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SAS COMBAT VEHICLES 1942-91



GAVIN MORTIMER

**ILLUSTRATED BY HENRY MORSHEAD &
IRENE CANO RODRÍGUEZ**

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INTRODUCTION

The origins of the Special Air Service began, somewhat ironically, not in the air but under the ocean. In late April 1940, Bill Stirling and five other British Army officers had tried unsuccessfully to mount a covert operation in Norway, an operation that had failed when the submarine in which they were travelling north developed engine trouble and returned to Scotland. Stirling, a Scottish laird with a grand house set among the rolling countryside of central Scotland, was disappointed but not defeated by the failure of Operation *Knife*. Together with his five comrades, Stirling was granted permission to establish a guerrilla warfare training school within the 15,000 acres of his estate. Their idea was enthusiastically supported by the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, an ardent admirer of irregular warfare since he witnessed at first hand the effectiveness of the Boer commandos during the South African War of 1899 to 1902. As the number of recruits to Stirling's guerrilla warfare school grew, it became necessary to find a larger and more isolated base. Lord Lovat, a cousin of Stirling's, suggested using some of his land at Inverailort, a remote stretch of coastline between the isles of Mull and Skye. Among the new instructors was Stirling's younger brother,

A rare view of an SAS patrol on its return from operations in the desert, uniforms dirty and appearance unkempt, in Cairo in early 1943. It's interesting to see that the SAS has acquired a Ford F30, the truck used by the LRDG in 1941. Previously the LRDG had used a Chevrolet WB, in 1942, replacing the Ford with the Chevrolet 1533. The Fords were not popular with the LRDG, which found them heavier and less nimble than the Chevrolets as well as less fuel efficient. (Gavin Mortimer)



David, skilled in the arts of climbing and fieldcraft, and one of the students was the actor David Niven, who, at the outbreak of World War II, had returned from Hollywood and re-joined the army as a lieutenant. He divided the men at Inverailort into two groups: 'There are the genuinely courageous who are itching to get at the throat of the enemy, and the restless who will volunteer for anything in order to escape from the boredom of what they are presently doing.'

David Stirling fell into the latter category. As an officer in the Scots Guards – he had been nicknamed the 'Giant Sloth' by his peers because of his indolence – he had persuaded his brother to appoint him as an instructor to escape the tedium of regular soldiering. Stirling subsequently volunteered for Layforce, the commando unit named after its founder, Colonel Robert Laycock, in the hope of seeing some action. However, when Layforce was shipped to the Middle East in early 1941, the opportunity to put its commando skills to good use was limited by the ignorance of the higher command and the fluctuating nature of the war in North Africa following the arrival in Libya of Germany's Afrika Korps.

Stirling foresaw the demise of Layforce weeks before the unit was disbanded in July 1941, and had, with another intrepid officer, Jock Lewes, undertaken some experimental parachute jumps. Stirling injured his back on one jump and, during his recuperation in a Cairo hospital, committed to paper an idea for a small parachute unit to carry out raids behind enemy Axis lines. 'I sought to prove' he wrote, '... that 200 properly selected, trained and equipped men, organized into sub-units of five, should be able to attack at least thirty different objectives at the same time on the same night as compared to only one objective using the current Commando technique.'

Granted permission by Middle East HQ to raise a unit comprising six officers and 60 other ranks, Stirling's force was called 'L' Detachment of the Special Air Service Brigade. The inaugural SAS raid was a bitter failure that robbed Stirling of 34 men, either killed or captured after they parachuted into Libya on the night of 16/17 November 1941. The operation – timed to coincide with the start of the Eighth Army's Operation *Crusader* – was launched into the teeth of a howling gale, scattering Stirling and his men far and wide. Only Stirling and 20 soldiers reached the rendezvous with the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), which loaded the bedraggled survivors into the back of their Ford F30 trucks. The LRDG, the pioneer of British special forces warfare, had been formed 18 months earlier, and its knowledge of the desert was unmatched among European nations.

