

## ‘“Commando Consciousness” and criminality in post-Second World War Fiction

A swift dash by sea to some solitary cove, a sudden attack in the night on an enemy headquarters, the seizing of telling documents or the wrecking of some vital plant – such is the type of operation for which the British commandos have trained and planned [...] They are [...] proud, self-contained units, trained to the limits of human endurance. [...] They become dead shots with all the small arms and masters of the fighting-knife; they can march 60 miles a day and live on the country; they are experts in explosives and the arts of stalking and fieldcraft. [...] The possibilities of such a highly trained force of guerrillas may easily be imagined. (Anon, 1941:2)

First formed in the summer of 1940 to implement a policy described by Churchill as ‘butcher and bolt’ along the coastline of occupied Europe (qtd Messenger, 1995: 1152), the Commandos were not publically acknowledged as a discrete and specially-trained force until early 1941, when the propaganda value of their activities became apparent, and articles extolling their work, like the one from *Picture Post* quoted above, began to appear. Even at this point, some, like Cyril Falls, writing in the *Illustrated London News* in May 1941, critiqued the media discourse that had arisen around these alluring figures, preferring to stress the aspect of Commando operations that required co-operation between the different forces, especially the army and the navy:

Commandos are not made up of supermen. [...] Commandos are not made up of “toughs”. At least, that was my experience, and the quiet, sensible man seemed to be the most usual type. [...] If I may digress for a moment, I should like to express my disgust with the ideal of a bullying brute which is so often held up to us by certain writers in the popular Press. Such men do not make the best soldiers. (Falls, 1941: 516)

The tension between the valorisation of ‘toughness’ and disgust at the ‘bullying brute’ is one which became more pronounced as the war proceeded, and, in literary representations in particular, ambivalence in the face of these two inter-related versions of masculinity is marked. The Commando embodies the tipping point between the ‘tempered [,] restrained version’ of virility that Sonya O. Rose

(2014) sees as the preferred wartime model of British masculinity, and its 'hyper-masculine' Other, emblematised by the Nazis (178). In the 10-15 years following the war, which will be my focus here, a number of literary representations engage with the potentially dangerous masculinity of the Commando through a consideration of what happens when these men return to civilian society. In these novels, former Commandos become involved in criminal activity and debates about the consequences of training men to kill thus intersect with wider concerns about the causes and prevalence of criminality in postwar Britain. It is when Commandos or former Commandos come into contact with the forces of law and order that their anomalous and threatening role in civilian society is brought into focus and, superficially at least, controlled.

The word 'Commando' was initially a collective noun referring to a group of soldiers, but individuals who were part of these groups soon came to be referred to as 'Commandos'. Falls (1941) complains about this slippage partly on purist grammatical grounds: 'Incidentally, it is absurd, though I suppose inevitable, that an individual soldier should be called "a Commando"' (516). But Falls is also attempting to address the concerns of those who 'do not approve of the principle of the Commandos, which is foreign to the recent traditions of the British army' (516). He therefore downplays the specialness of these special forces in favour of the co-operative spirit their actions represent. This accident of nomenclature can be understood, however, as both a symptom and a cause of what Gordon Holman, writing in the early 1940s, termed 'overdone Commando consciousness' (Holman, 1942: 145). By this he meant hyper-awareness and idealisation of Commandos among the general public. Articles such as Falls's, and also Holman's own reports on Commando raids, simultaneously critique and promulgate such consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The possibility of using the word 'Commando' to indicate either a single individual or a group also indicates a potential ideological contradiction: the armed forces generally try to subdue individuality – hence issuing their members with uniforms and demanding rigid standards of discipline – but individualism was often perceived as

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<sup>1</sup> Connelly and Willcox identify similar attitudes in newsreel and newspaper reports from the early 1940s (2-7).

being particularly valued in the Commandos. Difference and sameness therefore operate in complex ways in these representations.

