Sheppard of the Sands

Tom Sheppard has made exploring the Sahara his life's work, although he also managed to squeeze in 24 years in the RAF, latterly as a test pilot. This is his story...

STORY: GARY PUSEY PICTURES: TOM SHEPPARD

LAND ROVER LEGENDS 27



SQUADRON LEADER TOM SHEPPARD MBE

The 1973 recce expedition used Tom's Velar, a 109 and a Bedford RL to compare performance and payload

NOT many of us are lucky enough to spend our lives doing the things that truly inspired our childhood enthusiasms, but with dogged determination Tom Sheppard is one of the fortunate few who have made it happen. I'm joining him on his 86th birthday to talk specifically about one of those interests – 4x4 desert exploration – but I'm also looking forward to hearing from him about the other one – his career in the RAF.

Tom was born in eastern India in what is now Bangladesh, where his father was a tea planter. "It was 1946 and I was 12 years old," he remembers, "and we were travelling back to the UK. My parents had spent 25 years in India and we were taking the train from Calcutta to Bombay, or should I say from Kolkata to Mumbai as they are now known, to sail on the 'Empress of Scotland' to Liverpool. As dawn broke, our train was making its stately way through the deserts of Rajasthan, and I remember the desolate beauty of the landscape and the amazing quality of the light. The memory has never left me, and I think this is where my love of the desert began."

Tom's other childhood interest was aeroplanes and flying, and his first solo flight was at the age of 16. "I learned to fly with the Air Training Corps while I was still at school in Bristol and my first solo was in 1951," he says. "I flew a Tiger Moth from Bristol to Exeter and back, but I'd decided before then that I wanted to join the RAF and that's finally what I managed to do, after two attempts! After graduating from the RAF College at Cranwell I qualified to fly fast jets which in those days meant things like the Hawker Hunter, and I was posted to 208 Squadron, the second Hunter squadron to be formed and the first to be posted overseas, to RAF Nicosia in Cyprus. That was where I had my first real experience of Land Rovers. The RAF had plenty of Series Is and I was very impressed with their amazing workaday versatility.



RAF Driffield, 1955, and Tom completes his first jet solo in a Meteor Mk4

"In 1959 I was posted to Farnborough to train for a year as a test pilot. While I was there I hitched a ride as a supernumerary pilot on a four-engined Beverley transport aircraft between RAF El-Adem, just south of Tobruk in Libya, and Khartoum and on to Aden. It was during this flight, as we were crossing the south-western corner of Egypt, that my boyhood attraction to the desert was rekindled."

We can do no better than quote from Tom's delightful book, *Quiet for a Tuesday*, to really appreciate just how inspired he was: 'Ahead, as the great aircraft droned on, the first scything cut of the sun on the horizon skimmed rays of pale light across the desert, colour emerging from the thin grey haze. Below us, Uweinat's gaunt rocks cast mile-long shadows over the sand; a small line of dunes down to our right showed slip faces to the sun, scalloped shadow backing each bright crescent. The Sahara in all its vast majesty; serene, awesome, beautiful... It was like witnessing the birth of the world'.

While he was at El-Adem, Tom had met the RAF Desert Rescue team and talked himself onto one of their training exercises that was heading to broadly the same area he'd witnessed from the flight deck of the Beverley, with the twin objectives of crossing the Calanscio Sand Sea and trying to locate the remains of three Blenheims that went down, lost and out of fuel, east of Kufra during WW2. Sadly, all the crew members died. "We got to Uweinat and back in the gaggle of half a dozen Series Is and I learned a great deal," recalls Tom, "although it was mostly about what not to do when driving in the desert. I was astonished to discover that no-one had a tyre pressure gauge, so deflating the tyres to cross soft sand was a hit-and-miss affair, and more often than not we missed. A lot of time was spent digging the vehicles out! But we did find the remains of one of the Blenheim bombers."

