

INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War led to far-reaching changes in the Netherlands' armed forces. A new era had arrived, with unexpected security issues and no fixed enemies. Successive national governments shifted the emphasis from home defence to worldwide crisis management, and towards armed forces that served above all as an instrument for international ambitions. An important development was the switch from a large and geographically-tied defence-oriented army made up mostly of conscripts towards a (considerably) smaller professional armed expeditionary force that had to be available for deployment anywhere in the world. Over the years, thousands of Dutch servicemen and -women participated in a non-stop series of international interventions: humanitarian, peacekeeping, peace-enforcing or peace-building operations, as well as an occupation in Iraq and a long-term stabilisation and counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan. In a period of just over two decades, the Dutch armed forces took on an entirely new, expeditionary role.

In the new world order, the emphasis shifted from home defence to international crisis management. (Photo: KCT)



In this process of transformation, all units and tasks were reassigned, also within the *Korps Commandotroepen* (KCT), the Royal Netherlands Army Special Operations Forces Regiment. During the Cold War, the Dutch 'Green Berets' had developed into a Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) unit ready for deployment in the expected major confrontation between East and West. After 1989, the LRRP role proved too restrictive for the Dutch commandos. At the same time, as the government was scaling down its military forces in the early 1990s, it was far from certain whether the specialist unit would even be continued. Was there still a need for elite troops in the Netherlands? Was there a place for Special Operations Forces (SOF) in a 'new world order' in which crisis response, peacekeeping and stabilisation operations would likely be the primary tasks? Would it not be better to integrate the commando troops into the army's newly established Air Manoeuvre Brigade, or could they be placed within an all-encompassing armed forces elite unit with (and within) the Royal Netherlands Marine Corps? Or, indeed, was not the rapidly-changing, increasingly chaotic and in the opinion of many security experts even 'anarchistic' new world order ('New World Disorder') in fact the ideal battleground for a renovated and recalibrated special-purpose force of flexible and multi-skilled 'super infantrymen'?

Based on a Rich Tradition

The Royal Netherlands Army SOF Regiment only had to look back at its own history to find inspiration for a new future. Traditionally, Dutch commandos were jacks-of-all-trades. The Regiment's roots lay in the Second World War, during which the Netherlands was occupied by Nazi Germany, the Dutch colonies in East Asia were under the control of the Japanese and the remnants of the Dutch armed forces fought side by side with Allied forces. The first Dutch commandos were trained by the British army as battle-hardened fighting soldiers for special missions against the German and Japanese military. Great Britain had operated with troops of this kind since 1940, when it started preparing elite soldiers for the most difficult and most hazardous assignments of the war, both at the front and behind enemy lines. In just a short period of time, these commandos acquired an audacious reputation with successful actions in North Africa, France, Norway and Burma. They undertook long-range reconnaissance missions and destroyed important military targets in enemy-held territories. From 1942 onwards, the British started training their allies for similar tasks. The day on which the first Dutch soldiers started commando training, 22 March 1942, has since been established as the date of birth of the KCT. The 25 soldiers who completed the arduous Commando Basic Training in Achnacarry in Scotland were presented with their distinctive green commando berets just one month later. As No. 2 (Dutch) Troop they became part of



In the 1990s, the Dutch armed forces switched from a defensive army based on national service to a professional expeditionary force. (Photo: KCT)

the multinational special operations unit No. 10 (Inter Allied) Commando. During this same period, a 40-strong group of Dutch servicemen were also trained as commandos by the British in India. Their unit became known as *Korps Insulinde*.