The knotty relationship between the reality of the Commandos and their mythologisation is pointed up by an exchange that took place in the House of Lords in 1948, during a debate on the Criminal Justice Bill, which proposed the abolition of the death penalty. Viscount Stansgate, a Labour peer who had seen action during the First World War, and had gone on to serve as Secretary of State for Air in 1942 (Hale), drew a connection between the necessary acceptance of violent death in wartime, and the increase in crime that had characterised the postwar years,<sup>2</sup> highlighting the difficulty of the cultural shift from war to peace: ‘In time of war, naturally, the moral sense of the people deteriorates and sinks. You cannot have commandos, people smearing themselves with blood and dancing about with bayonets, without degrading the moral sense and reducing respect for human life’ (Hansard, 1 June 1947-8: 58). Coming to the Commandos’ defence, Lord Goddard, President of the Court of Appeal, asserted that since the end of the war, and in the course of between 500 and 600 cases, he had only come across a single Commando accused of a violent crime: ‘Commandos were hand-picked men, but they were subject to strong and rigorous discipline and they profited by it. It brought discipline into their lives. The outbreak of violence is not due to people becoming used to lethal weapons but to the breakdown of discipline’ (Hansard, 2 June 1947-8: 118).<sup>3</sup> Goddard challenges Stansgate’s promulgation of the popular culture view of the Commando, one which was often reflected in fiction of the postwar period, with evidence from his own experience in the Appeal Court, but implies that continuing to impose military-style discipline in peacetime is the answer to the postwar increase in crime. Goddard’s comments also indicate that the image of the Commando as dangerous, devious, violent and criminal is a fantasy, and the question that then arises, and which will be addressed here, is: what purpose might that fantasy serve?

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<sup>2</sup> Government crime statistics for the 1940s reveal a peak in cases of murder in England and Wales in 1945, with 492 cases recorded; there were 322 recorded cases in 1943, 358 in 1944, 347 in 1946 and 371 in 1947. More pronounced is the increase in ‘More serious wounding/threat or other acts endangering life’. There were 329 cases in 1943, 403 in 1944, 545 in 1945, 498 in 1946 and 572 in 1947 (Anon).

<sup>3</sup> Even granted that not all of those found guilty would submit an appeal, these comments are cast in a different light by what is now known about the activities of former Commando Roy Farran, who was acquitted of murder in Palestine in October 1947. See Cesarani.

According to Graham Dawson: ‘The guerrilla, the commando, the Special Operations forces, the secret agents, spies and saboteurs who operate “behind enemy lines” or in the margins of the conflict: these become the characteristic soldier heroes of twentieth-century adventure’ (Dawson, 1994: 19). Like members of these other groups, the Commando was set apart from regular troops in public awareness and came to be associated with specific qualities and attributes. Surveying representations of British special forces between 1939 and the early 2000s, Mark Connelly and David R. Willcox share Dawson’s characterisation of postwar depictions of Commandos as being principally concerned with reliving ‘the glories’ of the war, with an emphasis on ‘daring missions’ (9). Connelly and Willcox mainly cite texts written for children and memoirs, but novels aimed at an adult readership reveal different attitudes and also indicate how familiar readers were presumed to be with the mythology that had grown up around the Commandos during the war. Mapping the literary onto the historical reveals that representations of Commandos and, importantly here, former Commandos, flourished even as the units themselves were disbanded.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the texts in which Commandos figure as criminals are detective novels: well-known practitioners of this genre, including Agatha Christie and Josephine Bell take former Commandos as their culprits in postwar novels.<sup>5</sup> Bell and Christie depict the former Commando as an anomalous individual who, in the pattern familiar in classic detective fiction, is purged from the society that his crimes have affected. Although, as the works of Bell and Christie illustrate, this classic form still endured in the wake of the Second World War, during the war years many detective authors, including to an extent Christie herself, shifted towards a thriller-type structure, emphasising not the retrospective identification of causes and culprits of crimes that have often already happened when the narrative opens, but exploring instead ongoing, forward-moving threats that are posed by gangs and conspiracies, sometimes of a political nature, rather than individuals with personal grudges (Symons, 1985: 141). Margery Allingham’s *The Tiger in the Smoke*

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<sup>4</sup> The Commando units were dissolved at the end of the war, but, as John Newsinger explains, the Special Air Service was ‘to be revived in 1947, but as part of the Territorial Army. [...] Not until the height of the Communist insurgency in Malaya [in 1950] was the SAS to be re-established as part of the regular army’ (15).

<sup>5</sup> Not a familiar name now, Josephine Bell was a popular and prolific detective author whose career spanned the years between 1937 and her death in 1987 (Tarbutt, 1980: 90-3).

