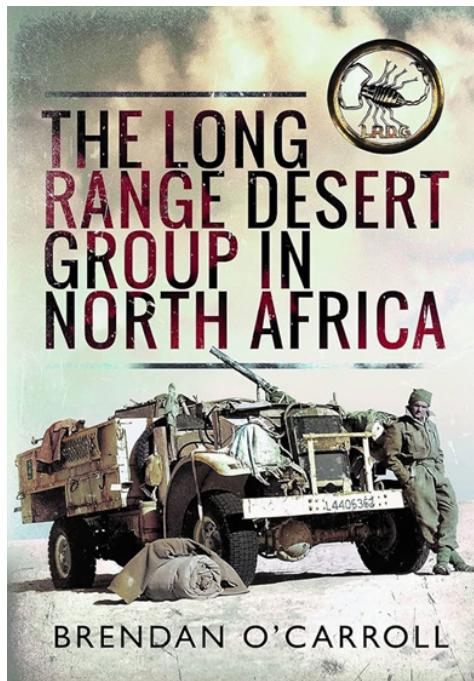


BOOK REVIEW: THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP IN NORTH AFRICA

BRENDAN O'CARROLL.

YORKSHIRE: PEN & SWORD MILITARY, 2023. 256PP.

ISBN 978-81399064057



REVIEW BY: BLESSING J. EDET

PHD, MILITARY HISTORIAN

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF UYO, NIGERIA

BLESSINGJEDET@UNIUYO.EDUN.G

ORCID: 0000-0003-0617-5744



Brenda 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 to 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) during World War II (WWII). His many decades of researching the LRDG lend authority to the book, enabling the author to craft a simple yet engaging narrative on the subject. Prior to this publication, O'Carroll had published six books on LRDG, namely: *The Kiwi Scorpion: The Story of the New Zealand in LRDG* (2000); *The Beaded Brigands* (2002); *Barce Raid: The LRDG's Most Daring Exploits in World War 2*; *Long Range Desert Group in Action, 1940-1943* (2020); *The Long Range Desert Group in the Aegean* (2020); and *Fighting with the Long Range Desert Group: Merlyn Craw MM's War, 1940-1945* (2022). The 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 the Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) aspects of WWII in North Africa.

The LRDG was a British Special Forces unit formed in July 1941 and operated until the end of 1943 in the North African Desert Campaigns during World War II. The LRDG, operating from Egypt, carried out ISR operations around the southern borders of Libya and Tunisia. In fact, one may wonder about the significance of the LRDG to the overall outcome of the war. It is essential to note that the LRDG's success in the campaign marked the first major Allied land victory, which turned the tide of the war and enabled the Allies to launch further offensives into Europe. The LRDG was primarily formed for reconnaissance and intelligence gathering behind enemy lines. During the campaign, it gained a reputation for penetrating deep into territories held by German and Italian forces in North Africa, gathering vital information while risking their lives through daring exploits and raiding missions. These efforts played a crucial role in securing Allied victory in World War II. The LRDG exemplified success in maneuver and tactical warfare, characterized by excellent leadership, troop organization and discipline, resilience, and individual acts of heroism. Their achievements reaffirmed the importance of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) in warfare.

The book attempts to depict the resilience of soldiers caught between two challenging alternatives, reminiscent of the mythological Scylla and Charybdis. These alternatives involve fighting against Axis forces and enduring the severe conditions of the Sahara. However, both the introductory section and the subsequent chapters soften these challenges, suggesting that some LRDG (Long Range Desert Group) soldiers actually considered this campaign to be one of the most enjoyable compared to other battlefronts they had served in (see p. xi). This idea of soldiers' "enjoyment" conveys the impression that the LRDG soldiers were on holiday in North Africa, particularly when contrasted with their counterparts in Europe, who were trapped in trenches facing continuous enemy bombardments, the threat of disease, and the unsanitary conditions prevalent in those environments.

The LRDG faced significant challenges during the North African campaign, and it was far from easy. The twelve chapters of the book vividly describe two major difficulties they encountered. The first challenge was the harsh desert terrain, which could be extremely hot and uncomfortable. It was often infested with flies, snakes, and scorpions, and was sometimes hit by severe sandstorms. These conditions negatively impacted the LRDG's efficiency and constantly jeopardized their missions. The second challenge involved combat, as the LRDG was frequently targeted by enemy aerial strafing and bombing. They also faced dangers from landmines and direct combat operations in their desert strongholds and forts. This warfare resulted in casualties, including deaths, injuries, permanent disabilities, and prisoners of war (POWs).

The chapters also describe the LRDG's responses to various challenges. These responses included a well-organized structure divided into Reconnaissance Patrol groups and supported by aerial assistance from the Royal Air Force (RAF). The LRDG established Heavy and Vehicle sections to transport food, fuel, personnel, and equipment to forward bases. They implemented efficient weapon systems for both offense and defense, and a signal group that kept General Headquarters (GHQ) updated with Situation Reports (SITREP). To support their operations, the LRDG ensured a constant supply of food for soldiers, utilized navigational equipment for survival and topographical information, and employed military paraphernalia for identity and protection against the harsh desert conditions. Additionally, they created a taxi service mission, known as the Libyan Taxi Service, which was responsible for guiding, supplying, rescuing, and recovering wounded LRDG members, undercover agents, downed aircrew, and prisoners of war (POWs). They also established a road watch to provide detailed observations and reliable intelligence on enemy movements along the Tripoli-Benghazi Road. As a result of these measures, the LRDG successfully achieved its military objectives and effectively frustrated the strategies of the Desert Fox, Erwin Rommel, and his Afrika Korps. Over the years, many instances of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) operations during World War II have come under scrutiny. Notable examples include the intelligence failures that preceded the Pearl Harbor attack in December 1941, Operation Barbarossa in June 1941, the German Blitzkrieg against the Maginot Line, and the launch of the Ardennes offensive in December 1944. However, the LRDG operations

The book attempts to depict the resilience of soldiers caught between two challenging alternatives, reminiscent of the mythological Scylla and Charybdis. These alternatives involve fighting against Axis forces and enduring the severe conditions of the Sahara.

in North Africa not only demonstrated the strategic and tactical significance of ISR in warfare but also significantly influenced the outcome of World War II.

The book not only weaves a fascinating narrative of the everyday life of the LRDG troops in the desert operation, but also employs a technique that combines transcriptions of the original LRDG operational reports, oral interviews, and pictorial evidence mostly taken from private cameras of the LRDG. The sources combined to animate the realities of operating in such difficult terrain. The copious number of pictures used is carefully chosen to give a balance between the author's analysis and the operational report. In doing so, the author, while sensitive to the needs of both scholarly and lay audiences, presented a narrative that extensively relied on primary evidence, allowing facts to speak for themselves.

While the author has done an excellent job of utilizing primarily primary sources to recount the LRDG operations in North Africa, it is difficult to conclude that O'Carroll exhibits complete historical objectivity. The story told predominantly reflects the perspectives of the LRDG, with the voices of enemy forces rarely represented. In the chapter on "Enemy Encounters," the sources used by O'Carroll primarily include accounts from New Zealand members of the LRDG. This focus likely stems from the author's intention to create a straightforward narrative centered on the experiences of the LRDG. However, incorporating additional perspectives from German and Italian troops could have provided new insights into the campaign and enriched the overall account. 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, he provides a generally reasonable account that will have a considerable impact on 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 those devoted to pictures may indicate the author's intention of reaching both professional and casual audiences. Given the nature of the evidence utilized, the book can serve as an authoritative secondary material for Military Historians.