



NIGEL MESSENGER

MEGIDDO

THE BATTLES FOR ARMAGEDDON

Contents

Title Page	i
Publisher Information	ii
Acknowledgements.iii
 Crossing of the River Jordan.	 1
My Early Life	5
Off to War	14
My First Battles	22
Flying High	37
The Battle of Arsuf	45
The Battle of Megiddo	76
Deborah	87
The Present Day.156
Bibliography.180
 Also Available181

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The Battles for Armageddon

Nigel Messenger

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Crossing of the River Jordan

I could not believe the power of the water flow as I dipped naked into the raging foaming river. It was essential that I get to the other side and tie the rope, which was around my waist, to a tree. Only then could a raft and a pontoon bridge be pulled across the river and we could begin to send soldiers, horses and equipment to combat the enemy and chase them out of the country.

The cold was absolutely shocking and I was desperately trying to get my body used to it by swimming vigorously: I was a strong swimmer having learnt off the English south coast during my basic army training which took place over several months and this had been the first time I had ever seen the sea or even been in water. I thought the cold of this River Jordan would seize up my limbs and my body only adjusted with great difficulty and extreme pain. I thought to myself – why did it have to be me – but that was so negative and I had a huge mental battle to stay in a positive mode.

The current was so strong that I had to swim with a strong overarm crawl to move forward but even so I was dragged towards the south and it was really hard to fight against the river's power. I could just make out enemy soldiers on the far side: it was the middle of the night and they had lighted fires along the far shore to seek out enemy swimmers like me. I was the only one in the water at this time as all the others had been shot or drowned. I lost count of how many had been killed but only a few minutes ago I saw eight men on our bank stripping off all their clothing and jumping into the river. With the fires from the far side we could pick out their white bodies in the dark water and we hoped fervently that these brave men would get across safely. As they struggled through the water we could hear the gunfire and see the flames from their rifles as bullets splashed all around the men. Suddenly a man would stop swimming and would be tossed in the water and we knew he had been killed. Others were swept away by the strong flow and we never saw them again.

I knew that my chances of success were very slim but I had no time to think about that. My full concentration was on getting across to the other side in one piece and this was proving to be extremely difficult. I could hear the zings and splashes of the bullets very close to me but I could also hear the cheers and encouragement of my friends. As the terrifying power of the current kept pulling me over to the south, slowly I noticed that there were fewer bullets and they were splashing further away from me. I was moving out of range and hopefully out of site of the enemy and this was an incredible relief. I was exhausted already, trying to counteract the force and I realised that I couldn't get across without a lot of luck and a massive effort.

Suddenly something crashed into my left shoulder and I felt a stab of pain. I saw a small tree rushing past me and I guessed a broken branch had smacked into me and I think it had torn my skin. Luckily I did not believe that my shoulder was badly damaged and I managed to carry on swimming even though it hurt like hell and once again my strength and energy seemed to desert me. Several times I thought I was going to die but I had little time to dwell on this as my main focus was on survival and success. I kept swallowing mouthfuls of water and I came near to choking and drowning. Suddenly the current pulled me under the water and I felt the foul river getting into my nostrils and mouth. I tried not to panic as I forced my way to the surface gasping for air and then I was forced under again. This seemed to happen again and again and I felt weaker and weaker. I kept telling myself to keep trying and I managed to force myself away from this dangerous spiral and I kept above water after that. I kept talking to myself to keep going and that just one more stroke and then another stroke and I would be across. At last I reached the far side and I was dizzy with relief. I held myself out of the water by clinging on to a root and when I got my breath back and a little strength in my arms, I gradually managed to haul myself out of the water. I promised God that I would never deny him again as he had spared me – as long as he continued to do so!

The enemy still had not spotted me but the fires were a long way down the bank to my left. I was exhausted but so pleased that I had got across unscathed. As far as I knew I was the only one who had made it. I lay on the earth for a few moments to get my breathing back to normal and I then started to look for a more secure hold for my rope. I worked my way along and shortly found a tree close to the bank and I felt its roots below the waterline. I untied the rope from my waist and retied it onto one of the thicker roots. I gave two sharp pulls on the rope which was the signal for my friends to pull tighter from the other side. I then quite easily hauled my way back through the water on the rope and within minutes I was back with my friends as they hauled me out of the deadly river. My limp body collapsed on the river bank and I was totally spent.

My mates were so pleased with my success and I don't think they had expected to see me again. I was smothered in blankets and placed by a small fire to try to get some warmth back into my exhausted and wrecked body. They rubbed and rubbed my body to try to warm me up and get my circulation flowing. I was later able to witness a raft being hauled across the river holding some thirty soldiers, horses and their equipment. They pulled the small craft across with my rope and I felt a huge sense of pride that I had made a positive contribution towards our objective for the first time and I was highly praised by my friends. Someone said I would get a medal for this but it never happened. I did get promotion to Lance Corporal shortly afterwards and perhaps this was recognition for my achievement but nothing was said.