(1952), which I will discuss later, combines elements of both detective and thriller forms and simultaneously depicts the individual and the corporate aspects of Commando identity.

Even in literary narratives that would not be described as detective fiction, Commandos are often associated with criminality. Other middlebrow authors, including Nevil Shute, also exploited the emblematic figure of the Commando. In a number of instances, the perceived criminality of the Commando intersects with a dangerous sexuality. As I have discussed elsewhere, both Betty Miller's *On the Side of the Angels* (1945) and Elizabeth Taylor's *Wreath of Roses* (1949) feature men who claim to have been Commandos and who exploit 'Commando consciousness', relying on the publicity garnered by Commando actions to flesh out their pretended histories (Stewart: 2010). Making a passing reference to 'Vaagso' or 'Dieppe' is enough.<sup>6</sup> In Miller's novel, the general public are shown to be knowledgeable about the signifiers of status: the green beret and the Commando insignia serve, like the names of Commando raids, as metonymies that need no further explanation from the pretended Commando himself. In each of these novels, the associations with danger and secrecy that accrue to their actions or perceived actions make the Commandos objects of desire for women. The reality is in stark contrast to the myth, however. Claudia, in *On the Side of the Angels*, finds out only as she is about to elope with Herriot that he is a deserter on the run and already married. In *A Wreath of Roses*, the claim to a false war record is compounded by another, much worse crime: Richard, who has been attempting to establish a relationship with Camilla, is revealed as a murderer, on the run from the police. Women contemplate embarking on illicit relationships with these men, but the men are ultimately shown to be unable to measure up to the socially endorsed images of masculinity that seemed so alluring. To use Rose's term, the 'hyper-masculine' performance cannot be sustained and the hoped-for relationship has to remain at the level of fantasy. At the same time, the supposed inadequacies of the ordinary soldier are thrown into relief, and come to signify safety where they might previously have been perceived as stifling.

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<sup>6</sup> The Vaagso Raid was an operation mounted in December 1941 against German-held islands off the coast of Norway (Dear, 1995b: 1244). The Dieppe Raid of August 1942, undertaken with the involvement of Canadian troops, was intended 'primarily to test the defences of this German-occupied French port' (Dear, 1995a: 298). Described at the time as a necessary preliminary to an invasion of France, it has subsequently been seen as 'an unjustified gamble which, without adequate air or sea support, had no chance of success' (Dear, 1995a: 299).

While Commandos are occasionally depicted in a positive light in 1940s writing, with, for example, David Oldroyd, a minor character in Phyllis Bentley's family saga *The Rise of Henry Morcar* (1946), executed in an unnamed European country after attempting unsuccessfully to incite an anti-Nazi uprising, many authors share Miller's and Taylor's concerns about the type of personnel such a force might attract or indeed produce. Indeed, in other postwar representations, the question of what happens in peacetime to those who have been trained to kill in wartime comes into even starker focus and reflects wider concerns relating to guilt, responsibility and how wars are won. In Shute's *The Chequer Board* (1947), John Turner, who is fatally ill as a consequence of a wartime injury, searches for three men he met while hospitalised in 1943. The different fates of these men – one a black GI accused of rape, another an RAF Flying Officer, and the third a paratrooper with Commando training – allow Shute to consider the impact of different wartime traumas and the varied problems attendant on re-adaptation to civilian life. Douglas Brent, the paratrooper, is tried for murder during the war, after a man with whom he gets into a fight outside a pub dies. His defence is conducted by Major Carter, who appears in court not in legal robes but in the uniform of the Parachute Regiment: 'I serve the King in two capacities. I assist in the discovery of the King's justice in these courts. In another capacity and in another place, by order of the King passed to me through his officers, I teach men such as Douglas Theodore Brent to kill other men with knives.' (Shute, 1969: 225-6) The depiction of Carter nods towards a model of the Commando that co-existed with the 'tough' and was in tension with it, a model which situated the Commando 'in a long line of British aristocratic and gentleman hero-adventurers' (Connelly & Willcox, 2005: 4). By having Carter bluntly state the nature of his wartime duties while, simultaneously, he acquits a version of his civilian role as a barrister, Shute implies that it might indeed be possible to be a reasonable, highly educated individual *and* a killer. Notably, however, Carter does not survive the war and is not shown having to disentangle himself from his wartime duties.

