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are estimates only based on general observations. Those for Southampton Island are the most reliable owing to my longer experience there. A table for Foxe Peninsula would rather closely follow that of Southampton Island with perhaps a 10 per cent. increase in bearded seals. In one for Igloolik the percentages of walrus would be considerably larger at all seasons than that for Southampton Island, and if the hunts of those natives living on the north-east side of Foxe Basin were included, the winter caribou percentage would be fairly large.

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE QATTARA DEPRESSION

D. C. M. MATHER

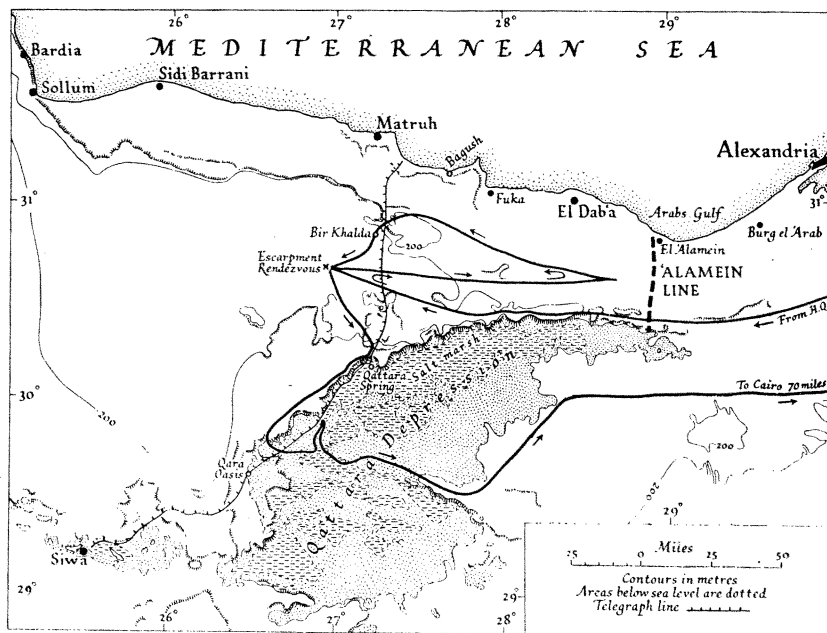
DURING the second year of war in the Western Desert and Libya, we had found it profitable to make long-distance raids on the enemy's exposed line of communication. Benefiting by the invaluable experience of the Long Range Desert Group, who by the time we had arrived on the scene were already veterans in desert travel, we endeavoured, with a good measure of success, to make wide sweeps behind the enemy lines, suddenly attacking exposed landing grounds and destroying aircraft on the ground. At first we had worked exclusively with the L.R.D.G., they had been our guides and had carried us to and from our objectives with unfailing accuracy. Now in the summer of 1942 we attempted our first large-scale operation with our own transport and navigators.

In June the war situation in the Middle East was as bad as it ever had been. After the fall of Tobruk the Eighth Army had retired to the 'Alamein line, a line 40 miles in length bordered by the Arabs gulf in the north and the Qattara Depression in the south. Here the remnants of the Desert Army were endeavouring to make a final and desperate stand. It was decided that our raiding force, under Stirling, should make a series of attacks on aerodromes behind the 'Alamein line working from a base 100 miles behind the German front. Here we would stay and operate for as long as our supplies held out. When they were finished we would return again to the Delta. For this operation we had about ten officers and one hundred men. We used jeeps mounted with machine guns, and 3-tonners to carry all our supplies of petrol, water, food, and ammunition. They would form our floating base until their loads were exhausted. Armed with maps, which in case of defeat at 'Alamein would enable our party to travel south-west to Kufra and Chad, south to the Sudan, or east into Sinai and Palestine, as the situation demanded, we left Cairo one June evening.

Travelling west from Eighth Army H.Q. on the Alexandria-Cairo road, we passed north of Wadi Natrun reaching the base of the 'Alamein line after a day's journey. Having passed safely through the line we hugged the lip of the Qattara Depression, occasionally following an indistinct track marked by palm leaves. The bottom of the Depression could not be seen, only a descend-

ing series of cliffs and boulders dropping sharply until their outline was lost in a shimmer of pink. A further two days' travelling brought us to a point about 30 miles north of the Qattara Spring, 50 miles from the enemy-controlled coast at Mersa Matruh, and 100 miles due west of the 'Alamein line. Here was a long low escarpment which offered good cover for our thirty vehicles, and this we made our base for operations.

