



## Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the Secret Special Forces War in Iraq

By Mark Urban

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Facing defeat, the Coalition waged a hidden war within a war. Major-General Stan McChrystal devised a campaign fusing special forces, aircraft, and the latest surveillance technology with the aim of taking down the enemy faster than it could regenerate. Guided by intelligence, British and American special forces conducted a relentless onslaught, night after night targeting al-Qaeda and other insurgent groups.

*Task Force Black* reveals not only the intensity of the secret fight that turned the tide in Baghdad but the rivalries and personal battles that had to be overcome along the way. Incisive, dramatic, exceptionally revealing, the war in Iraq cannot be understood without this book.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"This is an essential record of a remarkable military period. Too often Special Forces operations are shrouded in uncontextual mystery, rendering many works about them speculative homoerotic hagiographies. Urban is immune to such nonsense."

--Sam Kiley, *The Times* (London)

"Urban's book catches the tensions which surfaced between various branches of the military and government departments.... what it does do is give human faces to a bunch of remarkable men."

--*The Independent*

#### About the Author

MARK URBAN is Diplomatic and Defense Editor of the BBC's *Newsnight*. He has covered many of the world's conflicts during the past twenty-five years, including the Iraq campaign that began in 2003. He lives in London.

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#### TASK FORCE BLACK (Chapter 1) Mission Paradoxical

Early in April 2003 an RAF Chinook flew through the darkness towards Baghdad. It had set out from a remote airstrip in western Iraq and was heading for the city's airport. The pilots, highly trained special forces aircrew, scanned the land below through night-vision goggles, trying hard to keep low while racing over a desert so featureless that those who misjudged their height could easily fly into the ground.

BIAP (Baghdad International Airport) was the objective for one of the US armoured brigades that had sped up from Kuwait. But although the armour had reached it, the place was far from secure. Mortar rounds dropped in as the capital of Iraq tottered between decades of authoritarian rule and its uncertain future. The US 3rd Division's race to the capital had been part of the overt military campaign. It came up from the south, accompanied by dozens of embedded reporters. The RAF Chinook, on the other hand, was arriving from a different point of the compass and had been part of an effort that was rarely talked about publicly.

A few minutes out from their destination, the passengers in the British helicopter started to glimpse the sprawl below. Tracer fire from heavy machine guns snaked into the sky, fires were visible across the city and the desert too. Disbanded Republican Guards, Fedayeen Ba'athist irregulars, and the criminals let flooding out of the jails were vying for the streets, turning the city into a cauldron of violence.

The Chinook came thumping over the apron, its twin rotors producing a huge cloud of dust as it came close to the ground. Taxiing to a halt, the passengers glimpsed more signs of America's eviction of Saddam Hussein. A couple of shot-up Iraqi Airways aircraft, one a Boeing 727 with its tail jutting awkwardly into the air could be seen in the darkness. As one of the early British arrivals recalls, 'The airport was a defensive perimeter under blackout conditions, with people in shellscrapes and Bradleys in defensive positions.'

The Americans were taking Baghdad. It wasn't a matter of marching straight in but a process of probing attacks. The airport had already served as the launching point for several thunder runs. These were strong armoured reconnaissance missions to test the mettle of those who had vowed to turn the city into a new Stalingrad. Although many Iraqis emerged to take pot shots at the passing tanks, the level of resistance was far less than the Americans, who had planned for 120 days of fighting, had feared. But as the Iraqi capacity for organised violence ebbed away, disorder was breaking out. Well-to-do businessmen were hauled from their cars and dispatched with a shot to the head by those who wanted their wheels. Looters carried off the contents of museums, Ba'ath party offices and even hospitals. The settling of scores was beginning too: between those who had been oppressed and the overlords who had trodden them down without mercy. The Sunni minority, and in particular members of Saddam's tribe, the Tikritis, braced themselves for payback from the Shia majority and the Kurds too. Too many had been tortured, bombed or killed for the thing to pass without bloodletting.

Out of the British Chinook stepped a group of officers with a handful of civilians and some well-armed SAS troops. One of the civilians on board, a young MI6 officer who had not been to war before, questioned whether the machine-gun fire they had seen had been evidence of celebrations. 'That's one celebration you don't want to be on the end of,' quipped a special forces veteran.

