

MEMORY FROM THE PASTE

Man without Memory is not Alive (G. Pasquali)

The dramatic history of on Italian plane, lost in the Libyan desert during the Second World War

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The poor remains of the Italian Sergeant-Major Giovanni Romanini were found on 21st July 1960 by a Lericci gravity party working for AGIP in the northern part of Concession 82 in Eastern Libya. The plane was found some three months later in the central part of the Erg.

The Petroleum Preamble

During the late Fifties and in the Early Sixties, Agip decided to go back to the foreign activity and some Petroleum Contracts were signed accordingly: in Egypt, Morocco, Iran, Sudan, Tunisia and Libya.

After exhausting negotiations, Enrico Mattei President of Agip and Mr. Ben Katu, Libya Minister of Oil, on 19 November 1959 signed the Licence Agreement for Concession 82 relevant to an area of 29.997 sq Km (figure 1), which well compares with the size of Sicily (25.426 sq km). After some area relinquishments the present concession is limited to 4.370 sq km and the partnership is equally shared between National Oil Corporation, NOC and Eni North Africa Middle East. The area falls upon the jurisdiction of Agedabia (Ajadabiyah) political province.

Geomorphology of Concession 82

In North Africa there is a very wide inhospitable geographic region called *Libyan Desert*, which enters as well in Egypt. Essentially two desert sand regions



**Figure 1: Libya,
Concession 82 as in 1959**

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Figure 2: Garet Uedda (FdC)

some sand-clayey deposits.

Rock erosion is the most evident natural process in the *Hammada*. Hills (*Garet* or *gara*, plural *gour*) in the form of mushrooms are present all over the area (figure 2).

Main outcrops are of the Garet Uedda formation of Pleistocene age, composed of continental deposits, with a 26 meter thick section type, with fossil remains being quite rare. The study of the sediments suggests that there existed four or five Pluvial (or wet) Periods alternated with three or four Interpluvial (or dry) Periods.

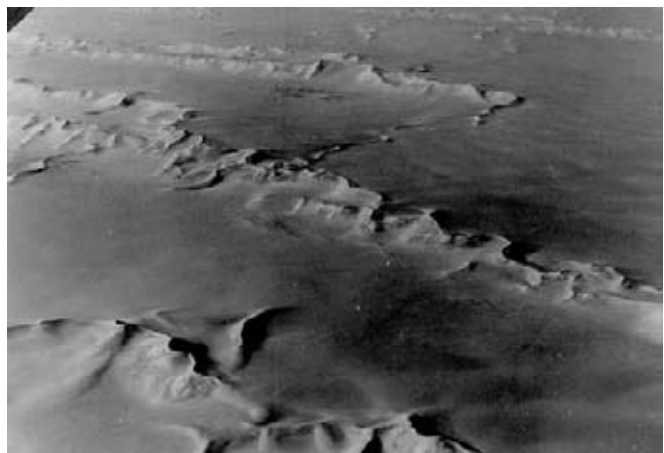


Figure 3: Ribbon Dunes in the Southern part of Concession 82. (FdC)

Three types of *Serir* (In Arabic *serir* means *dry*, plural *serir*) are present: *alluvial*, *eluvial* and *aeolian*. It is in the *Serir* that the Jalo-Giarabub (Jalu-al Jaghub) track develops. It is a very old track that starts from Murzuk in the Fezzan, climbs to northeast to Augila, then from here to Giarabub, Siwa, Alexandria and, at the end of the long journey, arrives at Cairo.

can be singled out, from East to West: *The Great Sand Sea* (mostly in Egypt) which in the northern part adjoins, in Libya, with the *Calanscio Sand Sea*. Concession 82, as originally granted, fell essentially in the area of the Calanscio Sand Sea. Mostly Erg, desert of sand; bounded to the North by the Hammada (Rock Desert). In between the *Serir* i.e. rock fragments of different lithology, often rounded, with

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Figure 4: Neolithic Spear Heads and detachment cores.
The large amygdale long axis 15 cm (FdC)

It was used in the past centuries and even now by slow camels caravan which, with their gait, have produced deep tracks in the soil. The *Erg*, the Desert of Sand, starts to the south of the Serir; initially in the form of chaotic dunes which are very difficult to cross; after a while the dunes assume aspect of long ribbons (figure 3). Highest dunes measured in the range of 100 meters.

In between patches of recent sediments where with a little patience it is possible to find human artefacts, mostly arrow heads, spear heads, axes, detachment cores, scrapers, fragments of ostrich eggs. Neolithic-Prehistoric industry used the chert from the caliche of the Fourth Pluvial or from Nubian Sandstone (figure 4).

The climate is terrible with Summer temperatures higher than 60°C and winter ones very close to zero (figure 5). On February 1st, 1962 the working diary of the Geological Team reported the following sentence:
strong snow, back to Base Camp.



Figure 5: Geological team working in Sahara during winter (FdC)

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Dangers in the Desert

The northern strip of the Concession, along which the caravan route Agedabia-Giarabub was meandering, had been the silent spectator of war episodes in North Africa. All the area had been mined and it had been necessary a long work of mine-sweeping before entering and measuring the outcrops.

