

**Title: Commando Kayak**

**Subtitle:** The man behind Australian folboats

**Author:** John Hoehn

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**Review:** John Kirk-Anderson

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Fitting firmly in the 'special interest' section, this book tells the story of Walter Hohn, the inventor of folding kayaks, or folboats, used by the Australians during the Second World War. Written by his son, John Hoehn, it draws on memories of the author, documents found after Walter's death and interviews with former commandos.

Walter, a Swiss-born engineer living near Melbourne, had patented his design of a folding kayak in 1929 and this helped bring him to the attention of military officials when they needed a small craft to wage war against the Japanese who were drawing close to mainland Australia. Little information on their intended use was given to the inventor, and feedback was less than clear. Post war reports have indicated that they were extensively used in reconnaissance, sabotage, rescues and raids.

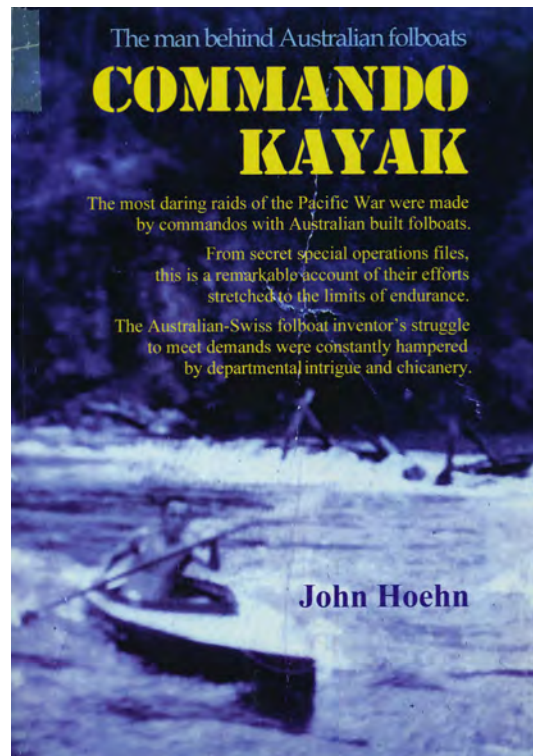
It would be easy to imagine that during wartime, petty bickering, politics and profiteering would be put aside for the war effort, but this book makes clear that this is not the case. Much of the book is devoted to the battles that Walter fought against bureaucracy as his designs were stolen, tenders given to competitors and his supply chain blocked.

Adding to his woes, but also the reason for the military's approach in the first place, were the territorial disputes between the Americans and the British over operating in the South Pacific. Britain's Special Operations Executive (SOE) were the driving force behind small unit raids behind Japanese lines, but this clashed with America's ambitions and they cut funding, requiring the Australians to look closer to home.

A gem that came out of the book was the selection process for some of the men chosen to test the craft, and I quote, "After all, truck drivers develop strong arm and shoulder muscles for moving goods around and are also used to sitting down for countless hours, so it was a fair bet that he would also fit the job as a competent folboater."

It is probably fair to say that driving trucks was a different job in the 1940's than it is today!

Also interesting to the contemporary recreational paddler was the method the commandos used for crossing surf, both launching and landing; both paddlers would sit on the deck with their feet in the cockpit and paddle from there, usually using a single-bladed paddle. No explanation is given for using this method, which would do little for the stability of the craft.



The author, like his father, is also a Swiss engineer, and as expected the book is logical, clear, and thorough. There are 75 pages of closely-typed text, organised into eight chapters, followed by 31 pages of black and white prints, plans and documents.

All in all, this is a book that will probably appeal only to students of history, given the dry way the story is presented.

Footnote: The June 2012 edition of *Sea Kayaker Magazine* carries an article titled *Australian Folboats and Commandos, Their Vital Wartime Role*, by John Hoehn.

This six page article details some of the history behind the World War Two folbots, including a 16 day, 750 mile trial of their effectiveness in May 1943, but also adds stories of their use during the Korean and Vietnam wars.

This article is written in a much more lively style, hinting at the benefit of good editing.