

Sandhurst Expedition to South East Libya

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The old Italian maps showed a plateau broken in two by a gap. It lay to the east of the Tibesti Mountains and west of the old camel route from Faya in Chad up to Kufra and thence to Benghazi. The Sudan Defence Force under John Wright had done a survey of part of the northern bit, but the southern part was to be the area of exploration for the 1963 expedition from Sandhurst. The object of this expedition from Sandhurst was to map the plateau as accurately as possible and to carry out geomorphological and archaeological surveys of an exploratory nature. Unlike the expedition to Archenu where time was limited, on this expedition to South East Libya we were to spend almost a month in the desert. I persuaded Captain John Blashford-Snell, who had just come to Sandhurst, to be my second-in-command. The whole team¹ of 15 had financial support from the RGS, RMAS, and REMEC, and it set off by air to Benghazi on 4 August 1963.

Before leaving I had invited a medical expert, I think it was the physiologist Colonel Adam, to come and talk to the team about the problems of acclimatisation to a hot dry environment. This briefing was essential because the area to be studied was hot and dry in the hottest time of the year. I was hauled in front of the Adjutant when the Chief Medical Officer at Sandhurst heard that I had asked an expert instead of him. He was clearly furious. I could see nothing wrong and explained to the Adjutant why I had chosen the expert. I agreed that perhaps I should have let the SMO know. On hindsight, though, he would probably have stopped me from having Colonel Adam.

I had all the necessary contacts in Benhazi, and once again Mr Katzorakis created a petrol dump at the date factory in Kufra for us. We flew by the RAF to El Adam and made our way to Benghazi. At one stop on the road near an apparent old ruin a splendid picture confronted me, as I wrote in a letter later that day to your mother:

In front of me is an old ruin, and walking about is a very large figure in white shorts and a topé. It can only be John Blashford-Snell. An Arab girl on a donkey rode past and could not seem to get over the strange vision. As she rode away her head kept turning to gaze on this strange apparition until she rode out of sight. John came over to say that the ruin was a graveyard.

For this expedition I asked for a three ton truck to come with us for the first 130 miles, so that it could carry some of the heavy petrol and water over the early rough ground and so that water could be used lavishly on the first day. This time calculations were based on two gallons per man per day for all purposes, and work was to continue all day rather than stopping for the hottest part. We also had at least one walk of about four miles followed by a swim. This all worked well, and we did not have any cases of heat illness. It was on one of those walks that I met somebody who knew me from Mizda, and I quote from a letter I wrote from Benghazi to your mother:

I still can't believe what happened on the way back. We were walking along when a Libyan came and walked along beside me. He asked me if I was going to Mizda. I said "No" and explained that we were going to Kufra. It then turned out that we had met at Mizda last Christmas, that being about 800 miles

¹ Capt Hall, Capt Blashford-Snell, Lt Durn REME, Dr Forss WHO Congo, Martin Williams UCL, 2Lt Sellon, OCdts Overton, Willcocks, Briathwaite, Southwood, Gilbert, Brocksopp, Spenlove-Brown and Glynn, and Sgt Breese RSigs.

away. The most astonishing thing was his complete lack of emotion. We might well have met just earlier in the day from the way he greeted me.



John Blashford-Snell, a most colourful colleague, did us proud when we arrived at Kufra, giving us a five course dinner in the date factory, starting with caviar on compo biscuits (the 'hard tack' biscuits used by the Army in place of bread). He clearly had immense style, and his attention to the rations and the cooking meant we ate well - good for morale.

Down along the edge of the plateau we carried out surveys into the wadis leading off the escarpment. There was much evidence of Neolithic man: broken simple pot, stone tools, grinders and querns, and everywhere around any site was broken ostrich egg shell. We would split into small parties every day and explore different parts of the edge of the plateaux. Walking up towards the head of some of the wadis one would almost expect to find Neolithic man round the next corner. Up on the plateau the stones were dark, and heavy Van Dyke brown. I suddenly came across one that looked paler, not having the same patina as the rest, and found it to be a perfect large scraper which has lived with me since. Martin Williams was working hard, tough as nails, and always interested. He had a great store of anecdotes, many being about his time in Sudan. He would debrief us carefully in the evening for us to report on our findings or to give, for example, slope profile readings.



Navigation was simple but fun. We used theodolites rather than bubble sextants and therefore achieved more accurate star fixes, and our dead reckoning by sun compass became skilled

Our forward base was the well of Maaten Bisciara where there was good water at 120 feet below the surface. We drew water in shifts with rope and bucket. Once when returning for replenishments the water smelt horrible, and when I pulled up the bucket I found a dead swollen rat in the water. I threw it out and quickly buried it in the sand. We threw a great deal of water sterilising powder down the well, and left it until the following morning when it was fine again for giving us water for returning the 90 miles to the far southern end of the plateau named by Martin Williams *Hamada el Akdemin* (Stony Plain of the Snakes). The last evening was tantalising because one small party had found what they believed were some form of field system or drainage pattern on top. We had to



leave and make our way back north to Benghazi and home from the airfield at El Adem.

Again the expedition had given us all, especially the cadets, something outstanding to remember all their lives. With the work of the earlier Sandhurst Archenu Expedition enough science resulted for Martin and me to produce a paper in the Geographical Journal² I was longing to return to Harriet, and in a very loving letter I wrote to her from Benghazi asking if I could possibly come and stay with her and Bill for the few days before I was due to go to Southampton.



Photo: A wadi from the escarpment

I had thoroughly enjoyed the challenges of navigating in the desert and was interested in navigating over other terrains such as rain forest and the Polar regions. I wrote a number of papers on navigation for the Geographical Journal³.

² Recent Expeditions to Libya from the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Williams & Hall. Geogr J 131482-501

³ A Simple Method of Navigating in Deserts. Geogr J 133, 2:192-205 and Further Notes on navigating in Deserts. Geogr J 133 4:508-11, and Land Navigation for Travellers and Small ~Expeditions Geogr J 138, 3: 339-46, and *Expedition Navigation* published by the RGS Survey & Training Committee.