



THE WAR GRAVES PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECT



In Association
with the CWGC



Diary of a Project Volunteer in Libya and Egypt

January / February 2010 – by David Milborrow

Monday 18th January 2010

The most bizarre experience of the day was probably lamb cutlet and scrambled eggs at 11 am, courtesy of BA. I flew from a chilly, fog-bound London to a warm, sunny, noisy Tripoli. Flying in low, heading directly south approaching the long Mediterranean shore with the city spread out as far as one could see, one might have been an allied pilot in 1943, but it was better not to go there!

Tripoli Airport just like Heathrow's Terminal 5 – for each person on duty at a desk there were three others standing chatting or looking important. Pushing, shoving – what's a queue? – attempting to get my paper visa translated into full passport approval took what seemed like hours; yet the officials were kind and considerate – as I headed in the wrong direction one policeman caught up with me and patiently headed me off in the right direction. Smiles abounded.

Never, ever, attempt to drive here. Imagine dodgems in real life, but far worse. In Tripoli, traffic police in groups are on every street corner; I'm told this keeps the speeds down. But there are no rules to be obeyed; no-one gives way to anyone, until they are inches away from colliding. According to my guide, 'The hero is the one who does not mind smashing his car.'

The architecture is a mixture; early twentieth century Mediterranean (courtesy of the Italians here from 1911 to 1943), interspersed with splendid modern buildings of a more Middle Eastern style. The Colonel appears in varying guises on giant hoardings on almost every main street.

The food is wonderful; my order for 'chicken' (better safe than sorry) resulted in a spicy chickpea soup, bowl of rice, what seemed like an entire mini chicken, all freshly cooked, with chips – enough for two people at least, and all for about £4. Soup and rice gratis.

Apparently 50's style décor is all the rage here – when did you last have a hotel room with a grandfather clock? It was thankfully not functioning. But with a fully functioning bathroom and a water cooler en suite, there was little with which to find fault.



Tuesday 19th January

After room-service breakfast – at least the rolls were fresh, off to the two Tripoli cemeteries, which occupy the same site. For many volunteers this would have been very familiar, but despite having visited well over 2,000 churchyards and cemeteries in the UK and N Europe, stepping into a green enclosure with palm trees was moving in a fresh way. I was on another continent, but still our countrymen died here too. And many other countries were represented here – the Commonwealth, France, Greece, even the Sudan. High cloud and very little sun presented near-perfect conditions for photography. Time for renaming will tell whether all the stones, apart from the sites clearly showing where stones were missing for repair, were photographed. The unique (for me) grave was that of Captain Bayliss, War Correspondent with Paramount News.

Unusually (in my experience) all the graves in Tripoli Military Cemetery, some 239 identified casualties, represent post WW2 deaths, many being civilians.

A visit to the adjoining Italian Cemetery was the unexpected bonus. It had held the graves of 28,000 Italian soldiers from WW2 until Libya had requested their repatriation in 1970.



Awaiting custom clearance

The cemetery, surrounded by a civilian cemetery with several thousand graves, was then left abandoned until a few years ago; all the civilian remains were then exhumed, and either buried in a vast crypt or repatriated by family request. A number of the latter remain in their wooden crates awaiting official clearance!

I was shown the gravestone for Italo Balbo, the former 'air ace' and Governor General of Libya killed in 1940. Green tea and biscuits followed with the caretaker and his wife, at which much heated discussion took place about how the Libyan cemeteries (British and Italian) were amongst the few where the land remained owned by Libya, and so the national flag of the cemetery could not be raised. A tour of the Medina (old town and market) ended the day's work (!).

Wednesday 20th January

My day off. The problem with my visit to Leptis Magna today was that I soon ran out of superlatives. Magnificent, wonderful, amazing, enormous, spectacular, etc etc. Leptis is a Roman city on the shores of the Mediterranean, some 130 kms east of Tripoli. It must be (one of) the largest Roman cities still existing; it was buried for centuries in the sand, and even now less than 50% has been excavated. Despite much having been sold on, or dumped as massive stone blocks by the water's edge to clear the site, there is a massive city which needs at least a two day visit.

