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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 the School of History, Philosophy and Politics – Massey University

By

Clive Gower-Collins
1999

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List of Illustrations

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 campaign[2], or works on related subjects such as intelligence histories[3], 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

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[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.

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[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.

Chapter One – Background and Conception.

With the outbreak of war with Germany in 1939, and the possibility of war with Italy, proposals were made for the establishment of a specialised unit to carry out reconnaissance, intelligence gathering, and raiding deep in the Libyan Desert. Initially, none of these proposals was accepted. It took a combination of Italy's decision to declare war on 10 June 1940, and a Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) known for his "love of the unorthodox"[1], General Archibald Wavell, to provide adequate stimulus for the foundation of what were initially described as the 'Long Range Patrols'.[2]

A quarter of a century before the establishment of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), British commanders entrusted with Egypt's defence had faced the possibility of an attack from the west. The open terrain of North Africa demanded mobile troops and, in the British Army of 1915, mobility meant horses. The reliance of these units upon ready supplies of food and water rendered them incapable of undertaking tasks that took them more than a few kilometres from the northern coast. In order to patrol the desert frontier further inland, 'Light Car Patrols' were raised. It was then that the earliest experiments were made in motorised desert travel. However, the close of hostilities in 1918 brought the army's interest in mobile desert patrols largely to an end. Troops in vehicles would still occasionally make their way out into the 'western desert', but now on the affairs of the Desert Survey Office, a branch of the Egyptian 'Frontier Districts Administration'.[3] Official surveys and private expeditions, including those sustained by the Royal Geographical Society, continued throughout the inter-war period. Such excursions helped continue crucial developments in desert navigation, mechanical modifications that enabled vehicles to cope with the demands of terrain and climate, and personal desert skills. As Bill Kennedy Shaw, a former LRDG intelligence officer points out: "To exist at all in the Qattara Depression or in the Sand Sea in June or in the Gebel Akhdar in February is in itself a science which practice develops into an art."[4]

More than a few members of this band of desert explorers went on to make exceptional contributions to the Allied war effort in North Africa. Principally this was as LRDG

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[1] I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1*: The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941), London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954, p.295.
[2] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.16.
[3] Peter Clayton, *Desert Explorer: A Biography of Colonel P.A. Clayton DSO, MBE, FRGS, FRCS, FGS, 1896-1962*, Cargreen, Cornwall: Zerzura Press, 1998, p. 20.
[4] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.19.

officers and navigators, although there were also individuals such as Vladimir Peniakoff who gained recognition as the commander of 'Popski's Private Army'.[5] The LRDG owed its existence to the doggedness of one of the 'band's' members, Major Ralph Bagnold. Chance found Bagnold in Egypt in late 1939 where he repeatedly suggested to his superiors the establishment of a desert reconnaissance unit. Acceptance of his idea followed the Italian declaration of war in June 1940 and a summons by his C-in-C, General Wavell to explain his ideas. Bagnold later recalled:

> I was sent for by Wavell and I told him that we needed a small mobile force able to penetrate the Desert to the west of Egypt to see what was going on.
> Wavell said: 'What if you find the Italians are not doing anything in the interior at all?'
> I said without thinking: 'How about some piracy on the high desert?'
> At this his rather stern face broke into a grin, and he said: 'Can you be ready in six weeks?'
> I replied: 'Yes, provided . . .'
> 'Yes, I know,' he interrupted, 'there'll be opposition and delay.'
> He then rang his bell and a lieutenant-general came in as the Chief-of-Staff.
> Wavell said: "Bagnold seeks a talisman. Get this typed out and I'll sign it straightaway: "I wish that any request made by Major Bagnold in person should be met instantly and without question." '
> And it was like a talisman. I had complete carte blanche to do anything I liked.[6]

Whatever criticisms could be made of some of Wavell's judgements as a military commander, his decision to allow the formation of the Long Range Patrols demonstrated a judicious appreciation of the North African situation.[7] Events during the preceding eight months had left Wavell in a position inferior to the Italians in terms of both manpower and material. British productive capacity had been exceeded in building-up the British Expeditionary Force, making up for the loss of nearly all the Force's equipment in the flight from Dunkirk, and extending the British 'Home' defence

[5] Vladimir Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army*, London: The Reprint Society, 1953.
[6] Quoted in: Adrian Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1992, p.189.

in the ensuing panic. So supplies to the Middle East forces had been token at best. This was compounded by the fact that in the previous October Wavell had been advised that he was to observe a "defensive policy" and that any demands he made for forces and their material requisites were to be based upon this.[8] Even the increasing arrival of reinforcements from Australia, New Zealand, India and other Commonwealth and Empire countries did little to ease his predicament as the contribution was one of good keen men accompanied by little or no equipment.

However, despite the apparent superiority of their position, the Italians demonstrated little eagerness in June 1940 for attacking the British outright. Instead, they limited themselves to what the British Official History disparagingly describes as: "a rather clumsy form of reconnaissance"[9]. Wavell's fear was that his somewhat poorly motivated Italian enemy might be augmented by German armour and motorised infantry, thereby adding both substance and resolve to the danger from the West.

Any threat to the Upper Nile and the British river-borne supply route from Khartoum to Cairo was of paramount concern.[10] The "Admiralty declared themselves unable to pass even military convoys through the Mediterranean on account of the air dangers," [11] and the Luftwaffe bombed and mined the Suez Canal.[12] Hence, heavy equipment had to be landed at Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast and rail transported across to the Nile. The Italian capture of the Kufra Oasis 700 miles south-west of Cairo from the native tribesmen in 1931 had intensified this potential threat to the Nile route, as it was the key to the southern region of Libya known as the Fezzan. Two possibilities had to be planned for. Firstly, that the enemy might use Kufra as a base for launching a ground and airborne drive across to the Red Sea, and cutting Wavell's re-supply route for forces in Egypt and the Sudan. Secondly, Italian forces located beyond Matruh and Sollum might attempt to seize Egypt, while forces in Eritrea and Abyssinia attacked the Sudan in an effort to unite Axis-held Libya with Italian possessions in East Africa.[13]

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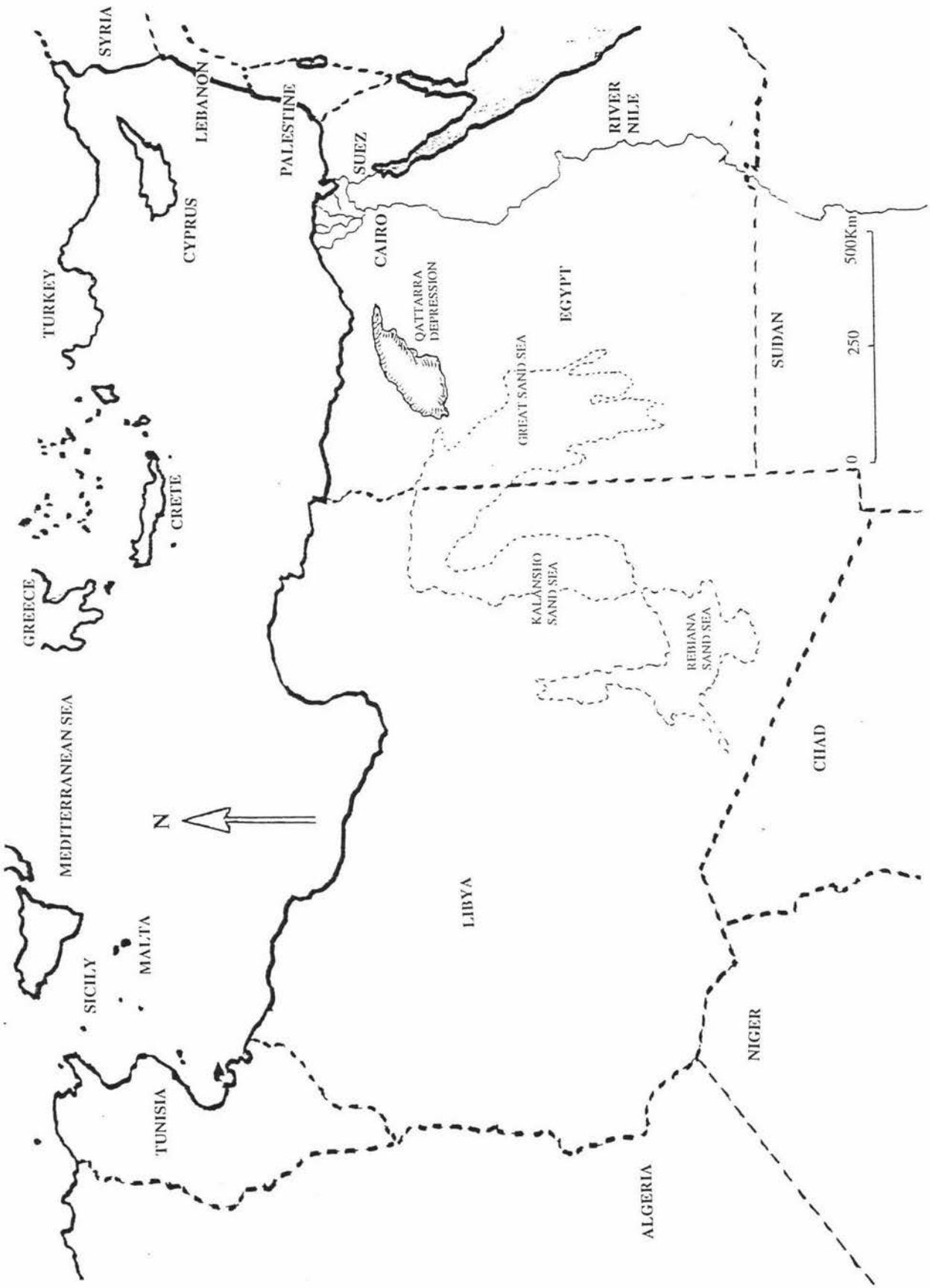
[7] For criticism of Wavell, see for example: Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. III: The Grand Alliance,* London: The Reprint Society, 1950, pp.280-285, & Calvocoressi, P., *Top Secret Ultra,* London: Cassell Ltd., 1980, p.80.
[8] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1: The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941),* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954, p.55.
[9] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1: The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941),* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954, p.205.
[10] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. II: Their Finest Hour,* London: Cassell and Co., 1949, pp.370-371.
[11] Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. II: Their Finest Hour,* p.370.
[12] G. Weinberg, *A World at Arms: A Global History of World War II,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, 214.
[13] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal,* [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945, p.31.

Figure 1. Theatre map.



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In meeting these threats, Wavell's situation might have been improved had the intelligence resources at his disposal been adequate to provide him with detailed intelligence of enemy movements and capabilities. Instead, an optimistic view of the likelihood of another war and the desire to curb military spending in the wake of the costs of World War One did much to ensure that "while the resources deployed on military intelligence are bound to be run down in peace-time, they were reduced after 1918 for a longer period and to a greater extent than was wise."[14] Those that remained acquired a new emphasis towards air-intelligence that reflected predictions that the wars of the future would be 'air-wars'.[15] Even in this Wavell was unfortunate, as the reconnaissance aircraft available to him lacked the necessary range to provide the information he required. In 1940, Air Chief Marshal Longmore's demands for a more suitable type of aircraft were still a long way from being met. The only option was to persevere with the few Lysanders already present, but they lacked both range and defensive capability, demanding constant fighter escorts.[16] The threat of invasion was given as the principal reason that aircraft could not be spared for Middle East duty.[17] Not that additional aircraft would have helped much, given that only one of the existing five Egyptian airfields had a runway capable of supporting the operation of modern aircraft.[18]

A significant intelligence asset available to senior British commanders throughout the war was high-grade signals intelligence (sigint); yet even this was denied to Wavell due to Italy substituting many of her critical ciphers on declaring war. Britain's continuing ability to decode Italian diplomatic signals was of small consolation as these dealt largely with trade and Italian intelligence efforts, shedding little light on operations or plans.[19] The break-through with the Italian Air Force ciphers, which would contribute so much to the British counter-offensive in December, could not have been foreseen at this time.[20]

However, Wavell's lack of intelligence resources was not simply the outcome of two decades of parsimony and a measure of Italian prudence. A contributing factor was

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[14] 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, p.10.
[15] Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air,* (translated from the Italian by Dino Ferarri), London: Faber and Faber, 1943.
[16] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. I: The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941),* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954, p.192-193.
[17] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. I,* p.207.
[18] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. I: The Early Successes Against Italy (to May 1941),* London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1954.
[19] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. I,* p.206.
[20] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, Vol. I,* p.375.

that, taken as a whole, military intelligence had been regarded by officers for years as underhand, contemptible, the very antithesis of the ethos of the officer corps with its emphasis on honour and courage. Labouring under such a stigma, the outcome was inevitable. As military psychologist Norman Dixon observes: "The history of the various departments of espionage and counter-espionage, of 'special operations' and the like, is one of badly staffed, ill-equipped Cinderella organisations struggling to perform their duties in the face of contempt, jealousy, and resentment."[21]

Wavell did not subscribe to this antipathetic attitude towards intelligence, even though he suffered as a result of its pervasiveness.[22] In fact, leading intelligence historian F. H. Hinsley stresses that Wavell was a "notable exception", and elsewhere he is accepted as being blessed with " imagination and love of the unorthodox".[23] These personal attributes certainly had much to do with Wavell's ability to recognise the opportunity presented by Bagnold's suggestion. However, before putting Wavell into too 'visionary' a light, it is worth recognising that forces operating at a numerical or material disadvantage have a strong incentive to operate 'unconventionally'. Clausewitz suggests: "The weaker the forces that are at the disposal of the supreme commander, the more appealing the use of cunning becomes. The bleaker the situation . . . [the] more readily cunning is joined to daring".[24] A former Oxford Don turned officer, David Hunt offered a slightly different explanation. He recalled that in the early years of the war he noticed

> A certain lack of self-confidence among regular officers. They had been under attack so long from the intellectuals, with Low and his Colonel Blimp marching at their head, that some of them began to have doubts about their firmest opinions. Many times in the coming years I was surprised at the way in which regular officers whom I knew to have keen and acute brains would allow themselves to be put upon by bogus intellectuals . . . They [the officers] knew they were supposed to be hidebound, conventional and set in their ways; it was less trouble in the long run to allow a little waste to take place rather than get themselves written down as unimaginative. A good deal of

[21] Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence*, London: Random House, 1994. p.293.
[22] Former Intelligence Officer Ralph Bennett has suggested that: "The ascent of intelligence to a secure place in the counsels of military decision-makers may indeed in the future even be regarded as the chief legacy of the Second World War, perhaps ranking with the victory it did so much to win in the years between 1939 and 1945". See: R. Bennett, *Behind the Battle: Intelligence in the War with Germany, 1939-1945*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p.xvii.
[23] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. I*, p.295.
[24] Quoted in: M. I. Handel, "Intelligence and Deception", in John Gooch, & Amos Perlmutter, (eds.)., *Military Deception and Strategic Surprise*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1982, p.124.

> the proliferation of special forces, private armies, separate intelligence-gathering organizations, was due to the same fear.[25]

Thus armed with both motives and means, Wavell approved the establishment of the Long Range Patrols with the objectives of "Reconnaissance, military, geographical and political. For propaganda among tribes in distant parts of enemy territory . . . To cause the enemy to expend fuel, vehicles and aircraft in protecting both his isolated posts and their supply columns against attack."[26]

With Wavell's support for raising the patrols, Bagnold arranged for other interwar desert explorers to join him.[27] He later reflected on their contribution:

> The very long raids across the whole width of Libya which have been carried out by the patrols have only been made possible by the presense of one or two officers with many years experience of similar work in peace time. It is doubtful if patrol leaders without such experience would ever learn enough in war time to achieve comparable results.[28]

This group of officers, the official British war history suggests:

> felt that no recruits would be more suitable than men from the 'outback', like some of the Queenslanders in Palestine, but the Australian Government was opposed to its men serving outside Australian formations and General Blamey felt unable to agree. Three patrols, each of two officers and about thirty men, were chosen from the New Zealanders in Egypt.[29]

The suggestion that the New Zealanders were approached only following an Australian refusal is an interesting and doubtful one. It was true that Blamey was asked by the

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[25] D. Hunt, A *Don at War,* London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990, pp.14-15.
[26] R. A. Bagnold, *Notes on Long Range Desert Patrols for operations in the Interior of LIBYA,* Cairo: Long Range Desert Group, 11 February 1941. NZ National Archives: WAII, 1, DA304.1/10/1.
[27] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1,* p.295.
[28] Bagnold, *Notes on Long Range Desert Patrols for Operations in the Interior of LIBYA.*
[29] Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, Vol. 1,* p.295.

British to lend a variety of specialised units, and had refused "point-blank,"[30] but the official view does not correspond with Bagnold's own account:

> Within six weeks we'd got together a volunteer force of New Zealanders. The New Zealand Division had arrived in Egypt but had yet to be supplied with arms and equipment because of shipping losses. So they were at a loose end. Apart from that, I wanted responsible volunteers who knew how to look after and maintain things, rather than the ordinary British Tommy who was apt to be wasteful. They were a marvellous lot of people, mostly sheep farmers who'd had fleets of trucks of their own and were used to looking after them.[31]

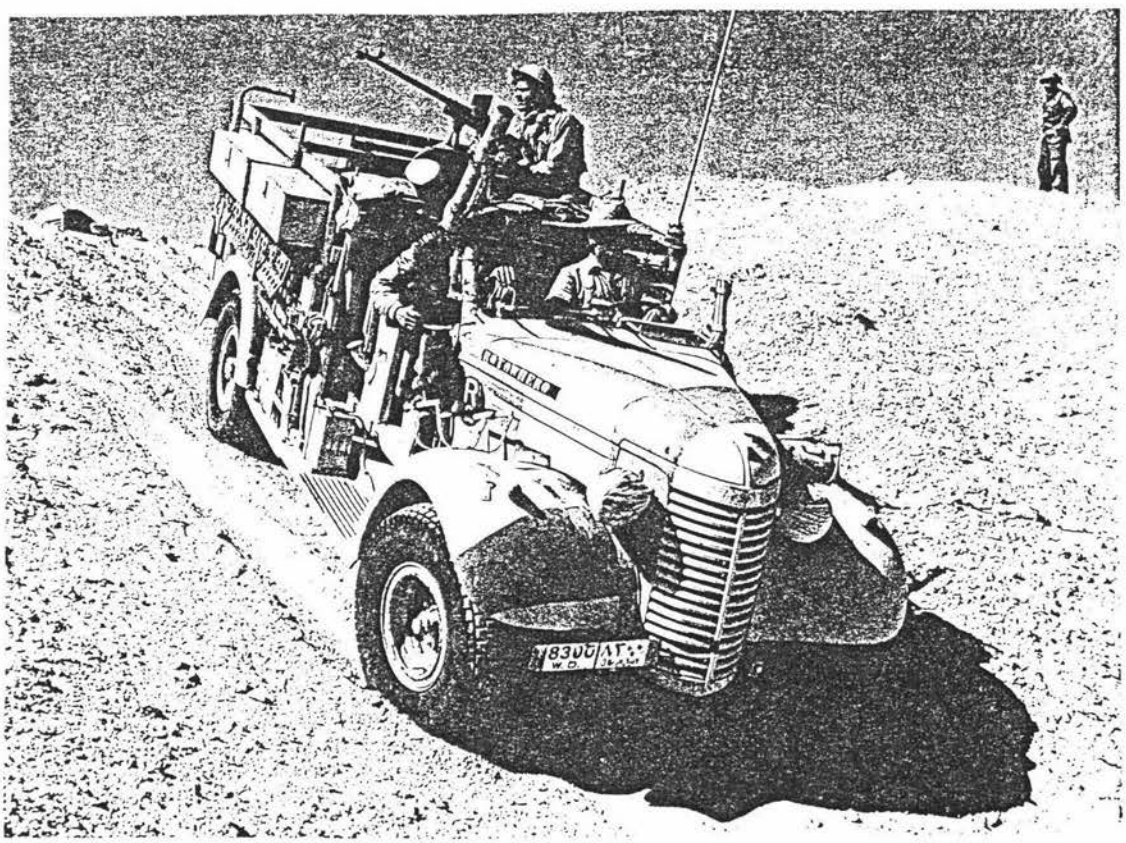

Figure 2. New Zealanders training near Cairo. Photo: Imperial War Museum, London.

The former patrol commander and eventual Commanding Officer of the LRDG, David Lloyd Owen, supports Bagnold, suggesting: "Although I have been aware of this claim I

[30] Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations,* London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1991, p.233.
[31] Quoted in: Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War,* London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1992, p.189.

do not believe there is any substance in it."[32] Bagnold, in the presence of General Wilson and various staff officers, put the request for volunteers to Brigadier Edward Puttick, commander of the New Zealand troops in Egypt.[33] Puttick agreed in principle, subject to final authorisation by the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force's (2NZEF) commander, General Bernard Freyberg, V.C. Cabling his superior in London on 1 July, Puttick pointed out: "The greater part can be provided from the Divisional Cavalry, and the remainder from various units without impairing efficiency, using personnel for whom equipment is not available. The Divisional Cavalry welcome the opportunity of higher training and experience and relief from monotony"[34]. The following day, Freyberg cabled his approval of Puttick's request.

The speed of preparation reflected Bagnold's promise to Wavell to have the patrols ready in only six weeks. On the evening of 4 July, the first volunteers from the New Zealand Division reported for duty at the Royal Armoured Corps Base Depot at Abbassia. In four days these men and a few from the Royal Armoured Corps took over barracks, administration offices, technical and quartermaster's stores and prepared for the arrival of the bulk of the volunteers. By 11 July, the first of two former Egyptian Army trucks arrived after being modified in the workshops of the Pharonic Mail Line in Alexandria. On 16 July, the greater part of the New Zealand party arrived from their base at Maadi. Training in gunnery, signals, driving and use of the 'Bagnold Sun-compass' began the next morning. The balance of the New Zealand personnel marched in to Abbassia on 25 July and were arranged into patrols. Training continued with the vehicles venturing further and further afield. A formal inspection of '1 Long Range Patrol' by the Commander-in-Chief, General Wavell took place on 27 August, followed by an informal visit by Brigadier Puttick to look in on his men three days later. [35]

Trained and equipped, Bagnold's Long Range Patrol was ready for operations, unaware that a dispute over British 'borrowing' of New Zealand troops would soon become serious enough to throw this, or any other, New Zealand contribution to the LRDG into doubt.