For fourteen nights we attacked almost nightly the enemy aerodromes lying between Matruh and Dab'a. At the end of these two weeks our supplies of vehicles and ammunition were exhausted so, leaving a small retaining force of thirty men at the Escarpment Rendezvous, the remainder returned to Cairo. A fast party of four jeeps under Stirling managed to force their way



down the camel track at the Qattara Spring, drop into the Depression and reach Cairo in two days. The heavy party travelling on top of the Depression Escarpment again, filtered through the 'Alamein line and reached Cairo intact in three days. Two hectic days were spent refitting and collecting new vehicles, then the new force of about twenty-five jeeps returned by way of the Qattara Depression back to our rendezvous.

After a busy day's preparation we delivered our final aerodrome attack. A 50-mile night drive brought us to our objective near Fuka; here we spent twenty minutes destroying the Stukas, Messerschmitts, and Junkers which lay thick on the ground, and then melted again into the desert. As we had destroyed ninety enemy aircraft during these four weeks, it was decided that only one more operation, of a rather different nature, would be undertaken.

Four jeep patrols, each consisting of two vehicles, were to cover the rear of the 'Alamein line with the purpose of strafing the soft-skinned convoys

which brought up supplies to the enemy forward troops. From our escarpment R.V. lying 100 miles west of the fighting line, it would require two nights for the outward journey, two nights of operating, and two nights for the return. All our parties reached their objectives, but this time our luck had turned and although we spent two nights driving undisturbed amongst their tank leaguers, we found no targets that would justify revealing our intentions and jeopardizing our chances of a return visit in more fortunate circumstances.

This part of the Western Desert which we had grown to know so intimately, an intimacy which had become almost possessive, was a wide flat land. To the north was the Mediterranean; to the south there was the Qattara Depression. We knew the land to the north as a rest area. We knew the Depression as a bolt-hole, an alternative route to the Delta, and security; it was hot and treacherous and a little overpowering in its dimensions. The land between seemed to contain three main escarpments. There was the main coastal escarpment dropping down to the sea; 15 miles farther south another escarpment of perhaps 50 feet, and 15 miles farther south again the third escarpment of the same height. The land beyond this rose gently until it reached the lip of the Depression, where it dropped steeply for 400 feet into the great bog and salt marsh.

Most of this country we had only seen by moonlight, for travelling in daylight was an open invitation to prowling Macchis and Messerschmitts. There was very little chance once one's dust-cloud had been seen; then it was usually one jeep against one fighter, and the latter always won. Most of us had experienced that unpleasant individual type of strafing. Many of us had lost our vehicles once or twice over and been faced with a waterless journey on foot, and a few had lost their lives. So most of our knowledge had been gained from maps and night driving, but we knew that these three escarpments began at the great cliff above Sollum, now a heap of rubble, and as they ran eastwards gradually fanned out and dipped to the south until they were lost in the gentle country south of Burg el 'Arab. The land between them was flat and occasionally intersected by shallow wadis. The coastal belt had been a battle ground, it stank, and the camel scrub was trampled down so that the only cover by day was in the heavy shadows of burnt-out vehicles and tanks. Farther south it was more healthy for us. There were shallow depressions and small patches of camel scrub, never growing higher than 2 feet, but sufficient cover for a camouflaged jeep. We spent many burning hours lying, unmoving, in this camel scrub unable to shelter from the blazing sun, waiting until the evening brought relief and we were able to drive on under cover of darkness.

On the fourth day out my little party of two jeeps and three men lay snug and concealed in a small wadi running down from the central escarpment. Although the escarpment was only 30 feet high at this point our wadi had shallow caves and small bushes in which we could hide ourselves and our vehicles, remaining concealed from the air or from ground patrols. We had taken good care to obliterate all tracks approaching our hideout, crawling down the wheel marks on our hands and knees and pushing back the sand into the furrows, so that no shadows would be cast which can be so quickly recognized from the air.