Not one forum but two, plus markets, churches, temples, hot and cold baths – several of each, moles each side of the Roman harbour, a Phoenician harbour, amphitheatre (coliseum), hippodrome (race track), and so on.

A return to Tripoli preceded an evening flight to Benghazi, for the next stage of my journey. As we were boarding the aircraft, half way up the steps I noticed the pilot hanging out of his window shouting at someone behind me in the queue. I gathered a rough translation was 'Put that cigarette out before you get on my plane!'



Thursday 21st January



An early start took us to the two cemeteries in Benghazi. Commission headstones and palm trees; I was forcibly struck by the privilege which was mine of representing the Project in such a unique place. ('Get the best images I possibly can.') Like Tripoli, the War Cemetery contained the (1,200) WW2 graves, and the British Military the post WW2 – both military and civilian, all of whom are on the Commission listings, including maybe 40 from a plane crash in 1959. After the recent rains the sand in the War Cemetery had turned to mud. Part way through our visit, the cemetery keeper, from French Morocco, provided us with the best coffee on the trip so far.

After a slight falling out with a traffic policeman over an illegal U-turn (he was eventually forced to smile and wave us on), we left for Cyrene. Lunch en route was taken at a wayside café; cooking was over open fires, and tea served free by the tiny glass from a 50 litre kettle.

The afternoon found us escaping to become tourists once again; Cyrene was a Greek city with 80k inhabitants, and these ruins, up to 2,500 years old, were another 'must see', covering many, many acres although much less than half have been exposed so far. Another spectacular series of buildings, forums etc, and my guide was at pains to show me the attached necropolis, 'the largest in the world', with over 1,200 tombs. Despite this diversion, we were still half a day ahead of schedule, giving us more time in our next stop Tobruk.

Friday 22nd January

Winds of 30kph, gusting stronger, blowing sand into every opening and every joint of the camera and lens. So began the visit to Knightsbridge War Cemetery, near Tobruk.

The day had begun with a spectacular 150 mile drive along unspoilt Mediterranean coastline, white breakers from a deep blue sea, miles and miles without the familiar coastline development. A visit to the market – piled higher than high with all sorts of fruit and vegetables, all produced locally – yielded a plenteous stock of oranges and dates, plus lunch. Then across unbroken semi-desert, to arrive at Knightsbridge, named after one of the defensive 'boxes' with which the Allies had surrounded Tobruk.

As 50% of the 2,600 stones were east-facing, it seemed wise to take these first, so as to minimise shooting into the sun. But that meant facing directly into the wind. Within half an hour my mouth was crunchy, my eyes were smarting, and the camera was covered in dusty sand. Somehow it didn't get any worse, and I had to accept that I wasn't going to be able to see what I was doing. Centre stone, shoot; step to side, centre stone, shoot. And so on. A number of stones had lost their faces partially or entirely; if I understood the keeper correctly, this was the effect of the sun on the stones, and over 400 had been replaced last year alone.



Towards the end of my visit the dust clouds lessened, but the sun retreated and it was cold in the strong wind. The cemetery keeper kindly came to find me after 3 hours or so, and, once I was finished, kindly invited me into his home for tea and cake. Dust dropped off my every surface, and it was clear the damage was done to the camera and particularly the lens – the zoom now has a distinctive grating sound!

My driver eventually arrived and we drove to our hotel; we shared a 5 room 'suite' – no lift, no wifi, no mobile signal, cistern not filling for the toilet, no head on the shower, heating / aircon non-functional and, of course, all distinctly grubby. But the local Libyan restaurant charged just £2.25 for all the dinner I could eat and all the green tea (I'm a rapid convert) I could drink – this is Libya.