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[32]Letter to author from D. Lloyd Owen, 13 April 1999.
[33] At this time, Wilson was 'General Officer Commanding British Troops in Egypt'.
[34] Department of Internal Affairs (War History Branch), *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45*, Vol. 1, Wellington (NZ): Government Printer, 1949, p.232.
[35] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *'R' (New Zealand) Patrol, LRDG War Diary (July - September 1940)*, Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: DA 144/1/1-3.

Chapter Two – Serving Two Masters[1]

With the overseas transport, concentration and training of the 2NZEF plagued by difficulties and delays, General Freyberg, and his subordinate commander in Egypt, Brigadier Puttick, consented in 1940 to a series of short-term 'detachments' of New Zealand personnel in the Middle East for service with British formations. The approvals were given on the understanding that the troops would be returned immediately once the 2NZEF was ready to concentrate and train. Between late 1940 and early 1941, Freyberg's efforts to 'repatriate' his men damaged his relationship with the British Commander in the Middle East and threw future New Zealand's contributions to the LRDG into doubt. Yet without this contribution, there might well have been insufficient alternative sources from which to raise the LRDG.

On 28 February 1940, the British War Office had raised with the New Zealand Government the matter of "pooling our resources", asking if it was " . . .intended to keep the Dominion forces intact or should the British Expeditionary Force draw on them, and vice versa, as the demands of efficiency suggest?"[2] As innocuous as the request seemed, it had an ugly precedent. During the 1914-1918 War, Generals Currie (Canada), Monash (Australia), and Godley (New Zealand) had all encountered serious problems brought about by British commanders' determination to view Commonwealth forces as 'colonial divisions', rather than recognising and treating them as the national entities they were. Claims and counter-claims of military ineptitude were rife. General criticisms of British strategy allegedly led to a lack of conferral with 'colonial' officers who were not reticent in pointing out the shortcomings of poor British staff work. [3] The War Office had also sounded out Freyberg with their suggestion. Less than a week later a cable from Wellington notified him: "The Government do not like this idea."[4] Despite making this position clear on various occasions, the wishes of the New Zealand Government and Freyberg were ignored and the dispersal of New Zealand troops took place regardless.

Like Bagnold, Freyberg felt a sense of urgency for assembling and training his men ready for deployment. However, the logistical difficulties involved in the recruitment,

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[1] "No man can serve two masters." Luke 16:13

[2] Department of Internal Affairs (War History Branch), *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45*, Vol. 1, Wellington: Government Printer, 1949, p.62.

[3] E. M. Andrews, *The ANZAC Illusion: Anglo-Australian relations During World War I*, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp.193-117.

[4] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.63.

transport and equipping of so many men made it obligatory to build up the New Zealand Division in stages. Egypt was the selected concentration point, offering areas fit for large-scale advanced training as well as enabling the New Zealand force to form an element of a strategic reserve in case the defence of Britain went amiss.[5] The expected result was an all-inclusive fighting force consisting of 2 New Zealand Division, the 'fighting' component, together with the specialised logistical and support functions indispensable for undertaking operations. The understanding at the time was that the Division would in due course be employed in France, and the 2NZEF would be concentrated at Colchester in England.[6]

On 29 April, the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs[7] advised the New Zealand Governor-General of changes to the security arrangements for the convoy two days before the Second Echelon of 2NZEF was to embark. The Admiralty had determined that cruiser escort was "adequate" to guarantee the safety of the combined Australian and New Zealand troopship convoy, and had given orders to the proposed heavy escort, HMS Ramillies, to set course for the Eastern Mediterranean.[8] The Australians responded by issuing an order to suspend their troops' embarkation, preferring postponement to the possibility of their soldiers being delayed at some intermediate point. They asked the New Zealand Government to do likewise. The Australian decision was based on the concern that air attacks launched by Italian forces in Abyssinia could render the Red Sea route unsafe for an under-protected convoy. It must be said that in asking New Zealand to make the same decision, the Australians were less worried about the welfare of the New Zealand servicemen, than concerned about the difficulty of accommodating them if they should be delayed in Australia.[9] On 30 April, the New Zealand Prime Minister pressed the Dominion Secretary further regarding any likelihood of hostile action by Italy during the following month, an assessment of Italian forces which posed any threat to the convoy, and details of any planned British response. The telegram also asked about, "the probable steps that would be taken if the possibility of diversion is contemplated in these circumstances".[10] An urgent response was requested as the New Zealand troops were due to embark at 8 a.m.

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[5] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.55. Keegan, J., *The Battle for History: Re-fighting World War II,* New York: Random House, Inc., 1996, p.53.
[6] Paul, Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations,* London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1991. p.202.
[7] Hereafter referred to as the 'Dominion Secretary'.
[8] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.91.
[9] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.92.
[10] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* pp.92-93.

the following day. Within hours the government had its reply: "It has now been decided that for the time being HMS Ramillies need not be detached."[11]

Later that day a second telegram was despatched, seeking to assure the Australian and New Zealand governments that their convoys' safety had received serious consideration. It explained:

> The alternative of the troops proceeding by the overland route to Egypt . . . is considered impracticable by the War Office for climatic and administrative reasons. Moreover, if war with Italy were to break out subsequent to the arrival of the contingents in Egypt, there might be considerable difficulties in equipping them, as the necessary material has to come from United Kingdom resources. In the circumstances it has been necessary to consider the advisability of the diversion of both ['US2' Australian, and 'US3' New Zealand] convoys. Since better training facilities exist in the United Kingdom than in other possible destinations and since the equipment must be supplied from this country, it is suggested that the best course would be to divert these contingents to the United Kingdom.[12]

On 1 May New Zealand's "general agreement" with the British proposal was explained in a telegram from the Prime Minister to his Australian counterpart. It also requested the views of the Australian Government on the issue. These were transmitted to London and Wellington simultaneously:

> The Commonwealth [Australian] government is gravely concerned at the prospect of the 6th Division being split into parts located in Palestine and the United Kingdom. Though this entails administrative handicaps there is also the possibility of difficulties in re-concentration from the operational point of view, and in our minds the latter is imperative.[13]

New Zealand gave its formal consent to 'diversion' at the discretion of the British Government on 2 May. In the same cable British advice was sought over concern for "the embarrassment which would result were Australia to take one course and New Zealand another".[14] The Australians relented soon after and troop embarkation was underway. Two days later the British Government attempted to allay any lingering concern:

> The anxiety of the Commonwealth and New Zealand Governments in the event of diversion to the United Kingdom at the present time and the inherent disadvantages

[11] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.93.
[12] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.94.
[13] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* pp.95-96.
[14] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.97.

> in the splitting of formations are realised. However, *all possible steps would be taken to reconstitute the whole expeditionary force at the earliest possible date.*" [Emphasis added].[15]

The Australian and New Zealand troopships were diverted to Britain on the orders of the British War Cabinet on 15 May.

Freyberg's position was complicated enormously by the events of the following month. In the first week of June the British and French forces facing the German advance in France collapsed, necessitating the evacuation from Dunkirk of more than 300 000 members of the British Expeditionary Force.[16] As a result the British 'Eastern Command' was re-designated a war area. This meant that the Second Echelon of the 2NZEF would have to be dispersed on arrival throughout the districts surrounding Colchester.[17] Also, the Italian declaration of war on 10 June caused greatly increased apprehension over the possibility of a threat to Egypt from the Western Desert. With the War Office decision having split his force in two, Freyberg was forced to decide whether his proper place was preparing the First Echelon in Egypt against a potential Italian attack or supervising the training and equipping of the Second Echelon on its arrival in Britain.

Late in May, concern over the apparently imminent prospect of conflict with Italian forces in the Middle East prompted the Prime Minister to cable Freyberg: "The New Zealand Government are strongly of the opinion that you should remain in Egypt and that you should not proceed to the United Kingdom at this juncture." They suggested that Brigadier Falla, already in England to prepare for the arrival of 2NZEF, was capable of looking after the accommodation and other administrative requirements of the Second Echelon.[18] Freyberg's reply began with the confident assertion: "In the event of war with Italy the situation in Egypt is giving no anxiety . . . Although mobilisation equipment for the New Zealand Expeditionary Force has not yet arrived, the garrison of Egypt is adequately equipped and large reserves of troops are available."[19] Freyberg believed, correctly as it turned out, that Marshal Graziani would wait for the cooler autumn weather before launching any major attack and that only a

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[15] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1,* p.102.
[16] D. Mercer, *Chronicle of the Second World War,* London: Chronicle Communications Ltd. and Longman Group UK Ltd, 1990, pp.89-93.
[17] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1,* p.116.
[18] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1,* p.64.
[19] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1,* pp.65-66.

situation in which, "Italy is helped by Germany with up to date methods and equipment", would justify re-appraising the risk.[20] This view suggested that Freyberg had three to four months to whip his force into fighting shape and equip them.

Freyberg then corrected his government's apparently mistaken understanding of why he felt his presence in England necessary. Echoing their confidence in the administrative abilities of Brigadier Falla and his team of officers, Freyberg explained: "What I wish my Minister to realise is that none of the senior officers of the Second Echelon are fit to start unit or collective training without first being trained themselves. Every day I am kept from taking their preparation in hand will delay the ultimate preparedness of the troops." Having previously made his reservations about the decision to divert the Second Echelon known, he added: "As you will no doubt appreciate, splitting a force always raises problems of this kind."[21]

A further complication emerged with British plans to billet the Second Echelon throughout the district of Colchester. Freyberg cabled the Minister of Defence in Wellington:

> I have wired Falla as follows: Cannot agree to the arrangements suggested for the Second Echelon . . . I would point out that the collective training of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force is already grievously interfered with by lack of equipment and the separation of the Second Echelon from the First. The arrangement suggested in the Eastern Command is bad for discipline and will further hamper training for war. I would therefore press to concentrate . . . in the Southern Command.[22]

His misgivings were made explicit in a personal letter to Brigadier Miles, to whom he suggested that the New Zealand Division was a "fighting force" and, "We should resist to the utmost any effort that may be made to turn us into garrison troops for England."[23] Freyberg's concerns were well founded. On 12 June the High Commissioner in London advised the New Zealand Prime Minister: "As Britain is a war zone the War Office intimates that the troops here will be under local command and not under the

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[20] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.344, (Appendix IV).
[21] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.66.
[22] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.116.
[23] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.120.

commander in Egypt."[24] That same day the Dominion Secretary cabled the Governor-General:

> Hitherto, the policy which it had been hoped to follow in respect of Dominion troops . . . was to allocate them to areas selected principally on the grounds of suitability for training purposes, and entirely without reference to the possibility of the troops in question having to be used as part of the country's available defence . . . Because of the altered situation with which we are now faced it has been necessary to reconsider the disposition of the Australian and New Zealand contingents arriving in this country . . . All efforts will of course be made to arrange for the continuation of their training on the most effective lines, including, so far as possible, avoidance of dispersal, but there is no alternative to locating contingents in any district in the United Kingdom, where . . . they will be best placed to carry out whatever defensive role it might be necessary to allot on the occurrence of an emergency.[25]

A series of telegrams were exchanged from this point. New Zealand expressed growing concerns over the circumstances surrounding arrangements for the Second Echelon, and was met by British protestations that such concerns could only have been occasioned by, "some misunderstanding [on the part of New Zealand] as to what has been contemplated".[26] Against this background, the government gave its approval on 15 June for Freyberg to proceed to England and take matters in hand at his discretion.[27] The following day Freyberg recommended to the Chief of General Staff (Wellington) that he place Brigadier Edward Puttick in command while Freyberg was absent in England. Puttick's responsibilities encompassed the on-going training of the 4th Infantry Brigade, local administration, discipline and, "In the event of active operations . . . the New Zealand troops in Egypt would come under his command".[28]

From June onward Freyberg was fully occupied with the business of overseeing the equipping and training of the Second Echelon. During this time it was decided that the 2NZEF would serve in Egypt, not France, and haste was required to ensure that they were ready to depart England in late September.[29] Prior to departing for England, Freyberg had agreed to requests from the Headquarters – British Troops in Egypt (HQ –

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[24] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. I,* p.123.
[25] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. I,* p.124.
[26] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. I,* p.122.
[27] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. I,* p.67.
[28] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. I,* pp.67-68.
[29] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. I,* p.145.

BTE) for the loan of specialised detachments on a short-term basis.[30] Further detachments were authorised by Puttick[31] throughout July and August in the belief that, "we should pull our weight in the peculiar circumstances obtaining at the time."[32] One of these detachments was of 87 personnel for service in, "special patrols of strategic importance [later called LRDG] in the Western Desert", which was subsequently approved by Freyberg.[33] All of these detachments were permitted on the basis that the personnel would be released back to their parent units once the Division was ready to concentrate. While Freyberg was in England, Puttick learned of a proposal drawn up by GHQ-ME for a 'reorganisation' of the New Zealand troops in Egypt. Despite their awareness of the wishes of the New Zealand Government to maintain the Division as a coherent whole, the suggestion effectively entailed the dispersal of the First Echelon to plug gaps in British rear-echelon forces. It drew a predictably strong reaction from Freyberg:

> MOST SECRET: Following for General Wavell . . . Have just received from PUTTICK your proposals the above organisation with its repercussions upon the New Zealand Division in Egypt. Hope these proposals will not be proceeded with as no change can be made without approval of NEW ZEALAND Government. I do not care to have to disclose the proposals outlined by you to break up the NEW ZEALAND Division to my Government as this would make a most unfavourable impression in NEW ZEALAND official circles with repercussions you possibly have not foreseen. The answer to any such proposals would be I am sure an uncompromising refusal.[34]

Freyberg also took up the problem with General Sir John Dill, at that time the Chief of Imperial General Staff. Dill agreed with Freyberg that Wavell's suggestion could not be acted on and undertook to settle the issue. Like a number of promises made to Freyberg, it would not be kept.[35]

Pledged to reconstituting Freyberg's force at "the earliest possible date," the British Government had proposed late September as the earliest a troop convoy might be

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[30] New Zealand Division Egypt, *Statement Showing Detachments From NZ Division As At 25 September 1940.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33, pp.6-7. (Divisional Ammunition Company, 19 May 40; No1 Company Divisional Signals, 9 June 40; No 4 Res Motor-Transport Company 18 June 40).

[31] In his book, Major-General Stevens incorrectly asserted that Freyberg approved of all detachments prior to leaving Egypt, failing to mention Puttick's role entirely. See: Stevens, W.G., *Freyberg, V.C.: The Man, 1939-1945,* Wellington: A.H. and W. Reed, 1965, p.29.

[32] E. Puttick, (Brigadier - HQ 4 Inf Bde*), Subject: Detachments from NZ Division – 'PERSONAL' Letter to General B. C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division, dated 13 October 1940,*. NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

[33] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* pp.231-232.

[34] B. C. Freyberg, *Subject: Planned Break-up of NZ Division - 'MOST SECRET' Signal to Fernleaf (New Zealand Division Egypt) dated 4 July 40,* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

arranged.[36] Satisfied with the high standards displayed by his officers and men, Freyberg was looking forward to concentrating his force. Once more his expectations would go unfulfilled. On 20 September, the Dominion Secretary cabled the Governor-General, suggesting that

> The New Zealand troops are occupying an important place in the defence of Great Britain which could not at present be filled by other troops without serious dislocation. Therefore, it has been thought very desirable that the proposed move should be postponed for a few weeks . . . though [the British Government] are aware that the New Zealand Government attach importance to the concentration in the Middle East at an early date of the New Zealand forces overseas . . . the postponement is intended to be not longer than would permit of the second New Zealand brigade leaving this country towards the end of October.[37]

On 21 September Freyberg's worst fear was realised when, in a brief but crucial telegram, the New Zealand Government agreed without reservation to the retention of the Second Echelon in the United Kingdom, adding that they were, "satisfied to leave to the United Kingdom authorities the date of the departure of these troops to the Middle East".[38]

Freyberg returned to Egypt, arriving on 24 September. The following day a report was produced entitled "Statement Showing Detachments From NZ Division."[39] It showed clearly that Freyberg's objections to Wavell's plan for the dispersal of New Zealand troops had been discounted. Aside from the Headquarters element in Maadi, his troops were scattered throughout the theatre, in some cases as much as 200 miles away.[40] With the concentration of his Division imminent, Freyberg wrote to HQ – BTE on 29 September, recalling the loaned personnel:

> In the past, with the object of helping, we have met practically every request for the loan of New Zealand Units and detachments. The time has come when we can no longer comply with requests for detachments, and in fact . . . it is now necessary for us to recall those already made.

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[35] Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations*, p.232.
[36] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.102.
[37] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.146.
[38] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.147.
[39] New Zealand Division Egypt, *Statement Showing Detachments From NZ Division As At 25 September 1940*, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33, Folio 6 & 7.
[40] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1*, p.188.

Freyberg then listed the detached units which he required most urgently, adding: "The seventy other ranks in the Long Range Desert Patrol should return to regimental duty in due course, and I would appreciate information regarding when they are likely to be released from their present duties."[41]

Freyberg's justification in making the request was undeniable and entirely in accordance with the terms of the agreement struck when the loans were made. Almost a fortnight later Freyberg had a reply. It was solely concerned with the consequences for the LRDG of Freyberg's request. Beginning, "My Dear Freyberg", the Deputy Chief of General Staff, General Arthur Smith, explained that the C-in-C (Wavell) was anxious lest Freyberg push the issue, in view of the "very important role in our war effort" being played by the patrols. Ignoring the fact that it was Freyberg's right to demand the return of his men without question, Smith continued: "If you still feel that the New Zealand personnel should be returned to their units, the Commander-in-Chief will be glad of an opportunity of discussing the matter with you."[42]

Freyberg had instructed his General Staff Officer, Keith Stewart, to write to Puttick and admonish him. Freyberg felt that Puttick had left him in a difficult position in the light of the detachments agreed to in his absence. Stewart also mentioned the allegation of HQ – BTE that Puttick had agreed to a one-year detachment for the LRDG personnel, causing Puttick to telegraph an immediate vehement denial to Divisional Headquarters. Puttick then replied to Stewart explaining what he had agreed to in Freyberg's absence, and why, insisting: "I feel that the background against which my decisions were made is an important factor." Puttick then wrote a personal letter to Freyberg in which he pointed out that Freyberg himself, prior to his departure, had agreed to many of the existing detachments. He repeated his denial of the agreement to a one-year detachment to the LRDG and continued:

> It is very distressing to me that you should find yourself embarrassed through anything I did in your absense as I never failed to consider that aspect with every decision I made . . . [never forgetting] that I must do nothing – if I could avoid it – which you would have to undo on your return.

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[41] B. C. Freyberg, *Subject: Detachments From NZ Division – 'SECRET' Letter to Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt, CAIRO, dated 29 September 40*, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.
[42] General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO, *Subject :Withdrawal of LRDG Personnel - 'PERSONAL AND SECRET', Letter to B.C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division (MAADI), dated 11 October 1940*, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

An implication in Stewart's letter that Puttick had merely been trying to curry favour with the British particularly offended him:

> The popularity question never entered my head . . . I remarked to you on your visit here that you should find a background of goodwill due to what you had done prior to your departure . . . I honestly believe that in the circumstances, had you been here, you would have done precisely as I did.[43]

That Puttick did not lose Freyberg's confidence on a wider level showed in the responsibilities Freyberg delegated to him as their relationship continued. However, from that point on Stewart[44] handled issues of personnel detachments whenever Freyberg was prevented from giving them his personal attention.[45]

At this moment, Freyberg moderated his demand, agreeing to a gradual return of detachments, including the men with the LRDG, who were to be allowed to complete a further patrol. Freyberg was not simply vacillating. His awareness of British preparations for an upcoming offensive told him that to press for the immediate return of his men might jeopardise the operation.[46] In a letter to Arthur Smith, Freyberg declared:

> The history of this patrol is a bad one . . . they immobilised our Divisional Cavalry Regiment by taking all or nearly all of its best officers, NCOs, and men from it against the CO's wishes. This was under the distinct understanding that they were to be returned to him at the end of one journey. They then came back and I was informed that they had been lent for a year, which is quite incorrect [Freyberg apparently accepted Puttick's claim]. As a matter of fact, I have written to [GHQ] Middle East saying I will not raise any more difficulties . . . The position that distresses me most is that I am rapidly forced into a position where even my old friends subject me to a form of suspicion and reproach . . . Stewart will see Pierce and arrange to minimise the damage done by substitution, and when they come back you must either take men from depot units or give the Long Range Patrol to somebody else.[47]

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[43] E. Puttick, (Brigadier - HQ 4 Inf Bde), *Subject: Detachments from NZ Division – 'PERSONAL' Letter to General B. C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division, dated 13 October 1940,*. NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

[44] In his book, Stevens suggests, "In the end Headquarters sent the units back to us, but with a bad grace". This implies that the units returned at the same time, which is not the case. The returning of Freyberg's men dragged out over months. See: Stevens, W.G., *Freyberg, V.C.: The Man, 1939-1945,* Wellington: A.H. and W. Reed, 1965, p.29.

[45] B. C. Freyberg, *Subject Continued Loan of LRDG Personnel - Letter to General Arthur Smith (General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO), dated 18 October 1940,* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

[46] Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations*, p.235.

[47] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* pp.233-234.