Starting in 1942, Dutch commandos participated in intelligence-gathering operations on the Japanese-occupied Dutch East Indies island of Sumatra, and in 1944 became involved in reconnaissance and combat patrols behind enemy lines in the Arakan region in Burma. Later in that same year they saw action in Europe in the Battle for Arnhem (Operation *Market Garden*). Seconded to the Allied airborne troops (the American 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, the British 1st Airborne Division and the British 1st Airborne Corps), as well as to 'Jedburgh' Special Forces teams, their tasks involved gathering information, undertaking reconnaissance missions, establishing contacts with the resistance and acting as guides and interpreters. They fought in Eindhoven, Son, Veghel, Grave, Groesbeek, Nijmegen and Arnhem. The Dutch Green Berets were also involved in amphibious operations at Vlissingen and Westkapelle on the island of

Walcheren, in November 1944. During that same period, commandos operated in the still German-occupied northern part of the Netherlands. They trained resistance groups in the provinces of Friesland, Groningen, Drenthe and Overijssel.

After World War II, the Royal Netherlands Army (RNLA) still needed commando-style Special Operations Forces. During the war of decolonisation in the Dutch East Indies, from 1945 to 1949, between the Dutch colonial regime and the Indonesian independence movement, commandos (still clearly recognisable by their green berets) and paratroop commandos (with red berets) engaged in typical counter-guerrilla warfare. Their aim was to identify and eliminate groups of irregular opponents, often un-uniformed, almost always invisible and extremely difficult to locate. In situations beyond the capacities of the regular infantry, they carried out capture or kill and mopping-up operations in volatile areas – first on the island of Celebes and later on Java and Sumatra. These missions involved intimidation and direct action, even going as far as using violent methods like forced interrogations and executions. During

Then and now: like in colonial times, Dutch Special Operations Forces in Afghanistan fought irregular opponents, often invisible and difficult to locate. (Photo: KCT)



regular military offensives, the green and red berets cleared resistance strongholds through daring in-depth attacks, and secured important infrastructural objects such as dams, airfields and power stations. During an offensive called Operation *Crow* in December 1948, the commandos were the tip of the spear for the unit that took the city of Yogyakarta, the headquarters of the Indonesian insurrection, by executing a bold, large-scale airborne assault.

During this same period, the *Stormschool Bloemendaal* was established in the Netherlands, an infantry training centre based in the North Holland town of that name. Combat training took place on a military exercise area in the dunes between the towns of Zandvoort and IJmuiden. Many of the instructors were British-trained commandos from World War II. In 1949, the *Stormschool* transferred to the *Engelbrecht van Nassau* barracks in the southern town of Roosendaal. Here, one year later, on 1 July 1950, the training centre was converted into an actual unit of elite troops: the *Korps Commandotroepen*. This new elite regiment was made up of instructors from the *Stormschool* and of red and green berets returning from the war in the Dutch East Indies.

The KCT of the 1950s – the period during which the Netherlands armed forces became integrated into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) – was a robust organisation with its own staff, a support company, an instruction company, three operational companies (of recently trained conscripts) and a fluctuating number of companies available for mobilisation. Conscript commandos trained for a wide variety of special combat tasks including reconnaissance and surveillance in enemy territory, demolition and sabotage, intelligence gathering and direct action against key targets such as command and control centres, ports, airports, bridges and enemy logistical facilities. In peacetime, the commandos could be called upon for disaster support missions, for example during the February 1953 Flood Disaster in the Dutch coastal areas that cost the lives of some 1,800 people. In wartime, the mobilisation companies of the KCT were made up of reserve troops and professional personnel. They were intended for securing vital objects on national territory (such as airports, bridges and ports), and for defence against enemy air- or seaborne operations.

Commando training for conscripts started with a physical examination following completion of basic military training. Anyone who according to the selectors possessed the required physical fitness and characteristics was eligible for initial instruction, which on average took four weeks. Prospective commandos then underwent actual commando training that lasted between six and eight weeks. Professional soldiers wishing to join the KCT were also required to follow this elementary course, and the same applied to groups of Royal Marines who used commando training to hone their skills for their own special set of tasks. This section of training always ended with the infamous event called the ‘endurance week’. For five uninterrupted days and nights, the prospective commandos underwent a severe trial that tested them physically and mentally to the



The reconnaissance and surveillance task in a hostile environment remained part of the KCT 'toolbox' throughout the history of the Regiment. (Photo: KCT)

core. Anyone who passed this test would earn the coveted piece of headgear that was 'not considered an item of clothing but a mark of distinction': the Green Beret.

