

# **Modeling the Long Range Desert Group and the Special Air Service in World War II**

**By Bob Walls**

One of my favorite aspects of modeling is when I mix it with one of my other interests, military history. I love the hunt for research which will make a model either a little more accurate or a little more interesting. The internet has helped with this but I still enjoy reading about my subjects. I have always been interested in the North African Desert Campaign between Great Britain and the Axis and have accumulated a few models on the subject.

When you hear Long Range Desert Group (LRDG) or Special Air Service (SAS) you may well think of US Army Jeeps with machine guns mounted all over the vehicle. But that would be more cliché than fact. A quick look at model kits will give you a few more items to choose from than just jeeps!

## **Brief History of Both Units**

It is easy to confuse these two units or assume they were actually one combat unit. They were separate units under separate command with separate and distinct missions. The LRDG was formed first and was designed to go where no one in their right mind would go, deep into the unmapped desert of North Africa. Founded in June, 1940, by Major Ralph Bagnold, the LRDG reported directly to General Archibald Wavell, the British Commander-in-Chief Middle East. The LRDG was designed to slip undetected into enemy territory and to report back by wireless on enemy strength, troop and supply movement, any other intelligence they could gather, and then to return to their base camp. Since these missions could last several weeks and cover over 500 miles one way, great emphasis was placed on navigating the featureless desert to reach enemy bases. Roads were also monitored to spy on the number, direction, and type of enemy traffic. Reporting this information back to headquarters was more important than engaging the enemy in combat.

The SAS was formed in July, 1941, by Major David Stirling. His vision was for commandos to parachute next to enemy airfields, infiltrate them, and blow up aircraft. General Wavell heard Stirling's idea and considered it to be a low risk/high reward operation. With battles going badly for Britain, Wavell gave Stirling his full support. At that time, Stirling and hardly anyone else knew the LRDG existed as its mission was top secret. The inaugural SAS mission proved to be anything but a success. Two-thirds of the SAS force was killed, wounded, or missing as a result of multiple paratrooper drop zone problems. The remains of Stirling's unit were ferried back to Egypt by the LRDG. On his trip back, Stirling realized that if the commandos could be brought back from their targets they could be taken to them. Joint cooperation was approved at the highest levels. For a period of time, the LRDG and SAS became brothers in arms while retaining their own command structures. The LRDG carried extra fuel and water while guiding the SAS to a location close to their target. The LRDG would then guide the SAS back once the raid was over. During the height of Rommel's attacks on Egypt the German troops were close enough for the SAS Jeeps to venture into enemy territory on their own. The jeeps were armed with Vickers Machine guns taken from obsolete RAF bombers.

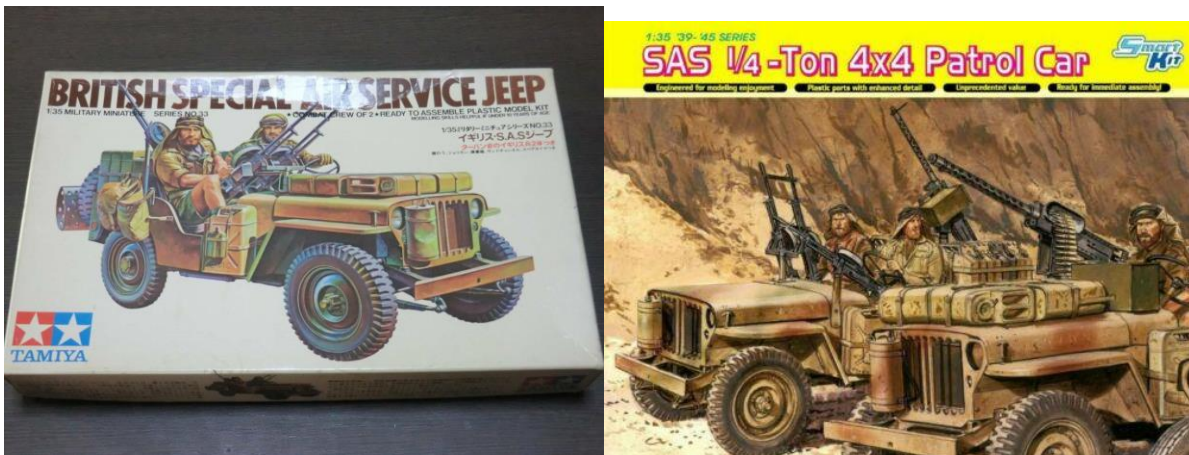
After the Allies won the North Africa campaign, these two units went their separate ways. The SAS came under the wing of the British Paratroopers in Europe while the LRDG fought in many Middle East battles. The LRDG was disbanded at the end of WW II while the SAS went on to become the elite commandos of the British Army. Today, the SAS is part of the United Kingdom Special Forces.

## Modeling this subject

Over the years various SAS and LRDG models have been released. Some are available through hobby shops, some have to be mail ordered, and others are only available through eBay as they are out of production.

