

EYES ON THE SAND

THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP AT EL ALAMEIN

Watching and reporting enemy movements, the LRDG served as
Monty's eyes and ears in the build up to the decisive battle

WORDS GAVIN MORTIMER



September 1942 was one of the worst months that the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) had experienced in North Africa. A series of raids launched by British special forces – including the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Special Boat Service (SBS) – against Libyan ports had resulted in the death, capture or injury of several of the LRDG’s most experienced soldiers. Two officers, David Lloyd Owen and Nick Wilder, were in hospital beds recovering from wounds and one of the unit’s best navigators, Mike Carr, had been captured by the Italians at Jalo.

The raids had been hastily planned and were too ambitious in scale, so it was a relief for the LRDG’s commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Guy Prendergast, that their next task was a reversion to what they did best: reconnaissance.

That was the LRDG’s original purpose, the idea which their founder, Ralph Bagnold, had sold to General Archibald Wavell in June 1940. He had submitted a proposal to the officer commanding the Middle East Command for a light reconnaissance force to penetrate deep into Libya to gather intelligence on the enemy: “Every vehicle of which, with a crew of three and a machine gun, was to carry its own supplies of food and water for three weeks, and its own petrol for 2500 miles [4,000km] of travel across average soft desert surface – equivalent in petrol consumption to some 2,400 miles [3,860km] of road,” Bagnold had written.

Wavell thought it a splendid idea and told Bagnold to have his unit operational within six weeks. Prendergast succeeded Bagnold as the LRDG’s CO in the summer of 1941 but the pair – both pre-war desert explorers – shared the same vision that the unit was essentially a reconnaissance force and not a raiding one, though it had the capability to launch attacks if necessary.

A little over a year since the founding of the LRDG, the Desert War had given birth to another special forces unit, the SAS, and while there was mutual respect there was also on the part of the LRDG a growing irritation with the SAS. “They were a gung-ho lot,” remarked one LRDG man, Arthur Arger, about the SAS. “They were very good at what they did but they couldn’t stop out for the length of time we did. If we were going to do something for the length of time we did, if we were going to do something like the SAS, we would go further afield and do it, and then go further afield still and do it. But the SAS could only do one thing

and come back. They were short-term, we were long-term,” he commented.

Increasingly throughout 1942, the LRDG had been obliged to divert some of its precious time and resources to assist the SAS in logistics and navigation. In one memorandum to GHQ Cairo, Prendergast objected to being forced to play “universal aunt” to them.

Eventually, on the eve of the Second Battle of El Alamein, Lieutenant Colonel John Hackett, recently appointed officer in charge of light raiding forces in North Africa, summoned the LRDG and the SAS to his office. “One of the chief problems was to keep these little armies out of each other’s way,” he recalled. “There was the LRDG practising its intricately careful, cautious, skilful reconnaissance... but the SAS would come out to blow up some aeroplanes and they were very careless about it. Lovely men, but very careless and they would leave a lot of stuff around, and they would stir the thing up no end and out would come the Axis forces to see what had stirred it up, and they would find the LRDG.”

It was imperative that this did not happen once the battle was underway; the LRDG was being tasked with conducting reconnaissance patrols – what they called ‘road-watches’ – while the SAS’s instructions were to attack the Axis forces on the coastal roads. Hackett therefore “drew a line down the map like a medieval pope separating out the Italians

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Left: The LRDG’s main purpose was to conduct reconnaissance missions on the enemy

Right: Two SAS men pictured in 1942. The LRDG considered the SAS to be too gung-ho

Below: Each LRDG vehicle had a team of three, a machine gun and enough fuel to travel 4,000km





LRDG patrols were praised for the accuracy of their reports on enemy troops, vehicles and weapons



Paddy Mayne, a founding member of the SAS, led raids on German airfields in North Africa

from the Portuguese in the Atlantic. And I said west of this line LRDG only, east of this [line] SAS only, and that kept them more or less out of each other's hair."

