

# Royal Naval Party 67

## “To Recover and Return”

### **Background**

This was a Royal Navy special forces unit sometimes referred to as Hunter Force (later Spence Force). It was formed under the command of Lt Commander Andrew Hunter RNR (Royal Naval Reserve) in December 1996. It was given the role of dropping agents by sea and working with 21 (Artists Rifles) SAS (and later 27 SAS) to recover shot down pilots by sea. Later it was also given the role of acting as a courier service to the Scandinavian countries. In at least one operation it was used to deliver a party of SBS behind enemy lines for a raid (Operation Pigeon in late 1998). From mid 1997 to late 1998 the unit additionally was responsible for a number of raids (using troops from the attached “Borneo” Company, 45 Commando Royal Marines. From December 1998 the unit returned to the pure delivery and recovery role. In early 2001 it was further tasked with helping to supply the North Sea oil rigs (where it worked with the Oil Rig Protection Group, Royal Marines).

### **Selection**

Selection for the unit was by application. Volunteers of either sex completed an application form and returned it without knowing what the application was for. Each applicant was scored based on their answers. Those who achieved a score regarded as satisfactory were invited for interview. This was undertaken at Dover Castle by a board of three and conducted initially weekly then once the force was established monthly. The first was an officer who was already a member of Naval Party 67 (Lt Commander Hunter often undertook this role himself), the second was a psychiatrist specialising in how people coped in extremely stressful situations and the third was either a language specialist (if the candidate stated they had native level fluency of a language) or a second Naval Party 67 officer (if not). None would wear uniform or rank for the interview. These would all throw seemingly random

**“Wanted applicants for hazardous duty**

*Individuals are required to undertake hazardous duties. These duties will be disclosed only to successful applicants. Candidates should be fit, able to swim 500m in normal clothing, be free from tattoos which can be identified as British or containing English language elements and mentally robust. Qualification in any of the following trades is regarded as advantageous but their lack will not prohibit a candidate:*

- \* marine engineer*
- \* medical (any speciality)*
- \* radio operator*
- \* linguist*
- \* master at arms*

*Applicants should complete form RN823 (1996) (obtainable from their unit admin officer) entering the reference RN-945-67-06 before returning it via their admin office.”*

*Extract from Admiralty Order 279(96)*

questions at the candidate (it was normal practice to swap questions between the panel to further confuse the candidate). After the interview the board reviewed the scores given and those who were regarded as potential candidates were invited back into the room where they were advised of their success and given a rail warrant for travel to Poole dated around three weeks later.

## **Training**

On arrival in Poole they were met by an obviously military man in civilian clothes who would advise them to get in the back of a transit van with no windows. To the six to ten students, a plant would often be added to



*Figure 1: Recruits were also put through an intensive fitness regime, here trainees of intake 4 are seen undertaking the dreaded mud run. Note that lower levels of fitness were not a bar to selection (provided the CFT was passed), instead the idea was to show recruits they could push themselves further than they thought. MoD*

help assess their attitudes during the journey. Having been driven around for about an hour, the door was opened and they were told to leave all their things and form up for a Combat Fitness Test (CFT). After this they were allocated accommodation in four man rooms (regardless of rank). Training was conducted in batches with up to two intakes being trained together on a subject until all bar the resistance to interrogation package was completed. Subjects covered were:

*“We had completed training and had all had a beer or two to celebrate before going to bed when I was woken up by movement in the room. I sat up and saw two black jump suited figures wearing black balaclavas. One held me down while the other put something over my mouth and nose that knocked me out.*

*I woke up naked tied to a chair with a bucket of water being thrown over me. There were lights in my eyes but I could see there were three of them. My blood went cold, the man with the bucket was in a Soviet GRU uniform, there was a woman in everyday civilian clothes eyeing me distastefully and behind the desk was a man in a suit with a Communist Party lapel badge. He started to speak quietly in accented English, so quietly I had to strain to hear him,*

*'good afternoon Sub-lieutenant Jennings, let us not beat around the bush, you are party of Naval Speznatz and you know that entitles us to take you out and shoot you. That would be a waste, it is up to you, tell us what we want to know and you get to be treated as a War Prisoner, otherwise after some...unpleasant things you will become another sad statistic. It is your choice.'*