When the raft was just about to reach the other side an enemy shell made a direct hit. There was an enormous explosion and we were horrified to see bodies blasted into the air and moments later we saw bloody men, body parts, dead horses and wooden splinters floating away pushed by the raging current. There were no survivors and the raft had disappeared.

Undeterred the men launched a second raft and fortunately my rope was still intact. I watched while the men hauled the raft across whilst firing at the enemy. They crossed safely this time and

secured the bank and shortly a pontoon bridge was pulled into place. Not long after hundreds of men were crossing and later we carried our guns across on a team of camels and we travelled east towards the enemy.

My Early Life

My name is Nathaniel Sullivan, I'm always called Nat, and I was named by my mother after a biblical prophet. I was born in 1900 during the Boer War (no we never understood what it was all about either) and during the Boxer rebellion in China. Queen Victoria was still on the throne. I always found it easy to remember my age as it was the same as the year – well the last two numbers anyway!

I fought in Palestine in World War 1 for the British Army as part of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force. I was a machine gunner in a London regiment. I was born and raised in London in Bermondsey and my father and his father before him were dockers. I became a Labour MP after a long period working for the Trade Unions.

I am now approaching the end of my life and want to record my days honestly so that no falsehoods can ever be claimed. I want my family to know my history and where they came from and possibly give them some future direction even when the present seems dark and difficult. May they find a path through their difficult times and never give up hope.

I have also recorded the extraordinary dreams I had when serving in Palestine during periods of great stress. These dreams appeared to reflect the past and involve me. You can be the judge of why and to what purpose they served but I think I understand. I hope you enjoy reading about my life and that it will inspire you to greater achievements which I know we are all capable of. I now reflect back to my early days.

My mother and my younger brother Sam, older sister Sarah, father Mack and I lived in a small dingy flat in Bermondsey. My mother Florence, known mostly as Flo, worked part time as a nurse in nearby Guy's Hospital and later she was joined there by Sarah.

My upbringing, like for most people in that part of London, was tough and poor. Food and clothing were scarce and lack of money was always a problem. Outside of work there were two elements to my father's life and these were drink and football. And of course

fighting and thieving from the docks. He had been caught thieving once and was sentenced to five weeks jail with hard labour. He was found to be carrying a bottle of rum and he and others felt this was an extremely harsh punishment but ignored the fact that there were another seven bottles missing from a crate and maybe a whole crate as well but nobody was too sure. It didn't stop him or the others though. They felt it was their right to share in the great wealth of the Empire when the pay was very low and work intermittent. I think maybe they had a valid point.

The dockers were tough and independent and were a race apart. There were hardly any full time jobs and dockers had to queue each morning and hope to be chosen for work. This was called "Standing on the Stones". Dockers needed years of experience and skills and had to learn to load the ships tightly and securely. They also had to learn how to keep the cargo off the wet floors. Unloading was another skill and needed to be carried out as quickly as possible without damaging the goods. Mack was an experienced docker and was mostly chosen but as he latterly began to drink more he became unreliable and got less work.

I grew up remembering the many strikes at the docks where the workers were fighting for higher wages, better conditions and safer conditions. Many were seriously injured and worse were killed when a few basic precautions and better facilities would have prevented many of these accidents. There were always too many men for the few jobs available even though there were over a thousand wharves in London. It was a huge industry. The wharf owners paid a force of strike breakers so that their wealth and regular income were not affected by the strikes. These men were often drafted in from far away and were promised fixed wages and months of work.

Away from work Mack was a passionate and often violent supporter of Millwall, the team known as the Lions. They used to play on the Isle of Dogs. He first took me to a match when I was ten years old and they had just moved to The Den at New Cross a few miles away. He told me that the new stadium had cost the huge

amount of ten thousand pounds. The noise of the “Millwall Roar” was deafening and it was said that it gave us a goal start. We paid one penny for a programme and unfortunately we lost one nil on our first match there against Brighton and Hove Albion.

From a young age I knew that I wasn't like Mack and I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing what he did. I certainly didn't want to be a docker and I didn't like drink; I remember the overpowering smell of his breath and his whole body smelt of alcohol, and the disgusting smell began to permeate the flat. He used to shout at my mother after a heavy session and his hangovers the next day were horrendous. I didn't like following him to football and decided that this would not be my main hobby when I was older. I did enjoy the game and like all the other boys I loved a kick about on the local streets, but I did not like the bad things that always seemed to go with football, the violence, boozing, swearing, betting, shouting and spitting. Although I had a few friends from school and in the neighbourhood, I felt different from them and my family. I also disliked living in the area as it was then. Despite the nostalgia for the East End you hear spoken about these days I don't share it. The whole area needed rebuilding and cleaning up but I respected the supportive nature of the community and the friendliness. I also didn't like the gang culture and the thieving and violence which seemed to be prevalent then. At school I hated the bullying and was often beaten up or totally ignored. I learned the meaning and suffering of being sent to Coventry which was often worse than a beating and I suffered a few of them in my defence of others. I didn't want to live like this but of course at my tender age I had not worked out how I wanted my life to be in the future. I just knew I didn't want this.

