Last Across Africa

by Collyn Rivers

This article records the very last drive across Africa (via its centre) and back believed to have been possible. During the QLR Bedford's return, country after country politically exploded behind it. The Sahara was officially closed to all except the military on the 28th April 1961. Our exit from it was that night.

How the Trip Began

During 1954, whilst working for de Havilland, I'd designed and built a unit that vibrated a cube of 100 electronic components in a controllable manner. It replicated the various range of forces known to be encountered in air-to air guided missiles. I later used that background at Vauxhall/Bedford Research in an attempt to replicate poor quality road surfaces under controlled conditions.

This was seriously needed as existing testing involved vehicles circling tracks of simulated roughness. This had too many uncontrolled variables. It also subjected test drivers to unacceptable kidney and other damage.

The simulator concept was workable (and eventually used) but hindered by none by the then none but anecdotal knowledge of Africa's roads and tracks – where Bedford was seeking to increase truck sales.

There was also a non-concealable agenda. I had an ambition to travel throughout Africa whilst it was still (just) politically feasible to do so.

The astute department head felt it was an excellent idea, but not one that the company could financially support. He did however assist to liberate a totally unused and very rare Bedford QLR 4×4 truck that I bought for a nominal one hundred pounds.

Mobil Oil offered to provide seriously needed political assistance plus fuel and oil for the entire expedition. The British Army supplied about 100 kg of experimental dehydrated food that proved excellent. Many other organisations assisted. All this was welcomed as I had next to no money left over for the trip.

Finding no like-minded soul within Vauxhall/Bedford I persuaded my long-term friend, Antony Fleming, to join me. Antony was an ex de Havilland engineering apprentice but, following a stint as a mica miner was then (despite being only 23) a police inspector in Mombasa (Kenya). Also, with us, initially, was Rex Yates, an ex de Havilland trade apprentice.

En-route in southern Spain: Left to right: Antony, Collyn and Rex

The QL Bedford

The QL Bedford was designed, just prior to WW2, as a versatile off-road military vehicle able to carry three tonnes virtually anywhere. With a fully laden weight of seven tonnes, the QL was gradually coerced into motion by a 3.5 litre petrol engine designed in the early 1930s by Chevrolet. This provided a rarely attained (and governed) top speed of 32 miles/hour (about 50 km/h).

Whilst a fully laden QL makes an overladen oxen-drawn timber wagon seem like a Ferrari, it had the extraordinarily low bottom gear ratio of (104:1). Even a minor gradient would slow it to walking pace but, given enough time, a QL could virtually climb the side of a house.

Ours was the rare QLR version. It was built in early 1940 as an emergency aircraft runway control centre but was never used. It had a superbly made coach body that was ideal for our intended purpose. The QLR had a massive centre-mounted winch and a 12-volt, 600 amp dynamo the size of a large garbage bin. Both, plus a huge air compressor, and front and rear axles were driven by separate power shafts from the huge centre mounted transfer box.

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The spacious but very heavy metal body was heat-insulated, with opening windows protected by sliding bullet-proof shutters. We converted the rear into crude living quarters. The QLR originally had two 180 litre fuel tanks and we added three more the same size, plus five 20 litre jerry cans. The resultant 1000 litres (about 1.2 tonne) provided a safe 3500 km range for the Saharan crossings – and the ability to cross Europe without refuelling. We carried 700 litres of water of water (another 700 kg). Cooking was via a couple of paraffin-fuelled Tilley pressure stoves. Internal lighting was 12 volt electric.

Initial Planning

The planned route was through Europe to Gibraltar, across to Tangiers, along the North African coast to Algiers, and then south via the Atlas Mountains and across the Sahara to Kano (Nigeria), and then south east across to Maidugari. From there we were to travel through French Equatorial Africa, the Belgian Congo, Northern and Southern Rhodesia, and South Africa down to Cape Town. This had to be changed to the South African border (at Bulawayo) because of virtually impossible visa requirements.

The return route was via Northern Rhodesia, across to Tanganyika to Dar es Salaam, and then to Mombassa on Kenya's east coast. From there toward the Sudanese border, then back track to cross Africa east-to west just north of the equator, then to Kano, and back across the Sahara.

Our biggest problems were political – not mechanical or geographic. There was a war in Algeria through which we had no choice but to travel. There were serious independence struggles in the Belgian Congo, and uprisings in Rhodesia. Further, the Mau Mau were only too active in Kenya, and there were minor skirmishes in the French and British Cameroons. But we were in our twenties back then – hence still immortal.

We worried mostly about whether the food could be made edible (it was) and whether Antony's reasonable (and my less so) French would be as despised in the French-speaking parts of Africa as mine was in Paris.

