

SAVE OUR SECRETS

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By Nick Martin-Clark and Pete Sawyer

The SAS love secrecy, but they may have gone too far this time

THE MINISTRY of Defence is not generally known for its openness. Much of its secrecy is quite rightly born out of necessity: to protect operations, personnel and its own specialist ways of doing things.

Nevertheless, there is much evidence that this culture of secrecy has gone far beyond the realms of rationality. And nothing better illustrates the MoD's lunatic culture of secrecy than the secrecy surrounding plans to raise a statue to the venerable founder of the SAS, the late Sir David Stirling.

The scheme was put together by the SAS Regimental Association, a registered charity which operates from a PO box number in a "secure military area" in Chelsea. There are no prizes for working out that this could be a reference to the Duke of York's Headquarters on the King's Road.

The exact plans for the statue are supposed to be "hush-hush", but Punch can reveal that the bronze statue has been commissioned from the internationally acclaimed sculptress Angela Connor. Connor was unable to discuss the project at length, because the Regimental Association had told her that it was concerned about her personal security. But we understand that the statue will be "bold and strong" and will stand around eight feet high, resting on a natural stone plinth.

It will be erected, not in the obvious location of Hereford, the home of 22 SAS and the hub of Britain's special forces, but on a Scottish farm, on land specially donated by Stirling's family to the Regimental Association. The SAS commanding officer felt that Hereford was "not the right place for it".

The association has some £6 million cash in its kitty. But it was mindful of potential problems with the Charities Commission as the erection of statues falls outside the charity's constitutional aims. So in February of this year, it set up a limited company, Keir (Gardenia) Ltd, which trades as The David Stirling Memorial Fund, to mastermind the project.

Gardenia gives its address as the same PO box number as the Regimental Association. Among the directors is a member of Stirling's family, the owner of the farm.

A lack of consultation over the statue, and the bizarre choice of site have caused rifts within the Regimental Association. We spoke to several former SAS men who questioned the merits of spending some £150,000 on something which few, if any, will make the trek to see.

"The general feeling is that it's not a good idea," said one. "They should have the statue at the entrance to the camp where everyone can see it. Otherwise people will have to pay to get up to Scotland."

The secretary of the Regimental Association, who also has a part-time ("none of your business") job with the MoD, asked us not to reveal his name for fear of reprisals. He justified the location. "Scotland is the home of David Stirling. The statue will be on the estate where he was born and grew up. He's a Scottish hero."

He admitted there would be no sign-posts to the statue. "We don't want to be exact about where we're doing it, but it would be there for the general public to see and will be easily visible from the road. We're not aiming to hide it away. We just didn't want a blaze of publicity," he added.

We asked him to explain the curious way in which the statue had been funded. "Unless you ask me some straightforward questions I will terminate this conversation," he said.

Stirling was knighted in 1990, but died a few months later at the age of 74. He was awarded the OBE and DSO for actions in North Africa and Europe during World War Two.

Connor says: "I try and keep out of the politics of these things as much as possible. The project inspires me. David Stirling is an extremely interesting individual. The association wanted to underplay the whole thing. I don't understand why. What can you do with a statue?"

"But they couldn't be nicer people to work with," she added. □