Saturday 23rd January

After bidding adieu to our hotel's night-watchman, our day in Tobruk started at Tobruk War Cemetery – some 2,300 identified casualties. After completing the east-facing stones, we adjourned via coffee to the little French cemetery (200 graves and several artillery pieces) and then a great mock castle on the highest point overlooking Tobruk harbour – the burial place of some 6,000 Germans, listed on 15 high panels. The views from the top over the town and harbour were spectacular. Lunch preceded a return to the War Cemetery, now that the sun had moved round.

By mid afternoon the last stones had been photographed, and a quiet moment's reflection for the lives that had been lost and the chaos which would have surrounded us 67 or 68 years before.

Chasing internet access was followed by a celebratory fish meal – one selected the object of one's repast from the fishmongers, and his brother next door grilled it. Hopefully the Project has another country 99.5% (allowing for the stones under repair) completed, with the bonus of additional French and German names.



Our night watchman

Sunday 24th January



Desert Rat Bunker?

After a breakfast which my guide, a former hotel inspector, rated as poor as he had ever had, we revisited Knightsbridge to retake two sections which had suffered from face-on sunlight on Friday. Then the WW2 tourist spots – Rommel's HQ, the Lady-Be-Good plane wreckage, the Fig Tree Hospital, and some excellent Australian (?) trenches/caves on the hilltop above.

We drove towards the border, arriving late lunchtime at the last town, Umm Saad. It felt like the American Wild West, Egyptian trucks careering along the narrow road on which stood our 'hotel'. Our previous lodgings had been steadily deteriorating, presumably in preparation for this bleak and broken-down place. The staff could not have been more friendly, but....Even to ask for internet access would have been mockery. Lunch was a sandwich in the sunshine, and the hotel offered to cook us a special evening meal for £5.

Monday 25th January

We had no cause to complain about breakfast – there was none! We conclude that this is why there were Mars bars and a carton of orange juice on our bedside tables. Down the road we stand in the dust at the side of the highway for coffee and cheese toasties from a wayside café.

We are just 5 minutes from the border, and the part of the trip that no one had been able to explain fully – how one can go on foot from Libya to Egypt. My guide takes me through the police check, and persuades Libyan Customs to allow him to drive me through ‘no man’s land’. It’s then a ten minute hike to passport control – they need my pen to complete their forms, and where my Egyptian guide is supposed to be but is not, through the police check and then I have another ten minute hike (fully laden with luggage, of course) to the security gate, where my driver is supposed to be, but is not. There is much discussion and persuasion that I should take one of the taxis to Sallum, since this is my first destination. (Bear in mind that no one has more than a few words of English, certainly not enough to communicate properly. My 3 words of Arabic are even less adequate.) I am told I must not sit on the bench outside – only on the kerb....



Sallum Bay

My mistake is in telling them I want my ‘car’, rather than I am expecting ‘my driver.’ Finally one of the security force, now understanding that I have contact phone numbers, uses his mobile to call my guide. Having been told to meet me at 10am rather than 9, he is just 10 minutes away. But the border is crossed, and within 10 minutes we are at Halfaya Sollum War Cemetery, a pretty place by the sea just yards from a delightful bay.

The cemetery keeper is expecting me, and has given up his public holiday for me. We share tea, and I take my pictures. Sadly, my lens succumbs to the ravages of Friday’s sandstorm, and I have to revert to one more basic. But by 2pm we have another 1,800 images in the bag. A four hour drive, ‘punctuated’ only by a dusk-time puncture, takes us the 400 km to Alamein, and my three day stay at this renowned spot.

Tuesday 26th January

By 8am I had begun El Alamein War Cemetery; for no explicable reason, it’s somewhere I’d long dreamt of visiting, never expecting to. Now here I was, facing over 6,500 graves and a Memorial with 300 panels. But, hey, the sun wasn’t shining and the cloud was high – just perfect weather for the job in hand, and the task was only the same as 10 cemeteries of 650 graves. Just pick a section and get going.