Initially, the LRDG had been equipped with the Chevrolet WB (30 CWT), a vehicle it found ideal for long-range patrols deep inside the enemy-held Libyan desert. However, a shortage of new Chevys compelled the LRDG to look for a new truck in early 1941 and the

David Stirling, seen here in North Africa sometime in 1942 leaning against a Chevrolet 1533X2 30 cwt truck of the Long Range Desert Group (LRDG). The inaugural Special Air Service (SAS) raid ended in disaster and compelled Stirling to abandon the idea of parachute insertion. Instead, he partnered with the LRDG, which transported the SAS to its targets in its trucks. The LRDG had used Ford F30 CMPs for most of 1941, but as wear and tear took its toll they were replaced with 200 Chevrolet 1533X2s in March 1942, a vehicle that had better weight distribution than the Ford, as the rear wheels were almost central to the rear body. (Gavin Mortimer)



model chosen was the Ford F30. It proved unpopular, despite the fact it was a four-wheel-drive vehicle with large tyres and high ground clearance. Whereas the Chevrolet could cover 240 miles on a single 20-gallon tank, the Ford F30's maximum range on its two 12¼ gallon tanks was 150 miles. In addition, the Ford's engine was troublesome; not only was it vulnerable to sand, but it was situated next to the driver and front passenger, making life very uncomfortable on long and arduous patrols. None of this particularly bothered David Stirling, however, who was grateful for the LRDG's offer to transport him and his men to their next target; it was safer than a parachute.

SELF-SUFFICIENCY: THE BLITZ BUGGY

The partnership formed between the SAS and the LRDG was built on mutual respect, even if this was concealed beneath some ribald but affectionate mockery. The latter dubbed the SAS 'parashits' and it in turn called the LRDG the Long Range Taxi Service; but a more efficient taxi service one would be hard pushed to find. The forte of the LRDG was navigation, as the SAS soon discovered. In December 1941 it transported two parties of the SAS, one led by Stirling and the other by Lieutenant Blair 'Paddy' Mayne, towards the airfields of Sirte and Tamet in Libya. The last mile was made on foot, and while Stirling had no luck at Sirte, Mayne and his raiding party destroyed 24 aircraft at Tamet with Lewes bombs, a 'stodgy lump' of plastic explosive and thermite rolled in motor car oil with a detonator, instantaneous fuse and a time pencil.

A fortnight later Mayne and his men returned to Tamet and destroyed a further 27 aircraft, while a party led by Lieutenant Bill Stirling accounted for 37 planes at Agedabia. 'The fruits of our co-operation with Stirling and his men were beginning to fall and this was only the start of even greater pickings,' reflected Captain David Lloyd Owen of the LRDG.

In fact, the first few months of 1942 was to be a period of frustration for the LRDG and the SAS. On 21 January General Erwin Rommel launched his Afrika Korps in a counter-attack against the Eighth Army, that forced it to withdraw 350 miles from the western border of Cyrenaica (eastern Libya) to the Gazala Line. Among the possessions forfeited by the British was Jalo Oasis, erstwhile desert base for its special forces. Stirling, however, had a knack of turning a bad situation to his advantage and he decided that as the port of Benghazi was in Axis hands it was only fitting that it should be targeted. It would also be an opportunity for the SAS to be self-sufficient; the LRDG had been unstinting in its support, but ferrying the SAS to targets reduced its ability to carry out long-range surveillance operations on enemy traffic, and Stirling also craved autonomy.