The line designated by Hackett was the 20th meridian of longitude east, which ran north to south through Jedabia, and that necessitated a move in October for the LRDG – whose strength was 25 officers and 278 other ranks – from their HQ at Fayoum to the oasis of Kufra, their base in the spring of 1941.

One of the LRDG officers sent to Kufra was Captain Alastair Timpson of the Guards Patrol. On arriving he learned "of the great victory at Alamein... as the enemy recoiled westwards the road-watch was now of increased importance". Deprived of their ports in eastern Libya as they withdrew, the Germans' only line of supply and communication was in Tripolitania in the west of the country.

The first LRDG patrol deployed on a road-watch had left Kufra on the same day as the Second Alamein offensive began, 23 October, and headed north, 1100km west of El Alamein. Under the command of Captain Ken Spicer, the patrol's orders were to conduct a census of the vehicles using the Benghazi-Tripoli road.

They began their task at 7pm on 30 October until relieved by a New Zealand patrol nine days later. Concealed within desert shrub in pairs at a time, one observed the road through binoculars and made a vocal record of every vehicle that passed down the road in either direction: motorbikes, staff cars, oil tankers, 15cwt trucks, 30cwt trucks and, if possible, what was inside. The other soldier noted it all in his journal, and at nightfall they trudged back to where the rest of the patrol was camped and the intelligence was radioed back to Kufra from a wireless truck.

It was a strange existence for the LRDG soldiers, a mix of tension when surveying the road and tedium when off-duty. "It was intensely boring because when you weren't actually down on a two-man road-watch you were back by the trucks, and all you could do was lay under them all day," recalled Ron Cryer, one of Spicer's

patrol. "You couldn't walk about because you might attract attention from the road."

Spicer's patrol recorded an average of just under 100 vehicles each day travelling along the road in both directions. Within three days, the New Zealanders were radioing back to LRDG HQ at Kufra that enemy transport was streaming westward at a rate of 3,500 vehicles a day.

As the Axis forces withdrew from the onslaught of the Eighth Army, the LRDG kept up a continual flow of intelligence, noting in November that there were more Afrika Korps heading west than travelling in the other direction towards the enemy. It was also recorded that the Germans going west were "in much better form than those going east, judging by the shouts they gave each other when they passed".

Each day hundreds, sometimes thousands, of Germans passed underneath their noses. On occasion they came even closer – unpleasantly so. Alexander Stewart and a comrade were camouflaged among some scrub on a road-watch when a German convoy pulled off the roadside. "About 100 yards from us they got out of the trucks and walked as if they were coming straight towards us," recalled Stewart. The two LRDG men watched as the Germans approached the scrub, then turned, unbuttoned their breeches and answered the call of nature.

Stewart's patrol was scheduled to be relieved by one commanded by Timpson at the end of November. By now the Eighth Army was in possession of the ports of Benghazi and Agedabia and hard on the Axis heels. The LRDG were only 160km west, watching the road from Agedabia to Nofilia.

There was an LRDG adage, recalled Carr, that "if you go 500 miles [800km] behind the lines, though it sounds spectacular, you're as safe as houses because nobody's going to suspect you. It's when you're only 50 miles [80km] behind the frontline that everyone is trigger-happy."

Timpson's patrol discovered the truth of that statement as they motored towards their observation point. On the morning of 24 November he spotted eight armoured cars

"IF YOU GO 500 MILES BEHIND THE LINES, THOUGH IT SOUNDS SPECTACULAR, YOU'RE AS SAFE AS HOUSES BECAUSE NOBODY'S GOING TO SUSPECT YOU"



Left: An LRDG vehicle pictured in Cairo, Egypt, during the arduous North African campaign

Right: Intelligence officer and desert explorer Bill Kennedy Shaw (left) served with the LRDG

Below: As well as the enemy, LRDG patrols had to battle the treacherous desert conditions



“THE LRDG, 20 MEN IN FIVE TRUCKS AND TWO JEEPS IN TOTAL, RESPONDED WITH BURSTS FROM THEIR TWIN VICKERS K MACHINE GUNS, BUT TIMPSON KNEW THEY WERE HOPELESSLY OUTNUMBERED”



Above: Men and vehicles from both the LRDG and SAS pictured in North Africa

on an escarpment. Doubling back, Timpson soon spotted six more vehicles approaching, guns blazing. The LRDG, 20 men in five trucks and two jeeps in total, responded with bursts from their twin Vickers K machine guns, but Timpson knew they were hopelessly outnumbered and that their only hope was a breakout.

