

# The Seven Year Hitch

(with apologies to Marilyn Monroe)

The title of this memoir refers to the almost seven years that I spent as a member of the British army during World War II. This time was lengthy periods of mind-numbing boredom, relieved by evenings of comradely fun, punctuated by bursts of sphincter-tightening terror. What follows is a synopsis of the events of which I was a part, from January 8, 1940, until I was discharged sometime in October 1946.

Soon after joining the Grenadier Guards it became obvious that the Guards and I were not compatible. When I was sentenced to 28 days in the Glasshouse in Aldershot for striking a sergeant and injuring him their feelings toward me changed from one of dislike to positive loathing. This worked to my advantage because when Winston Churchill insisted that the army brass organize the commandos they released me with alacrity.

In this unit I met a remarkable group of individuals, a number of whom became my companions over the course of the next few years. Our military training ranged from storming beaches to all manner of explosive devised. Early in 1941 we were sent to the Middle East but as General Wavell had no work for us we drifted around the country. I again offended the authorities and was sentenced to 28 days in a Field Punishment Centre, where I contracted typhoid and was hospitalized.

Richard James "Dick" Holmes  
1921-2017

Upon my release I was sent to assist in the evacuation of the British forces on the island of Crete. Shortly after my return to Egypt I was attached to a regiment involved in the invasion of Syria. My platoon was taken prisoner by the Vichy French but was released after 10 days when the French surrendered.

I spent several weeks up the desert with the Scots Guards, a short stint with the corps of Military Police, five months attached to a signals unit in Cairo and then the blow fell; a Grenadier Guards battalion arrived in the Middle East and I was recalled.

This renewal of relations was no more successful than the first. After participating in a night exercise in which my platoon officer not only did not understand the basic fundamentals of using a compass he seemed incapable of accepting the fact that the pistol he was holding in the palm of his right hand was affecting the camps that he was resting on top of it. In order to facilitate my departure from a situation that I considered a threat to my health I applied for a transfer to the Special Air Service (SAS), a parachute regiment that contained a number of my friends from my commando days. I began my service with that unit in June 1942 and continued to June 1945.

After several weeks of training I transferred to the Special Boat Service, the amphibious arm of the SAS. The late winter of 1942 and the spring of 1943 were spent in Beirut, and on my return to our base in Palestine, just south of Haifa, I reported for parachute training. Ten days and eight jumps later I was a qualified parachutist.

Soon after my return to camp I found myself selected for a raid on the island of Crete. Two days later we stood on the shores of the Mediterranean at Mersa Matruh. The following night we landed on the southern coast of the target. We marched across the island towards Heraklion but as there were no planes on the airfield we attacked a nearby fuel dump containing several thousand gallons of aviation fuel.

I made my way past a couple of dog patrols and placed bombs on tow of the dumps, withdrew and from a distance watched the fuel go up in flames. We returned to Mersa Matruh the following night. Upon our return to base I was informed that I had been awarded the Military Medal.

In early September 1943 60 members of the regiment, including myself, made our way to a small island south of Rhodes where an Italian admiral flew in to offer the surrender of the Italian-controlled Dodecanese Islands, just off the Turkish coast.

Throughout the months of September and October we disarmed the garrisons on various islands without any real opposition from the German forces in the area, but early in November several battalions of enemy troops landed on a number of the islands, finally forcing us to cross a narrow strip of water into Turkey.

We were interned for a couple of weeks before being transported through turkey to the Syrian border. We traveled by train to our base in Azib, north of Haifa, where we were welcomed back by our friends, who had believed us to either prisoners of war or dead.

After Christmas we learned how to ski in the Cedars of Lebanon, then returned to the Aegean, where we took up residence on a Greek caique [a small sailing vessel used in the eastern Mediterranean] moored in Turkish waters. For over six weeks we landed on various German occupied islands, eliminated the garrison, then returned to our floating base. I undertook a number of recces [reconnaissance missions] on some of the nearby islands, some on my own and some with a special friend, Jack Cree.

Mail caught up with us and one addressed to me was from my girlfriend back in England, the contents of which are explained in the following verse, sung to the tune of "Lily Marlene":

*Got a letter last week from my girl named Nan\*  
I've married a Canadian he's such a lovely man,  
I know I said I'd wait for you,  
But you're out there and I'm so blue,  
And you're a D-Day Dodger, out in Italy.*

\*Her name was Peggy, for which there are very few rhymes.

