MILITARY HISTORY & STRATEGY

the real bravo two zero

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Quick Takeaways

- The Bravo Two Zero patrol was an eight-man SAS team inserted into Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War.
- Conflicting accounts between patrol members Andy McNab and Chris Ryan led to significant controversy.
- Independent investigator Michael Asher discovered many inconsistencies in the heroic narratives, suggesting the "real" story was far more tragic and less action-packed.
- Equipment failures, particularly the PRC-319 radio, played a critical role in the mission"s failure.
- The patrol suffered from extreme environmental conditions, including hypothermia, which was the primary cause of death for some members.

Introduction: The Legend of the Eight-Man Patrol

In the annals of special forces history, few names resonate with as much mystery, heroism, and controversy as "Bravo Two Zero." Originally the callsign of an eight-man British Special Air Service (SAS) patrol during the 1991 Gulf War, it became a global phenomenon through the best-selling books by Andy McNab and Chris Ryan. However, as the years passed, a different narrative began to emerge—one that challenged the staggering body counts, the cinematic escapes, and the portrayal of certain patrol members. To understand the real Bravo Two Zero, one must look past the sensationalism of 1990s thriller writing and examine the cold, hard facts of military operations, topographical reality, and the testimony of those who were actually on the ground.

The Mission: Strategic Goals and the SCUD Threat

The strategic backdrop of the Bravo Two Zero mission was the threat posed by Iraqi SCUD missiles. During the early stages of Operation Desert Storm, Saddam Hussein began launching these missiles at Israel, hoping to provoke a retaliatory strike that would fracture the fragile Arab-Western coalition. The "Great SCUD Hunt" became a top priority for the Allied forces. The mission of Bravo Two Zero was threefold: to locate and neutralize SCUD mobile launchers, to find and destroy underground fiber-optic communication lines that linked the Iraqi high command to their launch sites, and to act as a stay-behind observation post in the Iraqi desert.

The Eight Men of Bravo Two Zero

The patrol consisted of eight highly trained specialists: Andy McNab (Patrol Commander), Chris Ryan, Mike Coburn, Vince Phillips, Malcolm MacGown, Bob Consiglio, Steve Lane, and "Dinger" (also known as Leggy). Each man carried a specialized role, from medic to demolition expert. However, from the outset, the mission was plagued by intelligence failures. The patrol was dropped into an area they were told was sparsely populated, only to find themselves in a region teeming with Iraqi military activity and civilian shepherds.

The Infiltration: A Disastrous Start

On the night of January 22, 1991, the patrol was inserted via a Chinook helicopter. Almost immediately, things went wrong. The terrain was not the flat, sandy desert they expected, but a series of rocky wadis and ridges. Furthermore, the weight of their gear—nearly 200 pounds per man—made movement nearly impossible. This "burden of the soldier" meant that the patrol could not easily move to a more secure location after their presence

was potentially compromised by a young goat herd.

The Radio Failure: The PRC-319 Mystery

Perhaps the most critical failure of the entire mission was the breakdown in communication. The patrol was equipped with the PRC-319 radio, which was the state-of-the-art special forces kit at the time. However, due to incorrect frequency planning and the interference caused by local topographical features, they were unable to establish contact with their base. This isolation meant that when the patrol was discovered, there was no chance for an emergency extraction. The "real" story of Bravo Two Zero is largely a story of technical hubris and the failure of back-up communication protocols.

The Contact: Fact vs. Fiction

In Andy McNab's account, the patrol engaged in a massive firefight against hundreds of Iraqi soldiers and several armored vehicles, killing dozens of enemies. However, subsequent investigations, most notably by Michael Asher, an ex-SAS soldier himself, tell a different story. Asher traveled to Iraq after the war, located the actual site of the contact, and interviewed the local villagers who were involved. According to these witnesses, the "army" McNab described was actually a small group of armed locals and a single armored truck. The body counts reported in the popular books appear to have been significantly exaggerated for dramatic effect.

The Long Walk: Escape and Evasion

When the patrol realized they were compromised and unable to call for help, they began a desperate escape and evasion (E&E) trek toward the Syrian border. This journey is where the patrol's cohesion began to shatter. In the bitter cold of the Iraqi winter—one of the coldest on record—the men suffered from severe hypothermia. They were wearing standard-issue DPM (Disruptive Pattern Material) uniforms, which were not designed for the freezing rain and snow they encountered in the high desert.

The Splitting of the Patrol

During the retreat, the patrol split into two groups. This decision remains a point of intense debate. Chris Ryan eventually made a legendary 300-kilometer "Long Walk" to the Syrian border, a feat of endurance that remains an SAS record. The other members were either captured or killed. The real tragedy of this phase was the death of Vince Phillips, who was later blamed in the books for the patrol"s failure. Subsequent accounts by Mike Coburn and investigations by Asher have largely cleared Phillips" name, suggesting he died of hypothermia while doing his best to keep up with a group that was physically and mentally exhausted.