Shortly after this Freyberg had an interview with the C-in-C General Wavell and the Commander of British Troops in Egypt, General 'Jumbo' Wilson, where, in a sad commentary on the deteriorating relationships, Freyberg claimed: "I was treated as though I were a fifth columnist."[48] On 17 October Smith wrote: "I understand you have discussed the whole matter [of LRDG personnel] with Jumbo Wilson. The C-in-C is very grateful to you for allowing the N.A. Long Range Patrol to carry on. I am quite sure myself that their value cannot be overestimated."[49] Freyberg replied, stressing that this was the last time, adding that from now on, "Shearer [Director of Intelligence – Middle East] and Bagnold will have to arrange for themselves. Later, when our Base is started, we may be able to help, but only on a trip-to-trip basis as my Government will not sanction any longer detachments."[50]

Freyberg's 'difficulties' in his relationships with the British continued. In a particularly telling meeting with the Dominion Secretary, Anthony Eden, when he visited Maadi in late October, Freyberg reiterated the necessity of preserving the coherence of the New Zealand forces and of avoiding at all costs breaking up the Division, something he assured Eden that the New Zealand Government would never agree to. Eden patronisingly replied: "What, those dear old men, they would agree to anything."[51] Further clashes between Freyberg and Wavell continued throughout the latter part of 1940 and into the New Year, including a meeting of which Freyberg later remarked: "Things were said that cannot be too quickly forgotten."[52] On 26 January, following a meeting of this kind, Arthur Smith wrote to Freyberg:

> I understood you to say yesterday during your conversation with General Wavell that you were now prepared to leave your men with the Long Range Desert Group indefinitely. I would be grateful if you would confirm this and, if correct, whether you would maintain that number or whether you would allow them to waste away. At the moment they form two complete patrols and Bagnold is very keen to keep them as such not only because there is plenty of work for them in the near future but because your men are particularly suited to the job. They have been doing splendid work recently.[53]

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[48] Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations*, p.234.
[49] General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO, *Subject :Continued Loan of LRDG Personnel - Letter to B.C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division (MAADI), dated 17 October 1940*, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.
[50] B. C. Freyberg, *Subject: Continued Loan of LRDG Personnel - Letter to General Arthur Smith (General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO), dated 18 October 1940*,. NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.
[51] Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations*, p.236.
[52] Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations*, p.236.
[53] General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO, *Subject :Indefinite Loan of LRDG Personnel - Letter to B.C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division (HELWAN), dated 26 January 1941*, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

Freyberg had indeed decided to relent on the issue of his men continuing to serve with the patrols. It is possible that he simply conceded defeat, acknowledging that he could do little to induce HQ – BTE to release his men before they were good and ready. Whilst possible, this seems unlikely, Freyberg was nothing if not tenacious. Though the deteriorating command relationships troubled him enough to subsequently make the acerbic remark to Field Marshal Montgomery that: "What you have to be out here is 'a nice chap'", Freyberg was not the type of commander to change his mind simply for a 'quiet life'.[54]

LRDG Patrol Commander in 1941, and the unit's last Commanding Officer, Major General David Lloyd Owen offers a more probable explanation:

> Freyberg, or rather his deputy I believe, agreed to provide men on loan and by about Dec. 1940 demanded their return. However, after the great success of the raids in the Fezzan in Jan/Feb 1941 he changed his mind . . . on 16 October 1980 Ralph Bagnold wrote and told me that Freyberg was so impressed by the work of the LRDG that he asked R.A.B. [Bagnold] to take his own son in to the unit.[55]

In February 1941 the New Zealand Division's headquarters forwarded to GHQ – ME a letter detailing, "Conditions under which men of the 2nd NZEF are lent for service with the Middle East Long Range Desert Patrol." The relationship between 2NZEF and the LRDG was formalised with this letter, with the Division guaranteeing to "maintain two patrols [four officers, fifty-four other ranks, and nine 'spares'] until Tripoli has been captured".[56]

Meanwhile the delays in transferring the Second Echelon to the Middle East had continued. On 10 October Freyberg had relayed to the Minister of Defence (Wellington) a War Office cable which suggested the British hoped to include the Second Echelon in a convoy sailing in December but would offer no guarantee.[57] Mounting concern in Wellington over the likelihood of the 2NZEF concentrating in the near future brought forth a telegram to the Dominion Secretary requesting further advice on prospective sailing.[58] Deferred sailing dates continued and the concentration of the

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[54] Lewin, R., *Montgomery as a Military Commander,* London: Batsford, 1971, p.50.
[55] Letter to the author from D. Lloyd Owen, 13 April 1999. Paul Freyberg was commissioned into the Grenadier Guards, Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Nominal Roll of Officers,*[undated, probably late 1943], NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12. Following his commisioning he was posted straight to the LRDG in October 1941. P. Freyberg, p.343.
[56] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.236.
[57] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.147.
[58] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.148.

Division eventually took place on 3 March 1941, ten months after the original diversion of the Second Echelon to the United Kingdom.[59]

Despite the new agreement regarding the loaning of New Zealanders to the LRDG, a variety of problems continued which were suggestive of a tendency by British authorities to overlook their obligations to the New Zealand parent units. In just one instance among many, GHQ-ME found it necessary to write an apologetic letter to HQ 2NZEF following the promotion by his temporary British commander of a New Zealand officer attached to the LRDG. The act of promoting 2nd lieutenant D G Steele to Captain completely ignored the fact that the officer was simply not theirs to promote. The issue came to a head when the officer's pay remained at its previous level, as the New Zealand Division who paid the man had no idea what had transpired. The GHQ was in the uncomfortable position of having to ask the New Zealand Unit to approve this, and a number of other promotions, retrospectively.[60]

Other problems, such as failing to notify New Zealand parent units of casualties in the agreed manner, had more serious implications. The failure to advise the unit could result in serious delays in the notification of the serviceman's next-of-kin. This type of issue could have grave political consequences for the New Zealand Government. In January 1941 the Deputy Adjutant-General of 2NZEF sent a letter to GHQ - ME which threatened that unless the notification of casualties took place in the proper way, casualties would not be replaced nor personnel appointed in lieu of a casualtied serviceman.[61]

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the New Zealand forces continued to supply personnel for the LRDG until recalled by their Government in late November 1943. Shortly before this, in a prophetic telegram to the Minister of Defence, Freyberg questioned the wisdom of continuing the arrangement:

> I am not entirely happy about the LRDG now that we are moving to a different theatre [Greek Islands]. It may not be practicable to withdraw the New Zealand

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[59] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,Vol. 1,* p.155.
[60] General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO, *Subject: New Zealand Officers Employed with British Units or Formations – Promotion, dated 7 February 1941.* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA11/9/2/4
[61] New Zealand Division Headquarters, *Subject: Notification of NZ Casualties whilst Serving with British Units or Formations, dated 24 February 1941,* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA11/9/2/4

> Squadron, but I feel, if and when it can be relieved, that the time has come when it should be recalled and our commitment with the LRDG should cease.[62]

In a further breach of agreement between the two governments, the British committed the New Zealand Squadron of the LRDG to operations in another theatre without referring the issue to Wellington for approval.[63] The operations were failures, resulting in the casualty or capture of around half of the New Zealanders involved.[64] The New Zealand Government immediately despatched a scathing telegram to the Dominion Secretary, describing the operations as "ill-advised in their nature and most unfortunate in their consequences".[65] Former LRDG Commanding Officer, David Lloyd Owen concurs, insisting: "We should never have been employed as we were."[66] The New Zealand telegram continued:

> His Majesty's Government in New Zealand wish to observe that they were never consulted as to the use of their troops in this connection nor, they are advised, was their Commanding Officer in the Middle East advised until the men had actually landed . . . it would seem appropriate at this stage to make it clear that His Majesty's government in New Zealand desire that this unit should cease to be under the control of General Headquarters, Middle East, and that any survivors, about whom early information is requested, should be made available for service with the 2nd New Zealand Division.[67]

The New Zealand Government subsequently demanded an explanation of how this fiasco had come about. This was offered by the Dominion Secretary on the advice of the Chief of General Staff, 'Jumbo' Wilson.[68] It did nothing to ease the tensions created by the issue. On 27 November, the New Zealand Prime Minister asked the High Commissioner in London to convey a message to the Dominion Secretary and the acting British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee. It included the observations that

> The circumstances surrounding the loss of Leros [scene of the LRDG operations] have already largely destroyed my own faith in the present Middle East Command, if it was responsible, and when it becomes known that a number of New Zealanders were stupidly sacrificed without even consent for their inclusion in the task force

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[62] Department of Internal Affairs (War History Branch), *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. II,* Wellington (NZ): Government Printer, 1951, pp.308-309.
[63] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol. II, p.308.
[64] New Zealand Division Headquarters, *'MOST SECRET' Cipher Message to Fernleaf (CAIRO) for Premier (Wellington) dated 26 November 1943,* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/74.
[65] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol. II, p.313.
[66] Letter to author from D. Lloyd Owen, , 13 April 1999.
[67] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol. II, p.313.
[68] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol. II, p.314.

> being asked from our Government, the disappointment and bitterness here will be intensified many times over. General Wilson's statement regarding the capture of Leros, with its out-dated, unhappy, and totally irrelevant references to Greece and Crete, was rejected unanimously, even contemptuously. It is felt that to have 1944 war problems dealt with by commanders with 1941 minds is most dangerous and may be disastrous.[69]

The British response amounted to little more than the suggestion that the potential benefits of a successful operation had made the risk seem worth taking.[70] In any event, the New Zealand commitment was at an end and on 19 December 1943, LRDG Commanding Officer, David Lloyd Owen, wrote to Freyberg expressing his disappointment:

> It is with the deepest regret that the LRDG have learnt of the decision to withdraw 'A' (NZ) Squadron from the unit. From the early days when the LRDG was formed the men from 2NZEF have always been of the highest order and any successes that the unit has achieved have been largely due to the magnificent courage and ability of the New Zealand Patrol.[71]

Clearly the New Zealand manpower contribution to the LRDG from July 1940 until December 1943 was a substantial one. Equally clear is the fact that without the stubborn refusal of the British to give up the New Zealand troops they had acquired, that contribution might have ceased as little as three months after it had begun.

The shortage of manpower in the Middle East was chronic at the time the first patrols were raised. For a long while trained men were scarce. Part of the problem stemmed from the need to utilise every vessel possible to ferry desperately needed supplies to the United Kingdom, which meant few were available for use in troop convoys. As an illustration of this, when Freyberg first attempted to secure a place for the Second Echelon from Britain to the Middle East, his men were among units totalling100 000 men seeking a place in a convoy which could only handle 30 000 at a time.[72] Later, when British forces in the region were on the increase, many of the men had their war cut short when German advances saw them pass into prisoner-of-war camps, causing a shortage once more. Had the original request for a detachment been declined by Puttick

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[69] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol. II, p.323.
[70] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45,* Vol. II, p.325.
[71] Owen, David Lloyd, Lt-Col (OC LRDG),), Subject :Return of LRDG Personnel to NZ Division - 'SECRET' Letter to B.C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division, dated 19 December 1943, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/74.
[72] *Documents Relating to New Zealand's Participation in the Second World War, 1939-45, Vol. 1,* p.147.

or Freyberg in July 1940, it appears almost certain that a patrol would not have been raised and trained in time to provide much needed intelligence for Britain's successful summer offensive against the Italians.

Given the importance attached by Wavell to raising the patrols, it seems logical to ask if Bagnold could not have simply approached other units in the Middle East for volunteers. However, at the time of the patrol's formation there were just not the alternative units to draw upon. It is true that later a patrol was provided by the Brigade of Guards and another from the Yeomanry regiments. Yet even this was not without its problems. The Guard's strict insistence on rotating personnel on a tour basis stood to place an intolerable training burden on the LRDG had they been its only source of recruits. When the call for volunteers was first put out to the Yeomanry units, it "produced a large number of men whom their COs were anxious to dump before re-roling to armour".[73] It took the LRDG two months just to sort the genuine volunteers from the 'unwanted' troops. Later plans to create patrols from "Highland, Greenjacket and Home County regimental groupings were frustrated due to manpower shortages, and unit reluctance to part with so many keen volunteers".[74] This particular sentiment was quite widespread. The former 'G' (Guards) Patrol Commander, Michael Chrichton Stuart, recalls his Commanding Officer telling him in "homely language what he had already conveyed to the Colonel on the subject of regular officers leaving the battalion to fight in other *necessarily lesser units* [Emphasis added].[75] It appears that from a manpower perspective the New Zealand contribution was critical.

Quantitatively vital, the men of the 2NZEF made a significant contribution to the LRDG in the Western Desert from July 1940 until 1943. It remains to examine closely the nature and value of the work these men undertook.

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[73] B. Jenner, and D. List, *The Long Range Desert Group*, London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1983, p.8, & Gibb, A. D. (Buster), June 1999.
[74] B. Jenner, and D. List, *The Long Range Desert Group*, London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1983, p.8.
[75] M. Chrichton Stuart, *G Patrol: The Story of the Guards Patrol of the Long Range Desert Group*, London: William Kimber and Co., Ltd., 1958, p.25.

Chapter Three - RAIDS

'Like a Thief in the Night'[1]

Described by Shaw as "a sort of mechanised highway robbery," raiding featured strongly as a priority on the Long Range Patrol's (LRP) first sorties.[2] Over time, this changed and raiding was relegated to second place relative to the LRDG's intelligence-gathering activities. Nevertheless, behind-the-lines raiding was conducted with considerable success and contributed significantly to Allied achievements in North Africa.

A brief preparatory phase preceded the first operational sorties. While most of the New Zealand LRP recruits were completing their training, Captain Pat Clayton led two crews in 15 cwt Chevrolet trucks into the Libyan Desert, establishing forward supply dumps of fuel, water and rations, and conducting valuable reconnaissance.[3] Once these preparations and the unit's training were complete, the LRP was 'ready for action'. By the beginning of September 1940, it was clear to the staff at GHQ – Middle East that Marshal Graziani's forces in Libya were preparing an advance along the Mediterranean coast into Egypt.[4] Concerned that Graziani's plans might include operations further south, GHQ ordered the LRP to investigate. On 5 September three patrols left Cairo at ten-minute intervals and headed into the desert[5] with instructions to conduct a thorough reconnaissance of all routes to the Italian garrison at Kufra, destroy any enemy supply dumps they might discover and, if possible, return with enemy prisoners for interrogation.[6]

For the following ten days each patrol shifted supplies between Clayton's forward dumps and the operation's final jumping-off point, a rendezvous known as 'Big Cairn'.[7] On 15 September the patrols parted company. Mitford's party set out from Big Cairn to reconnoitre westward and intersect two of the routes into the Kufra oasis, and then

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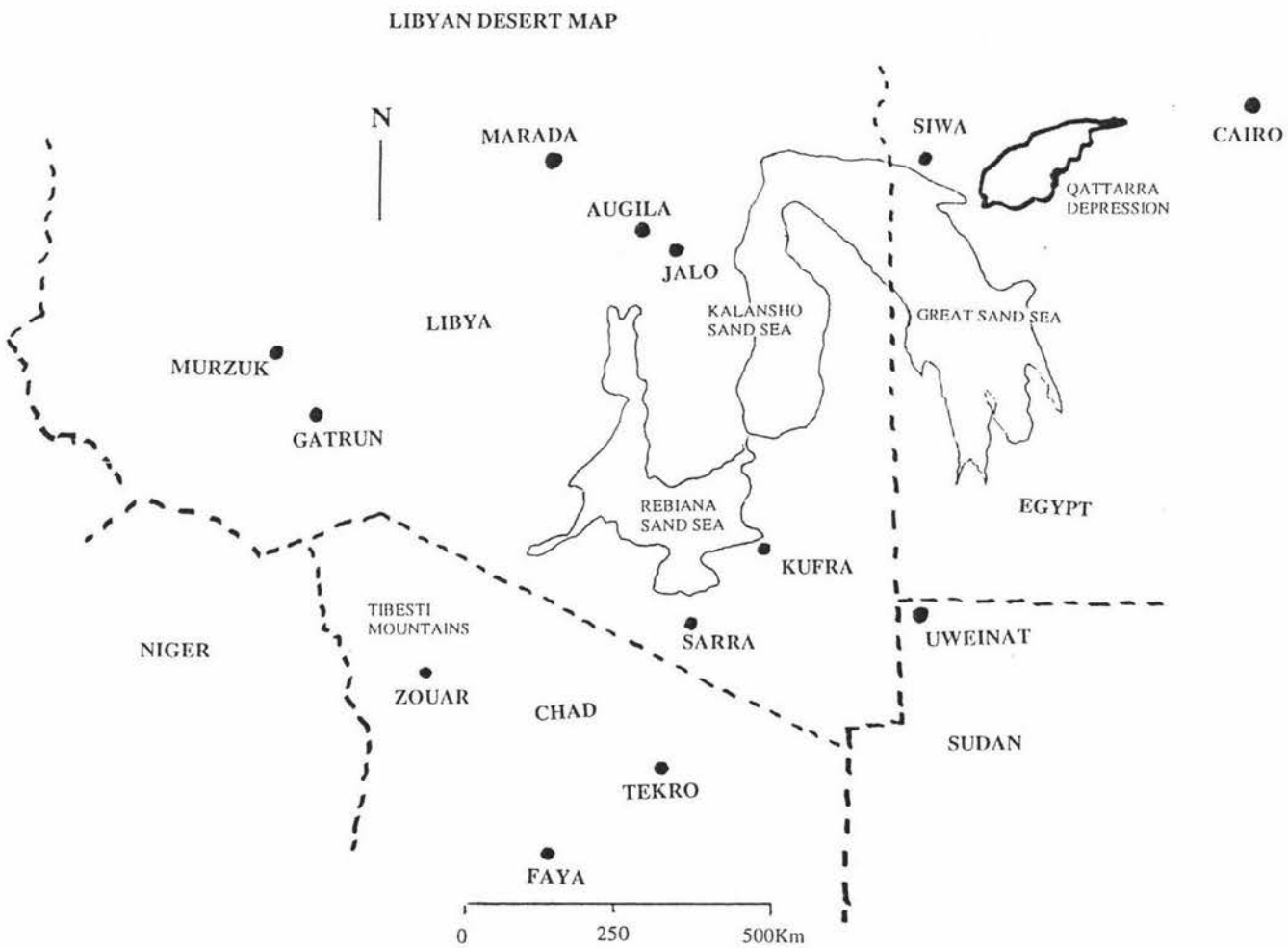
[1] Revelation 3:3, "Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as [like] a thief, and you will not know what hour I come upon you."
[2] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, "LRDG Activities in North Africa", Unpublished report Held at the Imperial War Museum, London, p.3. This was probably given as an address to officers in Middle East in early 1943.
[3] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *'R' (New Zealand) Patrol, LRDG War Diary (July - September 1940)*, Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: DA 144/1/1-3, (7 August & 19 August), & Curtis, M., 15 June 1999.
[4] David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1980, p.27.
[5] Patrols commanded by Captain P. Clayton, Captain E. Mitford, and Lieutenant D. Steele. See: Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *'R' (New Zealand) Patrol, LRDG War Diary (July - September 1940)*, Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: DA 144/1/1-3, (5 September). At this time each patrol was usually of 8-10 vehicles carrying three crew apiece; the whole under the command of an officer who usually had a junior officer as 2IC. This arrangement lasted until late 1941.
[6] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.36.
[7] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.36.

Figure 3. Raiding operations map.



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continue along the Kufra-Marada track with the intention of attacking any columns they met. Clayton's patrol was to proceed south-west, checking the Kufra-Uweinat track. In this way, the two patrols would be able to examine all routes into the critical oasis.[8] Clayton would then head south on an old caravan route to Chad to establish contact with the northernmost French outpost at Tekro.[9] Steele's patrol was to continue ferrying fuel from Siwa Oasis to Big Cairn under the supervision of Bagnold.[10]

In just six days, Bagnold's patrols delivered results that exceeded all expectations and justified Wavell's confidence in him. Clayton and Mitford scrutinised every route radiating from Kufra without their patrols being detected. There was no sign whatsoever that the tracks were employed other than for routine supply columns to the garrisons of Kufra and Uweinat.[11] This information in itself made the operation worthwhile, but Mitford's party delivered an unexpected bonus in what Shaw described as "the bloodless battle of Landing Ground No. 7".[12] Mitford's patrol (accompanied by Shaw) had intersected the Jalo-Kufra track the day after leaving Big Cairn. A full day's study revealed nothing to suggest that it was subject to anything but routine traffic. On the 17th the patrol paused at two untended airfields along the route and destroyed petrol tanks, pumps, and wind indicators.[13] The following two days were spent examining tracks to the south and west with the same result as the previous track surveillance. On 20 September the patrol took to the Tazerbo-Kufra route in search of their enemy. Near Landing Ground 7, they encountered a fortnightly supply convoy destined for Kufra. Shaw offers the following recollection:

> One burst of Lewis gunfire over their heads ended that great battle and we had our first prisoners – two Italians, five Arabs and a goat, and our first booty – 2,550 gallons of petrol, a nice line in cheap haberdashery, and, best of all, the bag of official mail.[14]

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[8] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945, p.36.
[9] 950 miles in a straightline from Cairo. See: William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *LRDG Activities in North Africa*, [unpublished report, given as an address to Officers in Middle East, early 1943], p.6.
[10] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.41.
[11] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.37.
[12] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.45.
[13] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.42.
[14] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.45.

Despite Shaw's humorous description, this capture was of the utmost importance. As Bagnold later stated: "In these [mail bags] alone there was enough evidence to satisfy the C-in-C that no offensive enterprise was brewing from the Kufra direction."[15] For the beleaguered Wavell, the news radioed from the patrols brought enormous relief and prevented his scant resources being stretched to cope with a non-existent threat. The wider realisation of the LRP's potential at GHQ was accompanied by swift action. Before the patrols had even returned to Cairo, GHQ had successfully petitioned the War Office to double the size of the unit. The result was that the patrol became designated the Long Range Desert Group, commanded, with Bagnold's promotion, by a Lieutenant-Colonel in charge of six patrols organised into two equal squadrons.[16] In the days that followed Mitford's success, a small group detached itself from the main party near the oasis and returned to Cairo under the command of Shaw with the prisoners and mail bags.[17] The patrols regrouped to carry out a reconnaissance of Uweinat and once again study of the tracks revealed no cause for alarm. On the 29th the rest of the patrol reached their base.

While plans were made for the reorganisation and expansion of the unit, "a body blow was dealt to the LRDG when General Freyberg demanded the return of all New Zealanders to the division he was commanding."[18] Wavell then applied every persuasive means at his disposal to get Freyberg to postpone the demand long enough for men from British and Rhodesian units to be selected and trained as replacements.[19] As Bagnold found, any initial scepticism at GHQ over the potential value of the patrols had been well and truly dispelled:

> Our information changed things a good deal. The [GHQ] staff in Cairo decided that the role of the LRDG should now become a more offensive one . . . Wavell gave us a free hand to stir up trouble in any part of Libya we liked, with the object of drawing off as much enemy transport and troops as possible from the coastal front to defend their remote . . . inland garrisons.[20]

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[15] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, pp. 36-37.
[16] David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.28.
[17] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *'R' (New Zealand) Patrol, LRDG War Diary (July - September 1940)*, Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: DA 144/1/1-3, (24 September).
[18] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.28.
[19] By way of example, one patrol member recalls the disbanding of one patrol to enable its members to be returned, whilst the other two were hurriedly dispatched into the desert and "the general [Freyberg] was told we were out of touch and couldn't be contacted, so I believe". A. D. (Buster) Gibb, June 1999.
[20] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.37.

