

# “Professional Expansion” ...Early On

By John Halsall, O.L.S.

It was my first interview for an overseas posting. The offer was something along the lines of getting dropped out of a bush plane somewhere in northern Nigeria, procuring a local crew, and setting out ground targets for aerial photogrammetry while ‘living in the bush’. Throughout this somewhat unnerving interview, however, there was a large map of Egypt behind the interviewer with coloured thumbtacks embedded up and down the entire Egyptian Nile River.

Considerable persistence was required to divert the interview to this map...in effect, trying to reverse the interviewer and interviewee roles. With a more nautical

leaning from the beginning, whatever the Nile River could throw at one seemed a better ‘deal’ than trying to outrun green mamba snakes on a daily basis, and no water in sight! “Hah!...that’s a wild card”, he said, “huge job...probably the biggest private sector hydrographic survey of any river in the world to date...logistics will be a nightmare...we’ll never get it...now...back to Nigeria...”

In the end, the contract was awarded, persistence reigned, and commencing in 1981 for a year and a half, one of those ‘life changing experiences’ that one can only truly realize more than a few years later...and even more recently, with the discovery of some long lost, original, crusty photos.

The arrangement was 2 weeks on and 1 week off (local leave), and 1 month off ‘home’ in Canada every 6 months. However, the 2 weeks on involved at least 12 hour days rotating between running the survey launches, running the shore crews setting up Trisponder sites (yes a microwave range-range system...this is before commercial GPS was a viable option!), or running the shore crews on horizontal control (Wild T-2, Distomat, and sunshots), running levels and setting concrete benchmarks. Rest assured it was a tough 2 weeks, particularly when the ‘Westerners’ comforts’ diminished quickly to something more realistically local outside of the tourist areas of Luxor, Aswan, and Cairo. The surveys started in Lake Nasser (the huge flooded area created behind the Aswan High dam in southern Egypt and



Proud young Nubian boatman in his first boat (Lake Nasser)

ran the entire length of the Egyptian Nile to the delta into the Mediterranean. Geographically, the area that appealed the most, to the author at least, was actually Lake Nasser where the largely Nubian population had moved to higher ground on the various islands formed after the flooding. This was the first (and last) area we dared to swim. Further downriver the regular sighting of bloated animal carcasses and other flotsam, and the presence of the bilharzia parasitic disease carried by local snails, put a prompt stop to cooling in the water. It was in this area that we met (and employed) the local Nubian boatmen...superb ‘naturals’ afloat. The young boatman who paddled up in his homemade canoe a little over 1m long made of hammered out cooking oil cans, scrap wood, and a touch of asphalt to seal the joints...unforgettable, and a truly impressive example of ‘local initiative’!

Further downriver, and well away from the tourist areas, the stark reality of daily life as opposed to our much more luxurious standards in the ‘developed world’ was nothing short of incredible. It was on one of many small islands in the middle of the river, while reconnoitring for a Trisponder site, that we met a large family, the only inhabitants. As far as I could make out, the father was a very stout 70 years of age at least with the family (some 3 daughters and 6 sons at least, and more grandchildren) all living off whatever fishing could be had, a small banana plantation, some vegetable plots, and date palms. We were invited to



Shallow draft water jet propelled survey launch on the Nile

Egyptian tea (60% tea and 40% sugar) served on a spotless shiny tin tray and bowls of steamed vegetables, something like okra, and rice and fish. The grace, hospitality, and humbleness of this whole family, living in a simple but impeccably clean dried mud house on a sliver of land in the middle of the Nile, with nothing but their own very local resources, remains unforgettable as well.

On the 'flip side', the next island was from relative heaven...straight to relative hell. Uninhabited by man, but as it quickly turned out, the 'penal colony' for dogs gone too wild for the local villagers. It was an ideal Trisponder location, but it never transpired. The only ammunition available

was a spray paint can and dried 'mud balls', which barely allowed a retreat back to the boat. When asked why such an ideal spot was not used, the only reply required was "that's the first and last time I want to experience being circled by a pack of wolves!"

