

The Hunt for Zerzura *The Lost Oasis and the Desert War*

by SAUL KELLY

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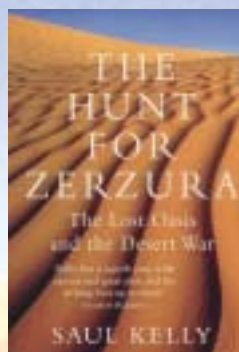
Reviewed by Group Captain Peter W. Gray

At first sight, the vast majority of readers would be at a loss to either identify the relevance of the Zerzura Oasis, or even why it may be familiar to them. Saul Kelly relieves the doubt with the inclusion on his front cover of informal sub-title 'The true story behind The English Patient.' The Zerzura Oasis became something of a Holy Grail for explorers in the inter-war years and the Zerzura Club met once a year for dinner in the Café Royal in London. Michael Ondaatje won the Booker Prize for his novel in 1992 and it was subsequently turned into an Oscar winning film. But as Kelly points out in his introduction, the basic story had inspired at least two other novels and associated films since the end of World War II. The real story shows that the explorers had considerably more on their varied agendas than merely searching for water in the desert and the associated traces of lost civilisations.

As motor transport, and very soon thereafter the advent of air power, made the distances involved in desert exploration marginally easier to cover, the surveys were of increasing military importance. For the British, the Suez Canal was absolutely vital in the protection of her lines of communication with the Empire. As Mussolini became increasingly determined to build an empire incorporating Libya and Egypt, his experts sought routes across the desert that would enable him to threaten the upper reaches of the Nile. This would extend British defence lines, strain Imperial relations with the Egyptian government and drag reinforcements away from other theatres. There was more to the survey work than merely seeking water supplies - important though this factor indubitably was. The nature of the desert surface was critical as this dictated the 'going' and hence the route and make-up of convoys. Scope for re-supply, ambush and the development of navigation techniques were all vital factors. Air power was involved throughout with reconnaissance and re-supply two of the critical factors. As tension increased between Britain and Italy the impermanence of air power became a major strength in that the two sides could probe and put down markers without risking confrontation on the ground - and hence a *casus belli* was avoided.

When war broke out for real the techniques, and results of the surveys, were utilised by both sides (Britain and Italy) - and subsequently by Rommel's forces when the Germans became involved in Africa. One of leading exponents on the British side was instrumental in the formation of the Long Range Desert Group and Kelly is extremely informative on the detail of their operations - both in isolation and subsequently with the Special Air Service. On the Axis side, the Hungarian aviator, and explorer, Count Almasy (the 'English Patient') was equally active. Kelly's primary source research is again outstanding as he details the attempts to insert German spies along overland routes into Cairo. This element of the story has again been well used in the popular fiction arena. Kelly's version is all the more gripping because it is a true rather than a fictional account.

Overall this book is extremely well researched, using sources in Germany and Hungary as well as interviews with survivors. The story embraces the high politics of international relations, the technical detail of desert exploration, espionage, counter-espionage, tales of military daring and a review of the existence or otherwise of the mythical oasis. Does it exist, with the associated remnants of a lost civilisation? The final answer to the quest is certainly not to be imparted in a mere review!



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