

HRH and Libya

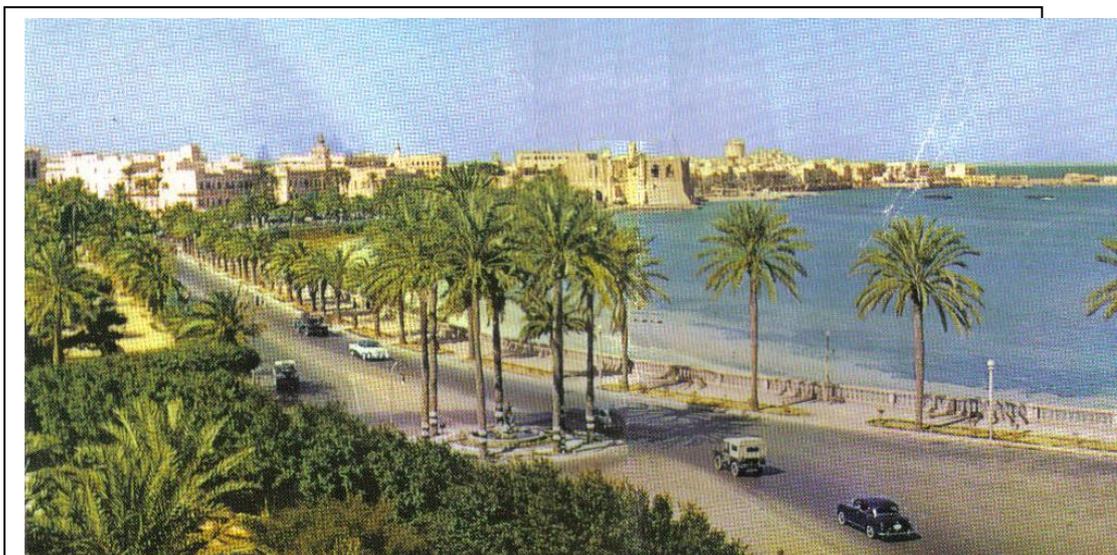
More than five decades ago I ventured to North Africa to seek my fortune. I was all set for a career with a prestigious British company, English Electric, (E.E.Co) having done one of their “thick sandwich” Apprenticeships. A dark cloud, however, was looming in the shape of Arnold Wienstock as he was beginning to decimate the UK electrical and electronics industry and E.E.Co was in the firing line. The final straw came as I was negotiating a salary for my employment. E.E.Co was mean in the extreme and offered little more than the pittance students were paid on their Apprenticeship scheme. “Engineers/ Scientists needed in Libya” was an advert that caught my eye – “needs to be single, have a degree in engineering, geology or physics and has to present themselves for a medical”. “Well, that must be worth a try” were my thoughts.

About a month later, early in October 1962, I found myself been driven in darkness down a twisting road from Idris airport into Tripoli by Pop, the person in charge of personnel at Robert H. Ray Inc, RHR, my new employer. There were few exchanges between Pop and myself during the journey only to say I was booked into a hotel for the night



The hotel was more luxurious than I would have believed. Polished marble in the entire hallway and pictures, depicting views around Tripoli, hanging from the walls. Centrally placed above the reception area was a large portrait of King Idris (above), the ruler of the land. The most striking feature, I guess to me and possibly other foreigners arriving for the first time, was that there was not a woman to be seen; all staff were male and, within the limitations of gestures rather than language, were helpful and courteous. (Of course, Libya was populated by Libyans (75%) and Italians (25%) so there were Italian women in the town but they did not work in the hotels.) A palatial bedroom was now my goal and --- sleep, sleep, sleep...

Rather earlier than I had wished I was woken by soundings from the minarets as the call to prayer started at 5:00 am. Yes, this was definitely a foreign land and I would have to get used to unfamiliar customs. The view from Hotel al Waddan, the finest hotel in Tripoli, was exquisite and I felt sure I was going to be happy in this **new** country.



It transpired that Pop **was** the Personnel Department; there was an accountant, Tom, and Mr Ray, CEO of the company, had two secretaries to deal with clients from the oil companies. RHR, lovingly known by the Brits as HRH (His Royal Highness), was a geophysical prospecting company which did seismic surveys for the likes of Shell, BP, Occidental. Oil had been discovered in the desert areas of North Africa and the gold rush (black gold) to Libya had begun. Pop explained that I was to work in town. Most of the new recruits were sent into the desert regions and their work was to collect seismic data. Purely by chance, an operative was required in Tripoli at the time I arrived and the town work involved deciphering the seismic data and writing reports for the clients; well, hardly as exciting as a life in the sand dunes but it was certainly going to be different from working on Canberra and Lightning aircraft as I had been planning to do at E.E.Co.

