

Chapter 27

Journey in West Africa - 1943

Motoring in Britain and all the impedimenta connected with it, ie. the garages, pull-ins, wayside cafes etc. are taken for granted. Not so in West Africa in 1943.

One day, looking out from Bathurst, with the sun glinting on the sea, I was sent for and told that help was needed in Portuguese West Africa to build and rig a vintage De Havilland Moth belonging to the Governor's son. I was told that I was the only person available to carry out the job and who was I to argue - a month's working holiday in a neutral country. Interesting!

Problems started straight away. The car to take me on the journey, driven by the Governor's son, was of foreign origin and had no brakes. There were no spares in Bathurst and no apparent way to "bodge" any. A further complication was that there were two more passengers, the British Consul, who had introduced the visitors, and a very attractive French lady, the wife of a French Army Lieutenant, who had decided to come along for the ride. It was intended to stay the first night at her house in French West Africa, being about two thirds of the journey through jungle and on rough roads. Despite the lack of brakes, we duly moved off with the horn as the only means of preventing accidents. If people along the way would not move, there was no alternative but to turn off the road into heavy undergrowth!

During the journey, we had to cross seven rivers. There were no bridges, only hand operated ferries, which consisted of wooden structures floating on the river and held in place by wires. They were either pulled across by a primitive form of a capstan, or paddled across by Africans swimming while others pulled on ropes. It was quite a dicey job driving a car with no brakes onto these floating platforms. I did not envy the swimmers either as one could see the glow of lights reflected in the eyes of crocodiles lying partly submerged in the water. There was much shouting and splashing to keep them away. Despite everything, we finally reached the French lady's house where she ordered dinner and treated us to Cadbury's Chocolate and Haig's Scotch Whisky, which, considering that we were in the middle of nowhere, was nothing short of marvellous. An hour later, we were sitting down to a seven-course dinner plus French wine. I shall never know how they did it.

The following morning, I was introduced to the French Commanding Officer, a Colonel of the "old" school who had a hook in place of one hand. Around his office, he had several shrunken human heads, no bigger than oranges, which had been confiscated from the head hunters who were active in the district.

The French could not help with the car so on we went, brakeless, to our final destination and my introduction to the DH Moth which was loosely assembled and standing outside on the edge of the forest. I managed to get it into a "Flying Position" with a lot of contriving. The instruction book was not much use as it was written in French. Fortunately, one of the Consulate officials interpreted for me. Eventually it was built and rigged and the engine checked over, however I never was to see it fly, as an oil pipe from the tank to the pump was cracked and it was time for me to leave. The pilot said that it would be OK as he could get it repaired. I never did hear how it went, but I suppose that it must have been alright otherwise I certainly would have heard.

After a month in which I enjoyed considerable French and Portuguese hospitality, I was back on the road again. This time it was in a small French car, once again with the Governor's son driving. The main incident on the return journey to the French Garrison occurred in the dark, travelling on what was no more than a cart track through the forest; we felt a terrific bump which shook the car and us. It was a deer which had hit us full tilt. It ran off apparently none the worse for wear; the car door however, was badly dented. The following day, I was collected by a civilian African driver in an RAF van. He was a Muslim and I was rather impressed by his attitude to life. He drank no alcohol and he only had one wife although his religion allowed him four; as he said "I love the one I have".

The only way, on the journey I have described, to obtain rest and refreshment, was to stop at the various French Army outposts. The ones I met were all pro-British. One in particular had a French Sergeant, alone except for his African Askaris, who spoke no English. Whilst being plied with glasses of rum, we had a long conversation using a French/English dictionary. Then onwards back to base and reality, where, on my return, and as a matter of course, I was interviewed by an Intelligence Officer.

There was a sequel to this journey. A year later, I got into a tube train in London. Sitting next to me was the self same Intelligence Officer who had interviewed me. In a city of seven million, I thought that a remarkable coincidence.