



FIGHTING WITH POPSKI'S PRIVATE ARMY



Park Yunnie

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Park Yunnie
Of Popski's Private Army

With New Material By
Ben Owen of P.P.A. & Don Yunnie



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An Appreciation

of Captain Bob Yunnie of 'B' Patrol, P.P.A.

Although I am not particularly enamoured of the expression 'a one-off' in anything other than engineering terms, I must admit that it is an apt description of Bob Yunnie. I first met him when I joined P.P.A. during the war. There was talk in the Unit that he was a 'mad Scotchman' who hogged all the jobs going. I decided that these were qualities I wished to be associated with, and on my request I was allowed to join 'B' Patrol. And never regretted it.

Popski, in his speech to us on the disbandment of P.P.A., said that he considered his greatest achievement was in making such a cosmopolitan crowd as we were into a band of brothers. I would say that we were a big family – and 'B' Patrol was a smaller family within that big family. My own family at home had broken up with the death of my mother when I was twelve years old, and the death of my father not long afterwards. Now, here in 'B' Patrol, I was again to live day and night, night and day, with twelve or so men who became as close to me as anyone else has ever come in my life.

We did not have the usual army discipline in P.P.A. to keep us striving in the mountains, snows and rivers of Italy. It was our mutual respect for each other – the determination to pull just as strongly as the others in a bid to make us a team to be proud of. I was always irked by newcomers to the Unit who immediately began addressing the officers by their surnames, so we patrolmen in 'B' Patrol got together and decided that from then on we would address Bob Yunnie as 'Skipper'.

The Skipper was a brilliant navigator, but what always amazed me was the way he would consult his map just once and then lead us for hours over mountains and valleys, and through rivers, just as if he were native to the area. He was a very impatient man, and always reminded me of a budgerigar in a cage, going backward and forward. We would stop for perhaps a meal or a drink of tea – which he would drink, scalding hot, in almost one gulp – and then there he would be, hopping about, impatient to get going, while the rest of us were trying to drink, not managing to

and often having to pour it away. One day I reminded him that it was a crime in the army to waste tea. He took the tip, but still imitated a budgerigar each time we paused for a break.

We must have confused the Germans no end with our dashes up and down the mountains, travelling as like as not along a 'carripath' – a goat track. Our nippy, very mobile jeeps, in the hands of experienced drivers, darted here and there, barely concealing more than four feet of the vehicle above the ground. We must have been very difficult to spot and to engage, although we experienced spandaus and mortars, and occasionally 88mm guns.

One day, after we had forded a deep, fast-flowing river – and had removed the fan-belt to prevent the water being washed over the engine – we had paused to allow the engines to cool off, when suddenly the Skipper made a sudden dart towards a deep fissure in a mountainside. It must have been worn through the ages by water rushing down. It was a V shape, and anything from 20 to 30 feet deep. We engaged four-wheel and booster drive in our jeep, and the vehicle almost stood on its rear in its bid to climb the mountain. Ali Stewart turned to me and said, 'Nobody in the wide world but this mad Scotchman Bob Yunnie would even think about driving up a place like this.'

When we arrived at the top of this mountain it was to find a vast flat tableland – miles and miles of lovely green turf such as we had never seen since leaving Britain years before. With the jeep engines cooling off again, Ali and I ran around like schoolboys pretending to pass a football. We drove further through this wonderland to find flocks of sheep, with their shepherds living in small stone huts. Some of them didn't even know – or didn't care – about the War. On other journeys we had to bolster the roadside with stones and trees, working against the mountain with the picks and shovels we were carrying, and with hundreds of feet below us waiting to devour us if we made one false step.

Looking back, I think that the world was far from big enough for Bob Yunnie. He should have been born years ago, at the time of the first explorers of the planet. Perhaps, if we conquer the Universe in the future, he will come back among us as a spaceman.

Ben Owen
'B' Patrol, P.P.A., 2002

Author's Note

This is the true story of a small group of men who enjoyed World War II. The war was not of their seeking, few of them knew anything about war or wanted it, but when it came they volunteered as a matter of course.

One by one, led by a love of adventure, they gravitated to a special service unit called 'Popski's Private Army'. I was second-in-command of Popski's Private Army. I was the first recruit. I trained the men and knew them intimately. I fought with them and joked with them. I shared their triumphs, their failures and their fears. I saw some of them die. I loved these men and was honoured by their friendship and their faith.

This story should have been written long ago, when the war ended. It was, but in a different form, and never published; now I have found time to rewrite it, just as it happened during the years of the war.

Park Yunnie
Captain Bob Yunnie, M.C.

Prologue

‘But, Popski,’ I asked, ‘how on earth did you get away with it?’

Major Vladimir Peniakoff, M.C., Russian-born, ex-sugar manufacturer of Cairo (code-name ‘Popski’), regarded me with penetrating, green-flecked eyes – commanding eyes accustomed to searching sun-baked desert horizons; aged about forty-five or six, thick-set, deeply tanned, bald, dynamic, minus a finger taken by a German machine-gun bullet in the recent Barce raid, Popski was a man to be reckoned with: an individualist, a forceful personality to whom people gave way, a man who, having once decided upon a course of action, never deviated. Cultured, well-read, a man of the world and the master of five languages, Popski had volunteered the minute war broke out and had been commissioned to the General List in Cairo; unorthodox, adventurous, with a genuine flair for intelligence work, fluent in Arabic and familiar with the Libyan Desert, he had quickly established a reputation and was going from strength to strength. He had come from G.H.Q. Middle East where the proposal to form a sabotage unit of his own had just been sanctioned; he was telling me about it.

‘It was Shan Hackett’s idea,’ he smiled reminiscently. ‘When the Brigadier asked what I wanted to call the unit I hesitated and he suggested “Popski’s Private Army”. I said I’d take it. Shan promised to fix it with the War Office.’

‘Popski’s Private Army ... Popski’s Private Army.’ I repeated the words slowly, lovingly, turning them round my tongue, savouring their richness as one savours the bouquet of a good wine. What a perfect name for a sabotage unit to work behind the enemy lines! I regarded Popski with admiration.

‘You’d get away with murder, Popski,’ I laughed. ‘When do we move?’

Popski’s desert-tanned face grew serious.

‘As soon as possible, Bob. Looks like Monty’s going to break through at Alamein and it’ll be another race for Benghazi. We want to be in on it. I’ll give you a fortnight to get ready.’

Fourteen days wasn’t a very long time in which to raise and equip a new unit.

‘A fortnight!’ I exclaimed. ‘Hell, Popski, that’s a tall order.’

Popski turned on his devastating charm.

‘You can do it, Bob,’ he flattered, ‘here’s your G1098. Get cracking,’ and he handed me my authority to draw vehicles, guns and equipment.

I glanced through the military document placed in my hands. M.E./W.E./866/1 officially designated us No. 1 Demolition Squadron, Middle East. How prosaic! Popski’s Private Army was a far better name.

‘What do we wear, Popski?’

‘Ordinary desert dress with black Tank Corps berets and P.P.A. shoulder flashes. Our unit badge is the astrolabe. I’m having cap badges and shoulder flashes made.’

‘What about men?’

‘I’ll do the recruiting. You get cracking on the stores and equipment.’

‘Is Jan coming?’

Jan Caneri, a Free French officer, was a friend from earlier days of the war, when he, Popski and I were company commanders in the Libyan Arab Force. A friendship had sprung up between the three of us that we had maintained after leaving the force.

‘He’s on ops at the moment. He’ll join us later.’

‘Good.’

It was nearly six o’clock on a sultry October afternoon in 1942. We were sitting in Popski’s Cairo flat in sharia Malika Farida. The rumble of traffic in the streets below, the sing-song intonations of the news vendors and flower sellers drifted through the open balcony windows, mingling with the heavy scent of jasmine. I rose and stood on the balcony, looking down upon the crowded scene, the press of military vehicles and horse-drawn gharries, the saluting, jostling, jabbering khaki-clad figures making for the clubs and bars, the white-gowned, tarbushed Egyptians being roughly elbowed out of the way. I was happy. Cut off west of Benghazi in the last retreat, I had walked 400 miles across the desert to Tobruk, gone to hospital for a while, and then for the past three months had been kicking my heels at base depot waiting to join Popski. Now the days of boredom were over; I had a worthwhile job at last.

