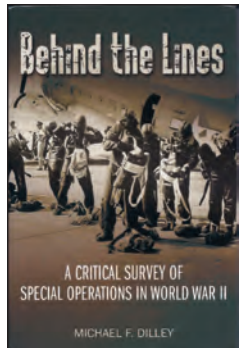


Behind the Lines: A Critical Survey of Special Operations in World War II

Michael F. Dilley. Casemate; 2013. Hardcover: 280 pages.
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Review by R. Alan Hester

Under clear night skies of 27 February 1942, men from C Company, 2nd Parachute Battalion, turned-up mugs full of tea and rum before boarding planes to conduct Operation Biting. Their mission was clear: conduct a raid behind enemy lines to steal a German Würzburg Antenna (code-name “Henry”) so the British could gain a better understanding of German radar technology. The men endured bitter cold and anti-aircraft fire as they crossed the English Channel en route to Bruneval, France. Two hours passed before the men received



the signal to take their places. As they neared the drop zone flying at 500 feet, the lead plane’s light turned green, and the men exited the plane—over the wrong drop zone. After the men assembled on the ground and recovered their equipment, they moved toward their target undetected. MAJ Frost, C Company Commander, approached the front door of the target building and was so surprised to find it unlocked, he almost forgot to blow the whistle to initiate the raid. Was the mission a success? Did it contribute to the larger strategic and operational mission? Was the risk of resources worth it? These are the questions Michael F. Dilley attempts to answer in *Behind the Lines: A Critical Survey of Special Operations in World War II*.

The work is composed of short vignettes that have been mostly reworked from previous articles that explore missions in World War II conducted by “special purpose, special mission units.” The diversity of the missions is only rivaled by the diversity of the countries from which these units hail. He highlights missions that might be new ground to general readers and historians alike. The author, however, goes beyond simple retelling of missions. He examines what did and did not work, as well as successes and failures of the missions as viewed through his lens: predefined parameters set forth in the first chapter, which are useful for comparing different types of missions and garnering lessons for future operations. More important, he is imploring planners and commanders to evaluate the use of Special Operations units by finding analogies in the past.

He begins by establishing what constitutes “special purpose, special mission” organizations and the criteria he used for critiquing these missions. This is helpful, for it might be confusing if terms and nomenclatures were not established from the beginning. His criteria for critiques are based on his judgment, experience, and two published works that establish paradigms for surveying the use of Special Operations Forces. Dilley uses Lucien S. Vandenberg’s *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy* to identify failed operations and summarizes his criteria as follows:

- *Inadequate intelligence*, including of the objective and enemy forces defending it.
- *Poor coordination*, including lack of compatible equipment; getting one agency or service to be fully alert and responsive to the needs of another; difficulties by planners in understanding one another’s standard operating procedures; and outright confusion and mutual mistrust.
- *Provision of faulty information to the national leadership*, including deliberately misleading information of one-sided information.
- *Wishful thinking*, including missions designed or evaluated on the assumption that had a limited basis in fact; rejecting information that runs counter to the hopes for success by the planners or decision makers; and the blind desire to see a proposed mission proceed and succeed.
- *In appropriate intervention in mission execution*, including by higher military headquarters or the national leadership. This is a factor I label as “the President as squad leader.”

Conversely, the author summarizes William H. McRaven’s *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* criteria for a successful special operation as follows:

Planning phase:

- *Simplicity*: limiting the number of objectives; good intelligence; and innovation.

Preparation phase:

- *Security*: preventing the enemy from gaining an advantage through foreknowledge of the mission by concealing the timing and means of insertion.

- *Repetition*: honing routine skills to a degree that allow quick reaction to a threat, provided that threat fits within the standard scenario the unit has developed and practiced. Because Special Operations vary enough from standard, new equipment, and tactics must often be employed. This necessitates at least on (but preferably two) full dress rehearsals prior to insertion.

Execution phase:

- *Surprise*: catching the enemy off guard through deception, timing, and taking advantage of his vulnerability.
- *Speed*: getting to the objective as fast as possible to prevent expanding ones area of vulnerability and decreasing ones opportunity to achieve relative superiority.
- *Purpose*: understanding and executing the prime objective of a mission regardless of emerging obstacles or opportunities.

In Chapters 2 through 7, he applies the above-mentioned criteria to individual missions. He first offers a brief unit history and explanation of the mission and then offers a critical analysis. If a particular mission met his standards, he does not belabor the positive points, but if the mission does not, he offers an explanation. His critiques for these chapters are straightforward and educational.

His work begins to weaken beginning with Chapter 8, wherein he expands to more unit histories. Instead of explaining individual missions, he describes vaguely the history of a special mission unit, and then applies his criteria to the unit's missions as a whole. In Chapter 9, for instance, he concluded that the unit's missions were "mostly" successful and "generally" met his criteria. This makes garnering lessons and comparisons to other missions difficult. Moreover, because he does not provided a lot of the history of the unit and mission, one cannot use his paradigm to come to one's own conclusions.

The latter portion of the book (Part 2) analyzes missions conducted behind friendly lines, from intelligence gathering in consulates within the United States to the famous Gran Sasso raid to rescue deposed Italian Dictator Benito Mussolini. Unfortunately, his work further founders at this point. During the Gran Sasso raid, for

instance, Italy was in the early phases of aligning with the Allies. To say that this operation occurred behind friendly lines is a stretch. German commandos had to use gliders to infiltrate the target area because friendly lines had shifted and a nearby Italian unit and terrain impeded avenues of approach to the target. Furthermore, the author fails to mention the most important reason the 250 Italian soldiers guarding Mussolini did not open fire on the small German force: when they recognized the Italian general brought along as a diversion, they lowered their weapons, allowing time for the raiding force to find and secure Mussolini. This was an innovative tactic from the planning phase and allowed surprise and speed during the execution phase, all of which fit within McRaven's criteria, but the author did not highlight the former and only briefly noted the latter. This lack of clarity might be a result of the limited explanation of the mission provided by the author, or it is secondary to another weakness of this work: the lack of an organized and uniformed critique at the end of each chapter. In McRaven's work, the critiques discuss each criterion and explain how the mission did or did not meet it. Dilley's work would have benefited greatly from the same model.

Learning from the past is difficult. Mark Twain once noted that history does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes. Dilley sought to offer a usable paradigm to critique past missions and hopefully elicit questions as to whether the mission is suited for Special Operations units, thereby preventing unnecessary risk of lives and resources. The two works he leaned greatly on provide a useful starting point for those seeking to analyze past missions with an eye on the future. Dilley's work, alas, is found wanting in some areas. The content and ideas are sound, but the editor failed to serve the author during the substantive edit phase by not making the book more functional for its readers. Furthermore, it does not contribute significantly to the scholarly discussion, because it is based heavily on secondary sources and other's models. It does, however, have a valuable bibliography if one wants to further explore the missions he analyzed. The faults noted above should not, however, overshadow his bold effort. He recognized that commanders and planners will grapple with how to use Special Operations forces in future conflicts, and he took the initiative to consolidate the analogies of the past for imminent comparisons.