Among the party was Brigadier Graeme Lamb, Director of Special Forces (DSF). Lean and obsessively fit for a man of forty-nine, Lamb had started his military career in the Queen's Own Highlanders. The product of a Spartan Scottish boarding school, he had been reared to shun the rat race and crave adrenalin. He had commanded a squadron in the SAS and later, his regiment of Highlanders. Having experienced command at these levels, Lamb's ambition was almost spent. Friends say he never thought of himself as a general, and had assumed that he would leave the army as a colonel. But Lamb's superiors had other ideas. They had detected that, with his reputation for toughness, easy way with soldiers and special-forces mystique, he was a man whose services needed to be retained. He was one of the few people in the army with the self-confidence, as well as the respect of the old sweats of the SAS, to carry off the job of Director of Special Forces. The brigadier was given to blasphemous plain speaking, and his dismissal of overcomplicated ideas as 'bollocks' made some think of him as anti-intellectual. But as those who knew Lamb would attest, what he always sought was clarity, robustness and the avoidance of bullshit.

Not long after his appointment as DSF, the world had been shaken by al-Qaeda's attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Summoned to a weekend meeting to brief Tony Blair at Chequers, Lamb surprised the Prime Minister by turning up wearing Bart Simpson socks. As Blair listened, his eyes occasionally turned to the brigadier's ankles. Lamb laid out the ways in which the UK special forces might support the American effort in Afghanistan swiftly and effectively. The briefing carried the same message as his socks: 'no problemo'. He had made his mark with the Prime Minister, whose own world view had been altered dramatically by 9/11. Although the invasion of Iraq would involve much larger conventional forces than the toppling of the Taleban, that early meeting at Chequers had defined a relationship; Blair would take a personal interest in special forces throughout the Iraq campaign.

As DSF, Lamb had overall responsibility for the various regiments comprising Britain's military elite: the regular and two reserve regiments of Special Air Service; the Royal Marines Special Boat Service; a specialist surveillance unit; and the signallers who supported these forces on operations. The overthrow of Saddam had involved a big military operation of 'shock and awe' air strikes, divisions racing to Baghdad and the thunder runs that had sealed the city's fate. Britain's contribution, exceeding forty thousand servicemen and women, had taken southern Iraq, including the ancient port city of Basra. But Brigadier Lamb's role in this business was part of a different war – the mobilisation of hundreds of special forces troops for a secret campaign codenamed Operation ROW.

In essence Operation ROW was Britain's part of a larger Coalition effort designed to take large parts of the west and north of the country. This would pin down several Iraqi divisions, stopping Saddam either reinforcing his effort against the main invasion, from the south, or thickening Baghdad's defences. The mission of the US, UK and Australian special operators moving in from the west and north was thus to take on entire Iraqi divisions by applying a level of force out of all proportion to their numbers, a task they took on with alacrity. The seizure of large tracts of Iraq – perhaps one third of the country – bordering Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey by two special operations task forces totalling a couple of thousand men required them to advance with relentless aggression. With the offensive about to start, and a couple of weeks before his own arrival in Baghdad, Lamb had sent a final message to the UK special forces about to enter battle. Urging them forward, he signed off, 'Remember, the faint-hearted never fucked a pig!' This soldierly exhortation became something of a catchphrase among the special operators.

Milling about at Baghdad airport, the members of D Squadron of the SAS exchanged greetings with Lamb and the others who had come in on the Chinook. It was a chance to hear news of other elements of the covert offensive. The troopers who had flown in were just a few dozen who had set off from another Middle Eastern country on 19 March. A few of their D Squadron mates were down south as part of an SAS and intelligence team that had been detached to support the advance of the UK's 1st Armoured Division. This team infiltrated the city of Basra, where they brought in strikes against the local Ba'athist leadership. Apart from that small band, however, the majority of Britain's special forces had been part of joint Coalition special ops task forces that were supposed to take the place of divisions that would ideally have attacked from the north and west, but which political sensitivities had made impossible. While the rulers of certain countries did not want to risk the wrath of the Arab street by allowing overt movements of US troops through their ports towards Iraq, they had been prepared to accede to the launching of highly secret Coalition attacks from their territory. It was a typical double-dealing Middle Eastern approach, but the commanders of the UK and US special operations forces were used to that from years of operating in the region.

Most of the British – including B Squadron of the SAS – had come from the west. This force, including supporting aircraft, Royal Marines and RAF Regiment soldiers, had been limited because of regional nervousness about showing support for President Bush's war. B Squadron drove into the western Iraqi desert in its modified SAS Land Rovers festooned with weapons, looking for ballistic missile launchers along the way. They were still out in the desert when Lamb arrived in Baghdad. Meanwhile, most of D Squadron had been used as a heliborne force in a set-piece operation to seize a desert airfield before pushing on to the Iraqi capital.

Whereas the SAS had fought mainly in the west, the SBS had joined an American-led taskforce coming from the north. Because of the traditional rivalry between the special forces organisations, by the time the SAS reached the airport there was already much noisy comment ...

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