

# THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP

— 1940-1945 —

PROVIDENCE THEIR GUIDE



**MAJOR-GENERAL DAVID LLOYD OWEN**

INTRODUCTION BY SIR JOHN KEEGAN

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THEIR GUIDE

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LONG RANGE  
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1940-45

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by

Major-General David Lloyd Owen  
CB, DSO, OBE, MC

With a Foreword by General Sir Hackett  
GCB, CBE, DSO, MC  
and introduction by  
Sir John Keegan



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## **Dedication**

Officers and men from the British Army, from the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force and from Southern Rhodesia served with the Long Range Desert Group during that unit's five years existence in the Second World War. This book is primarily dedicated to them.

But none of us will forget the many brave and generous people, in the countries where we operated, who so often gave us much needed help at frightful risk to themselves.

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# Foreword

by General Sir John Hackett

Nothing throws a clearer light upon the characteristics of a nation than the way it goes to war, and what is revealed there is likely to be reflected to some degree in everything else it does.

The British way in war was the product of geography. The mongrel inhabitants of these off-shore islands, separated by salt water from the Continent of Europe, were forced ages ago to look to the sea, first for their very survival, and then for their prosperity. Defence, trade, the projection and advancement of the national interest as these islanders moved on towards the establishment of the world's greatest empire, all depended on the use of the sea. Wherever there was blue water there was an open flank, first for military exploitation and then for the introduction of the trader and the empire-builder. The British way in war is not that of continental nations, whose natural tendency is generally towards massive frontal action. It lies more in looking for the open flank and then making use of it, often by distant action and deep penetration. The British method lies predominantly in the oblique approach, in going round or under or over whatever stands in the way, whether in terms of physical obstruction or military forces.

In World War II the Mediterranean theatre offered an almost embarrassing choice of open flanks. There was not only the sea, offering enormous stretches of coastline often backed by useful mountains, with a plethora of islands. There was also the desert. The land battle for Africa, and for control of the southern shore of the Mediterranean, was essentially fought along a narrow coastal strip, a couple of thousand miles long but rarely more than fifty deep. To the south of it lay vast stretches of desert wasteland, little visited and largely unexplored. In these deserts there came into being one of the most remarkable of the small specialist forces spawned in such numbers and variety by the British in the Mediterranean theatre of war for the exploitation of its open flanks. This was the Long Range Desert Group. When the war in Africa came to an end and we had

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run out of desert the LRDG was to be used with great effect on sea-coasts, islands and mountains. But the deserts of Northern Africa were its cradle and its original habitat. It was here that the LRDG found the disciplines and the challenge under which it grew into a unit which in its professionalism, its level of attainment in specialist skills, its internal coherence, its very high morale and its avoidance of the public eye was in my experience unique.

David Lloyd Owen had long wanted—as had so many others—to join the Long Range Desert Group, and was taken on in July 1941. He was to finish the war in 1945 as its commander. This book of his about the LRDG, under so apt a title, is written with a restraint, and with a degree of generosity and modesty, as characteristic of the writer as of the unit he writes about. It is an enthralling document. I read it with deep enjoyment and a heightened understanding of men and events of which I already knew a good deal, and I am now grateful to be allowed to write this foreword.

It all started in the thirties, when travel by motor-car in desert places began for several young Army officers to become almost an obsession, and Ralph Bagnold, that ingenious and inventive officer of the Royal Signals, was developing better means of setting about it. Many others who served in Egypt in those years will welcome a glimpse in these pages of people some of us knew well—Teddy Mitford, Rupert Harding-Newman, Pat Clayton and Bill Kennedy Shaw (though these last two did not, I think, become soldiers till war came) and of course Guy Prendergast, whose modesty, and even shyness, made him not an easy man to get to know.

When war broke out and the early Patrols were set up out of detachments from the Brigade of Guards, the Yeomanry, Rhodesians and New Zealanders, there could hardly have been brought together men of more varied backgrounds. Of these the New Zealanders were the first, and the equally redoubtable Rhodesians came in soon afterwards. The development of high comradeship, intense loyalty to the unit and an almost fierce dedication to the task in hand—all characteristics uniformly found throughout the LRDG—was the result of careful selection from an enormous number of applicants (Lloyd Owen once had to select 12 from 700 volunteers), meticulous planning and the discipline of the task itself. Patrols worked and lived in small groups, very often hundreds of miles from each other, in a hostile environment and under frequent threat of discovery and destruction. Every member of a Patrol not only knew his own job perfectly and was able and willing to help every other man with his: he also knew exactly what was expected of him, and what he could expect from the others. The expectations were high, and were very rarely disappointed. To fall below them might mean being RTU, or 'returned to unit'. This was a dreaded punishment. In a unit where exacting requirements had to be most precisely met, the threat of it was the only sanction ever needed. It is little wonder that in spite of the efforts of Guy Prendergast (its commander from August 1941 to October 1943) and of

## FOREWORD

others to keep the LRDG away from notice, this was probably the most difficult unit to get into—as well as possibly being the most efficient—in the whole theatre.