The solution was a stripped-down Ford C11ADF station wagon. Stirling had discovered the vehicle in a base workshop (apparently it had been sent for repair after being damaged during unloading in Cairo) and he liberated it for his own purposes. 'It was well sprung and had a powerful engine, and the removal of the roof and sides had considerably increased its speed,' recalled Fitzroy Maclean, who had recently joined

Lieutenant-Colonel Blair Mayne, better known as 'Paddy', was the outstanding SAS operator in World War II. An Ireland and British Lions rugby international before the war, Mayne was a natural guerrilla fighter and it was his idea in 1942 to use the jeep as an offensive weapon. He led A Squadron on a successful mission to harry the retreating Germans in the autumn of 1942 and in Germany was awarded a third bar to his DSO after driving to the rescue of his men, who were pinned down by enemy fire. (Gavin Mortimer)





Johnny Cooper (second left) and Reg Seekings (right) were original members of the SAS and also served in France on Operation *Houndsworth*. Cooper was only 19 when he volunteered for the SAS and he and Seekings both travelled extensively with Stirling in the Blitz Buggy. On most occasions Stirling drove, but sometimes, if he wanted a nap, he would hand over the wheel to Cooper. In October 1940, shortly after he had joined the Commandos, Stirling was fined 10s by a Scottish court for driving a car without a valid driving licence. Admitting the indiscretion, Stirling told the court it was the 'result of a pure oversight'. (Gavin Mortimer)

the SAS. 'It was fitted with mountings for two machine guns in front and two behind. The guns themselves could be removed at will and placed out of sight on the floor.' The Ford C11ADF had the same voluminous 3.91-litre engine as the LRDG trucks, but its lighter chassis made it faster, although its fragile track rods were a liability in the unforgiving desert terrain. It was right-hand drive and had a maximum speed of 70mph.

Stirling had the C11ADF fitted with a spotlight, a sun compass and brackets for sand channels, and a radiator coolant expansion tank was installed to conserve engine coolant. Stirling nicknamed his acquisition the 'Blitz Buggy', probably drawing inspiration from the vehicle that had been designed by the American Bantam Car Company at the start of the war and was the forerunner of the Willys jeep. The Blitz Buggy had won the approval of the US Army's Ordnance Technical Committee specifications but not the War Department, which didn't award Bantam the contract because its estimate was over budget and there were concerns over the ability to meet demand within the tight timeframe.

Stirling's Blitz Buggy was painted grey (although one SAS veteran recalled it as dark green) to mimic the enemy's colours, even adding a broad white stripe across the bonnet, which was its air-recognition mark. The unit's insignia, the flaming sword of Excalibur (frequently and erroneously described as a winged dagger) was stencilled onto both doors.

On 15 March, Stirling set off from Siwa Oasis bound for Benghazi, 400 miles north-west. There were six men in the Blitz Buggy on bench seats front and rear, including Corporal Johnny Cooper. He remembered that the vehicle's 'suspension had been modified to cope with desert travel', and other adjustments included converting the boot into an extra petrol tank to augment its fuel capacity of 12¼ gallons.

The Blitz Buggy got the men to Benghazi, but when they attempted to assemble the folding canoe (known as a folboat) they discovered it had been



This is an early shot of David Stirling's 'Blitz Buggy', before it was fitted with a water condenser and had had the SAS insignia stencilled onto both front doors. The vehicle was a stripped-down Ford C11ADF station wagon that Stirling had discovered in a base workshop and liberated for his own purposes. 'It was well sprung and had a powerful engine, and the removal of the roof and sides had considerably increased its speed,' recalled Fitzroy Maclean. The suspension was strengthened to cope with the rigours of desert travel and an extra fuel tank was fitted in the rear compartment. (Gavin Mortimer)

irreparably damaged during the long journey from Siwa. Stirling tried again in May, and this time the Ford C11ADF's familiar failing became apparent as they drove down the smooth road that led to Benghazi. The Blitz Buggy began emitting what Stirling described as a 'high-pitched scream'. He pulled over in the dark and Johnny Cooper got out to examine the vehicle. 'During the long approach march across the desert the wheels had moved out of alignment so that one of the tyres, now on a hard, unyielding surface, created a drag,' he wrote. Nothing could be done at that moment to fix the bent track rods, so they continued into Benghazi where they parked the car in a garage. Stirling and his men set off on foot to attack enemy shipping in the harbour, while Sergeant Johnny Rose endeavoured to repair the bent track rods. Neither was successful.

