

# Desert At First Looks Like Nothing—Nature Is Best Camouflage For Bedouins Or Troops

By RICHARD MOWRER  
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At first the desert doesn't look like anything—just vast and empty with lots of sky above it. Much of it is flat, hard-packed and stony, for miles. Or it may be hard-packed and stony with high swells that wouldn't be noticeable except that they limit the range of vision.

Sometimes the desert becomes very lumpy with dunes of powdery white sand that makes men flounder when they walk. Sometimes there is a break in the desert—a sudden rim to a great plateau that had seemed endless,

with the rim cracked by steep dry gullies that the Bedouins call "wad." Some areas in the desert have small clumps of camelthorn, a round scraggly bush that collects sand around its roots so that it seems to be growing out of a mound.

You wonder, at first, how you are going to find cover if the enemy suddenly appears, and you wonder how an army with trucks and guns and tanks and armored cars can hide from enemy aviation. But the desert is a funny place and continually surprises one with all it has to offer in the way of camouflage and concealment.

Because of your shadow you are

most visible from the air in the early morning, and again toward sunset. Your shadow at these hours seems a mile long. In the desert a man's shadow is like a giant, and a truck's shadow is like a barn. You feel awfully conspicuous.

Where there is camelthorn there is surprisingly good cover, even when the sun is lowest and the shadows are longest. For if enemy planes come, you can crouch, and your shadow will blend into that of a camelthorn bush. The main thing is not to run. Movement would draw the plane's attention, the way a rabbit does by suddenly popping out near a hunter instead of lying

low and letting the hunter walk by. Next to the darkness of night, the middle of the day offers the best shelter. For one thing there are no shadows to worry about. Also, midday is when the mirages come up and blur the landscape. The hot air shimmering off the burning desert distorts the horizon and everything a few hundred yards away.

While on patrol in Libya one time, we stopped often to study black lumps on the horizon that seemed to be moving. Were they tanks or trucks? But those black lumps turned out to be mere camelthorn bushes only a couple of hundred yards away, instead of

tanks or trucks a mile away. It was the shimmering hot air that had made them seem to move.

Visibility from the air, as well as from the ground, is disturbed by the midday heat, and, if nobody runs around when planes come over they often pass without seeing, even when flying low. On two occasions Italian planes flew right over us without spotting anything suspicious, although our group consisted of a dozen armored cars and two station wagons.

We were scattered in an area of camelthorn and camouflaged with camelthorn. But while the cars were bulky objects compared to

the rest of the desert and its little bumps of camelthorn, the hot air rising off the ground smeared their outlines effectively, and of course we refrained from moving.

From about noon till 4 in the afternoon the air was generally free of aircraft, due to blurred visibility on the ground. The Italians carried out their raids or reconnaissance flights in the early morning, usually just at sunrise when the shadows are so immense, and just before sunset when the shadows, after having shrunk to nothing at all, lengthen out again.

Where there are concentrations, it is difficult to conceal men and

machines. However, scattering the units several hundred yards apart and covering them with nets or canvas and smears of dust was found quite effective. The weather seems to make the best camouflage. This is especially noticeable in relation to Bedouin tents. These are virtually invisible until you are near them. One reason for this seems to be that a Bedouin tent is never brand new—it is a patchwork of old rags, old rugs, old blankets, old skins, weathered to a tone that blends into the general topography of the desert.

Almost every night a heavy dew descends upon the desert. Then, with

day the sun dries off the dew and beats down on everything. Repetition of this process is nature's method of camouflage, copyright unreserved.

A British artillery unit once got together with nature on a camouflage project for the tent that sheltered their kitchen and the mess. Instead of throwing away the soggy remnants from the teapot, the cook would throw them upon the tent, causing large brown stains to spread on the canvas. The alternations of heavy dew at night and scorching sun in the daytime worked on these stains,

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