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Darien Breakthrough

The Darien Breakthrough

The story of the British Trans-Americas Expedition

by Major J. N. Blashford-Snell, M.B.E, F.R.G.S, R.E.

Complete success for the British Trans-Americas Expedition came on 9th June 1972 when Captain Jeremy Groves of 17/21 st Lancers sent the signal 'Mission Accomplished' from the Cape Horn area. The Range Rovers had driven through every type of terrain. The frozen wastes of Alaska had almost stopped the undertaking when one car slid 200 yards on the ice-bound Alcan highway to smash into a huge lorry blocking the way. The Rocky Mountains had presented some challenging drives on roads from which vertical drops of thousands of feet descended into rushing, boulder-strewn rivers.
In Mexico they met desert conditions and in Guatemala the Pan Americas highway became a rutted track. They beat the jungles and swamps of Darien and climbed up into the high Andes.
In May 1972 they sped on through South America, crossing more mountains and once again meeting desert in Chile. Here they covered 2,375 miles in four days, and one day made 800 miles cruising at 90 mph on a straight desert road. In the Darien Gap they only averaged 3 miles in a day!
As they neared their goal they hit snow and ice once more. Many mountain passes were blocked and it took five long days to break through this last obstacle belt. On one occasion they had to cross a lake on a very Heath Robinson local raft to avoid the blocked passes. One can imagine the feeling of achievement as the drivers gazed at Cape Horn and switched off their engines after seven months and 18,000 miles.

The Expedition's aim was to focus attention on the need to complete the 18,000 mile Pan American Highway, connecting North and South America, by taking motor vehicles from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. At present it is blocked by this notorious 'Tapon del Darien'.
To my horror I saw the rubber raft rear up like a stricken beast, I tried to shout a warning to the crew, but words failed me and by the time something suitable to say came to mind I heard one of the helmsmen yelling 'She's going lads, get away, get away, we're going over'. The tow rope from my

piragua slackened as the raft and its swaying Range Rover car spun out of control in the foaming

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water, engines racing and men plummeting over the side. Water was pouring in through a two-foot gash in the hull of one pontoon.

Like a whaler's longboat the piragua, or Indian canoe, with which we had been towing the raft across a fast flowing river, was now dragged backwards by the stricken grey 'whale'. One man was still aboard, the raft commander, Sgt. Major David Wright of the Royal Engineers, boat expert and formerly a helmsman on the Blue Nile. Already my Panamanian boatman, Canito, instantly realising what must be done, had sliced through the tow rope with his sharp machete. Somehow the raft was still upright. Men were struggling in the water, clearly visible by their bright red life jackets. Down-stream the great raft spun, but by a miracle it seemed the serious-faced raft commander was winning control and as we watched he rammed the wreck into a shingle bank. Most survivors had reached the river's edge and were clinging on to the trees, few had the strength to climb out: they had been working for hours in the blistering heat and for some every step, with their feet raw from 'jungle foot', was agony. With his usual skill Canito swung the 30ft long boat around and we picked them up. Some laughed nervously, some grinned, others looked very shaken and in spite of a shade temperature of over 80°F, they shivered. Thank God everyone was safe, even the vehicle had been saved; but the raft ripped open by a rock was crippled and would need much work before it could continue.

At the end of the expedition, after over three months gruelling battle against one of the worst obstacles in the world this incident seemed to have happened years ago and indeed was only one of the near escapes we had suffered during the 99 days the British Trans-Americas Expedition had been striving to get motor vehicles and a team of scientists through the infamous Darien Gap that stretches from Canitas in Panama to Barranquillito in Colombia. The Expedition's aim was to focus attention on the need to complete the 18,000 mile Pan American Highway, connecting North and South America, by taking motor vehicles from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. At present, it is blocked by this notorious 'Tapon del Darien', which previously had defeated all attempts to take vehicles through the Gap and over the great Atrato swamp. The Expedition also carried out a large scale scientific programme involving British,
American and Panamanian scientists, who studied the botany, biology, geology, geography, entomology and zoology of the region. Medical and veterinary subjects as well as the Indians were also studied.