And excitement was in the air; retreat was a thing of the past, the big push was coming. A new star of unexpected brilliance shone in the Middle East military firmament; Lieutenant-General Bernard A. Montgomery had infused new life into a weary Eighth Army; and tanks, guns, reinforcements and supplies of all kinds were pouring into the delta. A new cycle of events was taking shape.

An apt slogan suddenly came to mind, as if wafted to me from the lively

Cairo scene; I smiled and re-entered the room. Popski was relaxed on a couch, smoking a cigarette, thinking, planning.

‘You’ll need a recruiting slogan, Popski. What about “Join Popski’s Private Army and Enjoy the War”?’

Popski looked up at me and laughed.

‘I’ll take it,’ he said.

1

A line of military vehicles wound its way across the Libyan Desert, bound for the Oasis of Kufra. Popski sat at the wheel of the leading jeep, his eyes on the moving shadow of the sun-compass clamped to the instrument panel in front. In the seat beside him, Bell, his gunner-driver, sat with pencil and notepad, logging their route. Ahead of them, dancing in the heat haze, fantastic shapes of sand and rock marked the ragged escarpment of the Gilf Kebir.

Popski glanced at the speedometer and shook his head.

‘Give me the map board, Bell.’

Bell lifted the map board from his knees and apprehensively handed it to Popski. Navigation wasn’t Bell’s strong point; he felt ill at ease.

Popski looked at the grubby log on the map board and from the grubby log to Bell.

‘Do you know what you’re doing, Bell?’

Driver Bell went red in the face.

‘N-not really, sir,’ he stammered.

‘Then why the hell didn’t you tell me?’ Popski exploded. ‘You’re here to learn. If you don’t understand a thing, ask.’

Bell looked sheepish.

‘Yes, sir,’ he said meekly.

Popski held up a sunburned hand and the line of vehicles halted. He wheeled his jeep and drove to the end of the column, braking level with the last jeep. I looked at him expectantly.

‘Yes, Popski?’

‘We’re wrong somewhere, Bob. According to the speedometer reading we should be in the gap by now. There’s no sign of it. Either the bearing’s wrong or I’ve made a mistake somewhere. Stay here till I make a reconnaissance.’

‘O.K., Popski.’

Popski revved away in a rising cloud of dust. I called to Sergeant Waterson in the next jeep.

‘Brew up, Sarge. We’re waiting.’

Sergeant Waterson cocked a blue eye in the direction of the nearest 3-tonner and swung from his jeep.

'*Shay, Mohammed,*' he bawled to the Senussi guide perched on top of the load.

Mohammed Mustapha grinned, showing perfect white teeth.

'*Aywah,*' he answered, and slid off the truck.

Driver Davies jumped down and from the back of the 3-tonner lifted a perforated petrol tin, which he scooped half full with sand, poured petrol over it and threw in a lighted match. The contents took fire with a swoosh and Davies shielded his face from the flame.

Driver Weldon jumped from the driving seat of the other 3-tonner, poured water into a blackened tea can and stuck it on top of the fire; Sergeant Waterson reached over the tailboard and drew out a tin of condensed milk. 'Catch!' he shouted to the group by the fire and tossed it through the air. Weldon cupped his hands and caught it neatly, like a cricketer catching a ball.

When the water boiled, Sergeant Waterson threw in a handful of tea, stirred the contents with a stick, lifted the can off the fire and tapped it with the stick to make the tea-leaves sink to the bottom; the tinny sound echoed strangely in the still desert air. Driver Weldon jabbed two holes in the top of the condensed milk tin with the spike of his jackknife and poured a thick spout of milk into the tea.

'Come and get it,' Waterson yelled.

We all grabbed our enamel mugs and gathered round the tea can.

'What's the form, sir?' Waterson asked. 'Bearing's wrong. We're too far north,' I replied between gulps of tea. 'Popski's gone to look for tracks.'

We stood in a group in the blistering sun, drinking tea. The desert was all about us, a silent, heat-filled waste of sand shimmering under a cloudless sky. Nothing moved but the dancing mirage; apart from ourselves there wasn't a living thing for hundreds of empty miles. We were five days out from Cairo, halted on a wrong bearing, 400 miles from Kufra; lost.

In the absence of its commander, I surveyed Popski's Private Army. It wasn't much to look at – three small jeeps and two big 3-tonners, one officer (myself), a dozen men, three Senussi Arabs; a hastily recruited, raw, untrained and untried unit. Popski only had any real desert experience. The rest of us were just tyros; keenness, willingness to learn, our only assets.

I looked at the low-slung, racy jeeps with their welded array of water and petrol can brackets, their twin-mounted Vickers machine-guns, the

grooved yellow sand channels clamped to the sides. I looked at the overloaded 3-ton Chevrolet trucks with their sawn-off driving cabins and the single machine-gun mounted in front. I looked at the men, at Sergeant Waterson from the King's Dragoon Guards with his piercing blue eye staring from under the brim of the peaked New Zealander's hat shading his face from the sun; at Corporal Locke with the piratical black patch over one eye; at Driver Davies with the baggy shorts a size too big for his waist; at Driver Weldon with the scrubby beginnings of a beard on his chin; at little Jock Welsh, the fitter from R.E.M.E.; at Petrie, our navigator, a thoughtful young man who lived with the stars; at Bill Wilson, my driver, desperately keen to make good; at Mohammed Mustapha, at Abdel Salem Othman, at Yunes Yusef Abdallah, our three Senussi guides crouched over a fire some distance apart, brewing their sweet Arab tea. A motley crew.

'Why did you join?' I asked Driver Davies, who was helping himself to more tea.

'Browned-off with base, sir. I wanted something to do.'

'And you, Jock?' I asked Fitter Welsh.

'Same mucking reason, sir. Brownd-off with base.'

A black speck appeared on the horizon. It grew bigger and bigger ...

'Popski,' somebody said.

I shaded my eyes from the glare and watched Popski's jeep come sailing through the mirage; his wheels appeared to revolve without touching the sand.

When he drew up beside me I handed him a mug of hot tea.

He pushed the motoring goggles away from his eyes.

'I've found the track. We're miles out.'

'I knew the bearing was wrong. That signal was corrupt.'

Popski gulped a mouthful of tea.

'It's that clot Waddington's fault. He promised me the wireless in Cairo. It's waiting for us in Kufra. We shouldn't have left without one.'

'Too late to worry about it now,' I said philosophically.

Popski gulped the last of his tea and handed me the mug.

'Thanks, Bob. That was good. Follow me.'

Popski drove to the head of the column. Sergeant Waterson bawled:

'All aboard!'

Driver Davies poured the tea-leaves into a russet heap on the sand and hung the empty tea can on its hook under the tailboard of his 3-tonner; Driver Weldon emptied the perforated fire can and pitched it in the back;

the three Senussi ran to the trucks, clutching their teapot and glasses, trailing their *jerds* in the sand.

Self-starters rasped, engines revved, and the column moved on....

Following the sand-blown wheel tracks of a Long Range Desert Group patrol we twisted and turned through the maze of basalt teeth that filled the gap between the towering black cliffs of the silent Gilf Kebir. Hades itself could be no more terrifying than this dead valley of petrified rock, bleached camel bones, sifting sand, heat, mirage and diabolical stillness; the note of our exhausts death-rattled against the lifeless mushroom rocks and our voices, echoing hollowly in the riven gullies, cackled like the souk of the damned. 'Fly, fly from this forgotten vale,' they seemed to cry, 'the living have no place here, this is a haunt of the dead.'

The sand was soft. Popski, an experienced desert driver, changed into lowest booster gear and chugged jerkily through it. Petrie, behind him, stuck and had to use sand channels. Weldon, following close behind in his overloaded 3-tonner, felt his rear wheels sink in. He changed down, accelerated madly and sank his truck to the tailboard. He got down and stood looking at the buried wheels, scratching his head.

