
August 2022



The Sentinel

A Special Issue

RHODESIAN S PATROL LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP CAMP AT ZIGHEN, LIBYA,

1941

By Brendan O'Carroll, LRDG author and researcher

In June 1941, the New Zealand T Patrol of the Long Range Desert Group was travelling to camp at the Libyan oasis of Tazerbo which was 252 kilometres from Kufra, in southern Libya. The oasis consisted of a few scattered palms around brackish salt ponds, though the wells supplied good subterranean water supporting a population of about 700. It was an area where the men were to experience very high temperatures and frequent dust storms. The heat was so bad at times, that salt pills had to be taken to compensate for salt loss, and the troops had to spend much of the day resting under their trucks for shade.

Trooper Dick Lewis wrote in his diary, *The wind and sun here will dry a washed towel held up at arm's length, before your arms get too tired to hold it.* Although the men were used to walking about barefoot, by noon they could not stand the heat of the sand on their feet and had to tip-toe around the place. The area was home to many scorpions and snakes, including the sand viper, the most deadly reptile in North Africa. Also, to quote Lewis, it was home to, "Large hairy spiders the size of the palm of your hand!"

On their way to Tazerbo, T Patrol stopped for a rest at the Rhodesian S Patrol LRDG camp at Zighen. Corporal Merlyn Crow wrote in his diary of arriving at their camp:

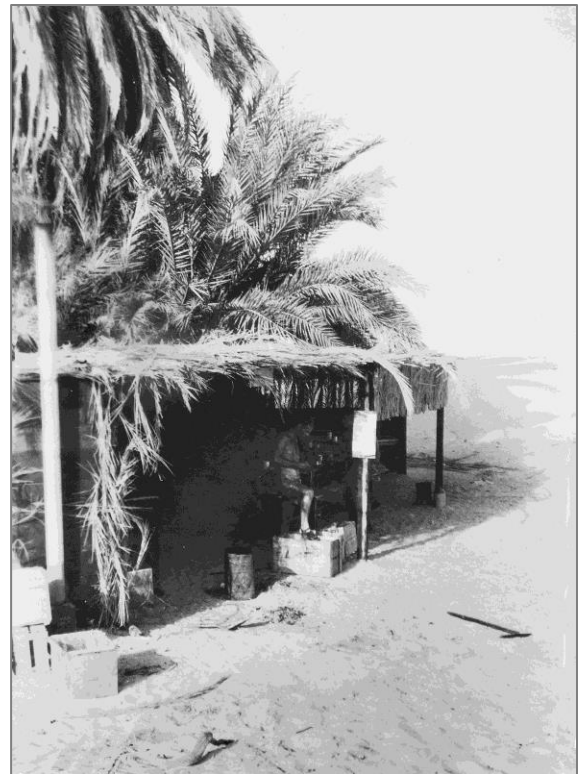
Tuesday 10th June: Arrived at Zighen and had morning tea with S Patrol. The Rhodesians have made quite a good camp and cook house with some timber they got from the Italian aerodrome a few miles away. They had even made a swimming pool by digging a hole in the sand and putting in drums around to keep the sand back. We left them and after about half an hour's drive arrived at Tazerbo where R Patrol were. We had a puncture or rather a bad bulge, so we had to change the tyre. The first one we have had on our truck. We did not camp at the village, but a few miles out. R Patrol had sunk a pipe with a pump and we had enough water.



S Patrol shelter

Trooper Frank Jopling of T Patrol recorded a detailed account of how the Rhodesian S Patrol had established a very comfortable camp at Zighen:

10th June: They have made this into a wonderful place. There is no population and only one or two palm trees. All you have to do is to scrape a hole with your hands and you can get a nice cool drink of water. It is marvellous to see nothing but sandy waste all around you and yet an abundance of water only one foot underground. However, the Rhodesians have made full use of this and have dug a swimming pool which is very cold; far colder than the one at Kufra. The 'Lookout' site is on top of a palm tree and they have put a swivel chair up there! What next! The cookhouse is really a wonderful bit of work. They got the timber from the landing ground we had passed. It is built around a palm tree and is a better kitchen than you see on some farms in NZ. They have made a stove out of a benzine drum and sand and benzine tins filled with sand. They have made a small refrigerator with a small biscuit tin inside a large one. The big one has lots of holes in it, in between the two tins is filled with charcoal which is kept wet and the evaporation



S Patrol camp, Zighen

keeps the inside tin as cool as a refrigerator. They also have a wine or should I say a rum cellar underground and they have built a big oven at the back.

