

The Amazing SAS: The Inside Story of Australia's Special Forces

Ian McPhedran

Reviewed by Stuart Ellis

Ian McPhedran's book recounts experiences and exploits of Australia's SAS Regiment over the period 1999-2004 – one of the most intense operational periods for the unit since it was formed in 1957. Specifically, it has chapters on SAS operations in East Timor, Afghanistan, the 2003 Gulf War and the *Tampa* incident in 2001. Rather than being 'the inside story on the SAS' as reflected in the subtitle, it is instead a series of stories which are perhaps better described by the alternative subtitle 'everything I have ever heard about the SAS but in no particular order'.

McPhedran is a defence correspondent for various News Limited publications. From his attendance at numerous press conferences, and through a number of interviews with key officers and some SAS soldiers, he has cobbled together a series of stories into this book. As a snapshot of SAS operations it provides a good insight for those who know little about the regiment. It will probably disappoint those with much of an understanding of defence force matters.

The chapters on East Timor provide good insights into early SAS operational activities, including delicate liaison with the guerilla arm of the Fretilin resistance movement – Falantil. The incident involving the then commanding officer, Tim McOwan, his RSM and others at Tibar reflects very well on their judgement and discipline. It does much to dispel the image of the SAS as overly aggressive. Rather, SAS operations necessarily involve high levels of independent judgement, coolness under extreme pressure and battle discipline. A theme developed in the book, through this and other stories, is that judgement and thinking is valued more than brawn and grunt. The physical efforts of special forces operations are really required to get into a position to use your head.

The detail on the SAS involvement with the interception of the *Tampa* provides good background, and valuable further detail from the SAS standpoint, that has not been at all well covered in other books on the incident. Like many of the other operations described in the book, the operation provided a clear illustration of the strategic utility of the SAS – as a trusted, disciplined force that can operate under broad directives, and which can be relied upon to make sound military judgements in unforeseen or otherwise unusual circumstances.

The descriptions of operations in Afghanistan were in contrast quite disjointed. I struggled to gain a good appreciation of the military context of SAS operations in that theatre, although the descriptions of hardship in cold, high-altitude environments were vivid. Individual stories are recounted but there is little discussion and no analysis of overall strategy and operational utility. This is a disappointing aspect found throughout the book. Individual experiences are



described – many of them a good read on their own – but the book lacks critical analysis at any level by the author.

The chapters describing SAS involvement in the 2003 Gulf War provide a combination of commentary from both officers and men, something lacking in some earlier chapters. The impressive tactical and operational-level impacts of the SAS during that campaign are highlighted in the general narrative and personal stories. It was also pleasing to see the author cover the strategic impact of SAS operations through daring and controlled aggression – and the flexibility of an SAS squadron operating with its headquarters also deployed in the field.

Interestingly, for a book authored by a journalist, it is quite poorly edited. The author's expression is also at times poor and the frequent repetition detracts from the book's flow. The lack of a logical sequence also had me struggling from story to story. While broadly factual overall, there are easily avoidable errors in the research. For example, Somalia in 1994 not Suai in 1999 was the first occasion the Australian SAS fired a shot in anger since Vietnam. Finally, while McPhedran is clearly sympathetic to the SAS and impressed with their capability, he has obviously failed to grasp the need-to-know principle. He places greater priority on telling the world how much he does know (or thinks he knows), rather than exercising the due discretion required. I thought it particularly inappropriate that the book includes identifiable references to the families of SAS members.

I know all the officers and many of the soldiers quoted in this book. Many are my friends. While I am pleased for them and their families that the exploits of the SAS Regiment during these campaigns has been publicly recorded, I am disappointed the book is not better written from both a stylistic and an analytical viewpoint. But perhaps the author could only work with the information he was given and there were limited opportunities to gain a more holistic view. Still, the book is worth reading to get a flavour of SAS operations, the character of the regiment and the ingredient that makes the SAS so successful – the officers and men who make up the unit. ♦

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