

# Commando: On The Front Line

**ITV's eight-part series** tracks 50 young men all hoping to be awarded the coveted 'Green Beret' of a Royal Marine Commando. The eight-month training regime is widely recognised as the most demanding, both physically and mentally, of all military training programmes.

Director/cameraman, Chris Terrill, records the hopes, aspirations and fears as the recruits try to make the grade. Only a handful will succeed. Chris then follows those proud Green Beret wearers to Afghanistan on their first tour of active service to see if their months of gruelling training really did prepare them for life on the front line.

This factsheet provides information about the Royal Marines and their long, distinguished history, and has details about how you can follow in the footsteps of the recruits. It contains extracts of an interview with Chris Terrill about the making of the series and has suggested books, websites and museums that can tell you more.



## About

**The Royal Marines** are the amphibious (from sea onto land) fighting force of the Royal Navy. Their motto is *Per Mare Per Terram* (by sea and by land) and the fact that they will 'go anywhere' has

been their founding principle from their earliest history.



Royal Marine Commandos are always ready at a moment's notice to support the UK's military operations, or to carry out peacekeeping duties, provide disaster relief and help police the seas. They can be sent anywhere in the world.

Commandos are part of the Royal Navy's 3 Commando Brigade which is made up of three commando units - 40 Commando (based in Taunton), 42 Commando (Plymouth) and 45 Commando (Arbroath). Each commando unit consists of about 700 men on permanent alert.

At the head of 3 Commando Brigade is Command Company. Command Company is responsible for command, control, communications, computation, intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance - known in the business as C4ISR. It does this using the very latest technologies, including Electronic Warfare and Psychological

Operations, in the ever-growing battle over information security and surveillance.

The other units are organised to enable Commandos to better meet these challenges through logistics, close combat and fire support.

Currently, Royal Marine Commandos are serving all around the world including in Afghanistan and Iraq.



*ITV pictures*

## History

The Royal Marines have a long and distinguished history. They are one of Britain's oldest military units dating back to 1664 when 1200 soldiers were recruited to the Admiral's fleet. These soldiers were also trained as seamen and became part of each serving warship.

The early Marines had various jobs. They were the infantrymen for naval landing parties and the snipers in the main troops. They were also used to prevent mutiny and guard the hatches to stop men fleeing below deck in the heat of battle.

Royal Marines fought in the Dutch wars but when William of Orange and Mary came to the throne they were disbanded. There continued a history of disbanding and coming together until the siege of Gibraltar in 1704 when Royal Marines held Gibraltar against the French and the Spanish for eight months. The Gibraltar Battle Honour is still carried on the Royal Marine Colours (flags) in memory of this epic defence.

After the siege of Gibraltar, the Royal Marines were firmly established. As long as Britain was a maritime power with a fleet then Marines would be needed to defend King and country.

Over the years their numbers grew and they became expert in amphibious warfare, landing from ships and fighting on the land. By the time of the Second World War there were over 15,000 Royal Marines.

In May 1940 the British Army were being pushed back over the land to the beaches of Dunkirk. A massive beach evacuation was required. The time for commando soldiers had arrived.



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Winston Churchill summed up the duties of these new commando units in two letters to his Chiefs-of-Staff. "We should immediately set to work to organise small, self-contained, thoroughly equipped raiding units," said his first letter. The second called for: "specially trained troops of the hunter class who can develop a reign of terror down the enemy coast."

Yet, despite the Royal Navy's well-recognised expertise in amphibious warfare the early commando units were drawn from the Army. It wasn't until Valentine's Day in 1942 that the first Royal Navy Commando unit was formed.

Five Royal Marine Commando units took part in the D-Day landings, the largest amphibious assault in history, when

nearly two-thirds of the landing craft were manned by Royal Marines. At the end of the Second World War, Army Commandos were disbanded and the commando role was assigned exclusively to the Royal Marines.

In the ensuing years, Royal Marine Commandos have been deployed on active duties across the globe in every year except 1968, including in Northern Ireland, the Falklands, the First Gulf War, the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq. The fact that they can deploy very quickly has resulted in them being called upon to fight in all manner of extreme environments, from deserts to arctic climates and mountains to jungles.

## Commando 21

In 2003 the Royal Marine Commandos were reorganised for the first time for half a century. The Cold War was over but an eerie new war had begun - one that couldn't be won by shipping vastly superior equipment and soldiers to a trouble-spot and relying on their might. The combating of terrorist activities relies much more on intelligence and specialist forces operating in very unpredictable territory - a new order was needed.

The Royal Marine Commandos were reorganised around a brand new logo. The reorganisation created the Command Unit and Logistics Support Unit but also gave each Commando Unit an extra fighting company.



