

## How Dare You

*David Stirling*

*The Phoney Major: The Life, Times and Truth about the Founder of the SAS*

Gavin Mortimer

London: Constable, 2022, £25, h/b

## John Newsinger

On Sunday 30 October, the BBC broadcast the first episode of its much trumpeted drama series, *SAS Rogue Heroes*, with a screenplay by Steven Knight of *Peaky Blinders* fame. The six part series is based on Ben Macintyre's *SAS: Rogue Heroes*, a eulogistic account of the regiment's early years and celebration of David Stirling's genius. This was first published in 2016, with the additional statement that it was *The Authorized Wartime History from the Secret SAS Archives*. On the same evening, the BBC also put out all three episodes of the 2017 documentary series on the regiment, *SAS: Rogue Warriors*, also based on the Macintyre book.<sup>1</sup> Ben Macintyre is a columnist and associate editor at *The Times*; he is also author of the controversial *The Spy and the Traitor* (2018) in which he exhumed the discredited story that the (then safely dead Michael Foot) had been paid some £1,500 by the KGB in the 1960s. The revival of this story came in plenty of time for the 2019 general election and was guaranteed to excite the right-wing press.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> To be fair to the BBC, it also broadcast the devastating *Panorama* episode, *SAS Death Squads Exposed: A British War Crime?* on 12 July 2022, for which they came in for considerable criticism from the right. And at least they are not responsible for the truly appalling *Celebrity SAS: Who Dares Wins*.

<sup>2</sup> The right have never shown the slightest interest in the fact that Foot did actually take money from one extremely dubious source that would have certainly discredited him if it had got out at the time. While he was supposedly taking a paltry £1,500 off the KGB, Foot really had been taking money off his good friend Lord Beaverbrook. After the 1950 general election, via the *Daily Express*, Beaverbrook handed over some £3,000 to help keep the *Tribune* newspaper afloat. At the time, Foot was also living rent free in a cottage on Beaverbrook's Cherkley estate. Foot thought all this showed what a nice chap the reactionary and ferociously anti-Labour Beaverbrook was. But its more likely was that he saw the Labour Left as worth covertly supporting because it might help divide the Labour Party in the run-up to the 1951 general election. See my *Hope Lies in the Proles: George Orwell and the Left* (London: Pluto, 2018) pp. 103-104.

The TV series is, of course, a travesty, that has nothing whatsoever to do with the realities of the war in the Desert. Rather, it seems intended to put out the message that in times of crisis what the country really needs to have in charge are rogue, rule-breaking public schoolboys – i.e. the likes of David Stirling. in charge. They may be young privileged toffs, irresponsible, dishonest even, but nevertheless they are able to recognise that the establishment – in this case the military establishment – is actually an obstacle to success, is holding the country back, indeed putting it in danger. Men like this are what we need. Remind you of anyone? And does all this presage an attempt to revive the SAS as the right-wing cultural phenomenon it became during the Thatcher years? In the aftermath of the SAS storming of the Iranian Embassy in May 1980 and then the retaking of the Falklands in 1982, the Regiment came out of the shadows to be celebrated as the epitome of British masculinity, embodying everything that made Britain (and Margaret Thatcher) great. There was a deluge of memoirs, histories, survival and keep-fit handbooks and novels.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, in times of political difficulty and crisis, the Conservatives often turn to our glorious military past for sustenance, for distraction. Whether that will work today is another matter.

One problem with mobilising David Stirling as a heroic example for our times is Gavin Mortimer's new book, *David Stirling: The Phoney Major*. Mortimer is the author of a number of books on the wartime exploits of British Special Forces, going back to *Stirling's Men: The Inside Story of the SAS in WW2* published 2004. He was also a consultant on the 2017 BBC documentary series. Looking back on this earlier volume, he now describes it as having 'added to the hagiography'. But since then he has re-examined the Stirling legend. What helped was that, after Stirling's death in November 1990, 'the odd voice began to speak out, if not critically then at least with more honesty'. (p. 403) The result is *The Phoney Major*, a really quite devastating exposé, a required antidote to the Macintyre-Knight TV series. In this book, Stirling is revealed to have been an 'incompetent egomaniac', shamelessly taking credit for other men's successes and irresponsibly putting the lives of the men under his command in danger. (p. 404) The Stirling myth was founded on lies.

