

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**“Nothing Impossible: A Portrait of The Royal Marines”**  
**General Editor: Lt. Colonel Ewen Southby-Tailyour OBE**  
**(ISBN 978-1- 906507237; Third Millennium Publishing; £45)**

This beautifully produced coffee table book has been published as the 350<sup>th</sup> birthday of the Royal Marines’ “hoves into view” in 2014. It is the first official portrait of this famous Corps for more than 20 years and in some 200 glossy pages sets out to capture “the life, activities, capabilities and ethos” of the Marines, then and now. Some 120 first person essays detail the history, service and training of the Corps, there is a Foreword by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh (Captain General Royal Marines), much fascinating archive material has been unearthed and the whole production is reinforced and enhanced by superb images of the Marines in action today commissioned specially for the book.

Pulling it all together was the challenging task given in late-2008 to Ewen Southby-Tailyour (55-59), now as well known for his military histories as for his military exploits in the Falklands campaign. Working with him was the leading photojournalist Julian Andrews. In less than two years they managed to compile a truly memorable picture of the ups and downs of one of the British armed services most colourful and courageous fighting units down the centuries, with a special emphasis on the Corps’ activities since the end of the Cold War.

Reviewing a book like this is difficult. The reader can start at the beginning and go through to the end. Or, as I suspect is more normal, he or she can dip into this cornucopia and extract items of interest in a more random fashion. Either way, do not be put off by the “coffee table” designation. This is a serious and educational study that should be read as well as looked at and is full of fascinating insights on every page.

Did you, for example, know that there are 7,800 serving Royal Marines and 6,000 RM veterans today? Or that the Corps peaked in numbers at 78,500 at the end of World War 11? Or that the Marines were founded by an Order in Council on 28 October 1664 and received the title ‘Royal’ only in 1802? Or that nine Royal Marines have been awarded the Victoria Cross? Or that RM units have seen active service in 14 different locations worldwide since the end of conflict in the South Atlantic in 1982 and have been in action somewhere in the world every year since 1945?

A well-designed Timeline stretching over 14 pages lists just about every activity of any significance undertaken by the Marines since 1664. The first recorded action seems to have been against the Dutch at the Battle of Lowestoft in 1665, the most recent the ongoing commitments of 40 Commando Brigade in Helmand province, Afghanistan. In 1704 the Marines captured Gibraltar; 211 years later Marines led the allied landings at Gallipoli in World War 1. The first Royal Marine Commando was established in 1942 and two years later Marine commandos played a leading role in the invasion of France.

Disasters, as well as triumphs, are faithfully recorded including a ruinous Royal Marine debacle in Russia in 1918 following the Bolshevik takeover, the Dieppe Raid into France in August, 1942, and the decimation of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Marines at Tobruk, North Africa, a month later.

The second half of the book brings the reader up-to-date. Sections on life in the Marines since the early 1990s cover the Commando Brigade, the wider corps, training, sport and corps family life. The book ends with 12 pages of images showing a year in the life of the Royal Marines today. One of the contributors is Colonel Rory Copinger-Symes (79-86) – at the time he wrote his essay Commanding Officer of 1 Assault Group Royal Marines, a multi-faceted unit that provides “a continuous thread” running through the Marines’ amphibious capability.

If there is a downside to an exhaustive portrait like this it is the overload of military jargon – familiar, no doubt, to everyone with a Royal Marine background but a jarring sentence-stopper to anyone else. More than 200 military acronyms are listed in an exhaustive Glossary at the back of the book giving some idea of the scale of the problem.

That said, this is a handsome, sumptuously illustrated volume that would be a worthwhile addition to every library and to every collection of books about British military life. “A birthday celebrating 350 ‘long, rough and glorious’ years (Sir Winston Churchill’s words) is a very special one and needs marking in the most distinguished way possible,” writes Ewen Southby-Tailyour in his introductory notes. “This portrait book, offering selected snapshots from many of those years, is such a commemoration.” More than that, it is an affectionate and balanced work that will launch the Royal Marines happily into the 36<sup>th</sup> decade of their long and proud history.

*by ROBIN KNIGHT*