'How the mucking hell did I do that?'

Davies, churning along behind him, bogged down also, but not quite so deeply; seeing Weldon dig in, he learned from his mistake, and stopped in time. Waterson and I drove alongside in our lighter jeeps; we felt our rear wheels sink in as soon as we applied the brakes.

Waterson regarded Weldon's bellied 3-tonner with a jaundiced eye.

'We'll have to unload that bastard,' he groaned.

Popski, chugging on ahead like a motor boat in a choppy sea, looked back to see how we fared, saw the mess we were in, wheeled about and came back. He gear-braked his jeep to a stop on a patch of hard sand without sinking the wheels. I marvelled and walked across to him, feeling the burning heat of the sand through my desert boots.

'We'll have to unload Weldon's 3-tonner, Popski.'

He nodded and lit a cigarette; the operation would take time.

We jumped from our vehicles and set about unloading Weldon's truck. The temperature was 100°F and there wasn't any shade.

Off came the heavy petrol and water cans, the boxes of hand-grenades, the road mines, the rolls of plastic 808 high explosive, the pans of Vickers ammunition, the boxes of compo rations....

Weldon and Davies took spades and dug the sand from the buried wheels.

'Deeper,' said Waterson, 'deeper yet... now put in your sand channels.'

They put the perforated, grooved steel channels under the rear wheels. 'Right, Weldon,' said Waterson, 'lowest gear and let in your clutch gently.'

Weldon climbed to the driver's seat, started his engine, grated into first gear and let in the clutch....

The rear wheels spun, throwing out sand, gripped on the channels and the truck moved forward a few inches. We all rushed behind and shoved.

'Keep going, keep going,' we yelled.

The 3-tonner jerked forward a few feet, rode over the sand channels and sank in again.

'Stop!' we yelled frantically. 'Stop!'

Weldon declutched. We picked up the sand channels, ran forward and pushed them under the wheels.

'Take 'er away.'

Weldon revved and his truck moved forward again, rode over the channels and kept moving.

'Keep going,' we encouraged him, 'keep going, keep going,' and picked up the sand channels and ran alongside, throwing them under the moving wheels....

Popski watched our antics from the comfort of his crawling jeep; he'd done the same thing himself, hundreds of times; now it was our turn to learn.

Three hundred yards further on Weldon drove onto a patch of hard sand and drew up his truck; we muttered 'Thank God,' wiped our dripping brows and walked back to ferry the load....

'What a bloody life,' groaned Fitter Welsh, staggering through the churned-up sand with a box of grenades on his shoulder.

'Shouldn'ta joined, chum,' jeered Davies, easing the compo box on his back.

'Get your knees browned,' laughed Corporal Locke, coming back for another load.

'Stop ticking, Welsh,' admonished Sergeant Waterson, striding past with his arms full of high explosive.

'Watch ye dinna blow up, Sarge,' tittered Bill Wilson.

'I'll blow you up, Wilson. Get a jerk on.'

When Weldon's load was ferried and re-stowed on his 3-tonner we went back and helped Davies through the soft patch; then we formed up and drove on again....

The fantastically shaped basalt pillars shrunk in size, the sand became harder and we left the silent, eerie Gilt behind; the soaring black cliffs

became a dark line against the sky and gradually disappeared. The empty desert stretched in front of us, a vast solitude of undulating, yellow-ochre sand in which nothing moved but the dancing, shimmering heat waves. Sand, sand, sand; not a bush, nor a blade of grass, no living thing; no water; not even a rock nor a stone, no landmark of any kind; nothing but sand, hot, burning sand, with the *khamseen*, the searing desert wind, blowing in our faces, cracking our lips, drying our throats, filling eyes and ears and nostrils with a fine, sandy dust....

Day after day we rode over the blistering surface of the great inner desert, navigating its uncharted wastes like a convoy of ships at sea, steering our course by the shadow of the sun on a needle, checking our position at night by the stars. Popski led, followed by Petrie, logging his route; then Weldon's lumbering 3-tonner, followed by Davies in his; Waterson followed Davies in his jeep, with Yunes beside him; Bill Wilson and I brought up the rear.

One day was very like another. It began at crack of dawn with Waterson's parade-ground voice bellowing 'Wakey, wakeeey' as he went from truck to truck rousing the sleeping crews.... We cursed him inaudibly, wriggled out of our warm sleeping-bags, pulled on sweaters against the morning chill – for the desert is cold at night – and physical-jerked the sleep from our eyes.... The cooks for the day made breakfast – burgoo porridge, two rashers of bacon, biscuits and jam, two or three cups of sweet tea.... Self-starters rasping ... engines revving and left running to warm up, with the exhaust note burbling clearly in the crisp desert air.... Then Popski would beckon and we would take up our mapboards and gather round him for details of the day's route ... stow sleeping-bags ... and wait for the sun to cast a shadow on the sun-compass....

We drove until noon and halted for a rest. We had to, because for an hour the sun was directly overhead and cast no shadow, so that we couldn't navigate.... We gathered round the tailboard of Davies' 3-tonner and Waterson rationed out the midday meal – biscuits and cheese, pickles, tinned fruit, lime juice powder and water. When it was consumed we thrust our heads under the trucks for the only shade there was and dozed a while, feeling the sun burning our trunks and legs.... At one o'clock we drove on again, guided by the shadow cast by the westering sun ... and pulled into leaguer an hour before dusk ... vehicle maintenance first – fill up with petrol from Weldon's 3-tonner, lightening his overload; check water and oil levels, tyre pressures, chassis nuts and bolts; clean guns ... then rum issue – a mouthful of water, rum and lime juice powder, which

miraculously removed bodily fatigue ... followed by the evening meal – bully-beef stew ... and the enchanting hour of dusk when the rapidly falling sun, dropping over the desert's rim in a last flurry of blazing gold, filled the dunes with mystic light and transformed the glaring waste into a haunting fairyland of marching rainbow hues, phalanxes of burnished gold, brave companies of purple and mauve, charging squadrons of violet ... and the wind, the desert sculptor, blowing spume from the crests of the dunes in fluttering pennants of indigo ... twinkling stars strewn richly in the velvet cupola of night.

Petrie's work began when ours finished; as soon as the stars shone forth he set up his theodolite and became engrossed. We lay close to the vehicle wheels snug in our sleeping-bags, talking in undertones, cracking jokes or lying quietly, thinking, and looking up at the distant stars, seeing the earth revolve. One by one we'd feel drowsy and drop off to sleep while Petrie continued to flip the pages of his astronomical charts in the light of a shaded torch, muttering to himself, calculating and re-calculating the divisions of his astro-fix; behind him, some distance apart, our faithful Senussi crouched round their flickering fire, keeping watch....

It came upon us one morning, a raging furnace of howling, swirling, screaming sand that darkened the midday sky and blotted out the sun. The desert rose from its bed like a storm at sea and lashed us unmercifully with mountainous waves of stinging, biting grit that scratched the glass of our goggles, cut the skin of our cheeks and scraped the paint from our vehicles.

'Sand storm coming!' Popski yelled. 'Turn round – backs to the wind!'

The column swung round and halted, tailboards to the storm, like cattle in a field, backs to the rain; we sat hunched in our seats, shielding our ears, waiting for the smother to envelop us....

It hit us like a whip-lash, taking our breath, leaving us cowed and defenceless, whimpering with pain. We couldn't breathe. Hot, smarting dust clogged our nostrils, seared the backs of our throats, coated our tongue and gritted in our teeth; drifts of fine-blown sand formed in the folds of our clothing, blew into our pockets and found its way through to our skins; sand piled up in the trucks, forming miniature dunes, stuck to the oily and greasy parts of the chassis, blew under the bonnet and sifted into the carburettor, the magneto, the unsealed working parts; grating sand filtered into the Vickers guns, jamming the ammunition pans; sand found its way into everything, everywhere. Each truck was isolated in its own drift, cut off from the others by an impenetrable wall of frenzied, shrieking grit; we couldn't see, we daren't open our mouths to speak; we

could only crouch half-suffocated, cut, whipped and savaged by the pitiless, rasping sand....

