A LONG RANGE DESERT WARGAME

by

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Hands up all those World War Two wargamers who couldn't resist buying some LRDG Chevrolets or SAS jeeps for their collection. Lots of you? I don't blame you: both these units have lots of appeal for the wargamer: a buccaneering reputation, a fine battle history and, best of all, vehicles armed to the teeth!

But do they see much action on your wargames table? No, I thought not. They aren't really designed for fighting in the front line, are they? They are intended to fight behind the enemy lines. So your models have probably ended up collecting dust.

Well, fear not, gentle reader; there follows a set of rules and ideas, suitable either for solo players or for an umpire and from one to five players, based on the type of operation carried out by the LRDG in the Libyan desert during 1941-2, to enable you to make full use of your dusty "Chevies".

But, before the wargame, the factual bit...

THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP

The LRDG were formed by Major R A Bagnold, a noted pre-war desert explorer and author of the book The physics of blown sand and desert dunes, which I am sure we have all read. Bagnold happened to be passing through Alexandria en route for somewhere else when he was head-hunted by General Wavell for his staff. Major Bagnold proposed the formation of a long range penetration unit several times before he finally got his way, and he then scoured the Middle East for men experienced in desert exploration to lead the new unit. The first patrols set out into the desert at the end of August, 1940.

At first, the LRDG was intended purely for reconnaissance and map-making, (most of the army's maps of Libya were Italian made and largely fictional) but they soon diversified into other tasks, including beating up enemy supply routes and airfields, the delivery and collection of agents and saboteurs far behind enemy lines and the maintaining of a watch on the main coast road, far behind enemy lines, to record troop movements.

The men of the LRDG were all volunteers from other units. 'A' squadron was mostly made up of New Zealanders; 'B' squadron consisted of volunteers from the Guards, Rhodesians and various yeomanry regiments. There was later an Indian Long Range Squadron. Royal Signals, REME and RAOC personnel also played their part.

The LRDG's vehicles were (obviously) customised for the task they were to perform. A bog-standard 30cwt Chevrolet had cab roof, windscreen and doors taken off; extra leaves in the springs, a radiator condenser and stowage brackets added. Ten-inch sand tyres were fitted. Each vehicle carried three weeks' water and rations for her crew and petrol for 1100 miles without a refuelling stop. The extra stowage was for sand channels for extracting bogged-down vehicles, camouflage nets, towropes, wireless sets, and all those extra supplies. It was a point of honour never to abandon a damaged vehicle if it could be recovered; the record recovery was that of a 15cwt with a broken half shaft, towed 900 miles by a Guards patrol.

The first patrols consisted of 11 lorries and over 30 officers and men, but these were soon halved in size and standardised at one officer, 15 to 18 other ranks and five lorries. All the lorries had two mountings for machine guns: Vickers guns, Lewis guns, Brownings or Brens. One of the lorries in a patrol would usually mount a 20mm Breda cannon or 37mm Bofors in place of one MG. Space would also be found for the crew's personal weapons, and any other weapons that the resourceful troopers could lay their hands on: Boyes Anti-tank Rifles, mortars, grenade cup-dischargers and anything picked up from the enemy.

One lorry in a patrol would mount a No. 11 wireless set. This type of set was supposed to have a 20 mile radius, but LRDG signallers consistently used them at distances up to 1000 miles! French wireless procedure was used, to convince enemy RDF units that any wireless traffic they picked up from behind their lines came from French Equatorial Africa.

The LRDG were specialists at navigation in the trackless wastes of the North African desert. A normal magnetic compass would soon have been rendered unreliable if fixed on to a lorry festooned with metal objects and bouncing across rough terrain for hundreds of miles, so a sun compass was used. This ingeniously simple device, a bit like a miniature sundial, consisted of an upright needle, throwing a shadow onto a circle of card. The card could be rotated according to the time and, as the position of the sun is known at each time of day, the needle will give a compass bearing. The sun compass, of course, would not work until the sun had fully risen, nor around midday, when it was too high in the sky to throw an effective shadow. The LRDG, therefore, must have been unique in the British army in having an officially sanctioned 'lie-in' in the morning and a siesta at lunchtime! A combination of compass bearing and distance travelled (speed x time) would give a reasonably accurate dead reckoning position, which could be checked by star-sight at night, in the manner of a navigator at sea.