*By now I was confused, was I a prisoner or was I in an exercise. I must have looked confused as he continued,*

*'you are wondering where you are I*

*have no doubt, you are in the basement of the Soviet Embassy in The Republic of Ireland after one of our Speznatz teams attacked your base. You were drugged and smuggled here by our friends in the Irish Republican Army. Now I have no time to waste, let us start with the big four as no doubt you will want to stick with these.'*

*I really didn't know what to say, I hesitated and another bucket of water was thrown over me. That was just the start, the next 24 hours (although it felt at least three times that!) was a nightmare of stress positions, hooding, white noise, beatings, being dragged back into the room, verbal abuse from the woman (who I nicknamed Cruella in my head), including a number of lesbian suggestions and some reasonable suggestions from Mr Suit such as a cup of tea, a Kit-Kat and a jumpsuit if I just signed to say I was being treated well.*

*Finally I was dragged into a room (still hooded) and asked by Mr Suit if I was prepared to talk yet. When I said 'I'm afraid I can't answer that question,' I heard him sigh and say something in Russian regretfully before I was forced to my knees and heard a pistol being cocked before feeling the metal at the base of my skull. All I could think was I wish I had had time write a letter of goodbye to my family before the hood was pulled off, a blanket put round my shoulders and Lt Commander*

- ▲ small boat handling and sea survival – mainly conducted by members of 539 Assault Squadron, Royal Marines
- ▲ weapon handling – conducted by Royal Marines and SBS personnel and covering small arms, foreign small arms and support weapons
- ▲ speciality training – students usually completed two modules depending on skills already held. Ideally this training was aimed more at developing skills already held into those more applicable for the size of vessel used by the unit. Specialist subjects were communications and signalling, language and deception, mechanical marine engineering, demolitions (the least often taught), medical and marine catering.

Once this training was completed, students were then unceremoniously grabbed, drugged and subject to interrogation (this could be from their rooms, a snatch as they were sent on an errand off base or even as they were walking out of the NAAFI). After an intensive 24 hour interrogation, they were formally accepted into the unit and sent to Ashford in Kent for a resistance to interrogation course run by the Intelligence Corps of the Army. Ideally an intake that had trained together would be assigned to the same ship under an experienced commander. The pass rate of the course was approximately 55% of which a quarter were female.

## **Vessels used**

Naval Party 67 used a number of vessels, details of these are hard to come by but the following are known to have been used. There have undoubtedly been others but the records remain sealed under the fifty year rule (future historians will no doubt appreciate the surviving records).

- ⤴ HMS Wolf (pennant number 271), an Osa II class formerly belonging to the East German Navy and purchased from the German government in mid 1995. This was usually used where speed was important and/or the potential rewards were high. The boat survived the war and is currently being restored by the Imperial War Museum, Plymouth.



Figure 2: A nasty surprise, HMS Wolf sometimes mounted a 7.62mm minigun which has caught this pirate boat by surprise. Taken by Petty Officer Colin Hart off Gdansk in late 1998. MoD

- ⤴ HMS Storm (pennant number 561), this is known to be a captured Polish coastal defence boat. Sources differ to the class which was either an Osa II or a Komar. It was lost in late 1999 with all hands in the Baltic.
- ⤴ HMS Winter (pennant number 842), this was a captured Polish Shershen class coastal defence boat which was used on a number of operations on the Baltic coast including one mission that took the ship a short way down the Vistula. The craft was last heard from in June 2000 when it was again operating near the Vistula estuary dropping agents from the Free Polish Government ahead of the NATO operations in the north. No emergency signal was received and the reason for the loss of contact is unknown.
- ⤴ HMS Stiletto (pennant number 532), a CP2204 class boat originally built for the Italian Coast Guard by Swan Hunter. With the outbreak of hostilities it was