Carter suggests that Brent cannot be held responsible for the murder because, at the crucial moment, his training came violently and uncontrollably to the fore. Brent, unlike Carter, is not educated, and joining the army, which he does before the outbreak of war, is constructed as at least in

part a means of controlling his unruly libido: 'He had his first girl trouble when he was fourteen [...]. By the time he was sixteen-and-a-half his father was paying a paternity order for him, and didn't like it.' His mobilisation causes '[e]very mother in [his home town of] Romsey' to breathe 'a sigh of relief' (36). The implication is that this energy is then diverted into his training, and by the time of the fatal fight, he has learned his lesson well: 'It was certainly the corporal's intention to hurt Mr Seddon, to cause him a great deal of pain. In his instruction, however, nobody had ever told him when to stop in order to avoid killing his man' (40). Carter describes the training received by men such as Brent in terms of the reshaping of instinctive responses: 'The accident of war has taught this young man to do certain things by instinct. The accident of war has turned what would have been a simple brawl into a lamentable homicide' (234). Referring back to the fact that this training has ultimately been underwritten by a duty to King, Carter argues that the jury has no option but to find Brent not guilty: 'But you may well ask – how, then, is the public to be protected from the homicidal crafts that he has learned in the years following the war?' (234) This is perhaps the bluntest statement of the anxieties that underpin many of the novels considered here: even if violent behaviour can be condoned in wartime, what guarantee is there that war can contain it?

Carter's answer to this question is to suggest that once the war is over and Brent has put aside his uniform he will also be able to slough off these 'instincts'. Following the logic that Brent's training sublimates his unruly sexuality, it is perhaps unsurprising that after the war he takes on another role that could be seen to offer a different kind of thrill, becoming a 'Wall of Death' motorcycle rider with a travelling fair: 'It was a job that a Commando or a Paratrooper would have turned to naturally [...] full of bravado and noise and glamour' (241). John Turner, whose quest for his wartime acquaintances structures the novel, hears this from a third party but is ultimately unable to track Brent down. Unlike the other men who prompt Turner's quest, Brent seems incapable of settling back into civilian life. Interestingly, his trajectory from Commando and paratrooper to 'Wall-of-Death' rider is reversed by the twins who feature in R. F. Delderfield's *The Avenue Goes to War* (1958), a saga which follows the varied fortunes of the middleclass inhabitants of the Avenue, located in a London suburb, into wartime. Boxer and Bernard are 'Wall-of-Death' riders before the war, and

then join the Commandos, participating in the raid on Vaagso and being taken prisoner after the Dieppe raid, with Boxer eventually sent home from German captivity with serious injuries and Bernard seeing the war out in a prison camp before making his way to safety when the camp is evacuated in the closing stages of the war. Boxer ends the novel settled with a wife, though traumatised by his experiences, including the loss of one of his arms, while Bernard, who retains a no-nonsense pragmatism in the face of adversity, returns to Europe and is last seen helping with the refugee relief effort. These contrasting attitudes allow Delderfield to imply that war experience, and specifically Commando training, might provoke differing responses even in individuals who have had similar, if not identical, upbringings. This doubling echoes the implicit parallel between Carter and Brent in Shute's novel. *The Chequer Board*, though, is more pessimistic: Brent is suited to Commando training because of qualities that, in peacetime, place him at the margins.

Brent is found 'Not Guilty' of murder, largely because of the efforts of his defence barrister, but Shute seems unable to imagine a place for him in the postwar: he disappears from view. Detective fiction of this period takes a more forthright approach to the identification of the culprit and his or her expulsion from society, even though it eschews the legal process as a means of affirming guilt. David Hunter, a confidence trickster, appears in Agatha Christie's *Taken at the Flood* (1948), and comments of his wartime career: 'I'm Irish. But like all the Irish, I like fighting. The Commandos held an irresistible fascination for me' (72). Using military idiom, he speaks about crime as an 'operation' (130). Hunter comes under suspicion of murder partly because, as the police Superintendent explains, he is perceived as a particular 'type', one which has 'done well during the war. Any amount of physical courage. Audacity and a reckless disregard of personal safety. The sort that will face any odds. [...] Yes, in wartime, a man like that is a hero. But in peace – well, in peace, such men usually end up in prison. They like excitement and they can't run straight and they don't give a damn for society – and finally they've no regard for human life' (235). It is hard to know to what extent Hunter's war experiences have made him as he is and to what extent his existing disposition has been fostered in wartime; either way, the Superintendent points to the uncomfortable fact that war may require and indeed value qualities in an individual that in the peace would be deemed immoral.