Originally the idea for the venture came from the Darien Action Committees in the Americas, and a British Trans-Americas Expedition Committee under the energetic Chairmanship of Lt. Col. Julian du

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Range Rover Classic Special Theme

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Range Rover Conversions
Range Rover Advertisement
Range Rover Camel Trophy
Range Rover CKD Assembly
Range Rover Darien Gap
Darien Breakthrough
Land-Rover Series S1 S2 S3
Land Rover Defender

Range Rover Classic by Year

Range Rover 1970
Range Rover 1971
Range Rover 1972
Range Rover 1973
Range Rover 1974
Range Rover 1975
Range Rover 1976
Range Rover 1977
Range Rover 1978
Range Rover 1979
Range Rover 1980
Range Rover 1981
Range Rover 1982
Range Rover 1983
Range Rover 1984
Range Rover 1985
Range Rover 1986
Range Rover 1987

Range Rover 1988
Range Rover 1989

Parc Braham was formed in 1970. Experienced explorers and travellers in this wild land were asked to consider whether such a project was feasible. Most people considered it was sheer folly, especially as several other well-prepared expeditions had failed.

In 1970 the Committee asked my advice on the idea. Looking back I remember that I too, considered that it was madness, but after reconnaissance carried out by a young explorer, Brendan O'Brien, I believed that it could be done, but it would need to be a massive undertaking, fought like a long-drawn-out battle, with a good chance of high casualties and a certainty of great discomfort. Nevertheless, the project got under way and soon the supporters included the British Army and the Governments of Panama and Colombia, the British Museum (Natural History), the Scientific Exploration Society and numerous companies and individuals in Britain and the Americas. With the backing of the Army, the Expedition assumed the proportions of a war-time task force: 59 men and 5 women from Britain and America joined some 40 Panamanian soldiers and 30 Colombian servicemen in central America in early January 1972. Operation Darien, as it was known, had begun. Air support consisted of a British Army Beaver aircraft, plus helicopters from the United States Air Force and the Air Forces of Panama and Colombia. Medium range transport aircraft and light reconnaissance planes also helped us.

The vehicles chosen for this great drive were two Range Rovers kindly provided by British Leyland and they were to be joined later by a Land Rover pathfinder, which we purchased in Panama. The Range Rovers with six men as their crew went on to complete the drive from Alaska, which they left in early December 1971, to Tierra del Fuego, which they reached in June 1972. The Land-Rover, having completed its task as a pathfinder, has now been flown back to Panama and given to the Guardia Nacional.

To carry stores as far as the Colombian border, Army Veterinary Officer, Major Keith Morgan-Jones (whose ancestor. Sir Henry Morgan, was also well known in the area) brought 28 pack ponies. To comply with foot and mouth regulations they were to be replaced by local mules at the Border. Although only five ponies reached there it is a great credit to our vet and his two lady assistants, Miss Carolyn Oxton and Miss Rosemary Allheusen, that even these got so far. Frequently they became stuck in the deep mud, some died of disease, others were driven almost mad by the bites of vampire bats and blood suckers, but the strong kept going and enabled the Expedition to advance.

The Sappers, whose equipment was largely carried on the horses, developed a strong affection for them. On one occasion a section of Engineers struggled for some 19 hours to save a pony from a deep morass.

Rover engineers putting the finishing touches to the special interior equipment of one of the Expedition Range Rovers

Our horses were a vital part of the team. One Royal Engineer, Lance Corporal Lee Veun, took particular care of his section's pack horses. A splendid bay called Cromwell was suffering from the bites of vampires and huge blood sucking flies. To prevent Cromwell from scratching the ointment-

covered wounds the Lance Corporal cut up a pink parachute and made a protective bonnet and enveloping nightdress. Alas, Cromwell, attired in this garb, broke loose one night and disappeared into the jungle. Later, he was found by Indians who had been indulging in an all-night drinking party. On

Range Rover 1990
Range Rover 1991
Range Rover 1992
Range Rover 1993
Range Rover 1994
Range Rover 1995
Range Rover 1996

Range Rover Classic US by Year

Range Rover US 1987
Range Rover US 1988
Range Rover US 1989
Range Rover US 1990
Range Rover US 1994

Land Rover - Special

Land Rover-Leyland Group
Range Rover 1985 Salesman

sighting this terrible pink apparition they took to their heels and fled, believing it to be an ancestor come to reprimand them for their drinking. However, the expedition went to the rescue. Cromwell was disrobed and the Indians were allowed to keep him in the interests of good relationships.