Hours passed and the storm howled unabated. It seemed that all the sands of Libya and of the vaster Sahara beyond were in open revolt; the sun had gone from the world, never to return; something had happened in outer space. God had gone berserk, worlds were in collision, a tidal wave of sand was sweeping the Universe and carrying all before it; it was the end of the world, we would never see the sun again, we would all be buried alive; or so it seemed to us huddled blindly in our sand-swept trucks, hidden in a cloud of angry dust, 100 miles from Kufra....

The maelstrom swept over and raced towards Cairo, leaving us weak, battered and breathless, half-buried in sand. For a time a blood-red hunter's moon hung overhead like a curse and became a blazing sun when the final turmoil subsided and we saw blue sky again.

A great peace lay over the cleansed and chastened desert, but its face had changed; old dunes had been levelled, new ones formed, and our wheel tracks were wholly obliterated, wiped out like chalk from a slate. The desert had been born anew.

'Christ,' said Sergeant Waterson, rising from his drift and shaking the sand from his clothes, 'have you seen this?'

'This' was the side of the truck, polished like a mirror, every vestige of paint sanded off.

I stood back from the column and surveyed the aftermath. Sand drifts hid the wheels, up to the polished mudguards; a sculptured sand dune curved from every tailboard. Closing my eyes I visualized snow instead of sand; that's what it was like, a Christmas party of motorists caught and marooned in a snowstorm. Least affected were our three Senussi; high up on the back of the 3-tonners they had wrapped themselves in their blanket *jerds* and weathered the storm like cocoons.

Bill Wilson pressed the self-starter. I put my hands to my ears. Rasp ... rasp ... rasp. The sound resembled a rusty file scraping rusty metal.... Rasp ... rasp ... rasp. Every truck was the same, like old crocks found in a car cemetery....

'Clean guns,' Waterson shouted.

'Brew up,' somebody cried.

'Have to clean out the mucking carburettor,' Davies cursed when his grinding engine died on him for the third time....

'Now you can see why navigation is so important,' Popski explained to Bell. 'Where would you be if you'd been following tracks without logging your route?'

'I'd be lost, sir,' said Bell, brightly.

'Exactly, Bell. That's where dead reckoning comes in.'

Popski reached for his map board, shook it and blew off the sand. Bell panicked, knowing what was coming.

'Where are we, Bell?'

Bell stared at the buff-coloured paper, like a child at castor oil, and felt his neck getting hot.

'There,' he said desperately, prodding the map with a grimy forefinger.

His finger landed very close to the right place; it was a lucky guess. Popski was surprised and looked at him.

'How did you know, Bell?'

Realizing he'd guessed correctly, Bell smiled superiorly.

'Dead reckoning, sir.'

'Tell me, Bell...?' Popski started to say.

'Come and get it!'

Waterson's clarion call saved him.

We stood by our halted vehicles and stared at a horizon of rootless palm trees dancing in blue water above a long line of yellow sand dunes.

'Mirage,' I muttered.

'Kufra,' said Popski.

'Ouch!' cried Waterson, withdrawing his hand from a jeep bonnet upon which eggs would have rapidly fried. 'Mucking hot, that...'

'Kufra,' said Popski again, 'there's no mistaking those yellow dunes.'

Hours later we straggled into the Oasis of Kufra, religious shrine of the Senussi sect, operational headquarters of the Long Range Desert Group, past the shelled Italian fort on the hill, past a huddle of dilapidated mud huts clustered round a battered mosque, past clumps of motionless palm trees, past lagoons of blue water, more palm trees with trucks under them draped in camouflage nets and buff, bearded soldiers sitting about....

We parked in the shade of the palms beside a pool of clear water, and Popski walked through the oasis to report to O.C. L.R.D.G. I sat by the pool of clear water, touching it to make sure it wasn't a mirage. Water, I thought, what glorious, heavenly stuff, and touched again, just to make sure.... I was still there, lost in a watery contemplation, when Popski returned, looking a trifle upset.

'What's the matter, Popski?' I asked tactlessly.

He scowled at me.

'We hold the record from Cairo. Eleven days. We should have done it in five.'

2

Kufra! The mythical oasis hidden away in the heart of the Libyan Desert, the isolated, jealously guarded shrine of the fanatical Senussi, the oasis in which no white man had set foot until after the First World War. Kufra, the outlandish, the unattainable, brought within a few hours' journey of Cairo by the modern aeroplane.

I wandered round the oasis with Mohammed Mustapha, soothed by the song of the rustling date palms. We visited the Italian fort on the hill, captured by the Long Range Desert Group; we walked through the fly-ridden alleys of the mud village near the ruined mosque, which Mohammed, but not I, an infidel, was permitted to enter; we sat in the shade of the date palms by the blue lagoon. It was here, Mohammed told me, in a vibrant voice, that the Senussi fought their last battle with the colonizing Italians; it was from here, he told me bitterly, that 'Butcher' Graziani took the hostage sheiks to Benghazi under guise of friendship and hung them, living, in the public square, suspended by the chin from iron hooks. 'The Italians came and seized our land and murdered our sheiks,' he hissed with flashing eyes. 'We hate them.'

In 1942 Kufra was the desert nerve centre, the controlling brain from which the Long Range Desert Group patrols drove forth to harry the German and Italian divisions strung out along the Mediterranean coast. Six hundred miles, more or less, separated Kufra from the coast, 600 miles of empty sand and sand dunes upon which no rain ever fell. The outer desert was no man's land – the strip along the coast; it changed hands frequently with the ebb and flow of retreat and advance; but the inner desert was sacrosanct, the acknowledged preserve of the Long Range Desert Group, and no enemy patrols dared venture into its guarded fastness.

But events on the coast were moving fast. Eighth Army had reached Benghazi and was driving on to Tripoli; Kufra would soon be obsolete for the first time since the desert war began, for no British general had previously driven the enemy round the Gulf of Syrte.

'We're moving to Zella, Bob,' Popski informed me, 'Kufra's too far south. The whole of L.R.D.G.'s moving up.'

This was cheering news for, having been at such pains to get into the desert war, I was beginning to fear it would be over before we'd had an opportunity to do anything. But I needn't have worried; there were adventures aplenty in store for me.

I drew the promised wireless set – an ill-fated one as later events will reveal – replenished the 3-tonners with petrol, water and rations and we set course for the Oasis of Zella in the Fezzan – 500 miles north-west as the crow flies.

The journey was sheer delight. Rough edges rubbed off by the buffeting we had received on the 700-mile drive from Cairo, the unit had settled down and come to its second wind. Friendships had been formed and capabilities assessed; we worked as a team. We no longer bogged our vehicles every few hundred yards, but skilfully avoided the soft patches, recognizing them from afar. Desert driving became a pleasure instead of a pain and happy in a new-found confidence, we raced one another across flat stretches of hard sand at 60 miles an hour, plunged through crested sand dunes like ships through foaming waves, and gear-braked our vehicles to a stop without sinking-in the wheels.

'Jings, sirr, isna this grrrand!' enthused Bill Wilson, happy as a child, as we zoomed over a gamboge stretch of sand, wind-swept smooth as a billiard-table, with the speedometer needle flickering about the 60 mark. 'Better than Brooklands, sirr.'

'Better than base depot, eh, Bill?' I shouted at him into the wind.

'Gosh, sirr,' his voice whipped back, 'I dinna wint tae ging back therre.'

We were in the war, but out of it, enjoying the fun of the chase, thrilling to the joy of high blue skies, pure, sunlit air, speed, and the freedom of the unfenced, open desert; and at nights, with our wireless set, we were no longer isolated from the rest of the world, but could tune-in to the latest news of Eighth Army's triumphant advance, and lie in our cosy sleeping-bags under the stars, listening to dance music from Cairo or London, feeling we belonged!

Our compass course took us through the Oasis of Tazerbo, a smelly cluster of mud huts in a grove of wind-bitten date palms with a few scrawny hens scratching about and glaucoma-eyed bedouin staring at us suspiciously, a miserable sand-swept water hole guarded by the dunes of the Kalansho Sand Sea, a place of loneliness and sougning wind, of heat and flies and listlessness surrounded by silence, a place forgotten by God.

