

Lost in Egypt
December 1997

Prologue

The Washington Post *LUXOR, Egypt. November 17, 1997*

Gunmen opened fire on foreign tourists gathered at an ancient temple on the Nile River Monday, killing at least 57 foreigners and three Egyptians in the country's deadliest terrorist attack by anti-government extremists.

The gunmen launched their attack about 8:45 a.m. as tourists were arriving in buses at the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut, a stunning sandstone edifice at the base of a cliff near Luxor's world-renowned Valley of the Kings. Most of the victims were Japanese, Swiss and German tourists killed in a spray of gunfire as they stood in a courtyard in front of the massive three-level temple, authorities said.

Badawy Ahmed Salem, 33, a cab driver, said the gunmen fired at tourists on every level of the temple. "Then they started getting out knives and stabbing people," he said. "They were pulling tourists like sheep on the floor and slaughtering them. We were up to our knees in blood. Even those who did not die will be dead psychologically."

Police exchanged fire with the gunmen, killing one at the scene while the rest fled in a commandeered bus. Over the course of the next several hours, police killed five more gunmen when they sought refuge in the nearby desert, authorities said.

The attack was the most lethal incident of violence in Egypt since Islamic fundamentalists launched their campaign to topple the secular, military-backed government of President Hosni Mubarak in 1991.

- John Lancaster

December 5, 1997

I sat in the Frankfurt airport nursing a coffee and a burning hangover while the destination boards clack-clack-clacked overhead. My flight to Israel to brief my distributors on our new product direction was cancelled due to yet another Israeli border guard strike. I rubbed my eyes while I listened to the complaining tourists. Through the din I overheard a Lufthansa attendant explaining options to an English couple. "You know, you can fly to Cairo and wait there for the border to open up." She was looking at the lazy lines dropping all over northern Africa on the Lufthansa destination map. "Surely it will be only a matter of days."

I stood up and paced over stiffly to look at the map. This was the only English conversation at the counter. So it was the only option of which I was aware.

“Of course, they have had some unpleasantness recently. It really isn’t advised. But if you stay in the city - at a nice hotel – maybe you can wait the strike out there.”

This was starting to make some kind of sense. And surely, with the recent...unpleasantness, they would have increased security everywhere, I reasoned. I imposed myself between the English couple and the Lufthansa employee. “When does that flight leave,” I said.

“At 1.”

Cairo. The name alone was enough to quicken the pulse; images of Bogart and the French foreign legion, of sand dunes and pyramids, Antony and Cleopatra, Alexander and Lawrence of Arabia.

“I’ll take it,” I said.

I had only one small carry on bag. I went through security with it and was surprised to see that it was nothing like the security for Israel-bound flights. No one looked in my bag or asked me any questions. I was already very tired so sat in the departure lounge with my eyes closed. The previous night I had attended a wine tasting dinner at a friend’s house outside of Sindelfingen. He had a full cellar beneath his house and fifteen of us drank more than thirty bottles from a dozen Bordeaux vintages before I drove my borrowed Mercedes through the snow encrusted streets back to Pforzheim. I only had about four hours of sleep before I had to head out on the autobahn to drive the two hours through snow flurries to Frankfurt. I was tired. But I was still determined to get to Israel. I was in charge of Europe, the Middle East and Africa for a small software company based in North Carolina. But my only active account outside of Europe was in Israel. The fourth quarter of 1997 would be complete once I met with my distributor there and secured their first order for the new product.

I had heard about Luxor and the killings in September before that. But I was still young enough to think of myself as invincible. To me it was just another in a long line of adventures. I had been chased through the streets of Sao Paulo and robbed by the police in Moscow all in the same year. I was single and living by myself in Germany. I wasn’t just invincible. I was immortal.

When I think about it now, I see myself with the dark eyes of the people in the streets of Cairo. They must have been confused and surprised to see a blond-haired, blue-eyed American walking freely through the bazaar in Cairo only three weeks after the massacre. Some of them came up to me to apologize for “the accident”, as they called it. Others just watched as I walked by. It reminded me of the trains in Japan. I could feel the hot dark eyes on me; eyes that would avert when I looked up. There was no such thing as anonymity. But I got used to it.

When the plane landed we were dumped unceremoniously on the tarmac. It was night. And it was warm. I had slept the entire flight. I was bleary-eyed as I handed my passport

to the immigration official. He flipped through it and stopped. Then he looked at me. “Why so many times in Israel?”

“What?” I said, trying to focus on the small dark man.

“Why so many times?”

“Oh, that. I am a salesman. I cover the Middle East.” I replied

Another man joined him in the cubicle. They talked while the second man studied me for a minute, then waved me through. Another official stopped me and told me that I needed a visa stamp. “Oh shit” I thought. I hadn’t realized I needed a visa for Egypt.

It’s okay. He reassured me. Go to this man and buy your stamp. I looked to the left and saw a line of people waiting at a table where an official looking man was selling stamps. I walked up, bought my stamp for 50 Deutsche Mark, pasted it in my nearly full passport, and wandered into the thronging terminal.

Like everyone else who looked European, I was accosted immediately by a mass of people offering rides, hotels and “tours”. I managed to push through them while pulling my wallet and passport out and putting them in my front pockets. Their hands were touching my arms and back. I grabbed one man’s arm and pulled it away from me and spoke to them all in German. “Nein! ich bin nicht interessiert. Danke. Nein. ”

I had decided that I wanted people to think I was German. Not that this had helped the Germans at Luxor. But whenever I was in the Middle East I tried to appear either Italian or German...both felt safer than American. I am not sure if I was ever successful.

