

Oil Rig Protection Group, Royal Marines

In 1980, Comacchio Company was formed to provide a force capable of dealing with terrorist threats to oil rigs and as protection for nuclear weapons. This force was company sized as it was felt that a full commando (equivalent to a battalion) was not required. Shortly afterwards it was renamed the Comacchio Group. The name Comacchio is a reference to the Battle of Lake Comacchio in Italy in World War Two. It carried on the traditions of 43 Command which had been disbanded after World War Two and briefly reformed and disbanded in the 1960s.

"I joined Ornito Group almost by accident, well really it was an accident, it wasn't what I thought I would be volunteering for. There were rumours going round about a new underwater sabotage unit and when a notice asking for volunteers for a new specialist unit were posted, I applied thinking that was what it was. Wrong guess! Still it's a good life, one week in three at sea, a week on admin and maintenance and a week training, although I'm getting sick of CQB drills in the old Martello Tower – makes me wonder if any of the Herreford Hooligans ever tire of the kill house."

Corporal Tom Lawhead in conversation with the author

In 1996, Comacchio Company was rerolled to just provide enhanced security for nuclear warheads. To provide cover for the oil rig protection (not just from terrorists but also sabotage), a new unit was formed, the Oil Rig Protection Group, Royal Marines (using a cadre from Comacchio Group). In early 1999 the unit was renamed after a battle honour awarded to 43 Commando in World War Two as Ornito Group, Royal Marines. (This was the Battle of Mount Ornito which occurred during the Battle of Anzio.) It is believed that the reason for this is to help hide the fact that the UK has a trickle of oil from the North Sea (with the loss of Scottish bases these are vulnerable to a range of nations such as Norway, France and the newly independent Scotland).

The Group has a TRF badge of an oil rig surrounded by a circular brick wall. Initial strength was about 500 including specialists from the Royal Navy and 539 (Assault Squadron) Royal Marines. Currently in July 2000 its strength is approximately 175.

It is organised as follows

- HQ Headquarters Squadron
- O Rifle Squadron
- R Rifle Squadron
- S Support Weapons Squadron
- P Squadron Royal Navy (A mix of boat crews and aircraft crew and mechanics all seconded from the Royal Navy)

Currently the unit is based in Portsmouth with approximately a third of the unit deployed to the North Sea at any one time.

Vehicles available

2 x Sea King helicopters
10 x Rigid Raider
4 x fishing boat
Scuba equipment to fully equip two squadrons



Illustration 1: P Squadron helmsman in a Rigid Raider ferrying R Squadron marines on a deployment exercise off the south coast

The RAF has been known on one occasion at least (in an emergency when speed was urgent) to have ferried members of the group and rigid raiders directly to a point just off the target rig.

Weapons



Illustration 2: R Squadron Marine on a training exercise using Browning HP-35 (L9A1) MoD

HP35 (some silenced)
P226 (these were in the process of replacing the HP35 but many of the HP35s were pulled from storage as the war continued)
pump shotguns of assorted types (some sources have indicated that a number of HK CAWs were purchased in 1996)
L85A1/2 (preferred over M16 for close quarter on rigs due to length)
L19 and L19A1 – this has not been confirmed but is widely believed

L22A1

L34A1

MP5SD

L2A3 – less common than MP5s but often carried on board fishing boats as less conspicuous

MP5

L7A2 (usually boat mounted)

M2 (only boat mounted)

Milan (on boars)

L42A1

L96

L115A1

CS grenades

flash-bangs

the odd Blowpipe or Javelin anti-aircraft missile

All members are trained in small boat and helicopter assault. The unit is unusual in that all ranks are issued and trained on pistol shooting. Every 6 months the unit loses 5-10 members to the SBS. Many of the instructors with the ORPG (who are part of Headquarters Squadron) have spent a tour with the SBS.

“We probably have the most scruffy unit in the Royal Marines, when we are operating in the North Sea we want to look like locals and not a military unit. So we try and look like fisherman unless we are doing an assault. I tend to wear a pair of navy coloured walking trousers with plenty of pockets, a baggy off white wool jumper and a wooly hat. We’ve also been told we can grow our hair and beards, hence the Uncle Albert look [editor referring to an old merchant seaman character from a BBC comedy who had a full beard]. I know nobody looks like they did pre-war but we look almost piratical I suppose – nobody would think for a minute we were military (although it is hard at first to stop recruits saluting and using ranks).”

Corporal Kevin Newton in conversation with the editor

Ornito Group in print and film

Ornito group due to their secretive nature have not appeared in many works of fiction. The best known are:

“Operation Hijack” by Esther, Ruth and Jennifer ffoukes – Raven Press - 2023– this features a desperate mission by a small group of Ornito Group to recapture an oil rig from a band of ruthless terrorists with a nuclear bomb. Not noted for accuracy. It is rumoured that a film may follow.

Sergeant Jack Barrowman from the BBC radio and later TV series “Agents” is revealed to be a former member with the tattoo of the TRF on his upper right arm.

“When Mountains Fall” the third in the revived James Bond film series starring Alistair Higgins features members of the Ornito Group working with Bond at the start of the film recapturing an oil rig from unspecified agents. They also appear delivering Bond and the SBS to the villain's hideout at the film's climax.

The unit is directly subordinate to Joint Services Command. Once the Special Service Brigade returns to the UK the group will be subordinated to it.

According to “A Secret History of the War” by Derek Hunt and Sara Johnson, Ornito Group was involved in the mysterious destruction of the Eagle Explorer oil rig. They claim that the rig exploded whilst it was being stormed by members of the group.

They state they are unable to determine who had taken over the rig but rule out the Scottish government and state they believe it was either Norwegian or French agents. As ever the British government has refused to confirm or deny any special forces involvement. Evidence for the claim however has not been produced and most commentators believe it is unlikely.

At least one credible unsubstantiated source has claimed the unit has been used for special operations involving shipping near the UK.

They have also been made responsible for contact with Norway using fishing boats from May 2000.



Illustration 3: Interesting MoD picture of Oil Rig Protection Group Marines in training, of note are the high power torches, P226s in drop holsters, field dressings on the belt and the black coveralls. The webbing is standard DPM PLCE pattern (although the holsters appear to be OG. Also note all items are tied with paracord to the marines. The nearest marine appears to be wearing a crash helmet normally used by boat crews.