

## Turn Left for Tangier

October 18, 1958 was the beginning of an adventure for two prototype Triumph Heralds, a saloon and a coupe, a Standard Pennant Companion estate car, and a Standard Atlas van, converted as a minibus, as they set off from Cape Town, South Africa, for a nine-week journey the length of Africa to Tangier, Morocco, and on to London. Cape Town to Tangier being 15,500 plus kms alone. A Vanguard Estate joined the “Gallant Little Band”, so named by accompanying “*The Motor*” magazine journalist Richard Bensted-Smith, at Kano, Nigeria, where he and John Pratt also joined for the Sahara crossing.

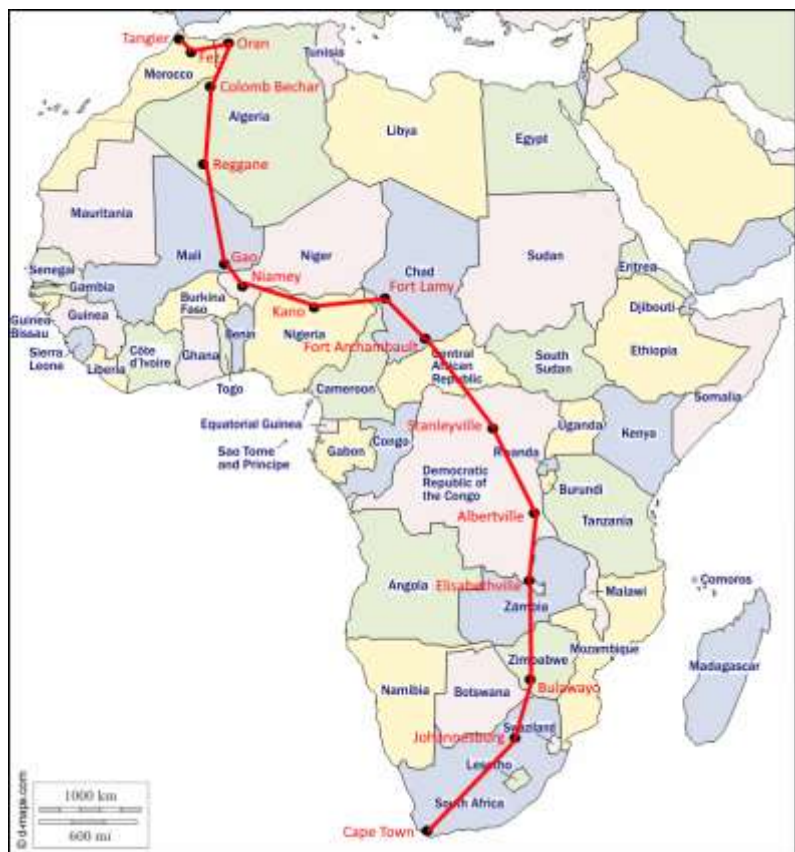
The trip was conceived by Triumph Executives Harry Webster, Martin Tustin, and possibly Managing Director Alick Dick, as a “proving run” for Triumph’s new model, code name Zobo, later to be named “Herald” after Alick’s boat. Interestingly, the names Triumph “Torch” and “Trumpet” were considered, but rejected.

Amongst other less known Africa-drives, standouts are a Wolseley 18-85 making a north-south trip in 1939 taking 32 days, and Richard Pape making his 1955 solo passage in an Austin A90. But as far as is known, Triumph’s effort was the first using new model prototypes.

Originally the cars were to be shipped to Dakar, Senegal, driven south to Cape Town, turned around and driven to Tangier and on to London, a total driving distance exceeding 32,000kms. In his book “Triumph Herald and Vitesse, The Complete Story”, Graham Robson writes, “Common sense finally prevailed, and it was arranged to ship the machinery out to Cape Town”.

