From the March 7th, 1943 issue of *Yank, The Army Weekly*
vol. 1 #38

Rangers in Training

In the bleak hills of Scotland, more Rangers are learning all the tricks of the Commando Trade

By CPL. BEN FRAZIER
YANK Staff Correspondent

SOMEWHERE IN SCOTLAND – A gloomy and forbidding house, grey with age and greyer still in the sodden weather, is the headquarters. A clear, cold stream leaps down the mountainside and rushes past the house, as if in an angry attempt to wash it away, massive though it is, into the lake a few hundred yards below. On three sides the mountains tower above the rugged glen and its house. On the fourth side is a lake.

A few fields are clear for pasturage; the rest is wilderness.

In one of the fields is their camp. Low, green and black, the Nissen huts barely emerge from the mud. The inevitable drill square is the only solid ground and it is always covered with puddles.

The mists hang heavy on the mountains. Occasionally through a rift the snow peaks can be seen. Then the clouds close in again. Off and on, mostly on, all day, every day, it rains – usually a fine cold mist which bathes the entire countryside in dampness and causes springs and brooks to gush from under every rock. The ground is one great sponge which oozes water at every step of heavy boots. Waterfalls from the mountain snows pour off the cliffs on every side, adding their quota to the wetness of the valley and the misery of the troops.

It is a grim and uncompromising spot for a grim and equally uncompromising school. This is the home, the training school for Rangers.

It is here that the volunteers for the Rangers and the Commando units come for their preliminary training. Here the requisite qualities are discovered and developed. If not the men are sent back to their old outfits. They must have team work, coordination and cooperation. They must be kind and considerate and friendly, and to think of the other fellow. There is no place for the big bruiser or the wise guy. Men trained here must have endurance, to be able to march, run, or climb all day, and all night, too, if necessary. And to do it on rations so slim an office worker would consider them a starvation diet. There is no sick call. If a man is sick, he may be given a pill, but he must go on. He might be given an easy detail for a few days like one fellow, almost voiceless from laryngitis, who was "resting up" by driving that well-known pneumonia buggy, the jeep, over the winter roads.

The character of the training is made immediately obvious right inside the gate. A row of graves lies beside the road, well-tended and carefully mounded. They are marked by crosses; on the crosses are inscriptions:

"These men DIED of their own stupidity. Watch your fieldcraft."

"This man forgot to examine his climbing rope."

"This man advanced over the top of cover."

On one cross between two graves – "These men bunched."

"This Royal Marine walked in front of his pal's rifle as a bullet left the barrel."

"This man took up a position on the skyline."

"This man failed to splay the pin of his grenade."

"This officer put a bomb down the 3-inch mortar the wrong way."

The Ranger or Commando volunteers are not told when they arrive whether or not the graves are real, but if they break any of the rules listed, their names are posted on the appropriate tombstones for a week. A very obvious and brutal implication, quite in keeping with this, the toughest of all military training schools.

The school for some time now has been turning out Commando units. The instructors are all from Commando units. They are tough and have the respect of every man under them.

"Come on, you lousy Americans, you ice cream guzzlers, you Coca-Cola hounds. Get a move on before I shoot the seat of your pants off."

That's the way the Commando captain talks to the Rangers, and the Rangers eat it up.

"We like him because he's always with us. He cusses us out from the top of a cliff, not the bottom. He's with us on 15-mile speed marches, and he keeps up on assault courses. He's always there, damn him." Or of another one, "He's got more goddam energy than the sun. Oh, they're plenty tough these instructors."

That is what the Rangers think of the officers and men who are training them. They are mostly British and Scotch, and occasionally from other Allied nations. They are not all young men. Some are definitely middle aged, but they are just as keen and just as wiry as the youngest. They are all volunteers.

The Rangers' day begins at 7.00 with Reveille by bagpipe. "We hate'm worse than bugles." Breakfast at 8. Drill begins at 9, with 40-minute periods until 12.45 when they knock off for lunch at one. There are 5-minute breaks between periods, but since the next period may be a mile away, they spend the "break" running to get there on time. At 2 the periods begin again until 5 when there is "tea," which consists of a very light supper. After chow, they have to clean their equipment, always soaked in water and caked with mud, until lights out at 9.30. Every couple of nights there are night problems, lasting from a couple of hours to all night.