## Jeeps

There are five 1/35 scale SAS jeep Willys/Ford kits readily available to buy. Three are for the North African Campaign while two are for the European Campaign. The Tamiya kit is decades old and somewhat shows its age. But it can be built up into a nice model and there are also aftermarket items to improve it. Dragon also makes a SAS jeep which is nicer and Cyber Hobby released one. The main differences in the Dragon and Cyber Hobby kits are in weapons/stowage.



MiniArt produces a series of Bantam 40 jeeps, any of which could be used for an LRDG jeep. These jeeps did not carry lots of guns or gas cans, so you will need to source those items. The kits do not contain LRDG items. NOTE: The LRDG switched over to Willys and Ford jeeps once the USA standardized the Army jeep to that pattern. The SAS never used the Bantams.

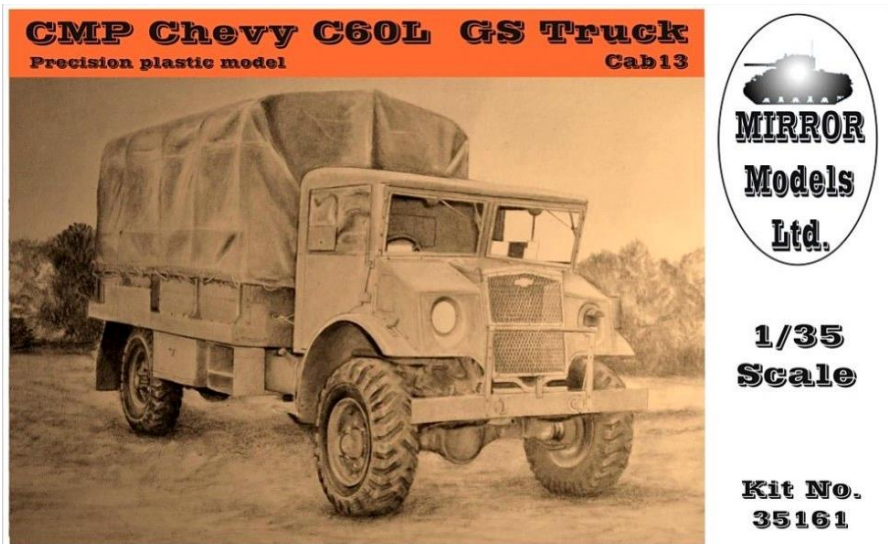


## Trucks

The LRDG used various British Army Trucks. Only Tamiya makes a 1/35 scale one--the Chevy 30t truck (3 ton) that is out of the box LRDG. Again, the kit is rather old but has held up well over the years. The most recent Tamiya release includes the Italian-made Breda gun. The LRDG was particularly fond of this weapon because of its extra firepower against light tanks and aircraft. As normal, there are various Chevy truck aftermarket kits for added detail. Dragon makes a 1/72 scale Chevy 30t truck which builds up into a nice model, and there are several 1/72 aftermarket items for this small-scale kit. NOTE: The new Tamiya kit has the Breda gun being towed. The LRDG never towed the gun. They installed 20-40mm guns of different types in the truck beds of some of their trucks. The Breda gun was their favorite and was the most effective one available to them.



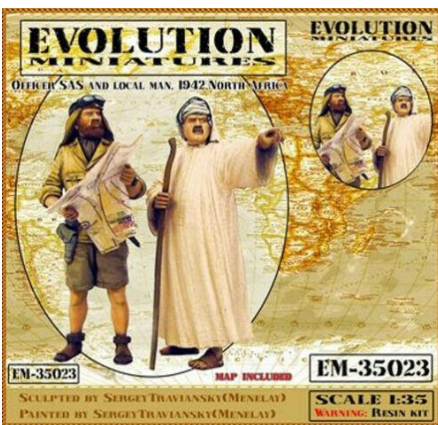
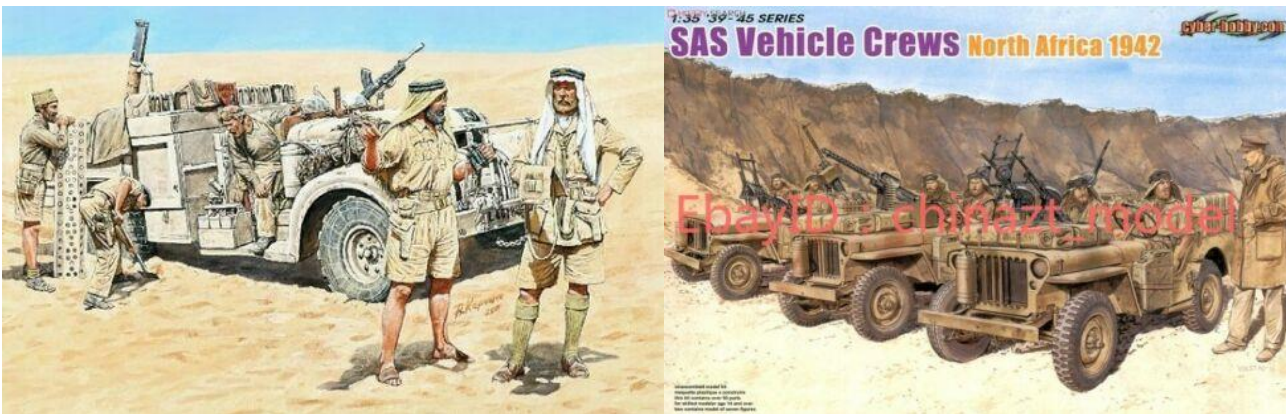
The LRDG used whatever trucks they could locate. While preferring the Chevy 30t, they used anything they could get their hands on. Mirror Models and IBG make several British trucks which the modeler can convert into a LRDG vehicle. In modeling these trucks it takes little more than adding a gun. In some cases removing fenders or scratch building a new truck bed will be in order.





