



## Piracy on the high sands: covert military mobilities in the Libyan desert, 1940–1943



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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the history of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) who gained notoriety in the Second World War by conducting a new form of covert warfare deep behind enemy lines. The LRDG waged a psychological war; continuously appearing and disappearing, they succeeded in creating a sense that the British were everywhere and yet nowhere. In order to effectively execute these covert operations LRDG soldiers became closely acquainted with the desert, their senses attuned to a battlefield of sand, wind and stars. This paper is a study of military bodies and technologies adapting to perform a novel form of deceptive warfare. Examined from the British military's perspective it explores how the desert-modified car mingled biology, technology and environment to produce a new form of military mobility which shaped the character and legitimised the use of covert desert warfare. It also reveals how covert warfare was naturalised through a heroic narrative of piracy which inspired the group's inception, justified its establishment and methods, and framed the soldiers' own performance and understanding of their actions. Overall, the paper uses mobilities research to expose the processes which legitimise warfare strategies. It also argues that it is only by examining these mobilities that such narratives can be held accountable.

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In the North African desert in the Second World War a new form of warfare was beginning to be experimented with by the British military. Operating deep behind enemy lines, a raiding group caused havoc by capturing communications and prisoners, destroying supplies and transport and undertaking reconnaissance.<sup>1</sup> This was the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) who waged war by subterfuge, trickery and concealment. By the mid twentieth century developments in motor car technology (with some technical adaptations designed for the demands of the desert environment and terrain) alongside more detailed, yet still unreliable, maps of the interior of Libya and Egypt created the potential for new forms of covert operations to take place on the edges of conventional warfare.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of the LRDG and the adoption of covert warfare in the Second World War was thus an outcome of entangling landscape, geographical knowledge and technology for military purposes. When the presence of the group

was revealed to the British public in 1941 media depictions conjured heroic visions of covert warfare waged by:

Sand sailors who venture hundreds of miles into shifting dunes in the interior of Libya, navigating by the sun, moon and stars ... stripped to the waist, bare legged in khaki shorts, with a Bedouin head cloth ... these warriors of the wide and open spaces travel weeks at a time far from their desert bases, scouting the unknown wildernesses of rock and sand... Men, mounted on light trucks bearing outside desert tyres, strike boldly forth into wastes... Tractor marks and the virgin desert surface, enable them to tell with almost the accuracy of a Sherlock Holmes how many enemy vehicles have passed this way, their size, type and probably destination and purpose.<sup>3</sup>

This imagery of the group as courageous and subversive had been carefully crafted by their founder, Ralph Bagnold, an experienced soldier, renowned desert explorer and esteemed

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<sup>1</sup> D. Lloyd Owen, *The Long Range Desert Group, 1940–1945: Providence Their Guide*, London, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> I. Forsyth, Desert journeys: from exploration to covert operations, *Geographical Journal* 182 (2016) 228–235.

<sup>3</sup> G. Anderson, Sailors of the desert: with the Long Range Desert Patrol, *Egyptian Mail*, 22nd August 1941, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College Bagnold archive [hereafter CA], NCUACS 35/3/92 C11/7.

geomorphologist. It was a vision and narrative that the soldiers of the LRDG themselves were eager to embrace. This paper employs a mobilities framing to narrate the British military's perspective on, and the LRDG soldiers' experiences of, covert warfare. It demonstrates that an engagement with mobility studies can reveal the processes – such as the cultural construction of heroism and technological innovations – which serve to legitimise shifts in strategy and in what can be considered 'just warfare'.<sup>4</sup> First, the paper will explain what an engagement between mobility studies and critical military geographies can offer historical geographies of warfare, before examining the roots and routes of covert desert warfare through a study of Bagnold's days of inter-war desert exploration, explaining how this shaped the implementation of a novel form of warfare. Thereafter, the experience of operating deep behind enemy lines will be explored in order to narrate the mobile and embodied experience of conducting covert operations. Overall, the paper examines how mobilities research allows a productive lens of analysis for making sense of warfare, showing how such an approach can reveal the intertwining of the corporeal and technological that would otherwise remain concealed.

However, this paper also highlights the challenges and limitations of a mobilities approach. A focus on the experiential aspects of military mobilities can reveal the processes by which military tactics are legitimised, but it can also reentrench and naturalise heroic narratives of conflict unless the lasting consequences for the nature of warfare are commented upon. Stuart Elden has stated that the discourse of the 'War on Terror' provides an apparently new language to justify what is a continuous practice. This paper proposes that the mechanisms and discourses which facilitated and naturalised the LRDG's covert method of warfare are part of the continuous process that has worked to frame the Middle East as a violent landscape.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, through a history of the LRDG this paper both suggests that an engagement with military mobilities can reveal the processes which legitimise and naturalise strategies of warfare and it traces their implications in order to disrupt heroic narratives of conflict and make the consequences of military mobilities accountable.