A brief summary of the African route: Cape Town, Johannesburg, Bulawayo, Elisabethville (now Lumumbashi, Zaire), Albertville (now Kalemie, Zaire), Stanleyville (now Kisangani, Zaire), Fort Archambault (Chad), Fort Lamy (now Njamene, Chad), Kano (Nigeria), Niamey (Niger), Gao (now in Mali), Reggane (Algeria), Colomb Bechar (now Bechar, Algeria), Oran (Algeria), Fez and Tangier (both in Morocco).

John Lloyd led the expedition of eight. Others were charge-hand/expert welder Bob Wilson, fitters Ray Henderson, Syd Griffin and Tim Taylor, body builder Harry Darkins, Triumph test driver Roy Smith and cameraman Johnnie Coquillon.



All vehicles were heavily laden with spares, maintenance and repair tools and supplies. Also, food, drink, cooking and camping equipment. The weight resulted in the Heralds having a ground clearance of just three inches with the suspension constantly bottoming out.

The crew did not fare well either with medical problems developing, including heat exhaustion and malaria. John Lloyd, who was in daily contact with Bill Wanley back at Triumph HQ commented “we certainly encountered circumstances that a group of engineers from Coventry were not even geared up to meet.”

John Lloyd described much of the route as worse than the punishing HORIBA MIRA testing facility, colloquially known as a Vehicle Resilience (VRES) Technology Centre, for new vehicles in Nuneaton, UK. The best days driving was 682kms from Beni (Chad) to Stanleyville. The worst day, only 130kms was travelled between Fort Archambault and Fort Lamy. So hard was the going that the crew was happy if they completed just 240kms in a day.

Almost immediately the Herald's lack of cooling capacity became evident resulting in radiator changes being made to the production car specification. Being well laden and experiencing frequent full bump, the rear suspension radius arms failed for the first time just before Elisabethville. The team solved the problem temporarily by bending the arms to stop them hitting the underside of the body shell. This modification was also added to the production Herald.

The front suspensions slowly collapsed as the top wishbone mounting turrets settled causing loss of camber and ground clearance. Wishbone lower mounts broke where they went straight through the chassis rails, eventually snapping off due to "embrittlement and fatigue". Dust ingress was a constant issue making much of the journey quite uncomfortable.

Crossing the Sahara presented other challenges. As water and fuel had to be brought along, the spare parts stock was reduced to an "emergency minimum" with the discarded being shipped back to the UK. "A gallon of water, per person, per day" was needed. Ten in the team after Kano meant nearly half a ton of water and the same for fuel had to be carried for the ten days expected to cross the desert.

The low ground clearance resulted in 169 "bogging-down incidents" during the ten days. The main cause was the Herald chassis getting snagged into the sand with wheels at the limit of their rebound movement. Apparently, the record was 24 "de-ditching exercises" in a single day. More issues like broken drive shafts, radius arms, and overheating were experienced in the desert. While travelling through Northern Algeria, the group required a military escort for protection as the area was experiencing a "near-civil war", adding to the stress of the desert transit.

It is recorded that on arrival at Tangier, the romance of the journey had worn off! So much so that when leaving Gibraltar, they drove non-stop arriving at London in just 46 hours and in time for Christmas.

Within four months, the Herald was presented at London's Albert Hall with pomp and circumstance, complete with those urgent post-Africa "fixes".

So why did Triumph do it? After all, crossing the Sahara is outside the normal driving experience of motorists, even today. The political state of Africa's countries almost made the trip impossible then, and certainly is now. As Richard Bensted-Smith reported, "Standard-Triumph's object was final testing of a prototype a few months before its release to the public in the most varied but consistently bad conditions that could be found in one journey".

I note that there is no mention of publicity being a company objective. But there was publicity, "in spades". No doubt, Bensted-Smith's three reports, entitled "Turn Left for Tangier" in "The Motor" after the April release, stirred enthusiasm in the car's sale. The reports were later turned into a book with the same title. A film, produced by Triumph's Publicity Department, also with the same title, used Coquillon's footage taken on the trip and is now kept at the Heritage Motor Centre at Gaydon, in Warwickshire, UK. Also, John Lloyd's letters to Bill Wanley exist today and provide a rich source of what really happened.

What a "proving run" the expedition turned out to be!

Alan Andrews

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