The LRDG took seriously their boast of being able to get to any position behind enemy lines at any time. The axis forces did not seem to take serious large scale precautions to protect their inland flank; the Germans perhaps lacking the manpower and the Italians the inclination, but there were fortified posts in the desert and some mobile patrols. Enemy aircraft were a serious threat, best side-stepped, apparently, by waving at the pilot and hoping he identified the patrol as friendly. A very large proportion of axis transport was made up of captured British vehicles anyway, so recognising the type of lorry was no indication of the nationality of its crew.

The local population, in so far as they took any interest in the war at all, were strongly hostile to the Italians. Marshal Graziani had herded thousands of Arabs into concentration camps in the '20s and '30s during his campaign to crush the Senussi revolt, and the Arabs had not forgotten this. Their antipathy to the Italians was often useful to LRDG patrols, though the Germans did not seem to suffer by association with their allies.

So now we have enough information to press on to the wargame...

WARGAMING THE LRDG

If you are umpiring a group of players, perhaps each commanding one vehicle, provide your players with a general map of your area of operations showing topographical features, hills, ridges, wadis, etc, and keep a more detailed map for yourself which also shows enemy positions and any 'surprises' you feel like including. (See example.) If you are a solo player, simply dice at random for your encounters. Bear in mind that the further north you are the more likely you are to encounter the enemy.

Before you swan off into the desert, you need to load up your lorries. The Chevrolet diagram shows the gun mountings and stowage available on each vehicle. (I've also included an armed jeep diagram, in case you prefer to wargame an SAS raid) First, the weaponry.

Each vehicle can mount one class A and one class B weapon. It does not matter which mounting is used for which weapon.

Class A weapon

| Twin Vickers K |
| Browning 5" |
| Vickers .303 HMG |
| Breda 20mm cannon |

Class B weapon

| Single Vickers K |
| Browning, 5" |
| Lewis Gun |
| Bren Gun |

Then the other stowage: The diagrams show where items can be stowed on the vehicles and how many stowage points are available. The following table gives the points cost of each item:

May be stowed externally:
5 gallon can of petrol or water 5 points
Sand screen/mat (For freeing bogged down vehicles) 2 points
Camouflage net 2 points
Spade or pick 1 point each
Wirecutters 1 point
Spare wheel 2 points
Tow chain 1 point

Must be stowed internally:

One man with personal kit and weapon. 10 points
Box of ammunition (suitable for 10 bursts) 10 points
20mm 8 points
0.5” or .303” 5 points
14 day ration box for one man 5 points
First Aid kit 3 points
Tool kit 3 points
No. 11 wireless set 6 points
Satchel charge 2 points
Verey light pistol and flares 1 point
Two Mills 36 grenades 1 point
Torch 1 point
2 anti-tank mines 2 points
Boyes anti-tank rifle and ammunition 3 points
Box of tea (very important) 1 point
2" mortar 2 points
Six 2" mortar rounds 3 points
Per major spare part (e.g. starter motor, carburettor) 1 point

Next, the mission. Choose one according to taste:
Make a detailed map of the area.
Drop off or collect an agent at a given point on the map.
Beat up traffic on a road or a census of a day’s traffic on it.
Destroy a supply base or airfield.

Dice at random on an average dice for the ability of each driver. The lower the score, the better. If you prefer, every member of the patrol can be given his own particular specialties or ratings. There are, after all, less than 20 of them, so it wouldn’t be too onerous a task. To take this idea to its logical conclusion, you could build up the character of each crewman as follows:

Private Nobby Clark (Middlesex Yeomanry), driver - rating 3, poor shot.
Craftsman Dusty Miller (RAOC), driver - rating 5, qualified fitter, average shot.
Guardsman Sandy MacRae (Scots Guards), non-driver, good shot. Has advantages in hand-to-hand combat. (Regimental boxing champ) And so on...

Move distances across the desert are as follows:

Stony desert or sandy plain 100 miles per day.
Rocky desert 60 miles per day
Road 150 miles per day
Salt marsh, dunes 40 miles per day

If not on a road, the patrol should be moving along a compass bearing. The umpire should introduce slight navigational errors along the way, just to prevent the players having too much control; say plus or minus five to ten miles north-south and east-west each day.

If crossing an escarpment or other obstacle or a patch of soft sand or salt marsh, throw a D10 (0-10); if this does not equal or exceed the driver’s ability rating, a mishap has occurred. If on soft going, the vehicle has become bogged down and has to be extricated; deduct D6 x 5 miles from the patrol’s movement for this day. If on hard going, test for damage to wheels and suspension as if hit by small arms fire. Use same ability test for stalling engine if trying to climb a steep gradient. After each day’s journey, mark off the following from the supplies carried:

One day’s rations per crew member.
One gallon of water per crew member.
One gallon of petrol per 20 miles travelled.

