

Mark Urban's book Task Force Black.

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Mark Urban is an established Diplomatic and Defence Editor for BBC Newsnight who has a well-deserved reputation as an author of military history as well as contemporary books about Special Forces and British intelligence. He is probably unique in that he has managed to cultivate a range of credible contacts within the Special Forces (SF) without which this authoritative book would probably not have been possible.

The book focuses almost exclusively on SF operations, often in great tactical detail, but does not adequately place these operations in the wider context of British objectives in Iraq and the role of the British army based in Basra. The SF in Iraq was a small force of perhaps 150 men, including their support, whereas the US had deployed the vastly larger Delta Force. It was evident to the Director of Special Forces (DSF) in 2003 that his forces would only be effective if they aligned themselves with the US SF operation in Baghdad. However, after the calamity of the Fallujah operation in 2004 where the SF were directly involved in the Delta Force operation during which they lost five men early on, UK political and military support for the nature of the SF operation waned sharply. There followed a period of considerable in-fighting involving the SF senior command elements, the senior echelon at the Permanent Joint HQ (PJHQ) and the military and political elements of the MoD. It was only the dogged spirit and decisiveness of the Commander of the SAS Regiment at that time that eventually defeated the lack of will in London that led to the SF playing an effective role alongside Delta Force in defeating al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The book is in no small part about the influence that General McChrystal brought to bear on special operations on his arrival in Baghdad in 2006. Instead of the many independent small scale operations based on poor intelligence, it was McChrystal's design for joined-up intelligence-led operations with new tactics to directly confront the insurgents with a high intensity campaign that turned around the deteriorating situation in Iraq. It was into this new concept of operations and organisation that the British SF became integrated despite the political and cultural barriers that had to be overcome with the help of the British Deputy Commander to McChrystal.

This enabled the SAS to access the US intelligence that enabled their operations and despite the small size of their squadron and the need to support operations in Basra when required, the SAS carried out nightly raids to great effect along with their Delta Force colleagues. The main aim of these raids was to gather intelligence from the prisoners that were captured. It was in this area that the cultural differences showed as any prisoners were handed over to the US for interrogation. At the beginning prison where they were held and interrogated was 'black' and the conditions and methods used gave the British SF grave cause for concern. Over time these differences were resolved when the US acknowledged that significant changes were needed to

the facility.

The major operating difference was that the US were quick to call in air power to eliminate a target rather than risk lives to capture targets in difficult tactical circumstances. It was during this period the British SF scored two notable successes namely, their role in the finding and elimination of al-Zarqawi and the finding and release of Norman Kember.

This book shows clearly that McChrystal's concept of what he called 'industrial anti-terrorism' proved highly effective in reducing the level of violence in Iraq. It was undoubtedly helped in no small way by the US troop surge in 2007 in response to General Petraeus' argument and the fact that the successes against al-Qaeda were instrumental in persuading influential Iraqis to support the allies in growing numbers.

There is a theme running throughout this history of the SF in Iraq that reflects a lack of political will and military leadership to support the SF. It is the perceived wisdom that SF should by the nature of their business be used sparingly. However, it appears clear that those in senior military and political positions in UK were too remote from the realities of conditions in Iraq to recognise that this dictum did not apply in the increasingly violent circumstances. They evidently did not appreciate the serious effect that their 'red cards' and lack of vision was having on operations.

Undoubtedly, wherever there are differing rules of engagement affecting highly integrated forces, then problems will occur. However it is no answer just to ignore the situation or erect further barriers to operations. When two SAS troopers were captured there was unforgivable indecisiveness throughout the UK military and political chain of command over the plan to recover the troopers. When the need for timely action was evident and urgent requests for a decision from UK were being ignored, a local military decision was made in Basra to mount the operation that rescued both troopers.

There seems to be two important lessons for our political leaders that emerge from Urban's account. Firstly, if you make a political decision to go to war then you have to be prepared to prosecute that war to the fullest extent and not subsequently step back or become half-hearted in its support. Secondly, once the decision to go to war is made there is a need to recognise there still remains a large element of truth in what the Prussian General von Lossau said in 1815 that "politics ceased to have a function once war started".

Militarily it could be argued that the SF experience in Northern Ireland unjustifiably dominated SF thinking in the early days in Iraq and was found to be wanting once they were an integral part of McChrystal's well led and orchestrated concept of 'industrial anti-terrorism'. The success of this concept indicates that a violent and organised insurgency can in the right circumstances be overcome by military force.

The rather ignominious withdrawal from Basra undoubtedly diminished the British Army's standing with the US. It is perhaps true as Urban suggests that it was the highly professional and commendable performance of the British Special Forces that upheld our honour in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion; they certainly earned the respect of their US colleagues. Task

Force Black provides an excellent insight into the professionalism of the soldiers and marines who comprise our special forces as well as into the allied tactics employed to beat the insurgents. This book will serve well as a history of their bravery and dedication against al-Qaeda in Iraq.