

Palestine – Views from another Pair of Eyes

I was very interested to read the series of articles in *'Faith Matters'* about Palestine, as I had some experience of that country myself in the mid-1940s.

I was put on a draft for the Middle East in the autumn of 1944, after a long period of training for technical work with the Royal Corps of Signals. Towards the end of September of that year we sailed from Liverpool on the troopship *'Duchess of Bedford'*. This was a former Canadian Pacific liner which had been taken over by the government. It was known to the troops as *'The Drunken Duchess'*, and it was not long before I discovered why it had acquired this nickname! As we entered the Bay of Biscay we met some heavy weather, as one might expect there. Just as I was about to descend a stairway to a lower deck, it came up to meet me! For the next few days, most of the troops aboard were rather inactive! Fortunately things settled down after we passed Gibraltar and entered the Mediterranean Sea.

The voyage lasted a fortnight - no quick air travel then - and as we approached Alexandria, where we were to dock, we went up on deck to watch. After ten minutes we had to go below again - the sun was too hot for us! After a few days in Egypt we began to get used to the heat, and had no more bother. It was the same with the brightness: I had to wear sunglasses, but as in those days there were no plastic lenses, they were made of glass, and after breaking several pairs I managed to do without them.

We spent a few nights in a Transit Camp near Cairo, then boarded a train going north and after crossing the Sinai Desert we entered Palestine. Travelling on up the country, we came to Haifa in the north where we spent another few days in a Transit Camp. This gave me my first opportunity to see something of Palestine. We explored Haifa, both the older port, and the newer Jewish area on Mount Carmel. By a strange coincidence, in October sixty-two years later almost to the day, I had lunch in the Californian town of Carmel.

In Haifa I noticed a display of notices and posters written in Hebrew, and my impression was that they were upside down. I stooped right down

(something I could do in those days!), looked up at them from underneath, and they still seemed to be upside down! Further on we saw another notice announcing, in English, a performance that evening by the Israel National Opera Company of the operetta *'Lilac Time'*, which was written using the music of Schubert. Some of us went along, and thoroughly enjoyed it, although it was sung in Hebrew, but as it started so late in the evening we had to leave after the first act.

While in Haifa I took the opportunity to visit Nazareth. I had to go by local bus, and my memory tells me I had to change buses halfway. In Nazareth, quite a modern town, there was nothing to link it with Bible days, but the old synagogue did have something of a suggestion of those times, and I could quite imagine it was in just such a building that Jesus was invited to read from the Book of Isaiah, as recorded in St. Luke's gospel Chapter 4, verses 16-30.

After a few days in Haifa, we moved on to Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, and I was stationed in that area for the next eighteen months. This included the end of the war in Europe, VE Day, in May 1945. All the army units stationed there held a mock parade more on the lines of a carnival, with decorated army vehicles depicting the defeat of Hitler. A day or two later, some incident occurred in that volatile country, and as we were passing through the town centre, Martyr's Square, or Place des Canons, shots were fired. I have never seen a crowd disperse and disappear so quickly, though no doubt the locals had had lots of practice! The United States and Britain each sent a warship to Beirut, and all of our army vehicles had to display a Union Flag to ensure our immunity from the local fighting. After a few days an agreement was reached, and things settled down again. For a few weeks I was on detachment to Ninth Army headquarters, in a town called Aley, in the hills above Beirut, where they had taken over the former Grand Hotel. I was there when Japan surrendered, and the hotel was decorated with flags and bunting. Aley was on the railway from Beirut to Damascus, and such were the gradients that it took the train two hours for the ten miles or so!

Whilst in Beirut, I paid some visits to Christian workers in nearby towns and villages in the hills. On one of these trips, I went up in the local bus, and as it was full, I had to share the back seat with a sheep! Sometimes these local buses would carry a piece of furniture tied to the roof to oblige one of the passengers.

