

SPECIAL FORCES CLUB 40TH ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS
GIVEN BY SIR PATRICK LEIGH-FERMOR

When our President first telephoned to Greece and suggested that I should have the great honour of saying a 'few words' on this important anniversary, I was rather alarmed; and, for several nights afterwards, between sleeping and waking, I had some nightmarish visions, curiously entangled with the adjuncts and impedimenta of SOE. I saw myself sneaking into a Special Forces Club whose appearance and atmosphere had subtly but completely changed from the snug and welcoming haven we all know: it was entirely different, too from the Royal and Ducal precincts where we are feasting tonight. The place had become a daunting and shadowy Valhalla, a club only fit for primordial heroes to drink in, and it was guarded by ogreish janitors. I sneaked in with trepidation, almost forgetting the password as I did so, leaving my coat in a grim cloak-and-dagger room and, at last, with misgiving found my place at a very unusual dining table with a commando-knife on one side of my place, a gelignite plunger on the other and a stick of plastic instead of a roll. The menu was written on a one-time pad in disappearing ink and just as well perhaps; because, between dagger and plunger lay an unappetising Teller mine with limpets and clams to follow..... The cocktails were all Molotoff; the wine glasses were abrim with hair-dye and knock-out drops; and instead of polished wood or peerless napiery, the dolefully groaning board was partly laid with old and tattered parachute material and partly with the blown-up maps of enemy-occupied territory that used to be sewn into the pre-infiltration outfits of agents about to be dropped in the dark.....But worse was to come. An intimidating assembly of nightmare veterans were gathered and, as they subsided into their chairs round the eerie banquet, all the cutlery, sinister enough already, started to shift and gravitate in a hair-raising, concerted and centrifugal movement: there was a clinking and clattering. What on earth was going on? Suddenly revelation descended: everything metallic on the table had come simultaneously under siege from the scores of escape-compasses transformed into magnetic trouser-buttons as the guests sat down.....And it is only now, gazing round at fellow-members and seeing that they are not nightmare veterans at all, but friendly contemporaries, a few of them a bit older and a great many very much younger than I, that these early misgivings are exorcized. There was nothing to be alarmed about at all.

Nevertheless, a fortieth anniversary is a venerable milestone in the life of a club – how pleased Sir Colin Gubbins would be if he could float down into our midst – and the extraordinary thing about this particular lapse of time is that it has

passed so quickly. If, without warning, we were asked when, as demobilized bachelors, we had actually joined, many of us might thoughtlessly say 'Oh, ten years ago – fifteen perhaps' – and only then remember that the Club dates from the end of the War, and that the time lapse is only a decade short of half a century. Naturally, some of the older foundation members are great-grandparents by now; but, as the membership, most wisely and joyfully, has long since been expanded to include sister-services, it is perfectly possible for, say, an SAS member not even born when the Club began to be the father of a thriving family - even a grandfather, if he has got a move on. So, counting from oldest founding-father to youngest recruit, we can lay claim to half a dozen generations and, heredity being what it is, the future of the Club is full of promise.

On anniversaries like this, the thoughts of members stricken in years automatically wing back to the places that were most important to them during the War. We each have our own; mine happens to be Crete; and not Crete only, but three different men on that island, two of them English and one Greek. None of them are members here; for two of them the Club wasn't founded early enough; and the third never came to England; but so representative of the spirit of the Club are all three that they must surely be posthumous honorary members.

The first is John Pendlebury. He had been a brilliant classical scholar at Winchester and Cambridge and, for the last few years, he had been Sir Arthur Evans's right-hand archaeologist in Crete: he knew the whole island backwards and loved the islanders as they loved him. He spoke their dialects, knew all their songs, could walk the fleetest of them off their feet over those merciless ranges and drink them all under the table afterwards. It was largely owing to his arming and training of guerillas in the crucial months before the battle, that those of us who returned to the island after it was lost were spared the political tangles that became the scourge of the rest of occupied Europe. How well I remember him outside Herakleion, on the second day of the German parachute invasion! His florid handsome face with its single sparkling eye – he had lost the other in a youthful mishap – his slung guerilla-rifle and bandolier and his famous sword-stick brought a stimulating flash of romance and fun into the khaki gloom of our headquarters-cave and the battle raging outside. Setting off alone to join his guerrilla friends in the mountains, he was badly wounded fighting the parachutists who had dropped outside the Western walls of the city. A German doctor chivalrously dressed his wounds, but a new wave of parachutists shot him without mercy. His fame was such that the Cretans said Hitler was not able

to sleep at night until his glass eye, as proof of his death, was actually placed on his table.

