

SAS Warlord: Shoot to Kill. By Tom Siegriste. Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2011

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Book Reviews

***SAS Warlord: Shoot to Kill.* By Tom Siegriste. Philadelphia, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-61200-035-0. Glossary. Pp. 299.**

Tom Siegriste's brief paperbound book purports to be the biography of a former sergeant major who served in Britain's Special Air Services (SAS) and was later recruited from his regular regiment to serve in a specialized unit known as the Military Reaction Force (MRF) operating in Belfast, Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. That unit is also named more accurately in scholarly sources as the Military Reconnaissance Force. The identity of Siegriste's protagonist, who used the pseudonym Jack Gillespie, remains unknown. According to Siegriste, Gillespie died while swimming in his pool in Spain, where he was living out his retirement in septuagenarian seclusion.

Unfortunately, since this book contains no supporting documentation, no interviews with anyone who could support Gillespie's recollections, and is written in a fashion that indicates the author might have had a screenplay in mind, its veracity is naturally suspect and its usefulness by scholars is seriously undermined. Nonetheless, the existence of the MRF has been substantiated, as have at least some of the operations discussed in the book. If Gillespie's tale is true, however, Siegriste's ghostwriting effort has done him a great disservice by presenting the story in a fashion that raises suspicion about its truth. In short, it reads like a bad adventure novel. Moreover, the MRF was short-lived, supposedly due to recognition of its amateurish, heavy-handed tactics. Gillespie's tale seems to add credence to that notion.

It is now known that the MRF operated as an undercover unit in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s, yet details of its sensitive role remain sketchy. Thus, one of the most instructive pieces of information that could potentially come out of a book of this sort is a discussion of the kinds of operational tactics that were used to counter Irish Republican Army (IRA) activities at that time, and the means by which some British operations

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were compromised. Because of the skepticism many readers will immediately feel, the book's usefulness is likely to be marred even in regard to the operational details.

If Siegriste and Gillespie are to be believed, Gillespie successfully operated by day by posing as a photojournalist, developing romantic relationships with local women—some of whom happened to have close relatives in the IRA—and fending off his lasses' jealous former suitors by knocking them senseless. When he worked, Gillespie would drive to the British Army compound in County Down from which the MRF operated, and which apparently was never under any type of surveillance by the IRA, drive out in an unmarked, hardened vehicle that had been stolen or seized locally and then altered to provide some armored protection, shoot up some IRA types in a tactic they called "shoot and scoot" (p. 18), and leave the Royal Irish Constabulary to sort out the mess and blame the entire affair on the Unionist paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force. Apparently the heavily armed MRF patrols simply prowled the streets in their unmarked cars on the off chance they would encounter some armed IRA men they could engage. There's no significant discussion of the role MI6 or other intelligence gathering efforts might have played, and as a senior non-commissioned officer, Gillespie surely would have been privy to that information in pre-operational briefings. Still, it seems likely that the patrols were designed to gather information in response to intelligence, and if things turned ugly, the MRF was prepared and apparently eager to engage targets of opportunity. In that sense, it also seems likely that the MRF did have "shoot to kill" orders, but whether that was their first priority or not remains subject to question.

When intelligence efforts are discussed, it is in typical dramatic fashion that highlights the stereotypical conflict between the "suits" and the operators. In one case, the mishandling of an informant by MI6 is blamed for the disastrous compromise and end of a British operation. In fact, Siegriste mentions only the failed operations that already have been acknowledged as reality and openly discussed in other sources, though he mentions none of those corroborating sources and never expands beyond his simple storytelling methods in an attempt to substantiate any portions of his tale. As a result, the book is not satisfactory as history, nor is it a good memoir. Readers are simply asked to take Jack Gillespie's story at face value. Naturally, there are a number of problems with that. First, as mentioned, there is rarely any supporting evidence provided or substantiation by other participants. Second, the subject of Siegriste's work conveniently dies of natural causes as noted in the closing chapter of the book, before his hair-raising tale was published. Third, it is decidedly one-dimensional storytelling; it is a biographical piece that places Jack

Gillespie as the centerpiece, but without the interpretation and context that Siegriste might have provided had he looked further. Is this really the memoir of Jack Gillespie, or is it a conglomeration of his memories of events he participated in, witnessed, or heard about from others and repeated to his ghostwriter, or is it largely fabrication? Readers are left to decide that on their own, but the evidence to back the first option is not strong.

All of those criticisms come prominently to view in one of the later chapters of the book where Gillespie reveals one of the bombshells that created a minor stir when the book was released in the United Kingdom. According to Gillespie, an MRF team had been assigned to assassinate IRA leader Gerry Adams during an IRA meeting scheduled for June 23 at a community center in Andersontown. The plan called for three carloads of MRF members to park along the main road near the community center and there to await Adams' arrival. One of the cars was to be parked only about fifty yards from the location where Adams was expected to enter the building. Once Adams arrived, he would be gunned down in a hail of bullets from the heavily armed MRF teams. Is it possible the IRA would have been so cavalier about Adams' security as to allow three carloads of heavily armed men to loiter within deadly range of one of their most important figures? As we all well know, Adams was not assassinated that day. Instead, just as Gillespie was about to give the "go" signal to his team, a frantic radio call ordered him to abort the mission and return to base. A split second longer and Adams would have been dead. Interviewed by the *Western Mail* about this claim, ghostwriter Siegriste unabashedly quotes himself from that interview: "Hopefully someone will read this account and publish this book, or make a film from the book or a TV series" (p. 270). Thus far, it appears no one has stepped forward to make that film or TV series, but Siegriste has at least seen his work in print. Unfortunately, I cannot recommend that readers of this journal purchase it. It is a short read, mildly entertaining, but not particularly well written, and best left on the bookstore shelf.

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