I found myself mentioned in this narrative, and enlarge a little here because that enables me to say something more about its author. In early September 1942, after the battle of Alam al Halfa, I was brought rather reluctantly in from the desert (where I had been in the summer of 1942 having a delightful time in tanks on rearguard columns, and then as 2 I/C of an armoured regiment), to set up a new General Staff section co-ordinating the operations in the whole theatre of all British raiding forces in the Middle East. I arrived in GHQ Middle East when the disastrous combined raid on Benghazi and Tobruk (see Chapter 10) was already under way and beyond modification, let alone recall. It was too big and too complex, as both Prendergast and David Stirling had not been slow to point out. Security was bad, and (a point on which Montgomery was critical) it was commanded not by a field commander but by a committee of senior staff officers. My first big task was to pick up the pieces.

One of the pieces was David Lloyd Owen. He had been wounded in the back and arm in the last stages of the raid, and was convalescent in Cairo when I got to know him. We shared a common predicament. The manpower-planners in Whitehall had worked out a plan by which Servicemen who had been abroad for more than four years (as far as I recall) were 'entitled' to repatriation. The so-called 'entitlement' was nearer to compulsion. I had already been serving abroad for seven years, and David for nearly four. Thus we were both highly vulnerable, but neither of us wanted in the very least to be sent away from where the war was going on to where it wasn't. I pulled strings in GHQ, and, as a recently appointed Staff Officer in what was regarded as a critical appointment, got myself exempted. To get David in turn off his hook I asked for him as a GSO3 in my own staff section, and when he was appointed said he could not be spared. It worked, and he stayed, soon to go back to where he longed to be—with the LRDG in the desert. The company of this very engaging person was delightful, when I had the chance to enjoy it. He did not, however, do much staff work. In his own recollection he only drafted one signal from me, and he claims I tore it up. We had, however, achieved what we had set out to do, which was to outflank his 'entitlement'. He makes no mention of all this in his narrative. What he also omits to mention is that for his gallantry in action he had been awarded a Military Cross.

The reader of these pages will meet some great people—Olivey, Timpson, Browne, Tinker, Wilder, Croucher, Lawson, the Signals Officer Tim Heywood to whom a unit in which communication was vital owed so much, the towering figure of Jake Easonsmith and in the background the quiet, tireless, devoted personality of Guy Prendergast. The author's praise of David Stirling and his prestigious exploits with the

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SAS is both well earned and generous. In the early days, after their one and only parachute raid (which was a disaster) and before they acquired their own mobility, the SAS were carried in and out by the LRDG. But these were two very different sets of people. The SAS were raiders. The LRDG were specialists in deep reconnaissance. The SAS could act as information-gatherers too, and the LRDG, as Guy Prendergast explained to me, were the better for 'an occasional beat-up', but their rôles were different and their operations had to be kept apart. The 'Stirlings', as Guy called them, would dash in and destroy enemy aircraft on their landing-grounds, or some other equally tempting target, and wake the whole area up. When they had gone—usually leaving the desert strewn with what they had jettisoned—the enemy's patrols would come out in strength in an energetic search for them, sometimes to find and flush out instead the beautifully sited and carefully concealed observation posts of the LRDG. These two groups had enormous respect for each other, but it was better if they did not operate in close proximity. I remember behaving rather like a late-medieval Pope dividing up the maritime world between two rival seapowers along a meridian in the Atlantic. I chose a meridian in the desert. To the west of it the LRDG was to operate, the SAS only to the east.

It was in deep reconnaissance, among many other distinguished activities, that the LRDG shone with truly unrivalled brilliance. In my opinion the Road Watch was their most remarkable achievement, and I expect that most who know what they did would agree. A circuitous journey, often over a thousand miles long, would bring a Patrol up through a deep forward base, already situated well inside hostile territory, and thereafter through a series of dumps to a point where a couple of men with binoculars would be hidden a few hundred yards from the main Axis supply road. There they would stay, counting every vehicle, in any category, which went up or down and reporting the tally back to GHQ. The value of this information in the attempt to divine the enemy's intentions was quite incalculable. The skill and boldness with which it was obtained take the breath away.

War is a hideous business, brutal, cruel, ruthless and unforgiveably destructive. Like all human activities conducted on a grand scale at a high level of intensity, however, it is not without opportunities for elegance. The LRDG displayed this quality of elegance at every point. In the whole concept under which it operated, in the devising of the means to carry it out, in the exquisite precision of operational and logistical plans, in the skill and restraint with which these were executed—and above everything else in the structure of human relations built up within the unit itself—I find an elegance unique and admirable. Fortunate are those with memories of service in the LRDG, who can be reminded of it in these pages.

# **Introduction**

**by Sir John Keegan**

It is a great pleasure to write the introduction to this new edition of Major General David Lloyd Owen's memoir of the Long Range Desert Group. Part of the pleasure is personal, for I owe the author a debt of gratitude. When I joined the staff of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in 1960, David Lloyd Owen was a very senior Sandhurst figure and I was not only the most junior but also the youngest member of the instructional staff, not long out of Oxford and, having been found unfit for National Service, knowing nothing of the army at all. The General, as he now is, nevertheless took the trouble to be kind to me and to make me feel welcome. Such kindness is never forgotten.

More important, however, his invitation to contribute an introduction provides the opportunity to recall the achievements of an extraordinary organization that not only contributed greatly to the victory of the British army in the epic struggle against the Axis in the Western Desert but also helped to establish the foremost role of Special Forces in the modern military world.