After completing his training at the Empire Test Pilots School, Tom was posted to Farnborough as a qualified test pilot. "I spent six years there, flying everything from jets like the Hunter and Canberra, the four-engined Avro Shackleton that had been developed from the Lincoln, which itself was largely based on the Lancaster, and the Blackburn Beverley transport aircraft. The Beverley was an ungainly-looking aeroplane but incredibly manoeuvrable. You could chuck it around like a Tiger Moth!

"I had a few interesting moments during my time at »



Wreck of WW2 Liberator 'Lady Be Good' in the Libyan desert. The crew bailed out

Farnborough, including two total brake failures on fast-moving machinery. One was on a Supermarine Scimitar, which was a carrier-borne naval strike fighter. I was testing one with sawn-off wings with which we were researching 'runway friction'. No brakes meant not much friction! But nothing was as memorable as having a main undercarriage wheel drop down while flying a Hunter at 600 knots. The hydraulics and power controls blew and the aircraft was heading for Mother Earth. Ejecting at that speed would not have been a good idea but I managed to pull the aircraft out of the dive. I landed on just two wheels but I survived, which is more than I can say for the poor old Hunter!

"To be honest I was never kept particularly busy at Farnborough. I always said that I was 'over-trained and under-employed', but I soon discovered the attractions of nearby Long Valley where I could take my recently-acquired Series II 88-inch off-roading as often as I liked, before and after work. I also had a James trials motorcycle. I'd owned a rather nice 1936 Rolls-Royce 25/30 but I traded it in for the Series II. My brother wasn't a fan of either the Rolls or the Land Rover, and commented 'once a truck driver, always a truck driver' which I thought was a bit harsh. In many ways these off-roading activities were the best bit of my time at Farnborough, and eventually I started competing in Land Rover Owners' Club trials around Aldershot, at places like Tunnel Hill and Weavers Down.

"It was while at Farnborough that I came up with the idea for what became known as the RAF Trans-Sahara Expedition, which was a north-south crossing of the Sahara down to south of Lake Chad, in Cameroon. I put the idea to my boss at Farnborough and he was totally supportive and decided to come along as well. We managed to borrow three Series II Land Rovers from the RAF Regiment and got some sponsorship from Michelin who provided their then-new XS tyres. We loaded the Land Rovers and a Matchless 350 motorcycle onto an RAF Beverley, which helpfully flew us to Gibralter from where we took a ferry to Tangiers. The whole thing was done under the auspices of a very handy RAF scheme called 'Expedition Training'."

"I remember that we stopped at Béni Abbès in Algeria on our way south, where we were royally entertained by the officers of the French Foreign Legion unit stationed at the fort there. A great deal of Cognac was consumed in the interest of the Entente Cordiale, despite it being the middle of the day. We covered a total of 4500 miles but when we got to Lake Chad we found the area very badly flooded with no obvious way through, and my Wing Commander decided to call it a day. We finally got to Kano in Nigeria and took a commercial flight home from there. By then I was strapped-up with bandages and plasters, having broken my collarbone when a kamikaze dog intercepted the Matchless.



Officer Commanding, RAF Sharjah



Hunter after two-wheel landing following hydraulic and control failure at low altitude

"Nothing was as memorable as having a main undercarriage wheel drop down while flying a Hunter at 600 knots. The hydraulics and power controls blew and the aircraft was heading for Mother Earth"