Mortimer starts off by insisting that the death of one of Stirling's fellow SAS officers, Paddy Mayne, in a car accident in December 1955, was absolutely crucial to the post-war creation of the David Stirling myth. Stirling was 'afraid' of Mayne, 'one of the few men who had seen through

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this, see my *Dangerous Men: The SAS and Popular Culture* (London: Pluto, 1997).

Stirling and recognised him for what he was'. Mayne was in a position to challenge the veracity of Stirling's self-aggrandising version of events; but once he was dead, the way was clear. Within weeks of Mayne's death, Stirling had approached the author Virginia Cowles, proposing that she write his biography. The result was *The Phantom Major* (1958), the book that launched the Stirling myth – transforming him 'into a dashing guerrilla legend and Mayne into a dark intemperate Irishman'. (p. 5) Cowles embraced Stirling's fantasy world in which he 'was fearless, swashbuckling, audacious and irreverent, a man admired by prime ministers, cherished by generals and feared by his enemies'. (p. 311) Mortimer sets out to put the record straight.<sup>4</sup>

One initial point to make about Stirling is that – inevitably – he was a toff. His father was Brigadier General Archibald Stirling, a former Conservative MP and Deputy Lieutenant of Perthshire, and his mother was Margaret Fraser, the daughter of the 13th Baron Lovat. He had attended Ampleforth public school and, despite lacking any academic distinction, went on, briefly, to Cambridge. This was someone for whom doors opened automatically, someone oozing entitlement. However he was also infected by that common upper class ailment: younger son syndrome. According to Stirling, getting his proposal to set up a raiding unit operating in the Western Desert involved him breaking into Middle East Headquarters in order to get a hearing. But this was nonsense; there was no break-in. Stirling made the story up. It was just so much 'Hollywood fantasy in which the truth was sacrificed for titillation'. (p. 311) The only way a young 24 year old lieutenant – especially one with no combat experience and a poor reputation – would be allowed to set up a military unit all of his own was if he had the right connections. That was how the British Army operated. According to Mortimer, it was Stirling's older brother, Bill, who was instrumental in getting the go-ahead for the formation of the Special Air Service (SAS). This was not something that Stirling could ever acknowledge.

Mortimer brings out the extent to which class and connections operated in the British Army in his brief account of No 8 Commando. It had been formed in July 1940, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Laycock, whose 'breeding was impeccable; born in 1907, he had

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<sup>4</sup> Mortimer argues that Mayne was the man Stirling wanted to be and that 'towards the end of his life, in his mind he became Paddy Mayne and Mayne became David Stirling'. Stirling always portrayed Mayne as driven by 'an inner torment, a depressive streak, a destructive fury that made him unstable, and unsuitable as a leader. Stirling was talking about himself'. (p. 384)

followed the well-worn path for young men of his caste: Eton, Sandhurst and a commission in the Royal Horse Guards (The Blues). He had a house in Mayfair and was a habitué of several clubs, one of which was White's'. Now most people are probably not aware of how important White's was for the British war effort, but many of No 8 Commando's officers were members, including no less than three who were also members of the House of Lords. Mortimer makes clear, however, there '(a) few officers selected for reasons other than membership of White's'. As for Stirling, 'indolent and temperamental', he joined the unit in November and early the next year they were shipped out to the Middle East. (pp. 59-60) The main interest of the officers during the voyage was gambling and they established their own casino on board their transport ship, with Randolph Churchill losing £400 in one night. (As Mortimer points out, in today's money that is over £22,000.) The Germans never stood a chance.

