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TEN DAYS' HARDSHIP IN DESERT

Three Australians, the crew of a Blenheim bomber from an R.A.A.F. squadron in the Western Desert which forced-landed in enemy territory, have returned to their base after ten-day trek across 140 miles of desert.

During their journey they dodged enemy tanks and patrols, lived on some rice they found in a Bren gun carrier, and on water drained from the radiator of a derelict vehicle. When this water supply was exhausted, they moistened their parched mouths with dew from the tops of petrol tins and desert flowers.

The crew consisted of a 32-year-old squadron leader from Como, just outside Perth, West Australia; a 28-year-old sergeant-observer from Adelaide, South Australia; and a sergeant air-gunner from Mount Barker, South Australia, age 26.

Telling the story of their adventures, the squadron leader said, "Coming back from a bombing raid west of Benghazi, we were sailing along for home when our starboard engine began to pack-up. We were only a thousand feet up at the time. The port engine was not giving full power either, so we were done. I kept the aircraft going without any oil-pressure at all, and gave the duff engine an extra burst now and again to regain a bit of height, but after twenty minutes she seized solid and the prop stopped.

"There was nothing to do except get down as quickly as possible. I turned back into wind on the one engine and decided to try a wheels-down landing in case she went up in flames. The country was full of rock-shelves and I hadn't time to pick or choose a suitable spot to bring her down. I steered clear of the worst rocks and we came to a standstill with the tail-wheel broken off and the prop-tips bent as we went over a bit of an escarpment."

"Yes," commented the air observer, "it was an absolute miracle how the pilot managed to land on such rocky ground without injury to any of us. Being in enemy territory, it was useless to wait beside our aircraft. So we decided to walk."

Collecting the compass, a gallon water tank, mirror and the First-Aid kit from the aircraft, the three men set off. For the first two days and nights they made good progress and covered some 40 miles.

"It wasn't until the third day that we began to realise the seriousness of our position," said the observer, who took up the story. "It rained like hell and we got wet through and shivered all that night. It wasn't an ordinary shiver: our whole bodies quivered with the cold. Later on we came to pray for rain, but nothing happened.

"On the fourth day we hit a stony plain. You could glimpse the horizon and just nothing else, and we kept on seeing mirages.

"By the fifth day we were out of the water. So we went down on our hands and knees, sucking the dew off desert flowers and lucerne grass, drenching our handkerchiefs in any moist sand and burying our feet in it to relieve the pain from the blisters.

"We were now on our last legs, and had given up all hope of getting back alive. We wondered what our people were thinking, as by now we would have been posted as missing.

"Fortunately, we came across a derelict truck with about a quart of rusty water in the radiator, which kept us going that day."

"Looking back", said the squadron leader, "the greatest temptation was to swallow a mouthful of water from our water bottles. All we could afford to do was to gargle with it and then spit it back. We used to look for live snails - anything with moisture in it. I remember we killed a tortoise that gave us about a teaspoonful of liquid, and we licked the dew off the tops of any petrol tins we found.

"The mental strain was worse than anything. You don't realise how vivid your imagination can be. In the evening we could see our bar in the mess and all the boys round it.

"Our eyes began to go, too, after about four to five days, and everything became blurred as a result of the glare and sand. Our feet were giving us trouble with blisters, our groins were swollen due to the strain of walking, our legs sore and chafed to hell, our lips dry and cracked.

"Somehow we ploughed on, and, on the morning of the seventh day, we came across a Bren gun carrier. We discovered some tools on it, got at the drain-cocks on the radiator, and took all the water. It was an absolute godsend. We also found a clean pair of socks each and some rice which we cooked in a dixie over an open petrol fire in the sand. After a long rest, we reached a wadi over a big escarpment.

"By the tenth day we spotted what looked like an obelisk which we thought might provide some idea of our position. We had to get within 50 yards of it before we recognised it as a pile of petrol drums. The place was dotted round about with dug-outs, and nearby we found a well which we learned later had been used by the Hun the same morning.

"That evening three armoured cars, which were using the same wadi, and which had watched the Germans go there in the morning, came down to draw water and picked us up. They gave us their rations of food and provided us with blankets and clothing. We couldn't have been better looked after in a modern hotel. We spent that night with the patrol, which took us back to the British lines the next day. We were then driven to our advanced base, and now we are off for a spot of leave. All we can say is that we don't recommend hiking in the desert as a pastime.

"None of us were very religious up to this trip, concluded the observer, "but we reckon now that there must have been someone looking after us and that we were just not meant to land up in a prisoner of war camp."