From October 1940 onwards, Bagnold honoured his promise to Wavell to carry out "piracy on the high desert".[21] Tracks were mined, aircraft, airfield equipment and supply dumps were blown up, and remote Italian garrisons were terrorised. Such an outpost was the fort at Aujila where, Shaw explains, "a few rounds of the Bofors gun sent a cloud of pigeons out of the tower, and the Italian garrison over the wall."[22] It was not long before the effects on the Italians of LRDG operations became apparent

> By simultaneous appearances at places 600 miles apart we managed to exaggerate our strength, till nervous Italian post commanders began to report imaginary noises in the night. Graziani had to provide armed escorts for all his supply columns in the interior of eastern Libya, and to patrol the long Kufra routes by air. Moreover the strength and armament of every garrison was greatly increased, which caused a still bigger demand for transport to keep them supplied.[23]

Evidently effective, these 'piratical' activities peaked with the January 1941 LRDG raid on Merzuk, nearly 2400 kilometres from Cairo. Despite appearing to be an ambitious continuation of normal raiding, the Merzuk operation had at its heart a pair of important motives. Firstly, as Lloyd Owen suggested: "If news of a victory against the Italians deep in the Fezzan could be spread among the local people in Western Libya this might persuade them not to co-operate too willingly with the Italians."[24] Secondly, and altogether more importantly, the operation was aimed at the French colonies in North Africa. Following Marshal Henri Pétain's signature to the armistice between France and Germany in June 1940, the French territories had 'sat on the fence', apparently undecided in their loyalty. Shaw suggests: "Generally speaking, the older men with more to lose were for Vichy, and the younger for de Gaulle [Free French]."[25] On Libya's southern border, the Governor of Chad Province, M. Eboué had chosen to back de Gaulle, and it was hoped that a successful operation against the Italians by a combined LRDG-French force might bring French colonial territories into the war on

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[21] Adrian Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1992, p.189.
[22] Shaw, *LRDG Activities in North Africa*, [unpublished report, given as an address to Officers in Middle East, early 1943], p.6.
[23] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945. p.37.
[24] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.30.
[25] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.53.

the side of the British.[26] In November 1940, Bagnold flew to Fort Lamy in Chad, and in the presence of the Governor and his military commander, Colonel d'Ornano, presented the French with a proposal for a joint operation against the Italians at Merzuk.[27] Bagnold's plan received enthusiastic support, with the French pledging to bring supplies by camel through the Tibesti Mountains for the patrol, a rendezvous 2000 kilometres from the LRDG base. The French had one stipulation, that d'Ornano and a handful of his men must accompany the patrol on the attack.[28] Bagnold agreed and the plan's details were hammered out on the spot.

Two patrols under the command of Clayton radioed Cairo to inform Bagnold that they had successfully rendezvoused with d'Ornano and his men on 7 January 1941, eleven days after leaving their base.[29] Four days later, the patrols intersected the north road leading to Murzuk at a point ten miles away from it. Pausing long enough to lay mines on the track, the patrols advanced into the town. They achieved total surprise, initially driving through the streets of Murzuk exchanging fascist salutes with its inhabitants and then snatching the unlucky Italian post-master from his bicycle and forcing the terrified man to act as a local guide.[30] At this juncture, half of T (New Zealand) Patrol under Clayton and Shaw then attacked the aerodrome, while the remainder under Chrichton-Stuart attacked the fort. Two hours later the patrols had attained their objectives and turned south for Chad, aiming to do what damage they could en route.[31] Patrol losses were two killed (including d'Ornano), and three wounded.[32] Bagnold was advised of the operation's results soon after:

> My telephone rang at 2 a.m. It was the Director of Military Intelligence. News had come through his quick mysterious channels: Murzuk was on fire, its landing ground and aircraft destroyed; two other sleepy little Fezzan oases had been attacked, and the rest were wirelessing to one another in alarm.[33]

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[26] Letter to author from Lloyd Owen, D., 5 June 1999.
[27] Henry Maule, *Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French*, London: Odhams Books Ltd., 1966, p.85.
[28] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.38.
[29] Comprised of one 'new' patrol of Guards, and the seasoned New Zealand 'T' Patrol. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.38.
[30] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.31.
[31] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.63.
[32] Both d'Ornano and Sgt Hewitt, a New Zealander, were killed by a burst of machine-gun fire while attacking the aerodrome in Clayton's truck.
[33] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.38.

Maule made the somewhat melodramatic claim: " The news that soldiers of France were fighting once more, and had struck a shrewd blow for the honour of their country, was soon electrifying the free world and infuriating the Axis powers and Vichy."[34] However, he was certainly not exaggerating when he suggested: "The French were given the maximum kudos for this raid deep into enemy territory."[35] On 29 January the *Times* ran an article on the operation entitled, "No Respite For Italians: Daring Free French Raid in Libya."[36] This was followed by a tribute to d'Ornano, announcing his posthumous award of the Croix de l'Ordre de la Liberation, in which de Gaulle stated:

> During January elements of our troops in Chad, acting under the command of General de Larminat carried out a deep raid into Italian Libya in the region of Fezzan. Our troops reached and destroyed the base at Murzuk and carried the post at Gatrun, inflicting on the enemy serious losses in men and material. Several Italian aeroplanes were destroyed on the ground, Lieutenant-Colonel Colonna d'Ornano was killed in the course of the operations of the Chad troops at Murzuk.[37]

Wavell and his staff decided to capitalise on the propaganda value of the Murzuk success by authorising a further combined operation, against Kufra this time. Unlike Murzuk, Kufra possessed strategic as well as symbolic value. The town's airfield made possible a direct air-link between Mussolini's forces in Libya and those in Eritrea and Ethiopia. If necessary, it could be used as an Axis base from which to mount attacks on British forces in East Africa.

The Guards and New Zealand patrols were overhauling their battered vehicles in Faya (Chad) when Bagnold and Shaw agreed to place them and Clayton under the command of Chad's new military commander, Colonel Philippe Leclerc.[38] The patrols were to act as the vanguard and scout the route for the Free French force of "mainly native soldiers . . . with French officers and NCOs, in all 100 Europeans and 300 natives".[39] They would advance on Kufra via the old caravan route reconnoitred by Clayton the previous September. While T Patrol pressed forward to the vicinity of Kufra, the Guards under

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[34] Maule, *Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French*, pp.88-89.
[35] Maule, *Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French*, p.89.
[36] 'No Respite For Italians: Daring Free French Raid in Southern Libya', London: *The Times*, Wednesday January 29 (1941), p.4.
[37] 'Free French raid into Libya: Posthumous Award to Commander', London: *The Times*, Thursday January 30 (1941), p.3.
[38] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.68.
[39] Maule, *Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French*, p.93.

Chrichton-Stuart would remain at Sarra Well, 160 kilometres south-west, to cover the main force until it caught up with the New Zealanders just south of the target.[40]

The patrols left Faya on 26 January and proceeded to Sarra together. G Patrol waited at Sarra for the French to come forward while Clayton's party continued north.[41] Late on 31 January, in a region of hills 100 kilometres south of Kufra, T Patrol ran into serious danger. Aware that they had been observed by patrolling Italian aircraft, Clayton ordered the patrol to take cover among rocks in a small valley.[42] Unknown to Clayton, the aircraft were directing an Auto-Saharan Company (motorised infantry) under the command of Saharan veteran, Captain Moreschini, onto his position. Moreschini attacked with skill and soon three of the patrol's trucks were ablaze and one of the drivers was killed. Clayton decided to withdraw, re-group and counter-attack. In the process, he was wounded and, with two others, captured by the Italians.[43] With the exception of another four men initially believed captured or killed, the patrol withdrew to Sarra. Chrichton-Stuart and Leclerc wisely decided that the operation would have to be aborted, allowing the patrol to begin their long return journey to Cairo.[44] The four missing men were in fact alive and overlooked by the Italians who had promptly vacated the scene with their three prisoners. Faced with the choice of walking 100 kilometres north into guaranteed captivity, or attempting to retrace their route to the south with no food and little water, the patrol members chose the latter. Ten days, and over 300 kilometres later, they were discovered quite by chance by one of Leclerc's reconnaissance patrols.[45]

One vehicle of T Patrol had remained at Tekro to act as navigators for Leclerc, who was more determined than ever to take Kufra. Approximately a fortnight later his force invested the fort at Kufra.[46] Lloyd Owen explains that the Auto-Saharan Company responsible for the attack on Clayton's patrol apparently "felt that their mobility was designed so that they could escape, while leaving their compatriots in the fort to withstand the French siege".[47] On 1 March the Italians hoisted a white flag and

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[40] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.70.
[41] Maule, *Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French*, p.95.
[42] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.34.
[43] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.71.
[44] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, pp.34-35.
[45] Shaw, *LRDG Activities in North Africa*, [unpublished report, given as an address to Officers in Middle East, early 1943], p.8. Sadly, rescue came too late for one of the men who died later that day from his exertions. Another of the four, Corporal Moore (2NZEF) apparently displayed much annoyance at having been prevented by the rescue from proving that he could have reached the Free French at Tekro, a further 130 kilometres away. He was subsequently awarded a medal for his leadership during the ordeal.
[46] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.74.
[47] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.37.

capitulated just days before Leclerc's supplies would have run out.[48] A search of the signals room in the fort produced the Italian commander's last message before he surrendered: "We are in extremis. Long live Italy. Long live the King Emperor. Long live the Duce. Rome, I embrace you!" As Shaw dryly observed, "positions are not held on such stuff as this."[49]

The French accomplishment was not only a propaganda boon for de Gaulle, but it denied the Axis powers a vital forward link to their East African forces. Maule later suggested the victories were instrumental in bringing about the affiliation of the French colonial territories to the Allies. He claimed that without the LRDG part in the Fezzan operations, "the Free French cause must have foundered at its very inception."[50] A further tangible advantage was that Kufra, rather than Cairo, became the forward supply point and base for LRDG operations for the next two years, cutting many kilometres from their most frequent journeys.[51]

Following this, the LRDG returned to its primary role as a deep reconnaissance unit. As Lloyd Owen observes: "That we were often ordered, or took the opportunity, to harass the enemy was only because we were equipped, had the knowledge and ability to do so."[52] Indeed, structured raiding, as such, ceased for much of 1941. Any on-going deeds of 'piracy' occurred only when patrols encountered 'targets of opportunity'. Jake Easonsmith's patrol exploited a typical 'opportunity' in June. Having complied with his instructions to drop off two Arab agents near the Gambut airfield, Easonsmith proceeded on his own initiative to check the traffic on the Tobruk-Bardia road. At dusk he stumbled upon an assemblage of heavy vehicles encamped for the night. The patrol struck without warning. Such was the degree of surprise there was almost no opposition, and by the time the patrol vanished into the desert it had ruined twelve of the sixteen vehicles and snatched two Italian prisoners.[53]

Despite their random character, the outcome of these attacks was significant. Lloyd Owen asserts: "The total damage inflicted by these patrols was very small but the demoralising effect that it had on the enemy at the time was out of all proportion to the

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[48] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.39.
[49] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.77.
[50] Maule, *Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French*, p.82.
[51] Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, Jan-Feb 1945, p.40.
[52] Lloyd Owen, David Lloyd, *The Desert My Dwelling Place*, London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1957, p.56.
[53] Lloyd Owen describes Easonsmith as "by far the most successful Patrol leader the LRDG ever had." See: Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.45.

effort that we were putting into it."[54] This claim finds other support. Signals intelligence revealed that, at a command level, the Axis forces in North Africa were alarmed by the LRDG operations.[55] That many troops 'on the ground' shared their commanders' disquiet is without doubt. If anything, proximity appears to have exaggerated the menace. An example of this is seen in the captured diary of an Italian medical officer attached to a patrol of the Pavia Division. Commenting firstly on the apparent ability of the LRDG to move with ease through such gruelling country as the Qattara Depression, he goes on to state that the patrols "recently appeared in a very speedy vehicle with two sets of two MGs [machine-guns]. I think they are of American make. It can do 60 miles [per hour] in such a bad area. One of these machines, by itself, could annihilate our patrol."[56] A fortnight later, after his unit was decimated, the dauntless doctor wrote: "What is the situation? I don't know, no-one knows. Hemmed in from every side, pursued, everywhere English lorries which hunt us down."[57] Reading the diary entries in full, one is struck by the doctor's assumption that all raiding activity was the work of the LRDG alone. Whilst this was unlikely to be the case, in terms of damage to enemy morale, perception - not truth, is everything.

Putting psychological effects aside, Lloyd Owen is correct to point out that the material damage the patrols inflicted was *often* very small. However, regardless of the extent of the damage associated with any specific attack, the continual aim was to compel the enemy to violate the warfare principle of 'economy of force'. The intention was that the adversary should, in his efforts to act against the patrols, "waste his resources (e.g. time, ammunition, weapons, manpower, fuel) in unimportant directions".[58]

At the theatre level, British efforts in North Africa in the summer of 1941 produced a series of disappointments. The Afrika Korps had added the very elements of substance and resolve that Wavell had dreaded. Responsibility for the resulting British failures was laid squarely upon Wavell, despite his vigorous objections to Whitehall's constant pressure to launch operations he considered premature.[59] Matters came to a head in late June when Winston Churchill wrote to him, stating: "I have come to the conclusion that

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[54] Lloyd Owen, *The Desert My Dwelling Place*, p.137.
[55] 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, p.379 [footnote].
[56] General Headquarters, Middle East - Military Intelligence (CAIRO), M.I., *G.H.Q., M.E.F. Periodical Intelligence Notes No. 15, Up to 4.12.42.* NZ National Archives: WAII DA500/11, p.3.
[57] General Headquarters, Middle East - Military Intelligence (CAIRO), *Periodical Intelligence Notes No. 15,* p.5.
[58] M. I. Handel, , "Intelligence and Deception", in John Gooch, & Amos Perlmutter, (eds.), *Military Deception and Strategic Surprise*, London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1982, pp.124-125.
[59] B. Pitt, *The Crucible of War: Western Desert 1941*, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1980, p.309.

the public interest will be best served by the appointment of General Auchinleck to relieve you in the command of the armies of the Middle East."[60] With a stroke of Churchill's pen, the blame was shifted once and for all, and the first in a string of Middle East commanders was relieved of his role.

Like his predecessor, Auchinleck came under intense pressure to launch an attack on the enemy.[61] Four days before Auchinleck assumed command in the Middle East, Churchill cabled him to stress the threats to the Middle Eastern forces and Whitehall's belief in the immediate need to renew the offensive, adding: "The urgency of these issues will naturally impress itself upon you."[62] Auchinleck was not persuaded that Whitehall's appreciation of the situation was correct and insisted on delaying the launching of the newest operation, 'Crusader'. Churchill was "unconvinced"[63] by Auchinleck's reasoning, and the month of November was ultimately settled on as a compromise that left neither party truly satisfied.

Jackson offers the following description of the November offensive:

> 'Crusader' was a very complex battle . . . there was no clearly defined front line. British and Axis formations criss-crossed each other in bewildering patterns, each bent upon some purpose which might or might not have been based on valid intelligence of what was happening. The fog of war was so dense at times that the senior commanders on either side could do little to affect the issue, as formations, large and small, sought their destiny in their own way.[64]

Beginning on 17 November, the operation quickly got into difficulty. Shaw recalls "a hectic afternoon when every driver, batman and cook at Advanced Army HQ was being mobilised" to drive off a thrust by one of Rommel's columns.[65] On 24 November, 8th Army Headquarters sent the LRDG CO a signal altering their role from covert reconnaissance to offensive operations. Pirates once more, they were now ordered to "act with the utmost vigour offensively against any enemy targets or communications

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[60]Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. III: The Grand Alliance*, London: The Reprint Society, 1950, p.281.
[61]A. Clifford, *Three Against Rommel: The Campaigns of Wavell, Auchinleck and Alexander*, London: George G. Harrap and Co. Ltd., 1943, p.115.
[62] Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. III: The Grand Alliance*, p.319.
[63] Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. III: The Grand Alliance*, p.366.
[64]W.G.F. Jackson, , *The North African Campaign 1940-43*, London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1975, p.152.
[65] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.113.

within your reach."[66] The somewhat desperately worded signal further suggested concentration upon areas of the coast road, the enemy's main re-supply route. With the relief of besieged Tobruk at stake, Auchinleck and his staff were throwing everything they had into the melee in a desperate bid to produce a victory with Crusader. Being granted carte blanche for such action might sound well and good, but it was apt to cause high losses in men and machines. Former LRDG CO,[67] Guy Prendergast, explains: "The objection to a pure and simple "shoot up" of enemy traffic is that it naturally defines the spot at which the attack has been made, and so narrows down the area which the enemy have to search for the attackers."[68] Nonetheless, orders were orders, and the patrols took the offensive once more.

Numerous attacks took place over the following weeks. The 'best hunting' in November was had by patrols led by John Olivey (Rhodesians) and Tony Browne (New Zealanders) operating in concert on the Barce-Benghazi Highway. On the night of the 29th, they set an ambush that quickly netted a brace of supply trucks.[69] Following a period of inactivity, they decided the pickings might improve if they drove westwards along the coast road and attacked convoys going in the opposite direction.[70] The report of the action lists nine truck and trailer units destroyed (including fuel trailers), a number of enemy casualties inflicted and the telephone wires along the highway wrecked.[71] On their way back to base, a further two trucks with trailers were destroyed along with a large-capacity oil tanker.[72] December's raiding got off to a fine start with a night attack on a motor-transport park on the main coast road. By the time the Yeomanry Patrol withdrew, approximately fifteen enemy trucks were ruined.[73]

In early December, the forging of an alliance between the now well-established LRDG, and David Stirling's fledgling Special Air Service (SAS), was to have significance for the future of LRDG raiding, and the on-going accomplishments of both units. In July Auchinleck had given Stirling permission to organise a parachute detachment whose

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[66] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports,* [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], (1) *1 November – 6 December 1941,* p.3.
[67] Guy Prendergast took over from Bagnold in August 1941 following Bagnold's promotion to GHQ. Prendergast remained LRDG CO until the end of its African operations. See: Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* p.86.
[68] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (5), 19 April – 26 May 1942.*
[69] Shaw, *Phase Reports, (1) 1 November – 6 December 1941,* p.4.
[70] Lloyd Owen, *The Desert My Dwelling Place,* p.137. Elsewhere in his memoir, Lloyd Owen suggests that Bagnold "found that the New Zealanders were more dashing in aggressive operations and a little restive in those that required more patient qualities." (p.59).
[71] Shaw, *Phase Reports,* (1) *1 November – 6 December 1941,* p.5. and Shaw, *LRDG Activities in North Africa,* [unpublished report, given as an address to Officers in Middle East, early 1943], p.12.
[72] Lloyd Owen, *The Desert My Dwelling Place*, p.137.
[73] Shaw, *Phase Reports, (1) 1 November – 6 December 1941*, p.4.

primary role would be behind-the-lines raiding and sabotage.[74] The unit's first endeavour was a debacle. The plan had been to destroy German fighter aircraft stationed on five advanced airfields in the Gazala-Tmimi area in the opening hours of Crusader. Once this was accomplished, the parachutists were to make their way on foot to a rendezvous eighty kilometres away with the LRDG, who would return them to base.[75] The acceptable wind-speed limit for parachute operations was twenty-five kilometres per hour. On the night of 15 November wind-speed at the targets was gusting over twice that. Despite Stirling being advised to abandon the attack,[76] awareness of the importance of Crusader and its subsidiary operations, and anxiety to prove his concept, led him to commit his unit to the attack. Those men not seriously injured in the jump, or dragged away into the desert by the high winds, were hopelessly separated from their equipment. By the time the men straggled in their twos and threes into the rendezvous, it was apparent that Stirling had lost thirty-two of fifty-five men to no good effect.[77]

Lloyd Owen recalls proposing on the journey back to base that in future the LRDG could be used to convey the SAS into the target area, on time, accurately, returning afterward to collect them.[78] With occasion to examine the methods and men of the patrols up close, Stirling became convinced. "David's [Stirling's] conviction that he could operate effectively only with the full support of the LRDG resulted in a brilliant partnership between the two organisations. Providing the separate aims of each were not allowed to clash, there was no reason why they should not co-exist happily."[79] In a speech to the SAS Association members in the late 1980s, Stirling acknowledged: "In those early days we came to owe the Long Range Desert Group a deep debt of gratitude. The LRDG were the supreme professionals of the desert and they were unstinting in their help."[80] Elsewhere he affirmed: "We had learned so much from them [the LRDG]; it is debatable whether we could have got off the ground so swiftly without them."[81] The benefits of the arrangement were not as one-sided as Stirling's generous remarks might suggest. For the LRDG, the creation of a parallel, co-operative unit with a primary responsibility for behind-the-lines offensive action was a blessing, with

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[74] Virginia Cowles, *The Phantom Major: The Story of David Stirling and the S.A.S. Regiment*, London: Arms and Armour Press Ltd., 1986, p.22.
[75] Cowles, *The Phantom Major: The Story of David Stirling and the S.A.S. Regiment*, p.89.
[76] A. Hoe, *David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992, p.93.
[77] D. Mercer, *Chronicle of the Second World War*, London: Chronicle Communications Ltd. And Longman Group UK Ltd, 1990, p.241.
[78] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.61.
[79] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.70. This issue will be addressed more fully in the following chapter.
[80] Hoe, *David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S.* p.472.

pressure mounting at GHQ for the LRDG to return to the covert reconnaissance work which was their forte. Additionally, Prendergast's misgivings about the vulnerability of the patrols following a 'beat up' were being supported by experience. Repeated post-attack strafing was producing a rising toll in men and machinery.