But sometimes it’s easier to be flippant than to acknowledge the tragedy that a place like this recalls – more than 15,000 dead represented here alone, to achieve the allied victory in North Africa. The scale here becomes apparent when one tries to take some panoramic views – one cannot, even with viewing points structured over the Memorial and around the magnificently raised Cross of Sacrifice.

With a brief lunch break, by 4pm there were 4,200 graves completed, plus the Alamein Cremation Memorial; enough for one day. Then back to my strange hotel – a North African imitation of a European 5* hotel which fails at every turn; nothing open (‘low season’), coffee so weak it struggles to leave the cup, hot water tepid, salt in the pepper pot and vice versa, bedroom the size of a school classroom – why?.

Wednesday 27th January

Yesterday started with a buffet breakfast spread to feed 500, whereas the hotel currently has just 11 guests. One attempted to do it justice. Today breakfast is to order only - management must have finally realised that the buffet may not be economic.

Then it’s back to the War Cemetery for another 2,000 images; today’s sun, such a powerful contrast to yesterday’s cloud, negates further progress, as the graves face north.



We venture to the German cemetery – another Gothic castle, with 21 wall plaques containing the names of the 4,000 buried beneath. The plaques were duly photographed, in the confidence that Steve will find someone to rename them.

As a special favour ('Be quiet, so my father does not hear'), I am taken up a rickety ladder and through a trap door onto the roof! Wonderful view, but no handrail or other protection from a wicked drop. I stay away from the edge, and hang onto the keeper. He offers me a trip into the battlefield – 'Hospital in good condition and many vehicles', which I refuse with some reluctance.



View from the German 'Keep'

A room of wall displays contains details I had not realised – since the fall of communism, the German CWGC equivalent, the Volksbund Deutscher Kriegsgraberfursorge (VDK), has been active in the former Eastern bloc. Some 3 million German soldiers died there, and so far they have recovered and reburied some 350,000, in many new cemeteries.

Next the Italian Memorial. Here some 4,000 remains lie in boxes in walls like catacombs; each one is individually named – too much! I photograph the plaques listing the missing, and leave the task of taking the individual graves to a later visitor.

Then it's back to the War Cemetery which also contains the Alamein Memorial – nearly 12 thousand names of the missing from North Africa and Middle Eastern fields of conflict. This is a retake, so with much exchanging of camera lenses, and the camera set, as requested by Derek, at maximum resolution, this is completed by some 1,100 images in a couple of hours – time for a little African sunshine at the hotel.

Thursday 28th January

A rest day today – almost. First the last 400 or so graves at the War Cemetery, followed by a visit to the War Museum – the display of equipment outside better than the displays inside. As I was followed around by three attendants, I decided I must be looking more suspicious than normal, so attended the local barber's shop. An hour's 'treatment' cost under £2, and was worth much more. A peek at the old El Alamein train station building ended a short day; the rest was dedicated to catching up with emails.

Friday 29th January

I've rattled around in a 300-room hotel with just 11 occupants for long enough. The staff number dozens; the shopping mall claims to have 180 shops; if I was here much longer I'd resort to counting them. Two banks and two restaurants are the only businesses open – 'low season'.

We drive to Cairo along the new desert toll road (about 60p), diverting to pass the pyramids in a haze of exhaust fumes – no desire to stop. Dug around in the city to find the little Indian Memorials at Abbasiya which Steve wisely did not attempt to locate on his visit – without the help of a knowledgeable local we'd still be there. Then to the hotel and some spare moments to begin the renaming process.



Museum Display

Saturday 30th January

I am grateful to leave Cairo – no reason ever to return apart from flight home. Two hours to Port Said – poor and dusty. The dead camel in a gutter was maybe the most memorable sight, closely followed by the financial institution bearing the name 'NGB Bank'; says it all really.