Beyond Tazerbo's flanking dunes the face of the desert changed. We came to wadis and scrub, gnarled acacia bushes, gravel and outcrops of rock; gazelle rose at our approach, bounded in front of our wheels, leaping

and bucking, and swerved out of our path. Rifles were raised and levelled, but no shots fired; something in the grace and beauty of those lovely wild creatures darting terrified side-glances out of soft, brown eyes stayed our hands....

Over a rocky plateau of sharp, flinty stones that tore at our burning tyres – down a steep wadi with the chassis rattling and banging on the rough, uneven surface ... across a corrugated agony of ribbed, hard-blown sand, yellow and glaring in the fierce sunlight ... twisting and turning through a never-ending morass of high, crested dunes with the *khamseen* blowing spume from their tops in feathery tails and scorching our aching throats, we came to the Oasis of Zella – and blew up a truck on a mine.

An Italian garrison had recently evacuated the oasis, leaving mines in its sandy approaches. We expected mines and were on the look-out for them and the annoying thing about this one was that it didn't explode when the leading jeep rode over it. Popski drove over it first, then Petrie; neither of them set it off. Weldon came third in his lumbering 3-tonner, naturally thought the way was clear and followed. His much heavier front wheel exploded the deeply buried mine. There was a sudden flash, a loud explosion and Weldon felt himself being tossed about like a cork on an angry wave as the front of his truck violently plunged and reared.

Popski and Petrie looked round when they heard the explosion behind them ... and looked at each other; the rest of us stopped behind Weldon's halted 3-tonner. Jock Welsh, the fitter, jumped from Davies' truck and ran to Weldon's to inspect the damage; one wheel was buckled, the front axle twisted and rusty water dripped ominously from the radiator.

'That shook you, Weldon,' Welsh laughed heartlessly.

'That shook 'im,' chorused Davies and Robinson.

But Weldon just sat with his fingers to his ears, shaking his head and opening and closing his mouth, too literally shaken to appreciate the joke; nor was he ever the same again.

'They've discovered a dump of Italian mines, Bob,' Popski informed me the following day when we were comfortably leaguered in the oasis, 'L.R.D.G. want you to blow it up. See that you make a good job of it.'

'You leave it to me, Popski.'

I went in search of Waterson.

'Get some eight-o-eight, Sarge. We've got to blow a mine dump.'

The mines were in a cavern in the sand dunes on the outskirts of the oasis. I stooped at the mouth and peered inside. When my eyes grew accustomed to the inner gloom, I distinguished tier upon tier of long,

blue-black Italian road mines. 'This should go up with a nice bang, Sarge,' I smiled. 'How much eight-o-eight do you think?'

Sergeant Waterson bent and surveyed the dump with his piercing blue eye.

'A pound, sir?' he suggested.

'Let's make it two,' I said, 'just to be sure. Popski wants us to make a good job of it.' (A quarter of a pound would have been ample!)

Plastic 808 high explosive comes in quarter-pound rolls, wrapped in greaseproof paper. Dark brown in colour, pliable, it could easily be mistaken for toffee. We tied eight rolls together, stuck in a couple of detonators and connected up a long fuse. I laid the lethal charge inside the mouth of the cave, against the first tier of mines.

'Ready?'

I touched off the fuse and we walked quickly away....

The dunes suddenly erupted in a great mushroom of billowing sand and smoke, just like the pictures of the first atom bomb on Bikini, and a thunderous explosion reverberated through the oasis – breaking every window in the L.R.D.G. quartermaster stores (the one-time Italian barracks) a quarter of a mile away!

Popski dropped a bombshell in my lap early the following morning.

'L.R.D.G. are sending patrols into the Jebel Nefusa,' he told me. 'I'm sending Corporal Locke and two jeeps with Hunter's patrol. Waterson and I in the other two jeeps will go with Lazarus. You'll stay here and have the 3-tonner repaired.'

I jibbed. I remonstrated. I cajoled. I pleaded. I begged. Finally, I cursed and I swore.

Popski was adamant.

'The second-in-command's job,' he informed me disarmingly, 'is to be second-in-command. We can't both go, Bob. One of us must stay behind. Who will command P.P.A. if we both get bumped off?'

I glowered at him rebelliously.

'It's only a reconnaissance, Bob,' he soothed. 'You'll be in on it when we start raiding. In the meantime get the 3-tonner fixed up and everything ready to move.'

Reluctantly, I gave up my jeep and watched Popski, Waterson, Locke and Petrie get ready to move out. Heartbroken, I watched the spare-wheel bracket of the last jeep disappear amongst the sand dunes; and turned and called for Fitter Welsh.

'Come on, Jock,' I said miserably, 'let's get this mucking 3-tonner fixed up.'

3

Popski and the others had been gone five days. The damaged 3-tonner was repaired and, with its twin, loaded and ready to move at a moment's notice. I was sitting disconsolately in the shade of a date palm doodling in the sand with a sliver of stick when I heard a shout.

I looked up ... and my depression lifted.

Jan Caneri was striding towards me, swinging a bulging army haversack, a broad grin on his bespectacled, desert-tanned face.

I jumped up and ran to meet him. I hadn't seen him for months.

'Jan!' I exclaimed delightedly, slapping him on the back. 'Where did you spring from?'

'I was in El Agheila, Bob,' he explained in his slightly French-accented English. 'I saw an L.R.D.G. convoy come in. One of the drivers told me Popski was in Zella so I cadged a lift and 'ere I am. Where's Popski?'

I told him, and we sat down under the palm tree.

When World War II broke out, Monsieur Jean Caneri, a French citizen with a law degree from the Sorbonne, was serving his term of conscription as a sergeant in the French Army in Syria. When France fell he deserted from the Vichy regime, made his way to Cairo and joined the Allied forces in the Middle East. Like Popski, he was commissioned in the General List and posted to the Libyan Arab Force, where we met. Itching to do something to restore the fair name of France and finding scope somewhat limited in the Libyan Arab Force (detailed for guard duties on the L. of C), he transferred to Special Operations and for the past few months had been trying to sink ships in Benghazi harbour. Humorous, a trifle cynical, hard-working, able to cut through to the heart of a problem with his logical French brain, Jan gradually assumed control of the administrative side of P.P.A. and, as we grew, ran the unit with meticulous efficiency. He was twenty-seven years old, unmarried, five foot nine, of athletic build and physically fit, with steady, unwavering eyes that weighed you up while you talked; he wasn't a man you could fool easily.

'How did you get on, Jan?' I asked, eager to hear what he'd done.

He laughed, threw back his head, opened his hands French fashion and ejaculated, 'Pough.'

‘Look, Bob,’ he explained deprecatingly, ‘we’d to come in from the Jebel at night, get into the harbour, crawl past the sentries, swim out to the ships under water, attach the limpets under the water line, set the timefuses, swim back, crawl past the sentries again, walk through the town and get back into the Jebel before daylight.’

‘Did you sink any ships?’

‘Pough. Of course not. The harbour was too well guarded.’

Jan wiped his hands French fashion, dismissing the subject.

‘Tell me about P.P.A.’

I told him about our antics since leaving Cairo.

‘We hold the record, Jan. Eleven days to Kufra.’

‘Eleven days! Popski must ‘ave been furious.’

‘He was.’

Pause.

‘What’s Popski planning to do, Bob?’

‘Raids behind the Mareth Line.’

‘Tough.’

I nodded in the direction of the 3-tonners.

‘We’ve got enough eight-o-eight to blow up the whole of Tunisia.’

‘Tough.’

We were silent for a time, lost in contemplation of the infinite destructive power wrapped up in quarter-pound, grease-papered rolls in the 3-tonners.

‘We struck a mine coming into the oasis...’

I told him about Weldon’s truck and about blowing up the mine dump and breaking the windows in the quartermaster stores.

‘You wouldn’t be very popular, Bob,’ he laughed when I’d finished.

‘I wasn’t.’

The shadows crept out from the date palms and the strange hush of sunset settled over the oasis, rendering everything mysterious in the marching change of colours.

