aircraft.

EXT. COASTAL ROAD - NIGHT

Like rats, the SAS men scurry back across the road.

EXT. LRDG PICK-UP LOCATION - NEAR TAMET - NIGHT

AN LRDG GUNNER hears a noise and swings a .30 cal machine gun to bear.

GUNNER
Who goes there?

STIRLING (O.S.)
(password)
Bovril!

GUNNER
Welcome back.

The Gunner stands down and all ten SAS men materialize from the pitch darkness. They're all wired, pumped full of adrenaline from their skirmish on the airfield.

Holliman jumps off a truck to greet Stirling.

HOLLIMAN
How'd it go? We heard a ruckus.

STIRLING
(roguish smile)
Oh we had our fun. Probably best
if we shove off though.

Holliman nods his assent and signals the LRDG to saddle up.

In mere seconds, every last man has piled onto the LRDG trucks and they set sail into the Great Sand Sea.

EXT. DESERT - MINUTES LATER

The LRDG vehicles are moving slowly through the night, a few miles away from Tamet when the 30-minute fuses on the Lewes bombs ignite...

BOOM!!! BOOM!!! BOOM!!!

One explosion after another lights up the sky.

Stirling, Mayne, and the rest of the men watch the fireworks show with utter glee. It resembles the Northern Lights as airplane after airplane (and fuel trucks) go *KA-BOOM!*

Illuminated by the distant flames, Stirling's face beams with pride and joy.

MAYNE

You said you'd buy a round for every plane.

STIRLING

I did, didn't I. How many was that?

MAYNE

Twenty-four.

STIRLING

Bugger.

They laugh.

The LRDG vehicles are swallowed by the night.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - DAY

Stirling's nurse friend, Molly, pushes a cart along a hallway and backs into a room.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Molly absentmindedly grabs some bed linens from the cart and approaches a closed curtain. She whips it open and YELPS in fright...

Four men sit side-by-side, nursing hangovers...

Stirling, Mayne, Fraser and Lewes.

All four wear oxygen masks.

Stirling looks up at Molly, grinning under his mask. She shakes her head in amusement.

MOLLY

I guess someone got their little army after all.

FADE TO BLACK.

CODA:

John "Jock" Lewes carried out several more successful raids until he was killed by enemy aircraft fire on December 30th, 1941.

Over the next year, the 1st SAS Regiment destroyed over 250 aircraft.

In January 1943, Stirling was captured by the Germans and imprisoned in Colditz Castle until the end of the war.

Paddy Mayne took over command of the SAS and became one of the British Army's most highly-decorated soldiers.