The rains in Panama usually end in mid-December. One then has approximately three months of relatively dry season to cross the Gap but in 1972 we were out of luck. The rains did not end until mid-January and as a result the ground on the first part of our route was a sea of mud. My first task was to carry out air reconnaissance. The Beaver flew in on a cool summery morning to the little airstrip at the Military Instruction Centre on the edge of the Gap. Soon we were racing through the cold morning air, the roar of that powerful engine taking us up and above our base camp. Now for the first time I was seeing the Darien Gap, one of the most difficult and dangerous places in the world. We turned above the airstrip and headed east-south-east. Beneath us was a gentle country, rolling green Savannah, dotted park-like with trees and herds of white cattle. The town of Chepo, with its galvanised iron water tower, slid by under the port wing. Beyond, the sun glinted on the thick brown coil of the Bayano river, glistening like a giant snake. A scatter of white boxes in a square of turned

A foretaste of things to come

red earth was Canitas. We tilted down as our pilot, Captain David Reid of the Army Air Corps, turned the Beaver once again. Now the grassland was patchier; the green darkened and thrust up towards us. A mist that had lain in 'sausage' shaped clouds at tree top level began to clear.

"We had hoped to find the crossing point quickly but soon we were lost in a range of low hills that run parallel to the great waterway."

The true shape of our enemy now showed, but from 500ft it still looked oddly innocuous, the ridges that rose steeply beside us were forested, but on the plateau between, the trees that stood out most were widely scattered. All rose straight trunked, some carrying umbrellas of foliage at their tops, others white and dead looking. Their branches were like spread fingers reaching up to us. We dropped to have a closer look. I glanced at the altimeter. It still read 400ft, yet we seemed almost to be brushing the tallest trees. I looked again at the green carpet around their base and realised the truth. What we had been looking at was merely the primary jungle; the real problem lay below it. The most prominent trees must have been up to 150ft high. They rose out of undergrowth so thick that even from a modest height, it looked solid. This secondary jungle flourished where the tallest trees were sparse and let the sun in. Although it seemed like shrubbery, what we could see were the tops of lesser trees.

The Bayano river alone broke up the mass. David throttled back and put the Beaver's nose down. We skimmed between the trees a hundred feet or so above the water over one of the long, narrow outboard-powered canoes that serve as river transport in Darien. Faces turned up and arms waved. The Beaver's nose lifted and with a shattering roar from the engine we were carried over a loop in the river. The neat

Aluminium ladders proved invaluable in surmounting otherwise impassable obstacles. Two such ladders were carried on the roof of each vehicle.

rectangular palm leaf roofs of an Indian village clustered on the bank. Strangely, not a soul was in sight. We climbed to 1,500ft and headed for the northernmost of the two mountain ranges that flank the Darien Gap. They and the valley between were laid out tidily and precisely as on the map; a relationship which is strangely surprising the first time one sees it. The Beaver found a winding valley which we followed at tree top height, weaving in and out between the timber-clad slopes, switch-backing over the ridges that blocked our path. We made a tight turn to take a photographic run, I found myself clutching a Polaroid camera tightly to avoid it being sucked out of the open window. In the back of the aircraft, Peter Marett, my Information Officer, quickly processed the film as I handed the camera back to

him after each shot, at the same time he was making copious notes, using a special Tandberg tape recorder and watching the countryside flash past. Our eyes searched the ground for any sign of a track. There was none. The hills did not appear from the air to be too steep, but once you got low you could realise that they were not going to be an easy task.

The problem was to recognise the smaller features, such as rivers, which twisted and turned under the green canopy. There were very few villages shown on the map although we saw the occasional houses dotted along the river banks. One of my main tasks in the reconnaissance was to discover the best place to cross the Bayano river. We flew up and down the river line until our fuel was almost exhausted. Several points looked possible but all would require rafting and the current was by no means slack. Once we saw a track deep in sticky black mud leading to the river. So this was to be it. We turned for home and landed, deep in thought.

I could not imagine how Balboa in his suit of armour had staggered across this green hell to stand on a peak and discover the Pacific. However, I could easily understand how Sir Francis Drake and his lightly clad raiders had used the jungle to approach the Spanish treasure trail and enrich the coffers of Queen Elizabeth I.

The normal radiator grille was discarded in order to give more ready access to the front-mounted capstan winch

"Our sweat-soaked clothes rotted on us. Leather equipment grew mould, even the best jungle boots available began to fall apart. The mosquitoes, gnats and flies became a constant plague ..."

On 17 January, David Bromhead and his reconnaissance team moved in to the Gap. We had hoped to find the crossing point quickly but soon we were lost in a range of low hills that run parallel to the great waterway. Using the Beaver aircraft we directed the recce team on to the right track. At the end of this track they discovered the river. Meanwhile, the main body was assembling with its horses, vehicles and stores in Canitos. It was still raining as, drenched to the skin, we loaded the horses on 19 January. The recce party had warned us by radio that the track ahead was thick with mud and bisected by steep sided ravines, but we could wait no longer for three months was really very little time to reach the far end of the Gap anyway. So, for the first three days we marched in terrible conditions through the heat and mud of the open pastureland. At night we camped with our hammocks slung between the trees, cooking on damp wood fires. As yet the mosquitoes were not a plague but, nevertheless, we always hung nets above our beds.

