

REVIEW

O'Carroll, Brendan. 2023. *The Long Range Desert Group in North Africa*. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Military. 256 pp. ISBN 978-81399064057

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Brendan O'Carroll, the author of *The Long Range Desert Group in North Africa* (2023), has sojourned the worlds of military research; a process that enabled him transition from a Custom Officer in New Zealand into juggling roles of Military Historian, Editor, Collector, Exhibitor, Author, and Specialist in the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) of World War II (WWII). His many decades of researching LRDG explain the book in terms of its authoritativeness and the author's capacity to weave a simple but engaging narrative on the subject. Prior to this publication, O'Carroll had published six books on LRDG (O'Carroll 2000, 2002, 2005, 2020a, 2020b, and 2022). The present one being reviewed is the seventh but not the last of his publications in the LRDG series. The book is an addition to the historiography of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) aspects of WWII in North Africa.

The LRDG was a British Special Force unit formed in July 1941 that operated until the end of 1943 in the Desert Campaigns in North Africa during WWII. Operating from Egypt, the LRDG carried out ISR operations around the southern borders of Libya and Tunisia. As a matter of fact, one may wonder what the significance of LRDG was to the overall outcome of the war. LRDG's success in the campaign as a whole was the first major Allied land victory that marked the turning point of the war and allowed the Allies to launch further offensives into Europe. Formed primarily for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering behind enemy lines, the LRDG within the period of the campaign became reputed for penetrating deep into German- and Italian-held territories in North Africa in order to notch up vital information while putting their lives on the line with daring exploits and raiding missions that eventually paved the way for the Allied victory

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in WWII. The LRDG became the epitome of success in manoeuvre and tactical warfare framed by excellent leadership, troop's organisation and discipline, resilience, and individual heroics that reaffirmed the significance of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance in warfare.

Although the book attempts to paint the picture of soldiers' doggedness in-between two unfavourable alternatives as in the mythological Scylla and Charybdis, in this case, between fighting Axis forces and battling the harshest conditions of the Sahara, the introductory section and the other chapters mellow these conditions pointing to a campaign that was considered by some LRDG soldiers as the most enjoyable when compared to other battle theatres they once served (see p. xi). This notion of troops "enjoyment" gives the impression that soldiers of LRDG were on holidays in North Africa in comparison to their counterparts in Europe who, bugged in the trenches, faced constant barrages of enemy fire, threats of disease, and the unsanitary environment of the trenches.

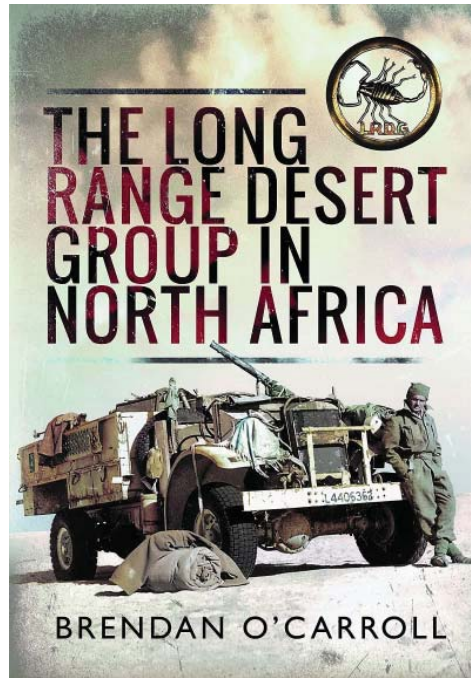
On the contrary, the LRDG in the North African campaign was no tea party. The twelve chapters of the book vividly encapsulate two major challenges of the campaign. First was the challenge of the desert terrain which could be hot and uncomfortable, ridden with flies, snakes, and scorpions and on occasion subject to huge sandstorms. This, of course, impacted the overall efficiency of the LRDG and constantly threatened their missions. The second challenge was combat actions in which the LRDG was frequently exposed to enemy's aerial strafing and bombing, landmines and direct combat operations in their desert strongholds and forts. This left the LRDG with casualties: dead, wounded, maimed, and prisoners of war (POW).

The chapters also describe the responses of the LRDG to these challenges: they include a well-organised LRDG divided into Reconnaissance Patrol groups with aerial support from the Royal Air force (RAF); Heavy and Vehicles sections to transport food, fuel, men and equipment to forward bases; efficient weapon systems for offense and defence; a signal group to abreast the General Headquarters (GHQ) with Situation Reports (SITREPs); constant supplies of food to soldiers; navigational equipment for survival and topographical information; military paraphernalia for identity and protections against the harsh conditions of the desert; a taxi service mission (Libyan Taxi Service) for guiding, inserting, supplying, rescuing, collecting, recovering wounded LRDGs, undercover agents, downed aircrew, and POW; and a road watch to give detailed observations and reliable intelligence of enemy movement along the Tripoli-Benghazi road.

Consequent upon these measures, the LRDG not only delivered its military objectives but increasingly frustrated the military brains of the Desert Fox – Erwin Rommel and his *Afrika Korps*. Many cases of ISR operations during WWII have come under scrutiny over the years. For example, the intelligence failure that preceded the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941; Operation Barbarossa of June 1941; the German Blitzkrieg on the Maginot Line; and the launch of the Ardennes offensive in December 1944, amongst others, has been questioned by scholars. However, the LRDG operations in North Africa not only proved the strategic and tactical importance of ISR in warfare but also influenced the outcome of WWII.

The book did not only weave a fascinating narrative of the everyday life of the LRDG troops in the North-African desert but this was done by using a technique that combines transcriptions of the original LRDG operational reports with oral interviews and pictorial evidence, mostly taken from private cameras of the LRDG. The sources were combined to animate the realities of operating in such a difficult terrain. The copious number of pictures used gives a balance between the author's analysis and operational reports. In so doing, the author, although sensitive to the needs of a scholarly and a lay audience, presented a narrative that extensively relies on primary evidence; in a way that almost allowed facts to speak for themselves.

Although the author has done a fantastic job of using mainly primary sources to relate the LRDG operations in North Africa, it may be hard to conclude that O'Carroll exhibited historical objectivity, given that he told a story in which the voice of enemy forces was rarely heard. In the chapter on "Enemy Encounters," the author relies extensively on oral accounts and private letters of New Zealand members of the LRDG to explain his points. This is likely because he wants to weave a simple narrative that concentrated on the experiences of the LRDG. More could have been done to generate new insights on the campaign by interacting with sources on German and Italian troops' impressions of the LRDG. Moreover, a comparative analysis of Allied and Axis ISR operations in the North African campaign invokes possibilities of future scholarship. Although his sources may be one-sided, O'Carroll provides a generally reasonable account that will attract a wide readership especially those interested in the tactical details and personal experiences of LRDG troops in WWII. However, a fairly sizeable number of pages devoted to explanatory analysis compared to that devoted to pictures may indicate the author's intention of reaching both professional and casual audiences. Given the nature of evidence utilised, the book can serve as authoritative secondary material for Military Historians.



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