Special Forces are an essentially British conception. They were born in an era of mass armies, which often wasted their valuable manpower in frontal assaults and attrition battles. The British, perhaps because they are a maritime nation, which must find entry into operational theatres by sea, or later by air, have a tradition of husbanding their quite limited manpower for operations against the enemy's flanks and weak points. Marlborough was the master of such operations. So, famously, was Wellington. His deployment of small forces against the flanks of Europe led eventually to the decisive victory of Waterloo.

The concept of indirect operations, in the aftermath of Britain's sole commitment of a mass army in the First World War, had been forgotten in this country. It was revived in the struggle against the Axis in Egypt and Libya during the crisis of the Second World War. Among several Special Forces raised to carry war to the enemy's flanks and weak points, the Long

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Range Desert Group was pre-eminent. Today, when Britain's mastery of Special Operations is universally acknowledged, it is appropriate to recognize the pioneering achievements of those who raised, led and served in the Long Range Desert Group.

## Preface

It seems extraordinary to me that it is now almost 60 years since the Long Range Desert Group was first formed in June 1940. I am only too delighted that Pen and Sword Books are publishing this revised edition of *Providence Their Guide* to mark this anniversary.

It was back in early 1974 that I happened to be in touch with a collector of medals named Christopher Jary, then aged seventeen. He had acquired a Military Medal won by a soldier in the platoon I was commanding in Palestine in 1939 and had written to me for some details of the action concerned.

Somehow the subject of the Long Range Desert Group had been introduced into our correspondence. I suppose I told Christopher that I was currently working on an account of the five years during which the unit existed during the Second World War. He in turn told his father, Sydney Jary, who wrote to me and said that he would love to read my manuscript because, while serving in Libya with The Hampshire Regiment after the war, he had become greatly attracted to the desert. He had previously fought as an infantry platoon commander from the Normandy beachhead to Bremen. Rather delightfully, I thought, he added that he had a modicum of experience of the book trade, as he was a publishing consultant. From that moment I was spurred on by father and son Jary to complete the story for them to read.

Without Christopher Jary's interest in the first place, and his father's vibrant enthusiasm throughout, I am quite sure this book would never have seen the light of day. Christopher's early interest was by no means his only contribution. He later undertook to compile the index for me; and I am greatly in his debt for the painstaking and meticulous care with which he did it.

Sydney Jary lavished on me, quite without stint, the benefit of his knowledge as a professional and as a friend. I could not have been more appreciative of his willing co-operation.

The preparation of any work for publication involves much exacting

reading and tedious checking of detail. My youngest son Christopher not only devoted hours of his free time at weekends helping me to plough through drafts and proofs, but he also came up with many sensible and original ideas for enhancing the presentation of the book generally. His wife, Antonia, was very long-suffering and patient throughout.

Among many old friends who also assisted me in various ways were two brigadiers under whom I once had the privilege to serve. Both feature in this book – Ralph Bagnold and George Davy.

None of us who knew Ralph Bagnold in the LRDG will dissent from the view that his flair, imagination and scrupulously careful eye for detail laid the foundations for our success. Even Rommel once claimed that the LRDG caused his forces more damage than any other unit of comparable strength.

Brigadier George Davy was Director of Military Operations in Cairo at the time of the raids against Benghazi, Barce and Tobruk in September 1942. His senior Staff Officer, responsible for special operations in the Mediterranean theatre of war, was Lieutenant Colonel ‘Shan’ Hackett. It remains a special joy to me that these two old friends each helped this book along.

For this edition my Publishers and I decided to retain General John Hackett’s Foreword which we feel could not be bettered. I am very grateful to John Keegan, for whom I and so many readers of military history have enormous respect, for agreeing to write an Introduction placing the role of the LRDG in context.

The Trustees of the Imperial War Museum have again kindly permitted me to make use of a large number of hitherto unpublished photographs from the LRDG collection in the Museum.

The portrait of Ralph Bagnold was taken in 1944, and I am grateful to the National Portrait Gallery for allowing me to include it.

Messrs Cassell kindly gave me permission to quote a passage from *The Campaigns of Wavell* by R M Woollcombe, which was published in 1959.

I wish to acknowledge the use made of other published works. I have listed the main ones in a select bibliography; many of the authors were friends of mine, but to all of them and their publishers I am grateful.

Agreement on the spelling of place names is always difficult. It is especially so when some of them are not to be found on pre-War maps, others are too small to merit inclusion and some names have been changed after countries achieved independence. I have used those which were in common usage at the time.

Soon after this story was first published, an Officer of the Royal West Kent Regiment got in touch with me because he was concerned that I had made no mention of the fact that his Regiment had taken part in the battle for Leros. I was unaware that they had been there because I left the island five days before the German invasion on 12 November 1943, but I undertook to look in to the matter and to correct any omission of the part played by that Regiment if ever the book was reprinted. In fact the main body of

## PREFACE

the Second Battalion was sent to the island of Samos in the Aegean on 23 September and there it remained until the night of 14 November when it was ordered by GHQ in Cairo to Leros. It was then thrown in to battle in order to try to save an already forlorn situation which resulted in the surrender of the island two days later.

Over forty years ago I began to write another story for my three sons – Michael, Piers and Christopher. I hoped that it might be of some interest to them and I prayed that they would never know the ugly horror of war. Michael now has two sons of his own, Harry and Tom, and Christopher has Edward. One day, perhaps, they might gain some inspiration by reading of the spirit of those who suffered much to win victory over evil. It was certainly worth fighting for. But they must think how tragic it was that we failed to win peace in later years.