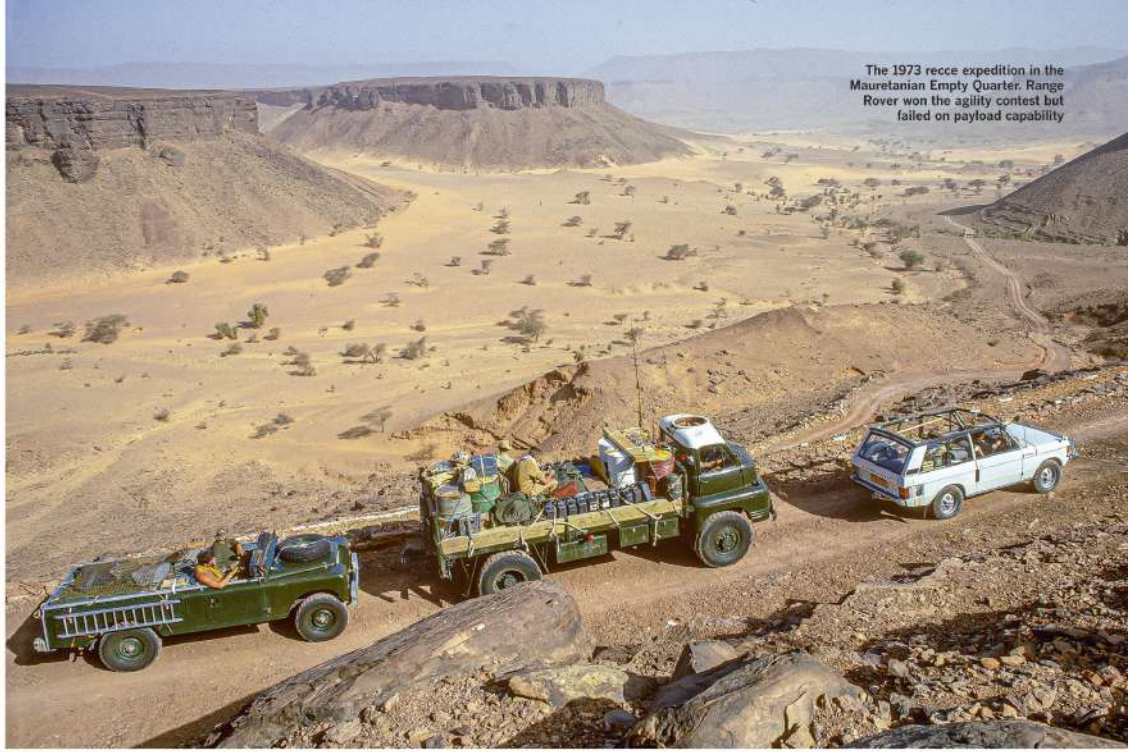
"Once back at Farnborough it wasn't long before I was pining for my next expedition. I still owned my Series II and in 1962 I planned and executed another expedition with a colleague from Farnborough, Sqn Ldr Jimmy Aitken. We managed to get the Land Rover air-lifted on a training flight to Tripoli and drove from there to Jalu, across the sand sea to Tobruk, before returning to Tripoli, a total of some 2400 miles."

After the completion of his second tour at Farnborough, Tom was promoted to Squadron Leader and posted to the Defence Services Staff College at Wellington in India. This was followed by a posting to RAF Sharjah in what is now the United Arab Emirates, as base commander. "The airfield at Sharjah had been developed in the early 1930s as a stopover and refuelling base for the Imperial Airways empire routes to India. When I was there it was still an important refuelling base for RAF aircraft heading out to the Far East, and we also had a detachment of Hunters and some resident Twin Pioneers. At that time this corner of south-eastern Arabia was a British Protectorate known as the Trucial States but in 1968 Harold Wilson's Labour government decided to withdraw British troops from the area and end the Protectorate. The region eventually re-emerged in the early 1970s as the United Arab Emirates.

"A good friend, Mac, had been posted to RAF Salalah in what is now Oman, which was not too far away from Sharjah, so we decided to take up our postings by driving out in my Series II. I'm surprised to this day that we managed to get everything into the Land Rover. Two of us and all the luggage for our postings, including our smart 'embassy kit', plus everything we needed for a lengthy journey across the desert.



1970: Oman-Bahrain route involved scary, unpredictable salt marsh along the Gulf coast. Sometime driveable, sometimes terminally not!