River crossings were made by rubber raft when the water was too deep for wading. Ladders provided a convenient loading and unloading ramp

The Bayano river was no mean obstacle, a 150-yard-wide brown stream flowing at over 4 knots between jungle-covered banks. However, the Sappers were confident and skilled, and in three hours they had got men, horses, vehicles and equipment all safely to the other side. The Avon M650 inflatable raft had already proved its worth. Now we stood on the far bank, having crossed the first obstacle. We looked ahead into the darkening jungle of the Bayano valley, the track still fairly clear but still covered in sticky black mud.

Each day we marched on a little bit further into the forest. Meanwhile outside the Gap the scientific team were working in their own areas, some of them coming in from day to day to visit us.

Through the jungle we moved in a long straggling column. Our prison, for that is what it was, was

Through the jungle we moved in a long struggling column. Our prison, for that is what it was, was illuminated by a dull green light, which at times gave an almost translucent appearance to this eerie world. Great trees rose up like pillars reaching for the sun, which beat down on the canopy some 150ft above. Lianas and vines hung down in a tangled mass to catch projecting horse loads and to trip the unwary. The ground was a mat of leaves constantly being re-supplied from above. Underneath we found a layer of humus, from which grew thick undergrowth. Visibility was rarely more than 30 metres and all the time, day and night, the jungle resounded to the drip, drip, drip of the condensed humidity and the occasional crash of some giant tree falling at the end of its life. When the rain came it usually fell in torrents, turning the track into an instant quagmire. The thick black mud, ravines, gullies and dense jungle were augmented by the fast flowing rivers, patches of poisonous palms and stinging plants. All these problems combined against us. It was easy to see how the ill-fated Scots colony that was established on the coast of Darien in 1699 had perished from disease and hunger.

Our sweat-soaked clothes rotted on us. Leather equipment grew mould, even the best jungle boots available began to fall apart. The mosquitoes, gnats and flies became a constant plague; there were inch-long black ants whose bite hurt like hell for hours, there were also stinging caterpillars and, in the rivers, electric eels. The heat and humidity were oppressive and even the nights brought little relief. Clusters of aggressive and vindictive hornets nested in hollow trees and swarmed out to meet anyone who disturbed them. I have never seen insects so vicious. Within seconds a well-ordered column could turn into chaos under attack from hornets. One of the girls became seriously ill when she developed an allergic reaction to one such assault. Inch-wide centipedes and black scorpions also took their toll, whilst spiders as large as dinner plates were fearsome to behold.

When brushing against the foliage we constantly picked up ticks that, almost unnoticed, buried their teeth into one's flesh with such tenacity that they often had to be removed by the medical officer. If the head remained in the skin it became a constant source of irritation. On the other hand, snakes, although numerous, were usually shy and it was not until later in the expedition that we came across more aggressive varieties. The larger animals were rarely dangerous and on one occasion a recce party came face to face with a beautiful black panther on the jungle track. There were other cats such as ocelot and margay and, surprisingly, large deer.

The white-lipped peccary, a small wild pig, was a different matter altogether. Unlike his timid cousin, the white-collared peccary, this beast was much feared and avoided whenever possible. They moved in the twilight areas of the darkened forest in sounders of up to 300. At nights in the impenetrable darkness only the noise of their snorting and rooting gave us 9 warning of their approach. A machine gun would have had little effect on the concentrated rush of these ugly-tempered creatures and on one occasion they completely wrecked a camp, scattering the terrified horses into the jungle.

Strong arms and machetes were frequently needed to dear a path for the vehicles

Not surprisingly our Sunday services were well attended and with Keith Morgan-Jones as choirmaster, the Sappers, who loved to sing, would give throaty renderings of 'Guide me, O Thou great Redeemer'

and other appropriate hymns.

The 25 Royal Engineers of our team were commanded by a veteran explorer, Captain Jim Masters. He had been one of the most important men in the conquest of the Blue Nile in 1968 and had also played a leading part in the Dahlak Quest expedition two years later. Army mountaineer, Captain Richard Summerton, who in 1970 climbed Annapurna, was one of the reconnaissance and re-supply officers.

