

Expedition to Jebel Archenu 1962

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At Sandhurst I had my long wheel based Land Rover with its canvas top and I knew that in Benghazi (Libya) the army had some 'adventure training' Land Rovers. It must have been early in my days at Sandhurst that I set about organising an expedition¹ for officer cadets to south east Libya. I could not have had more than six months to organise things in time for the Summer break of seven weeks. The mountain of Jebel (Gebel) Archenu had not been explored, but rock art had been recorded among the boulders at its larger neighbour Jebel 'Uweinat on the border of Libya and Sudan. Perhaps we could discover some at Archenu and increase the records for the area. There might be other items of interest to be discovered there.

I thought it would be useful to include a couple of scientists in the team, and so I contacted some academic friends. They discovered a likely post graduate, Martin Williams, who was to become a life long friend and who devoted his life to work in arid regions, especially Sudan. That, Zanny, is how I met your Godfather.

Somehow I had got to know Dr Peter Beighton in his early medical years at St Mary's in London. I used to go up and meet him at a pub near his hospital and we would talk for hours over lots of ale. He, a very direct and lively person, agreed to join us on the expedition and be our doctor.

I arranged with Mr Katsorakis, a Greek trader in Benghazi, for a petrol dump to be established for us at the oasis of Kufra, some 800 miles south. I had also made many arrangements with the army in Benghazi to provide Land Rovers, rations and the sort of paraphernalia needed so that I did not have to burden my Land Rover for the overland and sea journey via Marseilles and Tunis to Cyrenaica. The evening before we set off in my Land Rover, leaving some cadets to follow later by air, I was summoned to Government House, the Commandant's residence at Sandhurst. A sergeant ushered me into a sitting room, and after a while General Geordie Gordon Lennox appeared in dinner jacket looking formidable and serious. He came straight to the point. "Hall, I gather you are taking 8 cadets to the Libyan Desert. I want to make it clear to you that I want every one of them back". I think he did ask a few questions such as when we were leaving and returning, but that was about it. At that time there had been some soldiers dying from heat exhaustion, and he had a right to be concerned. I already knew something about the illness, and had had one sapper suffering from it on exercise in Tripolitania. I was going to take great care, especially since it was the hottest time of the year.

The drive south in late July through France was easy. We could stop at any farm for the night and would invariably be given a barn to sleep in and some eggs. It was south of Lyon that I first smelt the vineyards: *Oh for a beaker full of the warm south* summed it up. The main road south was mainly occupied by local traffic - a totally different picture to the route now. We crossed from Marseilles to Tunis by ship and motored along the

¹ Martin Williams, Dr Beighton, Officer Cadets Fawcus, Field, Overton, O'Sullivan, Clements, Horler, Sgt Brown, Cpl Thompson and me

main coast road to Benghazi. It was a joy to be back in Libya. In Benghazi we met up with the group who had travelled by air and sorted out the Land Rovers and stores. We went for runs in the early morning to keep up our fitness, at the same time acclimatising a little.

With Land Rovers stripped of roofs, windows, doors and windscreens, and sun compasses fixed to brackets on the dashboards between drivers and navigators, we set off on the 90 mile drive back along the coast road to Agedabia which figured in the Libyan revolution on the front line between east and west. Then we headed south, first along a rough and dusty track, and finally into open desert. There was the thrilling drive of over 250 miles of Calanscio Serir (fine gravel plain) at about 173 degrees, navigating by sun compass, to fetch up at Bir el Harasc, six palm trees. Miss that and carry on, and you are in the midst of the waterless Rebiana Sand Sea. We had had and were to continue having much mechanical trouble with the old adventure training Land Rovers lent by the army in Benghazi.



Steve Overton had developed gippy tummy and was deteriorating. He was not drinking sufficient water and could easily develop heat exhaustion. On arrival at Bir el Harasc we dug two metres and found reasonable water, and we settled Overton in the shade, giving him orange juice and water with a pinch of salt in it. We now had lots of water to splash around, and we put wet towels round him to cool him down. By the following morning he



was well enough to continue to the next phase of the journey which was about 90 miles over sand dunes. The leading vehicle tested the ground for those following, and from time to time would be pulled to a sudden halt in soft sand. It was important then not to rev up and let the wheels spin ever deeper into the sand (as had been done in the photograph), but to use sand channels and manpower to push the vehicle onto firmer sand. The dunes were followed by rough country.

We soon learnt how to tackle the soft sand in the fields of dunes. When driving into soft sand it was important never to allow the wheels to spin, since that would merely dig the vehicle deeper. Instead we placed the sand channels under the front wheels (four wheel drive) and all push like mad to keep it going onto firm sand. Meanwhile other vehicles would be seeking an alternative route over firmer sand. We navigated by sun compass on the move and by astro at night to fix our position.

Eventually we reached Et Taj, the Senussi fort on the escarpment where you look down over a vast depression filled with date palms east and west, the oasis of Kufra. The

Senussi were a religious / political sect based in Cyrenaica, and Kufra was an important centre for them until the Italians arrived there. On arrival in the oasis of Kufra the local policeman gave us a room for our stores, and we collected the petrol that had been dumped for us by the Greek trader, Mr Katzorakis. Thence about 190 miles down to Jebel Archenu. We entered the massif through a wide wadi, but not before we created a rough track to get the Land Rovers up a steep but low terrace. We spent three days looking for rock paintings and recording some slope profiles for Martin Williams. Those paintings we found were less well preserved than those at neighbouring Jebel 'Uweinat. What we did find, photograph and trace, was an unusually large depiction of a man, woman and child. One group went over to Uweinat for a day and collected some water from a spring there under the huge granite boulders.

It was on that trip that Peter Beighton said to me when looking south west across the border into Sudan: "We have the vehicles, we have some petrol, we have the knowledge, David, why don't we head on down to Kenya". I do not think he was serious, though he sounded it. At the time he and I were walking round the south eastern part of Archenu, and had we only climbed to the granite cliffs we would have found many interesting rock paintings. What we did see, though, was a magnificent mouflon close ahead of us, his



front legs on a rock, looking defiantly down on us. He turned and ran.



I had adopted a policy of making ample drinking water available. Every day we started our surveys early when at its coolest, but I encouraged everyone to rest up during the hottest parts of the day. Half way through the expedition I began to realize that resting in the shade of rocks in such heat made one lethargic, tired and hot. It was better to be out and about catching what wind there was, thus helping the body's refrigeration system.

Photo: We arrive at the Archenu tree to find that it must have been struck by lightning.



We carried cans of beer, sufficient for everyone to have one on at least two or three occasions, and these were nectar. The early evening in the desert when the sun is low or setting there is always a sense of peace but also of huge wellbeing. A tin of beer added greatly to it, and boosted morale no end in difficult times. Being in the massif of Archenu

was being in a totally different world. It could have been a planet or the moon!

I have always felt that Bedouin were not the dishonest peoples depicted in the army at the time, and I came across examples bearing that out from time to time. When the expedition had been in Kufra for a night I was called to the policeman who opened his

safe and gave me a spoon and fork and a camera. Parents had found children had 'lifted' them on our first day, but parents had brought the items along to him. I recall Tuareg leaving their bags of belongings by a track to collect them at a later time or date, confident that nobody would move them.

The expedition was a great experience for the young cadets spending some time far from civilization in a totally different world, meeting different people with different customs to theirs. I was glad to know that General Gordon Lenox had "every one of his cadets back safely"