‘I’ve got a bottle of wiski,’ Jan inconsequently announced.

‘What are we waiting for?’ I asked.

Jan fumbled with the straps of his haversack and produced a bottle of Johnnie Walker. He unscrewed the metal cap and held the bottle under my nose.

‘Cheers,’ I said, taking a swig.

‘*Santi*,’ said Jan, taking a mouthful.

It was sun-downer time and we weren’t on duty.

‘All the best,’ I said, taking another swig.

'A *Popski*,' Jan toasted, putting the bottle to his lips.

We were getting into our stride.

'A *la Huitieme Armie*,' Jan proposed, taking another pull.

'To the Eighth Army,' I replied, following his example.

Now we were off.

'A *Monty*,' swig.

'To Monty,' swig.

'A *la victoire*,' swig.

'To victory,' swig.

'A *le Pey Pey Ah*,' swig.

'To P.P.A.,' swig.

'A *le L.R.D.G.*,' swig.

'To the L.R.D.G.,' swig.

We regarded the inch of whisky left in the bottle.

'Not worth keeping,' I suggested.

Jan nodded and passed the bottle to me.

'To Jan Caneri,' swig.

'A *Bob Yunnie*,' swig.

We shared the last mouthful, stuck the empty bottle in the sand and walked unsteadily through the oasis towards the L.R.D.G. mess for dinner.

Eighth Army was still gathering momentum on the coast, carrying all before it. Zella, in turn, became obsolete and L.R.D.G. headquarters moved up to Hon, the next oasis, 100 miles further west; the tail of P.P.A. went also, tagged on like a spare part to an L.R.D.G. patrol.

We drove through an alien land. Gone were the billiard-table smooth stretches of virgin sand over which we could zoom at speed; gone were the glorious crested dunes through which we could plunge like ships at sea. We drove through a land of rough, black rock, of scorching, flinty plateaux, of sultry, airless ravines, an evil, abandoned, inhospitable country of sharp, knife-edged boulders that ripped and punctured our tyres. We had blow-outs all the way and it took us nearly as long to jolt the 100 miles from Zella to Hon as to skim the 500 between Kufra and Zella.

We had news of Popski at Hon, and met him later at Shweref. He'd been in trouble. Patrolling up the wadi Zemez towards the coast they'd been stalked from the rear by German armoured cars ('Oh, Popski!'). In the running fight that developed, the patrol was scattered, one man, Binney, was captured and they lost a P.P.A. jeep and an L.R.D.G. 30cwt. Chevrolet truck. Popski wasn't a bit depressed. The men had had valuable battle experience and Waterson, justifying Popski's faith in him, had proved

himself a tower of strength in a tight corner. The loss of the jeep was annoying – jeeps were precious things in those days – but the loss of valuable equipment never worried Popski. ‘War is wasteful,’ he used to say. ‘You can replace jeeps and equipment, Bob. You can’t replace experienced men.’

Further north, Locke, also, had proved himself when his jeep fell over an escarpment and he rescued it with all its equipment in the face of enemy machine-gun fire; with a fresh scar on his cheek to keep the black eye patch company, he looked more like a pirate than ever.

And now there was a worthwhile job to do. General Montgomery planned to outflank the Mareth Line – his famous ‘Left Hook’ – and urgently required a reconnaissance made of the route for the armour; when that was accomplished P.P.A. would remain in the area to carry out raids on enemy airfields and landing grounds in southern Tunisia.

We reorganized quickly and set out – P.P.A. and an L.R.D.G. patrol of New Zealanders commanded by Lieutenant Tinker – thirteen vehicles in all, an ill-fated number.

From where we stood smoking and talking amongst the acacia bushes of the wadi Shweref, Mareth was 400 miles northwest as the crow flies, but we couldn’t go as the crow flew; we had to take a wider sweep westwards in order to cross the Tunisian border between enemy-held Ghadames and Nalut, and then curve north towards Mareth, a total distance of 500 miles to the southern tip of the Mareth defences.

Our route lay across unknown, uncharted country; we were the first wheeled patrol ever to pass that way – across the great plateau of the Homada el Homra, the Red Desert, so called because of its gravel formation of reddish granules that turn blood-red in the rays of the setting sun, a breathtaking, incredible, unforgettable picture as the sun goes down. Imagine a vast lake of venous blood overshadowed by crepusculating waves of violet light touching a burnished horizon of flashing gold and racing banners of scarlet; imagine black towers of basalt rearing nightmarish shapes above the stagnant ocean of blood – bent old men, crouching tigers, charging horsemen, lone scouting wolves, witches’ hats; imagine an overhanging dome of palest duck-egg blue tinged with apple-green lavishly studded with scintillating diamonds; imagine an all-enveloping deathly hush, an empty, terrifying, universal silence and you have some idea of the incredible Homada el Homra at sunset; a place of awe and majesty.

We came to the edge of this plateau late in the afternoon and crawled along its bloody escarpment searching for a way to the plain below. Five

hundred feet lower, the shadowy Tunisian plain stretched towards the sand dunes of the Grand Erg Oriental and the limitless sands of the vast Sahara Desert. A writhing spume of dust rose from the plain, denoting a German or Italian armoured car moving north from Ghadames towards Tripoli.

Bathed in reflected blood-red light we walked along the edge of the Homada, looking for an exit.

‘There must be a way down, Tinker,’ Popski said.

Eventually Tinker found one, a fearsome gully, an open gash in the steep cliffs of the escarpment blocked by scree and fallen rocks.

‘If we clear the rubble away, Popski, this’ll just about do.’

Caneri and I peered over Tinker’s shoulder into the dark maw of the gully and looked at one another. What must be, must be....

Spades scraped, pick axes clinked and boulders crashed in the ravine, booming and echoing loudly as they bounced from rock to rock....

‘What a mucking din,’ panted Waterson. ‘They’ll hear us in Nate.’

The men sweated and heaved in the blood-red glow like figures in a Wagnerian scene.... When the last obstructing boulder had thundered down the gully and the mounds of scree had been levelled, Popski turned to Bill Wilson.

‘Right, Wilson. Down you go.’

Bill Wilson swallowed hard and nosed his jeep gingerly over the escarpment.... From the bed of the gully where I was standing, looking up, it seemed impossible that the jeep could remain on its four wheels, but must nose dive and topple over; all I could see was a dark jeep-like shape canted at a frightful angle in silhouette against the stars with Bill Wilson’s bodyless head and shoulders hanging from the sky. ‘Christ,’ I thought, ‘he’ll topple over,’ and I waited for the crash....

But Bill Wilson kept his head and that jeep came down on all four wheels inch by screeching inch without a thing going wrong. In perfect traction – lowest low booster gear with brakes half on – he crawled down the gully like a fly on a wall....

I backed down in front of him, step by step, until he was past the steepest part, then I stood aside and waved him on.

‘Well done, Bill,’ I whispered as he scrunched darkly past.

‘Muckin’ good things these jeeps, sirr,’ he whispered back, pleased as punch with his effort.

‘Take your time, Bill. Go a couple of hundred yards at the bottom and wait. Look out for boulders coming down.’

I watched Wilson fade into the abyss and climbed up the scree to guide the next jeep down ... the thin screech of half-applied brakes echoed from below like the wailing of a soul in torment....

The jeeps crawled safely down, followed by the manoeuvrable L.R.D.G. 30cwt. trucks, expertly handled by their experienced New Zealand drivers; then the two overloaded P.P.A. 3-tonners.

Weldon's came first ... suspended from the stars ... filling the mouth of the gully with its dark bulk ... screeching ... slipping ... slithering ... stopping ... poised for one mad, hurtling, screaming dive into the plain... I watched nervously, ready to jump quickly aside if it got out of control ... it was full of eight-o-eight ... screech ... slither ... sideslip. ('Oh, God. He's had it.') One of the rear wheels bumped over a sharp rock and glanced off ... the truck swayed dangerously ... almost toppling.... Weldon braked and gripped the steering-wheel, gritting his teeth ... the heavy truck steadied in its path and came down inch by inch ... screech ... scrunch ... slither ... inch by agonizing inch....