*"I was on the run from the KGB near Warsaw and had managed to link up with an escape or 'rat' line being run by the Free Polish Government. They got word out where I was. About a week later as I was moved around various safe houses, Radio Free Europe broadcast a message stating that 'Alexi from Gdansk has bought a new blue BMW with a CD player.' That was the signal I was to be taken to a certain beach in two days. Well, to cut a long story short, I was taken there and at the correct time we sent the Morse message out to sea. A small boat appeared with some of the most disreputable cut throats I have ever seen, they really looked like they had been dragged from the age of Nelson or perhaps Drake. Beards everywhere, one even had gold stud ear rings. They spoke fluent Polish and except for the weapons they had could have been Polish fishermen. They got me back to the fishing boat where I was given a tot of rum by a woman who looked as disreputable as the men. It was only then I realised I was on a Royal Navy ship! Admittedly an unusual looking one that smelled of fish but still a Royal Navy ship."*

*Patricia Cobb, MI6*

*Imperial War Museum Archives*

taken into Royal Navy service and used in the Mediterranean based out of Cyprus where it undertook operations in the Aegean, regularly disguised as one of the ten already delivered. In early 2000 it was mothballed in Cyprus due to a lack of spares. It is known that it was used in Operation Heron in conjunction with the SBS to rescue the pro-NATO General Calvari from his island prison in October 1997.

- ⤴ HMS Grey (pennant number 533), another CP2204 class boat taken into Royal Navy service. This was lost off the coast of Sicily to an Italian airstrike from a Tornado in mid 1999. The survivors were rescued by HMS Stiletto and added to the crew (the Tornado was shot down by a Stinger from HMS Stiletto).



*Figure 3: HMS Pharaoh being resupplied by Lynx helicopter from a Royal Navy ship. This was not a common way of resupplying but was not unknown. MoD*

- ⤴ HMS Pharaoh (pennant number 710), this was an Arab Dhow that operated out of Gibraltar and is known to have carried out operations along the coastlines of Libya, Algeria and Tunisia. It is believed lost in the nuclear strike on Gibraltar.

- ⤴ HMS Tourney (pennant number unknown), details

on this are lacking, it is not recorded in any official records but a recently declassified CIA file mentions the name in connection with an operation to drop an agent off the coast of Belgium in May 1999. No further details are available and most experts believe that the name is incorrect.

- ⤴ HMS Plaice (no number), a fishing trawler taken into service in mid 1998. It is known to have been seconded to MI6 for operations to drop and retrieve agents from the Republic of Ireland in 1999. It was retired from military service in 2007 but still operates as a fishing boat out of Newquay in Cornwall. It featured in the 2018 BBC documentary, “Naval Special Operations, Naval Party 67.”
- ⤴ HMS Tuna (no number), a fishing trawler initially used to covertly deliver specialists to the North Sea oil rigs from March 2000, having been used prior to this in a training role. It is still listed on the Royal Navy strength and used in a fishery protection role.

- ⤴ HMS Scampi (no number), a fishing trawler known to have been used in the covert restarting of the North Sea oil fields. A diplomatic incident occurred in 2005 when it was boarded and searched by the French in international waters (the commander Lieutenant Harry Watson managed to dispose of the weapons, code books and other incriminating material before heaving to). The row was quickly allowed to die by both sides.
- ⤴ HMS Eel (no number), a fishing trawler operating out of Cyprus. This had an eventful career operating around the Greek islands. It is known that it was used in Operation Measure to rescue a number of NATO pilots from the Italian mainland. It was sunk in a storm in March 2001.
- ⤴ HMS Stagecoach (no number), a fishing trawler, taken into service in March 2000 to provide a regular courier service to Norway. It is more (obviously) heavily armed than many of Naval Party 67's trawlers, the foredeck has an Oerlikon GAI-D01 twin 20mm cannon with an improvised gun shield and an L7A2 GPMG mounting on each side of the bridge (the weapons are normally stored inside the bridge to reduce corrosion) plus the crew's small arms. This armament is intended to warn off potential attackers.



*Figure 4: HMS Stagecoach crew manning one of the L7A2 GPMGs. Unusually they are wearing helmets and anti-flash (i.e. burns) equipment. This was not worn in*

### Naval Party 67 in print and film

Naval Party 67 due to their secretive nature have not appeared in many works of fiction. The best known are:

“Operation Hijack” by Esther, Ruth and Jennifer ffoukes – Raven Press - 2023– this features a desperate mission by a small group of Ornitto Group to recapture an oil rig from a band of ruthless terrorists with a nuclear bomb. Not noted for accuracy. It is rumoured that a film may follow. Naval Party 67 are responsible for the delivery of the initial assault group.