For entertainment there are movies or a show of some kind three nights a week. If there is any time left over they can and do walk 7 miles to the nearest town for a good four-square meal. And 7 miles back.

They do get one break. They have no details, KP or such like.

Their periods may be PT (physical training). They get out in the company square, stripped to the waist in the February mountain air. Here you can see them in the raw – not loaded down and half-hidden with equipment as they usually are or covered with mud. They have not an ounce of excess weight, all muscle, and well-developed muscle. You look at their faces. They are America, all right. The keenest and the best of every type, mostly from infantry outfits. They were bored with their old units. They are a cross section: farmers, seamen, truck drivers, salesmen, horse trainers, miners, regular army, mechanics, factory workers. And all stocks. A sandy-haired, soft-spoken southerner, an equally sandy-haired Yankee, perhaps a descendant of Roger's original Rangers, a Pennsylvania miner with a Polish name he himself probably can't pronounce, dark Italians, Jewish, German. A complete cross section in miniature.

They run around the square to warm themselves. Their instructor is from a Commando unit, a veteran of several raids, now detailed for physical training. He has a chest like a barrel and a booming voice that rings through the valley.

They break into squads of 8 and carry large logs, whole tree trunks, away from a pile by the side of the square and toss them over their heads from one shoulder to the other or from one squad to another. Or they hold them between their legs and pass them forward while the end man runs from one end to the other to catch the oncoming log and keep it from falling.

They finish the exercise and run with the logs to the side and throw them into a pile, the devil taking the squad ahead if it's not out of the way in time.

As they go on to another period, the square is taken over by a Commando unit who, likewise stripped to the waist, are in a general rough and tumble which would break an ordinary man's bones.

The next period may be a drill with knives. The men attack each other in pairs. Or one may stalk an unsuspecting enemy. There are bayonet dummies with the heart and the main arteries painted on them – just as a guide. Just to help you with your aim.

"Get his kidneys," the instructor roars, "don't mind if you blunt your knife. You can get it sharpened again." The knives flash even on a dull day, and you expect half the squad will be dead from an excess of realism and enthusiasm.

The period might be the "death ride" – crossing the mountain stream on a little single rope stretched from a high tree on one side down almost to water level on the other.

"The first time I saw that son of a bitch, my eyes popped out of my head," one of the men said. They cross the stream simply by wrapping their toggle rope over the other rope and around their wrists, and off they go, field pack, rifle and all. Their instructor tosses grenades into the water as they hurtle across. Downstream there is a net rope to catch them if they fall.

Or they might try the less hair-raising, but more strenuous job of crossing by a horizontal rope pulling themselves over hand over hand. Or a trek up one of the surrounding cliffs, being lowered back down over a hundred feet by rope.

They might have a go at one of the assault courses which are built up the mountain sides. Starting from the protection of a gravel pit beside the road, they crawl through barbed wire, over a fence, into a

"house" made of old bits of rusty corrugated tin, then past bayonet dummies, down into a gully, slimy with mud. They advance in pairs, each man protecting his partner. One tow-headed fellow steps on a land mine. It explodes right in his face. He falls face down into the mud. Instantly the instructor leaps through the mud and is beside him to see if he is hurt. But he picks himself up, black except a little lock of yellow hair. He looks for his pal and the two start forward again. Over a "fence" about twenty feet high. They climb part way down and then jump into a mud hole up to their arm pits. It's all they can do to struggle out of it. Then they advance from hummock to hummock, throwing themselves into the mud and firing live ammunition over the heads of the men in front, aiming at the objective they are assigned to capture.