Like *The Chequer Board* and *The Avenue goes to War*, this novel also uses doubling to throw the former Commando's particular brand of masculinity into relief. Lynn, who has herself seen active service, is attracted to Hunter partly because of his war record. Rowley, Lynn's fiancé, remained at home on the family farm for the duration, and feels himself to be inferior to Hunter, the man of action. Hearing that Hunter is now his rival for Lynn's affections, Rowley protests: 'I've missed my chance of fighting for my country. [...] I've seen my girl [...] dress up in uniform and go overseas. I've been Just the Man She Left Behind Her. My life's been hell – don't you understand, Lynn?' (Christie, 2002: 328). Rowley's sense of emasculation is compounded by Lynn's active service, and he attempts to compensate for this by physically attacking Lynn. Hunter, however, proves to be the villain of the piece, murdering the woman who was his accomplice in a blackmail plot, and also seeming set to take the blame for two accidental deaths caused by Rowley. Rowley is therefore freed from the taint of criminality and his violent outburst is constructed as a misguided effort to mimic Hunter's version of masculinity. As in Taylor's and Miller's novels, the supposedly inferior man emerges as the best match and, in addition, the former Commando is not only a criminal in his own right but also a scapegoat for the dubious behaviour of other men.

Like Douglas Brent, then, Hunter has a powerful allure for women and it is implied that, for both, life as a Commando provides a kind of excitement that might equally be sought in criminal activity. Parsons, the culprit in Josephine Bell's *Death in Clairvoyance* (1949), is a different type, a respectable officer worker who is eventually found to have killed two people, including his wife. His crimes are enabled by his Commando training, and the gulf between his wartime and peacetime activities and demeanour is much greater than it is for either Brent or Hunter. David Wintringham, the doctor who features as the investigator in several of Bell's novels, and whose children are also threatened by Parsons, comments: 'There must be a lot of Civil Servants and quiet professional men with an advanced technique of killing in their repertoire, and no opportunity any more for using it' (241). Police Superintendent Mitchell offers little reassurance when he replies: 'Let's hope they'll soon get rusty' (241). This echoes Major Carter's hope, in *The Chequer Board*, that once the uniform is removed, the habits of wartime will fade into memory, but this hope is belied both in Shute's novel

and in Bell's. Underpinning these sentiments is anxiety about what becomes of ideologically sanctioned versions of masculinity once the historical context that has produced them is altered. Differently configured, this anxiety also emerged in relation to other branches of the armed forces, such as fighter pilots, who are often constructed in postwar accounts as being unsettled by their inability to find the excitement and satisfaction in civilian life that their wartime exploits brought (Allport, 2009: 159-85). The particular concern raised by former Commandos centres on their specialised training, and particularly the 'advanced technique of killing', the hand-to-hand combat, that was often seen as characterising these forces.

Like the green beret, the Commando dagger had metonymic significance, cementing in the public mind the association between Commandos and hand-to-hand combat. This particular aspect of their training and their practice in combat, its visceral nature, was a key reason why the Commando became a focus for diffuse anxieties about how former soldiers might adjust to life in peacetime. This is apparent in John Dickson Carr's detective novel *Patrick Butler for the Defence* (1956), in which a parallel between a pair of protagonists who have been Commandos is also used, albeit more schematically than in *The Avenue Goes to War*. Cousins Hugh and Jim, now working as lawyers, have both received Commando training during the war. When a man is stabbed at their chambers, Hugh reflects, 'In the Army, Jim, we were taught to kill instantly and without noise. [...] That's part of an unreal life; it's gone now; we've forgotten it. But what made me sick, when I first saw this, was that somebody's botched the job and left the poor bloke in agony' (19). Jim in fact turns out to be the killer; he has deliberately 'botched the job' to delay the victim's death and provide himself with an alibi. Although Hugh dismisses their training as 'forgotten', he himself ends up falling back on the skills he acquired in wartime when, later, he has to make a precarious climb onto a fire escape: 'Hugh, who had done this sort of thing in war-time, was steadier than he had imagined he would be' (100). Jim has not got 'rusty' quite as quickly as Bell's superintendent might have hoped, and Carr does not pursue the implications of having one protagonist make positive use of his training, and the other put it to a criminal purpose. The focus on the Commando in these texts also deflects attention away from

