

BOOK REVIEWS



***Long Range Desert Group.* W.B. Kennedy Shaw. 1945; reprint, Greenhill Books, 2000. 260 pages. \$18.95 (softcover).** Reviewed by Lieutenant Colonel Harold E. Raugh, Jr., U.S. Army, Retired.

British Army Captain W.B. Kennedy Shaw served as Intelligence Officer of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) from the time it was organized in Egypt in the summer of 1940 until the concluding phase of the North African campaign in February 1943. During this action-packed period, Kennedy Shaw participated in numerous operations behind enemy lines against Italian forces and later Rommel's Africa Corps, and briefed and debriefed veritabily every LRDG patrol.

When Italy declared war on the United Kingdom in June 1940, its forces in North Africa numbered about 250,000 while British troops numbered 36,000. Recognizing the potential of desert travel to counter the Italian manpower superiority and to gain intelligence, Major Ralph Bagnold (a leading and experienced desert explorer) proposed the establishment of a light vehicle reconnaissance unit. Formed in late June 1940, the LRDG was initially composed of British officers and soldiers from New Zealand and Rhodesia. The group, after intensive training, became operational in September 1940.

The first patrols consisted of two officers, about 30 men, 11 trucks, 11 machine guns (although these numbers were later reduced by half), and vast quantities of fuel, ammunition, food, and water. Navigating over frequently uncharted, immense trackless stretches of desert and sand seas, in extremes of temperature (over 120 degrees F. in the shade in summer, and below freezing in the winter), the LRDG patrols specialized in gathering intelligence and reconnoitering enemy positions and new routes. The patrols also occasionally ambushed enemy convoys, interdicted supply lines, and attacked outposts, airfields, and rear area

elements, using their hit-and-run tactics and high mobility to give the Italians (and later the Germans) the impression that the British had more troops than they actually had.

One of the most significant activities of the LRDG was the "road watch" on the Via Balbia. The Via Balbia, paralleling the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, was the only paved road through an area where vehicle traffic was extremely limited and water was scarce. The Germans landed their tanks, and most of their other reinforcements and supplies, at Tripoli, then moved them hundreds of miles along the Via Balbia east to their forward units. At a vantage point near Sirte — some 400 miles behind enemy lines — the LRDG established its road watch site where patrols constantly monitored all enemy vehicular traffic and convoys coming from Tripoli. By monitoring all movements, the LRDG was able to provide early warning of impending enemy attacks by counting vehicles by type and identifying surges and other patterns in resupply and reinforcements, and other indicators of enemy activity. The road watch, according to Kennedy Shaw, was perhaps "the most useful job LRDG ever did."

Kennedy Shaw's gripping memoir provides tremendous insight into the Western Desert campaign and the colorful, courageous, and indefatigable personalities of the elite Long Range Desert Group, described in a contemporary newspaper article as "the bravest, toughest, and brainiest unit of Britain's great desert army." More importantly, the pages of this fascinating book reveal battle-proven lessons in small-unit leadership, tactics, and desert operations.

***Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism.* Peter Schweizer. New York: Doubleday, 2002. 339 pages.**

\$26.00 (hardcover). Reviewed by Glen F. Welch.

Throughout history, the rare individual has appeared on the historical scene and redirected the flow of events. This book is about one of those individuals. As Peter Schweizer describes in considerable detail, Ronald Reagan bucked the international consensus and trends among intellectuals and national leaders — nearly all of whom knew that the Soviet Union was unstoppable on the rise. To their doubts he said, "Yes, we can defeat communism."

Peter Schweizer, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, is the best-selling author of numerous books such as *The Fall of the Wall: Reassessing the Cause and Consequences of the End of the Cold War* (2001) and *The Soviet Concepts of Peace, Peaceful Coexistence, and Détente* (1988). With Reagan's War, he has again prepared a masterful analysis of the events of the Cold War. His most recent work chronicles the activities of Ronald Reagan — probably the best known cold warrior in the free world. Throughout his book, Schweizer makes all of the appropriate connections with Soviet successes and American retreats from the 1950's through the 1970's. During the same time, he points out, Ronald Reagan was developing his strategy for combating Soviet tactics. Disputing the argument that communism was bound to fail and Reagan only happened to be on hand when it happened, Schweizer gives full credit to Ronald Reagan for the defeat of communism.

Ronald Reagan's emergence in the Cold War began with his opposition (and leadership) to the 1946 strike in Hollywood of the Conference of Studio Unions — a thinly disguised attempt by the Communist Party to take over the movie industry in order to use it to influence America. Despite numerous threats to himself and his family (he actually sat up nights holding a revolver), he never wavered and the strike ultimately failed. Progressing through both state and national politics, Ronald Reagan always supported those who he believed

would best resist the onslaught of communism. Usually these same people either disappointed Reagan or failed to get elected. Finally, Reagan's turn came and he employed the strategy he had argued for over the course of many decades.

The strategy included confrontation through the employment of insurgents – formerly a communist monopoly. Reagan's arming of insurgents actually resulted in freeing two communist conquests – Nicaragua and Afghanistan. These reversals, along with the American invasion of Grenada, caused major concerns among the USSR's client states, including Cuba which demanded massive supplies of weapons. To settle Cuban nerves, Moscow delivered an additional seven billion dollars worth of weapons to them. This was an expense the Soviets could ill afford.

Reagan, of course, understood this weakness of the communist system and continued to take advantage of the Soviets' Achilles heel – their economy. His financing of insurgents cost the United States less than a billion dollars each year while the Soviet Union paid eight billion dollars to finance counter insurgency operations. Reagan also delayed construction of a pipeline which would have sold over seven billion dollars worth of Soviet Union natural gas to Europe. His other measures, driving down the cost of oil (the Soviet Union's largest export), swelling the size of the United States military, and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), cost the USSR dearly. The American military buildup and SDI induced the communists to attempt to compete with increased military expenditures. Against approximately 32 billion dollars in exports, Reagan's initiatives were estimated to cost the Soviet Union between 36 and 46 billion dollars each year. The Soviet Union was operating a deficit and international financing was also being cut off. One quote of Gorbachev is telling: "They look at us in the West and wait for us to drown." Schweizer also explains how the reduction in international oil prices helped the American economy while hurting the Soviet economy.

Of course, the Soviets did not accept all of this without a struggle. They even floated a conspiracy among the East Germans and North Koreans to assassinate Reagan in 1983. Nonetheless, their options were few and most realized they had no choice but to try to reach an arrangement with Reagan. This consensus resulted in the selection of Mikhail Gorbachev as Soviet Party Secretary. In short, Reagan's actions made Gorbachev's selection possible. Gorbachev desperately sought Reagan's assistance in extricating the Soviet Union from the Afghanistan situation and in reaching an international agreement which would end the SDI. On both accounts, Reagan refused.

In providing his argument about Reagan's accomplishments, Schweizer's approach is amazingly simple; chronicling the actual events and contrasting the activities of the Soviets and of Ronald Reagan. Unabashedly, he trumpets Reagan's philosophy and success. While this book will undoubtedly be subject to accusations of excessive simplicity, both in the author's approach and in Reagan's approach to combating communism, a more honest conclusion is that successful combat is often straightforward. The real tragedy is that it took a half century of communist brutality throughout the world for Americans to realize this truth – a revelation made possible only by the courage of one man. Truly, as Schweizer argues, Ronald Reagan stands alone in the 20th century as a unique and fearless leader.

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