It was dark by the time we were all gathered at the base of the escarpment. Had we been heard coming down? Would an enemy patrol be lying in wait for us on the road? We each had our private fears and kept them to ourselves.

Muted whispers floated from truck to truck, mingling with the softly popping note of the exhausts.

'Ready, Tinker?'

'O.K., Popski.'

'All set, Jan?'

'Ready, Weldon?'

'O.K., Sarge.'

'All ready, sir.'

Engines revved quietly, gears snicked, men settled comfortably into their seats....

Tinker led, followed by Popski, then Jan Caneri with an L.R.D.G. jeep behind him; then the five L.R.D.G. 30cwt trucks, followed by the two lumbering P.P.A. 3-tonners trailed by Waterson; Bill Wilson and I brought up the rear with the eagle-eyed Mohammed Mustapha sitting at our backs making sure no German armoured cars surprised us from the rear....

We moved across the uneven surface of the dark Tunisian plain, a ghost train of shadowy, blacked-out, creaking trucks, ten yards apart, swishing past bushes, lurching into hollows, jolting over hummocks and stones....

The drivers sat hunched behind their steering-wheels peering at the jogging tailboard of the shadowy vehicle in front; gunners and spare men searched the surrounding darkness, looking and listening for signs of the enemy. Nobody spoke. There wasn't a sound but the drooling note of exhausts, the creak and bump of chassis, the swish of scratching bushes. There was no moon. Overhead in an inky vault, a million points of winking light faintly illumined our way; we sat taut, keyed-up, alert, apprehensive, but enjoying the excitement of a dangerous situation.... When we reached the desert road between Ghadames and Tripoli, Tinker held up a hand and the column halted behind him, the rear trucks crowding up on those in front. Tinker scouted ahead in the darkness and we sat in our trucks waiting and watching, tensed for the burst of machine-gun fire that might come tearing out of the night....

But nothing happened. The road was deserted. Tinker returned, took his place at the head of the column and we followed him across the sandy road one at a time, feeling like boys stealing a march when the teacher's back is turned. When the last truck was across, the column halted again and waited, on tenterhooks, whilst the three Senussi ran back to the road and obliterated our tracks with their *jerds*....

We drove all night, hour after hour, in unrelieved concentration.

Visibility was limited to the blurred outline of the truck in front and to about 20 yards of shadowy scrub desert on either side. Thorn bushes clutched at us out of the gloom or suddenly appeared directly in front and vanished under our prancing radiators, smacking and tugging at the undercarriage as we rode over them. We halted for a few minutes about midnight to change drivers and stretch cramped muscles, then on again, mile after mile, lurching and jolting and creaking, nodding with fatigue in the small hours and jerking ourselves awake....

Dawn surged out of the east, a rapid paling of the darkness, a fading of the stars, followed by a quick uprush of flashing, golden light and we found ourselves adrift in a grey sea of rolling white-flecked waves, a vast expanse of undulating scrub about a foot high set in wave-like motion by the gentle dawn wind that came out of the east like a giant's breath.

'Camouflage nets, everybody,' Popski warned. 'They may have aircraft about. Keep a sharp look-out.'

We draped green and khaki fishermen's nets over the trucks to break up the give-away shadow seen from the air, filled up petrol tanks, breakfasted and snatched a few hours' uneasy sleep; then on again with look-out men on the backs of the trucks searching the cloudless sky for enemy aircraft....

The scrub grew thicker and taller as we advanced across the uninhabited plain. It was tough and wiry, dry as tinder. It didn't interfere with the bigger trucks but played havoc with the low-slung jeeps, catching round the driving shaft and collecting in the hot space between gear box and exhaust pipe.

'Bob! Your jeep's on fire,' cried Jan Caneri, pointing to the smoke pouring from under my jeep. We were travelling in V-formation with Tinker and Popski at the apex and Jan and I tailing opposite legs.

'So's yours!' I yelled back, indicating the smoke coming from his own jeep. Then we noticed that smoke was spewing from all the jeeps.

We stopped and located the trouble – an accumulation of tindery stalks between gear box and hot exhaust pipe, smoking furiously, ready to ignite....

Before we had covered a mile, smoke was pouring from the jeeps again. Every mile or so we were forced to stop and clean out the accumulation of brittle stalks (lest they ignite and set the jeeps on fire), lying on our backs on the scorching scrub, getting dust in our eyes and burning our hands on the exhaust pipes....

And then we came to the dunes of the Grand Erg, the Tunisian outriders of the great Sahara sand sea. We saw the dunes ahead of us one morning as we brushed across the scrub, a tumultuous sea of crested ochre waves dancing in the heat haze. We stopped to look at them, shading our eyes from the glare. They stretched to the far horizon, wave upon wave of them, like a giant ploughed field lying athwart our advance.

'Cor blimey,' exclaimed Driver Bell (no longer Popski's driver), 'do we have to cross that lot?'

'Don't like the look of them dunes,' observed Driver Davies from the seat of his heavy 3-tonner.

'This'll make 'em sweat,' grinned Sergeant Waterson, rubbing his hands. 'Plenty of spade-work.'

The crossing was a nightmare. The dunes weren't high, but the sand was soft and the distance between crests just sufficient to belly the trucks so that we progressed in jerks, like this: front wheels over crest ... lurch ... bump ... chassis bellied ... dig away sand.... 'Take 'er away' ... lurch forward ... front wheels over the next crest ... bump.... 'Muck it' ... chassis bellied ... dig away sand....

So we progressed throughout a never-ending day. Wind blew, swirling the loosened sand into our eyes, up our nostrils, down our parched throats. A pitiless sun blazed, scorching our bent backs, burning our hands, when we forgot and touched blistering metal; and there was no

respite, only an endless repetition of lurch ... bump ... dig ... sweat, from sand dune to sand dune.... And when we'd bellied through the final crest and were released from the agony, there was the rolling scrub again and stopping every mile to de-scrub the smoking jeeps....

Why did we do it? Why, though we cursed and swore outwardly, did we enjoy every minute of it inwardly? Why? Because it was different, because it was adventure, because it was something no one else had done; we were right up in front, in advance of the main army, undertaking a difficult and dangerous task. Not one of us would willingly have been anywhere else.

A hundred miles south of the Mareth Line we met our first Tunisian Arabs, the first human beings we had encountered since leaving Shwerref, poorly clad, half-starved, miserable, shifty-eyed wretches who peered at us suspiciously through glaucomatous eyes and held out their hands for food; quite different from the proud Senussi of Libya. Our Senussi talked to them in dialect and it was interesting to observe the undisguised contempt in which they held their Tunisian brethren. 'Basas,' Mohammed Mustapha whispered to me when we drove on (informers, spies). The Tunisian Arabs under French colonial rule were disaffected and we soon had proof of their disaffection.

Later that same day we leaguered in a wadi 60 miles south of Matmata, the southern apex of the Mareth defences. The wadi was only a fissure in the flat plain, a shallow crack between sandstone walls with a sandy bottom and a few stunted bushes, but it offered cover. We dispersed the trucks close to the bushes and draped them in their camouflage nets.

Popski beckoned and we gathered round him.

'We are 60 miles from the Mareth Line,' he said. 'Tinker, Jan Caneri and I in three jeeps will make the reconnaissance. The rest of you will remain here until we return. Captain Yunnie is in charge. Stay by your trucks and don't move about. Remember you are in enemy territory.'

The men serviced their trucks and cleaned guns. The cooks prepared a meal. The reconnaissance party got ready to move out.

I had words with Popski.

'It isn't fair, Popski,' I complained, 'I stayed behind last time. It's my turn to go. I'm missing all the fun.'

'You'll get plenty of fun later, Bob,' he assured me. 'More than you bargain for. In the meantime, I want you to make up a supply of Lewis bombs.'

'Why can't Jan Caneri do it?'

‘Because you’re second-in-command and because I say so.’ Popski became a trifle nettled. I saw I’d gone far enough and desisted. I watched the three jeeps drive away. ‘One day,’ I promised myself as I waved good luck to Caneri, ‘I’ll have my own patrol and go out by myself and have fun.’