The commandos fresh out of training would then undergo a follow-on programme, the purpose of which was to turn them into skilled specialists. This advanced commando training took approximately two months. At a riverine training centre, for example, commandos would undergo specialist training as canoe scouts, landing craft operators, sailors or divers. They acquired skills as demolition experts, train or truck drivers, snipers, communications experts, medics, mortar gunners, engineers or flamethrower and rocket launcher operators. NCOs and reserve officers received separate training in preparing and executing infiltrations and ambushes, equipping and using concealed shelters and acting as boat commanders or air reconnaissance officers. Having undergone this series of training programmes, the Green Berets were then admitted to the regular companies of the KCT. In the 1950s and early 1960s, these were 104, 105 and 108 Commando Companies. Training and instruction continued in these companies, with numerous exercises in a variety of settings at home and abroad.

In 1959-1960, Dutch commandos acquired experience in jungle warfare in New Guinea. This last Dutch colonial territory in Asia was under threat from Indonesia, and in response the Dutch government deployed troops. A detachment of volunteers from the KCT undertook surveillance and security tasks and carried out special



assignments, including kill-or-capture missions against enemy infiltrators. Starting in 1961, the Dutch armed forces also rotated commando companies at the Hohne army barracks in Northern Germany, to serve as a stay-behind organisation in the event of an attack by the communist Warsaw Pact. The specific circumstances of the Cold War meant that gradually the emphasis was placed on skills that tied in with a role in large-scale conventional warfare on the North German Plain. The deployment in the period 1961-1963, as it turned out, was the start for a new type of commando in the Dutch armed forces: the long range reconnaissance specialist.

The actual change took shape as part of a major reorganisation of the Regiment in 1964. The three companies disappeared to give way to a new standby unit, 104 *Waarnemings- en Verkenningcompagnie* (Surveillance and Reconnaissance Company). This company came under the direct command of the most senior military commander in the field, the commanding officer of the Dutch 1st Army Corps. The reconnaissance and surveillance specialists (or recon-observers) were the eyes and ears of the Corps and in wartime were expected to be able to fulfil their task over long distances and in difficult circumstances (far) behind enemy lines. In terms of skills, physical fitness, resourcefulness and resilience, these Green Berets were not very different from the 'old' all-round commandos of the past. They still received broad-based training aimed at enabling them to survive over long periods in a hostile environment. The new Elementary Commando Training was not essentially different from the training that had been provided pre-1964, except for the fact that more emphasis was placed on specific training of observation and reconnaissance skills, with a focus on signalling



and the ability to identify enemy vehicles and equipment. After obtaining their green berets, the recon-observers continued their training during standby periods with instruction programmes at the so-called KCT Specialist School, where they acquired competences including sailing, parachute jumping, mountain climbing, escape and evasion, and survival. These commando 'super scouts' had to be fully trained infantry soldiers, paratroopers, signallers, marksmen and survival experts. Any standby period included various international exercises with allied (NATO) forces.

For wartime use, a standby Commando Battalion was established consisting of three companies. As in the past, in the case of war, this unit could be brought up to strength with reservists and professional personnel. Within the overall structure of the Royal Netherlands Army, the KCT was also allocated a training function, as had been the case for the old *Stormschool* at the end of the 1940s. In the mid-1960s, the Regiment started providing combat training to ordinary infantry units and to the reconnaissance squadrons of the cavalry. Cadets from the Royal Military Academy (the national training centre for professional officers), trainees from the Royal Military School (the training centre for NCOs) and special arrest (SWAT) teams of the Dutch Police Force underwent similar training programmes. As a consequence, during the second half of the Cold War, the Army Special Operations Forces Regiment acquired a specific character, consisting of the two elements of being an advanced combat training centre and a standby reconnaissance-surveillance unit.