“When Mountains Fall” the third in the revived James Bond film series starring Alistair Higgins features members of the Naval Party 67 (or at least a reasonably similar looking unit) delivering Bond and the SBS to the villain's hideout at the film's climax. The novelization incorrectly identifies them as Naval Party 63.

“Fishing for Trouble” was a cartoon series created by Trevor Williamson (a member of the unit) featuring the misadventures of a fictitious ship that although never stated is a member of Naval Party 67 as it follows their methods and activities (although it inconsistently jumps between sections). It was originally published unofficially in instalments internally within the unit but a collection of the cartoons was published in 2011 by Naval Books (this selection omitted a number that identified individuals and a number were also removed to preserve secrecy of certain events).

*action and the items were possibly worn as a way to hide the identities of the crew. Of note is the extension bar on the mount running to the trigger. MoD*

## **Dress**

Dress was very dependant on the role being followed, usually the crew dressed as local fishermen. In the Mediterranean, shorts and flip flops were almost universal. Fishermen's caps were popular in all theatres. Those crewing foreign naval vessels tended to a more military appearance and the correct dress, those posing as fishermen tended towards beards and long hair.

In December 2001 members and former members of the unit were awarded a distinctive badge, a stylised red Osa in red on a black patch 2" across and 1" high worn on the left upper arm. In 2002 a red 67 was added under the Osa extending the centre of the badge downwards by 1/2". At the same time the right to wear the badge was extended to Royal Marine members and former members of the unit.

## **Weapons**

Pistols of assorted types were issued to the unit, many being captured examples and a few were silenced (mainly of NATO origin). Sterling SMGs were popular along with a limited number of silenced L34A1s. Rifles were predominantly the L47 series of rifles (the AK47 family) with a mix of other oddities. Sniper rifles were popular for use at sea where the longer range was appreciated. Heavier weapons were mixed, PK machine guns were common for use use in the Baltic and MG3s in the Mediterranean, in the UK area the L7A2 GPMG was the most common. RPG7s were widely carried alongside M72s and the occasional LAW80. Units operating where there was an air threat often carried Stingers, Blowpipe or (occasionally) SA14s. At least one unit carried a MILAN II or AT4 (sources vary and the only photo is too blurred to tell).



*Figure 5: L47A5 (AK74) taken into British service. Popular for reliability and for the fact that fishermen would not look out of place having these on the Baltic Coast. Most preferred the base L47 or the A1, A2 or A3 with the heavier 7.62S round. MoD*

## **Equipment**

Members of the unit were all issued an escape kit. This contained ten gold coins (value \$10 each), a blood chit in the local language promising a reward for safe return of the individual, a silk map of the area operating in, a clasp knife and a button compass. These were all issued as individual items to be hidden by the individual as the dress varied so considerably.

## **Cover Story**

All members of the unit were required to create a cover story intended to hold for 48 hours after capture. In most cases this was as a shipwrecked sailor of a neutral nation. After this if under too much pressure, they were then to fall back on a story that they were indeed a sailor from the Royal Navy who was attempting to escape and evade home (these stories would be carefully co-ordinated between a crew prior to each mission).

## **Organisation (December 1996)**

- ^ Headquarters, Administration & Support unit
- ^ 1 Section



## **Organisation (August 1997)**

- ⤴ Headquarters, Administration & Support Section
- ⤴ Training & Selection Section
- ⤴ Northern Section
- ⤴ Mediterranean Section – in the process of forming on Cyprus
- ⤴ Air section – a flight of two Sea King helicopters from the reformed Royal Naval Air Squadron 1700 were attached in order to allow limited resupply by air while at sea or to extract recovered personnel (these were transferred from the Air Sea Rescue role and apparently retained their yellow paint scheme as a cover)