the fact that even 'ordinary' soldiers might have seen or done things in war that would horrify, rather than thrill, the civilians among whom they now moved.<sup>7</sup>

In these novels, the postwar Commando is a more or less solitary figure whose attempt to transfer his wartime accomplishments into peace leads to confrontation with the forces of law and order. Margery Allingham's *The Tiger in the Smoke* is a rare example of the Commando being considered as a corporate entity in postwar fiction. Set in fog-bound postwar London, the novel sees escaped murderer and former Commando Jack Havoc seeking the men who were previously under his command and who have been awaiting his return, with the intention of returning to the Elginbrodde family home in France, scene of an unofficial wartime raid in which the group took part. Havoc hopes to retrieve the family treasure that he knows to be hidden at the house. He first appears over halfway through the novel, but prior to this the reader is left in no doubt as to the potential threat he poses, learning about his influence on and continuing importance to the men he commanded in wartime, as well as the mythology that has arisen around him. Havoc's gang are living together in a cellar and patrol the streets as a band, begging for money. When they first appear, Allingham's private investigator Albert Campion is surprised by the vehemence with which Inspector Luke condemns them: 'Demanding with menaces. What else is it? Gimme, gimme! [...] I bet you every man under sixty in this street is ex-Service, and half the women too. That little band of brothers is only ex-Service among other things.' (26) The implication is that 'other things' refers to criminal activity. Geoffrey Levett, who has himself seen active service, recognises the signs of military discipline and organization in the band's make-shift home after he is kidnapped by them: 'it was a definite variety of bachelor establishment [...] primitive and wholly masculine, yet not without a trace of civilization.' (77) Geoffrey happens to have his medals with him when he is abducted, and these are treated with respect by the band. If Luke's comments imply that the band are exploiting their past military service as a cover for criminality, Geoffrey's observations show that the men have retained the discipline they

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<sup>7</sup> In May 1942, *Picture Post* reported: '[S]elected batches of men are being blooded and toughened up as killers. Training methods, which were limited originally to the Commando troops, are now being applied to the whole army' (Hastings, 1942: 7-8).

learned in the army: their time in the army has helped to make them more efficient, or at least better organized, as criminals.

Havoc is a character type who appears only infrequently in classic detective fiction: he is described by Stanislaus Oates, Assistant Commissioner at Scotland Yard, as a ‘born killer’, one of the few ‘truly wicked men’ (64) he has ever met, and, as Lee Horsley notes, in this regard Havoc ‘comes close to sharing the qualities of later crime fiction psychopaths’ (57). As Horsley indicates, classic detective fiction more often features murderers who are driven to crime by the exigencies – or perceived exigencies – of particular familial or social circumstances; the ‘born killer’, whose actions cannot be easily contained within the usual cause and effect structure of the classic detective novel, is a much more unruly, and potentially threatening, figure (57). What complicates the depiction of Havoc is the fact that despite his known propensity towards violent crime, he is deemed the ideal candidate for the raiding party. He describes the process of his own selection:

“You’ve heard of a Hollerith, have you? It was a thing they had in the army, based on an American business invention. [...] They decided on the things they wanted in a chap – athletic, combat trained, been in a few scrapes, reckless, [...] not particular [...] good with men, or anything else they thought of [...]. Then they pressed all the buttons and up came his card with his name and number on it. [...] I was found by that machine [...] Mine was the only card that turned up. (148)<sup>8</sup>

At the time of his recruitment, Havoc is in prison awaiting court martial, but this is deemed by the authorities to be little more than a detail. Allingham here evokes contemporary concerns about the kinds of qualities and behaviour that the Commandos were believed to promote. Taken alongside Luke’s protest at the band asking for special treatment when the majority of people have been actively involved in the war, Havoc’s remarks indicate that he maintains a sense of his own exceptionalism. Similarly, the band has not only continued to function as a quasi-military unit, but looks to Havoc as its lost – or temporarily misplaced – leader. As Shani D’Cruze comments, Havoc ‘has an NCOs

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<sup>8</sup> Ben Shephard notes that after the introduction of compulsory intelligence and aptitude tests for new recruits in June 1942, the Hollerith machine, an automated punch-card sorting device, was indeed used to allocate individuals to particular roles (189).

pseudo-paternal authority over his platoon' (277); when he eventually appears at their cellar hideout, he announces: 'Dad's back' (131).