The Royal Engineers had been especially selected for their experience and stamina, many were old hands at jungle bashing but also there were two 17 year olds from the Junior Leaders Regiment RE, at Dover. Neither had been outside England before, but like other youngsters on the trip, put up a fine show. Also working as an Engineer was an 18-year-old civilian, Simon Wilson, who had just left school and was sponsored by the Project Trust. He obviously enjoyed working with the soldiers because on return to England he joined the Army I

An unusually straightforward river crossing allows time for a recording session

Other members included experienced Himalayan explorer, Major Kelvin Kent, Royal Signals, a former member of the Annapurna South Face Expedition; Mrs Kay Thompson, a well-travelled lady explorer, who had been on five major expeditions previously; Mr Robin Hanbury Tenison, an expert on the South American Indian and Chairman of Survival International; one jungle expert was Sgt Partapsing Limbu, of the 7th Gurkha Rifles. The Hon Charles Keyes, grandson of the famous Admiral, was an interpreter and navigator. There were also soldiers from the 17th/21st Lancers, Royal Artillery, Royal Signals, Infantry, Army Air Corps and REME.

In the beginning we had moved in a complete body with the leading recce team working some five to ten miles ahead. Another reconnaissance team worked about two miles ahead, marking the trail. Behind this came the first Engineer section to cut a track some 10ft wide, using machetes, power saws and dynamite. They must have felled thousands of trees and when they reached a ravine they bridged it with special aluminium ladders, two of which were carried on each car. These ladders could be linked together and were used for a variety of purposes from bridging to rafting. I calculated that we had used them four hundred times throughout the expedition. The second Engineer section used Tirfor jacks, blocks, tackles and the capstans on the cars to their absolute limit to drag the Range Rovers up the steep and slippery slopes.

Four-wheel drive and a powerful engine help to get one of the Range Rovers ashore

Finally the animal transport and Expedition HQ brought up the rear of the column. Rations, petrol, radio sets and medical supplies made up the bulk of the pack horse loads. Meanwhile the scientists moved in independent groups about the Expedition area. From time to time they came in to join the column before once again disappearing into the jungle in their quest for knowledge.

But time was against us and every day counted if we were not to be defeated by the onset of the rains in mid-April. We purchased a second-hand Land-Rover in Panama for use as a pathfinder vehicle and it was flown out in the belly of a giant United States Air Force helicopter. Its purpose was to support the leading Engineer section, which, under the command of veteran obstacle breaker Captain Ernie Durey, RE, was pressing ahead with all speed.

The climate and pace were beginning to tell. In fact, throughout the whole expedition more than 30

The climate and pace were beginning to tell. In fact, throughout the whole expedition more than 50 members had to be evacuated by helicopter, light aircraft or boat, because of illness.

Our doctor and his energetic SRN wife Suzie fought a constant battle to keep us fit. To maintain the momentum we employed large numbers of local people and Indians; which added considerably to our costs. With their long machetes these hard-working men continued to hack through the jungle. Navigation was always difficult and from time to time we became lost in spite of our Indian guides.

To keep us alive, supplies were brought in by boat, helicopter, parachute, pack ponies and porters. In all, over 10 tons of rations, 15,000 gallons of petrol, 2,400 cans of beer, and 80,000 cigarettes, plus sacks of horse fodder, boxes of dynamite and mail were delivered by these means. These vital items mostly came from our support base in the Pacific coastal town of La Palma. It was not always easy to find the customers so to help our Army Air Corps team, gas-filled balloons were launched on the end of a string to come bobbing up above the tree canopy. These balloons, coloured fluorescent orange, were accompanied by a firework display of rockets and mini-stars. Even so, searching for a small party deep in the jungle took all the skill the army pilots had.

When the rains came, winching was an often-repeated operation in the thick, glutinous mud

Members of the Expedition had been picked for their compatibility, physical fitness and expertise. I planned to form a team rather than a group of prima donnas. However, as our problems increased and the going became more difficult the inevitable minor squabbles and signs of nervous exhaustion more common in mountaineering, became apparent.

The girls rose high in our estimation, for in spite of living under the same trying conditions as the men and being expected to work the same hours, do guard at night, pull the horses through the mud, push boats up rivers and beat off the hordes of insects, they retained their good humour, rarely complained and always looked smart. Indeed, they added tone and often brought commonsense to cool down a heated argument.

