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HEAD OF BRITISH ARMED FORCES PAYS TRIBUTE TO SECRET FORCES

Their exploits were relatively secret at the time but now should be remembered with great pride

Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards



28/09/2012

An elite group of men who paved the way for success on D-Day have been honoured with an imposing monument in Hampshire, dedicated in the presence of today's military leaders. The Chief of Defence Staff and the head of the Royal Marines led tributes to veterans of COPP – the Combined Operations Pilotage Party – who carried out top-secret missions in the run-up to the Normandy invasion and are now celebrated with a memorial on Hayling Island.

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The head of the Armed Forces has praised a band of once-secret commandos at a memorial unveiling in Hampshire.

Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards, lauded veterans from the elite Combined Operations Pilotage Party (COPP) after Countess Mountbatten of Burma had unveiled a granite monument at Hayling Island.

The COPP units played an instrumental role in saving thousands of lives during the Second World War by reaching enemy-occupied invasion sites and recovering surveillance information.

The forerunners of the Special Boat Service, the Special Forces arm of the Royal Marines, they marked out the navigation channels for landing grounds at D-Day in 1944.

Speaking at the monument site at Hayling Island seafront yesterday, Gen Richards said:

"As an organisation they were unique.

"Taking risks in paddling miles from the relative safety of a ship or submarine, to the dangers of enemy occupied territory in two-man teams, they proved their courage time and again.

"Their exploits were relatively secret at the time but now should be remembered with great pride."

The unit was created by Lord Louis Mountbatten in 1943 after the failed Dieppe raid the previous year and was based at Hayling Island Sailing Club.

Perhaps the most famous important was carried out on the last day of 1943 when a team was

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sent to recce a beach in Normandy, taking samples back to the UK for experts to analyse; the sands they surveyed would become Gold Beach on D-Day.

And while D-Day is an episode and date from the war which everyone knows, the work of the COPP parties is known to only a small band of military historians and the dwindling number of veterans.

That is why a two-metre-high granite monument now stands on Hayling Island, officially unveiled by Lord Mountbatten's daughter. She said:

"It's a really wonderful occasion, with a large crowd marking the bravery and courage of the COPPists.

"I think it's wonderful that the Chief of the Defence Staff has attended, it shows what is thought of what happened with the COPPists were operating.

"It's nearly 70 years ago now that I was a Wren serving along the coast on the River Hamble in HMS Tormentor.

"We had some COPPists around but nobody liked to talk too much about them, such was the secrecy and importance of their work."



It took Hayling historian Robin Walton three years of campaigning and fundraising to install the 12-ton granite memorial on the seafront. He said:

"There are hundreds of memorials to commando raids in France but very few in Britain.

"We remember the Cockleshell Heroes for their raid, quite rightly, but this was strategically even more important.

"These brave men were literally leading the way to D-Day with their surveillance work."

Major-General Ed Davis, Commandant General Royal Marines, paid tribute to the pioneering work of the COPP units and explained their importance as ancestors of the Special Boat Service.

"It was a very memorable occasion allowing us to look back on the accomplishments and achievements of some very brave men," he said.

"It is right to mark the contribution they made and make sure that is perpetuated in the Royal Marines of today, that spirit and ethos."

Hundreds of people attended the event, which was presented by Four Weddings and a Funeral actress Anna Chancellor and Wendy Adams-Evans.

"I've been so impressed by this moving ceremony; I found I was very touched by the tributes paid to such courageous people at a key period in history," Ms Chancellor said.

You can find out more about the monument, the men and their missions at www.coppheroes.org

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