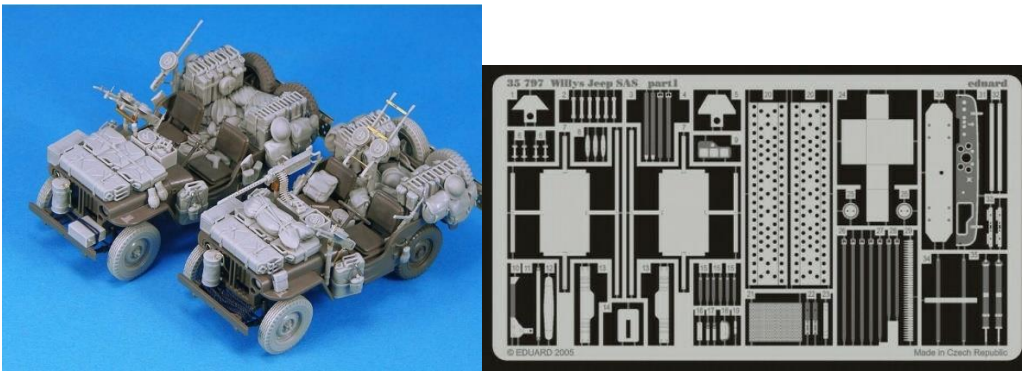
## Figures

In 1/35 scale there are two very good figure sets in plastic. Dragon makes a set of SAS jeep riders and Master Box makes a LRDG truck crew. There is a wide variety of 1/35 resin figures of SAS or LRDG single or double figures. Mitches Military Models in the UK sells several 1/9 scale busts of LRDG and SAS officers.



## Aftermarket Products

While many sets are available, these items are harder to find. eBay may be your best choice for searching for resin wheels, photoetch details, and stowage.



## Miscellaneous Matters

The SAS was known to use anything they thought might be helpful to accomplish a mission. They used British Army Ford staff cars (Lend Lease) painted to look like German staff cars, captured German staff cars, and Italian cars. These were one off and few pictures exist.

Both the SAS and the LRDG used equipment that was best suited for their missions. German Jerry cans were their favorite for fuel storage while US Army Thompson submachine guns (“Tommy guns”) was their personal gun of choice. Anything goes when it comes to accessorizing your model. Check out German and USA figure sets for weapons, personal stowage, and other items to add to your model. Have fun!



## Reading List

I recommend the following books if you want to learn more about these units.

***STIRLING'S DESERT TRIUMPH: The SAS Egyptian Airfield Raids 1942*** by Gavin Mortimer

***THE SAS WORLD WAR II: An Illustrated History*** by Gavin Mortimer

***THE LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP 1940-1945: Providence Their Guide*** by Major General David Lloyd Owen

***THE RAIDERS-Desert Strike Force*** by Arthur Swinson

***The Phantom Major*** by Virginia Cowles

Some of these books are out of print but re still readily available online at good prices on ABEBooks.com. Just search for SAS or LRDG.

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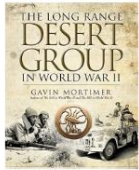
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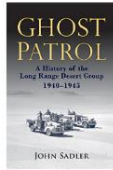
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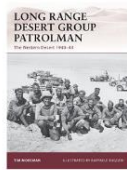
### Recommended for you



The Long Range Desert Group in World War II



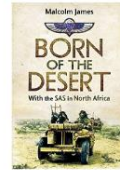
Ghost Patrol: A History of the Long Range Desert Group...



Long Range Desert Group Patrolman: The Western



Aircraft Pictorial F4U-1 Corsair Vol.2 Reference Book...



Born of the Desert: With the SAS in North Africa

The AbeBooks.com website is [https://www.abebooks.com/?cm\\_sp=TopNav--Home--Logo](https://www.abebooks.com/?cm_sp=TopNav--Home--Logo)