It was not unusual in Beirut to see a tramcar go by with a row of chickens perched on the rear dashboard. Passengers would hang on to the outside of the tram, jump off when the conductor came along and run alongside, then climb on again after he had passed along the car. The tram drivers seemed to think that in order to make the car go, they had to sound the foot-operated gong, so they went trundling along with the driver stamping away on the pedal. All drivers seemed to be called '*Ahmed*', and after each stop the conductor would call out, '*Marchez, Ahmed*' and the driver would set off, with the inevitable gong sounding loudly. Lebanon and Syria had been French mandates between the wars, hence the use of the French language.

In the spring of 1946, I was posted to join the staff of the Middle East School of Signals near Cairo, to help train the young soldiers coming out from England, by now National Service conscripts. As soon as I arrived there, before taking up any duties, I was given a month's leave in England, so it was not until June 1946 that I began my work there. I was not to stay in Egypt for long, as the political situation required the withdrawal of all British troops from Egypt except for the Canal Zone. We moved before we needed to, but as our Colonel told us, by going soon he had the choice of a new location, whereas if he waited, he would have had to take whichever camp was allocated to us.

So in October 1946 I once again entered Palestine from Egypt, only this time it was by road. I was part of the advance party, and we took some of our equipment on trucks over the Sinai Desert. Our new location was in a camp near Gaza, where several Army Schools were already established. Gaza, so often in the news nowadays, was not the densely populated town seen on our television screens, but a small, sleepy place centred round a long main street. There was a Church Missionary Society hospital, and I came to know the doctor in

charge.

By this time the Jewish terrorists were active, calling for an independent Jewish state. The King David Hotel in Jerusalem had been blown up just a few months before we moved to Gaza. Illegal immigrants - there's nothing new! - were attempting to land on the coast. Orders came that we were to mount a 24 hour picket to guard our part of the camp, and guess who was '*selected*' to take charge of it? We were all pleased when the order came to stand down after only a week or so.

In December 1946 we arranged to take a party of our students up to Jerusalem for the weekend. On the Saturday evening, after we had arrived, we went for a meal, and half way through we heard guns firing outside in the street. We had to stay inside until things were quiet again, by which hour there was no time to do any sight-seeing. That left us only part of Sunday to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Via Dolorosa, and to go on to Bethlehem to see the Church of the Nativity. Though interesting, none of these places conveyed much of the true atmosphere of the events which took place there in Bible times. It was only on the Saturday night, walking back in the dark after the shooting had stopped, that I could sense a '*something*' in the air, hard to describe, but giving the Impression that Jerusalem was, in some indefinable way, a '*special*' place. The only other occasion when I have had a similar impression was in Canterbury Cathedral.

When I think of the sophisticated equipment used by the army of today, I feel that what we used sixty years ago was really primitive, but at that time it was the latest in technology. One piece of apparatus we had gave three extra telephone circuits in addition to the normal telephone line, hence it was called a '*1+3*'. When you think what can be done now with tiny microchips, memory cards, and using fibre optic cables, the *1+3* consisted of three large bays reaching from floor to ceiling in order to accommodate the necessary circuits. The new '*1+4*' which replaced it was smaller, only two shoulder-height bays. Both instruments were included in my department's syllabus, but when the *1+3* became redundant it had to be returned to the army stores in Allenby

Barracks in Jerusalem. It was loaded on a truck, and with a party of students to act as guards, all of us armed with sten guns, we set off. Not far along the road we were stopped by an army patrol. We were told that some illegal immigrants were thought to have come ashore nearby, and we had to keep our eyes open for anything suspicious, but we saw nothing of them. In several places along the road bridges over almost dried up rivers had been blown up, and we had to descend to the bottom, drive across, and back up to the road on the other side.

At Allenby Barracks, I went to the stores and handed over the equipment to the Lieutenant Quartermaster in charge, obtaining the all important signature from him so removing it from my responsibility. Then I said, *"Can you tell me the way to the armoury, so that I can leave this gun while I go for a meal?"* Weapons were not allowed to be taken in to meals back at the School of Signals. He just laughed and replied, *'You're in Jerusalem now; you take it in with you.'* So I did!

My stint at the School of Signals came to an end in June 1947, and I returned to England. Some ten weeks of demobilisation leave took me to the date in September when I exchanged army life for an academic one by entering college to study for the teaching profession.

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