In the Long Range Desert Group our lives often depended on the need for foresight, which Bagnold, and Prendergast after him, instilled in us. But there were few of us who did not also recognize that Providence, in the guise of the benevolent care of God, often watched over us. In those huge open expanses of desert where we operated, it did sometimes seem that the world was all before us. And we were fortunate that, more often than not, we could choose our place of rest. It is for these reasons that I took the title of this book from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. I quote the last five lines of that great work:

Som natural tears they drop'd, but wip'd them soon;  
The World was all before them, where to choose  
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide;  
They hand in hand, with wandring steps and slow,  
Through *Eden* took thir solitarie way.

Norfolk, *February 2000*

David Lloyd Owen

# Chronological Table of Events

1939–1945

## 1939

3 Sept. War declared between Britain and Germany.

## 1940

11 May National Government formed under Churchill.

27 May

– 4 June British Army evacuated from Dunkirk.

10 June Italy declares war on Great Britain and France.

23 June Bagnold given authority to form the LRDG by General Wavell.

5 Sept. First LRDG Patrol leaves on operations.

11 Dec. Wavell begins rout of Italians in the Desert.

## 1941

30 Mar. Rommel advances in Western Desert.

27 Apr. Germans enter Athens.

18 Nov. Eighth Army's first offensive.

9 Dec. Tobruk relieved.

24 Dec. Eighth Army enter Benghazi.

## 1942

20 June Tobruk captured by Rommel.

13 Sept. Raids by LRDG and SAS on Barce, Benghazi and Tobruk.

23 Oct. Eighth Army offensive at Alamein starts. German retreat begins 4 Nov.

## 1943

23 Jan. Tripoli occupied by Eighth Army.

12 May German resistance in N. Africa ends.

10 July Allied invasion of Sicily.

7 Sept. Italy surrenders.

17 Nov. Germans capture Leros.

## 1944

22 Jan. Allied landings at Anzio.

18 May Cassino captured.

4 June Allies enter Rome.

6 June Invasion of Europe.

14 Oct. British troops enter Athens.

## 1945

2 May German armies in Italy surrender.

8 May End of war against Germany.

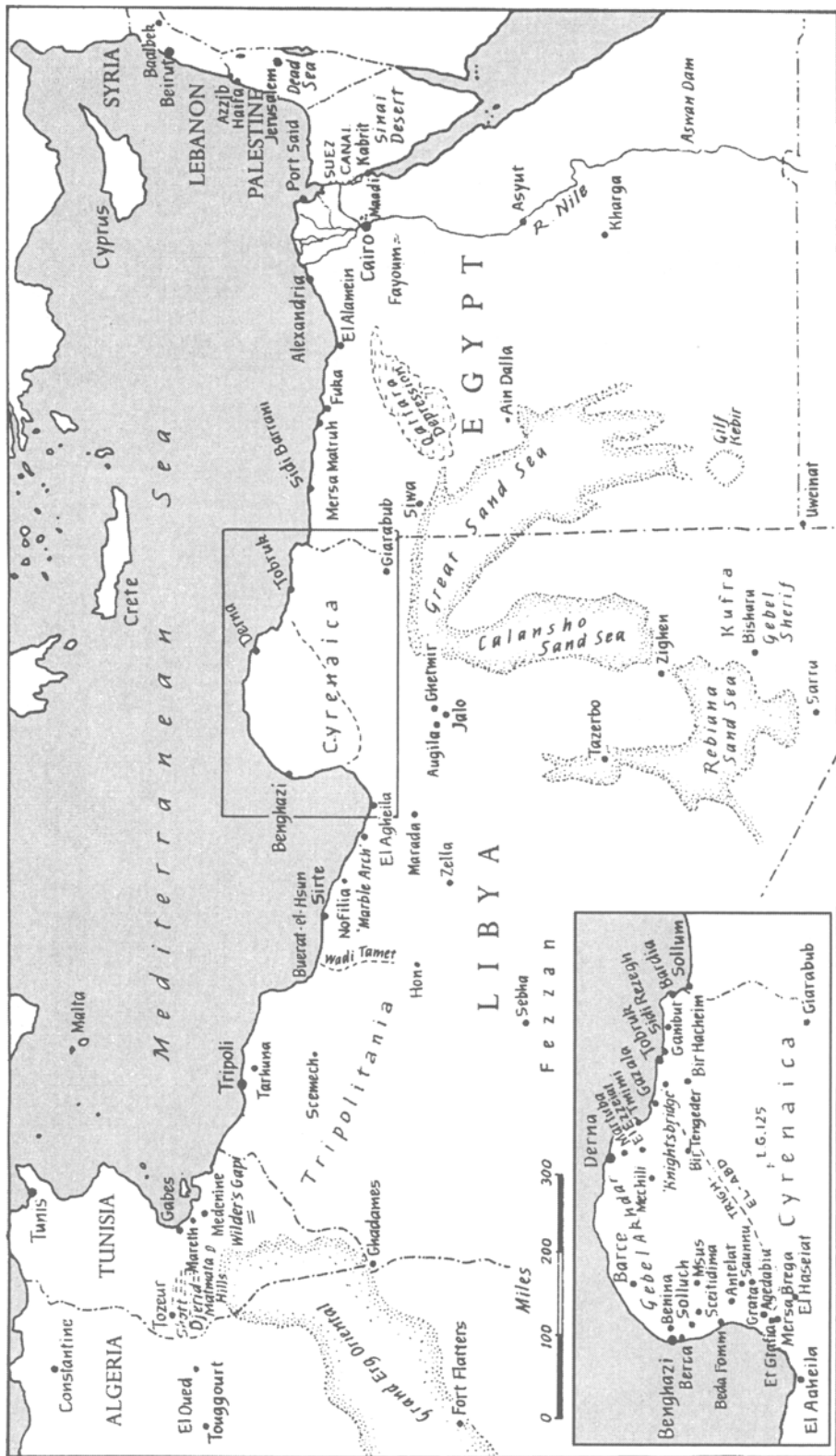
1 Aug. LRDG disbands.