On the way back to chow, they wade into an icy mountain stream up to their waists and wash the mud off, then dip their rifles into the water and scrub the mud off them. Then they go to the mess hall and have lunch, a very frugal meal, hardly enough for a small bedridden old lady. They curse, but in a friendly way. "Any guy that gets through this will have to be knocked on the head on judgment day. He won't die, that's certain." "Hell, I'm half dead already," a very fit and healthy-looking fellow retorts. "The first week was the worst. After that we sort of got used to it. We like it now. Hell of a lot better than the infantry." "But the weather, oh, Jesus, the weather." It rains all the time. All day, every day, for weeks." "We've only got two pairs of boots, and they're wet all the time. All our clothes are wet all the time. We go to bed in wet clothes." "Do you see that spot of sunshine on the mountain side?" one of them said as we went out of the mess hall. "That's our ration of sunshine for the day."

"We're going to climb that mountain tomorrow," the fellow added. "We're going on a thirty-six hour problem, cooking whatever food we can take or find, and everything."

The afternoon periods might be thrown into one for a speed march. Twelve miles or fifteen miles, with combat equipment and rifles. The Rangers have broken all speed march records. Fifteen miles in 2 hours and 30 minutes. Twelve miles in 1 hour and 46 minutes, against the old record of one hour and fifty-eight minutes. They double-time for a while then march fast-time for a while. Behind them comes a sandy-haired captain of the Commandos, who looks as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. If the men get tired and start to get out of file, he just sends a few rounds from his tommy gun up between the files. And the butter still doesn't melt in his mouth. If he is not along there is a sergeant who takes his place and he's an even better shot.

Or they might have an assault landing to attack and destroy an enemy strong point or objective.

They set out in little boats from a sheltered cove.

And as they do so, nearly two hundred years drop away. History repeats itself, in setting and command, in name and objective. Surely this is not a Scotch loch. Surely it is Lake Champlain, with its wooded deserted shores. It is Rogers and his Rangers slipping up the shore of the lake to attack the French supply dump somewhere in Quebec. Nearer and nearer they come. Is that Rogers with his curious flat-sided hat familiar from the cover of "Northwest Passage"? Surely you are looking at that first Commando raid of the first Rangers. Surely this is not modern war, with those little canoes and the paddles.

Rat tat tat tat tat tat. . . . .

The sandy-haired Commando captain and his tommy gun bring you back with a violent jerk from Lake Champlain to the Scotch loch, from 1759 to 1943.

The sandy-haired captain is just giving them a little taste of landing under fire. The bullets whip up little flecks of white on the surface of the lake, a few yards from the boats. Red tracers sail out onto the lake and ricochet high into the air. The captain moves his fire from one boat to another, giving them all a little toughening up. His dearest aim in life is to shoot a few holes in the paddles.

The boats near the land. Other Commando instructors toss hand grenades and set off land mines on the bank. Mud and water shower the invaders.

Once ashore, they fan out and advance on their objective. Little detachments creep forward from hummock to hummock. With only eight or ten feet between groups, the captain sends a stream of machine gun bullets in between. Red tracers almost clip the soles off their boots as the men lie in the mud, firing at the enemy dummies up the hillside. A land mine goes off, sending mud and turf and tree stumps sailing through the air over the men. One man falls flat in the mud and lies motionless right in the line of the machine gun fire. A doctor sees him, wriggles out on his belly through the mud. He dare not stand up; machine gun bullets are whizzing over his head. The Commando captain has not a thought of holding his fire just to help the doctor. Eventually the medic reaches the casualty and drags him to safety. The "casualty" smiles. He had a strained muscle in his leg, so he had been made a "casualty" for the exercise, and he had so completely entered into the spirit that he flopped right in the line of fire.

Land mines, grenades, mortars, tommy guns and rifle fire cover the hillside, but the Rangers advance slowly from cover to cover up the slope, the tracers just over their heads.

The "outpost" is captured and destroyed and the Rangers retire to the boats. The boats put out and the captain sets to for another try at the paddles.

As the last tracer lashes a red path across the lake and into the sky, as the last grenade erupts on the shore, and the echo of the last machine gun bullet has died away in the remote fastness of the mountains, history slips away again. . . .

Rogers is leading his men up to the shores of Lake Champlain, then, as now, under the friendly eyes of the British officers. Across that little cove where the Rangers are paddling so furiously, history has turned one complete cycle.