### Critical military mobilities

Of late there has been a growing area of work that teases out the taken for granted histories and politics of mobility.<sup>6</sup> Mobilities research focuses on processes, patterns and relations in which movement and mobility are embodied, creating spaces, stories and experiences.<sup>7</sup> It attends to the entanglement of economic, political, material, social and cultural networks and constraints, therefore offering military geographers the means to explore experiences of being in the military and processes of militarism as well as the intentions of military strategies and operations. Warfare in the twenty-first century is ever more diffuse and pervasive, and geographers have drawn attention to the ways in which technologies, spaces and discourses have led to the spatial and temporal transgression of the 'traditional' boundaries of the battlefield, leading to

an 'everywhere war' of battlespaces with no definable borders or vision of an end point.<sup>8</sup>

That military violence is executed in heterogeneous spaces, rather than predominately in militarised sites, and by mundane as well as spectacular technologies is the result of contemporary geopolitics and long histories of ever evolving and transforming military tactics and technologies. The LRDG provides an example of one such history. The group operated on the edges of the conventional Second World War battlefield, disrupting notions of war as taking place within fixed and bounded geographical areas, and has thus contributed to expanding and blurring notions of which spaces encompass the 'active' battlefield.<sup>9</sup> Expanding the scope of what should be considered as military activities, process and consequences is what Rachel Woodward has termed 'critical military geography'. She has drawn attention to the need to explore and account for the wide-ranging practices of the military, highlighting that armed conflict is the end point of diverse and entangled cultural, material, economic and political processes.<sup>10</sup> By tracing the roots of the LRDG to Bagnold's days of inter-war desert exploration, this paper demonstrates how modes and methods of military violence were born through an interweaving of personal experience, landscape ecology, cultural imaginary, technological innovations and geopolitics. The resulting narrative is complex, shifting between scales, spaces and times, including a variety of experiences and voices. Yet, such a diffuse approach offered by a mobilities framing does not disperse politics, rather it extends military history to include the more-than-human (technological and environmental), and enables the far reaching effects of warfare to be traced and held to account. With regards to the LRDG, it is the technology of the car in relation with the desert environment that becomes the pivot through which to study the histories and geographies of covert warfare.

In mobilities studies a focus on the car has been figured as an important means to highlight the culturally and socially embedded experiences of driving and the historical geographies of movement.<sup>11</sup> The car, as Mike Featherstone explains, is a symbol of modernity with 'a high visibility in the social landscape and cultural imaginary over the last century'.<sup>12</sup> The car thus simultaneously liberates and coerces, individualises and integrates.<sup>13</sup> Bagnold's motor car explorations in the desert and the LRDG covert operations took place, as Sean O'Connell explains, during Britain's first era of mass motoring. From the inter-war period to the 1940s technological changes and greater rationalisation of the production process led to reductions in car prices enabling ownership to filter down from the upper classes through Britain's professional and commercial middle classes.<sup>14</sup> Yet, if to some the car was emblematic of a new dawn of democratising technology, promising a smooth

<sup>8</sup> See D. Gregory, The everywhere war, *Geographical Journal* 117 (2011) 238–250 and S. Graham, Cities as battlespace: the new military urbanism, *City* 13 (2009) 383–402.

<sup>9</sup> Another Second World War example of the expanding battlefield, and thus the legitimisation of where and how war could take place, is the aerial bombing of cities and civilians, see K. Hewitt, Place annihilation: area bombing and the fate of urban spaces, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 73 (1983) 257–284.

<sup>10</sup> R. Woodward, From military geography to militarism's geographies: disciplinary engagements with the geographies of militarism and military activities, *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (2005) 718–740.

<sup>11</sup> See special issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* 21 (2004) and P. Merriman, *Driving Spaces: A Cultural-Historical Geography of England's M1 Motorway*, London, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> M. Featherstone, Automobilities: an introduction, *Theory, Culture and Society* 21 (2004) 1.

<sup>13</sup> J. Beckmann, Mobility and safety, *Theory, Culture and Society* 21 (2004) 81–100.

<sup>14</sup> S. O'Connell, *The Car in British Society: Class, Gender and Motoring, 1896–1939*, Manchester, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> T. Cresswell, Towards a politics of mobility, *Environment and Planning D* 28 (2010) 17–31 identifies six elements through which the politics of mobility can be explored: representation, velocity, roots, rhythm, friction and experience.

<sup>5</sup> S. Elden, *Terror and Territory: The Spatial Extent of Sovereignty*, Minnesota, 2009, 172.

<sup>6</sup> T. Cresswell, Mobilities II: still, *Progress in Human Geography* 36 (2012) 645–653.

<sup>7</sup> T. Cresswell and P. Merriman, Introduction: geographies of mobilities – practices, spaces, subjects, in T. Cresswell and P. Merriman (Eds), *Geographies of Mobilities: Practices, Spaces, Subjects*, Farnham, 2011, 1–18.

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