There were many narrow escapes. Captain David Bromhead, descendant of Bromhead VC, of Rorkes Drift, was bitten on the boot by a deadly 6ft Bushmaster snake. Feeling the reptile strike him he drew his .45 Smith and Wesson revolver and shot its head off with speed that would have done credit to one of the better gun fighters of the Wild West. On another occasion only the timely arrival of a United States Air Force helicopter, flown all the way from the Canal Zone to an Indian village on the Colombian border, saved one young soldier's life. Junior Sapper Duffy was suffering from acute appendicitis, brought undetected to a climax in this remote region because he had been taking penicillin for an injury and this had masked the real danger within his stomach. Our medical officer stayed with him throughout and returned to Panama to assist the surgeons in unravelling Duffy's twisted intestines. Near the frontier

Vehicles had to be coaxed through the undergrowth in conditions of great heat and humidity

we had another lucky escape from serious snake bite when our Gurkha Sgt. Limbu was struck at by a huge Bushmaster which reared up behind him. It struck twice but each time by good fortune Sgt Limbu was taking a pace forward for his next swing at the vegetation and each time the snake missed him. Behind Limbu there was a Colombian cutter called Ruby who spoke no English and no Gurkhali. Limbu spoke no Spanish and therefore Ruby's timely warning went unheeded. However, he raced up and pinned the reptile down with a large forked branch. Even so he could not manage to hold it. Now Limbu saw the danger and spun around to despatch his attacker.

Although the British Trans-Americas Expedition could not be called the most hazardous of operations, there was always danger around the corner. And on the last day we almost lost the lives of two men who were returning to Turbo with the Colombian gun boat. They were working on the raft which was tied alongside the gun boat, which in turn was moving at approximately five knots. Suddenly something must have hit the front of one of the inflatable boats, for without warning the bow of the raft doubled up and water swept over the whole construction. Both men were hurled into the river and sucked under the ship. They found themselves bumping along the rusty, flat hull and suddenly being spun with enormous force by the propeller. Fortunately the gun boat had lost a propeller the previous week and now only had one, which definitely increased their chances of survival. Nevertheless, they were extremely fortunate to be hurled out into the wake of the gun boat, having lost all their clothes and watches. With only superficial bruises and cuts they were hauled aboard the ship and congratulated on their lucky escape.

The Expedition rations had been designed specially for the project by the Ministry of Defence and were very good. Other food was provided by numerous kind sponsors. In addition, to economise and to vary the diet, we ate local dishes, which included jungle fruit, iguana, fish, monkey, snake and wild turkey. The climate, which was usually between 90 and 100°F with 85 per cent humidity, led one to long for fresh, crisp, salads, but the dehydrated food, especially the sliced apple, was a fine substitute.
"We were two weeks behind schedule and the promised rains began. It was a desperate race to cross the remaining 60 kilometres that no motor vehicle had crossed before."

Although water had caused difficulties for much of the journey, eventually the lack of it became a problem and thus we had to resort to slicing open vines and drinking from them or filtering the water from slimy pools, or having our own delivery by parachute.

Toward the end when the rains finally came we were lashed with the full fury of the elements to an extent which few of us had ever witnessed. When this happened we were still crossing the most difficult area of all. This was the hilly frontier region known as the Devil's Switchback. Here it was that whilst trying to hurry our reconnaissance we suffered a severe setback by leading the column straight up a 'one way street'. This led to an impenetrable hilly barrier and because our Beaver had suffered damage to its tail wheel at this time and was being repaired, we failed to see the danger by air

Exposed tree roots were among the many obstacles that had to be overcome on this epic journey

reconnaissance. Thus for 10 days we floundered and struggled to conquer the Pucuru heights. In the end we took a gamble and motored the cars up the bed of the river Tuira. This was possible because of the low level of the water, but occasionally when we reached deep pools a raft was called in and used to ferry the cars to the next shallow water. By this method all three cars were able to find a way around the obstruction and reached the old smuggler's trail on the eastern side of the Tuira valley after climbing some extremely steep hills.

At last we reached the frontier at Palo de la Letras, a broken concrete plinth on a jungle-covered hill top. This was our summit and now we were going downhill.

top. This was our summit and now we were going downhill.

Half a mile from the plinth, on the Panamanian side, we found a rusting red car, a sad reminder of the ill-fated Chevrolet expedition that had reached the frontier over 10 years ago, and then turned back. Now it lay, a rotting hulk with trees growing up through the engine compartment and an ants nest in the boot. As we poked sticks into the interior a venomous coral snake slithered from beneath the remains of the back seat and a large black spider emerged from the dashboard.

From here on the going got wetter but a new spirit had come into the team and nothing could stop us now, not even the swamp the size of Wales that lay ahead.

The pathfinder Land-Rover showing signs of its battle against the jungle. Winching was the only way out of this impossible situation

In addition to the support from the United States Forces in the Canal Zone, the help of the Colombian Air Force, Army and Navy was superb, and for the crossing of the Atrato swamp the Colombian gun boat became our floating HQ.

