SPECIAL FORCES CLUB

40th ANNIVERSARY

ADDRESS

When our president telephoned to Greece, first and foremost I should have the great honour of saying a few words on this marvellous anniversary, I was rather alarmed; and, between sleeping and waking, I saw myself, sneaking into a Special Forces Club whose appearance and atmosphere had subtly but completely changed from the familiar, snug and welcoming place we all know—and, indeed, it was somewhere entirely different, from the splendid precincts where we are feasting tonight. It had turned into something very different and very forbidding. It had become a daunting and shadowy Valhalla, a club only fit for heroes to drink in; certainly, but guarded by ogreish janitors.

I sneaked in with trepidations, almost forgetting the password as I left my cloak-and-dagger room, and at last I found my place at a very unusually table with a commando-knife on one side of my plate and a gelignite plunger on the other. 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 Tellerminx, with limpets and clams to follow... The cocktails were all Molotov; the wine glasses were full of hair-dye and knock-out drops; and instead of polished wood or peerless napery, the dolefully groaning board was partly laid with old and tattered parachute material and partly with the sort of blown-up maps of enemy-occupied territory that used to be sewn into the linings of the pre-infiltration outfits of agents about to be dropped in the dark...

But there was worse to come. An intimidating assembly of veterans were assembled; and, as they subsided into their chairs round the eerie banquet, all the cutlery, which was sinister enough already,
started to shift and gravitate in a hair-raising, concerted and
centrifugal manner. What on’ earth was going on? Suddenly, a flash
of revelation: everything metallic on the table had come
simultaneously under siege by 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 intimidating veterans at all, but friendly con-
temporaries, a few of them a bit older than us, and a great many very
much younger, that these early misgivings are exorcized, and I see
at last that there was nothing to be alarmed about at all.

Nevertheless, a fortieth anniversary is a venerable milestone in the
life of a club. The extraordinary thing about this particular lapse
of time is that it has passed in a flash, and if asked without warning,
when, as demobilized bachelors, we had actually joined, many of us
might thoughtlessly say ‘Oh, ten years—fifteen perhaps’ - and then
we would remember that the club dates from the end of the War, and
that the time-lapse is actually 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 who was not even born when the club
began to be the father of a thriving family already. Even a grand-
father, if he has got a move on. So, counting from our founding-
father to our youngest recruit, we can already lay claim to half
a dozen generations, and if heredity of callings still prevails — and
being what it is, — often does — the future of the club is full of promise.

On-anniversaries like this, our thoughts automatically wing back to the
times and places in our soldiering days that were most important
to us during the War. We each have our own; mine happen 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 they were all three so representative of the spirit of the club, and all that it stands for, that I feel they are all sort of 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' right-hand archaeologist in Crete. He knew the whole island backwards and loved the islanders as they loved him. He spoke every dialect, knew all their songs, could walk the fleetest of them off their feet over those merciless ranges, then drink them all under the table. It was largely owing to the arming and training of his guerilla friends before the battle, that the rest of us who returned to the island in the following years of occupation were spared the political tangles that were the scurge of the rest of occupied Europe. How well I remember him, Outside Herakleion, on the second day of the German parachute invasion! His florid face, handsome, with its single sparkling eye, 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—a menial, true friend—set off alone to join his guerilla friends in the hills and into the battle raging outside. He was badly wounded fighting the parachutists outside the western walls of the city. He was cruelly treated by a German doctor who dressed his wounds, but he was shot without mercy by a new wave of parachutists. His fame was such that the Cretans said Hitler was not able to sleep at night until John's glass eye, as proof of his death, was actually placed on his table.
The second figure is Mike Cumberlege. His father, retired Admiral Cumberlege, affectionately nicknamed "Mayor of St Tropez" by the inhabitants, spent for his retirement on the yacht he anchored there, and Mike's amphibian "growing-up" turned him into a brilliant seaman. After finishing at Pangbourne, he got a job sailing enormous craft and 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 guerrillas, he was conducting raids on the Dodecanese. Later on he slipped agents into Crete from Mersa Matruh in small piratical crafts like the Hedgehog, the Porcupine, and the Escapodor. He was finally captured in plain clothes near 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. Talking about marksmanship and shooting, he said there was nothing to it; and, pulling out his revolver, light-heartedly fired it in the air without looking up, as people do on festive occasions in Crete, and a second later he fell dead on the rock beside him, a lucky shot in a million. 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 threw a party on a large sailing yacht he had just piloted from Europe. Noticing that a beautiful guest was wearing precious screw-in earrings, he said they would be safer with pierced ears; but she said it would hurt too much. He said "Nonsense!" He picked up a sail-needle and drove it clean through the lobe of his own ear, letting out a surprisedcry of pain and a scarlet gush. She was so touched, she gave him the gold earring 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 Koustovarako 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, after the battle, took to the hills again. Like many Cretans, they saved
countless lives, rescued and 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 brothers, Manoli knew every peak and canyon in the island and it so happened that for two years we were inseparable in all sorts of improbable and dangerous moments. His fast pace, his knowledge of the Cretan cordilleras, his skill in finding the most inaccessible tracks, his aquiline glance, his fearlessness and vigour and humour made him one of the most loved men 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 do in his youth? He took down his gun without a word, and outstripped all his challengers in scaling the jagged mountains to the haunts of his forbidden quarry. They heard the bang of his rifle high above and returned crestfallen. But he failed to come back... A clean-shot ibex, ofrecord size and length of horn, was found on the edge of a precipice, but no Manoli. Hoisting it on his shoulder, 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 and they showed us everything. On our last evening they took us to the Empire State Building, with a forest of lesser skyscrapers all round us and a million cars roaring below. I saw he was smiling and asked why. "I was just thinking," he said, "back in the 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 of many who worked for years in selfless, unspectacular and unremitting danger for years on end: it is right that we should remember them tonight, for it is they, and people like them, the brave men and women of our world at war with a cruel tyranny, who were the inspiration of our club, its very spirit and the reason for its existence..."