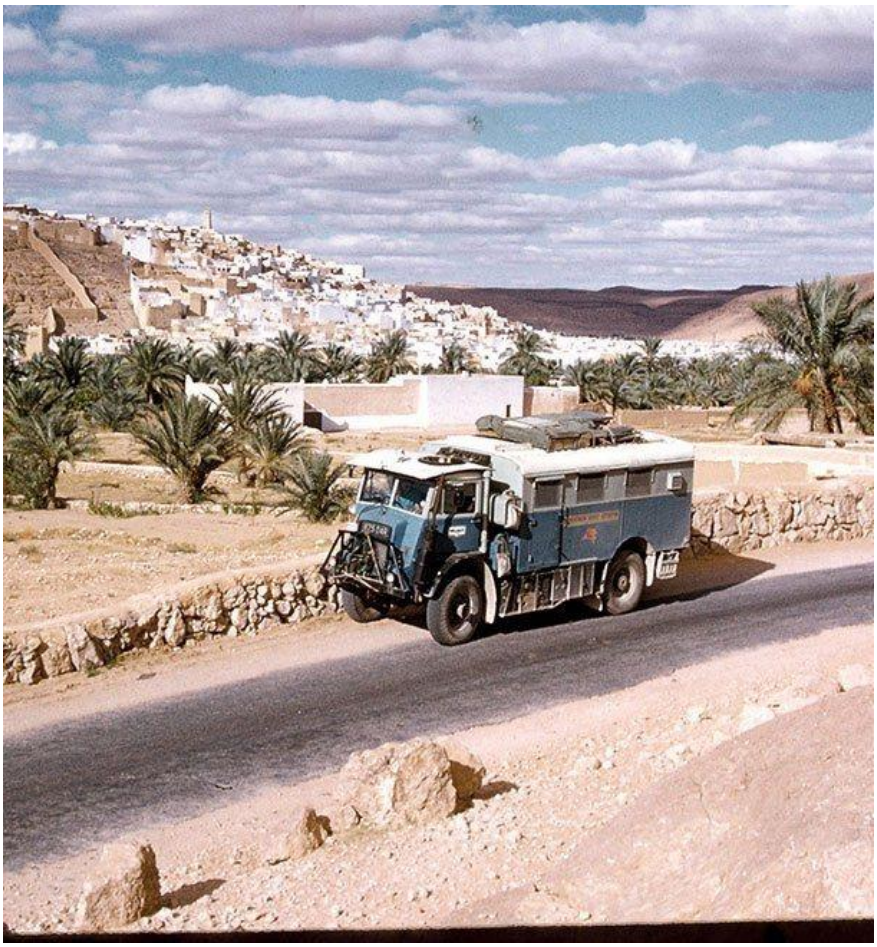
Gallic Intransigence

Our only realistic route into the Sahara (then vaguely controlled by the French) was through the middle of the conflict between France and the fellagha – es partisans de l'indépendance de l'Algérie (Algerian freedom fighters). It was initially of some concern but, by then, had turned into a full-scale war.

Obtaining permission involved two months in the Paris Surrete battling French bureaucracy was not helped by my grossly mangling their language. But hugely assisted by Mobil Oil's political clout, they eventually relented. It was permitted conditional on our driving in Algeria only during the (curfew) permitted 9.00 am and 4.00 pm. We had also to travelling in army conveys when ordered. We had to stay within police or army compounds at all other times. Whilst in Algiers we stayed within the heavily guarded main Mobil depot.

The Parisian flics however less than grasped the (Newtonian) consequences of 75 kW and 110 or so Nm pulling 7.0 tonne over the Atlas Mountains. This was the only route south and thus vital to both sides.

A short way up the first of innumerable mountain passes, with cries of 'Merde alors – le camion anglais est un ^&%$*&% escargo!' (loosely translatable as: 'Odure! the truck of England is a ^&%$*&% snail') the French Foreign Legion left us to our fate. They did however invite us to dine in their officers' mess, in their forecast improbable event that we actually made it.



Leaving In Salah, Algeria

A day and a half crossing 150 km of fellagha-populated mountain at 3-5 km/hr on the up bits, with trigger-happy 18-year old French conscripts in machine-gun concrete bunkers every kilometre or so is not one that we'd willingly repeat. We heard gunfire but were never attacked by the fellagha who eventually won – gaining independence.

We made it to the military camps each night, where we had memorable dinners with French Foreign Legion officers who had previously abandoned us. We stayed for a few days in a small semi-safe town to pull the cylinder head off to grind in the exhaust valves and their seatings (which turned out to become an ongoing chore) and eventually reached the Saharan oasis of Ghardaia without undue incident.

There, we were obliged to have the QLR inspected and certified for solo desert travel; and to have our Saharan driving permits validated. (These permits are valid only for the declared vehicle and driver/s.

Serious Sahara

Peace at last -nightfall in the northern Sahara – about 1000 km from Algiers

With formalities cleared, we entered the Sahara: the largest desert in the world. It is larger than the *whole* of mainland USA, has spectacular gorges and a high mountain range (the Hoggar) near its centre. Most is stony desert. There are areas of massive dunes and a difficult 700 kilometre stretch of soft sand on the southern part. The first partial crossing (to Tamanrasset – about 2500 kilometres south of Algiers, and 60% across) was by caterpillar-track equipped Citroens in 1922. To quote the leader: *'apre des difficultes sans nombre'* (after difficulties without number). Apart for rare explorers, complete crossings only began to take place after WW2. It later became bituminised all the way to Tamanrasset, but the road was destroyed by land mines a few years ago.

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The caterpillar-track Citroen was based on a standard production car that had 1452 cc (developing 20 bhp @ 2 100 rpm) and a 3-speed gearbox driving the twin rear tracks.

Apart from its huge size, it is unlike Australia's Simpson desert (which my wife Maarit and I crossed in our Australian-made OKA, in 1998).

The Simpson's hard going is some 200 km of 300 or so of relatively small dunes (that need to be crossed). The Sahara (the word means 'desert) has a vast number of hugely larger dunes, but the route (at times there is no track as such) mostly winds its way between them. The southern part however has extensive expanses of sand that are just passable early in the morning (using very low tyre pressures), but virtually impassable after noon. It also has very soft bulldust-like patches kilometres across that are not driveable except by a rubber caterpillar tracked vehicle.

The art, as we learned mostly on the return trip, is to detour around these soft areas – rather than attempting to go through them. As this may require deviating from the route by 50 km or more, to hopefully find firmer going, there is an essential need for careful navigation.

With few oases a long way apart, the Sahara is sparsely populated. We did however encounter two groups of Arab traders, each travelling the 10,000 plus km return journey (from Lake Chad almost into Algiers), with a hundred or so camels. They serviced various oases with spices and (very much prized) salt along the way. They told us that each return trip took up to three years!

Camels apart, there was little other traffic: a few heavily armed French Foreign Legion patrols, and about a dozen convoys a month, each of three or four vehicles. Only army-authorised 4WD trucks, such as ours, were allowed to travel alone. La Societe Algerienne des Transports Tropicaux ran a heavy passenger carrying truck between Ghardaia and Tamanrasset once every 14 days or so. Apart from that there were six to ten private vehicles each year attempting the overland crossing – mainly Land Rovers travelling in convoy.