It was in Colombia that a great tragedy occurred. Whilst setting out to join the expedition a reconnaissance party of six Colombian servicemen and our Liaison Officer, Captain Groves, were travelling in a small tin boat. After leaving Turbo Harbour the boat capsized in a heavy sea and sank within 15 seconds. The only survivors were a Colombian officer and Jeremy Groves. To our horror we heard that the remaining five Colombians had been drowned or sucked down in the mud of the mangrove swamp that fringed the shore nearby. Nevertheless, our Colombian friends produced another team within a matter of days and continued to support us wholeheartedly until the very end. So on 10 April the Expedition HQ was established for the last time. By coincidence it stood on a 'peak in Darien'

looking out, not across the Pacific, but over the steaming green morass of the Atrato swamp. We were two weeks behind schedule and the promised rains began. It was a desperate race to cross the remaining 60 kilometres that no motor vehicle had traversed before.

Working ahead of us for some weeks Captain Richard Summerton RE, had discovered a possible route through. Much of the area was pure liquid with a coating of water weed, and in this weed there lived countless mosquitoes, many snakes and the occasional alligator. To break through we decided to use our raft, which was undoubtedly the most successful single item of engineer equipment we possessed. It was designed to be carried inside one of the vehicles and when inflated could itself carry one car. This was the only raft of its type in the world and had been specially designed and built for us by the Avon Rubber Company and the Royal Engineers. Forcing a way through the matted weed was a very difficult problem, we tried cutting with machetes, pulling on it with grapnels, and eventually used necklaces of dynamite. The side benefit of the latter method was some good fish breakfasts. Indeed the swamp was teeming with huge Tarpon and numerous fish of all types. As we forced our way through, the foul stench of rotting organic material rose up. In some places logs had mixed themselves in with the weed to form more obstacles and these were smashed with dynamite or sliced through with the power saws. Gradually the trees began to increase, strange unearthly shapes, growing up from the swamp around us which was only populated by huge birds, lizards and giant otters. It had the appearance of a primeval forest and was totally uninhabited by man. On one occasion my piragua capsized in the swamp. Luckily it did not sink, because apart from a muddy bank nearby there was nowhere to swim for safety. Whilst bailing out the boat we were supported by our life jackets and although we lost some valuable equipment, we managed to reboard the boat and continue our journey, somewhat shaken, very wet and rather smelly.

Eventually the cars were placed on a firmer crust. This slippery surface of matted vegetation and soil would be flooded when the rains came to their height. Now, however, it was about three to four feet thick and would stand the weight of our vehicles fitted with extra wide Firestone tyres. The area, which was forested, had the construction of a giant sponge and you could see numerous holes going down

Aluminium ladders afforded extra grip for steep descents where the surface was loose or slippery

from the surface into the liquid mud, doubtless it was up these shafts the water would rise and flood the area. We were told by engineers and surveyors that they had lowered a drum full of concrete on a wire into the swamp and at 1,000ft they had not yet reached firm bottom. Many parts of this incredible area looked solid, but one day when landing from a float-fitted helicopter I climbed gingerly out onto the surface. Immediately the area within 10 or 15ft of me gave slightly and I had the wobbly feeling which I imagine one would get from standing on a giant blancmange.

On 23 April the sun set with its usual livid orange glow and as it did so a party of ragged, filthy men and women, mules and vehicles, emerged on the far side of the vast bog. Their eyes were hollow and their faces drawn, their bodies were a mass of bites and sores and their feet were in an indescribable

condition due to an ailment called immersion foot, but somehow as they staggered up, dragging, heaving and pushing their vehicles on to the northern end of the southern section of the Pan American Highway, they managed to smile.

After 99 days in the jungle and swamps of Darien, we had broken through. It was St George's Day.

We were received with fantastic celebrations in Colombia, made Freemen of the local town of Chigorodo, feted in the provincial capital, Medellin, and finally formed a motorcade through the streets of Bogota. Messages of congratulations poured in and amongst the first was one from Her Majesty the Queen. The Expedition was presented with a gold medal by the Darien Action Committee for their services and endeavours in conquering the Gap and each of us received a gallon of local spirit from the Colombian Army. My Deputy Leader, Major Kelvin Kent, said 'comparing this with the 1970 assault on the south face of Annapurna in the Himalayas, the crossing of Darien by vehicle had been as tough, and in many respects more difficult. When I compare this with the jungles of Borneo and Malaya, I find the Darien jungle to be infinitely worse'.