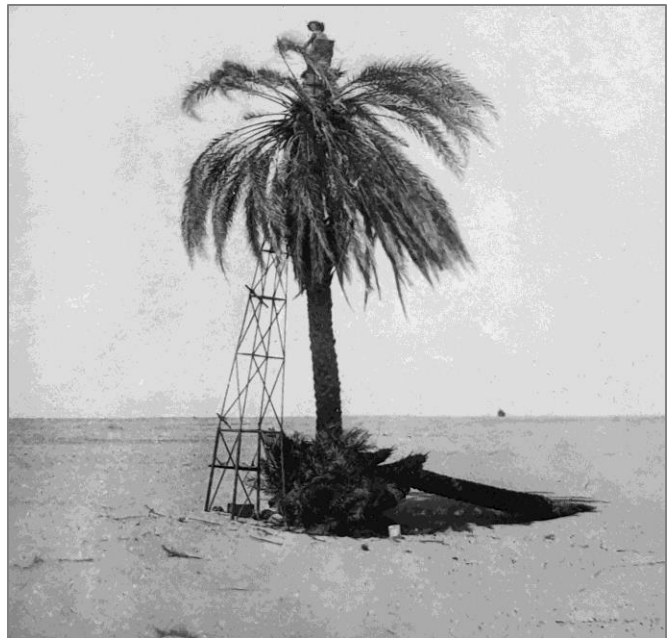
We left Zighen at 4pm and arrived at Tazerbo at 6pm after travelling 65 miles over good going all the way. When we arrived here we expected to see a lot of dirty bearded men, but instead we saw all clean shaven men, one or two had grown moustaches and had waxed the ends. They looked characters. Captain Steele had given orders that every man must be shaven by 6pm this evening. R Patrol reckon Steele has got a disease which I have been trying to find a name for some time. They call it 'sand happy' I know one or two who have it. They do a lot of childish sort of things. All R Patrol are looking forward to going back to Cairo. A lot of them have desert sores, so have we, including myself.

Desert conditions could at times affect a man's mind. The often-regular cycle of bitterly cold nights through to the severe heat in the day, drained some men both physically and mentally. This along with little water, fatigue, personal or war stress and exceptionally hot temperatures could lead to a condition known as 'cafard' or

desert madness, where a man's eyes became glazed, as he stared with a bewildered vacant look out into the horizon. Shade, rest, and plenty of water usually improved this malaise. In mid-1941, the Rhodesians developed a refreshing concoction to help overcome this condition. They called it an 'anti-qibli pick me up' that consisted of equal parts of rum and lime juice. This seemed to make the men cope better with the extreme conditions, at times.



Zighen pool



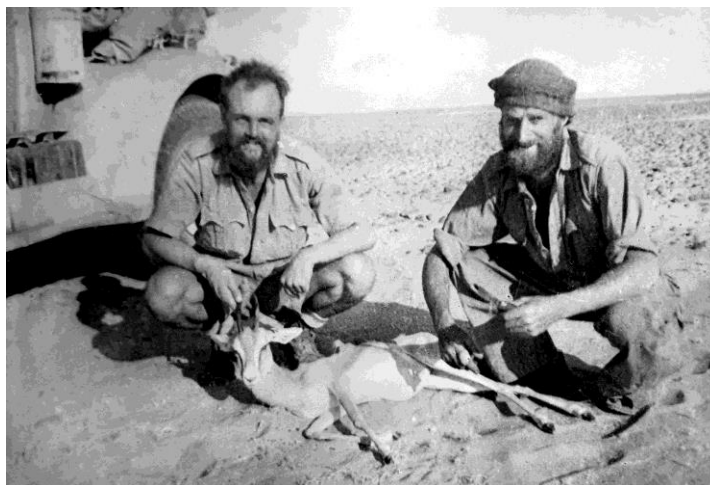
Zighen treehouse



S Patrol camp

Merlyn Crow wrote:

Sunday 4th July - 18th July: *Have not done much except to train for a football match with S Patrol at Zighen Oasis. We also had a rifle shooting competition which ended in a draw. The football game was played in extreme heat. We started with a performance of the Haka (a Maori war dance). The game lasted ten minutes each way. We had petrol cans as goalposts and the lines were marked out by vehicle tracks.*



Gazelle for dinner

Frank Jopling also wrote in some detail of the S Patrol sports day competition:

16 July: *We took five trucks with us and arrived at Zighen at 1.45pm. Naturally we all made for the swimming pool. At 3.30pm S Patrol put on tea and cakes. The cakes were made of oatmeal, cocoa and syrup and they were very good. The sports started at 4pm and the first event was the 37mm Bofors gun shoot. Neither party hit the target so it was a draw. The next was the 2in mortar at 300 to 400 yards range. S Patrol won the 300 yards and we won the other one, so it was a draw again. We then split up into six teams of four for .303 rifle shooting. We won the first, they won the second. We drew the third, won the fourth, lost the fifth, and drew the last, so again it was a draw.*

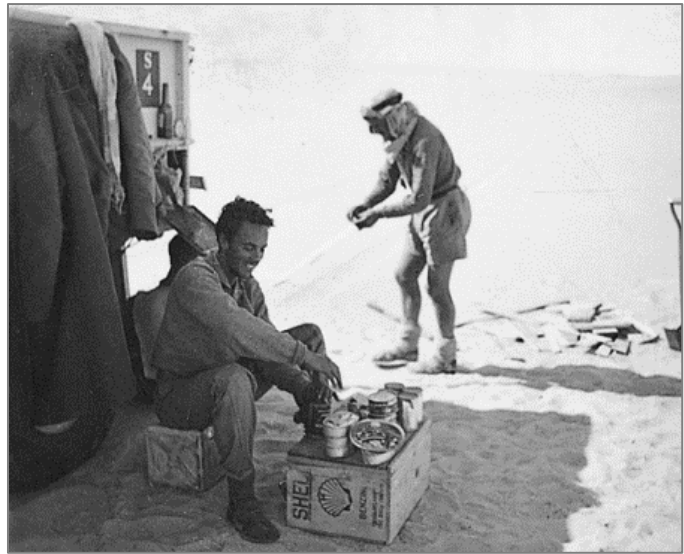
Then came the main event of the day, the 'All Blacks' versus the 'Springboks.' When both teams were lined up on the field, our team gave them the 'Haka'. After it was finished Lieutenant Olivey, (Lt. J.R.(John) Olivey) who was playing for the Springboks, ran to his truck and took his false teeth out saying, "This looks like it is going to be tough!" Vic Heard (Pte. V.J. Heard) is the best 'Pakeha' (European) I have ever seen doing a Haka. At half time we led 3 - 0 and never got the ball out of the scrum once. Their backs were good, but our backs were good tacklers which saved us the game. The end of the game saw us in the lead 6-0 and only once did our forwards heel the ball out of the scrum. The first half was 10 minutes and both sides decided it was too long, so the second half was 7 minutes. That put us in the lead.



T Patrol Haka

The next item was tea which consisted of gazelle which S Patrol had shot on recce on the Zella road. It was very good. After tea we had a smoke concert. There was plenty of wine and rum and a very enjoyable evening was spent by all.

17 July 1941: After a good evening of wine and rum everyone was suffering from the 'morning after the night before!' But in spite of that we had two basketball teams in which I was in the first and both were draws, no score, which was pretty good for us as S Patrol play every day there and we haven't played since we left Kufra. After that we had a relay race which was the final event of the



S Patrol cooking



Basketball, Zighen

meeting and S Patrol won leaving the total scores all even so we tossed up to see who would keep the shield and we won. We then hopped in for another swim and had lunch and left Tazerbo at 3pm and arrived back at 5.30pm having spent a real good time with S Patrol.



The basketball hoop is still standing today

Lewis wrote of the continued heat and daily life at Tazerbo:

Friday 18 July: Getting very hot now. Each day seems to be the hottest we have had, and the next day always manages to be a little hotter. From midday till 3pm is the worst, and then, just as you think you can't stand much more of it, the temperature drops a couple of points. The natives traipse out from the village every day, bringing various foodstuffs to barter, onions, watermelons, grapes and bread. We swap them for bully beef or tea, their most favourite items. They bring a hundred or two flies with them also. There seems to be a super fluidity of wine here at

present, as well as our usual rum ration. The wine was diverted from the Free French and a large crate found its way here.