Lewis bombs were the invention of a special operations officer in the Middle East, Captain Lewis, and were used for blowing up enemy aircraft on airfields and landing grounds. They were simple to make and very effective.

Recipe: 1 lb of plastic 808.
1 cupful of motor oil.
3 ounces of phosphorous.

Mix plastic and motor oil into a thick dough, sprinkle with phosphorous and mould into a ball. Put into an army ration bag, add detonator and delayed time fuse. Place on wing of enemy aircraft close to fuselage (above petrol tank) at dead of night, set timefuse and be miles away from landing ground when bomb explodes.

As the exhaust notes of the reconnaissance jeeps died away Sergeant Waterson and I sat down in the shade of Weldon’s 3-tonner and started to make Lewis bombs.

We unwrapped a hundred sticks of eight-o-eight onto an army ground sheet, poured a canful of old motor oil over them and squeezed and walloped and pressed and kneaded the filthy mess into a thick, evil-smelling dough.

‘Like treacle toffee,’ I remarked, picking up a lump and slapping it down.

‘What would happen if you ate a piece by mistake?’ Waterson wanted to know.

‘Don’t know, Sarge. Probably make you sick. Safer to be a non-smoker, I should think.’

We pounded and patted the putty-like dough, tearing it apart, joining it together like plasticine, rubbing and rolling it into a black, oily consistency.

‘That’ll do, I think, Sarge. Get the ration bags and the incendiaries.’

Waterson emptied the contents of half a dozen incendiary bombs on to the groundsheet. I made the dough into balls of approximately 1 lb in weight. Waterson held the mouths of the ration bags open; I dabbed the plastic balls in the phosphorous and dropped them inside. Later, we tied the necks of the bags and made up an equal number of time fuses.

'Right, Sarge,' I said when we'd finished, 'stow these in a safe place. If we blow up a plane with each one we'll do well.'

Sergeant Waterson put the twenty-five Lewis bombs in one 3-tonner and the twenty-five time fuses in the other.

An hour later I had a blinding headache, a most unusual thing for me.

'Have you got a headache, Sarge?' I asked Waterson.

'Yes, sir. Bloody awful.'

'Anybody else got one?'

We asked the crews.

'Got a headache, Jock?'

'No, sir.'

'Got a headache, Wilson?'

'No, sir.'

'Got a headache, Davies?'

'No, sir.'

The men looked at us, wondering why we were suddenly so solicitous of their welfare. I looked at Waterson, holding his head in his hands.

'Must be that bloody eight-o-eight, Sarge.'

I smelt my hands. They had a curious, cloying, metallic odour and when I put them close to my nose my head throbbed all the more.

'It's that bloody eight-o-eight. Smell it.'

Sergeant Waterson smelt his hands, and reeled back.

'Does it make your head throb?' I asked him.

Waterson nodded painfully.

'By Christ, it does.'

As the afternoon wore on our headaches grew steadily worse – a blinding, throbbing, splitting kind of headache that throbbed whenever we moved.

'This'll send me crackers,' Waterson groaned, rocking backwards and forwards on his heels in the shade of a bush.

'Think how you'd feel if you'd eaten a bit, Sarge. There's your answer.'

Towards evening the throbbing subsided and we woke next morning with clear heads; nor had we any after-effects.

'Plastic eight-o-eight,' the Middle East Special Operations Training School instructor was saying in Cairo, 'never touch it with your bare hands. Gives you a vile headache. Always use rubber gloves.'

Time hung heavily. Having made up a supply of Lewis bombs, cleaned guns and serviced the vehicles there was nothing for us to do but wait. We couldn't move about for fear of being discovered and the wadi was a sun trap; sitting in it was like sitting in an oven, being baked.

I felt uneasy.

Arabs from the encampment we'd passed the previous morning had come to take a look at us. They didn't venture into the wadi, but remained at some distance, watching.

I saw their heads bobbing on the skyline every time I looked up; not that there was anything particularly unusual about Arabs looking at us. At different times and in different places, Arabs had been looking at us ever since we'd left Cairo, but I remembered Mohammed Mustapha's whispered warning that these Arabs were probably spies and informers. I called Mohammed over to my bush.

'These bedouin, Mohammed,' I said. 'What should we do about them?'

The best thing to do, Mohammed thought, was to cut their throats, but we couldn't do that, he said, because there would be more bedouin in the vicinity and if we killed these ones or held them prisoner their relatives would come looking for them and we couldn't kill or imprison all the bedouin in southern Tunisia. 'Ignore them, Captain,' he advised. 'They are spies and informers, but what can we do? If we hold these, more will take their place. Less harm will come from ignoring than from antagonizing them. Leave well alone.'

It was sound advice and I took it. I had no desire to be attacked by hostile Arabs. In any case the damage had already been done.

We were having breakfast early the following morning, sitting by our camouflaged trucks eating fried bacon and biscuit when Waterson stopped chewing, put up a warning finger and listened intently.

'Aircraft, sir,' he intoned ominously.

We all stopped eating and listened intently. We heard the unmistakable drone ... drone ... drone of aircraft engines.

'Quick!' I cried. 'Push everything under cover.'

An enamel mug, a mess tin, anything with a bright, shiny surface glints in the sun and can be seen from a searching aeroplane. We gathered up all cooking and eating utensils, all pieces of equipment and pushed them beneath the trucks. Upturned human faces can also be seen from the air.

'Under your camouflage nets,' I said, 'keep your faces down.'

Our rule in enemy territory was not to fire at aircraft unless fired upon. If we kept still and they didn't see us all would be well.

Drone ... drone ... drone....

We sat under our camouflage nets listening to the Messerschmitts coming closer and closer ... keeping our heads down.... We could have saved ourselves the trouble. Informed of our presence by the bedouin, the

Luftwaffe pilots knew exactly where to find us. They zoomed overhead at 1,000 feet, turned steeply and dived out of the sun.

D-r-r-r-r-r-r.... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r. Bullets spattered in the wadi, kicking up sand ... little scarlet darts pinged viciously past our ears and ricocheted off the sides of the trucks ... incendiary bullets pierced petrol tanks and petrol cans.... Weldon's 3-tonner was loaded with eight-o-eight ... two Messerschmitts roared past, swaying the bushes with the wind of their passage....

Tearing off camouflage nets, we leapt to our well-oiled guns.... Brrrrrrrrt... brrrrrrrrt.... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r.... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r ... we didn't stand a chance ... as soon as one plane cannoned its way out of the wadi the second one came in, keeping our heads down.... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r. One by one our trucks burst into flames ... out of the corner of my eye I saw a New Zealand gunner aim his captured 20mm Breda at an oncoming Messerschmitt.... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r.... I saw him leap aside as his truck caught fire ... blazing petrol cans somersaulted through the air ... ammunition popped ... spare wheels, water cans, tins of bully beef, pieces of engine fell about our dodging heads.... I tried to save the wireless jeep, but a blazing petrol can tumbled into it. I heard Waterson's commanding 'Look out, sir,' just in time ... later, I couldn't get near it for the heat ... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r-r ... D-r-r-r-r-r-r-r ... the Messerschmitts roared up and down the wadi, pumping tracer and incendiary bullets into our trucks ... we fired wildly at them and ducked out of the way....

It was all over in ten minutes. In less time than it has taken me to write this passage, the Messerschmitts were heading for home. Every one of our nine trucks was a blazing wreck and nine columns of black smoke rose into the still morning air proclaiming our position for miles around....

Following upon the clatter of machine-gun fire and the roar of aircraft engines a deathly silence now filled the wadi, broken only by the sultry crackling of the burning trucks.

'Christ Almighty,' ejaculated Waterson, surveying the scene. 'What a mucking picnic!'

'Jesus!' breathed Driver Davies emerging from a bush.

'The mucking bastards,' swore Fitter Welsh indignantly when he saw the burning remains of his prized 3-tonners.

'Anybody wounded?' I shouted.

'Yes,' Sergeant Garven (L.R.D.G.) called out. 'Two jokers down here.'

Two of the New Zealanders were wounded in the legs. We applied field dressings and made them comfortable in the shade of a bush....