

LONG RANGE DESERT GROUP

RHODESIA

THE MEN SPEAK



Jonathan Pittaway



'The resemblance to the LRDG badge, a full year in advance, is astounding!'



Opposite page:
Roberto Chiarvetto
Sahariani embroidered patch
Sahariani metal badge (from a 1939 Army
Regulations handbook sketch)
This page:
Auto-avio-sahariana insignia on A.S. 37
door
LRDG Association car windscreen sticker



THE SAHARIANA BADGE

Roberto Chiarvetto, Italian historian and author

Italian Royal Army (Regio Esercito) and Air Force (Regia Aeronautica) insignia are a difficult subject: they have never been completely documented, nor there is any proof that at least a specimen of each – be it an original badge or a photograph of it – has survived the war. Currently only some insignia which belonged to famous Air Force fighter groups and squadrons are well known; much less is known with regard to bomber and reconnaissance units. This is especially true for the last pre-war years and the beginning of the Africa campaign, where the application of camouflage schemes and security reasons caused many insignia to be removed from the planes.

We must then keep in mind such considerations when dealing with a possible Italian origin of the famous LRP, then LRDG, badge, though the tale told by Brigadier Edward Mitford about drawing the inspiration from a Sahariana insignia which 'portrayed the constellation of Cancer on a blue ground surrounded by a wheel', seen by him during his 1938 trip to the Kufra oasis, is fascinating and well worth further analysis.

The Italian Compagnia auto-avio-sahariana 'Cufra' (Saharan Motor-Plane Company) was one of several companies stationed in the far desert outposts for patrolling duties. Close air-to-ground cooperation in desert operations had already been employed in 1931 by Graziani's forces during the conquest of Kufra and by the Sahariane themselves at least since 1936. From 1938 onwards the companies gathered in the Battaglione Sahariano (Saharan Battalion) each had an Army component, based on several SPA AS37 desert trucks, and an Air Force component, based on a flight of three Caproni Ca.309 Ghibli aircraft. Their commanding officer was an Air Force captain, with a second-in-command Army officer (usually a lieutenant) in charge of the land troops. The Compagnie Sahariane, at least in 1940, did have a unit insignia, which was a pennant with a golden lion's head on a black ground, but unfortunately, to this writer's knowledge, not one has survived, nor does any picture of it exist, just a description by a veteran commanding officer.

A similar insignia, though – a lion's head with wings, representing the power to attack both from ground and air – was painted on the truck doors and has been photographed several times. Troops wore on their uniforms the usual badge of the Sahariani (the elite camel-mounted Italian colonial troops, along with the Meharisti), a grenade with a vertical flame, a cornet and two crossed sabers. There is no documentation available on any other insignia, before or after 1940, but traditionally the Regio Esercito did not portray any kind of animals in its heraldry apart from eagles and lions, so we can almost certainly exclude the possibility that the badge seen by Mitford could have belonged to the Sahariana.

It could have belonged to an Air Force unit. Traditionally, the Regia Aeronautica used several kinds of animals and stars or constellations, so if we are to find a 'constellation of Cancer' insignia our only chance would be among planes and pilots. Unfortunately there is no known badge of the plane section assigned to the Sahariana at Kufra, from the 26^a Squadriglia Aviazione Sahariana (26th Saharan Air Force Squadron), though we know from a veteran pilot of the Jalo section in 1942 that they adopted a war badge





showing a cat carrying a lantern, tiptoeing in its boots but with the claws unsheathed and ready to strike at the enemy. Unfortunately his account does not confirm whether that was an unofficial badge used only in Jalo or was adopted by the whole unit, in which case it would probably rule out the possibility of a different badge only a few years before. Nor is it possible to ascertain unit insignia of all the squadrons operating from the Kufra airfield, which in 1938 was very busy with flights to and from the Italian East Africa colonies making technical stops there. There is no evidence of any crab or Cancer (the Latin name of the crab), but there are some intriguing insignia:

The Scorpio constellation (stars and scorpion silhouette) used in 1935 in Italy on reconnaissance planes of the 32^a Squadriglia 15^o Gruppo R.T. (Ricognizione Terrestre: 32nd Squadron, 15th Reconnaissance Group).

A black scorpion on a blue background inside a wheel (which looks almost like the real LRDG badge) in two versions, one with the scorpion superimposed on an outline of the African continent and the motto *Teneo te Africa*, the other without, used in 1939 at the Castelbenito airfield (Tripoli) on Fiat CR.32 fighter biplanes of the 93^a Squadriglia, 8^o Gruppo C.T. (Caccia Terrestre: 93rd Squadron, 8th Fighter Group).

Both of these confirm the use of constellations, blue backgrounds and scorpions. As far as we know, those CR.32 biplanes never operated near Kufra, but it is possible that Mitford saw them – the resemblance to the LRDG badge, a full year in advance, is astonishing – or that a badge like the one he described (pictured here in a possible reconstruction), if it ever existed, was actually in use by the planes of the Sahariana or some other unit in Kufra as far back as 1938 ■



Opposite page:
Modern Special Forces
First Gulf War
This page:
Sahariana postcard
32a Squadriglia 15o Gruppo RT, Italy 1935
Hypothetical reconstruction of 'the constellation of Cancer on a blue ground surrounded by a wheel'
93a Squadriglia 8o Gruppo CT (simplified version)
Castelbenito, Tripoli 1939
93a Squadriglia 8o Gruppo CT, Castelbenito, Tripoli 1939
Pilots and a Fiat CR 32 of 93a Squadriglia at Castelbenito, 1939