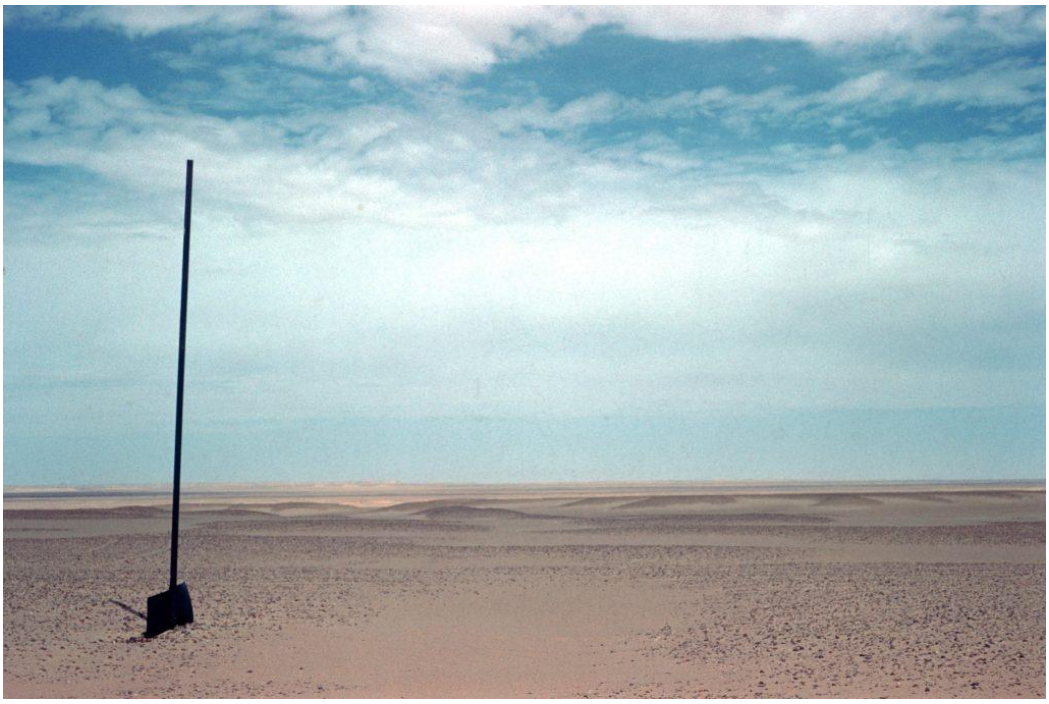
There was also the rare encounter with that little-known motoring oddity – the Citroen 2CV 4WD Sahara. With Gallic logic, it had an engine and a transmission system at each end with coupled controls.

The Saharan crossing was only permitted between 16 October and 28 April, and rains across the whole of central Africa make most tracks impassably flooded from July until December but, as we found out the hard way, can occur at almost any time.

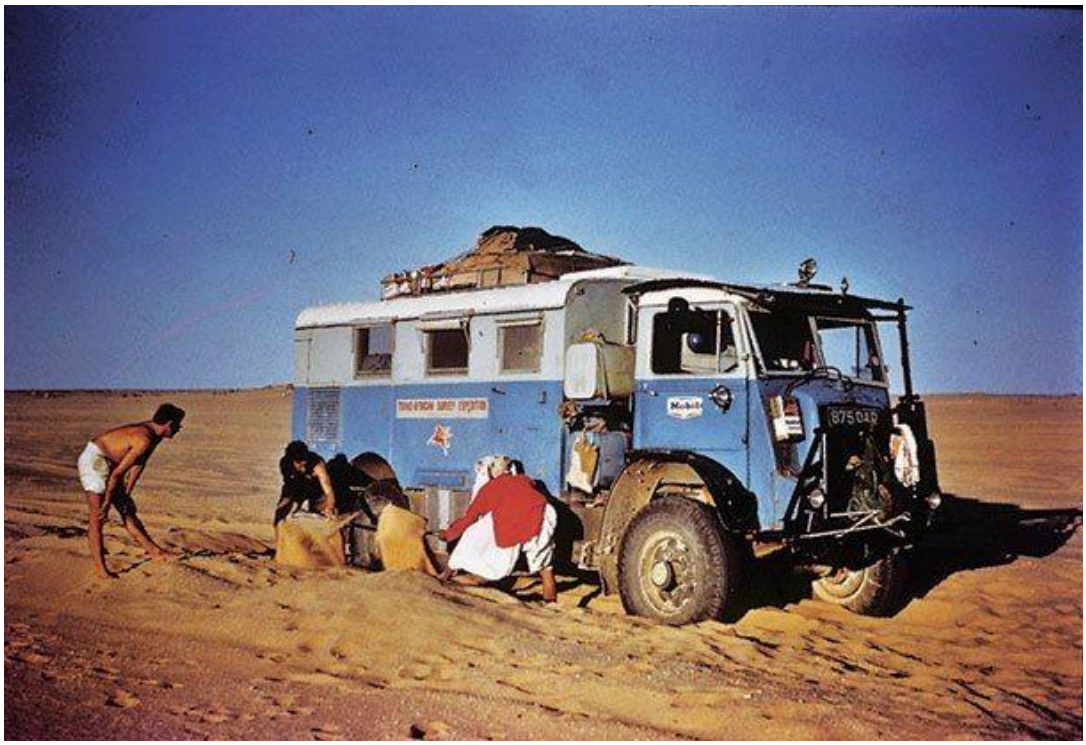
Finding the Way

There was a clearly defined route (but not always a track as such) as far as Tamanrasset. But once past there, there was no track as such – but a 'preferred direction of travel' delineated by thin black posts about 10 km apart. One headed, navigating by magnetic compass (and sun compass), in what you hoped was the general direction. The next drum could usually be spotted, via binoculars from the QLR's handy gun turret, when about half-way between the two.

This was a tricky part of the crossing as it was also frequently necessary to veer several kilometres to the left or right to skirt soft sand. It was thus vital to remember whether one had veered off to the left or to the right of the presumed line between the route markers.



Southern Saharan route marker – not the easiest to see from 10 km away. It points out the general direction – here there is no track



Bogged in the Sahara - being helped by Toureg

Sans Visas

With the Sahara behind us, our major problem was convincing border guards of our bona fides. Visas were required for all of the 50-plus jurisdictions we were travelling through. These visas could only be obtained by already having a visa for the area immediately following the one for which the visa was sought (to prove you had somewhere legally to go).

The problem was that no visa was valid for more than a few months. As each then took weeks to obtain, having 50 sequentially-valid visas for a journey of unknown time was impossible. An enterprising Parisian ex-diplomat I'd previously met in London suggested the solution – a version of which he'd successfully used himself.