Stirling should have dispensed with his Blitz Buggy after the second unsuccessful attack on Benghazi; it was a nice idea, but the vehicle was not suited to the tasks demanded of it. In the end, it was the Italian Air Force that put paid to the vehicle. En route to attack Benina aerodrome in June 1942, Stirling drove over a thermos bomb (small anti-personnel

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BLITZ BUGGY, LIBYA 1942

In early 1942 David Stirling discovered a Ford C11ADF station wagon in a base workshop in Cairo and spotted its potential as the first step on the SAS becoming self-sufficient and no longer reliant on the LRDG for its transport. Like the LRDG trucks, the Ford C11ADF had a 3.91-litre engine, but with a lighter chassis it was capable of maximum speed of 70mph. One of its disadvantages, however, was the fragile track rods that were prone to damage in the desert terrain. Stirling named his acquisition the 'Blitz Buggy' and kitted it out with a spotlight, sun compass, brackets for sand channels and a radiator coolant expansion tank was installed. It was painted grey with a broad white stripe across the bonnet and the SAS insignia was stencilled on both doors.



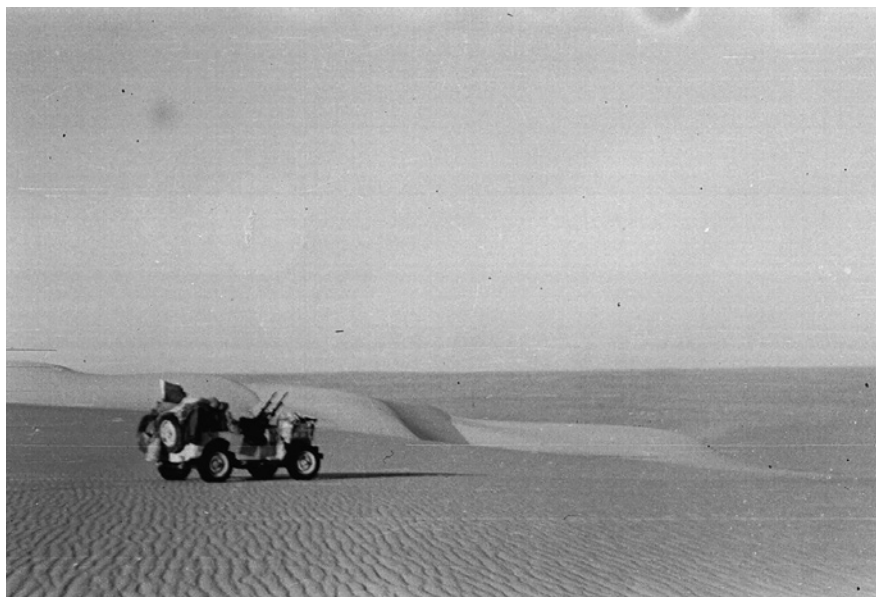
mine dropped from the air), which, remembered Cooper, 'had blown off the front wheel and messed up the front suspension'. The Ford C11ADF was repaired, but in July it was attacked by two Italian CR.42s, the agile biplanes that were deceptively menacing. Stirling had just time to yell 'abandon ship' before the buggy blew up. Its short life had been entertaining if not very effective.

SAS DESERT JEEPS

On 26 May 1942, Rommel had launched a major offensive against the Allies' left flank in alliance with the Italian X and XXI Corps. By the end of June, the Eighth Army had withdrawn east across Libya to a line between a coastal town called El Alamein and the edge of a large salt marsh called the Qattara Depression. Throughout July, fierce fighting would rage in western Egypt as the Axis troops tried to advance to Alexandria, an ambition that was thwarted and which left the Germans and Italians with a dangerously thin supply line.

