

Sahara Sands A Memoir

Dan Feltham

Recollections of a youth in the early days of aerial survey and oil exploration in North Africa

This book is an older man's recollections about the adventures in his early career half a century prior. Dan Feltham was chagrined to find that the oil companies were simply not hiring when he graduated from Stanford University in 1956 with a degree in geology. He eventually found a job doing aerial surveys in support of the oil business – among others.

Petroleum geologists know that oil must be found where it is trapped by certain fairly predictable geological formations. Beds of vegetation buried in the age of the dinosaurs has to have been covered, heated, and left to percolate over eons to be turned into oil. As geological forces push the oil bearing rock to the surface, geologists know what surface features will be promising to explore. Dan started his career doing the type of aerial photography they used to identify promising areas for more intensive exploration.

Aerial surveys use other devices than photography. Dan described using magnetism and sonar type detection as well to look beneath the surface. Also, they are used for other than petroleum exploration. One project had them mapping the seabed around the Shatt al Arab at the joint border of Kuwait, Iraq and Iran in order to plan dredging to allow the passage of deep draft oil tankers.

Though he learned his trade in Southern California, Dan was soon dispatched to North Africa to perform aerial surveys. Along the way he learned about every subspecialty within the field: assembling maps, navigating airplanes to make the photos, flying the airplanes, managing project finances, leading the exploration mission, negotiating with (and paying appropriate bribes to) officials in the host countries, and keeping everything working. Though he worked more in Libya than any other single country, he worked as well in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran.

The world was generally at peace during the late 1950s. The approach of the world to which Dan was dispatched had not been vastly transformed by oil wealth. The societies had been disrupted to various degrees by the Second World War and colonialism. The dangers that Dan encountered and to which he seems to have been surprisingly oblivious are the obvious ones: theft, bad food, misunderstandings and deceit. There were no terrorists and no overt anti-western sentiment.

Dan's account provides combines a useful survey of the technology of the era, an overview of the business climate of the 1950s, and an assessment of the politics. Equally interesting are his observations on relations with the fair sex. The 1950s was an era of chastity and civility in America and, one gathers from this account, the foreign ports in which he stayed as well. I make this assessment from a uniquely privileged vantage. I am a Californian only a few years younger than Dan, and I worked under Dan's management in Vietnam as we both watched with fascination and perhaps some horror as the sexual revolution swept over not only the United States but Europe and Vietnam as well. When he writes about an innocent era, he knows where of he speaks.

Dan was gifted by his creator with a sufficient endowment of good health, athleticism, good looks and intelligence that he could do what he wanted in life. He was a wonderful man to work for because becoming a manager was no big deal to him. It was a job he could do effortlessly, and his ego did not need to flaunt it. He was comfortable in his career with IBM because he did not need to compete terribly hard to achieve the things he wanted. Unlike most, he has arrived in his ninth decade of life without having made any serious compromises. He has the ability to look back with wry amusement on all of the adventures and misadventures, satisfied that he has fulfilled his obligations to both his employers and himself.

This book is in unselfconscious portrait of an era. It was the time before jet aircraft, before worldwide telephone communications, and long before the Internet. It was the time when popular music was dominated by love songs, marriage and family were the norm, drugs were almost unheard of, and America was indeed a "city on a hill" that enjoyed the respect of the rest of the world. It was a great time to be an American abroad, and Dan Feltham was a great ambassador for the America of that era.