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Raids, Road Watches, and Reconnaissance.

An Analysis of the New Zealand Contribution to the Long Range Desert Group in North Africa, 1940-1943

A Thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History at
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III

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Introduction

Brain-child of a Royal Signals officer, Major Ralph Bagnold, the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG)¹ was formed in Egypt in June 1940 to meet the British Middle East Command's urgent need for reliable tactical intelligence. Bagnold's Commander-in-Chief, General Archibald Wavell, recognised the dangerously impoverished state of Britain's intelligence resources early in the Desert War and authorised the formation of the unit, charging it with the responsibility for conducting reconnaissance deep in the Libyan Desert. An acute shortage of British manpower at the time and the fortuitous presence of the under-utilised 1st Echelon of the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force, led to New Zealand making a strong commitment in personnel to the LRDG which lasted throughout the three years of the desert campaign. This study seeks to assess the significance of the New Zealand contribution to the Long Range Desert Group in North Africa, 1940-1943.

Few published works deal with the LRDG directly. Most references to the Group occur in general treatments of the North African campaign², or works on related subjects such as intelligence histories³, accounts of so-called 'special forces' and irregular warfare.⁴ Typically, these either mention the LRDG in passing, or describe the Group's contribution to specific operations, without offering substantial details or evaluation. There are exceptions; Playfair's *The Mediterranean and Middle East* also gives a brief explanation of the unit's origin and mentions a couple of notable operations.⁵ Secondary works solely concerned with the LRDG are rare. Most of these, like that by Jenner and List, tend toward descriptions of technical matters, and make only general, if enthusiastic, observations on the value of LRDG operations as a whole.⁶ Largely, the secondary works address the

¹ The unit title was the *Long Range Patrol* for the first six months of its existence, thereafter the unit was expanded and given the new designation the *Long Range Desert Group*.

² For example, W.G.F. Jackson, *The North African Campaign 1940-43*, London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1975; Adrian Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1992; R. J. M. Loughnan, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-1945: Divisional Cavalry*, Wellington (NZ): War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1963.

³ F.H. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations, Vol. I*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1979. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations, Vol. II*, 1981. Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War: Its Influence on Strategy and Operations, Vol. III (Part 1)*, 1984; R. Bennett, *Behind the Battle: Intelligence in the War with Germany, 1939-1945*, London: Pimlico, 1999.

⁴ Virginia Cowles, *The Phantom Major: The Story of David Stirling and the S.A.S. Regiment*, London: Arms and Armour Press Ltd., 1986; A. Hoe, *David Stirling: The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S.*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992.

⁵ I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. I: The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941)*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954, pp.294-7; Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. II: The Germans Come to the help of their Ally (1941)*, 1956; Adrian Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1992.

⁶ B. Jenner, and D. List, *The Long Range Desert Group*, London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1983.

narrative aspects of the LRDG's history.⁷ They do not offer any deeper analysis and for the most part rely heavily upon the handful of published biographies of former LRDG members.

Those works that either consider the subject exclusively, or offer a superior level of comment on the LRDG are almost exclusively memoirs. These are of two kinds. The first are those of individuals who depended upon the services of the LRDG, were involved as outsiders in its operations, or worked with the intelligence it produced.⁸ The remainder are by past unit members. The significant feature of the former group is that they are necessarily narrow, if consistently complimentary, in their observations which deal with the LRDG only as it related to their own concerns and duties. The biographies of former LRDG personnel come closest to touching upon the question set by this thesis by making specific reference to the quality of the New Zealanders under their command. However, these works are intended by their authors to be primarily narrative accounts with the result that even in the best of them analysis tends to be patchy and deals with the unit as a whole.⁹

The purpose of this thesis is to take an analytical approach to the subject. It addresses the significance of a sub-group within the LRDG which, for a variety of reasons that are explored in the thesis, made up a sizeable proportion of the unit's strength. To do so, the study has drawn upon a range of sources, including a substantial body of primary material such as unit records and war diaries. It has also utilised memoirs and correspondence between the author and former LRDG members. The secondary sources have been surveyed extensively along with histories of the North African campaign to provide context and supporting detail.

⁷ R.L. Kay, *Long Range Desert Group in Libya, 1940-41*, Wellington (NZ): War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1949. Kay, *Long Range Desert Group in the Mediterranean*, Wellington (NZ): War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1950. Korero, *Kiwi Bedouin: A Korero Report*, *Korero*, (A.E.W.S. [Army Education and Welfare Service] Background Bulletin), 2:20 (1944), pp. 3-6.

⁸ D. Hunt, *A Don at War*, London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990. F. Maclean, *Eastern Approaches*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1956. B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958; Vladimir Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army*, London: The Reprint Society, 1953.

⁹ David Lloyd Owen, *The Desert My Dwelling Place*, London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1957. Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1980. William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945.

The study presents the issue in a broadly chronological manner. Each chapter focuses on the most prominent activity at a particular time. All activities occurred concurrently, but they tended to dominate at different times, allowing the material to be presented in three phases. Chapters One and Two are largely concerned with background factors, whilst Chapters Three, Four and Five each emphasise a prevailing operational activity.

Chapter One examines the background to Wavell's decision to raise the patrols. It surveys the First World War and interwar period for crucial developments in technique and circumstances that enabled the later formation of the LRDG. It also considers the prevailing strategic considerations and factors influencing Wavell's decision and introduces the involvement of the New Zealanders. Chapter Two examines the circumstances that led to New Zealand troops being made available for service with the LRDG. It explores the relationships between senior British and New Zealand commanders, analysing the attempts of the New Zealand commander to discontinue the involvement, and British efforts to retain the men on loan to the LRDG. It concludes with an appraisal of the quantitative aspects of the New Zealand contribution. Chapter Three is the first of three chapters that evaluate the nature and importance of a particular activity. This chapter examines the LRDG's efforts raiding behind the lines during the North African campaign. It investigates the early successes that proved the value of the deep reconnaissance concept. It considers the factors which, at various times, drove or retarded the emphasis upon LRDG raiding activity. It finishes by analysing the overall significance of the activity and the implications it had for organisations such as the Free French, Special Air Service and the Middle East Command. Chapter Four studies the practice and products of LRDG surveillance of the Libyan coast highway. It discusses the nature and value of the intelligence gained, and evaluates LRDG surveillance in relation to alternative intelligence-gathering techniques. Chapter Five explores the importance of the LRDG's reconnaissance role in aiding the conduct of mobile warfare over desert terrain. It assesses the LRDG contribution in accumulating detailed topographical intelligence, and in providing path-finding parties to lead larger fighting formations across country. The chapter concludes by assessing the central role of the LRDG in several prominent outflanking operations during the North African campaign. The conclusion reviews the range of evidence presented in the thesis chapters and claims that the New Zealand contribution to the LRDG was substantial in terms of both quantity

and quality. It summarises the importance of the LRDG as a whole and highlights the ways in which the New Zealanders contributed to this.