I found that the financial benefits of working closely with the oil industry were considerable. The living allowance from HRH was more than the salary I had been offered by E.E.Co and the "proper" salary was deposited in a bank of one's choosing. The accommodation presented a slight problem. New recruits were allowed to stay in the hotel for a week to get themselves "bedded down" but then the options were a little limited. Either one stayed in a hotel (something lesser than the Waddan) or shared a house/ apartment with fellow workers. A third way that only I considered was to stay at the Staff House. This consisted of two adjoined apartments in the middle of an Arab residential quarter. It was used by field staff as a stop-over on their way to Malta. Their pattern of working was three weeks in the desert and a one-week break which was taken by all in Malta rather than Tripoli. Staff House had the merit of providing very cheap lodgings and, though very Spartan compared to the Waddan, it was adequate for my needs.

The administrative/ technical staff at HRH were mostly American but there was Twassell from Pakistan and Pat from Ireland. The supporting staff were a mixture of Arabs and Italians and they made sure that the field equipment was in good working order. Pop, our beloved Pop, seemed to keep the whole show running in a harmonious manner. No one ever got close to Pop. There was every likelihood that Pop was ex-army and had fought in the desert campaigns of WWII. He had a fair knowledge of the Arabic and Italian languages and was admired by the whole company but Pop, the person, was an enigma. The population of Tripoli was three quarters Arabic and one quarter Italian with the latter being the remnants of a colonial past when Italy ruled Libya. UK forces, Army and Air force, were present around Tripoli and the USA had a huge base, Wheelus air base, east of the city.

Three months into my two-year contract and the work was expanding at an alarming rate. The office was open now from 7:00 am to 11:00 pm and two shifts were operated to keep Clients happy. More oil companies were buying "concessions" (marked regions on the map) and each of these was requiring seismic surveys. In January of the New Year, 1963, another chap, Colin, arrived from the UK to help out. Colin settled in very quickly and, thankfully, there was, at last, someone with whom to share accommodation. I shed few tears at leaving Staff House but I must admit it was interesting meeting the field crews who suffered quite some hardships in the desert.

Colin, ten years my senior, had worked in the communications industry and had "money in his pocket". Immediately he bought an old VW car and we moved to Georgio Populi, a suburb of Tripoli where other oil workers lived. A gaffir (an old gentleman) went with the property. He lived at the bottom of the garden and was supposed to guard the house and attend to other odd jobs. Ashamedly, we gave him a very small amount of money each week but it was said to be the going rate. Mohamed did produce vegetables in the garden but these were spirited away and we felt that he deserved the produce. Our furniture was delivered by donkey and cart so, thankfully, we hadn't ordered a grand piano! Six months of hectic work followed as oil was gushing from the deserts. Life was not unlike that in the western world ---- work -- shop, cook and attend to household duties -- sleep. There was a small supermarket in Georgio Populi and a larger one in town, both run by Italians. The Arab shops were well stocked with fruit and vegetables but the sight of half a carcass of

a camel hung up in an Arabic butchers put me off meat for some time. A radio station was operated by the UK forces and the US forces, at Wheelus airbase, offered a TV service.

Life was very much taking shape when Colin suddenly announced that he was going home!! I never found out what the reason was but I was happy to buy the old VW from him and give him a contribution for his share of the furniture. Almost immediately an American, Oscar Lee Huss junior, replaced Colin and work continued apace with Lee taking over Colin's duties. Lee agreed to move into the villa but in this respect there was a conflict in the making. Lee was keen to offer his amorous services to the single women (Nurses, oil Company secretaries. etc) in Tripoli so we were often three rather than two in the villa. An unexpected opportunity presented itself before I had to choose between a threesome or twosome. The leader of our group, an American, Peter, had got a kidney infection and had to be repatriated to US for one month. He offered his villa to me to "house-sit" for this period so I gladly accepted and therefore could vacate Lee's love nest before any hard words needed to be spoken. Lee did, however, introduce me to the vast metropolis of Wheelus airbase. As an American he could go and enjoy home-from-home comforts at the airbase and take guests along. I went a few times but enjoyed the company of personnel at the UK services, NAAFI, (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) rather more than the Americans.

