

The Circuit: An ex-SAS Soldier's True Account of One of the Most Powerful and Secretive Industries Spawned by the War on Terror

Bob Shepherd (with M.P. Sabga)

Reviewed by Tony Watts

Autobiographical accounts purportedly revealing derring-do by former members of the British SAS, or which have the words *true account*, *most powerful* and *secretive* in their subtitle, obviously invite some scepticism as to their literary, historical or professional worth. This is particularly so when the ostensible author is assisted by the services of a freelance journalist. It naturally prompts speculation as to whether this is just another co-operative effort quickly stitched together to boost a former NCO's retirement plan through assaulting soft targets in airport bookshops.

Fortunately this book largely tackles a new subtext of the genre and from an interesting angle. Bob Shepherd, a Scottish former warrant officer and 20-year veteran with 22SAS up to 1994, gives us an operator's view of the international commercial security circuit – hence the book's title. His account is assisted by Patricia Sabga, a former CNN correspondent and now a freelance journalist, but Shepherd's insights shine through clearly.

Shepherd projects the impression of a superbly professional individual totally committed to the job he is given, whether in the British SAS Regiment or as a private security advisor. His account initially takes the reader into the planning and execution of some well-known and unknown operations. The first-person accounts of extremely risky operations are gripping. He is forensically precise as one would expect given his pedigree. He has the skill of narration without embellishment and a flowing narrative style (although his co-author no doubt helped here). His digression into his role in the ill-fated Bravo Two Zero patrol saga reinforces his credibility. Apparently Shepherd was the original patrol commander but refused to undertake the task with three recent reinforcements and insufficient resources. He argued with his squadron commander on the issue of insertion mode and stated that a helicopter-inserted foot patrol was suicidal. For this he was posted to another squadron.

His subsequent accounts briefly cover five years or so of relatively mundane VIP security jobs in the 1990s, before the bulk of the book concentrates on his experiences since the 9/11 attacks protecting international journalists reporting from frontline situations such as Gaza, the West Bank, Iraq and Afghanistan.

While providing the reader with some priceless quotes and case studies in stupidity, both military and civilian, Shepherd also gives his opinions concerning expediency and political duplicity by Western Coalition countries. He believes that the out-sourcing of many military tasks to private security

contractors – rather than deploying sufficient troops – has backfired for a range of moral, strategic and operational reasons and is working against effective counter-insurgency measures by Western militaries.

The opening stories detail Shepherd reaching an epiphany. He comes to believe that the people he thought of as the “good guys” are in reality oppressors themselves and trigger insurgency by their very aggression – whether they be heavy-handed Israeli soldiers besieging Ramallah or bone-headed but well meaning American commanders blundering around Kamdesh. Unsurprisingly, Shepherd rates British soldiery as superior and gives us a detailed account of how well the capture of Basra was handled by them.

Early in his tale he alludes to Western press coverage of recent conflicts in the Middle East portraying the various factional groups like Fatah, Hamas and Hezbollah as the villains, leading him to make some false assumptions. It is a neat paradox that Shepherd ends up as an on-the-ground security advisor to a number of international television news networks.

Shepherd successfully combines a thoroughly military eye with brain attuned to the world of his clients – in most cases news crews – without the literary artifice found in many tales told by journalists or the spin that comes from government-commissioned reports. When discussing strategic and political decisions his criticisms are clinical and rationally based. Like many professional soldiers he thinks about the human imperatives that drive us all. This allows him to contextualise the Hamas, Fatah and Taliban fighters who pose the operational risk to his journalist clients. His grasp of the cultural and religious backgrounds of such combatants is sound. This also enables him to explain how the Coalition forces being reported on often come to pose dangers to his clients as well as themselves.

The accompanying maps and high quality photographs make the environment and context clear. The glossary is particularly useful for those unfamiliar with either British military jargon and acronyms, or terms used in the news-gathering profession.

Despite its initial airport bookshop feel, this is a mature, experienced and grassroots view of the dirty, and dangerous, work involved in filling our television screens each evening with updates from the world's troublespots. It also provides much food for thought about counter-insurgency doctrine and practice in complex human terrain. Finally, he raises the important issue of how the extensive use of private security contractors is increasingly counter-productive to the winning of counter-insurgency wars, not least because it demonstrates to the insurgents a lack of Western will to endure by real ‘boots on the ground’ effort. ♦

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