There is not the space here to catalogue the operations carried out by the newly formed SAS, but it is worth briefly considering why their exploits still exercise fascination today. The reason is quite simple really. Modern warfare conducted between conventional armies is very much a matter of the massive deployment of industrial might. What won the war in the Desert was not the heroics of the SAS, but rather the military superiority that the British built up. By the time of the battle of El Alamein, the Allies could put some 190,000 troops and a thousand tanks into the field against an Axis force of 116,000 troops and 540 tanks. Moreover, the Allies were in a position to replace any losses, while the Germans were not. But thinking in a practical way like this takes all the romance out of warfare; and this is the attraction of the myth of the SAS. They fought a Boys' Own War, turning the conflict into a dare-devil adventure – exciting, unconventional, fought by eccentric heroes rather than by the faceless cannon-fodder expended in the great set-piece battles. This was and is the attraction of the SAS and as Mortimer shows, as early as September 1942, the *Evening Standard* back in London carried an article by Randolph Churchill no less, extolling the achievements of the 'Phantom Major'. Other publications rushed to carry stories about this new hero, this 'Robin Hood in battledress'. (p. 181) He was even photographed by Cecil Beaton!

It is also worth putting the Desert War in a broader perspective at this point because, while the British were facing an Axis force that was 116,000 strong, on the Eastern Front the Red Army was fighting a German invasion force of some 3,700,000 troops. This is not to deny or denigrate the courage of the SAS, but rather to put their exploits into a

larger context. The altogether crass celebration of SAS heroics by such TV series as *SAS: Rogue Heroes* is pretty much an insult to all those other apparently more pedestrian soldiers, who actually won the Desert War.<sup>5</sup>

According to Mortimer, while some SAS raids were 'painstakingly planned and executed', these were the raids in which Paddy Mayne and Bill Fraser were involved. He goes on: 'many of Stirling's raids . . . were more redolent of a French farce than a special forces operation'. (p. 329) And then in January 1943, Stirling was captured by the Germans, having set up camp without posting any sentries. Once again, according to Mortimer, Mayne was 'no doubt relieved David was a prisoner and no longer in a position to endanger the lives of the men under his command'. (p. 235) Even after he had been captured, he still went head to head with his captors, both brave and foolhardy. When he was being transferred from the ship that had transported him to Sicily, he threw two of his guards into the sea. What a man! The only problem with this story is that 'Stirling was flown to Sicily'! (p. 230)<sup>6</sup> With Stirling gone, Paddy Mayne assumed command of the SAS; this apparently did not go down well in some toff circles, because he was after all 'Irish, middle class and the product of a grammar school. Not the sort of chap who should be commanding a regiment'. (p. 281)

After the War, Stirling moved to Rhodesia where he was involved in setting up the Capricorn Africa Society. This attempted to reconcile the white settlers across southern Africa with the emerging African elites and so preserve Britain's imperial position. In the end, this proved popular with neither the white settlers nor the African elites and the organisation had collapsed by 1956. He left Rhodesia after the publication of Cowles' *The Phantom Major* and returned to Britain where he became

'a habitu  of London's most exclusive casinos, clubs and restaurants. He liked to gamble at John Aspinall's Clermont Club with other members of the British aristocracy. "He was quiet, but menacing in a quiet sort of way", said Aspinall of Stirling. "With David you always knew he had strangled forty-one men and therefore it gave the man

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<sup>5</sup> My own father, for example, was an infantryman in the Desert. He never talked about the war, except to recount a few funny and macabre anecdotes. It was only after his death that I found out that in one engagement his unit had suffered over 50% casualties, killed or wounded.

<sup>6</sup> My personal favourite out of Stirling's many made-up stories is the one about how he personally convinced General De Gaulle of the case for the SAS. The General was, like so many others, apparently 'charmed . . . by Stirling's audacity', except that the story was 'a pack of lies. De Gaulle never met Stirling.' (p. 330)

an aura. One wondered how many throats he had slit.” (p. 331)

To be fair, Aspinall was also an admirer of Adolf Hitler! And as for Stirling, when he was not gambling and drinking, he was ‘an old shooting buddy of the royal family’.<sup>7</sup>

Stirling was involved in various mercenary enterprises, recruiting ex-SAS soldiers and others for activities the Foreign Office wanted carried out with maximum deniability. He played an important role in setting up the mercenary operation assisting the Islamist rebels fighting against the secular nationalist government of Abdullah al-Sallal in the Yemen that was allied with the Egyptians. This operation, covertly supported by the British government, was financed by the Saudis who paid ‘with gold bullion’.<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting here that the British had no problem whatsoever supporting Islamist rebels against a secular government! He was also involved in an abortive attempt to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. And he set up one of the first modern private military companies in 1967, Watchguard International, indicating that mercenary outfits were now once again regarded as legitimate enterprises. They have, of course, since proliferated worldwide.