They also got a new injection of specialist equipment including modern ships and aircraft, a greater range of weapons, and vehicles like the all-terrain armoured *Viking* vehicle. ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target, Acquisition and Reconnaissance) assets are also being modernised. All will be in place by 2010.



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## The job

To train as a Royal Marine Commando takes a particular type of person. Not only do you have to be extremely fit but you also have to have a particular attitude and mindset. Commandos (or 'Bootnecks') pride themselves on a shared sense of humour that bonds them together. They enjoy telling stories (or 'spinning dits'), often at their own expense. They have a dit for every occasion. "Once a Marine, always a Marine," so the saying goes - and with good reason. Royal Marines are incredibly loyal and long after they have left active service continue to help each other out.

The Royal Navy defines the 'Commando Spirit' as being:

- courage
- determination
- unselfishness
- and cheerfulness in the face of adversity.

These are combined with the core group values to equal the 'Commando Ethos'.

- adaptability
- commando humour
- fortitude
- humility
- professional standards
- unity.

'Commando humour' is the hardest to define but successful Royal Marines develop it during commando training and it stays with them for the rest of their lives - the ability to see the funny side even in times of adversity.

Most newly trained recruits start as riflemen. This involves serving in:

- A Commando unit on standby to respond to emergencies around the world as part of the government's Joint Rapid Reaction Force
- The Fleet Protection Group, guarding UK nuclear weapons.
- A Fleet Standby Rifle Troop, trained to board ships at sea.

After about a year and a half commandos are able to train for specialist areas, ranging from aircrewman to chef, assault engineer to clerk. There is a full range of career profiles on the Royal Navy website (see Further information).



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## Joining

To become a Royal Marine Commando you must be male and a British citizen. Women cannot become Royal Marine Commandos. You do not need any formal qualifications. Instead you must pass the Royal Navy selection process. This includes:

- An aptitude tests for reasoning, English language, numeracy and mechanical comprehension.
- An interview and medical check
- A fitness test - a 2.4km (1.5-mile) run on a treadmill that you have to finish in 10 minutes and 45 seconds.
- The Potential Royal Marine Course (PRMC) which includes two and a half days of physical exercises and a personal interview.

Royal Marines Commandos serve open engagements, which last 22 years. This can be extended up to the age of 55. You will usually be able to give 12 months' notice if you wish to leave after serving at least three years.

To become an Officer, the minimum entry requirements are three GCSEs (A-C) or five S grades (1-3) including English language and mathematics and two A levels or three H grades. Applicants with alternative qualifications are considered on their individual merits.

If you are considering a career in the Corps you will be expected to attend a three-day assessment at the Commando Training Centre at Lympstone.

Whether you are attending the Potential Royal Marine Course (PRMC) or the Potential Officer Course (POC), you will be tested both physically and mentally to see if you have what it takes to successfully complete the full thirty-two weeks of commando training.

For more information see the Learn Direct [Royal Marine Commando](#) job profile. ([www.learndirect-advice.co.uk](http://www.learndirect-advice.co.uk))

There is also a CD Rom and audio guide to becoming a [Royal Marine Commando](#), which costs £9.99 including postage and packing, from How 2. ([www.how2become.co.uk/royalmarines.htm](http://www.how2become.co.uk/royalmarines.htm))



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## Training

All training takes place at the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines in Lympstone, Devon which traces its history back to 1939. An average, 1,200 recruits and 400 potential officers pass through its doors every year. Another 2,000 potential recruits go there but don't make it to full training.

Training is divided into six modules, beginning with the Initial Training (nine-weeks) and ending with the King's Squad Pass Out Week.

At the beginning of week 26 the recruits who have made it this far attempt the 6 Mile Speed March. This is a six-mile course, carrying full fighting order (30lbs) and weapon at a pace of 10 minutes per mile (60 minutes in total). Successful recruits are awarded the 'Cap Comforter' which means they are allowed to begin the Commando Phase of training.

Before they complete the Commando Phase, recruits have to pass a series of arduous and daunting tests all carrying full fighting order (30lb).

### The Endurance Course

Starting early in the morning trainees complete a two-mile obstacle course and then run four miles back to Lympstone. Back at camp they then need to achieve six out of ten shots on the rifle range. Time: 73 minutes.

### The Tarzan Assault Course

The Tarzan course test their aerial confidence, starting with a death slide and including a obstacle course high up in the trees. It ends when the recruit reaches the top of the 30ft assault wall.

Time: Recruits 13 minutes.



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### The Nine Mile Speed March

A 'speed' march of nine miles (10 minutes per mile) as a squad or troop. Time: 90 minutes.

### The 30 Mile March

The final 30-mile 'yomp' across Dartmoor carrying full fighting order, safety equipment and weapon in teams. Time: 8 hours.

Only those recruits that pass all the commando tests are then awarded the precious Green Beret at the 'King's Squad' Passing Out.