Allingham's characterisation of Havoc as a 'born criminal' is therefore combined with a sense that his time in the army, and specifically his time as part of a Commando, has fostered rather than discouraged these tendencies. This novel appeared at a period when, in the face of a postwar increase in crime, psychiatrists and criminologists were debating the extent to which inherent tendencies and environmental factors might intersect as causes of criminality. Works such as the psychiatrist John Bowlby's *Forty-four Juvenile Thieves* (1944), which stressed the impact of separation on young criminals, had chimed in with concerns about the effects of evacuation on a generation of children, and evacuation itself prompted debate about the conditions in which some children were growing up. Army service was sometimes seen as a way of preventing the young from turning to delinquency and crime, as *The Chequer Board* shows, but *The Tiger in the Smoke*, like Shute's novel, seems pessimistic about this possibility.

Havoc is able to rejoin the band because he escapes from prison by feigning mental illness, an indication of both his own duplicity and the difficulties, widely discussed at the period, of deciding where criminal responsibility began and ended.<sup>9</sup> *The Tiger in the Smoke* does not show Havoc being brought to trial, so questions about his sanity or otherwise remain at the level of individual speculation rather than being tested in a legal context. Reaching the Elginbrodde house in France at the same time as Meg, the legal heir, Havoc is unable to reach the treasure before her, and the final sentences of the novel indicate that he chooses to end his own life:

[T]he pool was quiet and very still

It looked dark. A man could creep in there and sleep soft and long.

It seemed to him that he had no decision to make and, now that he knew himself to be fallible, no one to question. Presently he let his feet slide gently forward. The body was never found. (223)

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Sean O'Connor's examination of the case of Neville Heath, the former airman hanged in 1946 after committing two sadistic murders, and deemed to be responsible for his actions, despite attempts by his defence to prove otherwise.

Suicide is sometimes constructed in detective fiction as an ‘honourable’ way out for a culprit who, identified by the detective, admits the crime and chooses to save their family the disgrace and publicity of a trial. (Elton, in Taylor’s *A Wreath of Roses*, also kills himself.) From a narrative perspective, the detective’s resolution of the crime is given precedence over any legal proceedings or judgements that might follow: so far as the reader is concerned, the detective’s word is law and the case is closed.<sup>10</sup> Havoc’s sentiments reveal a slightly different line of reasoning. To some extent, he is saving face by not having to admit to the failure of this ‘mission’ and his own fallibility. Without a mission, it seems, he has no purpose in life. This is the most pessimistic view of what might become of the Commando returned from war: he has so little purpose in the peace that he may as well end it all. Simultaneously, Havoc’s final disappearance indicates the difficulty of incorporating such a figure into postwar narratives, whether these be detective novels or the broader accounts of postwar nationhood to which such texts contribute.

These novels reveal the complexity of attitudes towards Commandos in the immediate postwar period. Not only of interest because of his novelty and the peculiarities of his wartime role, the Commando becomes a means of exploring wide-ranging concerns about masculinity, criminality and violence. The tension Sonya Rose identifies between an acceptable, virile masculinity and a much more problematic hyper-masculinity is recognised and worried at but never fully resolved, even by the apparently conclusive endings of crime narratives. Excising the source of troubling emotions by having him either commit suicide or be imprisoned or executed, serves only to underline the difficulties of re-integrating such a figure into civil society. Or, to put it another way, the question of what society might be like if these men were an accepted part of it is itself too difficult to confront.

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<sup>10</sup> See for example, Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (1930), in which Lord Peter Wimsey condones the suicide of Tallboy, who has admitted murdering the man who blackmailed him (Sayers, 1989: pp. 281-2).

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