14 Aug. Japan surrenders.

**PART ONE**

# **NORTH AFRICA**

**JUNE 1940 - APRIL 1943**



## CHAPTER 1

# Ralph Bagnold

In 1971 Arthur Barker Ltd published a book called *Hidden Heroes*. It was written by a New Zealander called Trevor Constable, who had been a resident of California for twenty years. The blurb on the dust jacket of this book describes the contents as being 'the story of individual courage of a high order. Dealing with little-known achievements of heroes of the two World Wars, most of the deeds of daring involve a high element of danger . . . it tells of the tremendous efforts of little-known heroes, who served in less spectacular roles but with substantial influence on events'.

One of the subjects covered by Constable in this book is Ralph Bagnold. Bagnold's only claim to fame might otherwise have been the fact that he is the brother of that well-known authoress Enid Bagnold. (And this in spite of the fact that he has himself published books.)

I am so glad that at last something of Ralph Bagnold's genius has been given due credit. I have no doubt that, because of Bagnold's exceptional knowledge of deserts, and also of the Army, General Wavell was able to take some risks which he might not otherwise have been able to take, since he had Patrols of the Long Range Desert Group to cover him.

I do not doubt either that the success of the early Long Range Desert Group operations gave a fillip to Wingate with his Chindits, Bob Laycock with his Commandos and David Stirling with his Special Air Service. These very remarkable men became famous for their exploits. But as Trevor Constable so rightly comments, 'missing from among them [the famous men] is the brilliant progenitor of all these private armies of modern times—the soldier-scientist, who conceived and built the most successful of them all—Ralph Bagnold'.

I think that Constable's comment is a very true one. But it is interesting to consider why Bagnold, and the Long Range Desert Group, are so unknown. I believe that this was because the Group, and those who served with it, were inclined to shun publicity. There were two reasons for this. One was that the need for strict security made it very undesirable for more

than the absolute minimum to be known of the unit and its activities; and the other was because of the personalities of its commanders.

Bagnold, Prendergast and Easonsmith had certain characteristics in common. They were all to some degree reticent, undemonstrative, dedicated to their duty and imbued with a natural modesty that would have made it anathema to them to have received the plaudits of the public. I think too that their example made all of us practise the art of British understatement to a very marked extent.

As I tell this story I suspect that the reader may sense this himself when I try to describe the kind of man who volunteered and was selected for this work behind the lines. I only hope that my own fascination with the subject—coupled with a desire to do it proper justice, without being influenced by bias—will not detract from the courage, endurance, patience and strength of mind of those whom this story is about.

I did not myself join the Long Range Desert Group until the end of July of 1941, and so I do not have first-hand knowledge of the early days when Bagnold raised the unit, nearly a year previously. I have therefore had to rely a great deal on the memories of those who were with him at the time, and also once again on Trevor Constable's book.

When I wrote to Ralph Bagnold asking him if he would record for me any facts about the founding of the Long Range Desert Group which had not been related elsewhere he replied in a typically modest way, that

the fullest account is that given in *Hidden Heroes*. I hesitate to mention this book because of the immoderate references to myself. You must discount these [his letter continued], as being necessary to the author if a book of this kind is to have any reasonable sale . . . the facts are correct as far as my memory goes and Constable went to a lot of trouble to get them right. He asked me for a lot of the detail including my talks with Wavell.

That statement authenticates the facts as far as these can ever be established after such a gap in time.

In the late twenties and thirties Ralph Bagnold and a small group of like-minded enthusiasts who were inspired by the magic of the desert spent a lot of time and money in exploring the areas of sand between the Mediterranean and the Sudan. Among this band were Pat Clayton, Bill Kennedy Shaw, Guy Prendergast and Rupert Harding-Newman, all of whom rejoined Bagnold when he needed them in the Long Range Desert Group. Their expeditions in those days were really very remarkable achievements, for they explored areas which had never before been crossed; and from their experiences many of the everyday items of desert equipment for the Army in the Western Desert were designed, perfected and later developed.

Bagnold was the leader and driving force behind these trips. His inventive brain produced the answers to the many problems that arose. He

designed a simple sun-compass to make navigation easier; he perfected the condenser, first invented by the Light Car Patrols of the Great War, to conserve the water in car radiators which would otherwise be lost through overheating; he thought up the ideas of sand mats and iron channels, which could be laid under the wheels to help extricate a car stuck in soft sand; and he appreciated the necessity for properly balanced rations, in order to keep healthy under extremes of heat, thirst, fatigue and strain.