## Behind the scenes

Commando: On The Front Line was filmed over a 12 month-period by award winning director/cameraman Chris Terrill who not only followed the 50 raw recruits of 924 Troop, he also trained alongside them. He underwent the rigorous regime, pushing both body and mind to their very limit during the gruelling commando tests. Then, after winning his own honorary Green Beret, Terrill followed the successful few onto the front line in the Helmand region of Afghanistan and right into the teeth of battle.



In this interview he talks about his motivations and experiences.

**Why was it important to you to train alongside the recruits?**

'I wanted to bring people's attention to the extraordinary nature of the Royal Marine Commandos and to do it in a very different and very personal way.

'The way I work as a trained anthropologist is to live with people, to share their lives and to participate with them until I am accepted and trusted. I realised that the only way I could do this with the Royal Marines was to get well and truly stuck into their training regime. I had to prove myself in their terms. I knew I had to attempt the gruelling commando tests.'

**Do you think you were treated differently to the rest of the recruits?**

'I didn't have to call anybody 'Sir' and everybody of all ranks called me Chris, but I still had to take my punishments! I remember very, very well one day when Jon Stratford, the PTI [Physical Training Instructor] in charge, was hauling the recruits across the coals for some transgression. As one of their number I was hauled over with them. I suffered the mud run with them and I got drunk with them: it was very important for me to join in every experience - the good and the bad, the painful and the enjoyable and the safe and the dangerous...'

**Did the recruits totally accept you as a fellow recruit and forget you were carrying a camera?**

'They could see I was there with the camera and I was sometimes there at embarrassing times like when they were being shouted at, scolded or beasted, but I know that they not only accepted me, but appreciated what I was doing. They understood it and the reasons why I was doing it.'

**You followed young Bertie Kerr onto the front line in Afghanistan. At what point did you realise that you were to face your own mortality?**

'I was very excited about going to the front line. But the reality of what I was about to face came home when I had to sit down and write what are called my "death letters." These are letters to my loved ones only to be read in the event of my being killed. Having to write to people that you love as if you're dead is not easy and can be extremely upsetting. That's when it hit me that this was not just another filming adventure; this was a bit different.'

**Which troop you were embedded within and where they were deployed:**

'I went out to a place called Kijaki, where the Taliban were trying to gain control of the biggest dam in Afghanistan. I joined 11 Troop of M Company, which is part of 42 Commando who were there to suppress the insurgency and protect the dam from Taliban attack.'

'When I started going out on patrols it was bit like being in a feature film. But when the bullets started to fly it suddenly got very real - especially when they whizzed past your ears.'

'But you don't have time to be particularly frightened because adrenaline kicks in and you do what you have to do. I had a job to do and I had my mind on that, just as the lads had a job to do. The training just kicks in.'

## Further information

### Museums

The National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, London, celebrates Britain's naval history, including hands-on exhibitions.

[www.nmm.ac.uk](http://www.nmm.ac.uk)  
020 8312 6565

Commando Country is an exhibition currently on at the National War Museum Scotland at Edinburgh Castle that illustrates the key role Scotland played in the formation of Commando infantrymen.

[www.nms.ac.uk/commandocountry\\_1.aspx](http://www.nms.ac.uk/commandocountry_1.aspx)  
0131 247 4413

The Royal Marines Museum in Portsmouth, Hampshire tells the story of the commandos from their earliest history to the present day.

[www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk](http://www.royalmarinesmuseum.co.uk)  
023 9281 9385

The Royal Naval Museum in Portsmouth tells the history of the Navy from the time of King Alfred.

[www.royalnavalmuseum.org](http://www.royalnavalmuseum.org)  
023 9272 7562

### Websites

The Royal Navy website has more on the history and traditions of commandos, as well as information about the gruelling training and how you can join.

[www.royal-navy.mod.uk](http://www.royal-navy.mod.uk)

Elite forces has more information about the commandos' structure and units.

[www.eliteukforces.info/royal-marines/](http://www.eliteukforces.info/royal-marines/)

Once a Marine is an information and networking website written by a former serving marine.

[www.onceamarinealwaysamarine.co.uk](http://www.onceamarinealwaysamarine.co.uk)

### Reading

*By land and by sea: The story of the Royal Marine Commandos* by Robin Neillands

*Commando: Winning the Green Beret* by Hugh McManners

*The Making of a Royal Marines Commando* by Nigel Foster

*Royal Marine Commandos: The Inside Story of a Force for the Future* by John Parker

### Organisations

The Royal Marines' Association was formed to help Royal Marines find jobs after World War II. It still provides support and to former marines and helps people stay in touch.

[www.royalmarinesassociation.org.uk](http://www.royalmarinesassociation.org.uk)  
023 9265 1519

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[www.redpencilprojects.co.uk](http://www.redpencilprojects.co.uk)