In 2008, the author went on an expedition into Southern Libya retracing the tracks the LRDG travelled in 1941. While on the return journey, having just crossed the Rebiana Sand Sea from Kufra, they passed Zighen, and by pure chance came across the site of the 1941 camp of the Rhodesian S Patrol; an underground oasis (just dig a deep hole and it soon fills with water) with nice palm trees, gentle dunes and wild camels wandering about. The place



Looking for water

was identified by the remains of hundreds of flimsies, the four gallon tins used to carry water and fuel. The Rhodesians were based there for about three months and had established a comfortable camp. Flimsies and 44 gallon drums were filled with sand to build shelters and a swimming pool; they had even erected a basketball court with the hoops made from cut out from 44 gallon drums attached to steel rails, still standing today. Their rubbish dump was found, a large area of sun-blackened food tins lying scattered in the sand. Digging below the surface revealed dozens of cans of butter, sardines, herrings, bully beef, meat and veg, fruit, etc., plus bottles of fruit drink, beer, gin, whisky, pickles, broken SRD rum jars, cups, plates, cartridges, and bits of webbing, blankets, sacking and cigarette packets. Incredibly, all that was found below the surface looked as if it had just been dumped there the week before. Most of the drink bottles and pickle jars still had their paper labels, the cardboard cigarette packets were still intact and readable, and the tins were mostly rust free, intact, and identifiable. This evidenced that the LRDG, or certainly S Patrol, ate and drank very well.

The LRDG had the best rations in the Middle East, with food of high calorific value which they needed to sustain themselves in the harsh and enduring conditions of desert life. The Rhodesian camp was a great example of innovation by men used to dealing with the hardships of living in a tough environment and adapting to the conditions as best they could.



Rezin G.D., Private, KIA 20 Feb, 1943

This story was sourced from an extract of the book, **Fighting with the Long Range Desert Group, Merlyn Crow MM's War 1940-1945**. It was published in hardback by Pen & Sword, UK in May 2022. This work tells a gritty and detailed story of life and action in the LRDG, through 253 pages and 150 images. The book is available both internationally and in New Zealand, as a signed copy directly from the author: ocarrolls@xtra.co.nz



BRENDAN O'CARROLL lives in Auckland, New Zealand and recently retired from the New Zealand Customs Service. With a long time interest in military history, the Long Range Desert Group has become his speciality. He has interviewed over 30 veterans while writing *The King Scorpions: The Story of the New Zealanders in the LRDG (2006)*, *Rounded Brigands (2002)* and *Rover Raid: The LRDG's Most Daring Exploit in World War Two (2005)*. This book follows *The LRDG in the Aegean (2020)* and *The Long Range Desert Group in Action 1940-1941 (2020)* under the Pen and Sword Military imprint. He has numerous other published works and articles to his credit. In 2016 his work was recognised by awards from the New Zealand Military Historical Society.

Jackie Smith: Joe Whelan

For a complete list of current titles, please visit our website at www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

PEN & SWORD BOOKS LIMITED
 170 Church Street, Barnes, South Yorkshire, S7 2AS
 E-mail: enquiries@pen-and-sword.co.uk
 Tel: 01226 734222
 or via our website at www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

PEN & SWORD BOOKS (US)
 1700 Lovell Road, Havertown, PA 19088, USA
 E-mail: usinfo@penand-sword.com
 Tel: +1 610 853 9131
 or via our website at www.penandswordbooks.com
 OVER 7000 TITLES AVAILABLE.

FIGHTING WITH THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP
MERLYN CROW MM'S WAR 1940-1945
 BRENDAN O'CARROLL

UK £19.99 US \$34.95

UP £25.00 US \$50.00

www.pen-and-sword.co.uk

Formed in 1940 the Long Range Desert Group was the first Allied Special Forces unit established to operate behind German and Italian lines in North Africa. Its officers and men were volunteers recruited from British and Commonwealth units. Merlyn Crow was serving with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force when he joined the LRDG in 1941. He took part in numerous missions in the desert. The navigational driving and fighting skills of the LRDG were legendary and they were frequently responsible for transporting Stirling's SAS detachments on raids. Merlyn's luck ran out when he was captured on the Bucefal and in September 1942, but he escaped twice, the second time making it back to Allied lines. Sent home on leave, he returned to Italy with the New Zealand Army. After a 'disappearance' he went AWOL and rejoined the LRDG with no questions asked, serving until the end of the war. Drawing on interviews with Merlyn and other former LRDG veterans, the author has created a vivid picture of this exceptional and highly decorated fighting man. Readers cannot fail to be impressed by the courage and fearless determination of Merlyn Crow MM and his comrades.

This special issue of The Sentinel is compiled by Jackie Jackson for the Rhodesian Services Association, jackie@rhodesianservices.org



© 2022 The Rhodesian Services Association

Registered under the 2005 Charities Act in New Zealand number CC25203

Registered as an Incorporated Society in New Zealand number 2055431

Postal: PO Box 13003, Tauranga 3141, New Zealand

Physical: Unit 10, 14 Portside Drive, Mount Maunganui, New Zealand

Web: www.rhodesianservices.org and www.thelionandtusk.org