From early December onward, the LRDG "Taxi Service"[82] carried the SAS to their destinations, and back again. Little by little, patrol members passed on the techniques of desert-craft that eventually enabled the SAS to operate independently. Raiding by both groups continued unabated, with a joint SAS-LRDG undertaking bringing the high-point in December. On 10 December, New Zealander 'Bing' Morris led out T2 (Kiwi) Patrol accompanied by a dozen SAS members. Their twin objectives were the Agheila landing-ground, and an anchorage at nearby Mersa Brega being used to unload Axis supplies.[83] On the evening of the attack, the SAS found that the landing-ground was unoccupied and Morris established that any cross-country approach to the anchorage was impossible due to salt marshes. He decided the only way to get there was by using the main road.[84] A quick conference with the returned SAS team produced agreement. Morris's patrol vehicles formed a 'convoy' and proceeded to Mersa Brega on the highway, exchanging fascist salutes and greetings with some fifty on-coming trucks before arriving at a cross-roads near the anchorage.[85] Shaw described the attack:

> Round the buildings at the cross-roads were twenty cars or more, with their crews, German and Italian, waiting beside them or getting a meal at the roadhouse . . . then the lagging [LRDG-SAS] cars came up and all hell broke loose . . . at twenty-five yards range, with every gun they had, the patrol opened fire on the men and vehicles. On the outskirts the parashots [SAS] hurried from truck to truck, dropping into them their sticky bombs [incendiaries] and dragging the bewildered drivers out of their cabs to give them a coup de grâce.[86]

Some fifteen minutes later, as reinforcements began to arrive, the patrol broke contact and withdrew up the highway, past the salt marshes and into the desert. Mining the

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[81] Hoe, *David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S.* p.179.
[82] Hoe, *David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S*, p.104.
[83] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.126.
[84] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports, (3), 25 December – 5 February 1942*, p.2.
[85] Shaw, *Phase Reports, (3), 25 December – 5 February 1942*, p.2.

route in their wake apparently produced several satisfying sets of explosions. All of this the patrol accomplished without loss.[87] Subsequently the commander of 8th Army made it clear that such raiding had been of "great value", suggesting the attacks "were naturally grossly exaggerated by the victims, and the enemy command, uncertain of the seriousness of the threat to their communications wasted much time, fuel and personnel in fruitless searches for the attackers."[88]

As Crusader and Rommel's counter-thrusts lost momentum in the early months of 1942, LRDG raiding activity wound down. After the serious depletion of the group's resources in the preceding months, there was a general relief at having the emphasis on covert reconnaissance return.[89] It was not destined to last. On 26 May, Rommel counter-attacked,[90] and inside three weeks the LRDG received orders to "operate offensively against enemy transport".[91] Rommel, as desert commanders are wont to do, was becoming a victim of his own success. For as one advances in the desert, so one's supply lines lengthen, with occasional disastrous results.[92] Any extra pressure that could be brought to bear on Axis lines of communication would be invaluable. A captured enemy Intelligence Summary dated April 1942, testified:

> The L.R.D.G. plays an extremely important part in the enemy sabotage organisation. The selection and training of the men, the strength, speed and camouflage of the vehicles for the country in which they have to operate have enabled the Group to carry out very effective work.[93]

Raiding by LRDG patrols, alone and increasingly in co-operation with the SAS, continued until late July when the British made their stand at Alamein and, exhausted by the efforts of the previous months, both sides paused.[94]

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[86] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, pp.127-128.
[87] Shaw, *Phase Reports, (3), 25 December – 5 February 1942*, p.2.
[88] Quoted in: Shaw, *LRDG Activities in North Africa*, [unpublished report, given as an address to Officers in Middle East, early 1943], p.15.
[89] 8th Army Operation Instruction No 60 of 23 April. See: Prendergast, G. L., *Phase Reports, (5), 19 April – 26 May 1942*, p.4.
[90] K. Macksey, *Rommel: Battles and Campaigns*, London: Arms and Armour Press, 1979, p.99.
[91] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (6), 27 May – 28 June 1942*, p.2.
[92] For example, on 28 May, the German 21st Panzer Division ground to a total halt in the midst of an operation after running out of fuel. See: Macksey, *Rommel: Battles and Campaigns*, p.105.
[93] Quoted in: Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.165.
[94] Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, p.xiv and Clifford, *Three Against Rommel: The Campaigns of Wavell, Auchinleck and Alexander*, p.292.

In early August, convinced that fresh blood was needed in the fight against the Afrika Korps, the Chief of Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Alanbrooke, and Winston Churchill, replaced Auchinleck with Bernard Montgomery.[95] On taking over 8th Army, Montgomery predicted an early attack by Rommel.[96] It came on the night of 31 August and lasted for six days. Under Montgomery's leadership, the Allied line at Alam Halfa held and Rommel was forced to withdraw. Irving suggests: "The victory that Montgomery had scored over Rommel was more of a psychological nature than material."[97] In making this claim, Irving seems to place most of the emphasis on the relative material damage each side sustained. This tends to overlook the fact that Montgomery was all but sitting on top of his supply sources, whereas Rommel's supply lines were, once more, stretched to breaking. A further point to consider is that Rommel's losses in trucks were especially high (almost 400), nor could they be readily replaced because of incessant air attacks on his supply ships by aircraft operating from Malta.[98]

In late 1942, the LRDG's 'piracy' days began drawing to a close. Their reconnaissance value was such that GHQ was becoming increasingly reluctant to sacrifice patrols on other tasks, particularly when the SAS was carving itself quite a niche in offensive behind-the-lines roles. However, in September the LRDG were given a part in a group of synchronised raids designed to capitalise upon Rommel's deteriorating supply system. To achieve this, simultaneous raids would be mounted upon the harbours at Benghazi and Tobruk. A further raid on the airfield at Barce would, it was hoped, deprive the Axis of valuable fighter and transport aircraft.[99]

The scale of the operation was impressive and involved the LRDG, SAS, Commandos, Royal Navy, Royal Air Force, as well as elements of the Sudan Defence Force. Tobruk was to be struck from the sea and ashore, aiming to capture the harbour gun batteries, demolish harbour equipment and, in particular, to destroy the large underground fuel tanks, thus preventing tankers discharging there in future. The attackers would then withdraw, courtesy of the Royal Navy.[100] Benghazi was to be attacked from inland

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[95] A. Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide, 1939-1943: A Study Based on the Diaries and Autobiographical Notes of Field Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke, K.G., O.M.*, London: The Reprint Society, 1958, p.368. Note: Lieutenant-General Gott was the original choice for replacing Auchinleck, but the Luftwaffe shot down his aircraft on 7 August.
[96] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958, p.103.
[97] David Irving, *The Trail of the Fox: The Life of Field-Marshal Erwin Rommel*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977, p.194.
[98] Bryant, *The Turn of the Tide, 1939-1943: A Study Based on the Diaries and Autobiographical Notes of Field Marshal The Viscount Alanbrooke, K.G., O.M.*, p.402.
[99] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.104.
[100] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.183.

with the aim of damaging shipping in the harbour and, once again, large oil-storage tanks.[101] The Sudan Defence Force was to advance from Kufra to attack and seize Jalo oasis to secure the line of withdrawal for the land parties.[102] The principal role of the LRDG was to guide the attacking parties to their respective targets. Additionally, two patrols would aid in the attack on Benghazi, and a separate LRDG force led by Easonsmith would assault the airfield at Barce.[103]

Overall, the operation was a costly disaster. Feasibility concerns expressed by officers of the SAS and LRDG during its planning were fully borne out by the event. A general underestimation of both calibre and quantity of expected opposition[104] was compounded by a criminal lack of security in the preparation stages.[105] Lloyd Owen recalls: "It was very clear to me when I arrived there [Cairo] . . . that far too many of those who were to take part in these raids were talking about the chances . . . I had heard these [rumours] through gossip at parties and in the bars of Cairo."[106] Lloyd Owen reported the rumours to GHQ staff, but to no avail.

Jenner and List insist that the Germans did not know of the raids beforehand. Their claim is based upon the movement out of the target area of some German formations that would not be sensible with foreknowledge of the attacks. Although admitting that British prisoners-of-war in Tobruk were aware of the impending attack, they do not discuss the possibility that one or more of them may have deliberately or inadvertently tipped the Germans off. The matter, they claim, "remains a mystery to this day", and cap their argument by pointing out that the British Official History "flatly denies a compromise [of security]".[107] Some time after the raids an intelligence report confirmed that a British prisoner captured and taken to Tobruk "had said 'something big' would happen in five days."[108] Five days later another prisoner witnessed the raid. This prisoner said, "the Germans appeared fully prepared. Afterwards he was told by a German that their preparations had included arming German military patients in a hospital on a bay where one of the landings took place. 88mm [flak] guns from inland were used in coastal defence."[109] The cost of the operation was colossal. The shore

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[101] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.105.
[102] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (8), 11 September – 23 October 1942*, p.1.
[103] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.105.
[104] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.184.
[105] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (8), 11 September – 23 October 1942*, p.1.
[106] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.106.
[107] B. Jenner, , and D. List, *The Long Range Desert Group*, London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1983, pp.29-30.
[108] General Headquarters, Middle East - Military Intelligence (CAIRO), *Periodical Intelligence Notes No. 15*, p.1.
[109] General Headquarters, Middle East - Military Intelligence (CAIRO), *Periodical Intelligence Notes No. 15*, p.1.

parties were annihilated[110] and the Royal Navy lost four motor-torpedo boats, two destroyers, an anti-aircraft carrier and many lives.[111] The Benghazi attackers were strafed from the air *prior* to reaching their target, losing eighteen SAS attack Jeeps and twenty-five other vehicles, and the Sudan Defence Force ran into *prepared* opposition and failed to take Jalo.[112] Referring to the raids, the British official history suggests,

> At Barce the LRDG scored the only success when Major J. R. Easonsmith's two patrols, in five Jeeps and twelve 30 cwt trucks, having covered 700 miles from the Faiyum, reached their objective up to time and roamed over the airfield shooting up aircraft and hurling grenades into military buildings. The Italians reported sixteen of their aircraft destroyed and seven damaged.[113]

This somewhat spare description neglects to mention the additional heavy damage to buildings and motor transport, and casualties inflicted upon the enemy throughout the town. It certainly does less than justice to a raid that resulted in the awarding of two Distinguished Service Orders, one Military Cross, and three Military Medals.[114] In the midst of disaster the LRDG lived up to its reputation for professionalism by being the sole unit to achieve a significant proportion of its objectives.[115] The official account also fails to note the LRDG losses in the action and the retaliatory airstrikes that followed, totalling six wounded, ten prisoners-of-war, and the destruction of fourteen vehicles.[116] The effects of the vehicle losses in particular were felt for some time after as the patrols had to be re-equipped with vehicles previously handed in to the Ordnance Corps Depot as unsuitable for further use. Their poor performance hampered operations from that point on.[117]

Despite short-term sporadic rises to prominence, raiding was of low priority in LRDG tasking relative to reconnaissance, surveying, and path-finding activity. That the group was called upon to carry out raiding at all reflects the fact that sometimes the LRDG

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[110] Lloyd Owen, delayed by unexpected enemy presence approaching Tobruk wisely withdrew once it became clear the attack had gone awry. See: G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (8), 11 September – 23 October 1942*, p.2.
[111] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.106.
[112] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45*, p.106.
[113] I.S.O. Playfair, *The Mediterranean and Middle East, vol. IV: The Destruction of the Axis Forces in Africa*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1966, p.23.
[114] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (8), 11 September – 23 October 1942*, p.2. D.S.O's - Easonsmith and Wilder (NZ: farmer, Waipukurau); M.C. - Lawson; M.M's – Craw (NZ: farmer, Manawatu), Tippett (NZ: car painter, Te Awamutu), Dobson (NZ: farm labourer, Seddon).
[115] A. Hoe, *David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992, p.472.
[116] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.206.

was the sole unit available that had the capability of reaching targets deep within enemy-held territory. Also, the overall situation was, on occasions, so desperate that every unit had to be thrown into the fray, LRDG included, regardless of the possible costs. The dissipation of the enemy's resources as a response to LRDG offensive operations is well attested. In addition, the group's raiding exploits made substantial contributions to the rise of the Fighting Free French and the Special Air Service. However, as the capabilities of specialised raiding formations such as the SAS grew, the 'piratical' mantle was passed on by the LRDG, which was now able to concentrate on its principal raison d'être.

[117] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (8), 11 September – 23 October 1942*, p.2.

Chapter Four – ROAD WATCHES

Non vi sed arte [Not by strength, by guile][1].

General Wavell recognised the dangerously impoverished state of Britain's intelligence resources early in the Desert War and made certain that the chief role of the LRDG was deep reconnaissance.[2] A former British Intelligence Officer claims that

> The development of effective wartime intelligence takes time, but gets a particular impetus from defeat in the early years of the war; military men need a sharp shock to overcome their lack of intelligence interest and competence. The Allies' disasters in the early stages of the Second World War were more potent intelligence teachers than success was to the Axis.[3]

Efforts to expand British intelligence assets did not end with the formation of the LRDG and a series of Commanders-in-Chief did much to make sure that intelligence derived from LRDG activity was rapidly complemented by material from such other sources as prisoners-of-war and signals intelligence (sigint). Until at least the end of 1941, the LRDG was uncontested in its position as the Middle Eastern Command's foremost provider of reliable tactical intelligence.[4] Even in the period 1942 onward, LRDG surveillance reports provided vital corroboration of intelligence acquired from other sources.

In the main, the LRDG contributed two types of information to the intelligence 'pool'; surveillance reports and topographical information. All LRDG reports commented on the 'going', the state of the terrain the patrol had encountered and its suitability for various types and volumes of traffic. This topographical information was summarised by the unit's Intelligence Officer and passed to GHQ – Middle East, often forming the principal basis of commanders' plans for lines of advance, retreat, or re-supply.[5] LRDG surveillance reports were carried out by concealed observation posts known as 'road watches'. This duty was both the most tedious and among the most valuable of the

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[1] Unofficial motto of the Long Range patrol, attributed to the LRP's first medical officer, New Zealander, Dr Frank Edmondson. Note: This spelling is taken from, Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Original Long Range Patrol: Nominal Roll as at 5 December 1940* , Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12. The official records carry at least three variations on the spelling of this name which are then repeated across the range of secondary sources. B. Jenner, and D. List, *The Long Range Desert Group,* London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1983, p.3.

[2] R. A. Bagnold, *Notes on Long Range Desert Patrols for operations in the Interior of LIBYA,* Cairo: Long Range Desert Group, 11 February 1941. NZ National Archives: WAII, 1, DA304.1/10/1.

[3] M. Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.151.

[4] R. Bennett, *Behind the Battle: Intelligence in the War with Germany, 1939-1945*, London: Pimlico, 1999, p.xviii.

LRDG's many services.[6] It owed its existence to the fact that any enemy units or materiel travelling to and from the front were bound for geographical or logistical reasons to use the Coast Road, a single tar-seal ribbon extending from Tripoli to Cyrenaica.[7] Patrols would maintain the road watch for up to a fortnight before another patrol arrived to take over. By keeping three patrols assigned to a site, a watch on the ebb and flow of Axis forces on the Coast Road was sustained for months at a time.[8] The value of road watch information was confirmed by Intelligence Branch at GHQ – Middle East, which stressed that the information "was especially useful because the watch was continuous, and so enabled periods of activity and inactivity to be appreciated".[9]

The practice required the patrols to infiltrate hundreds of kilometres behind enemy lines unobserved, and then, under the cover of darkness, to take up the closest position to the road that would afford them sufficient concealment in daylight. Before dawn, two patrol members would conceal themselves within 300-400 metres of the roadway. These two would remain in position until evening, when they would be relieved by two of their comrades, who would be relieved in turn shortly before dawn.[10] Each pair carried enemy tank and vehicle recognition guides, notebooks and powerful binoculars. They were expected to record accurately details of every tank, vehicle and gun that passed. The men also had to determine the nationality of these things, and additional details such as whether they carried troops or stores, even the fine points of uniform embellishments so that the Intelligence staff in Cairo could identify the exact units on the move. This information was then coded and sent by radio to the Group HQ every twenty-four hours.[11]

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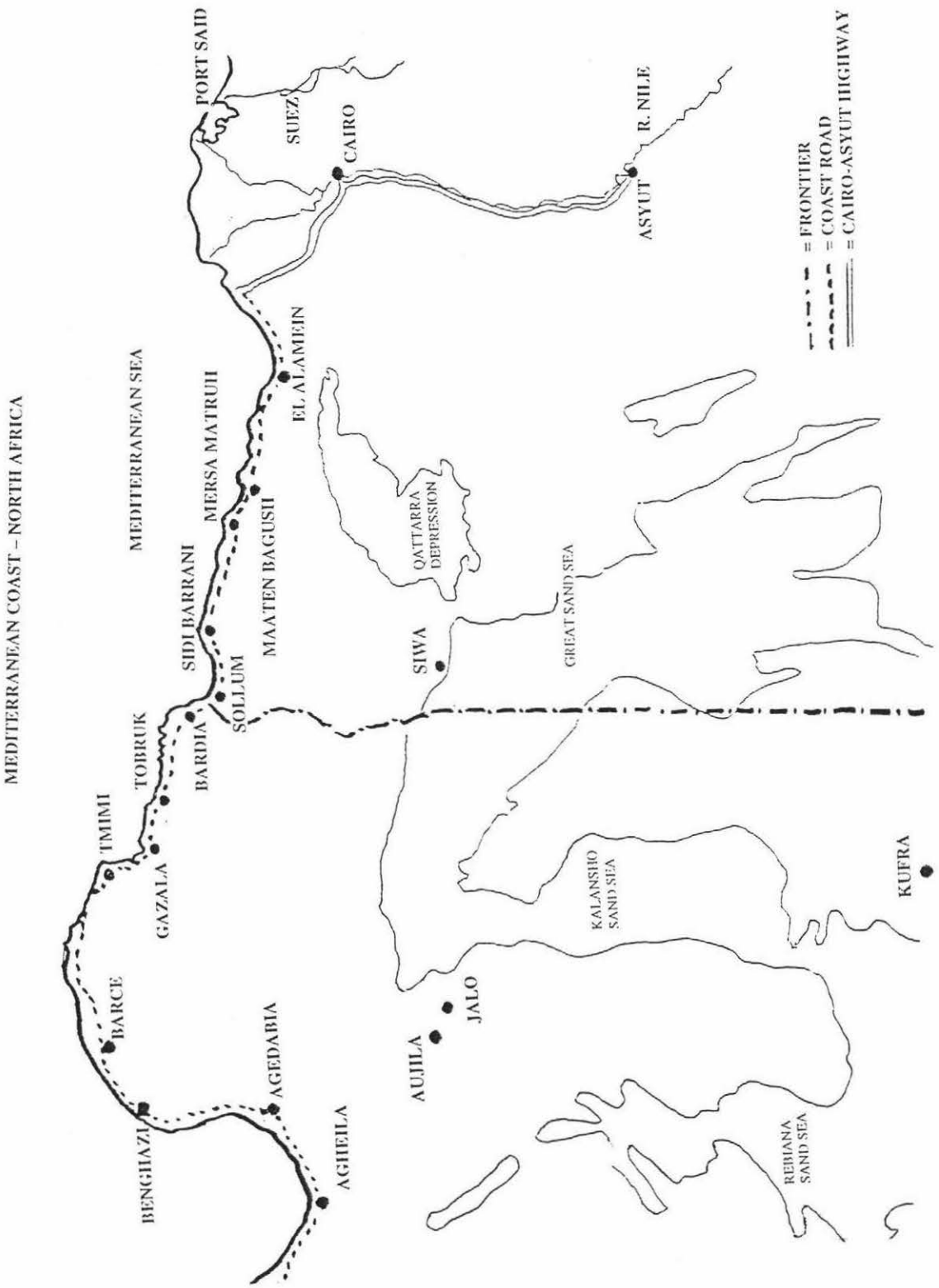
[5] David Lloyd Owen, *The Desert My Dwelling Place,* London: Cassell & Co. Ltd., 1957, p.162.
[6] David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45,* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1980, pp. 86-87.
[7] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.210.
[8] One patrol travelling homeward, one on site, and one en route to relieve it.
[9] G. L. Prendergast, Phase Reports, (7), 29 June – 11 September 1942, P.1.
[10] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.209.
[11] Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide*, p.86. In the official British history of World War II Intelligence, Hinsley makes the bizarre statement that the LRDG was "not allowed to take W/T transmitters with it on its operations." 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, p.379.

Figure 4. Road Watch Operational Area



C Gower-Collins
1999

The usual desert discomforts of blown sand and extremes of temperature aggravated this task.[12] In order to remain undetected on the daylight shift, the men could neither move around nor stand until night fell. The necessity to be within a few metres of the road at night at least gave the night crew an excuse to move around, and they needed to in order to keep warm. The monotony for both the watchers and their comrades waiting at the vehicles was astonishing. In the words of one patrol member: "You look at your watch at 11, and look again four hours later and it's 11:15."[13] The perpetual threat of aerial detection meant that even around the camouflaged vehicles movement had to be kept to a minimum, with men restricted to listening to the radio, reading, and swatting the interminable flies.[14] Lloyd Owen later recalled: "We hated it so much because we disliked being pinned down on a sedentary job when we knew other patrols were doing something far more exciting."[15] The boredom weighed more heavily on some men than others. Lloyd Owen remembers Bagnold suggesting that "the New Zealanders were more dashing in aggressive operations and a little restive in those that required more patient qualities".[16] Despite precautions, the risk of discovery was constant, and not always occasioned by ground or air patrols. Enemy vehicle convoys turned off the highway from time to time, looking for an overnight campsite or place to break for a meal. On occasions they halted a short distance from the watchers, who were unable to withdraw until nightfall. Wandering local people, apparently more attuned to the presence of strangers, at times attempted to engage watchers in conversation before moving on, leaving the patrol members to wonder whether they would be reported to their enemy. In one instance, a school bus pulled up near the watchers and discharged its passengers, who started playing a game similar to baseball.[17]

The 8th Army's staff caused a problem for the LRDG by issuing concurrent orders for road watches on the Tripoli-Benghazi stretch of the Coast Road, and 'beat-ups' of the Coast Road traffic by Stirling's SAS. These orders increased the likelihood of concealed patrols being flushed out in the enemy's efforts to track down fleeing raiders.[18] Like the LRDG, the SAS had been rewarded for their successes by increased

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[12] Gal and Mangelsdorff explain the effects on the watchers of their environment: "Heat affects performance of different types of tasks to varying degrees. Since heat has a cumulative blunting effect, continuous tasks of low demand, tasks with relatively low arousal value and those of a boring and repetitive nature tend to be affected most (e.g. vigilance, low-activity sentry or surveillance duty, routine watchkeeping etc.). R. Gal, & A.D. Mangelsdorff, (eds.), *Handbook of Military Psychology*, Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 1991, p.224.