Thus, year I of my time in Libya had passed very rapidly; the work had been frenetic but I was enjoying the seismic deciphering, I had a car and I had all the comforts of Peter's house with a TV !!.

Year II was a different year. The full flush of the gold rush was waning and the oil companies were consolidating their finds and setting up oil terminals along the Gulf of Sirte. I had to move out of Peter's house but there was a vacancy in a villa further out of town. It was called "the eight kilometre" and it was at a bend in the coastal road at exactly 8 km from Tripoli. There may have been some fishing or farming at this point in the past but now the habitation consisted of a few villas and a night club. Ray, a fellow Brit. had lived on his own for some time but had suffered a break-in and lost quite a lot of photographic equipment. Just at the time I was vacating Peter's house, he was interested in finding a person to share his villa so it was an offer I couldn't refuse. With two people living in the villa, it was anticipated that there would be less chance of another break-in; but possibly more effective than this was the fact that we bought a dog, Sheba, and she guarded the property. Ray was one of the most interesting people I met in Libya. He had spent three years at a research station in Antarctica and was presently contracted as manager of the power station in Tripoli. A widely travelled person with all the marks of a true English gentleman

One of the highlights of the second year was joining the Tripoli sailing club. I had sailed Fireflies in the UK but the fleet of GP14's were a delight. Racing in Tripoli harbour took place at the weekends and the social life of the club was warm and friendly. Sheila, a secretary from Shell, was a very able crew but my skills did not match her's and we never came much above 10th in a fleet of about 20 boats. Part of the bargain for her crewing was that I helped her dad to build a GP14 boat. This took some time but eventually "Octavia", (the eight boat that Sheila's dad had built) did make it to the sailing club by courtesy of a horse and cart.

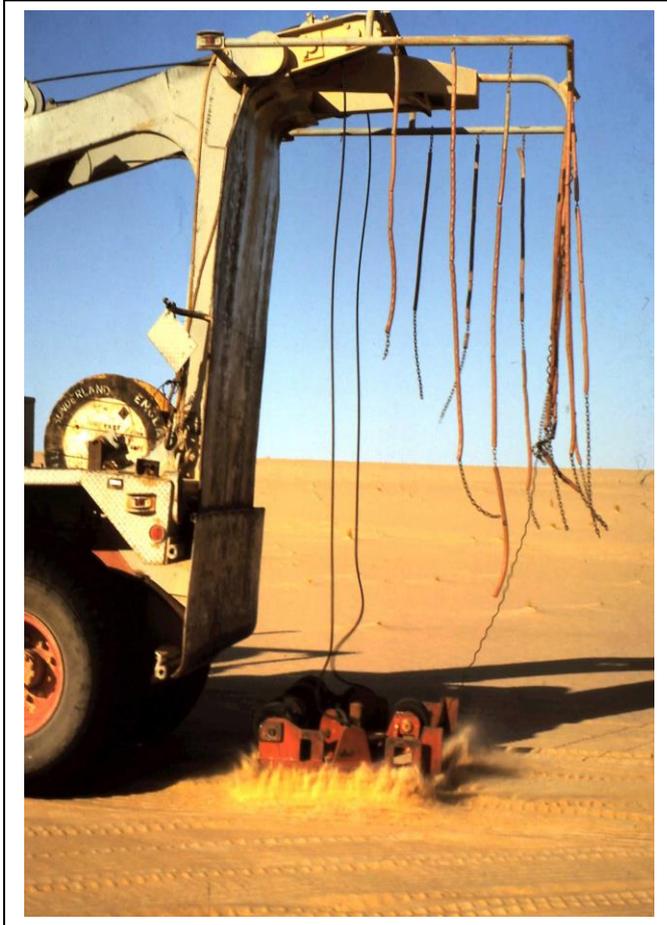


We also had some fascinating adventures into the desert with Les and his camels. Squadron Leader, Les Littler, from the RAF, was the nearest I shall ever come to Lawrence of Arabia. Les was given a wide brief for his intelligence work with the RAF and this did involve manoeuvres deep into the desert regions. He had taken a course in Arabic at Durham University and could converse fluently with the Libyan population. In his spare time he would take parties to settlements many kilometres south of the coastal strip and he got to know and be accepted by the local country folk.