One result of the Axis advance was the abandonment of Siwa Oasis by the LRDG and SAS. The latter returned to its HQ at Kabrit, 90 miles east of Cairo on the edge of the Great Bitter Lake in late June, and while the men recuperated, Stirling drove to the Egyptian capital to find a role for his unit. In the first six months of 1942 the SAS had destroyed at least 143 Axis aircraft (the figure was probably more, but Stirling erred on the side of caution when collating statistics). General Claude Auchinleck, Commander-in-Chief Middle East (and a family friend of the Stirlings) instructed Stirling, and the LRDG, to concentrate on Qaret Tartura on the north-western edge of the Qattara Depression, and from this remote base attack airfields and enemy lines of communication in the Fuka–Bagush area, approximately 55 miles west of El Alamein. According to Captain George Jellicoe, then in the SAS, it was Paddy

A jeep in splendid isolation in the Libyan desert, a region of sharp contrasts. The gravel desert was called *serir* in Arabic and the stony areas were known as *hammada*. Both, in general, were good to cross in jeeps, because the wind had removed the sand in a process called 'deflation'. At other times SAS patrols would encounter a bed of powdered clay, which enveloped them with choking, billowing clouds of white dust that were not only visible for miles around but also got into their eyes, mouth and every other nook and cranny of their bodies. (Gavin Mortimer)



Mayne who suggested 'it would be useful if a jeep could be provided to transport the elements of the Special Air Service Regiment to the scene of the operations'.

The SAS needed a vehicle that was more agile than a truck, and more robust than a Ford C11ADF station wagon, and Stirling found the ideal solution in Cairo. The Willys jeep (named after its manufacturer Willys Overland, although Ford was also involved in its manufacture) was a powerful and versatile four-wheel-drive vehicle that went into production after the American Bantam Car Company had failed to win the contract for a light utility vehicle.

Ford and Willys both submitted prototypes – the Willys Quad and the Ford Pygmy – and eventually in July 1941 the War Department chose Willys-Overland to fulfil its contract, because of its low bid (\$748.74 a unit), and its promise to meet production requirements. From the initial order of 1,500 units, another 16,000 vehicles were ordered. By October of that year Willys-Overland was struggling to keep up with demand and Ford was contracted to assist in manufacture. In total, Ford went on to produce approximately 280,000 of these vehicles.

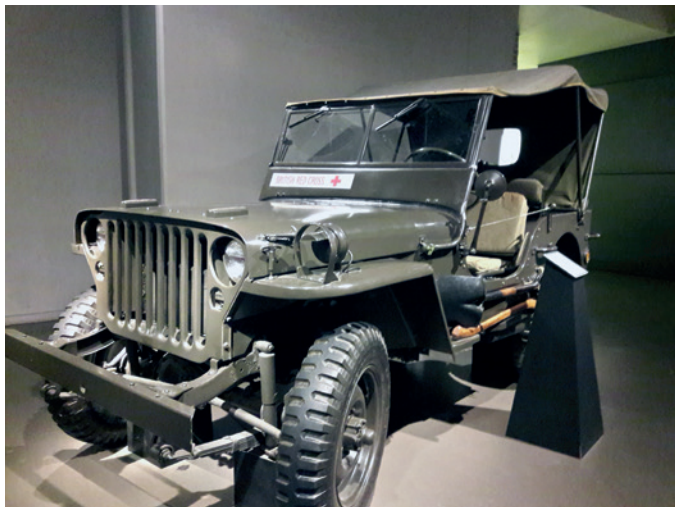
Meanwhile in May 1941 a reporter from the Washington DC *Evening Star* went for a test drive and subsequently recounted his experience: 'One of the mechanical bucking broncos was in Washington yesterday for informal inspection by War Department officials and interested members of Congress,' he explained. After the inspection he and the test driver headed to a clearing in Rock Creek Park, in the north of Washington DC, where construction workers had dumped piles of earth and in doing so imprinted heavy truck tracks in the mud. 'Hardly had we adjusted ourselves in the front seat of the mile-a-minute bug before the thing bolted toward a 4-foot drop,' wrote the reporter. He continued:



A member of B Squadron in the desert in late 1942. Judging from the equipment stashed in the rear of the vehicle this soldier was en route to resupply his SAS comrades. The Australian bush hat worn is unusual for the SAS, as is the sheet wrapped around the twin Vickers to protect it from sand and dust. In all probability he was making his way west from Cairo to join his squadron engaged in harrying the retreating Germans. (Gavin Mortimer)



Visible on the front of the bonnet of this Willys jeep are two rolled-up sand channels, indispensable to both the LRDG and the SAS in North Africa. Ralph Bagnold, the founder of the LRDG, who had explored the desert extensively in the inter-war years, hit upon the idea of using corrugated steel channel sections, 5ft long and 11in wide. 'A little valley [of sand] would be scooped out by hand from in front of each rear wheel, sloping downward to the base of each tyre,' he wrote. 'A channel section was laid in each valley, on which the wheels could bite as the car accelerated forward. This usually carried the car well beyond the front ends of the channel.' (Gavin Mortimer)



A Willys jeep in all its glory on display at the Imperial War Museum in London. The SAS removed the foldable windscreen, the front bumper and the roof. This jeep is a later model, identified as such by the headlamp mounted on the left front fender to guide the driver at night. This was another feature deemed surplus to SAS requirements. The first Willys jeeps had a welded, flat, iron-slat radiator grille, replaced in 1942 by a stamped grille, like the one shown here. (Gavin Mortimer)

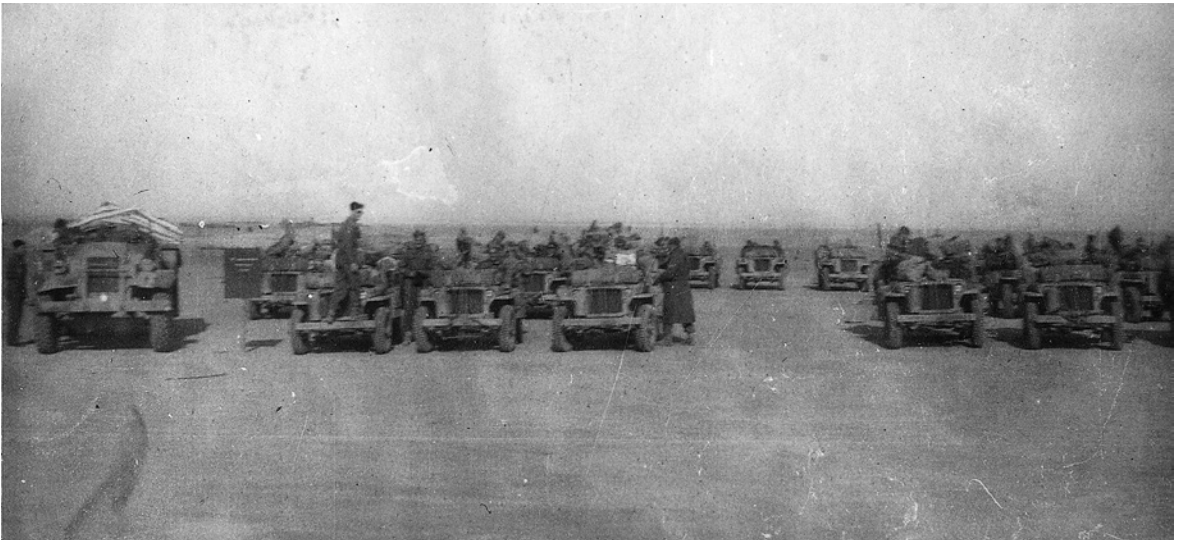
This first manoeuvre was negotiated without the loss of anything but my hat. For a moment I thought my stomach was in it. The 'jeep' bounded like a wild demon over the enlarged washboard left by truckers in the clearing and roared toward the 60 per cent angle cliff. There was a grinding noise, then that funny-tummy feeling again and we were half way up the side... with closed eyes I awaited developments. Things sort of whirled and then the ground seemed to be meeting us head on. We still had four wheels under us, however, and the 'jeep' levelled off.