Over the years these men had built up a wealth of experience, knowledge and lore about travel in the desert which was unrivalled anywhere in the world. It is a little surprising, therefore, that the man with so much practical wisdom about deserts, who had established (by sheer necessity) the four fundamentals essential for successful travel in them, was sent soon after the outbreak of war to Kenya in some routine post.

This man was Major Bagnold of the Royal Signals, who had been recalled to the Army to turn his unique energies towards scientific work connected with sand-formation. His treatise *The Physics of Blown Sand and Desert Dunes*, published in 1941, must establish him anyhow as one of the world's experts on the subject.

But he had also learnt more than this. He had such a shrewd understanding of the capabilities and limitations of human nature that he knew that he would only get the best out of it by devoted attention to what I described above as the four fundamentals essential to successful desert travel, which are also the secret if any small behind-the-line force is to triumph.

These four tenets are: the most careful and detailed planning, first-class equipment, a sound and simple communication system and a human element of rare quality. Ralph Bagnold had learnt these things the hard way in his pre-War desert ventures, and he was not the sort of man to forget them when it came to applying them to war. It was his teaching of the men who served with him in the Long Range Desert Group that made us ever mindful of every minor detail in order to ensure success.

Such qualities, of course, are not so glamorous as those of flair, élan and eye-catching strokes; but I believe that they are more enduring, and are more likely to contribute towards the achievement of continued success.

When Bagnold was on his way by troopship to Kenya a fortuitous accident in which his ship was involved in the Mediterranean sent the passengers ashore at Port Said while the badly damaged vessel was repaired. Italy had not yet come into the war, and there was little sense of urgency or tension in Cairo in those days.

But it was not to the flesh-pots of Cairo that Bagnold took the first train; it was to make contact with old friends in the Army and perhaps to find out what was going on, and whether anyone foresaw any use for his special talents and expertise. It would probably be at least a week before his troopship was overhauled, and he continued his journey through the Suez Canal to East Africa.

Bagnold went one morning to see an old friend of his—Colonel Micky Miller, who was then the Chief Signal Officer at Headquarters of British Troops in Egypt. Miller was obviously delighted to see him, having been asked to trace him by General Wavell. The latter had been appointed Commander-in-Chief of the new Middle East Command, and had read about Bagnold in a gossip column of *The Egyptian Gazette*.

An intelligent and observant reporter had noticed Bagnold in Shepherd's Hotel, and happened to know a good deal about his pre-war desert journeyings. He put two and two together and assumed that

Major Bagnold's presence in Egypt at this time seems a reassuring indication that one of the cardinal errors of 1914–18 is not to be repeated. During that war, if a man had made a name for himself as an explorer of Egyptian deserts, he would almost certainly have been sent to Jamaica to report on the possibilities of increasing rum production, or else employed digging tunnels under the Messines Ridge. Nowadays, of course, everything is done much better.

That quote was published in a column headed 'Day in Day Out' and was read by General Wavell, who then decided that he would like to see Bagnold.

It must have been a strange interview between these two taciturn characters—each a genius in his fashion, and each having the confidence necessary to overcome most difficulties placed in his way. I suppose that they both had something of the mystique of the visionary, for they were each able—as no other man at that time was able—to see the possibilities of exploiting the natural forbiddingness of the desert.

This first meeting between the two men was just long enough for Wavell, with his one good eye, to peer into and size up the material of which Ralph Bagnold was made, and for him to be convinced that there was more than might be apparent at first sight. Wavell made up his mind to have Bagnold's posting to Kenya changed so that he could keep him in Egypt, and make some proper use of his experience.

This was quickly effected, and Bagnold was posted to a Signals appointment in the 7th Armoured Division, based on Mersa Matruh, which was commanded at that time by that very great exponent of armour Major-General Percy Hobart—or 'Hobo', as he was known in military circles. Bagnold was fortunate in that he was to find himself with a commander who was as full of original and unconventional ideas as himself; and he began to think about the alarming possibilities if Marshal Graziani decided to march into Egypt with his quarter of a million men. He knew too that the Italians had garrisons at Kufra (about six hundred miles due south of the port of Derna) and at Uweinat (some two hundred miles farther south-east of Kufra, and where the borders of Egypt, Libya and the Sudan meet).

Bagnold realised that from Uweinat it was not beyond the bounds of

possibility for a strong mobile force of the enemy to move on farther east and to seize the Aswan Dam or wreck the docks and railway workshops at Wadi Halfa, thus cutting the tenuous communications between Egypt and the Sudan. At Uweinat there were landing-grounds and a good supply of water. It would only take a force three days to reach the Nile from there. Wasn't it therefore terribly important that the British should know exactly what was going on deep in the vastness of the desert south of the Great Sand Sea? And in those days there were no aircraft capable of covering these approaches to the Nile.

Bill Kennedy Shaw, who later joined Bagnold as Intelligence Officer of the Long Range Desert Group, in his admirable book covering the desert operations (*Long Range Desert Group*) writes also of the approach to Chad Province from Kufra. In Chad were immensely important airfields, which helped to sustain the Takoradi-Cairo air route along which so many aircraft were flown when the Mediterranean route was no longer safe. He goes on to guess how hard it would have been to dispose of an Italian force moving from Kufra and from Murzuk to the west down into Chad to capture Fort Lamy, and thus woo the hesitant French to their side in June 1940. All this reinforced Bagnold's burning desire to know exactly what was going on.