When you reach your objective, or you encounter something on the way which requires action, adjourn to the wargames table.

Here are some incidental encounters, to keep your players on their toes. These should be marked on the umpire’s map or, if preferred, diced for at random.

A group of apparently friendly Arabs - do they have information about enemy positions? Or are they spying for the Germans?
Two escaped British POWs walking home. They are hungry and thirsty and take up 7 stowage points each.
Patrolling aircraft. Dice for Fiat CR42 or RAF Tomahawk. 15% chance of it attacking; 90% if you shoot first.
Italian mobile workshop unit, scavenging wrecked vehicles for spares.
Enemy motorised patrol. Dice for Italian or German. 20% chance of it including armoured cars. Who spots who first?
Civilian vehicle; say a Libyan postmaster on his deliveries, for instance. Will he raise the alarm if you let him go? Will he be missed if you don’t?

If on road, motor convoys. Dice at random for number of vehicles, direction of travel and nationality.
Lorry lost in desert. Dice for nationality: Italian, German, British, Indian, Libyan?
Just about any WWII skirmish rules could be used for this game, but
regrettfully, few rules go into any detail regarding damage inflicted on softskinned vehicles. This clearly will not do for our purposes, so the following rules should redress the balance:

If a vehicle is hit, first dice for location of the damage; throw a D10 if hit from the side, D6 if from the front. Once the location of the hit is established, throw another D10. If hit by shrapnel or rifle fire, deduct one from dice throw. If hit by MGs over .303", add one to throw. If hit by 20mm or 37mm, add three. If score 0 or less, no damage or casualties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dice throw</th>
<th>Reducer</th>
<th>Engine</th>
<th>Wheel(s)</th>
<th>Suspension</th>
<th>Body</th>
<th>Cargo compartment</th>
<th>Chassis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>No damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>No damage</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>No damage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Slight</td>
<td>Engine stops in 6D6 moves</td>
<td>Tyre punctured</td>
<td>Immovable</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Broken shaft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Slight</td>
<td>Engine stops in 6D6 moves</td>
<td>Tyre punctured</td>
<td>Immovable</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prog shaft damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lifted</td>
<td>Prog shaft damaged</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Differential</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Differential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lifted, as above</td>
<td>Prog shaft damaged</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Reducer</td>
<td>Engine wrecked in 6D6 moves</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Reducer</td>
<td>Engine wrecked, as above</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reducer</td>
<td>Engine wrecked, as above</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
<td>Crewman hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Any item hit on 5 or 6</td>
<td>Prop shaft damaged</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Slightly wounded driver will drive erratically. Badly wounded driver will drive erratically for 6D6 moves, then the vehicle will slow to a stop.

WON OR LOSE?

Actually, there doesn’t seem much point in adding victory conditions. If you succeed in your mission and get back in more or less one piece, you have won! If you don’t, with luck, it is the POW cage for you or a long, long walk home. With no luck, well, someone will find your bleached bones in the desert one day...

Afterthought: a useful glossary of Arabic terms for customising maps.

Adrar, djebel - mountain. Garet - hill
Ain - spring Hamada - Stony desert
Bir - well Idehan - sandy plain
Borg, boudj - fort Tassili - rocky plateau
Chott - salt marsh Wadi - dry watercourse
Erg - Dunes

Results:
Starter motor wrecked: Can only be started with crank handle.
Plug leads: Reduce speed by 30% for each one broken.
Fuel line: Lorry stops, can be repaired by fitter.
Fuel pump: Lorry stops. Must be replaced by a spare.
Head or block wrecked: Engine stops immediately.
Puncture: Driving becomes erratic in 2D6 moves.
Tyre blown off: Driving becomes erratic.
suspension damaged: Lorry goes round in circles.
Half shaft: Stop immediately.
Wheel blown off: Unable to regulate speed. After each table move, throw two D6, counting one as number of inches added, the other subtracted from move.
Instrument wrecked: Driving becomes erratic.
Gear lever: Remain at present speed, or stall.
Steering column: Driving erratic.
Brakes damaged: +2D6 inches to stopping distance.
Prop. shaft damaged: Half speed.
Differential damaged: Stay at same speed or stall.
Prop. shaft broken: Lorry stops.
Brakes destroyed: Slow down by no more than two inches per move.
Chassis cracked: Driving erratic.