[13] Quoted in: Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.210.

[14] David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide*, p.86.

[15] David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide*, p.86.

[16] David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide*, p.59.

[17] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports*, [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], *(4), 6 February – 18 April 1942*, p.2.

[18] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (5), 19 April – 26 May 1942*, p5.

size and support. It did not take long before the enlarged scale of SAS operations began to impinge on the LRDG's more subtle tasks. In an effort to manage the situation, GHQ – Middle East issued an Operation Instruction that: "LRDG should carry out the Long Range reconnaissance tasks, and the SAS the shorter range attacks on enemy communications and aerodromes . . . it was left open for the LRDG to make similar attacks on long range targets."[19] The boundary was set at Long. 20° E, which effectively entailed the LRDG working all desert tasks west of the line, and the SAS undertaking all work to its east.[20] The arrangement did not entirely solve the problem. Despite strenuous efforts on the part of LRDG commanders to get the message through at GHQ meetings, the patrols were still unable on occasion to establish road watches due to aggressive enemy patrolling resulting from an earlier SAS 'beat-up' of the area.[21] Lloyd Owen recalls that

> We had some difficulty some times in keeping Stirling's marauders away from our much more sophisticated operations of gaining information. It would be fair to say that much as we admired the tremendous success of Stirling and Paddy Mayne [2IC SAS] and assisted them very successfully, we sometimes wished they were not always in such a hurry and, through lack of organisation, so dependent on our goodwill and expertise.[22]

Nevertheless, the patrols were highly successful on the whole in remaining undetected in enemy-held country. Partly for this reason, they became the delivery method of choice for most personnel going into the desert with a clandestine purpose, Arabs and Allied servicemen alike. The range of passengers 'taxied' in both directions by the LRDG was surprising, extending from officers of various intelligence organisations and Arab irregulars conducting reconnaissance, to escaped prisoners-of-war (POW). On more than one occasion, aircrew able to report their position before baling-out or making a forced landing were picked up by patrols.[23] Following Axis advances, troops cut off would often find shelter among the local Arab population, regularly finding their way into the hands of organisations that could assist them to escape,[24] and signal to

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[19] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943*, p.1.
[20] Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, p.221.
[21] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943*, p.2.
[22] Letter to author from D. Lloyd Owen, 5 June 1999.
[23] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (5), 19 April – 26 May 1942*, p.2.
[24] Vladimir Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army*, London: The Reprint Society, 1953, p.122. Peniakoff's work carries a full description of this activity. Unfortunately some parts of his book (e.g. the account of the raid on Barce) are strongly at variance with the official record and others testimonies. However, in its general description of the organisation this reference is adequate.

Cairo to arrange for their collection. On one such occasion, a Guards patrol under Alastair Timpson was ordered to make a pick up and a few days later his four trucks staggered into Siwa Oasis under the weight of forty-seven passengers. They included six British soldiers, eleven members of the Libyan Arab Force, the Mudir of Slonta, his two wives and child, their chickens, and the ubiquitous goat.[25] The patrols commitment to ferrying the SAS declined when the latter acquired improved desert skills and its own desert-worthy vehicles.

Ample evidence attests to the value of the road watch reports for the staff at GHQ - Middle East.[26] However, any deeper analysis of the significance of LRDG surveillance activity for theatre operations requires a measurement of the degree of success, and in speaking of intelligence activities, 'success' is primarily a relational term. Judgements which perceive intelligence assets in terms of those which 'delivered', against those which 'failed to deliver', miss the point that intelligence producing sufficient certainty to dispel the "fog of war",[27] often does so because of a congruence of time and location favouring a particular collection method, rather than some permanent advantage that inheres in its use. It is in the light of this idea that the LRDG enjoyed substantial success relative to the other assets available to the Allied commanders. It is hardly surprising that the results of LRDG surveillance were so well thought of early in the Desert War, given the high degree of reliability in its reports, and the general lack of effective intelligence-collection competition. That it continued to play an important role throughout the campaign despite the rise in availability and effectiveness of other collection methods requires explanation.

The other major providers of information in the theatre were POWs, aerial photo-reconnaissance, and sigint. Following early British successes, the number of POWs available for interrogation increased significantly. POWs and, in some cases, local civilians in areas newly captured from the enemy can prove a sizeable source of information, but have a number of drawbacks.[28] Firstly, military personnel rarely possess valuable information other than that directly relating to their position. Secondly, the information may be simply erroneous, or in some rarer cases, deliberately false. The outcome, Herman suggests, is that at best they "contribute pieces of the

[25] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports,* [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], *(4), 6 February – 18 April 1942,* p.1.
[26] D. Hunt, A *Don at War,* London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990, p.132; and David Lloyd Owen, *Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45,* London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1980, p.87.
[27] Field Marshal the Earl Alexander of Tunis, quoted in: D. Hunt, A *Don at War,* London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990, p.xxvii.

intelligence jigsaw, rather than highlights".[29] In contrast to the civilian informants, the LRDG patrol members were skilled observers and unlike the servicemen, they were not subject to the pressures acting upon a POW.[30]

Throughout the war aerial photo-reconnaissance played a consistent role as an intelligence collection method. From somewhat humble beginnings in World War I, significant advances in aerial photography and subsequent interpretation of the results gave it the means to deliver generally satisfactory results and the occasional bounty by the time of the Second World War.[31] However, a number of serious limitations attended its use. The first was meteorological; the weather simply had to be clear enough to produce usable results. The analysis of the images then depended heavily upon the capabilities of human operators, who, despite intensive technical training,[32] found that "what one could see in a photograph was often a matter of subjective interpretation".[33] Coupled to this was the limitation imposed by the simple fact that something must be physically present in order to register in the photograph, the information could seldom indicate enemy intentions. Furthermore, the cunning use of camouflage and deception techniques could impose serious restrictions upon photo-reconnaissance's usefulness.[34] These constraints give the lie to Bennett's description of photo-reconnaissance evidence as "factually incontestable".[35] Lastly, in order to observe changes in a given location the site must be revisited,[36] which entails the risk of the aircraft being brought down and of alerting the enemy to the precise intelligence objectives of the mission, thus enabling them to introduce counter-measures or deceptions.

Sigint has become the twentieth century's richest intelligence collection source.[37] The term sigint includes the interception of messages on hard-line based communication, such as telephone and telegram, and, radio direction-finding, signal interception and the

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[28] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, p.62.
[29] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, p.62. There are exceptions, such as the British raid on Tobruk in late 1942. General Headquarters, Middle East - Military Intelligence (CAIRO), *M.I., G.H.Q., M.E.F. Periodical Intelligence Notes No. 15, Up to 4.12.42*. NZ National Archives: WAII DA500/11, p.1.
[30] Gal, & Mangelsdorff, (eds.), *Handbook of Military Psychology*, pp.743-744.
[31] As with the photographs of the V2 rocket sites at Peenemünde. See: R.V. Jones, *Most Secret War*, London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1978.
[32] Constance Babington Smith, *Evidence in Camera: The Story of Photographic Intelligence in the Second World War*, London: Penguin Books, 1961, pp.78-81.
[33] R.V. Jones, *Most Secret War*, London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1978, p.339.
[34] C. Cruickshank, *Deception in World War II*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, pp.26-33. Rommel's order to manufacture dummy tanks built over Volkswagons "to enable us to appear as strong as possible and to induce the maximum caution in the British" was typical of such deceptions. B.H. Liddell Hart, (ed.), *The Rommel Papers*, London: Collins, 1953, p.103. The chances of such deceptions fooling ground-based surveillance were very much smaller. Even at 3-400 metres a dummy tank mounted on a transporter still tends to look like a dummy.
[35] Bennett, *Behind the Battle*, p.53.
[36] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, p.77.
[37] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, p.66.

cryptanalysis of enciphered or coded messages. The speed of radio-based sigint's development was remarkable between the World Wars. Extensive resources were placed in the hands of Allied specialists working on the interception, decryption and interpretation of enemy material. The programme which delivered intelligence derived in this way was named ULTRA.[38] At the heart of ULTRA was a copy of a German enciphering machine called Enigma. The refinement of a Dutch prototype, Enigma was offered to the commercial market in the 1920s without success by German engineer, Arthur Scherbius.[39] However, in 1926 the Kriegsmarine began using the machine, followed by the German Army three years later.[40] This was consistent with a movement toward automated enciphering machines by many countries including Britain, France, Italy and the United States, all of which immediately complicated the mechanisms and procedures to heighten security, and began working on methods of decrypting other nations' machine-based ciphers. At the forefront of attempts to break enciphered traffic were the Poles, who, in collaboration with the French, managed to read German signals produced on Enigma machines by the early 1930s.[41] With the advent of war, the Poles passed all their information and equipment over to the British and the French. Although German changes to the machines and ciphers set the Allied projects back for some time, the work of the Polish mathematicians was central to later Allied decryption successes.[42]

Given the remarkable strategic advantage attributed to ULTRA,[43] the reluctance of some British commanders to accept and act upon uncorroborated intelligence derived in this requires explanation. The commanders' reluctance may be viewed partly as a response to incessant pressure from Winston Churchill for action that they often considered rash and ill-advised.[44] The seriousness of the problem is indicated by Mckee's suggestion that: "ULTRA together with Churchill's impulsive reading of it, played a large part in the continual British defeats in the desert".[45] This problem arose

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[38] David Kahn, *Kahn On Codes: Secrets of the New Cryptography*, New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1983, p.89 & Hunt, A *Don at War*, p.xi. Note: Only those histories produced after 1974 contain references to this programme. The release of Cryptanalyst F. Winterbotham's unreliable memoirs that year was the first time the government of the United Kingdom had publicly acknowledged the existence of the ULTRA programme.

[39] Kahn, *Kahn On Codes*, p.103.

[40] P. Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, London: Cassell Ltd., 1980, p.23.

[41] R. Woytak, "Polish Military Intelligence and Enigma", in *East European Quarterly* 25:1, March 1991, pp.50-51.

[42] Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, 1980.

[43] Bennett, *Behind the Battle*, p.xviii. Historian and former code-breaker F. H. Hinsley has suggested that ULTRA shortened the war by up to four years. Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, p.67. This claim does not find ready acceptance among other commentators (including former code-breakers) see: Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, pp.70-71, and Kahn, *Kahn On Codes*, p.94 & 119.

[44] B. Pitt, *The Crucible of War: Western Desert 1941*, London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1980, p.309. Also: Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. III: The Grand Alliance*, London: The Reprint Society, 1950, p.319, & L. Deighton, *Blood, Tears and Folly: An Objective Look at World War II*, London: Random House, 1995, pp.248-249.

[45] Alexander McKee, *El Alamein: Ultra and the Three Battles*, London: Souvenir Press, 1991, p.32.

from Churchill's insistence on seeing decrypted messages 'in the raw'. Although the Joint Intelligence Committee held the responsibility for providing considered advice on matters of intelligence[46], Churchill remembered, "I had not been content with this form of collective wisdom, and preferred to see the originals myself".[47] On 5 August 1940, Churchill wrote to General 'Pug' Ismay:

> I do not wish such reports as are received to be sifted and digested by the various Intelligence authorities. For the present Major Morton [a member of Churchill's personal staff] will inspect them for me and submit what he considers of major importance. He is to be shown everything, and submit authentic documents to me in their original form.[48]

Betts draws attention to this phenomenon and offers the explanation that

> Principals tend to believe that they have a wider point of view than middle-level analysts and are better able to draw conclusions from raw data. That point of view underlies their fascination with current intelligence and their impatience with the reflective interpretations in 'finished' intelligence.[49]

Added to this in Churchill's case was a personal impatience Churchill himself admitted, "I am certainly not one of those who need to be prodded . . . In fact, if anything, I am a prod . . . my difficulties lie rather in finding the patience and self-restraint to wait through many anxious weeks for the results [of military operations] to be achieved."[50] Whilst it was certainly particularly characteristic of warfare in the Second World War (and since) that analysis could be outpaced by events, Churchill's demands, tinged as they were with impetuosity, would not have endeared him to his commanders.[51] Commanders were logically bound to question the basis of Churchill's insistence (ULTRA) if they were to argue for alternative courses of action.

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[46] 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, pp.36-38.
[47] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. III: The Grand Alliance,* London: The Reprint Society, 1950, p.289.
[48] Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. III: The Grand Alliance,* p.289.
[49] R.K. Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable", *World Politics,* XXXI, (October 1978), pp.61-89, Princeton University Press, p.68.
[50] Quoted in: M. Gilbert, *Road to Victory: Winston S. Churchill, 1941-1945,* London: Heinemann, 1986, p.255.
[51] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. IV: The Hinge of Fate,* London: The Educational Book Company Ltd., 1951, pp.260-264.

There were, however, additional reasons for their apparent unwillingness to place their faith in ULTRA decrypts. Hinsley's description of sigint as "always incontestable" echoes Churchill's over-confidence in 'special' sources.[52] Yet, like any source, ULTRA demanded corroboration.[53] There was never any certainty that the Axis had not discovered the Allied penetration of their encryption system and were using the breach to pass misleading information.[54] Moreover, on occasion the information was simply wrong. The commander of the United States Ninth Tactical Air Command, General Elwood Quesada, later recalled, "we went on many wild goose chases as a result of ULTRA . . . [it] was a very fine tool that also had its drawbacks."[55] In the earlier part of the war, ULTRA's shortcomings were accounted for in a variety of ways. Calvocoressi recalled that the decrypts tended to be "scrappy and puzzling", and that not much of the material coming into Allied hands was clearly understood.[56] Its very 'newness' contributed to this as intelligence databases against which the material might be compared were non-existent. The intercepted material frequently merely alluded to previous signals on the subject matter and often constituted "a random sample of the complete exchanges".[57] As the ability of the Allies to decrypt German Army messages improved, an altogether different problem came to light, based on the Allied assumption that the Germans were telling the truth.[58] It is a truism of the military everywhere that in making requests for manpower or material, one will only ever receive a fraction of what is asked for. Rommel knew this as well as any soldier did. For this reason he tended to exaggerate his material deficiencies to strengthen his demands for further equipment and troops.[59]

The differences in intelligence appreciation this could cause are typified by an occasion on which Whitehall inaccurately insisted that Rommel's armoured formations were in such a parlous condition that he was in no position to repel an offensive (even a hastily prepared one), and Cairo's counter-claim that the reverse was the case. Cairo's conclusion was partially based upon reports from LRDG patrols which had actually counted tanks, rather than estimated them. A further difficulty was that commanders

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[52] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. I*, p.55.
[53] A. F. Wilt, *War from the Top: German and British Military Decision Making During World War II*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, p.98.
[54] David Eisenhower, *Eisenhower at War, 1943-1945*, New York: Random House, 1986, pp.166-168.
[55] 1975 interview quoted in: A. F. Wilt, *War from the Top: German and British Military Decision Making During World War II*, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.
[56] Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra*, p.71. See also: F.H. Hinsley, & Alan Stripp, (eds.), *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, p.3.
[57] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, p.69.
[58] Alexander McKee, *El Alamein: Ultra and the Three Battles*, London: Souvenir Press, 1991, p.30.

seemed rapidly to reach a point where they tended to exaggerate the precariousness of their own situation in order to deny Whitehall's demands for immediate half-baked offensives.[60] Evidence that sigint was not "incontestable" was provided by Rommel's resounding defeat of Allied forces at Kasserine Pass. In this engagement Allied losses included 10 000 men (6 500 American), 183 tanks, 208 artillery pieces, 500 assorted vehicles and tons of ammunition and supplies.[61] This came about because after issuing his original battle directives, which were duly intercepted and interpreted by the Allies, Rommel changed his mind and issued new orders of which the Allies were unaware.[62]

There were also difficulties caused by over-supply of information. It is certainly the role of intelligence collection methods to help move towards sufficient certainty to support decision-making, and as Betts suggests, "uncertainty reflects inadequacy of data, which is usually assumed to mean a lack of information", however, "ambiguity can also be aggravated by an excess of data."[63] Hinsley describes the situation in the Middle East in 1941 where the cipher office "was so completely swamped by the amount of intercepts being transmitted . . . that a million groups of undeciphered backlog had to be destroyed in January 1942."[64] This is hard to reconcile with sigint supporters' belief in its "immediacy, the ability to read messages almost as quickly as the legitimate recipients".[65] German Naval historian Jürgen Rohwer cautions historians against believing that messages were decrypted and analysed this promptly. He points out that there were often delays, "sometimes of days, between interception and the solution, which meant that often those solutions were practically useless to the commands."[66]

Finally, there was a problem with the 'fragility' of ULTRA.[67] The need to exercise extreme care with the intelligence gained this way often led to situations where to

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[59] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War,* p.96.

[60] McKee, *El Alamein: Ultra and the Three Battles*, p.46 & Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. II,* pp.354-357. The particular obsession with tank strengths is part and parcel of desert warfare, but for those with Churchill's penchant for 'action this day ' on the basis of crude decrypts, the results could be disastrous.

[61] D. Mercer, *Chronicle of the Second World War,* London: Chronicle Communications Ltd. And Longman Group UK Ltd, 1990, p.385.

[62] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War,* p.87.

[63] Betts, "Analysis, War, and Decision: Why Intelligence Failures are Inevitable", *World Politics,* XXXI, (October 1978), pp.61-89, Princeton University Press, p.69. Herman also discusses "the problem of intelligence over-supply, particularly in single-source material on military subjects [whereby] . . . the recipient will often be deluged with information that cannot be usefully employed." Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War,* p.296.

[64] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. II,* p.22.

[65] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War,* p.70.

[66] Proceedings from a November 1978 colloquium at the University of Stuttgart on, "What Role Did Radio Intelligence Play in the Course of the Second World War?", quoted in: David Kahn, *Kahn On Codes: Secrets of the New Cryptography,* New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1983, p.91.

[67] Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*,p.89. Fragility being a measure of a collection source's vulnerability to counter-measures.

respond to the information appropriately would have given the Germans cause to question the security of their system.[68] The high volume of Axis shipping losses in the Mediterranean did in fact cause an investigation that, fortunately for the Allies, concluded that security had been maintained.[69] Field Marshal Montgomery's tendency to boast was a constant cause for concern. More than once alarm ran through Whitehall following his inclusion in speeches to his troops of information gained through ULTRA, instigating changes to the handling of decrypts and admonishments over security.[70]

ULTRA was of significance, and made an increasingly valuable contribution after 1943.[71] For the period under study, however, the above problems contributed to commanders' reservations about proceeding on single-source information. The surveillance information supplied by the LRDG was therefore invaluable, not merely in itself, but also because it allowed the best possible use to be made of other sources by providing the necessary degree of corroboration.[72] Non-fragile and embodying security and continuity, the intelligence derived from LRDG activities was indispensable until the close of the African campaign.

[68] For an example of this, see the question of Freyberg's intelligence on Crete in: Paul Freyberg, *Bernard Freyberg V.C.: Soldier of Two Nations,* London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1991, pp.284-286.
[69] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. II*, p. 413.
[70] Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War, vol. II*, pp.413-414.
[71] Hinsley, & Stripp, (eds.), *Codebreakers: The Inside Story of Bletchley Park*, p.7.
[72] Letter to author from D. Lloyd Owen, 13 April 1999.

Chapter Five – RECONNAISSANCE

> Since it is good not to neglect any one of the factors which contribute to the common benefit of the army, it is necessary to have experienced and intelligent guides . . . men who, in addition to knowing roads are able to conduct the army through mountain passes, who can plan ahead, and who know the proper distances for the campsites, locations which are suitable and which have plenty of water, so the camp will not find itself in dire straits. They should know the topography of the enemy's country in detail, so they can lead the army into it to plunder and take captives.
>
> Byzantine General, Nikephorus Ouranos, AD 994[1]

At the beginning of the desert war, British commanders were not only lacking information regarding their enemy, they were also desperately short of vital topographical knowledge. Despite the activities of pre-war explorers, all but a fraction of the Libyan Desert was unknown territory to Europeans, with serious implications for the commanders' understanding of what was possible in moving troops and support materiel in this difficult country. Collection of the necessary information was complicated by a widespread lack of ability to navigate and move over the desert terrain. The formation of the LRDG concentrated the handful of experienced desert travellers in a single unit that enabled the Army command to draw readily upon their combined expertise. The LRDG's ongoing operations added repeatedly to the commands' understanding of the terrain, and thereby the ability to recognise and seize opportunities, thus adding significantly to the successful outcome of the North African campaign.