We received a warm welcome from the staff at the War Memorial Cemetery; it was, of course, beautiful, and the number of entries in the Visitors' Book surprisingly plentiful given the relatively remote situation of the town. The adjoining British Protestant Cemetery was a dust-bowl looking neglected, and the Catholic Cemetery where I found a further 100 WW1 French graves was equally sad; the surrounding tombs were all collapsing.

Without the CWGC coming to assist us in the vast and rambling Muhammadan Civil Cemetery we would even now be there searching for the tiny plot containing the graves of the 33 Indians buried there.

That's today's 3 cemeteries visited (1,000 graves), so adjourn to hotel for more renaming. The choice for the evening's meal, between Pizza Hut and 'Grezy (or could be Crezy) Chef', was not difficult. Should I worry more about competency of local translators or marketing advice?



Sunday 31st January

Awake to find a floating city has docked outside the hotel – this was the mouth of the Suez canal. If M. Ferdinand de Lesseps ever stood on top of **the plinth bearing his name** (outside my window, by the water's edge, with much graffiti), he has long since departed. But some sort of sympathy or similar for the European remains; everyone I have met or whom we asked for help has been so polite, friendly and helpful; I have more than lost count of the number of 'welcomes' I have received. An early start leaves behind a roomful of insect life' last night's invasion of ants was later joined by mosquitoes imitating Stukas; this morning found a cockroach in the bath.

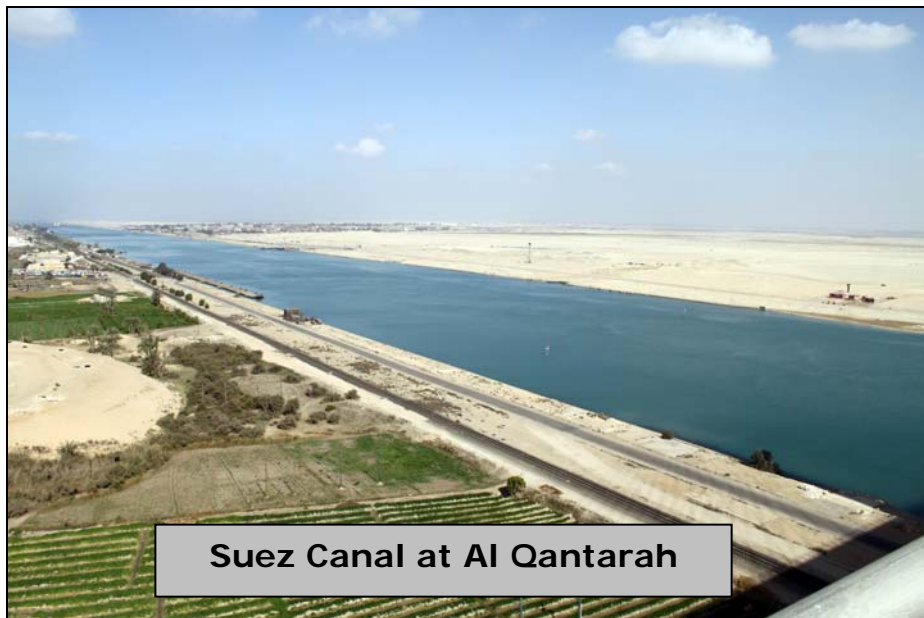
First stop – Kantara War Memorial Cemetery; the town is split in two by the Canal, and as the cemetery is in the eastern half we must cross the canal. We use the new Mubarak Bridge, which requires cutting much red tape as a Westerner is effectively entering the politically sensitive area of Sinai. The bridge is magnificent – imagine a new Severn Crossing in the desert!

The Cemetery is seemingly on the edge of the desert itself; once again we get a warm welcome and an invite to tea. It's a hot sunny day, with 2,000 graves, so liquid is welcome. Al Qantarah is a remote stop – it appears that less than 20 groups signed the Visitors' Book in 2009. We travel on to Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery – just 1,000 graves here, many from between the war years, and unexpected grass rather than sand. Really beautiful, and interesting to meet CWGC staff from Cairo HQ – Egypt's head gardener and Terry, Africa's horticulturalist.