The 1973 recce expedition in the Mauretanian Empty Quarter. Range Rover won the agility contest but failed on payload capability

We managed to get the vehicle and ourselves loaded onto an RAF Hastings and were flown to Libya, from where we drove from Tobruk to Cairo and Suez, and got on a cargo ship sailing from there to Jeddah. We were put on as deck cargo, and that was not just the Series II but us as well! At Port Sudan we were joined on deck by around 3000 sheep which spent the rest of the voyage eating everything they could get their teeth into!

"From Jeddah on the Red Sea we headed east right across Saudi Arabia to the Gulf and then south of Qatar. In those days there was no road or defined route through the dunes or the later sea-flooded coast known as sebkha, a frighteningly unpredictable salt crust that could leave you bogged and sinking till further notice. We were supposed to be met by a unit of the Trucial Oman Scouts who would guide us across these flood plains but they failed to arrive so we had to continue as best we could on our own. We had some issues with the Series II that we had to deal with, including a rear main bearing oil seal and a slipping clutch for good measure. But we arrived safe and well and once again, a Land Rover had seen us through, albeit rather limping. We covered 3600 miles."

Tom's posting at Sharjah ended in 1965 and another Gulf posting followed, before the inevitable tour at the MoD in London beckoned. Tom was assigned to the MoD's Operational Requirements Branch working on new aircraft procurement. "The job turned out to be pretty undemanding," says Tom, "and the daily commute from Uxbridge to Central London was not what I joined the Royal Air Force for."

But it was while he was at the MoD that an expedition came to fruition that he had been planning for many years, in fact since his time at Farnborough, and the one for which he is arguably best known among Land Rover enthusiasts. This was the 1975 West-East Crossing of the Sahara, the first time the desert had been traversed from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. Tom had originally planned to use the Series II 109-inch Forward Control for this expedition but, with hindsight, he is rather pleased that he didn't! The delay was caused by a spell in hospital during which part of one of his lungs was removed due to suspected cancer, which fortunately proved to be an incorrect diagnosis. By the time he had recovered, Land Rover had completed the development of the V8-powered 101-inch Forward Control.



Series II 109 short on power and tail heavy. 101 eventually chosen for the 1975 expedition

In 1973 he led a recce for the planned West-East crossing, covering 1700 miles across the Mauretanian Empty Quarter using a Bedford RL truck, a long-wheelbase Series II and pre-production Range Rover YVB 173H, which Tom had bought directly from Land Rover at Solihull in December 1971.

Again under the auspices of the Joint Services Expedition Training Programme, the West-East expedition finally got under way in 1975, greatly helped by Land Rover's decision to provide four early production 101s. The preparations for the West-East expedition also introduced Tom to Land Rover's Roger Crathorne, who remembers it well. "The 101s were the first four vehicles off the production line," Roger says. "I was working on the development of the vehicle and did a lot of work on the steering to make the handling better, including an anti-roll bar and a topple bar, and we also incorporated a lot of modifications that Tom had requested on the expedition vehicles." »

The expedition was the first lateral crossing and gravity survey of the Sahara, and Tom led the eight-man crew. The 101s acquitted themselves well despite the prodigious fuel consumption and the trials and tribulations of the powered Rubery-Owen trailers. "There being no room or payload for a film crew and their extravagant paraphernalia," says Tom, "so the expedition was filmed for TV by Geoff Renner, the expedition geophysicist, and myself." The Royal Geographical Society awarded Tom its Ness Medal in 1976.

When Tom and the team arrived at Cairo at the end of the expedition and he kept an appointment to meet the British Air Attaché, he was handed a signal from RAF headquarters telling him that his services were no longer required and his RAF career was over, after 24 years. The post-expedition celebrations were thus somewhat muted. "I can't say that I was particularly surprised at the news in view of how soul-destroying I had found the MoD posting and how outspoken I had been about it," says Tom. "But the important thing was that I got to complete the expedition report before I had to leave the air force. And it was speaking about the expedition on the BBC that led directly to the next chapter in my life. The programme was seen by the chief engineer at Vauxhall and he asked me to join them as their 4x4 consultant. I had a lot of fun at Vauxhall and worked on some interesting projects, including creating a pick-up from a cut-and-shut Bedford CF van, and equipping it with four-wheel drive and a viscous coupling. It was presented at GM's Detroit HQ but they decided there wasn't a market for a pick-up!"