So he decided to analyse the problem on paper, and he came up with a solution based on the formation of specially equipped patrols capable of penetrating into these seemingly impassable wastes. He set out the organisation that he thought was necessary, and prepared three copies of his proposals. He gave the first to General Hobart in November 1939, and with the latter's prescient understanding of the situation, it is not surprising that he agreed to send Bagnold's ideas on to Headquarters in Cairo.

But Hobart was not confident that the project would be well received, and Bagnold's plans were turned down. Of course, I do not know why this was, but I imagine that it was on the grounds that there was so little available in the Middle East in the way of men or equipment that it would be foolish to dissipate what little there was in penny packets. And there always had been a rather odd aversion to anything unconventional among the majority of Regular officers.

It is interesting to read in Constable's book that the real reason why the Staff turned down Bagnold's submission was because of their ignorance about—and resultant fear of—the desert, and that they thought that this curious major in the Royal Signals was propounding theories which were either ridiculous or mad!

In January 1940, after General Hobart had been removed from command of 7th Armoured Division, Bagnold put forward his ideas to his successor. Once more they were sent on to Cairo and rejected.

It is very easy to be critical of the Staff, and to express the opinion that much valuable time in creating a Long Range Desert Group was thus lost.

It is very easy to rail at the apparent stupidity of those who were unable to see how urgent it was to have intelligence of Italian intentions. However, I have always thought that the most likely explanation for failing to do more at that time was that there was no absolute certainty that Italy would actively invade Egypt, let alone the Sudan; and anyway, even if they did surely nobody honestly believed that the Italians would venture into the unknown desert, most of which was commonly believed to be quite impassable? Bagnold knew otherwise because he had experience of it; but very, very few others had even one iota of his insight.

On 10 June 1940 much was changed for those living comfortably (as I was myself) in the peace-time luxury of the Middle East. Italy declared war after France had collapsed, and so the Mediterranean was well nigh closed to shipping. Overnight the whole strategic picture had changed immeasurably, and the dangers which Bagnold had seen so clearly were now something that had to be faced up to squarely.

On 19 June he presented his proposals once again, and it is a reflection of how much the strategic picture had altered—together with the realism that had thus been injected into the Headquarters Staff in Cairo—that on 23 June Bagnold was summoned to see General Wavell.

What a triumph this was! For so long Ralph Bagnold had been convinced that it was necessary to do something. It was not only the need to know more of what the Italians might do: he had also been evolving ideas as to how he could create a threat to their lines of communication to Kufra and Uweinat, and thus leave them jumpy, jittery and disinclined to move far from the safety of their fortified bases. Now, at last, he had the ear of the Commander-in-Chief, who fortunately was a man who understood Bagnold's arguments.

This time the two men spent longer together, for Wavell was interested in how Bagnold thought he could carry out his plans; which were to get into Libya to watch the routes to Kufra and to Uweinat. He knew that by reading the tracks of enemy vehicles he could tell exactly what sort of traffic was using the routes, and thus he would be able to deduce the volume of troop movement involved.

Bagnold's plan was based on an approach from the least expected quarter. He told Wavell that he intended to go slap through the Great Sand Sea, by a route Clayton had discovered in 1932, to the west of Ain Dalla.

Wavell quizzed Bagnold about the dangers of using a route which was shown on maps which were published, and openly obtainable in the shops in Cairo. He asked him too about how he intended to cover up his own wheel-tracks in order to avoid the chance of the enemy following up such a party. The Commander-in-Chief then inquired of him what he would do if he found no signs of undue enemy activity. The latter suggested rather tentatively that his force might profitably take some aggressive action, and carry out some piracy against enemy convoys.

It was then that Wavell must have become convinced of Bagnold's ability to do what he promised, for he suddenly asked him if he could be ready in six weeks. He was told that this deadline could be met, providing Bagnold was given absolute authority to select the men that he wanted, and to collect the very special items of equipment that he knew he must have.

What happened next in this meeting between these two men was probably the most significant factor in those formative days of the Long Range Desert Group. Wavell was obviously clear in his mind that Bagnold could give him what he wanted, and that he was not risking his money on an outsider. He therefore dictated a memorandum to the heads of all directorates and branches in his headquarters, telling them that they had his full authority to meet any demand made personally by Bagnold, and to meet it quickly and without question. He even told Bagnold that as soon as the latter was ready to start operations he was to write out his own orders for carrying out his intentions, and to bring them personally to the Commander-in-Chief.

Bagnold was virtually given a free hand, and, of course, without it he could never have been able to raise and train the Long Range Desert Group as quickly and as thoroughly as he did.

I have also written to Lt-General Sir Arthur Smith, who was Wavell's Chief of Staff at the time in question, as I was interested to find out what he might be able to remember of the meetings between the Commander-in-Chief and Bagnold some thirty years earlier. He replied that it was difficult to remember details of events which happened so long ago, but added that the account given by Woolcombe in *The Campaigns of Wavell* is accurate as far as he knew. He went on to write that the Long Range Desert Group 'was certainly the sort of enterprise that appealed to Wavell, and, incidentally, to myself. I seem to recollect difficulty in getting the necessary equipment, but that was a persisting headache not confined to the Long Range Desert Group.'