## **Organisation (October 1997)**

- ⤴ Headquarters, Administration & Support Section
- ⤴ Training & Selection Section
- ⤴ Northern Section
- ⤴ Mediterranean Section
- ⤴ Air Section – the RNAS aircraft remained in role for Northern Section and it appears that a UH1 fitted with a winch was being used to support Mediterranean section (the origin of this is completely unknown)
- ⤴ Attached “Borneo” Company 45 Commando, Royal Marines – created to provide “muscle” on certain operations



*Figure 6: UH1 being fitted with an underslung road prior to a resupply mission. Interestingly it is painted in British pattern but carries no markings. MoD*

## **Organisation (January 1999)**

- ⤴ Headquarters, Administration & Support Section – now incorporating the training & selection functions
- ⤴ Northern Section
- ⤴ Mediterranean Section – from October 1997 to December 1999 this was the separate Naval Party 912
- ⤴ C (Canadian) Section – formed from Royal Canadian Navy personnel and used in the Baltic and Arctic
- ⤴ Some sources show an X Section composed of foreign nationals that may or may not have included C Section. Details of this are unclear and it is unclear if it ever existed.

- ⤴ N (Netherlands) Section made up mainly of Dutch volunteers (primarily from Whiskey Company, Royal Netherlands Marines) and tasked with operations in Holland.

## **Organisation (February 2001)**

- ⤴ Headquarters, Administration & Support Section
- ⤴ Baltic Section
- ⤴ Northern Section
- ⤴ Mediterranean Section
- ⤴ C (Canadian) Section with Admiral Halsey subsection of US volunteers remaining after Operation Omega
- ⤴ N (Netherlands) Section

## **Commanders**

- ⤴ Lt Commander (later Commander) Andrew Hunter (December 1996 – March 2001) – medical retirement
- ⤴ Commander Hugh Spence (March 2001 – January 2006) – retired
- ⤴ Commander David Hodges (January 2006 - )

## **Famous Members**

- ⤴ The spy novelist Ian Lambert was a member of the unit from 1996-2002 based mainly in the support section. He later used some of his experiences in creating the character of Duncan Last. Many of the characters in the series were inspired by the larger than life characters in the unit.
- ⤴ Lesley Evans the actress acted as a radio operator with the unit from 1999-2004. She is known to have been involved in an operation on the Baltic coast of Poland in 2002 in an attempt to find Sir Ian Burton's missing son.
- ⤴ Sergeant Robert “Spud” Murphy, formerly of 42 Commando, Royal Marines was posthumously awarded the Military Medal in unusual circumstances. Operating in the Mediterranean on board a fishing boat, they were ordered to heave to by a suspicious Italian coast guard patrol. While appearing to do so, the members of HMS Salmon covertly readied their weapons. Opening fire they caught the Italian Coast Guard by surprise. This was not enough however to overcome the Italians who returned fire, wounding Murphy who was manning an MG3 in the legs. The same fire killed his number 2 on the gun, Marine Ron Summers. Murphy continued firing despite his wounds, drawing more fire from the Italians. He was further wounded in the chest but still continued to fire. A third burst from the Italians severed two fingers of his right hand and damaged the weapon. Murphy tried to crawl to pick up a

Stirling SMG on the deck but could not reach it. With the Italians boarding he drew his pistol but with the damage to his hand he was unable to cock it. Taken prisoner he died of his wounds. The story would normally have ended there but the Italian captain was so taken by the actions of Sgt Murphy he wrote to the British Ambassador in the Vatican enclosing a picture of Murphy (as there was no other way to identify him), recommending Sgt Murphy be recognised for his actions. The ambassador passed this on to his intelligence staff who recognised what unit would have been involved and forwarded the letter and photo to the Royal Naval headquarters on Cyprus who instituted the paperwork for his medal.

## ***The Rescue of the Dutch Royal Family***

This mission is perhaps the best known exploit of Naval Party 67. In March 1998, twenty members of Whiskey Company Royal Netherlands Marines were landed in Northern (unoccupied) Holland. Linking up with members of the 101<sup>st</sup> Reserve Infantry Brigade they were transported south to near the front line. Under the cover of a diversionary attack they crossed the front line and continued to move south. Linking

up with a resistance group based in Boskoop, they were escorted to a remote farm house. There they met up with their target, the Royal Family of the Netherlands.