The previous day we had been disturbed by a Senussi, who, leaving his caravan out in the open plain before us, walked straight up into our wadi as though he expected someone to be there, but receiving no greeting from us he turned about and retraced his steps. We wondered a little at this, for there must have been about three hundred camels out in the plain below, and being only 12 miles behind the front line it was an unusual sight. Possibly they might be employed by the Germans for some obscure transport purpose, for they certainly would not work for the Italians, but it was strange, for since the fighting had started most of the Senussi had moved either south to the oases of Siwa, Giarabub, or Kufra, or west up into the Jebel of Cyrenaica. Only a few independent souls stood on the coastal road as the retreating armies passed to and fro, holding up eggs for whoever had time to buy. But generally we had found them strongly pro-British and anti-German, with no remembrance of their alliance of 1915.

Our suspicions were well-founded however, for towards the afternoon of this day our small wadi was visited by a column of German tanks and guns who made circles round our hideout, even sending stones rattling down the cliff sides, and although they approached to within 50 yards of our camouflaged jeeps they failed to see us. It must have been some trick of the sun that kept us invisible. When evening came we were glad to get away and travel all night under a waning moon.

The following day we lay up under what we imagined to be the southernmost escarpment; it only rose to a height of 20 feet but it provided adequate cover and we were not spotted by hostile aircraft. We passed under the line of telegraph poles leading from Bagush to Siwa early the next morning after a fast night drive. Luckily our navigation had been accurate and I recognized the spot as Bir Khalda. From here it was only 20 miles to the Escarpment R.V.

It was good to be driving up the familiar cliff side again, sending up clouds of fine dust into the morning air, and to find that the cave still seemed to be inhabited. We ran our two jeeps up the sand-bank and into the cave, making thunder in its eaves and awakening the sleepers. We found Sandy Scratchley in the cave and he greeted us with bad news. The German prisoners that we held had escaped, patrols were out after us, and the base of the 'Alamein line' had been sealed by the enemy and was impassable. Now that our work was completed we had orders to return immediately. The only possible route left was down into the Depression and across the marsh, allowing that the tracks and passes had not been cut by the enemy.

We had been ten days and nights without sleep, but after a breakfast of fried sausages and tea and a few hours of discussion, we prepared to depart. There was a pass leaving the high plateau between the Qattara Spring and Qara Oasis. Both these watering places lay in the western side of the Depression. The first was approached by a precipitous camel track impossible for heavy vehicles; the second by a long but navigable pass. We had information that Qara was held by the Germans, but we did not know about Qattara. The pass itself left the plain at a point just above Qattara, so that it was possible that the enemy might attempt to block it. Every moment the supposed force that was on our trail grew in size: the latest message that we received on our

11-set said five hundred strong, adding aircraft also. But to get back to Cairo we must descend into the Depression by the Qara Pass, and enemy or no enemy that must be our first objective. Scratchley had visited it by daylight a few weeks previously and he reckoned that he could recognize it again by night. It lay on the Bagush-Siwa telegraph line and quite near there was a small pile of petrol tins. If the moon had not been in its last quarter it would have been easy.

Before we left we had to pick up Steve Hastings, who was escorting two 3-tonners back from a disused landing ground near the coast. The previous night our main party had lit a flare path and brought in two Bombays to land there. The landing was a great success. The Bombays dropped petrol and picked up seventy of our men, and then returned to Heliopolis aerodrome outside Cairo. The remainder of us, about thirty strong, were to bring back our fifteen vehicles, a battered collection of jeeps and 3-tonners, to the Delta.

When Hastings came back the sun was well up, and he had been troubled by a low-flying enemy bomber which had circled over him several times, but he could not be sure that he had been spotted. Although it was daylight we decided to risk it and push east along the escarpment to get out of this unhealthy area. It was fortunate that we did this for we heard later that an enemy force had visited our old R.V. a short time after we had departed.