He knew we would have official Mobil Oil signage on the truck, plus letters from Mobil Oil verifying the purposes of the expedition. Also that we would have papers legally guaranteeing the truck would be returned to the UK at the conclusion of the survey, and valid and Africa-wide vehicle insurance cover etc. Our visas however would inevitably became out of date.

Noting that we already had 'Trans-Africa Survey Expedition' letter heading, he suggested that we obtain an impressive 'Trans-African Survey Expedition' rubber stamp, a bright red ink pad, and a portable typewriter. Following that diplomatic advice', before each border crossing we'd type and stamp an impressive looking letter (usually in Africa's then lingua franca of extremely bad French) asking that the 'bearers of great distinction be accorded le passage priorite'. These were signed 'Sir Washington Irving', 'Lord Alstair Clutterbuck' or whatever seemed impressive at the time. Those, plus the huge red stamps and the Mobil insignia on the truck, so impressed border officials that almost all ignored that the visas had expired months before.

Where it didn't a packet or two of Gauloises (hideously strong French cigarettes) carried for this purpose only once failed to suffice. It did so spectacularly in a frenzy of Gallic intransigence) that resulted in a 2000 km detour, but was resolved by the officials suddenly relenting following the third or so bottle of Beaujolais.

Citroen Presse

Close to Bangui and still in the vast Afrique Equatoriale Francaise, about 1500 km of that detour we found the track blocked by a (then) 30 year old Citroen 10 truck that had broken its chassis. Its African owner/drivers had been stuck there for two days without food or water – and were reluctantly preparing to abandon the remains (their only possession).

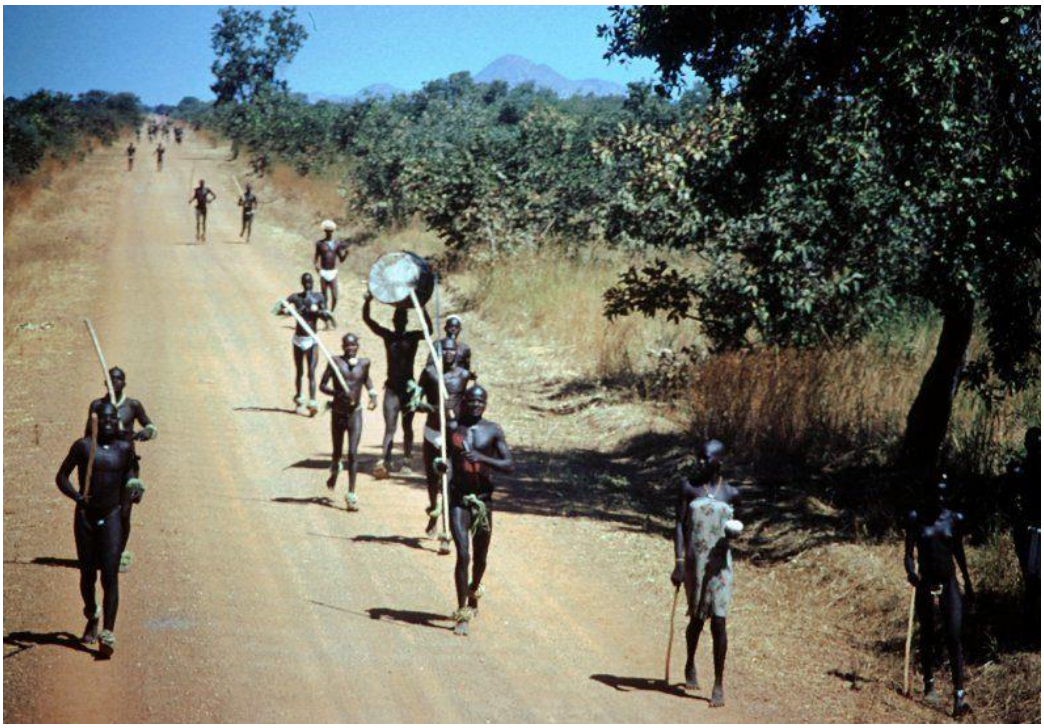
With time no great object, we made and shared a meal whilst working out what to do. We used a tree and the QLR's powerful winch to align the truck's two halves, using bits of tree to wedge them to correct height. We then reunited them using about a metre of 12.5 mm (half-inch) that we were carrying in case we needed it for the (then underestimated) QLR.

This took the better part of two days, due mainly to the need for drilling sixteen big holes through that steel and the truck's chassis. This had to be done with one of those hand drills which, older engineering-oriented readers may recollect, were only too aptly known as 'gut busters'. We then bolted the Citroen together, repaired broken brake rods and more or less straightened out the bent drive shaft.

The now delighted Citroen owners, whose only wealth now vaguely assured, invited us to stay in their village a few hundred kilometres south. There, the tribe put on a party with alcohol made from things I still prefer not to think about. An embarrassing invite associated with the (French-speaking) head man's daughters was tactfully handled by Tony explaining that alas 'we were too fatigued to do their extraordinary beauty full justice'.

Africa Unspoiled

Then and, I gather, in a few areas still now, central Africa was pleasantly primitive. A substantial population, as yet unbothered by missionaries, were still almost or completely unclothed. They lived substantially as they probably had been for tens of thousands of years in small self-supporting communities with equally small schools where the kids learned to speak French (French colonisation in central Africa was surprisingly benign). In these areas we never *once* felt remotely in danger.