It was a thrilling, if nerve-wracking, experience for the reporter, who ended his account by stating that the US Army had placed orders for 4,500 jeeps with 10,000 pending. They would be used as command or reconnaissance cars and were 'designed to carry three men and a machine gun at speeds as high as 70 miles an hour [it was actually 60mph] through mud and water and over rough terrain'.

Charles E. Sorensen, president of the Willys-Overland Motors Inc., boasted to the *Evening Star* that the jeep was the 'first completely new and original product of automotive engineering in years, and it has just as many advantages for civilians as it has for the military'. The Willys, which entered service in the American military in late 1941, had a 60hp L134 engine, nicknamed 'Go Devil', which generated 105ft-lb of torque, far more than the Bantam's 83 and Ford's 85. The Willys' wheelbase was 80in and had leaf springs and shock absorbers, a handbrake assembly at the back of the transfer case and hydraulic breaks on the wheels. On the instrument panel

Some of the original members of the SAS, including Johnny Cooper (far right), Ted Badger (driver's seat), Pat Riley (front passenger seat), Dave Kershaw (squatting by the back wheel) and Reg Seeking (kneeling by the front wheel), probably in the second half of 1942. The standard colour for the Willys Jeep was OD (olive drab) but the SAS's vehicles were painted desert-sand all over; while the LRDG painted many of its vehicles salmon pink or other elaborate colour schemes, the SAS refrained from following suit. (Gavin Mortimer)





was a speedometer registering 0–60mph, a Fahrenheit temperature gauge of 0–220, an oil pressure monitor and a map light.

The jeep was an instant success, and the US Army propaganda machine went into overdrive to publicize its virtues. The Washington *Sunday Star* published a photograph of the vehicle on the front page on April 12 1942 with the caption: ‘This is the United States Army’s new “jeep” – a smallish monster with an almost fabulous capability. As it stands here, it looks harmless and bulky, but watch it perform.’

A consignment of Willys jeeps arrived in North Africa around the same time that the *Sunday Star* was praising its performance, and David Stirling probably glimpsed one driving around Cairo. Instantly he grasped its potential and procured 15 jeeps, handing them over to the SAS fitters for modifications before their departure to Qaret Tartura.

‘Four days only were available for preparations,’ wrote Jellicoe in his operational report of the period. ‘15 jeeps had to be prepared with special equipment and guns and twenty 3-ton lorries loaded. This meant that the drivers and maintenance crews had to work, for some time, as long as 72 hours almost without a break.’

The foldable windscreen, canvas roof, side screen and the doors were removed from each jeep, as were the front grille slats to assist cooling. A water condenser was fitted to each jeep, an invention of the Light Car Patrol of World War I, and subsequently developed by the LRDG. ‘From the top of the radiator, the overflow pipe of which was blocked up, a rubber tube led into a two-gallon can bolted to the running-board and half-filled with water,’ said Bill Kennedy Shaw, the LRDG intelligence officer. ‘When the water in the radiator boiled the steam condensed in this can, and when it had ceased boiling the vacuum in the radiator would suck the water back and fill it up again. If all the joints were air-tight there would be no need to “top up” the radiator for hundreds of miles.’

In time, the LRDG also acquired some jeeps and fitted them out in a style similar to the SAS, although with just one machine gun, a front-facing single Vickers. The LRDG also opted to stash its jerrycans of fuel in the rear

This view of the SAS in 1942 in North Africa is interesting in that the jeeps have the welded flat, iron-slat radiator grille, which was the initial design by Willys. When Ford joined in the production, it introduced the stamped, slotted, steel grille. This became standard for Willys jeeps too, as they were lighter and more practical for mass production. The fashion in the LRDG and the SAS for removing all but two of the slats for better air cooling has been questioned by some post-war vehicle experts. (Gavin Mortimer)