This escarpment faced south-west, and so by following it along we were travelling south-east and towards Qattara. It was the first of the steps dropping down towards Siwa Oasis, another depression, but not as deep as that of Qattara. With our fifteen trucks spaced out at intervals of 200 yards we crept along the broken cliff side, moving slowly to keep the dust down, and stopping frequently to listen for hostile aircraft. We had one alarm as a bomber passed very high over us, but as we had stopped in time it could not see our dust clouds. At midday we halted and camouflaged all the vehicles. We stopped here until dusk and rested, but could not sleep for the flies and heat.

There was a high barren knob above our halting-place, and after lunch I climbed up this to take my turn as watch. The view to the south was almost limitless, but shimmering in the midday sun it was difficult to pick out any landmarks. Somewhere there was the place where the ground must sink to the Depression, and farther to the east was the route we had taken several weeks before to collect water from an L.R.D.G. Heavy Section. Quite close to where we had stopped on that occasion we had found some old pots lying under a cave. They were only fragments and we thought of "the lost army," but as we lay close to an old camel route they were probably no more than discarded Arab water jars. That was about the only find that we made during our journeys, in fact we took little interest in such things, being too concerned with our own immediate problem of living. Under this same escarpment we had found marine fossils embedded in the eaves of the caves, but no one questioned the reason for their being there in the middle of the desert. I often wonder that we did not take more interest in the nature of our surroundings, and afterwards reading papers in the *Journal* on "Problems of the Libyan Desert," I cannot help feeling that we would have been delighted to have known that there existed other problems in the Libyan Desert besides our own.

When I had scrambled down from the knob at the end of my watch, I

walked along to the cleft in the rocks where Scratchley was resting, and together we drank tea and made up a message to Cairo demanding a petrol dump to be made for us at Egyptian Post, a point on the eastern side of the Depression, for even though we had had supplies of petrol landed for us by the Bombays the previous evening, it was only enough for us to get half of the way back. Any alternative route round to the south of the Depression was out of the question, even the hard surface track following the great northern escarpment of the Depression was not feasible. On the 1 : 500,000 map a red dotted track was shown cutting straight across the central bog. There was a kind of bridge, the Qara Crossing, we had heard, and vehicles had passed that way before.

About an hour before sunset we risked moving and filling up the vehicles from the petrol 3-tonners so that we could be ready to start just before sunset and get at least an hour of travelling in the half-light, for the country beyond looked broken. Quite suddenly, when all the vehicles were out in the open, four Stukas appeared flying at 300 feet. We all froze, and as they passed over us they simultaneously let off a burst of machine-gun fire, not at us but into the cliff beyond.

The moon did not rise until 2 a.m., so that our first few hours of driving were very difficult. However there was a certain amount of light reflected on the surface of the desert by the stars. After two hours of driving we hit a soft patch on the upward slope of a ridge. Leaving the vehicles to extricate themselves with sand-channels and mats, we explored along the ridge in our jeeps and after an hour found a firm crossing. No sooner had we surmounted this obstacle than we fell axle deep into a wide field of soft sand, again bordered on the east by another impassable ridge, and we were forced to push on north in the opposite direction of our bearing until we found a gap. Some of the bolder drivers had taken it at a dash and, obeying the maxim of stopping only on hard going, had disappeared. Others, after extricating themselves, had followed separate veins of hard sand in all directions, so that it was not until midnight that we were able to reassemble the party. It was essential that we should reach cover in the Depression before daylight. Our first guide was the Bagush-Siwa telegraph line, and we hit it very soon, but on following it in the right direction for a few miles we were disappointed to find that the poles lacked wire and very quickly petered out altogether.

We took an eastward bearing and hit the main line after 2 miles, following it down on a good track until we came into the area of the Qattara Spring. Here we found the camel track to the spring below, where it disappeared over the edge of the Depression; then we cast about, carefully quartering the ground for a track leading south-west into the Qara Pass. After searching for an hour, with an uncanny sense, Scratchley found the spot, and very soon we were plunging down into a gorge enclosed by great rectangular rocks precariously balanced, and our engines echoed noisily until we passed out into a gradually descending open plain below. We followed this good track for the rest of the night, often travelling at 30 miles an hour, frequently stopping and changing drivers as they fell asleep at the wheel, until at dawn we turned left off the track towards hills formed of huge up-heaved rock slabs under which we could drive our jeeps and 3-tonners into safety.