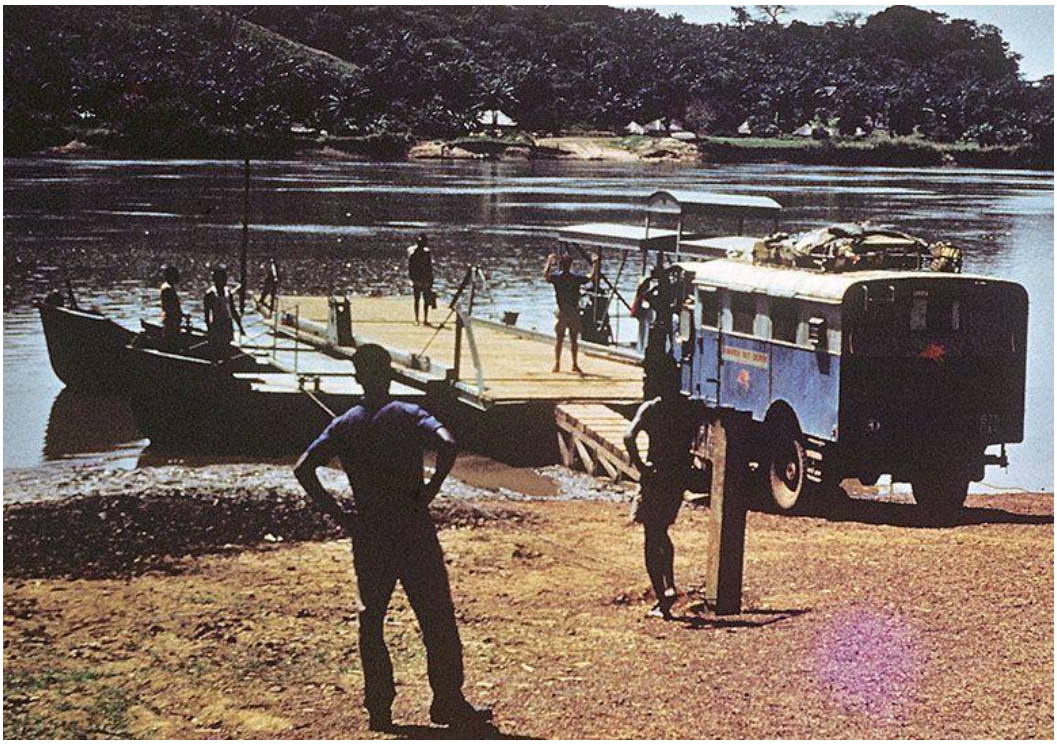


Tribal African musicians on their way to a gig (Afrique Equitoriale Francaise).

Deep in central Africa (back then at least), almost every African we met was kindly and courteous to an extreme. We felt far less secure in the allegedly 'civilised' areas.

I still clearly remember the beating of drums at night coming over the top of the curious noises and sometime alarming sounds in the jungle at night. We'd often wake up in the morning to find every move watched avidly by scores of tiny kids.

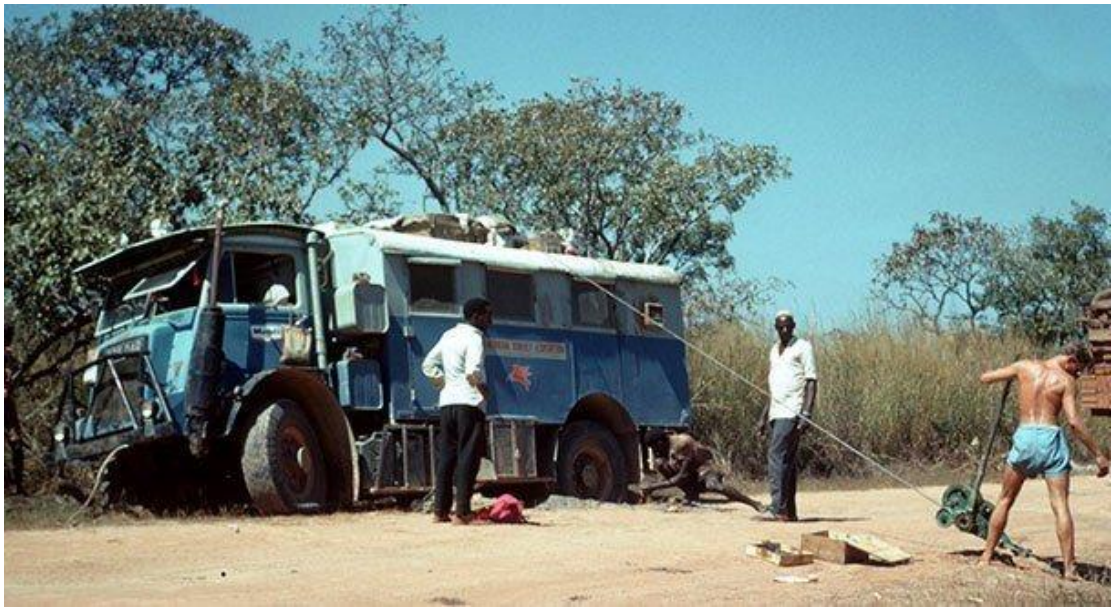
Leaving French Equatorial Africa required that two-thousand-kilometre detour, but now armed with the essential signature, we shipped the QLR across the Congo river on an African-built barge of tree-trunks kept more or less afloat by rusty oil drums.



Crossing the Congo

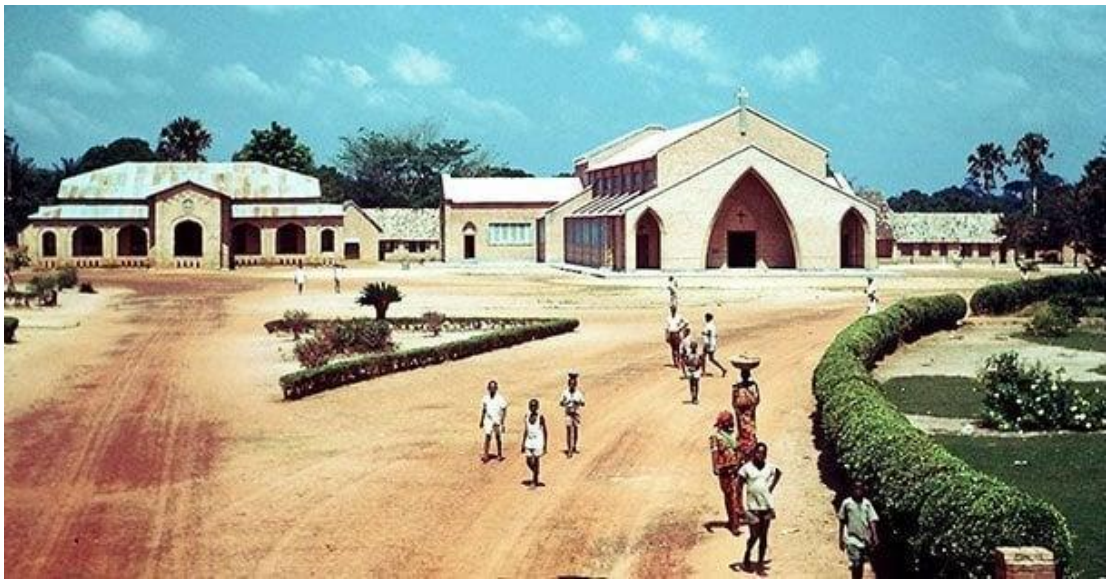
The Mission Belt

We continued (south-east) down and across the then Belgian Congo. Then, via the only north-south route, we skirted the full length of the Ruwenzori mountains (often known as the 'Mountains of the Moon').