I read the letter on board a caique taking us back to the islands, tore it up and scattered the pieces on the waters of the Aegean, then got gloriously drunk, the hang-over lasting several days.



We spent another month carrying out a number of raids. One in particular sticks in my mind.

I was detailed to take a small party to the island of Nisiros ostensible to bring back a German prisoner. A Greek met us when we landed, guided us across the island and settled us in a cave to wait until it became dark. Unfortunately, the cave was at the head of a gully regularly patrolled by the Germans. Early the next morning an enemy soldier peered over the wall that partially covered the entrance, saw several scruffy characters that were armed to the teeth. He screamed a warning to his comrades and raced to reach the cover of a dry stone wall but was cut down. In the ensuing skirmish we managed to eliminate two more enemy soldiers before we effected our escape, abandoning the attempt to pick up a prisoner.

Early in June we drove back through and on the way we learned that Allied forces had landed in France. Perhaps the end of the war was in sight, after four and a half year.

In August 1944 the whole regiment, about 200 of us, was taken aboard a Dutch troopship and transported to Italy, landing in Brindisi. We moved about the country for a few weeks, then two officers and 10 men were briefed to cross the Adriatic Sea to Yugoslavia to destroy a railway bridge. The line was being used to evacuate enemy forces from Greece and Albania back to the Fatherland to prepare for a last ditch stand.

We demolished the bridge and were chased up into the mountains by German-led Croatian troops, where we wandered about for several days until the partisans found us and guided us back to our embarkation point. We were picked up and taken back to Italy.

After a short leave in Rome I made several more crossings of the Adriatic to recce strategic targets such as bridges. Christmas 1944 was spent in an abandoned school on top of Monte St. Angelo. When the weather warmed up I was part of a group that attacked a bridge in Yugoslavia and the group I led landed on a tiny beach but were forced to paddle our kayaks about 20 miles to an adjacent island when the raid was aborted. The navy picked us up the following day.

In early April 1945 I parachuted into northern Italy, accompanied by an explosives expert. We stayed in a camp in the mountains for a couple of weeks, instructing the partisans on the use of explosives, and then we were guided to the east coast where we were picked up by a submarine.

On May 11, 1945 the war in Europe came to a close, and I returned home after spending four-and-a-half years abroad.

My final contact with the Grenadier Guards was no less stressful than the first two, but I managed to avoid any major incidents and was demobbed [demobilized] with the rank of sergeant.

*Dick Holmes and his wife, Eve, live in Port Hope.*



Dick Holmes on right



Schedule No. (To be left blank)

Unit: Raiding Forces, Middle East

Division

300

Rank and Army or Personal No.

Gdsman

(Lance-corporal)

2617665

Grenadier Guards

Corps

M5

Approved: 24 July 43

Name: Richard James HOLMES

(Christian names must be stated)

~~SECRET~~

Action for which commended (Date and place of action must be stated)	Recommended by	Honour or Reward	(To be left blank)
<p>This NCO was responsible for two-thirds of the actual sabotage done on the fuel dump at PEZA on the night 4th July 1943. In spite of an extremely difficult approach march during which each man carried approximately 70 lbs, the attack was successful and over 150 tons of aviation fuel were destroyed. In spite of continual patrols with watchdogs passing close by him, he continued systematically placing bombs until the dump was covered, before finally withdrawing. The success of this attack and withdrawal entailing night marches in mountainous country of over 100 miles with heavy loads depended to a very great extent upon his keenness and determination.</p>	<p>Captain D. G. C. Sutherland MC, Commanding Special Boat Squadron, Raiding Forces, Middle East.</p>	<p>Immediate MM</p> <p><i>[Signature]</i> General, Commander-in-Chief, Middle East Forces:</p> <p><i>Ronald H. Schoe</i></p> <p>Lt-Gen C.G.S. 23.7.43</p>	14201
<p><u>(It is requested that details of the above operations should not be published owing to their secrecy).</u></p>	<p><i>J. G. Sutherland</i> Captain 21 Jul 43.</p>	<p><del>SECRET</del></p>	