The following extracts from Woolcombe's book are, I think, of interest:

Impressed with the risk of mechanized raiding parties being sent by the Italians from the far interior of Libya across to the Upper Nile, to block our communications between Cairo and Khartoum, Major Bagnold before the end of 1939 had put forward proposals through normal military channels to Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt. These were for training a cadre of men for experimental long-range motor patrolling through the great sand seas to the inner deepness of the desert, the Libyan Desert, which was virtually the Sahara.

It appears that at that time Headquarters, British Troops in Egypt were in awe of the vast desert reaches; their minds were focused upon regular precautions inside Egypt and the war with Germany. They had a

solitary map of Libya, printed in 1915, carrying information which dated from 1873. Bagnold's proposals were turned down. He tried again in January 1940 with the same result. But then the personality of Wavell emerged from those modest rooms in Cairo, as Commander-in-Chief—and Bagnold was himself now serving in an appointment at the new GHQ. It was a simpler matter for him, when Italy entered the war, to press his case yet again. He placed the third and last copy of his plan before the Chief of Staff, Major-General Arthur Smith, who took it straightaway to Wavell.

Bagnold was sent for, and he writes that the Commander-in-Chief grinned at the scheme. Its acceptance illustrates a further feature of General Wavell's character: his gift for adapting the ideas of subordinates to his own purposes, and for allowing his subordinates full scope to carry them out, sustained by his backing but untrammelled by interference.

He signed what amounted to a blank cheque empowering Bagnold to order anything he wanted as an absolute priority from any department in Egypt, with no questions to be asked. Bagnold was instructed to be ready within six weeks and henceforth had personal access to Wavell at any time.

The cupboard of Middle East Ordnance was nearly bare. Nothing of this kind had been catered for. Specialized equipment and vehicles designed to particular specifications had to be improvised from the slender means that existed. Much had to be begged second-hand from the Egyptian Army, while a theodolite for navigation came from as far afield as Nairobi. Bagnold gathered his band: kindred spirits to lead the patrols were flown to him and commissioned on the spot, and the rest of the personnel were recruited initially from New Zealanders. There was some hurried navigational training, and at the end of August, seen off by Wavell himself, the Long Range Desert Group comprising three patrols each of two officers and twenty-eight other ranks moved in secrecy out of Cairo.

Bagnold's original fear of Italian activity directed against the Upper Nile was soon dispelled, but the patrols were brought into fresh alignment with General Wavell's aims. Their task was to harass the Italians by making trouble in any part of Libya they chose to select, to draw Italian troops and their transport, of which they were short, away from the coastal region to the defence of scattered garrisons in the deep interior. For Marshal Graziani had by this time begun his invasion of Egypt and his forces were ensconced, and seemingly mesmerized, at Sidi Barrani.

It was an extraordinary deception plan, conceived by the Commander-in-Chief and remarkably carried out, whereby the Libyan wastes became a liability to the enemy, and the few score men of the Long Range Desert Group in their trucks caused Marshal Graziani to

reinforce remote standing garrisons, consume transport, provide escorts for his inland supply columns, and to be unable to discern whether his own reports of Wavell's shortage in men and material were accurate or a trap. For this reason the work of the long-range patrols has been assessed as a main factor contributing to the failure of the Italian offensive into Egypt. [This was also the view of Brigadier Shearer, who had been Wavell's Director of Military Intelligence at GHQ in Cairo.]

A touch of the gambler . . . if there was any doubt as to what General Wavell really implied in attributing this quality to the great commanders, perhaps a panache which he himself scarcely seemed to typify, there is now an answer. After the Long Range Desert Group had been equipped there remained three machine-guns in reserve for the whole Middle East.

There have been so many dramatic and exaggerated accounts of what the Long Range Desert Group did in the desert, or of what it was reputed to have done, that I think it important to be quite clear what the role of this original and unusual new unit was. It was raised (and so remained throughout the five years of its existence) chiefly for the purpose of gathering information about the enemy behind his lines. It was never primarily intended to carry out offensive operations, which so often ruin the chance of effecting successful reconnaissance. (This is not to say that the Long Range Desert Group was not capable of taking part in harassing tasks, and the unit, of course, carried out many of them. But this was only a secondary role, when such work could rate a greater strategic priority than the gathering of intelligence.)

Bagnold raised the unit with an offensive capability in mind, and he was sage enough to know that it would probably never be easy to keep men continually operating behind the lines just watching the enemy, without ever giving them the thrill and relief of 'having a go' at him every now and then.

I have purposely rather laboured the point about the primary role of the Long Range Desert Group because I think it important to bear in mind when one comes to consider the other 'private armies' that later came into being. It has also a considerable bearing on the insistence by Bagnold—and Prendergast after him—that the Long Range Desert Group must operate only under the direction of the highest formation controlling operations in the desert. This was essential, because only at that level could the Long Range Desert Group be fitted into the overall strategic picture, and the correct priority between offensive action and intelligence work be weighed up. On top of this was the difficulty of trying to co-ordinate the work of such deeply penetrating patrols with the long-range attacks of the Royal Air Force.

With the best will in the world, there were bound to be mistakes when our Patrols were attacked by their own side from the air; but at least the