LRDG Intelligence and Topographical Officer, Bill Kennedy Shaw, asserted "Nothing in the way of intelligence interests the modern commander more than 'going'. In the LRDG no question was asked us more often than 'what's the going like there?' "[2] This statement reflects the fact that in any theatre of operation the physical geography is of critical importance. Variations in the terrain are a major factor influencing the nature and conduct of war. For this reason, clever use of the ground is a distinguishing characteristic of good generalship. The predominantly mobile nature of land warfare in the Second World War, with its high volumes of increasingly heavy wheeled and

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[1] P. Tsouras, *Warriors' Words: A Dictionary of Military Quotations*, London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994, p.355.
[2] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.26.

tracked equipment, made greater demands on the topographical knowledge of commanders and their staff than any previous conflict. Achieving success necessitated a keen understanding of the land over a wide area. The size of theatres, depth and frontage of battle lines, and potential to be fighting hundreds of kilometres away within days also placed a premium on the capacity to collect and assimilate further information in a timely manner.[3]

Map reading is normally the principal source of such information, but as Shaw explained, "map-reading presupposes maps, and in Libya there was the rub."[4] Bagnold recalled that in 1939

> In the General Staff offices in Cairo I could find only one small-scale map that extended westward beyond the frontier of Egypt. It was dated 1915, and contained little more up-to-date information than Rohlfs[5] brought back in 1874.[6]

It was true that the Italian Instituto Geografico Militare had produced some maps of significant oases and routes, but the errors these contained were of legendary proportions and LRDG personnel seriously questioned whether the Italian surveyors had in fact braved the desert conditions in preparing them. Shaw wrote of these maps

> The mountains were all high, as became the dignity of Fascist Italy. Making our way anxiously towards an obviously impassable range of hills, we would find that we had driven over it without feeling the bump . . . It is just possible that the absurd inaccuracies were a deep plot to mislead our attacking forces, but it seems hardly likely that the Italians had thought of that as long ago as 1931.[7]

The possession of largely misleading information, or more frequently none at all, was extremely serious. This is clearer once the character and extent of the desert are appreciated. Approximately 1900 by 1600 kilometres, the Libyan Desert forms the most arid part of the Sahara. Its northern half is mostly limestone and consists largely of flat gravel plains, broken only by a couple of plateaux and bereft of vegetation except

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[3] Heinz Guderian, *Achtung-Panzer!*, (translated by Christopher Duffy), London: Arms and Armour Press, 1995, p.191.
[4] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.24.
[5] Bagnold is referring to the German explorer, Rohlfs, who attempted several camel-borne expeditions into the desert in the previous century. Whilst impressive as human accomplishments, these expeditions yielded little of value in meeting the military problems of the 1940s. William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, Long *Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, pp.45-46.
[6] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945, p.31.
[7] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.25.

on its coastal fringe. Below latitude 26°, the terrain is mainly sandstone with patches of broken hilly country separating the huge 'Sand Seas'. Wind acts to form these areas into a vast series of parallel sand dunes, whose ridges can run unbroken for many kilometres and have as much as 150 metres separating the troughs from the crests. Apart from areas adjacent to the northern coast, rain might fall in the desert only once in every ten to twenty years. A handful of artesian-fed oases were the sole sources for water of somewhat varying quality. Some of these appeared to function solely as a breeding-ground for sickness. One New Zealander recalls his patrol being ordered to set out for Siwa Oasis, "It appeared Y Patrol [Yeomanry] had sixty percent casualties from Malaria and we were to relieve them."[8] The temperatures in this land could easily reach 50° Celsius in the shade in summer, and fall slightly below freezing during winter. A former patrol member wrote to the author that

> I doubt anyone who chances to read this will really understand the effect the [summer] heat has on people. A vehicle in motion creates its own wind, but travel was not possible between 10 a.m. and around 3.30 p.m. because the high temperature caused the radiator water to boil and if an attempt was made to continue, the petrol would vaporise in the fuel lines. Our practice was to scoop a shallow depression in the sand and drive the vehicle over it. We could then shelter [underneath it] from the sun until it was cool enough to move on.[9]

Such conditions were aggravated by desert winds that drove dust and fine particles of grit into eyes, ears, mechanical and electrical equipment. On occasion, these would build into ferocious sandstorms of such intensity that they could strip paint from vehicles, leaving the metal completely bare. During the summer of 1942, patrol members indoors at their Siwa Oasis Base during such a storm were unable to read without artificial light.[10]

The difficulties of desert travel did not end with the rigours of the climate. The nature of desert terrain, with its mixtures of soft sand dunes and rocky areas, forced tortuous routes onto the traveller, who could not be expected to keep to a pre-determined course for any distance. This was a problem because the army's navigational method was based upon the use of magnetic compass bearings in conjunction with mapped

[8] Letter to author from A. D. (Buster) Gibb, June 1999.
[9] Letter to author from M. Curtis, 15 June 1999. Emphasis in original.
[10] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.43.

landmarks, which entailed plotting a course and then following it accurately.[11] There were further problems with the use of magnetic compasses. To navigate with precision, the continual course changes had to be recorded correctly by the navigator, but the mass of the vehicle, weapons, and other metal equipment around the compass caused inaccuracies in the readings. The use of compensated aero-type compasses was simply not realistic as the loads, and therefore the metallic mass, varied constantly. The presence of large ore deposits in the surrounding terrain could add to this problem significantly. In addition, the lack of geographical features to relate to meant that any dead reckoning performed in this way would be useless for all practical purposes.[12] The challenge of measuring a daytime position was overcome by the LRDG's use of a sun-compass of Bagnold's pre-war design.[13] To compensate for any errors that accumulated throughout the daytime, astronomical fixes were taken when the patrols camped for the night. In this way, patrol navigation had more in common with maritime than military practice. In fact, Dick Croucher, one of the earliest officers to join the patrols, had been a ship's officer prior to joining the Army and had much to do with the subsequent training of patrol navigators.[14]

As one might expect, specialised methods demanded specialised equipment, some of which was beyond the Army supply system's capacity to deliver. Navigational items such as theodolites[15] were borrowed from the Egyptian Survey Office, and according to Shaw, "school-mistresses gave us books of Log. Tables and racing men their field-glasses, and in half-forgotten shops in the back-streets of Cairo we searched for a hundred and one (to the Army) unorthodox needs."[16] Suitable vehicles were also scarce. The original patrols were kitted out with a mixture of trucks purchased from the Chevrolet dealer in Alexandria and some loaned by the Egyptian Army, all of which were extensively modified. Open-cab conversions entailed removing hoods, windscreens and doors, extra leaves were fitted to 'beef up' the suspension, and a

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[11] R. A. Bagnold, *Notes on Long Range Desert Patrols for Operations in the Interior of LIBYA,* Cairo: Long Range Desert Group, 11 February 1941, p.8 (note 11), NZ National Archives: WAII, 1, DA304.1/10/1.
[12] Bagnold, R. A., *Libyan Sands: Travels in a Dead World,* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935, p.69.
[13] Letter to author from M. Curtis, 15 June 1999. R. A. Bagnold, *Notes on Long Range Desert Patrols for Operations in the Interior of LIBYA,* Cairo: Long Range Desert Group, 11 February 1941, p.8, NZ National Archives: WAII, 1, DA304.1/10/1.
[14] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Original Long Range Patrol: Nominal Roll as at 5 December 1940* , Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12. Letter to author from M. Curtis, 15 June 1999.
[15] Sextants had been tried but proved insufficiently robust to cope with desert travel. R. A. Bagnold, *Notes on Long Range Desert Patrols for Operations in the Interior of LIBYA,* Cairo: Long Range Desert Group, 11 February 1941, p.8, NZ National Archives: WAII, 1, DA304.1/10/1.
[16] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.17.

condensor was fitted to save engine cooling water.[17] These and numerous other alterations were required before the vehicles could be considered desert-worthy.

Fortunately for the British, the precious desert-lore of Bagnold and his fellow interwar explorers provided solutions to all these and many other problems. For much of the desert campaign, these specialised vehicles and their uniquely trained crews were the sole operators in the so-called 'impassable' reaches of the desert. The effectiveness of the equipment and training can be measured by the fact that not one patrol ever became lost during the three years of LRDG desert operations.[18]

LRDG reconnaissance commenced before the first batch of recruited New Zealanders had even completed their initial patrol training. The "restless" Captain Pat Clayton had searched out all his pre-war Bedouin acquaintances in his attempts to acquire some advance information on the Italian garrison at Kufra Oasis.[19] However, they were of little use, not having visited Kufra since the Italian occupation began some ten years earlier. Nevertheless, the knowledge that the Kufra garrison was supplied from Jalo enabled the planning of an early reconnaissance of the Jalo-Kufra track.[20] At the time, the Long Range Patrol had yet to take delivery of their vehicles. However, two were ready for pickup, "new, untried, and not run-in."[21] A New Zealand 'Driver/Mechanic' on loan from the Ordnance Corps, Merv Curtis, recalls being sent into Cairo "to obtain 2 suitable vehicles and spares necessary for a journey which could be of some thousand miles."[22] Curtis was Clayton's driver in the lead vehicle throughout the trip.[23] Another five New Zealanders handpicked by Clayton and a Bedouin acquaintance of Clayton's made up the rest of the party.[24]

The party initially made its way to Siwa Oasis. Here Clayton persuaded his old friends in the Egyptian Frontier Districts Administration to loan six trucks with Sudanese crews

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[17] Letter to author from A. D. (Buster) Gibb, June 1999. A former NZ Patrol member and mechanical engineer, suggests that the condensor was another of Bagnold's pre-war inventions. Letter to author from M. Curtis, 15 June 1999.

[18] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, "LRDG Activities in North Africa", Unpublished report Held at the Imperial War Museum, London, p.3. This was probably given as an address to officers in Middle East in early 1943, p.4.

[19] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945. p.34.

[20] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.32.

[21] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945. p.35.

[22] Letter to author from M. Curtis, 15 June 1999.

[23] Curtis had the responsibility of keeping the vehicles going hundreds of miles from their base under all possible conditions. He suggests, with justifiable pride, "they did. 1600 miles in 10 days of travel in that climate says it all." Letter to author from Curtis, 15 June 1999.

[24] Gunner Hamilton, Navigator Dick Croucher, Driver (eventually Colonel) Ron Tinker, Gunner 'Spottie' Spottiswood, Gunner Jack Emslie & Ali Said Fudail. Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Original Long Range Patrol: Nominal Roll as at 5 December 1940*, Abbassia (Egypt). NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.

under an Egyptian officer to act as petrol carriers for the first leg of the journey, ostensibly to check on "old frontier cairns."[25] According to Shaw, "the Sudanese crews were happy to get a trip into the desert", and were tireless in "unsticking" vehicles which became bogged in the sand.[26] One former patrol member said of these early days, "being inexperienced we had a lot of digging, tray and mat work to do." He explained, "When a vehicle sank into the sand, one had to dig out [the sand around the wheels] and put steel trays under the wheels, and lay long canvas mats which had bamboo pieces at intervals along their length." [27] This process was repeated until the vehicle was driven onto firmer ground.

Clayton's enlarged party proceeded through the Great Sand Sea to the frontier where the extra fuel was transferred to the Long Range Patrol vehicles. The Sudanese crews then retraced their tracks to Siwa. Having successfully maintained security with his ruse, Clayton's original party then turned westward. Although heading for a fairly precise location, the route chosen was new and in this way the party made discoveries of significance for subsequent patrol operations. Once through the northern end of the Great Sand Sea, they encountered a flat gravel plain that extended for one hundred miles from its western edge before entering the Kalansho Sand Sea. Shaw later claimed that

> The discoveries of this reconnaissance were some of the most useful that LRDG ever made. For many months afterwards . . . we used this route across the gravel plain guarded by the horseshoe of sands to the north. Across it we used to pass between Siwa and Kufra in 1941; over it ran the Kufra-Siwa air route with its chain of landing grounds and emergency dumps of water; in 1942 Easonsmith's [LRDG] raid on Barce and Mayne's [SAS] attacks against the enemy's lines of communication before 'Alamein profited by this knowledge.[28]

The heavy use made of this route reflected the British commanders' early preoccupation with Kufra. This appeared to last until the enemy was clearly not in any position to exploit Kufra's potential as a staging-post for attacks on the Allied Khartoum-Cairo resupply route. The degree of importance attached to LRDG reconnaissance of the area

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[25] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945. p.35.
[26] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.33.
[27] Letter to author from A. D. (Buster) Gibb, June 1999.
[28] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, pp.33-34.

is indicated by a letter written to Bernard Freyberg by General Arthur Smith.[29] Smith stated that the Long Range Patrol "is definitely carrying out a very important role in our war effort in that it watches the Western Desert towards the Kufra Oasis"[30].

The difficulties of deep reconnaissance were not confined to issues of negotiating the terrain and coping with the climate. An example of the considerable ingenuity that was applied to other problems is seen in an early investigation of the Italian garrisons and airfields in the vicinity of Uweinat. The poor going in this area had prohibited any approach except from the direction of an open plain with the attendant high risk of observation. Any ideas of approaching on foot were ruled out by the midsummer heat and the distance involved. The ideal alternative was to use the traditional mainstay of desert travel, the camel. However, this presented a problem because the distance to the objective entailed a return journey of approximately 1100 kilometres, too far for a camel to manage without water and rest along the route. Clayton got around this by purchasing a camel, then packing it into a truck and driving it most of the way to Uweinat. Once there, two Bedouin friends of Clayton's pre-war acquaintance spent a week wandering around the Italian outposts before the camel was packed into the truck once more, and the patrol returned to base with their cunningly-acquired intelligence.[31]

The 'camel' operation was an example of deep reconnaissance with the aim of direct observation of the enemy. Another example was the use of patrols during Allied offensives such as 'Crusader'.[32] Shaw recalled that at the time the LRDG's orders were "to report on enemy reaction to our advance and with this end in view the patrols were in position on various routes behind the front line and south of the Gebel [Akhdar] when the advance began."[33] On other occasions a less direct approach was used, such as when patrols examined newly-vacated Axis campsites in order to gain information on the enemy's forces.[34]

Reconnaissance with the aim of observing specific individuals or sub-units was rare. An exception to this rule was made in the case of Hungarian Count, Ladislaus Edouard

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[29] Smith was Deputy Chief of General Staff.

[30] General Headquarters, Middle East, CAIRO, *Subject : Withdrawal of LRDG Personnel - 'PERSONAL AND SECRET', Letter to B.C. Freyberg GOC NZ Division (MAADI), dated 11 October 1940.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/33.

[31] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" *The Geographical Journal*, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945, p.35.

[32] Operation Crusader was launched on 18 November 1941 with the twin goals of defeating the enemy in Cyrenaica and relieving Tobruk. Adrian Gilbert, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the Desert War*, London: Sidgewick and Jackson, 1992, p.xiii.

[33] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, "LRDG Activities in North Africa", Unpublished report Held at the Imperial War Museum, London, p.3. This was probably given as an address to officers in Middle East in early 1943, p.11.

de Almasy. Highly-educated and polyglot, Almasy had been well known in Egypt in the 1930s for his many desert explorations.[35] Shaw claimed that prior to the war, Almasy "never made any bones about his admiration for totalitarianism",[36] and his subsequent allegiance to the Axis came as no surprise. The LRDG were constantly alert to the possibility of Almasy's raising a similar formation on the German side, but initial indications were that Almasy had no such plans. This was not to last, as Shaw suggested

> From a sign here and there, from a letter foolishly preserved by a German soldier, from a careless word in a prisoner of war cage, from those other sources of information which the Censor would strike out if I set them down, we realised that Almasy was on the move.[37]

The British Army's inability to account for sightings of small patrols of 'British' vehicles in remote areas raised suspicion to near certainty. Following such a sighting in June of 1942, the LRDG lent its Survey Officer to act as a guide for patrols of the Sudan Defence Force from Kufra who were to go out 'hunting' Almasy.[38] They were unsuccessful, and they discovered signs in the desert passes that he had returned eastward prior to their arrival. In the event, Almasy achieved little of real value, the few German spies he dropped off were quickly detected and while his accomplishments (which included reaching the Nile on one occasion) were impressive on a personal level, the Germans seemed unconvinced of the merits of their "ersatz Bagnold" and there seems to be no evidence of any continuing interest beyond a couple of early excursions.[39]

The nature of deep reconnaissance meant that patrols were often ideally placed to put various types of deception plans into action. Typical of these was 'Operation Bishop', a plan in November of 1941 to plant a fake map where it would fall into enemy hands.[40] The false information on the map indicated an attack on the Italian garrison at Jalo from a specific direction by a substantial British force. Under the command of New

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[34] General Headquarters, Middle East, *Subject :Report on Going Map - Libya, dated 14 October 1941.* NZ National Archives: WAII DA 21.1/9/G21/9

[35] Vladimir Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army,* London: The Reprint Society, 1953, p.215.

[36] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.170.

[37] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.168.

[38] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (6), 27 May – 28 June 1942.*

[39] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.168.

[40] L.H. Browne, (Captain - LRDG), *Notes From Diary, September 1939 – March 1943,* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.

Zealander, Tony Browne, a patrol made its way to a spot due east of Jalo and made camp. They were not in position long before being approached by a single Arab on a camel, at which the patrol "left in a hurry leaving behind some odds and ends and a petrol box under which Browne had 'forgetten' [sic] his map board, scale and protractor."[41] The result was clear at the end of the month when the British over-ran the area. The LRDG Intelligence Officer visited Jalo and found that; "On to a large map in the Italian Commander's office the details of the planted map had been faithfully copied."[42] Other 'dropped' items included propaganda leaflets which assured the reader of the inevitability of defeat for the Axis powers and urged them to give themselves up. On at least one occasion, a patrol left "specially doctored boxes of Italian MG amn [machine-gun ammunition]" where they would be easily found.[43] Whilst deep in enemy-held territory, the LRDG was often called upon for a variety of duties like acting as a "wireless link" between forces whose radio equipment was unable to reach across the distances separating them.[44] This was used to particularly good effect between the Free French forces in the Fezzan and their allies further north.[45]

Some 'deep' patrols were conducted for matters of LRDG 'house-keeping', including the constant need to check on dumps of fuel, water and supplies in the desert interior. Inevitably, in the to-and-fro of Axis advances and retreats, a number of the dumps were discovered and removed; their importance to LRDG operations was such that it could not be left to chance to ensure that they were intact.[46] A further routine requirement was to maintain a watch on the condition of various wells and oases which had to be factored into 8th Army plans,[47] requiring an assessment of potability and flow which could be added as 'going' information to the force's maps.[48] Much of this was derived from the written report produced at the conclusion of every patrol by its commander. It was expected to comment at length on the going the patrol had encountered. It included general observations about the terrain, its suitability for the passage of various types and volumes of traffic, estimated travel times, and references to the availability of water,

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[41] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports,* [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], (1) *1 November – 6 December 1941,* p.2.
[42] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports,* [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], (1) *1 November – 6 December 1941,* p.2.
[43] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Report on 'A'* [NZ] *Squadron Operation #6, October 1941, by Captain J. R.. Easonsmith – Commander R Patrol*, p.11. [extracted from 2NZEF Daily Log], NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/13/1.
[44] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports, (2), 6 – 24 December 1941*, p.3.
[45] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943*, p.3.
[46] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports,* [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], *(4), 6 February – 18 April 1942,* p.4.
[47] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Report on Reconnaissance of Area bounded on the NORTH by Lat 33° 30', SOUTH by Lat 33° 15', EAST by Long 9° and WEST by Long 7° 30', carried out between February 12 and 14 [1943] by "G" Patrol long Range Desert Group.* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA21.1/9/G4/15.

possible landing-grounds, and cover in the area. Where applicable, it would comment on the reliability (or otherwise) of existing information sources such as maps or testimony from those claiming some knowledge of the area.[49] The importance of this information was not confined to simple questions of accessibility, but was also crucial to estimating the speed, or tempo, which a force might maintain. If a formation could move consistently faster between tactical actions than its opponents, it could seize the initiative and dictate the terms of an engagement.[50] The detailed information provided by the LRDG was vital in exploiting opportunities for rapid manoeuvre. Hand in hand with this went a fundamental principle of warfare, which asserts that logistics dictates the boundaries of the possible.[51] Sound topographical commentary was vital in assessing feasible lines of communication for the feeding, arming, maintenance and movement of men and material through the desert. It took skilled personnel to advise effectively on topography and the LRDG reports were highly valued.[52]

On occasion, units specifically requested the LRDG to perform reconnaissance in advance of their operations.[53] More usually, GHQ would order a full reconnaissance along its projected axes of advance, often months ahead of time.[54] The importance of the topographical aspects of the LRDG's role were recognised from the outset. In response to Bagnold's request for a Royal Engineers Survey Officer, the army provided Ken Lazurus, an interwar surveyor with the Colonial Office who had worked for the army since hostilities began.[55] Lazurus headed the LRDG's Survey Section that managed to produce accurate mapsheets of the region from the Fezzan to the northern coast, and from the Nile to Tunisia. His senior officer wrote in a 1942 report

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[48] General Headquarters, Middle East, *Subject :Report on Going Map - Libya, dated 14 October 1941.* NZ National Archives: WAII DA 21.1/9/G21/9

[49] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Report on Reconnaissance of Area bounded on the NORTH by Lat 33° 30', SOUTH by Lat 33° 15', EAST by Long 9° and WEST by Long 7° 30', carried out between February 12 and 14 [1943] by "G" Patrol long Range Desert Group.* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA21.1/9/G4/15.

[50] This is not a question of absolute speed, but rather being 'faster than they are'.

[51] The enduring importance of this factor is without question. "The commander who fails to provide his army with necessary food and other supplies is making arrangements for his own defeat". The Emperor Maurice, *The Strategikon, c. AD 600.* Tsouras, P., *Warriors' Words: A Dictionary of Military Quotations,* London: Arms and Armour Press, 1994, p.238. "Without logistics, a force has no military utility. Of course a force needs eyes, ears and teeth, but logistics represents the heart, lungs and lifeblood: it is the life-support system without which the whole force would grind to a halt." Hayr, K., "Logistics in the Gulf War", in *Royal United Service Institute Journal,* 136:3, Autumn 1991, pp.14-18.

[52] General Headquarters, Middle East, *Subject :Report on Going Map - Libya, dated 14 October 1941.* NZ National Archives: WAII DA 21.1/9/G21/9. B. L. Montgomery, *Subject: LRDG Contribution to 'Left-Hook' and turning of the Mareth Line,– Letter to Lt-Col G.L. Prendergast, CO LRDG,* dated 2 April 1943.

[53] New Zealand Division Headquarters, *Signal to HQ 13 Corps re:Qattara Depression, dated 10 August 1942.* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA21.1/9/G21/9

[54] G. L. Prendergast, Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943, p.3. 'Operations Reconnaissance' will be discussed more fully later in the chapter with reference to the 'turning movements' about El Agheila and Mareth.

[55] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.25.

> In April and May the Survey Section (Lazurus) was working in the country between Bir Zelten, Tazerbo and Bir Haaruf, and completed a survey of some 25,000 square miles of country, all of it, as far as Longitude goes, well behind the enemy lines.[56]

As Shaw commented later, "there cannot be many instances of continued survey work behind the enemy lines in war-time."[57] The Survey Section were every bit as vulnerable to the hazards of enemy action as the 'fighting' patrols, and added to the 'normal' dangers of operating so far behind the enemy 'lines' was the likelihood of discovery by the Royal Air Force (RAF). RAF fighters strafed LRDG patrols frequently. There were a few deaths as a result of these attacks, and the cost in destroyed vehicles and equipment throughout the campaign was substantial.[58] The use of recognition signals did little to rectify the problem, as pilots believed these were simply enemy forces' attempts to deceive them.[59] Despite these and other risks, the LRDG's performance was such that it developed a solid reputation for accomplishing objectives.[60] As the unit's standing grew, so did the variety of tasks it was asked to undertake.