At the end of the 1980s, in a very short period of time, the Cold War came to a sudden end. Within just a few years, the division of Europe into two heavily-armed power blocs simply melted away. The process was initiated in the Soviet Union which could no longer afford the costly arms race with the West. Reforms introduced by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev led to revolutionary changes on the world stage. In Eastern Europe, the communist satellite states broke free from Moscow's grasp. The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 was the symbolic highlight of this sea change. Within a year, West and East Germany were reunified, and the entire continent had set a new course for freedom, cooperation and prosperity. The hostile bastion behind the Iron Curtain on which several generations of Dutch military personnel – including commandos – had focused their entire careers had become a thing of the past.

Operator descends into an underground *karesh* irrigation tunnel, Afghanistan 2009.
(Photo: KCT)

At a Crossroads

As reflected in this brief history, Dutch commando troops had traditionally been trained to carry out a whole range of possible special operations, above all in wartime, but also in crisis response or disaster relief and emergency assistance operations. The general rule was that they operated in small groups – usually smaller than a platoon (approximately 30 soldiers) – behind enemy lines. They were viewed as a specialist instrument. Through unorthodox and irregular deployment, commando troops could achieve exceptional results in support of conventional combat operations, interventions or crisis response missions. The tasks they were able to undertake covered a broad spectrum, above all in the pioneering period of the 1940s and 1950s. At the peak of the Cold War, the focus was placed more on the reconnoitring of enemy territory, the gathering of intelligence about enemy activities and troop movements, the identification and observation of enemy targets and the issuing of battle damage reports. At the same time, the Green Berets maintained the general levels of skill that enabled them to undertake other special tasks whenever necessary. The main question for the Dutch Army SOF Regiment that arose following the fall of the Wall in 1989 was whether this specific package of special operations tasks should be further developed, or whether the Dutch elite forces should

Extraction of detainees, Afghanistan 2009. (Photo: KCT)



instead specialise in other assignments, for example as air manoeuvre infantry rangers or pathfinders.

Eventually, the first option was chosen. In the post-Cold War era, the KCT was converted into a full-spectrum Special Operations Forces unit and became a specially-equipped 'toolbox' for expeditionary military operations. Alongside traditional reconnaissance, surveillance and combat tasks, this specialist unit also included new competences such as providing (close) protection, liberating hostages, executing actions to counter serious organised crime or terrorist groups, providing security in the case of mass casualty incidents, offering humanitarian aid in the event of disasters and during reconstruction, training associated or allied foreign troops (so-called military assistance or security sector development) and evacuating civilian diplomatic personnel or national citizens (non-combatant evacuation) from conflict zones. In just a short period of time, the KCT achieved a massive turnaround in terms of organisation and personnel, and in terms of education and training, as well as doctrine. The aim of this book is to explain this transformation.

Military Practice

The story in the following chapters is a history of the Royal Netherlands Army SOF Regiment in the period from 1989 to the present, the timeframe following the end of the Cold War, seen from the point of view of military practice. Within the framework of the geostrategic shifts of this era, and of the developments in the Netherlands with respect to foreign, defence and security policy, the organisational, material and operational aspects of the recent history of the KCT will be discussed. By way of introduction, chapter 1 deals with the organisation and reorganisation of the Regiment, its broad transformation, and the professional tasks and training of its commandos. The focus then switches to an analysis of its modern combat and crisis response operations. Starting in chapter 2, the worldwide deployments of the commandos are discussed, beginning with the Balkan missions of the 1990s right up to the more current deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan and West Africa.

In telling this story, the aim of this book is to answer a series of broad questions: What led the Netherlands to maintain its Special Operations Forces after 1989 and how were they tasked in the international interventions and military expeditions of the 'New World Disorder' era? What and who were the Dutch commandos in this period, and how exactly were they organised? What made these forces suitable for special operations? And how were they used? Of particular interest is the continuing tension between how the instrument of SOF was viewed and what form their operations actually took. This latter aspect, the actual nature of the expeditionary operations of the Dutch Special Operations Forces since the end of the Cold War, is discussed in detailed reconstructions.