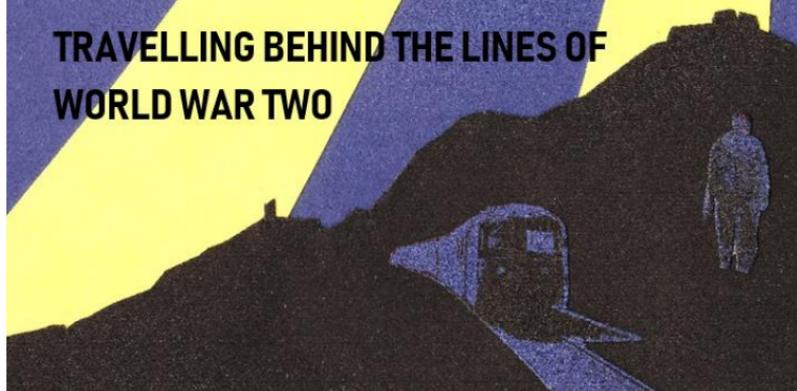


IAN M PACKHAM

*Into
adventure
and
sunshine*

**TRAVELLING BEHIND THE LINES OF
WORLD WAR TWO**



1

It is a grey, overcast morning, and the trains are running late. Four years ago I left Africa with the words ‘what now? What’s next?’ running through my head as a thirteen-month-long adventure on the continent came to an end without any real thought to my future. As much to my own surprise as anyone else’s, I find myself heading back among the souks and whitewashed medinas of the north, where the waters of the Mediterranean lap almost silently against the straight, cove-less beaches of its southern shores under the gentle and near-constant rumble of motor traffic in the warm autumn air.

As I learnt to my enormous regret that first time around, to enter Algeria, Africa’s largest nation state, visitors must either have an extraordinary handle on paperwork and a ready supply of cash, or one of the largest invasion fleets ever assembled. Though I failed in my attempts at entry the last time around, this time I manage to succeed in entering the country, using the first of these methods. When my great uncle reached the North African coast in November 1942 under very different circumstances, he was following in the wake of the second. A full 18 months before the D-Day landings on Normandy’s beaches, British and American troops together took part in an earlier all-or-nothing yet largely forgotten invasion of occupied French soil.

Albert Henry Cooke grew up during changing times, and in a different era; one when boys were still regularly christened Albert and known to all as Bert. It was just [a month after the first publication of the words of *Howards End*, and] nine years after the death of Queen Victoria. The British Empire was approaching its zenith, with sway over a quarter of the world’s population and a quarter of its landmasses coloured pink. Yet it was a time when historic allegiances were shifting too. The ink on the signatures which brought about the *entente cordiale*,

ending – officially at least – almost a thousand years of belligerence between England and France, was barely dry. Motor vehicles of any sort were still a rarity on the country’s unmetalled roads, while the only faces Bert saw outside of a book or newspaper were those of white native Englishmen not unlike himself. The first commercial airline flight wouldn’t occur for another four years, while the idea of television as we know it wasn’t even a pipe-dream. Born in 1910 amid the leafy hills of Surrey during the genteel years of the Edwardian period, had it not been to do his duty for the country he would probably never have left them.

His early childhood was overshadowed by the First World War, then known as ‘the war to end all wars’, in much the same way his prime years were to be eclipsed by the world’s second global conflict. Too young to truly understand either the significance or horror of the Great War, had he any perception of the goings on in Belgium and France it was with the glee children take from playing with lead soldiers, wiping out whole regiments with the sweep of a hand, and through the upswell of pride that tends to develop during times of national crisis.

Just as Bert was reaching adulthood, four years after he finished secondary school and undertook an apprenticeship in carpentry, the world shook again, this time as the Great Depression took hold. Childhood nonchalance turned into the anxiety of majority as he sought to make his own way in the world. Careful with money and savings though they were, no one in Bert’s family could have held out for long without a regular source of income.

The world’s major economies recovered to endure one further shock: the rise of European fascism in general, and the militaristic tendencies of the growing Nazi empire overseen by Hitler, a man who had come to power in the aftermath of the First World War and the economic tragedies that followed, in particular. No one wanted a second German war. Very few

even predicted its occurrence until it was too late. When the worse happened, nothing would be the same for Bert again. Neville Chamberlain's words were significant. "I have to tell you now" the Prime Minister said, "this country is at war with Germany. I know that you will all play your part with calmness and courage". It was followed by a recording of the national anthem and a long peel of church bells, a sound not to be heard again until the successful emergency evacuation of British troops from the beaches of Dunkirk seven months later.

Cutting across the south of Spain by air, Africa looks almost fantastical, like it is in reality a scale model created for a Hollywood blockbuster set on Mars. Even from 30,000 feet it stretches on almost indefinitely, all the way to Cape Agulhas at the southern tip of the continent 8,000 miles away, apparently flat and barren. As we approach the largest country in Africa it opens up before me, itself impossibly large. The sea is the colour and consistency of Prussian blue enamel, the air hazy. The line traced by the coast sets an almost ruler-straight contrast against the Mediterranean's bright waters, the land clearly dry while speckled with the dark green pointillist marks of drought-tolerating temperate shrubs sitting out the harsh summer conditions until the rain of winter comes. The bed of a dried-up lake becomes a giant sandpit. Whole towns lie spread-eagled smaller than a fingernail, looking lost and unproductive against the khaki palette of the surrounding terrain. And when Algiers finally comes into view, I'm struck most of all by its ordinariness, that despite its history and the reasons for travelling here it is just another jumbled and difficult-to-decipher capital city reached by just another uninspiring airport; already the third of my journey.

Seats of government give little away about the true nature of a country, but a lot about the greediness of its taxi drivers. Its people tend to be busy, uninteresting and uninterested, too used to confused travellers to feel they should help. Traffic is

routinely chaotic, and public transport baffling to anyone who isn't an initiate.

Despite the ease of my arrival and the modern ability to be anywhere on earth in 24 hours I hate air travel. It's not a fear but a lack of enthusiasm for hours spent *waiting*: for security, boarding, arrival, immigration, baggage and customs. There is more waiting as I try to convince the only *bureau de change* to open for me so I don't risk being stuck here eternally, waiting. The journey sees me surrounded by other travellers, bored, excited, some portraying their nervousness in endless chatter. I peruse the bookshops to break up the ceaseless waits ('They've got *Game of Thrones*', 'What? In a book?'), and sit as in a doctor's surgery as the minutes slowly tick by, trying to look worldly-wise rather than anxious, an emotion that doesn't come from waiting for a train. All the fears I had lost after 13 months of hard travel in Africa have come back to me in the intervening years. I have fallen back into the trap of believing my worst fears, and what I hear from the media.

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