*“Over the years I have had many wonderful meals and banquets but the one that sticks most in my mind is the one I was given by the British Royal Navy when I was rescued from my home country. Nothing I have ever tasted was as wonderful as the ‘fried egg banjo’ as he called it, the egg still dripping grease and with black crunchy bits and the bread with oil covered finger prints. This and the tea with a tot of navy rum were magnificent. That is why my next song is ‘Hearts of Oak,’ the Royal Naval march as everything I hear it I think of that meal and the men and women who rescued us.”*

*Princess Maxima of the Netherlands and Princess of Orange*

The initial plan had been to attempt a pick up by the RAF but two attempts by 7 Squadron were both abandoned as no safe route could be found through the French air defences even when flying NOE. A backup plan to fly out the queen as a rear seat passenger in a two seat Harrier of 911 (Special Operations) Squadron was also abandoned as the Queen insisted that all the family be retrieved. As a result the second back up plan was implemented and the group advised through a broadcast on Radio Free Europe (“the mathematicians have considered the difficulties in calculating the depth of the well”). This advised them that the pick up would be in five days time at Wassenaar.

Moving by night and avoiding any contact the group reached the rendezvous safely and at the scheduled time gave the signal of three short flashes of a torch followed by one long flash. At this point what appeared to be a normal fishing boat sent ashore a small boat containing members of Naval Party 67. After exchanging passwords the Dutch Royal family were ferried out to the fishing

boat (which turned out to HMS Pike) and ushered below. Here they were met by Lt Commander Hillary Reece the chief medical officer of Naval Party 67 who after a quick check of their injuries gave them a tot of rum and a large plate of sandwiches.

Moving quickly off the coast, the boat was illuminated by a French search radar and the radio operator broadcast the emergency code for help. Soon a French ship was seen on an intercept course, fortunately as soon as HMS Pike reached international waters HMS Edinburgh, a Type 42 Batch 3 destroyer was waiting to greet it. Getting between the French ship and HMS Pike, Commander William Taggart the captain of HMS Edinburgh radioed the French ship and advised them that the ship they were chasing was British registered and in international waters and he was prepared to defend it if required. After a flurry of protests from the French, Taggart retorted that he was “no longer prepared to listen to the whining of the descendants of those who fought at Agincourt and Trafalger and that if international law is not followed the consequences will be on your head.” At this point two RAF Harriers from 911 Squadron also appeared on the French radar. The French backed down, unaware of the nature of the cargo of HMS Pike. Within hours the Dutch Royal family were landed in Plymouth where they were greeted with an honour guard drawn from Borneo Company, 45 Commando, Royal Marines.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Edition Characters**

Entry 10+ Con gives a bonus

Skills: SBH:30 INT:10 CRM:30 PST:20 MEC:10

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Edition Characters**

Naval Party 67 Officer and Enlisted

Entry: May only be joined during war term by British or Canadian characters. INT+CON+AGIL=15+. Officer requires a commission in the Royal Navy, Royal, Royal Canadian Navy or Royal Marines.

1<sup>st</sup> term skills:

- ⤴ Small boat: 2
- ⤴ Small arms: 1
- ⤴ Heavy weapons: 1
- ⤴ Medical:1 or Mechanic: 1 or Navigation: 1

Subsequent term, choose 5 skills from:

- ⤴ Combat engineer
- ⤴ Disguise
- ⤴ Fishing
- ⤴ Forgery
- ⤴ Heavy weapons
- ⤴ Interrogation

- ^ Language
- ^ Machinist
- ^ Mechanic
- ^ Medical
- ^ Navigation
- ^ Observation
- ^ Persuasion
- ^ Small arms
- ^ Small boat
- ^ Stealth

Contacts: 2 per term, military or intelligence (foreign on 7+)

## ***Links***

Unless noted all links are to other articles I have written and posted.

- ^ Sheltie Holiday, Challenge 43: These are the ideal delivery/recovery unit during this scenario. A small group of PCs could be supplemented by a member or two after the shipwreck. Alternatively the pick up could enable the group to be attached to the unit for further scenarios.
- ^ Oil Rig Protection Group Royal Marines
- ^ Radio Free Europe
- ^ British Small Arms Guide for the details of the L47 series.

## Photos

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