He drove his jeep up and over an escarpment, followed by two of the five 30cwt Ford trucks. “While bumping along we exchanged shots with the enemy at fairly close range, but gradually we pulled away from them,” said Timpson. “Two chased us for about ten miles [16km]. We had to try to lose our tracks as we went so I followed various old enemy tracks, turning off them abruptly in a wadi bed and then dodging this way and that behind small hills.”

Timpson and nine of his men managed to escape but the other half of the patrol had been captured. Undeterred, they continued to the road-watch, which they undertook

Below: David Lloyd Owen (left), one of the LRDG’s most experienced officers, was wounded in a raid



All images: Gavin Mortimer

from behind a rocky outcrop 360 metres from the road below.

Now that the LRDG were so far west they encountered another difficulty: the attitude of the Bedouin who, unlike the Senussi in the east of Libya, considered themselves friends of the Germans. On finishing one road-watch, Timpson and the soldier with him walked into a Bedouin camp in search of water. “The Bedouin were suspicious of us,” said Timpson. “They sat around us in a half circle and asked us threateningly if we were British. On assuring them we were Germans, they became less menacing.”

Another LRDG patrol encountered two Bedouin who demanded tea and rations from the two men watching the road. If they weren’t forthcoming, said the Bedouin, they would report their position to the Germans. One of the LRDG men agreed to the blackmail and beckoned the Bedouin to follow. Once they were out of sight of the road, the LRDG men strangled the pair.

Another danger was enemy reconnaissance aircraft. Not far from where Timpson’s

patrol was conducting its road-watch, A and B squadrons of the SAS rendezvoused at a remote spot called Bir Zalten south of the coastal town of El Agheila. Paddy Mayne’s A Squadron had spent the last six weeks raiding airfields and roads to the east, but they were now instructed by Lieutenant Colonel David Stirling to harry the Germans further west on the road from Nofilia to Sirte; Stirling’s B Squadron would operate even further west, around Tripoli. The reconnaissance aircraft that flew slowly over the desert weren’t looking for the LRDG but for the SAS.

By the second week of December, the Axis forces were withdrawing in such numbers that the LRDG struggled to keep up. “The density [of traffic] grew so heavy that one could not write fast enough,” said Timpson. “It was only possible to keep the record going by quickly making a list every ten minutes of the different classifications of vehicles, troops, stores, equipment and unit signals, and adding a mark against each type as it passed, in the manner of scoring at cricket.”

Nevertheless, the German retreat was disciplined and the Afrika Korps were far from demoralised. There was also plenty of fight left in them, as they demonstrated on 22 December when they spotted a New Zealand LRDG patrol, commanded by Lieutenant Ron Tinker, close to the Tripoli Road. In the fight that ensued six of the eight Kiwis were captured.

The day before the New Zealanders were caught, Eighth Army issued fresh instructions to the LRDG. The road-watches were at an end; now they were to undertake topographical reconnaissance for the next stage of the Desert War – the advance beyond Tripoli towards Tunisia.

The LRDG’s contribution to the Second Battle of El Alamein had been small but significant, as noted by the director of military intelligence in Cairo, who in a report in December remarked: “Not only is the standard of accuracy and observation exceptionally high but the patrols are familiar with the most recent illustration of enemy vehicles and weapons... without their reports we should frequently have been in doubt as to the enemy’s intentions, when knowledge of them was all important.”