That morning we were able to have some excellent tinned American bacon for breakfast and plenty of biscuits and jam which had been dropped for us by the Bombays. We had done 70 miles during the night and were quite satisfied. The main problem that lay before us now was finding the Qara Crossing the following night. Later in the day a hostile fighter patrol warned us that we were wise to lie so carefully concealed. The track we had been following down went direct to Qara, from where there was apparently a good track to the Crossing. Unfortunately we could not pass through this enemy-occupied oasis, which was a pity as the Sheik of Qara was an old friend of some of us. We decided to leave the track about 15 miles north of Qara, swinging south-east to cut the track running from the oasis eastwards to the Crossing, which we hoped would lead us safely across the bog.

By the starlight we only got a vague impression of the surrounding land. Our route descended gradually amongst broken country, and as I was navigating I had to concentrate wholly on the wheel marks I was following. It was very tiring and exacting work. After about 50 miles we swung south-east passing over a flat gravel surface scattered with stunted acacias giving, in the gentle light, a rather park-like appearance. This scanty vegetation showed us that we were at the bottom of the Depression. At about 3 a.m. the waning moon began to rise, and we hit the track at exactly the correct mileage. We would have to hurry if we were going to get out of the flat bog by daylight, but we stopped to check our bearings, then drove on for 4 miles until we lost the track and, on turning round we found, to our surprise, that we were missing ten vehicles. The drivers had all gone to sleep at the last halt, and even the cries of "start up" and the noise of engines had not awakened them. After an hour's search we found all ten of them standing motionless in the desert, with drivers slumped over their wheels. The situation was getting critical. There was only an hour until daylight, and we were in the middle of the Depression with no cover within miles. We drove on fast for a few more miles, but after two bad collisions, we gave up the attempt, and raced back to the escarpment, where we could shelter for the day. In the dim light of dawn the great cliff towered before us, but it was more than two hours before we plunged into its deep shade. Here, lying beneath the 400-foot cliff, we spent our second day. We must have been about 20 miles from the Qattara Spring. It was intensely hot, but we felt secure from any enemy planes that might try and attack us. It was pleasing having cheated them so far, for there was no doubt that they had been after us for the past three weeks. From where we lay under boulders and wedged between rock clefts, we could see to the east a firm but broken crust, to the south-east a flat gravel plain, but no sign of bog or marsh. However we thought it would be wiser to retrace our old tracks of the night before until we came to the main Qara Crossing track. From here we could follow it slowly and carefully until we had passed over the bog.

That night we made our second attempt to cross the Depression. We followed the beaten track carefully until it became only a few wheel marks. Then we found ourselves following a single wheel track only, very difficult to see by starlight, and so cast left and right to locate the main route once again. A few miles more and it petered out altogether. Then we found ourselves

travelling over a rough rocky surface for about 200 yards. At the end of this lay a hard salt crust with a quaking bog beneath. We sent our four jeeps to the four compass points. Three returned and reported bog on all sides, the fourth with all its kit sank beyond recovery bonnet deep into the bog itself. Again only one hour remained till daylight. As the surrounding surface was hard rock we were unable to trace the route we had come by, and so we seemed to be stranded. Then we found an outlet. It was undoubtedly bog beneath, but there seemed to be a fairly stout crust. It might lead us into a further bog, we had no idea what lay beyond, but it was our only chance. For 300 yards the surface held even our heavy trucks. Then we came to a dyke of soft mud, only about 10 feet across. We put tarpaulins, steel sand-channels, sand-mats, and more tarpaulins over this, and each vehicle charged it at top speed. It had to be done very quickly because the stationary vehicles on the near side soon began sinking slowly through the crust, in fact we were too late with our last 3-tonner, for when its turn came to take the jump it had sunk up to the axles and soon the tail board began to disappear. We abandoned it and hurried on to the next dyke. This we bridged in a similar manner, and a third, and just when we were beginning to think that to continue was foolhardy and to return was impossible, the ground began to steady. The upper surface became spongy, but there seemed to be a firm foundation beneath, and shortly we reached a wide flat gravel plain. We halted for a few moments to get our direction; took a bearing on a low constellation of stars, switched on all our head-lights, and raced at 50 m.p.h. towards the north-east. The dawn was just beginning to break, the billiard table surface lasted, and we covered 30 miles in less than an hour. We raced on until we reached a large grove of acacias under whose friendly shade we finally stopped.