Winching the truck back onto the road

This was full-on mission belt territory, of varying and conflicting persuasions. The often incongruously wealthy missions were sited every 10 or 20 km along the route. Here, native Africans were obliged to wear clothing more suited to Victorian London than the (then Belgian) Congo's 38-40 degrees C (approx. 100 degrees F) and over 95% humidity.



Mission in the Congo

There was none of the spontaneous gaiety and openness that had characterised the 'less civilised' areas, although African-organised choir singing was very different to that normally heard. This area and time was truthfully and wonderfully captured in Barbara Kingsolver's aptly name book, *The Poisonwood Bible*.

This area, and our return through part of it, was the most potentially dangerous part of the trip. Under the long and despotic rule of the Belgian government, the white colonial population had overbearing attitudes toward the indigenous people. One example was that Europeans had right of way on the ultra-narrow single lane tracks. Their enforcement of this in the rainy season resulted in bitter resentment.

We descended from the mountains to the then called Elisabethville. This, now known as Lubumbashi, had since 1957, been a fully autonomous city whose Nationalist Alliance de Bakongo had demanded immediate independence from Belgium. This resulted in the growing nationalist movement led by Patrice Lumumba that shortly after resulted in the Congolese civil war. Most of the 100,000 or so white population had fled – or were actively doing so.

We were there just prior the actual onset of serious fighting and had intended to stay for a week or so – but anti-Belgian feeling was so strong (in the city at least) that even with an obviously UK vehicle we felt it too dangerous to stay.

Saving a Semi

Just prior to leaving the Congo (about 300 km from the still Elizabethville) we were cautiously descending a steep mountain range. Rounding a bend, we found the track blocked by an African-driven truck and trailer (from Kenya) that had overturned and totally blocked the road.

The truck had slid partially over a steep embankment (with a couple of hundred metres vertical drop). At considerable risk, various local Congolese had unloaded the trailer's fortunately light cargo, but they could not retrieve the truck, let alone the trailer without a big winch – which we had.

We anchored the QLR with steel ropes and the ground anchors (that we carried), and with considerable caution began to winch the truck more securely onto the track.

At this point there arrived a furious Cadillac driving Belgian. Since white people were barely ever seen driving trucks (let alone helping Africans) he failed to register our presence. He furiously berated the unfortunate locals, demanding they cut the cable (thus losing the trailer) to let him pass. He was 'summarily dealt with' by ex-police inspector Antony – who was handy at that sort of thing.

With the Belgian having suddenly 'rethought his position', we managed to retrieve the truck (but not alas the trailer) and headed off. Anthony commented (in his quietly reserved English public-school way), 'that bounder may think twice before he tries that one again'.

This incident could easily have resulted in the death of that Belgian.

The days had gone when white fellas routinely pointed guns at Africans. The Belgian police and army had long since fled, leaving virtual anarchy behind them. (We had to re-enter the Congo on our return route, via Uganda. We were not threatened, but were travelled as quickly as a QLR allows.)

Rhodesia and South Africa

Our time in the then Southern Rhodesia was relatively uneventful. But curious attitudes prevailed. Our arrangement with Mobil was to visit their headquarters in most countries – where we'd also fully refuel.

At one such (in what was then Salisbury) we were told repeatedly that some Africans made good drivers, and a few of the really bright ones could 'even' become mechanics. All except menial office jobs however were deemed unthinkable. Most such jobs were already taken anyway by those of Indian descent, but these too seemed confined to trade and non-managerial office work.

Despite the above, upon entering Uganda, (about 1000 km north and to the east) we were met at the border by Mobil Oil's local African manager. He was of the same tribal background as Africans in Salisbury. He had the identical managerial job, with about the same number of staff, in a different branch of the very same company.

To put it mildly it surprised me, but I was there to study road surfaces not politics or racial attitudes. Forty years later I seriously wondered why – and completed four years of Aboriginal Studies at the tiny and mostly Aboriginal-studented Broome campus of Notre Dame University.

A Break in Kenya

We spent an idyllic few weeks in Tony's previous town of Mombasa. We ate in the local markets and swam in the phosphorescent Indian ocean at night under a full moon. We often watched and listened to the dhows drifting in after their long voyages from the East: their slow-beating drums marking the successful completion of the passage. From Mombasa, we headed north, through what were a decade or two later to become game reserves, to stay for a week or two with Antony's father. He was a retired RAF group captain who lived on the slopes of Mt Kenya – complete with peacocks on the lawns. His (also ex RAF) companion had a Cessna in a hanger used for supply trips into Nairobi for supplies (but was sadly killed six months later whilst rescuing people fleeing from the Sudan).

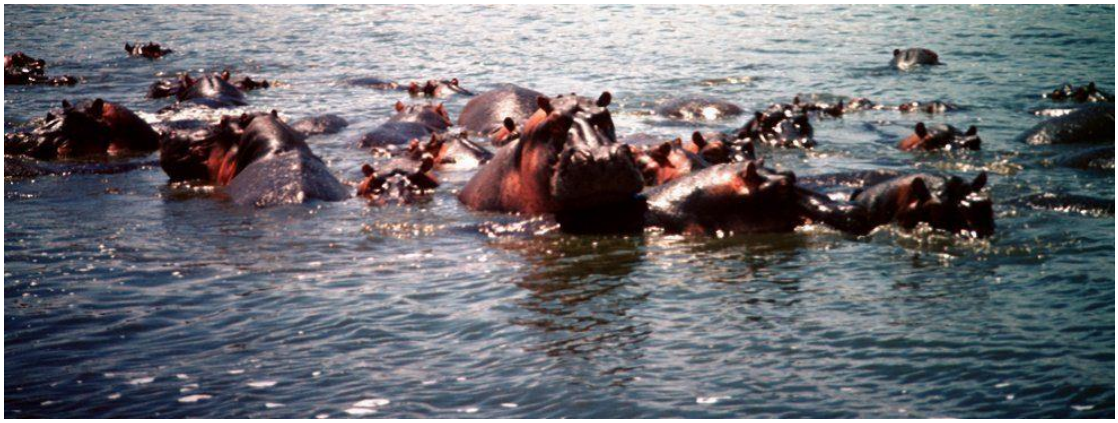
Beating the Rains

Travelling south for a bit, we then headed west, hoping to cross Uganda, part of the Congo and the (then) British and French Cameroons before the rains made the tracks impassable.

