

The Cider Boys

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THE 'CIDER BOYS' GET READY FOR AFGHANISTAN

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This morning there was an unusual statement for Radio 4 breakfast news, Brigadier Roger Lane, commanding officer of 3 Commando Brigade, speaking from Oman, counselled great caution about Afghanistan and made the point that he was not going to commit his troops until there was much better intelligence. In fact intelligence on the ground is very thin indeed. To whom exactly was he addressing this broadcast I wonder? Was it to his political superiors or was it to the Pentagon who might just like to use other country's more specialised troops or was it to the British public who are beginning to question the wisdom of getting involved in an unpredictable ground war on the coat tails of a "Go get 'em, String 'em High" President Bush who wants an international posse and a "Texas style" lynching. The inability of US helicopters to save Abdul Haq brings it home that satellite phones can't always save you in the gorges and ravines of the Hindu Kush. Hindu Kush means "Hindu Killer", and this refers just to the climate, altitude and terrain, add to this the descendants of Ghengis Khan and Tamurlaine combined with modern weapons and you have a recipe for disaster. Abdul Haq held many of the political cards for a peaceful solution. The fact that he was betrayed does not bode well for future negotiations on the ground or a post war coalition linked to the old King, Mohammed Zahir Shah.

At first the use of the marines might seem a strange choice. Afghanistan has no seaboard and no port. Cockleshell heroes will have to look elsewhere, unless of course river-beds are used for easy access for snatch squads. But most of the river-beds in the south are dried up until the snows melt and then they become torrents. Training in Arctic warfare will of course help but the snow here is often skimpy and powdery. Avalanches in the steep sided valleys are common. The snow does not compact down well and skiing on it can be very difficult. A very different outlook to the sands of Oman and the warm waters of the Gulf.

"It all comes down to local intelligence" as my great uncle Professor Kenneth Codrington once said. Born in 1900 he had been brought up on the North West Frontier and being born in a remote hill station he had a Pathan wet nurse, the wife of an Indian Officer. And he remained like a blood brother to the family all his life. Later as an archaeologist he had run a spy network in Afghanistan for British Intelligence in 1940-42. He was also "naval attaché" in Kabul which at the time seemed strange, Afghanistan having no navy, but his main job was to keep an eye on the German spies who, since the First World War were trying to incite revolt on the frontier. Uncle "Kenny" as we knew him also translated Afghan Sufi Poetry and for a short while tutored the "man who would be King" Daoud who deposed the present King in Exile and was himself deposed. He loved the country very deeply and spoke several of its languages. But it was not all a bed of roses. A century earlier his grandfather had died of wounds outside Herat.

Intelligence comes in many shapes and forms, and intelligence on the ground in this kind of war is vital and this comes down to maps and people.

In 1974 I myself walked in a very remote part of North Eastern Afghanistan called Badakhshan, where the Northern Alliance are now holed up and all across Nuristan which reaches down to the Pakistani border. The only British maps I could get from the Ministry of Defence were from the nineteen forties but were probably surveyed in the eighteen fifties. Large sections of the main mountain range were white, not from snow but from the fact that they had not been surveyed on the ground. Some valleys went the wrong direction. Add to this the American Air Maps shot from 30,000 ft with very few villages marked and you can easily make mistakes.

So remote was this region of Nuristan that it had only been converted to Islam in 1896. Luckily a secret British Intelligence Mission had been in 1885 and this was only accomplished by four army officers in heavy disguise. Colonel Lockhart, Colonel Woodthorpe, Captain Barrow and Surgeon Giles. Their report was never published and to this day, like many other reports gathers dust in the archives. Many of the unsung heroes were of course the Indians in British employ who secretly paced out the maps and took with them surreptitious surveying instruments. Uncle Kenny knew Kipling quite well and Kipling once told him that the real characters of Kim were far more eccentric than those he used in the book.

But the sort of intelligence needed today on the ground is very hard to come by. The old school whose knowledge we

sadly lack, are alas no longer with us. They knew exactly how to handle these very delicate situations often without recourse to troops. They knew the languages intimately and the land, like the back of their hand. The Marines could however do worse than brush up their Pashtu. An excellent book to consult is 'The Grammar of The Pashto' by Dr. Ernest Trumpp, published by Tubingen University in 1873. It has such classic lines as :

'the throat of every man is moist by his own spittle' and
'The world is a mangy goat, what use is there in keeping her'
'Come quick, O Physician, otherwise I die'.

Brigadier Lane is right to counsel caution.