On November 22, 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated and it cast a great sadness over the American personal at HRH. It seemed to sap the confidence of the company and, unfortunately, came at a time when less seismic surveying was needed. Lee left his love nest and went to Saudi Arabia and, on the grape vine it was heard that Colin had joined the company again and was now involved with seismic surveys in the North Sea. I was happy to continue in Libya but one was sensing a change in the mood of the local people. Perhaps the rhetoric of King Idris was becoming more strident. Vast revenues were now coming into the country and the population at large were becoming very self assured. From being a "safe" place to live, Tripoli was beginning to become hostile, stones were often thrown at foreign cars the word "imshe" (go home) was shouted by gangs in the streets. A particularly frightening event occurred when Sheila and I were finishing our swim at the 8 km point. Two armed police on horseback confronted us, firing in the air. No dialogue was possible and so we quickly jumped into the car and hastily drove away leaving most of our belongings behind. Care was, indeed, the watchword to be used.

An inevitable routine did descend on life in Libya after a year had elapsed but the New Year of 1964 did hold a few surprises.

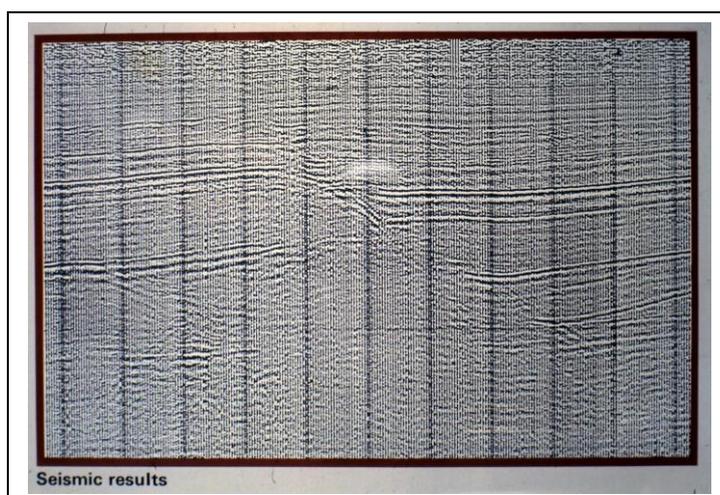
Owing to a sickness of one of the field workers I did my turn of three weeks in the desert in January 1964 at one of the seismic recording station. A commercial flight was used to ferry me from Tripoli to Benghazi and then a DC3 aircraft took me to the camp.



For seismic surveys one normally employs explosives to create vibrational waves in the earth but this did not work well in a sandy terrain. A falling weight gave superior results and therefore a truck was engineered to traverse the desert dropping a massive steel block onto the ground at regular intervals; previously, geophones (vibration sensors) had been laid out in areas marked by a surveyor. Intense vibrations from the impact of the block on the ground were transmitted down onto rock strata and then the reflected wave gave a distinct picture of the topography of these strata. The geophones picked up these vibrations and an electrical signal was recorded on magnetic tapes very much like a microphone recording onto a tape recorder .

These tapes were then sent to the office in Tripoli to be analysed.

It was very instructive to complete such measurements as I was later to analyse this data when I returned to Tripoli. A typical seismic survey is illustrated below:



With added geological data one could infer if oil or gas was trapped in the strata folds and then experimental drilling would commence.

As the pressure of work had reduced considerably by Easter I convinced Pop that I needed a short three-day break in Malta. What a delightful island and so European compared to Libya. I stayed with some of the friends I'd known in Staff House and they showed me around and made my visit so enjoyable.

I left Libya in September 1964 with mixed feeling. Yes, it had been an experience to work there and financially I now had money in the bank. But somehow the mood had changed over the two-year period. In the first few months of my stay I had felt completely safe living in the Arab quarter of Tripoli but now I was hesitant about walking in this same area. The Libyans had always resented the Italians since they were the colonisers but now they were beginning to resent all foreigners. Perhaps it was the right time to leave.

Epilogue

My association with Libya took an unexpected turn much more recently; I had to supervise a Libyan student on a PhD project as depicted. Discussions with him and his family about Libya in the "now" period, as compared to the "then" times (1962/64), were fascinating.

Optimisation of Photovoltaic-Powered Electrolysis for Hydrogen Production for a Remote Area in Libya

[Elamari, Matouk M Mh](#)

[Thesis]. Manchester, UK: The University of Manchester; 2011.