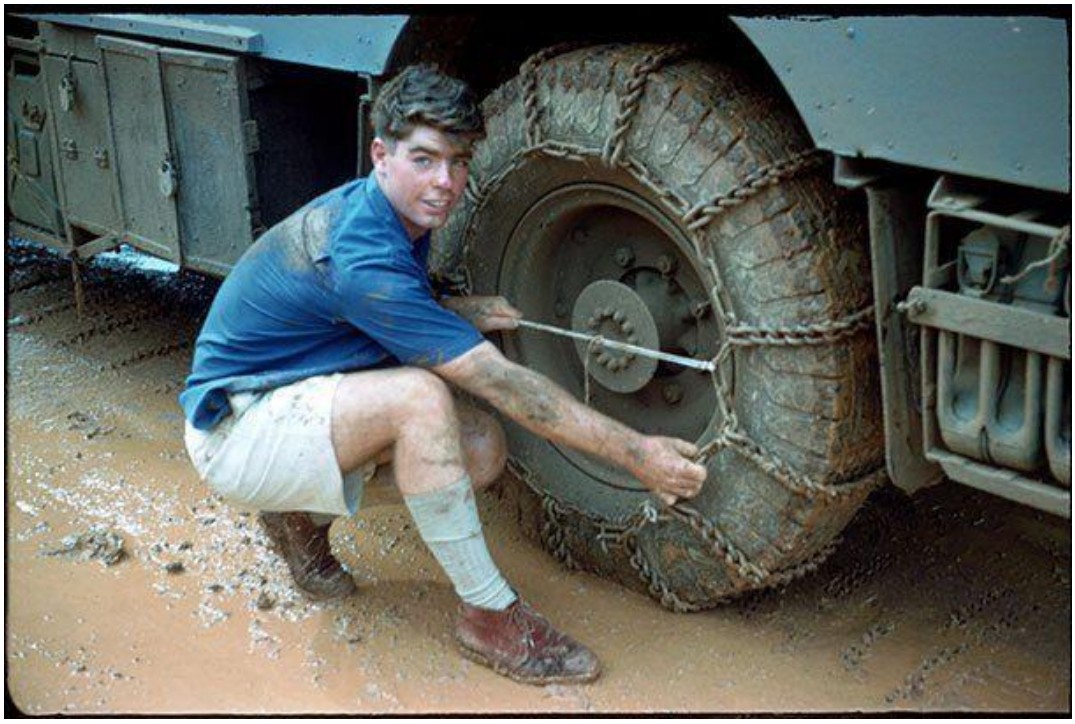
This was prior to seriously organised game smuggling. Central Africa back then was swarming with wildlife.

Elephants gather to enjoy an evening drink

Once, from a high Ugandian escarpment, we saw herds of elephants stretching as far as the eye could see in either direction.



In Uganda, we saw this river swarming with hippopotami. In retrospect foolishly, we walked amongst them when they came out of the river to sleep at night. We saw no lions, but heard many



We didn't totally miss the rains. Much of the time we could only move by using four-wheel drive with heavy tyre chains on all four of our huge 11.00 by 20 tyres. It was heavy going and we got bogged a few times.

We eventually arrived back in Kano in Nigeria (at the northern end of the Sahara) where we gave the QLR a thorough overhaul before its second Saharan crossing.

We did this work in the local Mobil Oil depot where we had a bit of a fright when the QLR's engine burst into flames about 30 metres from the depot's main petrol storage tank. This was rapidly extinguished by the African staff, using more and larger fire extinguishers than we previously knew existed.

Jeepers Creepers

In Kano, we encountered two forlorn Americans attempting to drive a forward-control Jeep 'around the world'. This endeavour had not been helped by them not knowing that, by double declutching, it was possible to change into the non-synchromesh first gear whilst on the move.

Constant use of second gear (of a four-speed gear box), when first was sorely needed, had taken its toll. But this was far from their only problem. By less than halfway through their journey, the Jeep had broken virtually one of everything – except for the drive to the front wheels and the power winch. It was stranded unless flown or towed out.

'Would you allow us to travel with you across the Sahara – there's a Jeep agent in Algiers, (some 6000 km south!) they asked. 'Travelling with you' turned out to be a euphemism for escorting, and at times pulling and winching this barely mobile machine across most of the Sahara. For reasons that now escape us (except temporary madness or too many Bourbans sans Coke) we agreed.

One of the Americans' so-called perks was a free supply of Coca Cola wherever in the world that company had a depot (which back then was most of it). Kano, whilst lacking a badly needed Jeep agent, had long since been Coca-Colonised. Half a dozen cases of the stuff, all in glass bottles, were loaded into the QLR. Most broke within a few hours, flooding the truck

with a syrupy glug, which then dried out to leave a sticky deposit that's probably there to this day. Antony and I didn't even like the stuff!

Apart from the physical consequences of seven/eight tonnes of laden QLR towing a plus five-tonne Jeep through soft sand with a 3.5 litre engine of 58 brake horsepower (but that extraordinary 101:1 bottom low-range gear) the Saharan return crossing was, by contrast, uneventful.

We had to stop for a couple of days, about 1000 km from the next closest human beings, to assuage the motor's now increasing appetite for exhaust valves, the re-grinding in of which had by now become routine every 10,000 km. Various bits of QLR engine lying around so freaked the two Jeep drivers that they temporarily ceased their (then) personal re-enactment of the American Civil War (presumably to contemplate their assumed imminent demise).