Some of us had been without sleep for thirteen days, but it was better, we thought, that we should reach the Delta first, rather than lie and sleep where we were, for although we had almost passed out of the danger area, during breakfast an hostile aircraft had passed high overhead. The smoke from acacia-wood fires made us feel drowsy, and to many of us who had not seen a wild tree growing for over a year, the scene before us was rapidly becoming more and more sylvan as tea followed bacon and tobacco followed tea, and a feeling came over us that of all places on earth this was the spot where we might peacefully spend the remainder of our days. So we pushed on through country marked on the 1 : 500,000 map as "numerous groves of trees in shallow depressions." It was still flat gravel country rising a little towards the east in gentle undulations with groves of acacia trees growing in the hollows. To the north could be seen the blue outline of the Depression escarpment.

It had been arranged that a relief party with petrol should meet us on the main track to Cairo, but after lunch we lost the track for this part of the desert seemed to be a mass of tracks running in every direction. However we continued on a Cairo bearing until we suddenly stumbled across them. Besides petrol, they had brought out dates, sweets, and tobacco, and as we were excitedly exchanging news, we were disturbed by aircraft for the last time. We drove eastwards at speed out of the acacia country across the rolling desert plains, past clumps of tamarisk bushes, until the evening came. We drew our vehicles up in a circle, turned on the dance music from Cairo,

helped ourselves to rum and limes, and prepared for our first night's solid sleep. Since we had left the Western Escarpment of the Depression the night before, we had done an 80-mile night drive, and during the day we had travelled another 100 miles.

When I awoke the next morning I found my head resting against the rear wheel of my jeep, my bedding roll untouched in the back, and my mess tin full of last night's bully stew. Later in the day we crossed the Bahariya track, and after many more miles, as the sun began to cast long black shadows, we topped the last ridge. Below us lay a wide luxurious belt of palms; through the palm trees and paddy fields ran the Nile. We picked up our glasses and recognized the familiar minarets of the citadel just visible against the blue cliffs. Warily we dismounted our guns and turned towards the pyramids. We parked the jeeps outside the Mena Camp Naafi, and three bearded officers slunk into the Mena House Hotel and ate, not out of dusty mess-tins, but off clean white plates.

THE OBSERVATIONS OF AMUNDSEN AND SCOTT AT THE SOUTH POLE

ARTHUR R. HINKS, C.B.E., F.R.S.

SOME seven years ago, in reviewing a book on the life of Peary, I had occasion to calculate by the position line method his four observations at the Pole, that had been calculated elaborately, but, as it seemed to me unsuitably, by methods of spherical trigonometry more proper to lower latitudes (*Geogr. J.* 89 (March 1937) 255 and 90 (August 1937) 167). I was interested to see how simply and conclusively these position lines illustrated and confirmed Peary's narrative of what he did to fix his position at the North Pole, and I resolved to apply one day the same method to the observations of Amundsen and of Scott's navigator, Bowers, at the South Pole. Other matters intervened, and it was only last winter that I found opportunity to collect the material, and time in long evenings on duty to study the observations made by the Norwegians and the British in December 1911 and January 1912.

The Norwegian and English editions of Amundsen's book, published in the autumn of 1912, contain certain figures in the narrative, a few pages of facsimiles from his observation books as illustrations, and a brief appendix dealing in a curiously incomplete and unsatisfactory way with his final observations at the Pole. But so far as I can discover, the bulk of his results have never been printed, and if the original observation books survive, they are unfortunately now inaccessible. One map in the narrative shows the Norwegians marching poleward along meridian 169° W., and another map shows them as on the meridian of Framheim about $163^{\frac{1}{2}}^{\circ}$ W. So the route of the expedition is not too well documented.

The surveys of the British expedition produced fourteen maps, which were