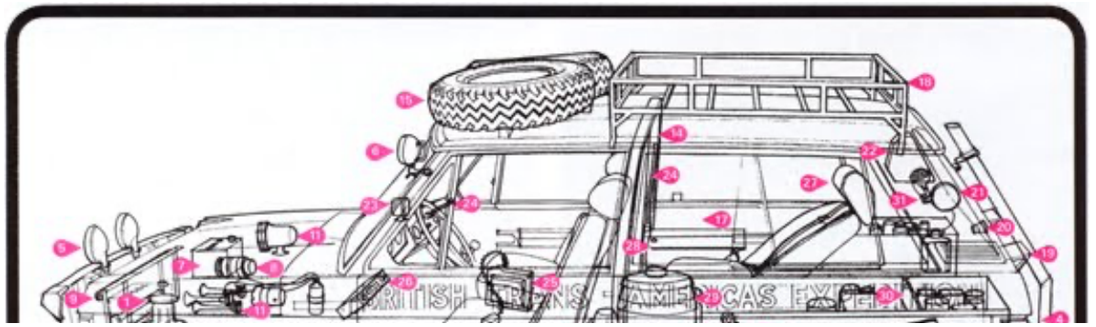
Comparatively easy going for a change

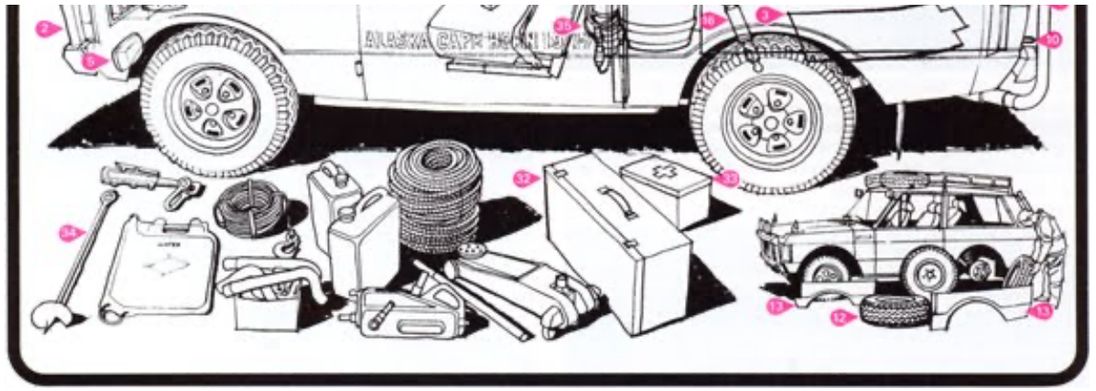
The project had been the most ambitious expedition ever undertaken by the British Army and many times during the journey we found it hard to believe that we could win, but still we pressed on.

Indeed, it has been an incredible adventure, accomplished by determination, flexibility, excellent equipment and good practical engineering, coupled with the generous help of all the sponsors and governments concerned.

Already our track has become known by the Indians as the 'Carretera Inglese' — The Englishman's road, and they are using sections of it to travel to market and visit distant relatives. Now we learn the Pan-American highway has been given the 150 million dollars it needs and will follow our path. One day I should like to return and motor through the Gap in comfort, but I sincerely hope that the road builders will spare a thought for the animals, the people and the flora of this strange land, whose environment
may now be changed for ever.

One of the Expedition Range Rovers fully equipped and fitted with extra large 'swamp' tyres. The pristine condition of the vehicle indicates that the worst was yet to come.





1 Front mounted capstan winch 3,000 lb capacity

2 Reinforced bumper/cow catcher guard

3 Petrol tank undershield

4 Raised exhaust extension

5 Four Quartz-Iodine spot and fog lights

6 Two swivel spot lights

7 Split charge two battery system

8 Heavy duty alternator

9 Radiator muff

10 Four extra towing eyes

11 Sirens and air horns

12 Swamp tyres

13 Removable wing panels

14 Roll-bar

15 Roof mounted spare wheels

16 Special low-temperature shock absorbers

17 Insulated body panels

18 Roof rack

19 Steps on tailgate

20 Power point in rear of vehicle for cooker etc.

21 Heated rear screen

22 Wiper/washer equipment for rear screen

23 Extra instruments — tachometer, oil pressure and temperature gauges, ammeter for split charge system

24 Map reading and interior lights

25 Two-way vehicle radio

26 Stereo-tape player and radio

27 Reclining seat with full safety harness and headrest

28 Built-in safe

29 Water keg

30 Partitioned stowage lockers

31 Inspection light, 26ft lead

32 Fully comprehensive tool kit

33 Medical supplies

34 Extra equipment, hand winches, ground anchors, cable, tow ropes etc

35 Coffee maker

(Based on the Range Rover brochure #844 from 1972 issued by British Leyland Motor Corporation)
