

Obituary - Lt Col Mark 'Foggy' Phillips - SBS



Lieutenant Colonel Mark 'Foggy' Phillips, who has died aged 56, was a Royal Marine who took part in an audacious mission during the Gulf War to blow up Saddam Hussein's telecommunications cables buried deep in the sands south of Baghdad.

On the night of January 22, 1991 the Special Boat Service (SBS) team was flown in two helicopters to a heavily defended stadium south of Baghdad where a prolonged aerial bombing campaign had failed to destroy the fibre optic cables carrying Iraq's command and control messages to Basra.

The SBS team were charged with cutting the cables using precisely placed explosives, an operation which one Special Forces source described as "the proverbial 'mission impossible' and many people thought Foggy's team wouldn't make it back alive".

A diversionary attack was launched to draw enemy troops from the area, while the helicopters flew in at low level to avoid detection by enemy radar. Two unsuccessful attempts were made to find and cut the cable, but each time headquarters announced that Iraqi signals were still being sent.

At the third attempt, all the explosives left were used to produce one massive blast where the cables were thought to be. They had the satisfaction of being told that Iraqi communications had suddenly ceased, but, not content, they dug and recovered a portion of the cable, before boarding the helicopters for a triumphant return to friendly lines. The fibre optic cable was later exhibited at the Imperial War Museum in London.

Subsequently Phillips took part in the SBS raid which retook the British Embassy in Kuwait City, and he and his team were attached to a joint UK/US task force given the mission to find and capture Saddam.

Phillips returned to Iraq in 2003-4 when he was based in Baghdad, from where he mounted operations against insurgents in Sadr city and carried out surveillance missions. He was appointed MBE in recognition of his gallant and distinguished services in the field.

Later in Afghanistan he served in another joint British and American Special Forces unit which tracked and ambushed enemy leaders.

Mark Christopher Phillips was born in Gloucestershire on May 24, 1961 and educated at Charlton Kings Secondary Modern (now Balcarras Academy), Cheltenham.

He was briefly a policeman before joining the Royal Marines. In training, he amply displayed qualities of courage, selflessness, professionalism and cheerfulness no matter what the situation, and he was awarded the coveted King's Badge as top recruit. He then served for a short while in 45 Commando before in 1987 passing further grueling training to join the SBS, where he stayed for 25 years.

Known as "Foggy" – a joking reference to his namesake, Princess Anne's former husband Captain Mark Phillips – he was one of the Corps's fittest and most respected officers, and a courageous and energetic leader who carried out numerous dangerous missions into the heart of enemy territory. He was also a well-known figure in military circles for his exploits in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although Phillips kept out of the public eye, he was a great athlete and in the 1990s he was four times winner of the 125-mile Devizes to Westminster canoe race, which has previously been won by Paddy Ashdown and Ranulph Fiennes. (Paddy did the DW in '65, came 12th, Ran completed it 3 times, though didn't win it. Ed.)

He retired from the Royal Marines in 2013 to set up his own security business, but was diagnosed with sporadic Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease, a disease so rare that only one in a million people is affected, and died after a short illness. He married in 1990 and is survived by his wife and children.

Lt Col Mark Phillips, born May 24, 1961, died August 12, 2017