The throng left me and attached to another hapless traveler. I ducked into what passed for a travel book shop and picked up the first thing in English I could find. It was *Lonely Planet’s Guide to Egypt*. While thumbing through it I jotted down the numbers of a few hotels before one caught my eye. The Windsor hotel boasted that Michael Palin of Monty Python stayed there while filming *Around the World in Eighty Days* for the BBC. I made my way to a pay phone and rang them up. It turned out that the Michael Palin suite was indeed available, and for the impossibly low price of only \$29 per night. They would send a driver for me. Don’t go with any of the others offering rides there, the voice on the other end warned.

I hung up and congratulated myself on my good fortune. Not only did I score the Michael Palin suite, but I had a ride to boot. Things were going well...considering. While I pondered my good fortune my eye was drawn to a large block of text in various languages on the wall of the terminal.

Penalties for possession, use, or trafficking in illegal drugs in Egypt are strict, and convicted offenders can expect jail sentences and heavy fines. The death penalty may be imposed on anyone convicted of smuggling or selling marijuana, hashish, opium, LSD, or other narcotics. Law enforcement authorities prosecute and seek fines and imprisonment in cases of

possession of even small quantities of drugs. In addition to drug offenses many criminal offenses may also result in the death penalty. While in Egypt you are subject to Egyptian law.

Hell of a welcome, I thought as I walked back across the terminal to go outside to await my ride. Once again I was besieged by men offering me rides, hotels and tours. I just waved them off and sat on the steps outside the terminal. The road to the terminal was just barely paved and in dire need of maintenance. It was dark and very warm. Despite the nap I had on the plane I felt my eyelids drooping.

For an hour I fought off the constant barrage of ride offers from men who drove up in pseudo taxis in various states of disrepair. Finally I stood up and went back inside to call the Windsor again. And again the voice assured me the driver was coming and that I should resist the temptation to ride with anyone else. "It is very dangerous." The voice said.

I went back out to my spot on the steps, eyes bleary and neck sore, breathing in the dust as the night wore on. After another half hour I succumbed to one of the offers. A large, bearded man gave me a broad and unsettling smile that was meant to reassure me as he took my bag and flung it into the back seat of his old Peugeot. There was no glass in the passenger side window. Without ceremony we went barreling through the Cairo streets, lights off and horn blaring. I was alarmed and leaned forward. "Slow down please. And turn on your lights," I said.

"Iz okay", he said. "Everything will be wonderful. I take you to nice hotel."

"Oh, the Windsor hotel will be fine. I am meeting some friends there", I lied.

"My friend has a very nice hotel. You will like better. I take you there and you look, okay"

I leaned forward even further. "No", I said evenly but with growing frustration, "thanks all the same. But I have a reservation at the Windsor."

"Windzair?" He asked, still honking his horn and grunting as he dodged pedestrians in the crowded streets.

"No, Windsor Hotel"

"I don't know this hotel. Where is it?"

I sat back, exasperated. "Please turn on the light." I said, opening up my travel guide and looking for the Windsor hotel. He ignored me and kept driving. Through the flashes from the street lights I was able to make out the address. "It says here Alfi Bey Street."

"Alphabet?" he said, "I don't know this." We were still hurtling through the streets. At one point he stopped the car and threw it in reverse. We backed up at the same speed, horn blaring.

“Stop the car.” I said.

“What?”

“Stop the damn car.” I was irritated. I got out of the car with my bag and started looking around me. Achmed came running around the car.

“What are you doing?”

“Look. You don’t know where my hotel is. So I need to find a driver who does.” We were attracting attention. A few men wandered over to listen in.

“I do know. Please to get back in car. Iz dangerous.” He actually looked nervous. “Get back in car. I will find it.” Seeing that I was not moving he hurried over to a nearby group of four young men. They had a brief conversation and then started getting into the car.

“Please come”, he said, returning and grabbing my arm.

“What? You have to be kidding”

“These men know where iz hotel. They will guide.”

“No \$^%ing way guy”, I said. “Get them out of the car.” I was already seeing the story in the Raleigh News and Observer. *The body of a local salesman, lost in Egypt for three months, was found today in a shallow grave in the desert....*

The four men mumbled as they piled out of the car, looking at me with curiosity. Then we all looked at my guide book on the hood of the Peugeot.

“Yes” Achmed exclaimed. “I know where iz now. Iz near theatre. Don’t worry. You are safe with me. I am crazy,” he said with a smile that left no doubt.

Finally I said, “Okay, but you really need to work on your sales pitch,” and got back in the car.

We arrived at the Windsor Hotel after eleven o’clock at night. A doorman rushed out to get my bag. I waved him off and held tightly to it, paid Achmed, and walked into the hotel from the dirt street ignoring his renewed sales pitch to take me on a tour of Cairo tomorrow. I had had enough of him.

When I walked up to the small registration desk the clerk was glaring at me. “Mr. Boyd?”

“That’s me.”

“Mr. Boyd where have you been? We were going to call the police. Why did you not wait for the driver?”

“I got tired of waiting.”

“This was very dangerous. I sent Muhammad all the way there and he waited for you. Please to pay him now.”

“What?!” I said in disbelief. “You have to be kidding.” But then I said “How much?”

“30 pounds.”

I calculated that to be about \$5. “Fine” I said and gave Muhammad the money.