Comparative Analysis: Different Accounts of the Mission

To understand the "real" story, we must compare the primary sources of information. The following table highlights the discrepancies between the most famous accounts and the findings of independent investigators.

Feature	Andy McNab (Bravo Two Zero)	Chris Ryan (The One That Got Away)	Michael Asher (The Real Bravo Two Zero)
Enemy Strength	Hundreds of troops/APC tanks	Large military force	Small group of locals/militia
Iraqi Casualties	Up to 250 estimated killed	Dozens killed	Very few, if any, documented
Distance Traveled	Exaggerated distances	Accurate but disputed terrain	Measured via GPS and local guides
Vince Phillips	Portrayed as weak/failed	Portrayed as a liability	Defended as a professional who died of cold
Radio Status	Failed due to malfunction	Failed due to interference	Incorrect frequencies and planning

The Michael Asher Investigation: A Turning Point

In the late 1990s, Michael Asher, a former member of the SAS and a fluent Arabic speaker, set out to find the truth. His book, *The Real Bravo Two Zero*, is considered by many historians to be the definitive account of what actually happened. By retracing the patrol''s steps with GPS precision and interviewing the Iraqis who captured the men, Asher revealed that many of the ''heroic'' moments in the original books were fabrication or embellishment. For instance, the ''tank'' the patrol supposedly destroyed was likely a simple bulldozer or a civilian vehicle.

The Significance of the ''Goat Herd''

Asher found the ''boy'' who had supposedly spotted the patrol. The witness, now a man, recalled seeing the soldiers but noted that they were not as stealthy as they believed. This highlights a fundamental truth of the real Bravo Two Zero: the patrol was operating in an environment they did not fully understand, with intelligence that was outdated by decades.

The Fate of the Eight: A Summary

The outcome of the patrol was grim. Of the eight men who went in:

- Andy McNab: Captured and tortured; released after the war.
- Chris Ryan: The only member to successfully evade capture and reach Syria.
- Mike Coburn: Captured; later wrote his own account, ''Soldier Five,'' to correct the record.
- Vince Phillips: Died of hypothermia during the E&E.
- Bob Consiglio: Killed in a firefight during the retreat.
- Steve Lane: Died of hypothermia and exhaustion.
- Malcolm MacGown: Captured; released after the war.
- Dinger (Leggy): Captured; released after the war.

Advanced Tactical Lessons Learned

Despite the controversy, the real Bravo Two Zero mission provides essential lessons for modern special operations. These lessons are studied in military academies worldwide to ensure similar mistakes are not repeated.

1. The Importance of Human Intelligence (HUMINT)

The mission relied heavily on satellite imagery that failed to show the density of the civilian and military population in the area. Modern missions now emphasize the need for real-time HUMINT to supplement technical data.

2. Communications Redundancy

The failure of the PRC-319 led to the implementation of multiple, redundant communication systems in SAS operations, including satellite phones and burst-transmission devices that do not rely on line-of-sight frequencies.

3. Environmental Preparedness

The death of three patrol members from hypothermia in a desert environment shocked the military establishment. It led to a complete overhaul of cold-weather gear requirements for desert operations, recognizing that deserts can be as deadly as the Arctic at night.

Common Pitfalls in Narrating Military History

When analyzing "the real Bravo Two Zero," one must be aware of the pitfalls of "war stories" and the publishing industry. The 1990s saw a boom in "SAS-sploitation" books, where publishers encouraged authors to add "color" to their stories to compete with Hollywood action movies. This created a situation where the line between a tactical debrief and a fictional thriller became blurred. The real Bravo Two Zero was not a Hollywood movie; it was a desperate, cold, and frightening struggle for survival against overwhelming odds and bureaucratic failure.

Troubleshooting the Conflicting Narratives

If you are a student of military history trying to find the truth, use these criteria to evaluate the accounts:

- Topographical Verification: Does the terrain described match the actual GPS coordinates? (In McNab"s case, often not).
- Third-Party Testimony: Are there accounts from local civilians or enemy combatants that corroborate the story?
- Official Records: While the MoD is secretive, official medals and citations (like Chris Ryan"s Military Medal) provide clues to the actual scale of the events.
- Peer Review: What do other SAS members from the same era say? Most SAS veterans have been highly critical of the commercialized versions of the story.

Frequently Asked Questions

Conclusion: The Legacy of Bravo Two Zero

The "real" Bravo Two Zero is a story of human endurance, tragic mistakes, and the harsh reality of war. It is not the sanitized, heroic version found on the shelves of airport bookstores, nor is it a simple story of incompetence. It is a nuanced historical event that reminds us that even the most elite soldiers are subject to the laws of physics, the failures of technology, and the fog of war. By looking at the mission through the lens of Michael Asher's investigation and the testimony of survivors like Mike Coburn, we gain a much deeper respect for the men who suffered through that Iraqi winter, regardless of the embellishments of the legend.

Tags: #bravo two zero #sas #special forces #andy mcnab #chris ryan #military history #gulf war