Part of this crossing was enlivened by a young Toureg named Akhakmadu. He was hitching the 1200 km from Agades to his home in Tamanrasset. He was delightful company and saved us a lot of digging by showing us that sand that looked hard usually wasn't – and vice versa. He also told us that the sand formed a crust in the early hours of the morning that lasted until around noon. We then stopped for the day.

He also taught us more about dates and date palms than we actually wanted to know, together with some very rude Saharan French epithets that still come in handy from time to time. He can be seen perched on the roof of the QLR in the above picture.

There were no major political problems during our return across the desert. Paris had accepted that the Algerian situation was a lost cause. The local French airborne forces and many local French however were in open and armed rebellion against metropolitan France re this.

Departing from Africa

We came within 1000 km of Algiers, and there left the Jeep to complete the journey using its remaining front wheel drive to reach that city – and the unfortunate Jeep agent who was to screw the thing back together again.

Now minus the Jeep, we travelled via minor tracks right across Algeria to the then-French Foreign legion town of Colomb-Bechar (now Bechar) on the Moroccan border. There, I obtained a pair of French Foreign Legion officer's baggy dress trousers – and still wear them to the occasional party fifty years later. From Colomb-Bechar we headed toward the North

African coast and through Morocco to Ceuta and by ferry across the Straits of Gibraltar to Spain.

Once back in Spain we took on enough fuel to detour to Monte Carlo (for the French Grand Prix – and the launch of the Peugeot 404) and thence over the Maritime Alps, and eventually to London.

The last ever trip

We arrived (back in Dover) late on the 28th of April 1960. Africa by then had virtually exploded behind us. As that date was also the last time for decades that the Sahara was open for traffic the QLR was almost certainly the last vehicle to date to complete this route. The Sahara is again far too dangerous for travel – as is much of central Africa. The only route now is via the east coast.

The Jeep

There was a curious sequel to this saga. Around 1965, extensive world-wide magazine promotion showed the self-same Jeep, with copy boasting about the great American know-how that had allegedly enabled that seriously troubled machine to circumnavigate the globe without breakdown.

(In early 2013, Antony (now owner of the world famous Fleming Yachts and living in California) located one of the Jeep's drivers. He revealed that the Jeep, having broken down no less than 78 times on that journey, was as equally amazed by the subsequent Jeep promotion as we were. He raised such a storm that not only was the promotion halted, but the (forward control) Jeep ceased production.

Curiously, it now has an iconic (ironic?) following in the USA.

A Great Truck

Apart from eating exhaust valves as if they were carrot sticks, the QLR performed superbly. It hardly put a tyre wrong in over 60,000 km, of which only 15,000 or so was on surfaced roads.

The QLR traversed tens of thousands of kilometres of tracks that make the Gibb River Road and the top end of Cape York seem like bitumen highways.

On the way back, it travelled virtually the whole width of Africa in low-range four-wheel-drive, ploughing through deep mud. It survived the return Saharan crossing, at times pulling over five tonnes behind it through soft sand. It was one tough truck.

Years later I realised the cause of its exhaust valves appetite. Seemingly the cooling system needed to run (at what was then) quite high pressure to limit water cavitation around the valve guides. We had experienced problems with the radiator cap valve even whilst in the UK and, later adapted a Schrader tyre valve to hopefully do the job. It now seems likely that the header tank pressure was too low and consequent cavitation around the valve guides prevented adequate water cooling.

Given a bigger engine (preferably diesel) and appropriate gearing, the now 60-year old generic QL would be an excellent machine even today. The Bedford ‘R-type’ was its later civilian and

armed forces successor. It was less unsophisticated (at least having synchromesh) and a lot more power. I felt however it lacked the very real personality of the QL. In many ways the Australian designed and built OKA is more the QL's spiritual successor.

The QLR came to a curious end. It was bought, for a nominal price, and without previous sighting, by an English aristocrat (I suspect he'd thought it was a great deal smaller) to transport guest shooters around his country seat in Leicestershire. Apart from other curious habits, upper-class Poms like to shoot unfortunate birds bred for the purpose, who are flown across their path (but only at certain times of the year).

I last saw the QLR being driven behind the good Lord's Rolls Royce, by his thoroughly bemused and somewhat snooty chauffeur – only too audibly encountering a non-synchro-mesh gearbox and a close to negative power/weight ratio for the first time.

It was a good trip and along the way I gained a fair (albeit mainly subjective) understanding of the nature of track surfaces and, in particular, corrugations.

For a time, I seriously believed I'd established the latter's cause – until I found papers reporting similar phenomena on bullock cart tracks in the early 1800s, and on the vertical steel guide bars of some elevators. Meantime GM had taken a different approach to vehicle testing but the info I had gained was passed to them for what it was worth.

The African experience was such that I found it close to impossible to settle down in Britain. Following a time in Libya, I booked a sea passage to New Zealand, but fell in love with Sydney on the stop-over, and did not get back on. I sadly never saw or heard of the QLR again.

In Australia, following some years designing and building engineering and scientific equipment, I started what became, eight years later, the world's largest circulation electronics magazine (Electronic Today International) ending up with editions in six different countries. I eventually left to start my own writing and publishing company.

Following a year or so driving around Australia we settled deep in Aboriginal territory (north of Broome, in the Kimberley) for 11 years. There, we physically self-built a home and large workshop on 10 acres of Indian Ocean frontage. It had no facilities except unlimited crystal-clear bore water. The whole property is all-solar. We built the solar system first, so it was even *built* using little energy other than solar. See Ensuring Successful Solar on this site.

My first edition of my *'Campervan and Motorhome Book*', finished in 2001 covers much of what I had learned on that trip. Later editions included my wife (Maarit) and my twelve plus return trips across Australia via mainly dirt tracks – from Broome to the east coast and back in our OKA, plus three in our 4.2 litre Nissan Patrol and Tvan. We also circumnavigated Australia.

We now live in a now all-solar home in Church Point, overlooking Pittwater (30 km north of Sydney). I remain a writer and publisher (and have very much 'walked the walk'). Maarit is a psychologist specialising in working with seriously traumatised young children.

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NOTE: The names of many African cities and countries have been changed since their becoming independent. I use their earlier names throughout this article, not out of a lack of respect, but because this is a historical article some readers are likely to be more familiar with them than the ones used today.