After two years at Vauxhall Tom left in 1978 and that was the year of his first solo desert expedition, a 4900-mile journey from Dakar back to the UK including 900 miles of off-tracks from Tombouctou to Reggan, using his pre-production Range Rover towing a trailer loaded with 17 jerrycans of fuel. An additional 43-gallon fuel tank replaced the rear seats in the Range Rover, but despite this huge fuel load the fear of running out of petrol was a constant concern.

"I suffered some unwelcome mechanical challenges along the way," muses Tom. "The in-line Bendix electric fuel pump packed up and I had to fit the only spare I carried, but this was nothing compared with what happened next. The steering felt increasingly odd and initially I put this down to the deep ruts I was following that had been made by large trucks. But when I stopped to check I found both front wheels pointing inwards at an angle of more than 20 degrees, and a broken track-rod. I was over 200 miles from the nearest workshop, so it was time for the extensive DIY toolkit to earn its contribution to the payload. I cut off various bits of metal from the trailer and with these made a splint. Four hours of hot work later and I had a repair that I hoped would get me to Bamako. It did, but by then I had a leaking clutch master cylinder to contend with as well.

"Amazingly, a replacement track-rod was available at Bamako and an intensive bout of bush mechanics soon had the clutch problem sorted, courtesy of some Renault parts that I managed to make fit. I took on 652 litres of petrol and five cans of water, and set off for Tombouctou, 895 miles distant. The rest of the journey was marked by innumerable boggings, sand-ladder recoveries, an episode using the Range Rover's Fairey capstan winch, and moments of real concern such as the vast area of needle-edged rocks that I encountered that would, I was sure, shred all six of my rather inadequate tyres. The 900 miles from Tombouctou to Reggan over a no-tracks route were more demanding and stressful than anything before or since, but the expedition was a success."



"Both 'Four-by-four driving' and 'V-DEG' have been used by Special Forces instructors as their definitive training and instructions manuals. Tom tells it how it is, based on a lifetime of desert expeditions (115,000 miles of overland travel since 1960)"

1975 West-East Sahara crossing: torquey V8 of the 101 and 9.00/16 Michelin XS tyres were major factors in expedition's success

1978 Dakar-Tombouctou-Reggan solo and pre-GPS was Tom's hairiest expedition



The Range Rover had by then been significantly modified to suit Tom's needs. The roof was removed and replaced with a tonneau cover, allowing him to use his specially-made one-off, translucent version of the WW2 Coles sun compass to navigate his way across the Sahara, backed-up by theodolite star shots and dead-reckoning. He had also remodelled the front end to incorporate rectangular headlights and an egg-box style grille, although it's unlikely that many would consider this to have enhanced the appearance of the Range Rover...

"Making this expedition on my own was as much as anything dictated by the limited payload after the requisite fuel, water and reserves had been taken on board. I am probably a bit of a loner and a solo journey was not a problem for me. In fact I enjoyed it. I didn't have to feel guilty about taking the time to thoroughly sort the off-tracks navigation and make the necessary decisions on my own."

In 1979 he joined British Aerospace, working in the Civil Aircraft Division on projects including the ground-breaking BAE 146 short-haul regional airliner launched in 1983. "I was with BAE until 1991 and they proved to be a very understanding employer, allowing me plenty of time to continue my expedition activity. During my 12 years at BAE I made almost yearly returns to the desert, including four solo motorcycle expeditions in the Sahara totalling some 15,000 miles; two expeditions into the central Sahara around Tamanrasset in a 110 that was also my first use of satellite navigation technology, and another 110-based expedition to the southern Sahara in 1990 that was my first use of an electronic compass and GPS."