One more in the 'memorable islands' category, a third island was also uninhabited and another superb candidate for a Trisponder station. Appealing high berms around a flourishing

banana plantation...but guarded by a black cobra. A most respectable reptile, particularly with the headgear extended, and I could only trust the feeling was mutual as we both froze and stared at each other before slowly backing away. My Egyptian crewmates were already back in the boat! More questions followed about why such a superb vertex for range-range geometry was omitted from the 'network'. "Ask the resident black cobra."

As for aquatic wildlife, a local resident of the river was the so called Nile Monitor, a large aquatic lizard with the looks to empty out a fully populated swimming pool in nanosec-



Diligent Trisponder station 'guards' on Lake Nasser

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onds but in reality a rather shy and harmless vegetarian. Whenever larger vessels and cruise boats went by, leaving very damaging wakes astern, massive chunks of riverbank would disappear into the river (truly extreme erosion!) and the basking lizard would plunge into the river from what used to be his sunning spot. The resultant sharp ‘boom’ from thick ‘leather’ impacting the river without warning was a heartbeat adjustment to put it mildly.

Over a year into all this and disaster struck and a more extreme ‘professional expansion’ took over. Being responsible for paying the local crews Egyptian Pounds cash every 2 weeks, I came back to the riverbank base of the week, a local hotel, one evening to find my locked cash box gone from its hiding spot. It was a sizeable sum even on conversion to Canadian dollars and there were a lot of crew to pay. While emergency funds were sent to cover the immediate pay-day, the company insisted I ‘work-out’ what was stolen. Frankly, the upcoming ‘downgrade’ in the delta region to tents (and many more lovely snakes and mosquitoes etc., etc.) that an ‘extended stay’ would entail, was looking less appealing by this time anyway.

This is where one of those rare strokes of incredible luck and timing drop down from whatever spirit one never believed in before. Digesting all this on the next 10 days off in Cairo, I was introduced in an expatriates’ pub to the local manager for a small Canadian oil exploration company. They were preparing to bring a mobile drilling rig by road up from a port in Sudan to the drilling site on the Egyptian

Red Sea beach. The need was for someone to oversee the construction, entirely by locals, of a road some 6 km long to the beach from the nearest paved road. The possibility of the heavy rig, with a hefty day rate, delayed by failure of the proposed access road was a major concern. I was professionally obliged to inform the man that I wasn’t an engineer and knew virtually nothing of road construction, but dammit a financial injection was sorely needed, and somebody sympathetic in the company must have planted some sort of recommendation in the oilman’s ear. When the remuneration topic came up, I figured I’d go for double the day rate on the river, not being particularly in touch with the oil and gas industry yet. The oilman smirked...”really now, we DO need to have this road work for the rig... first time”. The daily rate was doubled again and now, I was truly quite nervous...but committed.

A crawl through some markets in Cairo turned up some fascinating little bookstalls including a few with paperback textbooks on road construction. Mostly plagiarized from British textbooks, but the prices suited my gutted budget and copyright infringement was of absolutely no concern to the crash student! After some four days of voluntary confinement to very-far-off-campus study I relocated to Hurghada on the Red Sea coast based out of one of the only two hotels there at the time (a Hilton at that!). Every morning before dawn a Bedouin driver in his Toyota 4 X 4


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February 27 to March 1, 2013  
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showed up and the days were spent tromping (and sweating) around in the desert behind a motley collection of older Russian and Japanese built bulldozers, graders, and oil spreaders, using rudimentary ‘testing techniques’ not to be found in any engineering journals. A pleasantly plump brown envelope of \$US cash landed in my hands back in

Cairo some 2 weeks later and this paid off the debt and more. Equally important, a postcard arrived from the oilman a few weeks after my return to Canada, “the rig made it all the way down ‘your’ road...first time”.

Just one story of many, but beyond entertainment value I share it with the *potential* surveyors in particular...those contemplating a surveying career or already in studies or articles, as just one example where the ‘boundaries’ of the profession can be expanded virtually to the limits of your imagination. A healthy dose of adventurism helps, persistence, and certainly the occasional boost of the aforesaid luck, but in any case the ideal time to test those ‘boundaries’ is while one is still young (in mind at least and body as well, as local environments may demand!). These may appear seemingly ‘reckless’ instincts (as you look back later) but a few rewards, aside from new markets, is that a refreshing overview of the profession and all its disciplines worldwide will develop and new ‘doors’ will open. 



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