The second figure is Mike Cumberlege. His admiral father, affectionately nicknamed 'Mayor of St. Tropez' by the inhabitants, spent his retirement on the yacht he used to anchor there, and Mike's amphibian growing-up turned him into a brilliant seaman. After finishing at Pangbourne, he got a job sailing world-famous ocean-racing yachts across the Atlantic. He joined the Royal Naval Reserve at the approach of war and soon, with Pendlebury and his guerillas in H M S Dolphin, he was conducting raids on the Dodecanese. Later on he slipped agents into Crete from Brindisi or Mersa Mat..? in small piratical craft like the 'Hedgehog', the 'Porcupine' and the 'Escalador'. He was finally captured on plain clothes off Poros on the way to blow up the Corinth Canal, and he and his crew, after years in Mauthausen, were, tragically, shot in Sachsenhausen two days before the end of the War. No-one who knew him can forget his youth and fine looks and humour and panache. He was a great favourite in Crete. One day, talking about marksmanship after a meal with them on the shore, he said there was nothing to it; and, pulling out his revolver, he light-heartedly fired it in the air without looking up – as people do on festive occasions in Crete – and a second later - a lucky shot in a million – a seagull thumped dead on the rock beside him. He quickly masked his astonishment with a negligent gesture and for miles around the wonder grew.

He wore a single gold earring, like Sir Francis Drake. Just before the War, he had thrown a party on a large sailing yacht he had just piloted from Europe. Noticing that a beautiful guest was wearing precious screw-on earring he said they would be safer with pierced ears; but she said it would hurt too much. He said 'Nonsense; I'll show you', picked up a sail needle and drove it clean through the lobe of his own hear, letting out a surprised cry of pain at the scarlet gush. She was so touched, she gave him a gold earring to put in it and he wore it ever after.

The third of these island figures is Manoli Paterakis, one of six astonishing brothers from the tiny mountain village of Koustoyerako perched high in the wildest sierras of the White Mountains of Western Crete. When invasion came, they seized their guns and fell on the parachutists and rescued countless escaped British prisoners. Their mothers and sisters and daughters clad and fed them and all Crete helped them escape to the Middle East. A shepherd and goatherd like all his bothers, Manoli knew every peak and canyon in the island and for two years we were inseparable in all sorts of improbable moments. His fast pace,

his knowledge of the Cretan cordilleras, his skill in finding the most inaccessible tracks, his aqualine glance, his fearlessness and vigour and humour made him one of the most loved people in the island. Six months ago he was challenged by the young men of his village: could he still hunt ibex as he used to in his youth? He took down his gun without a word, set out and soon outstripped all his challengers up the jagged mountains to the haunts of his forbidden quarry. They heard the bark of his rifle high above and returned crestfallen. But when he failed to come back, a search party was sent out. A clean-shot ibex, of record size and length of horn, was found on the edge of a precipice but no Manoli. Hoisting it on his shoulders he had made the first false step in his life, and the last: he had fallen three hundred feet to instant death on a ledge inaccessible to anything but a helicopter. It was somehow a fitting death: he vanished like the mountain eagle he so much resembled.

Four years ago, he and I were invited for a gala fortnight to the United States by the Cretans of America. Neither of us had been there and they showed us everything. On our last evening, they took us to the Empire State `building, with a forest of lesser skyscrapers towering all round us and a million cars roaring below. I saw he was smiling and asked why. 'I was just thinking', he said, 'That back in my village it would be nearly time to go up and milk the ewes'.

All of us over a certain age can think of a score of similar figures. We can think, too, of many who worked in selfless and unspectacular but unremitting danger for years on end: and it is right that we should remember them all tonight; for it is they, and people like them, brave men and women at war with a cruel tyranny, who were the inspiration of our Club, its very spirit and the reason for its existence.