Roger Crathorne remembers that he arranged loan vehicles for Tom to use on some of these expeditions, and one year he came with them to the 4x4 show at Val-d'Isère. He soon realised that Tom was a master of detail and his written words were second to none. "I first asked him to write the 'Land Rover Experience' book which was to be the bible for LRE instructors, and then he produced the brochure called 'Fragile Earth' which demonstrated the company's commitment to the environment.

"Land Rover's booklet on expedition planning had first been produced in the 1960s and was very out-of-date," says Roger, "so I asked Tom to write the definitive book that would be the company's guide to expeditions. We eventually published the first edition of the 'Vehicle Dependent Expedition Guide' in 1998 but getting the necessary internal approvals for updates and reprints proved to be difficult, so Tom set up his own publishing company and has been issuing updated versions ever since."

Tom set up Desert Winds Publishing in 1992 and continues to publish the 'Vehicle Dependent Expedition Guide' (known by all as V-DEG), now in Edition 4.1. In the meantime, 'The Land Rover Experience' morphed through various versions into 'Four-by-four driving' and is about to be released in its fifth edition. For a few years now both this book, the next edition of which will incorporate the New Defender, and V-DEG have been used by Special Forces instructors in both the UK and the US as their definitive training and instruction manuals. Tom tells it how it is, based on a lifetime of desert expeditions using many different vehicles (115,000 miles of overland travel since 1960) and if a particular vehicle has shortcomings then he will say so. I for one look forward to reading what he has to say about Land Rover's new baby. His other books are well worth a read as well, and *Quiet for a Tuesday* brings to life his expeditions in the Sahara and also his fascination and love for the desert.

Tom has always done his own expedition photography and obviously on his solo expeditions this was the only option. He is an accomplished photographer and this was recognised in 1985 when he was made an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society.

Since leaving BAE in 1991 he has completed many more expeditions, including a 5200-mile jaunt around southern Africa in a Defender 90 300Tdi and a solo journey of 6000 miles in a Defender 90 that took him to the four corners of Libya. Although he is an ardent admirer of Solihull's finest, he has also used a Mercedes G-Wagen for several of his most recent expeditions, including six journeys in the Algerian Sahara that together totalled 23,000 miles.

"It all went pear-shaped in 2006 when the paranoid Algerians discovered I had, wait for it, maps!" he says with a smile. "Clearly, I had to be a spy! The folks in the green eye-shades in the secret basements in Algiers wouldn't give me another visa for ten years, but finally in 2016 and at the age of 83, after ten years of determined pleading and planning, I managed to get the necessary clearance and left the UK in a Jeep Renegade heading for the southern Sahara, but it all screwed-up for the usual Algerian reasons.

"The most recent trips in the G-Wagen were bliss," he says, "despite endlessly dodging the nannying Algerian gendarmerie and threat of 'escorts'. Six solo trips, all well away from tracks, meant the years between 2001 and 2006 were in many ways the golden years for me. But with the changing geo-political climate and the ever-present security threats, I suspect the days of further Saharan exploration are some way off, if not over."

Today, Tom still owns that Jeep Renegade and he has a high opinion of its capabilities. As for the New Defender, he's enthused and optimistic but won't be drawn on it, preferring to reserve his judgement until he's experienced it first-hand. But like many of us he is concerned about the level of on-board technology. Nevertheless, I wonder if there might be one final Saharan expedition for him, in the New Defender. I'd join him like a shot.



Powered Rubery-Owen trailers gave serious trouble and became dead-weight normal trailers before long



101s meet traditional desert transportation in the Sudan

You can find out more about Tom Sheppard's books and order them exclusively here at desertwinds.co.uk



Tom and Roger Crathorne reunited with lead 101 from the 1975 West-East Sahara expedition, Gaydon 2012