Firm Agip Headquarters instructions were stressing the necessity, as ordered even by the Libyan Government, to abide to 10 point regulations which considered, inter alia, the necessity for each car to bring food and water suitable for five days, to follow tracks which had been already cleared from mines. In few months all the area was perfectly cleared by mines and other war relics.

Difficult work but perfectly made by a Libyan Company (SASCO, Sayyed Abdallah Senussi Company). In this environment the Agip Geologists had been working some 45 years ago. Sometimes it was possible to identify the tracks left by the German side-car or by British armoured cars. The dry desert climate had kept in perfect conditions all the tracks left by the two enemy armies and in one case a gasoline /water cache was found still in good conditions.

The Savoia-Marchetti S79, the Damned Hunchback

In the early Forties, war in Africa was signed by violent forward movements which were followed by headlong withdrawn of both the enemies. In April 1941 the British Army, after having conquered the whole Cirenaica were going back to Egypt. In the same moment they were leaving Greece and the Italian Air Force heavily committed to hit the British convoys transporting troops to Alexandria.

In the afternoon of 21st April 1941, in the frame of these aerial attacks, one Italian aeroplane Savoia-Marchetti S 79 (The Damned Hunchback as the British soldiers had nicknamed it), left the airport of Berka (Benghazi) to attack a British convoy south of Crete. The plane never came back. After two days the Italian Headquarters declared the S79 lost in war.

Some 20 years later, on 5th October 1960, one gravity team of Lerici, found the carcass of this plane in Concession 82 in full Erg, some 485 kms south of Benghazi, (figures 6, 7, 8).

The plane had made a crash landing after having consumed all the fuel and it had

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landed utilizing its wheels. Outside the plane there were the poor remains of three men while a fourth one was found on his seat. Inside the deck everything was found undamaged and the plane did not seem to have been shut down.

Some time before, 21st July 1960, an Agip geological team had found the remains of Giovanni Romanini (1916-1941), a poor Italian aviator who had evidently decided to go north to look for help. If he had had the strengths to march for few more kms he could have reached the Jalu-Giarabub caravan route and certainly



Figure 6: The Savoia-Marchetti S 79 in the Libyan Desert (FdC)



Figure 7: The Savoia-Marchetti S79 in the Libyan Desert (FdC) at initial coordinates of Lat. 28°49'50" North; Long. 23°21'50" East (from 1:50.000 photomosaic).

In 1996 an Italian team (Capovin, Giovannini, Bruzzese, Rima) better defined coordinates making use of GPS, shifted by 2km towards SE in respect of the above.

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Figure 8: A squadron of Savoia-Marchetti S79. Courtesy www.regiaaeronautica.it

airplane during WWII in North Africa; in fact in the Libyan desert two more airplanes were found: a British fighter and an American bomber of the Liberator class, the well known *Lady Be Good* bomber. This four-engined American plane, with nine crew members, had left Libya base of Soluch on 4th April 1943 for a war



Figure 9: Lady Be Good. Courtesy of www.ladybegood.com

mission to bomb Naples (Italy). *Lady Be Good* turned back 30 minutes before reaching the target either due to poor visibility or engine problems. There are several speculations as to how the aircraft became lost. Strong tail winds, navigational errors and a lack of visibility of the ground being the most probable. The aircraft was discovered in the Libyan desert, some 700 km (440 miles) south of Soluch by a British oil Exploration team from D'Arcy Oil Company (to be incorporated later into British Petroleum) in May 1958 Even in this case well preserved in the desert environment (figure 9).

found the life. Many guesses for the presence of this plane in that inhospitable area being most probable the fact that the plane, after having completed the war mission, going to Benghazi had suffered for a strong North-West wind. The absence of ground reference points associated with a break of the onboard radio had been decisive elements of this tragedy.

This had not been the only tragedy occurred to a war mission to bomb Naples (Italy). *Lady Be Good* turned back 30 minutes before reaching the target either due to poor visibility or engine problems. There are several speculations as to how the aircraft became lost. Strong tail winds, navigational errors and a lack of visibility of the ground being the most probable.

The aircraft was discovered in

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Figure 10: Bristol Blenheim, Courtesy www.Aereofan@lycos.it

Another tragedy in the desert occurred on 5th May 1942 to a British aircraft, a Bristol Blenheim Z7513 (Figure 10) from the 15th South African Air Force Dragon which crash-landed some 200 kms due east of the Kufra oasis. The crew perished of thirst before they could be rescued. This plane, together with two more Blenheim landed in the desert, being short of fuel. Fuel of two planes was transferred to this one but Z7513 managed to fly only 40 kms before landing again. One surviving crew member from the other two Blenheim was rescued on May 11th 1942.

After rescuing the two other planes were repaired on the site and flew out but Z7513 was abandoned in the desert.

These deserts have always witnessed many deadly tragedies. One from the very past comes from Herodotus who in his *Histories* tells the tragic end of the army of Cambise II (599-522 b.C.), king of Persia and of Egypt. His Army composed of 50.000 soldiers was kept from a very strong deadly southern wind, the *khamsin*, while trying to reach the Oasis of Siwa for defeating the inhabitants, the Ammonians and their famous Ammon Oracle, who had been predicting ominous presages to the King.

This Army has never been found despite the many researches; probably Ammon was right.