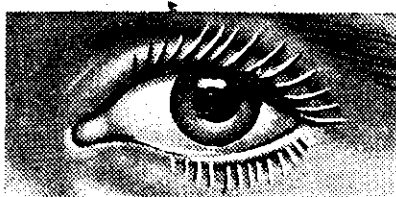




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## BOOKS

### COMMANDO FIGHTER

*WINGED DAGGER: ADVENTURES ON SPECIAL SERVICE.* By Roy Farran. Collins, London, through the British Council.

USING the term in its widest sense, the commando type of soldier must be as old as organised warfare. That is, the fighting man who likes to work by himself or in small parties, who prefers independence of action to working in a mass under restraint; the scout, the raider, the operator behind the enemy lines. Up to about the time of the first World War, however, he was handicapped by the severe limitations placed on his mobility and his striking power. He could travel on the water only as fast as the wind would take him (in the days before steam) and on land only as fast as a horse could move. A complete change began in 1914-18, when the submarine, the motor boat and the aeroplane came into use to place agents swiftly in enemy territory. By making it possible to jump over the enemy's lines, the aeroplane and the parachute provided armies with a new arm. The second war, however, was far more fluid, and in the meantime the technique of dropping men and equipment had been enormously improved. This very greatly widened the range of commando activity, and consequently the opportunities for daring action by fully armed and highly mobile men. There could not be a better example of this than an operation mentioned in this book of Roy Farran's. When he was working behind the lines in France, planes dropped food, clothing and mails for his unit with the Germans only three miles away.

The second World War, then, was a paradise for the dare-devil irregular. There are countless stories of his deeds, but only a very small fraction will ever get into print. Roy Farran, who has been in the news by reason of his trial and acquittal on a charge of murdering a terrorist in Palestine, and the subsequent killing of his brother by a bomb intended for himself, was one of these men. His high-nosed imperious face reminds one of the young Duke of Wellington, and of that most aloof and implacable of British cricket captains, Douglas Jardine. Farran tells his story in a book of nearly four hundred pages, packed as tight with fighting as a well-prepared parcel for England is with food. Here is the day-to-day business of war in the field as a subordinate and then a leader sees it—especially war behind the lines, preparation and action, the details of cut and thrust and parry, advance and retreat, success and failure, together with, in commando operations, daily contact with the people of the occupied country, partisans and civilians. It is important to note that the "Winged Dagger," symbol of Roy Farran's commando work, does not come on the scene till page 155. By then this youth, only 18 or so when he joined up, had fought in a tank in North Africa, struggled alongside the New Zealanders to save Crete, been captured, escaped from Athens, and nearly died of thirst at sea, and taken part in the retreat to Alamein.



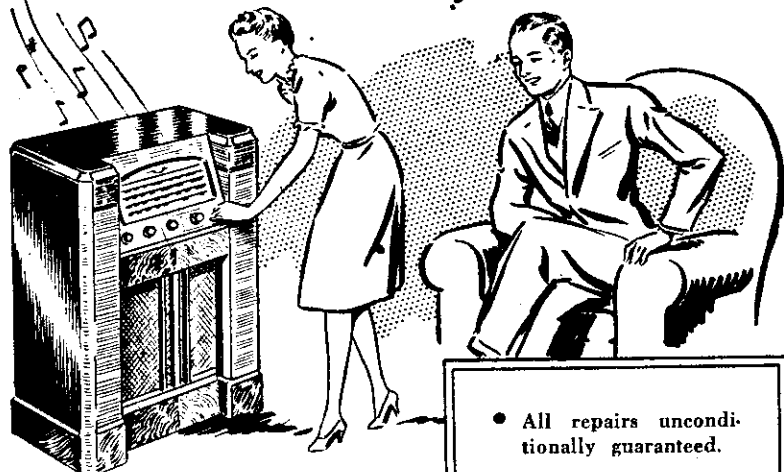
ROY FARRAN  
*The clock seemed to stop*

ALL this was enough to make a book in itself, and it has this special interest, that through it Roy Farran was meeting the German at the height of his strength and confidence. When he began his career as a commando officer, the tide had turned. His chapters on the desert fighting, the rough and tumble of tank work, are first-class, and the section on Crete is probably the best in the book. It pulsates with the fury of the struggle. The New Zealanders he ranks as not only the best troops in the Empire, but as "the finest in the world." There is an unforgettable picture of a Maori rearguard moving along smilingly with the Germans hard on their heels—the last two men carrying a pot of stew slung on a rifle.

Commando duty took Roy Farran first to behind-the-lines work in Italy, then to a similar job in France when the Allies were pushing eastward, then to Greece with little to do, and back to Italy for the biggest of his operations. In Italy the partisans were already divided between Communists and anti-Communists, and what with this and the fact that some of the Italians were not much use in a stand-up fight, a good deal of tact had to be exercised by the British mission. The commandos had to trust the populace daily, but apparently they were never betrayed. There were Italian girls used for intelligence who could march better than any man, and never failed to bring back information from the German lines. British Tommies who had never held non-commissioned rank made admirable commanders of partisan detachments. "I suppose," says Farran, with typical British absurdity, "the inborn contempt a Briton feels for all foreigners made them go out of their way to demonstrate their superiority." And Farran got everything he asked for dropped by parachute, even—to stir the romantic Italian mind and satisfy his (Farran's) vanity—Piper Kirkpatrick of the Highland Light Infantry, pipes and all. When the unit attacked a German corps headquarters, Kirkpatrick piped them on with "Highland Laddie."

(continued on next page)

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