Access to files

-  [Full text \(pdf\)](#)

Abstract

Hydrogen is a potential future energy storage medium to supplement a variety of renewable energy sources. It can be regarded as an environmentally-friendly fuel, especially when it is extracted from water using electricity obtained from solar panels or wind turbines. The focus in this thesis is on solar energy, and the theoretical background (i.e., PSCAD computer simulation) and experimental work related to a water-splitting, hydrogen-production system are presented. The hydrogen production system was powered by a photovoltaic (PV) array using a proton exchange membrane (PEM) electrolyser. The PV array and PEM electrolyser display an inherently non-linear current-voltage relationship that requires optimal matching of maximum operating power. Optimal matching between the PV system and the electrolyser is essential to maximise the transfer of electrical energy and the rate of hydrogen production. A DC/DC converter is used for power matching by shifting the PEM electrolyser I-V curve as closely as possible toward the maximum power the PV can deliver. By taking advantage of the I-V characteristics of the electrolyser (i.e., the DC/DC converter output voltage is essentially constant whereas the current increases dramatically), we demonstrated experimentally and in simulations that the hydrogen production of the PV-electrolyser system can be optimised by adjusting the duty cycle generated by the pulse-width modulation (PWM) circuit.

Additional information

Gaddafi In the latter part of the 1960's Arab nationalism was increasing in North Africa and protests flared up following Egypt's defeat in the SIX DAY war, 1967, with Israel; allied to the western powers, the Idris' administration was seen as pro-Israeli. Anti-western riots broke out in Tripoli and Benghazi, while Libyan workers shut down oil terminals in solidarity with Egypt. By 1969 Libya's armed forces launched a coup while King Idris was traveling abroad in Turkey and Greece. Initiating "Operation Jerusalem" on 1 September 1969, Military Officers occupied airports, police depots, radio stations and government offices in Tripoli and Benghazi. Gaddafi took control of the Berka barracks in Benghazi, while Omar Meheisha occupied Tripoli barracks and Jalloud seized the city's anti-aircraft batteries. Khweldi Hameidi was sent to arrest crown prince Sayyid Hasan ar-Rida al-Mahdi as-Sanussi, and force him to relinquish his claim to the throne. They met no serious resistance, and wielded little violence against the monarchists. The Libya Arabic Republic was formed.

A severely autocratic and often erratic rule followed for about four decades and two incidents alarmed the UK government, namely, the murder of a police officer Yvonne Fletcher on 17th April 1984 and, later, the horrific destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 above Lockerbie on 21st December 1988. How many more disasters were caused by this autocratic ruler will never be fully known but a Libyan nation which showed such promise after it was formed in the 1950's was in isolation from the rest of the world.

Into the new millennium, Gaddafi's stance appeared to be softening, after all, he was meeting the right people - Tony Blair.

Tony Blair's six secret visits to Col Gaddafi

Tony Blair's close relationship to Colonel Muammar Gaddafi has come under fresh scrutiny after it emerged he had six private meetings with the dictator in the three years after he left Downing Street.



Image 1 of 2

Tony Blair at a meeting with Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi at his desert base in 2007

But by this time the Arab Spring had taken hold. All Arab nations felt that if Saddam Hussain in Iraq could be toppled (Iraq war started 21 March 2003) than any autocratic leader could be ousted. And so it was that revolutionary forces defeated the regime in Libya and Gaddafi was killed on 20th

October 2011. It goes without saying that British and French Aircraft were vital for this defeat in that they disabled the Libyan airforce and carried out strategic bombing on key targets.

Arab Spring

After more than four decades in power, the downfall of tyrant Gaddafi's happened in less than a year. Saddam Hussain had already gone in 2003 and, in January 2011, the Tunisian revolutionary forces removed their dictator, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and so set off the “Arab Spring”. The next month, Egyptian ruler Hosni Mubarak was forced out, providing a morale boost to protesters in several Arab capitals.

Post Gaddafi, Libya has continued to be embroiled in violence. With state authority eventually being held by the General National Congress, various militia groups have vied for power. Dozens of political figures and activists in Benghazi have been killed, with many having to leave the area. The country has also seen a succession of interim prime ministers.

One must ask “has oil been a blessing or a curse for Libya?”

And what of the Arab Spring ? A press cutting will help you to decide:

On August 21, 2013, the international community awoke to a scene of absolute terror. Broadcasted on television screens around the world were pictures and videos of men, women, and even small babies sprawled on the floor, gasping for breath. Many were already dead from exposure to the sarin gas that was delivered from the Syrian army’s surface-to-surface missiles. The attack in the rebel-held suburbs of Damascus, which left an estimated 1,400 people dead according to U.S. intelligence community assessments, was the most gruesome chemical weapons strike since former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein gassed Kurdish civilians in the town of Halabja in 1988. Clearly, the president of Syria, Bashar al-Assad is not about to be toppled so the Arab Spring is now just a memory.