Then to hotel – have I died and gone to heaven? It's in a lush green enclave on the edge of one of the lakes which, when joined together, form the Canal. Sandy beaches, tranquil blue water, the hotel is to a standard unaffordable at home. Wonderful!

Monday 1st February

A busy day and a 'mixed bag.' First to Tel El Kabir; a grassy cemetery (rather than sand) as all 3 were today. Less than 700 graves per my sheets, but a number in the centre of the cemetery from the 1880's. Apparently there were 2 significant events nearby here – the battles of Kassassin and Tel El Kabir, the latter being the decisive victory which began the British Occupation of Egypt which lasted until 1954.



Suez Canal at Al Qantarah

There are a number of soldiers buried from these battles, and also 2 monuments listing those who died in the same period from cholera. Sadly more from cholera than both battles. If all the visitors to Tel El Kabir have signed the Visitors' Book, only some half a dozen groups have been here in the last 3 years.

Then to Moascar, which had always promised to be interesting. The cemetery is on the middle of an Egyptian Army base, and consent had to be obtained from the Egyptian Ministry of Defence via the Military Attaché at The British Embassy in Cairo. With no piece of paper to wave – 'just take your passport' – I was sceptical of success. But it worked! The guard called for his officer, who rolled up in a jeep and said 'follow me'.

As I slipped into the cemetery he asked how long I would be; when I said 'two hours' – exaggerating by a half hour for safety's sake – a tirade in Arabic began with my driver – outside the cemetery gate. Once I realised that this man could not, or would not, enter the cemetery I realised my pictures were in the bag; he couldn't get in, I wouldn't come out before I'd finished. As it happened, interrogating my driver afterwards I think I had exaggerated the situation a bit – but Steve was going to get my images!!



From previous battles

The graves covered the period until 1956 – a significant date for the British in Egypt. Curiously there were Canadian graves until 1958 – I wondered why. It was 1,700 graves so far today.

Our final stop was Fayid – turn left off the main road at the fish market – recognised by the statue of 2 large fish! 1,800 graves here, again dating until the end of the British Army's stay in 1956; also a large number of troops from the Belgian Congo, and of WW2 Germans.

Third cemetery - third cup of tea; most welcome. At 2.30pm the 5 gardeners (one was on holiday) went home and I was left alone in the peace of this remote spot. At least I was until I noticed a very elderly Arab gentleman lurking some distance behind me. As I moved from Plot to Plot, so he changed his location; constantly watching, always at a distance. When I finally finished and left, he was joined by a boy who proceeded to action the combination for the padlock on the gate. Things are never quite what they seem here; I had previously watched a couple walk along the footpath just outside the cemetery fence; from a distance I realised that they had something on a lead; I had assumed it was a dog, until I got closer and they moved from behind the shrubbery; no, it wasn't a dog they were taking for a walk, but their cow, which they were allowing to graze at will. Back to the hotel; nearly 4,000 images to download, sort and backup.

Tuesday 2nd February

Check out of hotel and drive to Suez, where we visit the last 2 cemeteries of the trip. The CWGC staff seem to be renewing the drains at the War Memorial Cemetery – from the smell !



Welcoming party at Fayid

As it's in an urban area it's not the peaceful spot one has come to expect, but it's beautifully kept, of course, though seldom visited if the Visitors' Book is complete. The little African and Indian Army War cemetery is our final one, and then it's back to Cairo for flight home tomorrow. The first half of the journey, with signs off right for Sinai, is through a barren moonscape of sandy dirt, broken by hills, as far as the eye can see. Presumably this is what the whole Sinai Desert is like – bleak, barren, empty, hot and dusty. It's a far cry from our green and pleasant land but part of an amazing and, for me, unique experience. I'm grateful to the project, and especially to Steve, for this opportunity, and all the help and support in it's planning and execution.