Most controversial, however, was Stirling’s involvement in the right-wing furore that followed the period of the 1972 miners strike, through the 1974 miners strike, the election of Harold Wilson’s Labour government and beyond. In 1974 he established Great Britain 75 (GB75), an organisation intended to fight the threat from the Left and ready to organise strike-breaking if and when there was a General Strike and attempted Communist takeover. The intention was to have a volunteer force ready in place throughout the country that would be able to keep ‘essential services’ running and help maintain ‘law and order’. *Peace News* famously exposed this and Stirling’s GB75 organisation was denounced by Roy Mason as ‘near fascist’. He was to deny any such links, but as Mortimer points out, at the time, he

‘was in communication with the notorious French far-right agitator Pierre Sergent, a veteran of the Indochina War, who. . . . had been a member of the vicious terrorist Secret Army Organisation (OAS) that sought to overthrow President de Gaulle . . . . He would later become an MP in Jean-Marie Le Pen’s National Front party’. (p. 337).

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<sup>7</sup> Richard J Aldrich and Rory Cormac, *The Secret Royals: Spying and the Crown from Victoria to Diana* (London: Atlantic Books, 2021), p. 530

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Dorrill, *MI6: Fifty Years of Special Operations* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001) p. 685

In the event, Stirling does seem to have taken steps to distance himself from the far right and from the activities of the likes of General Sir Walter Walker. He abandoned his strike-breaking initiative in favour of working inside the trade unions in order to strengthen the right. GB75 was closed down and he joined the efforts of Frank Nodes of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) at setting up the Movement for True Industrial Democracy (TRUEMID) – an organisation working principally inside the ETU, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) and the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA). As Ramsay and Dorril observed: ‘for all his grandiose plans, Stirling ended up playing no more than the traditional role of financier to the right in the trade unions’.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently the right-wing leadership of the by then Electrical, Electronic, Telecommunications and Plumbing Union (EETPU) played a part in Margaret Thatcher’s defeat of the miners in 1985, assisting the breakaway scab union, the Union of Democratic Miners (UDM). They also helped Rupert Murdoch defeat the print unions in the 1986 Wapping dispute by actually providing a scab workforce. They did not need any help from David Stirling in these activities.<sup>10</sup>

There is obviously more we could usefully know about Stirling’s post-war activities, but for the moment, Mortimer has written the standard biography of the man, demolishing the myths with which he surrounded himself.

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*His latest book is Chosen by God:*

*Donald Trump, the Christian Right and American Capitalism,  
published by Bookmarks. <<https://bookmarksbookshop.co.uk/>>*

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Dorril and Robin Ramsay, *Smear: Wilson and the Secret State* (London: Fourth Estate, 1992) p. 268. He apparently still entertained the idea of attempting to psychologically destabilising the Wilson government by flooding the lower floors of the House of Commons with sewage from the Thames. See p. 285.

<sup>10</sup> When he was interviewed for the BBC documentary series ‘True Spies’, David Hart stated that he had paid for ‘the leaders of [the] working miners’ to be provided with protection by ‘private sector, mostly ex-SAS people’. *If* what Hart claimed happened really did happen – and we have nothing more on this than his word – then it’s *conceivable* that David Stirling would have been involved at some level. However, that would have been as nothing, in terms of breaking the NUM strike, as the interference from MI5 and GCHQ. For Hart’s claim re. ex-SAS protection, see page 18 of the programme’s transcript, available on the Undercover Policing Inquiry website at: <<https://www.ucpi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/UCPI0000034224.pdf>>. For details of how big the secret state’s campaign to break the miner’s strike was, see *The Enemy Within: The Secret War Against the Miners*, by Seumas Milne (London: Verso, 2004)