Requests for LRDG patrols to act as guides for larger fighting formations were common. This was actively encouraged by GHQ – Middle East who often appended comments to topographical guides that stated, "experienced LRDG navigators with knowledge of the country are available."[61] The guiding task might be as routine as when Browne's patrol led a Sudan Defence Force supply convoy from Wadi Halfa (Sudan) to Kufra Oasis to prevent them becoming lost,[62] to something as specialised as taking an RAF Squadron Leader into the desert to reconnoitre suitable sites for establishing forward "fighter dromes".[63] At one point, the number of such 'passengers' the LRDG was required to ferry about the desert prompted one patrol commander to begin calling his patrol "Libyan Taxis", a nickname which stuck.[64] Many of these 'fares' were intelligence operators, Arab and European, for whom the LRDG was not only a

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[56] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (5), 19 April – 26 May 1942*, p.6.
[57] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.25.
[58] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports*, [giving an account of the part played by the LRDG in the operations of the 8th Army, November 1941- March 1943], (1) *1 November – 6 December 1941*, p.2.
[59] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, p.112.
[60] A. Hoe, *David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S*, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992, p.472.
[61] General Headquarters, Middle East, *Subject :Topographical Note on Area SIRTE – RY.0000 – BU NGEM RK.5006 – BENI ULID (R)R 2440 – W. SOFFEGIN, Junction main road (R) S. 5020, dated 5 December 1942*. NZ National Archives: WAII DA 21.1/9/G21/9II
[62] L.H. Browne, (Captain - LRDG), *Notes From Diary, September 1939 – March 1943*, p.3. NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.
[63] L.H. Browne, (Captain - LRDG), *Notes From Diary, September 1939 – March 1943*, p.6. NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.
[64] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Reconnaissance Report – LRDG, September – October 1941, by Captain J. R.. Easonsmith*, [extracted from 2NZEF Daily Log], NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/13/1.

means of reaching their distant objectives, but often their only means of subsequent resupply.[65]

Of all the LRDG's reconnaissance services, that of 'operations reconnaissance' – the specific reconnaissance of an area as a preliminary to an advance – was probably the most valuable. On two occasions in particular, at El Agheila and Mareth, such LRDG work was of critical importance to Allied success. New Zealanders had a central role in these two outflanking manoeuvres which involved the LRDG in the reconnaissance phases, and both the LRDG and the New Zealand Division in their successful execution.

By early December 1942, the Axis forces were retreating toward Tripolitania with the 8th Army hard on their heels.[66] Approaching El Agheila, General Montgomery claimed he "sensed a feeling of anxiety in the ranks of Eighth Army" as "many of them had been there twice already; and twice Rommel had debouched there when he was ready and had driven them back."[67] In his Despatches, Field-Marshal Alexander suggested, "At Agheila Eighth Army was facing the strongest position in Libya."[68] Protected by salt marshes, soft sand dunes and an escarpment, the positions natural defences alone prompted Montgomery to describe it, with masterful understatement, as a "difficult position to attack", and he resolved to force Rommel out of it by "bluff and manoeuvre", hoping in this way to "then attack him in the easier country to the west".[69]

LRDG road watchers provided evidence showing that the enemy was still retreating and did not seem at all intent on making a firm stand at Agheila, despite the fact that Rommel had received clear instructions that, "the Mersa el Brega Line [the Axis forces' name for Agheila] was to be held at all costs."[70] One signal from the road watch position read

> November 8 to 14. Westbound. Motor cycles 528 and sidecar 18. Cars 1,264. 15-cwt 407. 30-cwt 607. 3-ton 2,316 and trailer 474. 5-ton 2,697 and trailer 899. 10-ton 125 and trailer 117. Tractors 3. Transporters 2. Troop carriers 13. Tankers 23

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[65] Vladimir Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army*, London: The Reprint Society, 1953, pp.56-57.
[66] W. G. Stevens, *Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War, 1939-1945: Bardia to Enfidaville*, Wellington (NZ): War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, 1962, p.21.
[67] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958, p.146.
[68] H.R.L.G. Alexander, "The African Campaign from El Alamein to Tunis, from 10th August, 1942 to 13th May, 1943", a despatch submitted to the Secretary of State for War on 23rd May 1947, published in, *Supplement to the London Gazette of Thursday the 5th of February, 1948*, pp.839-887, London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1948, p.860.
[69] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958, p.146.
[70] B.H. Liddell Hart, (ed.), *The Rommel Papers*, London: Collins, 1953, p.359. Eighth Army Headquarters, *Agheila Notes, dated 3 December 1942*. P.8, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/27

> and trailer 3. Tanks light 8. Armoured cars 24. Guns 68, mostly light A/T [anti-tank]. Miscellaneous 400. Troops estimated 42,500 – repeat 42,500.[71]

Nonetheless, Montgomery wished to avoid a costly frontal attack, and in a manoeuvre typical of warfare in North Africa, decided to turn his enemy's southern flank.[72] The New Zealand Division and the 4th Light Armoured Brigade were chosen to carry out the sweep around Rommel's defences,[73] and Browne's patrol of New Zealanders were appointed as guides.[74]

The territory around El Agheila was familiar to the LRDG which had previously conducted both raids and road watches in the area.[75] In response to the Eighth Army request for guides, Browne's patrol was despatched on 4 December: "To advise on going and navigate 2 NZ Div with 4 Lt Armd Bde attached from El Haseiat to Marble Arch, thence west to Nofilia."[76] In this way, Montgomery hoped to encircle the German forces, which, in recognition of the hopelessness of their position, would surrender or, at the very least, be dealt with on terms more favourable to the Allies.[77] The initial plans called for the 'left hook' to commence on 15 December, but on being advised that Italian reinforcements were being moved into a good defensive position to the rear of Agheila, Montgomery moved plans forward, and on 13 December, Browne's New Zealanders began leading their parent division in a 400 kilometre arc around the German defences.[78] Over the next four days, the LRDG patrol led forces around Agheila and on 17 December guided the New Zealand Division in another flanking manoeuvre around Nofilia to the north.[79] Montgomery's 'bluff and manoeuvre' tactics paid off. Despite the New Zealand Division being spread too thinly to prevent the escape of some enemy units,[80] these did not escape lightly, being later described by Montgomery as, "severely mauled by the New Zealanders".[81] In a communication with Wellington, Freyberg stressed that, "success of the operation depended upon negotiating a hitherto [by such a

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[71] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943,* London: Collins, 1945, p.213.
[72] Eighth Army Headquarters, *Agheila Notes, dated 3 December 1942.* P.9, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/27
[73] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.,* London: Collins, 1958, p.146.
[74] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943,* p.3.
[75] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Phase Reports, (3), 25 December – 5 February 1942.*
[76] L.H. Browne, (Captain - LRDG), *Notes From Diary, September 1939 – March 1943,* p.7, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.
[77] B. L. Montgomery, *Subject: "Fire-Eater" – General Plan of Eighth Army, dated 28 December 1942.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/28.
[78] 2 New Zealand Expeditionary Force, *Cipher Message (C764) to 2 NZ Div, dated 22 December 1942.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/27 B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.,* London: Collins, 1958, p.147.
[79] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943,* p.3.
[80] 2 New Zealand Expeditionary Force, *Cipher Message (C764) to 2 NZ Div, dated 22 December 1942.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/27
[81] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.,* London: Collins, 1958, p.147.

large formation] uncrossed desert."[82] This movement was made possible by the work of the LRDG, which also enabled the tempo of the manoeuvres to be maintained by guiding another (smaller) turning movement at Nofilia.

LRDG topographical reconnaissance of the country through which the 8th Army would advance continued unabated until 29 March 1943, at which point LRDG operations in North Africa ended.[83] Its final service was another combined reconnaissance and 'guiding' task, this time to lead a substantial force in outflanking the so-called 'Mareth Line'. Following the success at Agheila, Montgomery tasked the LRDG with reconnoitring all the country to the north and west, with emphasis upon the Matmata Hills.[84] New Zealander, Captain Ron Tinker understood that: "The recce was to be done with a view to passing a force of at least divisional strength over this territory."[85] This entailed another circling movement, and as before, the New Zealand Division under Freyberg would have a central role.

The New Zealand Division were advised that the French-built Mareth defences constituted a

> MAGINOT Line in miniature, designed to oppose an enemy whose chief strength appeared to be in motorised divisions. Broadly speaking, it consists of several independent self-contained strong-points with all-round defence . . . running from Matmata to the sea . . . so sited that they command all rds [sic] and tracks leading to GABES NORTH of the escarpment and were designed to hold out for a considerable period.[86]

One of Field-Marshal Alexander's intelligence officers described this fortification between the sea and the mountains as, "a formidable proposition for a frontal attack," adding, "on the other side of the mountains the desert was believed by the French to be impassable."[87] Montgomery did not agree,[88] and interestingly, neither did his major opponent.[89] In his diary, Rommel described the Mareth defences as, "a line of

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[82] 2 New Zealand Expeditionary Force, *Cipher Message (C764) to 2 NZ Div, dated 22 December 1942.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/27

[83] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (10), 24 January – 29 March 1943*, p.1.

[84] B. L. Montgomery, *Subject: Talk to Officers of Divisional HQ Services (NZ Div), dated 4 January 1943*, P.5, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/45.

[85] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *Report on Reconnaissance Operations in the Area South of the Djebel Tebaga, January-February 1943, by Captain R. Tinker*, p.2, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/13/1.

[86] New Zealand Division Headquarters, *2 NZ Division – Notes on Mareth No 1, dated 29 January 1943.* p.1, NZ National Archives: WAII 21.1/1/38. The Wadi Zigzou also ran the length of the fortification thereby creating a natural anti-tank obstacle.

[87] D. Hunt, A *Don at War,* London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990, p.170.

[88] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958, pp.159-160.

[89] New Zealand Corps, *Intelligence Summary No 1, dated 15 March 1943.* NZ National Archives: WAII 8/30.

antiquated French block-houses which in no way measured up to the standards required by modern warfare."[90] His principal objection to it as a line of defence was based on the possibility of "being outflanked – though it is true, with some difficulty."[91] Rommel wanted instead to occupy the Wadi Akarit Line some 70 Kilometres to the rear of Mareth because he believed it could not be outflanked. His superiors disagreed. In particular, Field-Marshal Kesselring argued for a defence in depth. Kesselring later recalled

> The most favourable prospects for defence will be found in a defence zone which is sub-divided into several positions. The natural configuration of the terrain of Southern Tunisia offered such a defence zone, the foremost position of which was the Mareth and the hindmost the Akarit. It would have been operationally incorrect to have withdrawn immediately to the latter.[92]

It was against this background that the LRDG were instructed to find a way through the Matmata Hills for an outflanking force which would co-ordinate with a frontal attack designed to pin the Axis defenders down. In Freyberg's words, patrols went out and "criss-crossed the whole area",[93] in what was one of the single largest undertakings in the LRDG's history. An advanced HQ-LRDG was established at Azizia to make possible daily conferences between representatives of NZ Division staff, 8th Army, LRDG and SAS.[94] Each day's going was radioed back to this headquarters by the patrols. This was added to the results of photo-reconnaissance and passed to the NZ Division and 8th Army[95], which built up a scale model that was used throughout the planning of Operation Pugilist, as the outflanking operation had been dubbed.[96] Of particular importance was the fact that the patrols were not simply seeking a way through the hills. After all, patrols had passed through them on dozens of covert missions prior to this. They were actually in search of a route capable of withstanding the passage of almost 30,000 troops and some 6000 wheeled and tracked vehicles and heavy guns.[97]

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[90] B. H. Liddell Hart, (ed.), *The Rommel Papers,* London: Collins, 1953, p.392.
[91] B. H. Liddell Hart, (ed.), *The Rommel Papers,* London: Collins, 1953, p.392.
[92] K. Macksey, Kesselring: German Master Strategist of the Second World War, London: Greenhill Books, 1996, p.153.
[93] B. C. Freyberg, *Subject: Turning the Mareth Line, March 1943.* p.12, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/40.
[94] L. H. Browne, (Captain - LRDG), *Notes From Diary, September 1939 – March 1943,* p.8, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.
[95] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (10), 24 January – 29 March 1943.* New Zealand Division Headquarters, *General Officer Commanding's Diary (GOC's Diary), Part III, Sept 42 – Sept 43, entries for 13-26 February 1943,* NZ National Archives: WAII, DA21.1/1/38
[96] B. C. Freyberg, *Subject: Turning the Mareth Line, March 1943.* p.1, NZ National Archives: WAII 8/40.

Such a passage was discovered in late January by a patrol under the command of New Zealander, Nick Wilder, and was subsequently known as 'Wilder's Gap'.[98] To the dismay of members of Wilder's T1 patrol, they were denied the opportunity of leading the New Zealand Corps through the Gap as he had been recalled for duty with the New Zealand Divisional Cavalry[99] when 8th Army released the LRDG from its command.[100] However, Captain R Tinker and Corporal D Bassett remained to act as guides for the outflanking operation. In early March, Montgomery issued a personal message to the men of the 8th Army:

> In the battle that is now to start, the Eighth Army will destroy the enemy now facing us in the Mareth position; will burst through the Gabes gap [to the north]; will then drive northwards on Sfax, Soussem and finally, Tunis. We will not stop, or let up, till Tunis has been captured, and the enemy has given up the struggle or been pushed into the sea.[101]

The New Zealand 'Corps' began the 'left hook' on Mareth on 19 March, guided by Tinker and Bassett, who remained until Gabes was reached after fierce fighting on 29 March.[102] The following morning, in an address greeted with cheers in the British House of Commons, Winston Churchill stated, "General Montgomery's decision to throw his weight on to the turning movement [at Mareth] instead of persisting in a frontal attack has been crowned with success."[103] Montgomery afterward remarked, "It was obvious that the end of the war in Africa would now come quite soon. The Eighth Army had only to burst through the Gabes gap and join hands with the American forces."[104] In a letter to the Commanding Officer – LRDG, Montgomery wrote of the reconnaissance work performed prior to 'Pugilist'

> Without your careful and reliable reports the launching of the "left hook" by the N.Z. Div would have been a leap in the dark; with the information they produced,

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[97] New Zealand Army Board, *The Diamond Track: From Egypt to Tunisia with the Second New Zealand Division, 1942-1943*, Wellington: Government Printer, 1945, p.26. B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958, p.160.

[98] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *L.R.D.G. Diary - 'T1'(NZ Patrol), as kept by L/Cpl Davis J.L., of Stratford, from Oct 30 to Apr 8/43, Copied by Tpr A.B. Crawford on 15 Apr 1943*, p.10, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA441.2/6.

[99] Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *L.R.D.G. Diary - 'T1'(NZ Patrol), as kept by L/Cpl Davis J.L., of Stratford, from Oct 30 to Apr 8/43, Copied by Tpr A.B. Crawford on 15 Apr 1943*. p.14, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA441.2/6.

[100] The bulk of the unit falling back to Alexandria to "reorganise". Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), *"MOST SECRET" - Report on "10th Phase" of Operations in Support of 8th Army, 24 January - 10 April 1943*, p.1, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.

[101] B. L. Montgomery, *Subject: Personal Message From The Army Commander to 8th Army, dated March 1943*. NZ National Archives: WAII 8/30.

[102] G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (10), 24 January – 29 March 1943*. Lloyd Owen, David, Providence Their Guide: The Long Range Desert Group, 1940-45, London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1980, p.121.

[103] Reuters, *Telegram concerning Mr Winston Churchill's address to the House of Commons advising of the successful turning of the Mareth Line, London, 30 March 1943*. NZ National Archives WAII 8/30.

[104] B. L. Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, K.G.*, London: Collins, 1958, p.163.

> the operation could be planned with some certainty and as you know, went off without a hitch . . . please give my thanks to all concerned and best wishes from EIGHTH ARMY for the new tasks you are undertaking [reference to the upcoming Dodecanese operations].[105]

With the close of the North African campaign, the LRDG's desert operations came to an end. By overcoming the difficulties associated with desert travel, the LRDG had provided substantial quantities of accurate and valuable topographical information, and reports on enemy activity and capabilities throughout the period June 1940 – March 1943. Aside from acting as a vital communication link between Allied forces, and arranging passage of essential personnel throughout the theatre, the LRDG also contributed significantly to several outflanking operations in the closing stages of the campaign that undoubtedly enabled the Allied command to save lives which might otherwise have been lost in mounting frontal attacks on Axis positions.

[105] B. L. Montgomery, *Subject: LRDG Contribution to 'Left-Hook' and turning of the Mareth Line,– Letter to Lt-Col G.L. Prendergast, CO LRDG, dated 2 April 1943.*

Conclusion

This analysis has presented a range of evidence to demonstrate that the New Zealand contribution to the Long Range Desert Group in North Africa, 1940-1943, was substantial in terms of both quantity and quality. Taken as a whole, LRDG helped dissipate the enemy's forces, and assisted the rise of Allied fighting formations such as the Free French and the Special Air Service – both of which went on to make considerable contributions of their own.[1] LRDG activities offered extensive high-quality support to numerous service organisations, ranging from the Royal Air Force to clandestine operations.[2] In the provision of secure and reliable tactical intelligence, the LRDG was without peer,[3] and in matters of direct reconnaissance, the LRDG frequently provided the requisite degree of corroboration for material gained by other intelligence avenues.[4] The topographical information supplied by the Group was indispensable to the plans and operations of the Eighth Army.[5] In fact, one of Field-Marshal Alexander's intelligence staff offered this observation on the LRDG

> This magnificent organisation had all the virtues and none of the faults of the [so-called] private armies. It had a useful job to do, it knew how to do it perfectly, and did it quietly.[6]

With ample evidence attesting to the significant contribution the LRDG made to operations in the North African theatre, it remains to identify the part played by New Zealanders in achieving this.

In quantitative terms the New Zealand commitment was vital. At the time the first patrols were formed, the shortage of trained manpower in the Middle East was chronic. Later, when British forces in the region had increased considerably, German successes saw British

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[1] H. Maule, Out of the Sand: The Epic Story of General Leclerc and the Fighting Free French, London: Odhams Books Ltd., 1966, p.82. A. Hoe, David Stirling; The Authorised Biography of the Creator of the S.A.S, London: Little, Brown and Company, 1992, p.472.

[2] V. Peniakoff, *Popski's Private Army*, London: The Reprint Society, 1953, pp.56-57. G. L. Prendergast, *Phase Reports, (5), 19 April – 26 May 1942*, p.2. L.H. Browne, (Captain - LRDG), *Notes From Diary, September 1939 – March 1943*,p.6, NZ National Archives: WAII, DA 304.1/15/12.

[3] R. A. Bagnold, "Early Days of the Long Range Desert Group" The Geographical Journal, [Evening Meeting of the Society, 15 January 1945], Vol.: CV, No 1 & 2, Jan-Feb 1945. p.30-46.

[4] T.W. Corbett, Subject: Expressing appreciation for LRDG activity from Auchinleck - 'MOST SECRET and PERSONAL' Letter to G. Prendergast - CO LRDG dated 7 April 42.

[5] G. L. Prendergast, Phase Reports, (9), 24 October – 23 January 1943. B. L. Montgomery, Subject: LRDG Contribution to 'Left-Hook' and turning of the Mareth Line,– Letter to Lt-Col G.L. Prendergast, CO LRDG, dated 2 April 1943. B. L. Montgomery, Subject: Talk to Officers of Divisional HQ Services (NZ Div), dated 4 January 1943. NZ National Archives: WAII 8/45.

[6] D. Hunt, A *Don at War*, London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990, p.132.

troops pass into prisoner-of-war cages in their thousands, causing a shortage once again. When the Long Range Patrols were raised, of the original strength of approximately ninety – only three personnel (all officers) were not Kiwis.[7] By early 1942, the (reorganised) Long Range Desert Group had grown to a full strength of twenty-five officers, and 324 other ranks – over half of which were Kiwis, a commitment maintained until the close of the campaign.[8] Had the original request for a detachment of New Zealanders to form a nucleus of this unit been declined in 1940, it seems almost certain that the patrol would not have been raised and trained in time to provide desperately needed intelligence for Britain's summer offensive against the Italians. Given that the LRDG owed its existence to General "Wavell's personal patronage,"[9] and Wavell was relieved of his command by Churchill twelve months later,[10] and considering the 'turbulence' provoked by General Freyberg's strenuous efforts to reconstitute his dismembered New Zealand Division, it seems that there was a distinct 'window of opportunity' for the formation of the LRDG. If it had not been raised in June 1940, it might very well not have been raised at all.

To determine the significance of the New Zealand contribution to the LRDG from a qualitative point of view, requires assessing the suitability of New Zealanders for this type of operation. All nations seem to wish to believe that some special quality resides in its soldiers, a quality which makes its own fighting men a touch superior to any other, friend and foe alike. However, testimony to the belief in the existence of just such a special quality in the New Zealanders involved has two important characteristics. Firstly, those who offer comment are inevitably 'outsiders', predominantly British in origin. Secondly, commentators are unanimous in their opinion. For example, former LRDG Intelligence Officer, Bill Kennedy Shaw, suggests:

> There can be no doubt whatever that much of the early and continued success of the L.R.D.G. was due to the speed and thoroughness with which the New Zealanders learned desert work and life . . . most of the first New Zealanders were from the Divisional Cavalry –the "Div. Cav."- farmers or the like in civil life, and with a maturity and independence not

[7] R. A. Bagnold, *1 L.R.P.* [Long Range Patrol] *Routine Order #23,* Abbassia (Egypt), August 12, 1940.
[8] B. Jenner, and D. List, *The Long Range Desert Group,* London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1983, p.8.
[9] D. Hunt, A *Don at War,* London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1990, p.132.
[10] Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Vol. III: The Grand Alliance,* London: The Reprint Society, 1950, p.281.

found in Britishers of a similar age . . . I had never met New Zealanders before; all the knowledge I had of them were my father's words of the last war – that they were the finest of the troops from the Dominions. Closer acquaintance showed that one should always believe one's father.[11]

[11] William Boyd Kennedy Shaw, *Long Range Desert Group: The Story of its Work in Libya, 1940-1943*, London: Collins, 1945, pp.18-19.

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