I disliked school and didn't do very well there until I was taught by Mr Holdsworth. At first I thought he was a dull ugly old man who was rather boring. He taught arithmetic and I didn't pay much attention until one day we overheard two of the other teachers talking about him. They were talking about his war record. We found out that he had served in the Zulu war and had fought at

Omdurman. During the next boring lesson I plucked up courage to ask him what it was like at Omdurman. He looked at me for a few moments without expression and then started talking. He told us about the fear which gripped him and his fellow soldiers especially when they saw the massive numbers of the enemy and thought they would be overwhelmed. They were ordered to be disciplined and stand firm. He talked about the terrible noise of shouting and screaming frequently drowned out by the booming of the guns. He talked about their dreadful thirst baking under the hot sun in their thick uniforms. We were captivated and before we knew it the bell rang and our two hour lesson was over.

We couldn't wait for the next lesson and as soon as he came in I asked him about the Zulu wars. He said that we would have to do arithmetic first and if all our work showed a good understanding then he would use the final half of the lesson for stories. Well we became the finest mathematicians in the school! The Zulu wars were so interesting and we learned about their terrible King Cetshwayo who stood six and a half feet tall and was fat as a beer barrel. Mr Holdsworth said he had met this man in later peace negotiations and learned that he had killed his five brothers and mother just like the brutal Roman Emperor Nero. Mr Holdsworth fought in the battle of Ulundi where the Zulus were finally defeated. We felt as though we were with him in that beautiful country and we could see the plains and the hills with all the elephants and lions and herds of thousands of deer and cattle. We could even imagine the smells of the land and animals and could see the sun going down behind the tall trees and mountains.

Before Africa Mr Holdsworth was in the Indian Army and served all over India for many years. We travelled with him through Bombay, Madras and Calcutta up to the hills of Simla. We travelled on old trains overflowing with men, women and children. We felt the hot Suns and nearly drowned in the relentless monsoons. We could almost identify all the different spices as he described them in incredible detail. We learned some new words

such as punkawalla, bungalow, shampoo, jodhpurs, gymkhana and cubmmerbund.

Mr Holdsworth didn't know it but he probably changed the direction of my life. He had lit a fire in me which would never be put out. I loved stories and adventure but more importantly I was passionate about learning. I wanted to know about history but even more importantly I wanted to learn about the world and how everything worked. I wanted to know how our history translated into rules and laws for our people. Were they sufficient or should we fight for change to make the world a fairer place? And I wanted to know the extent of our influence in the world.

We had a book shelf at home and it wasn't long before I had devoured every book and many I read for a second time. We seem to have collected dozens of classics and I particularly loved the old Victorian stories of adventure and treasure. One of my favourites was King Solomon's Mines by H. Rider Haggard. I used to think this was a very strange name. What did the H stand for and who would ever name their son Rider? I loved his tales of Africa and the adventures of Allan Quartermain. I read the Bible from cover to cover and books on the Crusades and the mighty King Richard. I was also particularly interested in reading about the Civil War as this, alongside Magna Carta, was one of the most important developments in our history. The balance of power was changing and was written in law.

I loved my mother, brother and sister and in the future I wanted to support them and help them towards a better way of life which they deserved. I also wanted them to be proud of me. My father wasn't important in my future and he constantly criticised me saying that all this reading would do me no good and I should get out and work.

One morning he kicked the side of my bed which made me wake up in shock. I shared the bed with my younger brother Sam. He cried in fright. Mack boomed:

"Get up off your arse you lazy brat. It's time for you to work and bring some pennies into our poor house."

I dutifully got up, rubbed my eyes and followed Mack into the kitchen where mother had prepared some porridge. I was frozen cold and badly wanted to go back to bed but I knew that Mack was determined. I knew this was coming as all boys of my age followed their fathers into the docks. It was as natural as the seasons.

“Be ready to go in 5 minutes”. There was no room for argument.

I guessed he was still a bit drunk from last night. I had heard him getting in late and shouting at mother. We left in the cold morning and tramped the few streets towards our nearest dock. Luckily we both got work that first day and took home a few valuable shillings for our troubles.

I was only fourteen when Mack forced me to work at the docks. I didn't want to but he gave me no choice. We needed the extra money coming in to the house. Most days we walked the short distance to Springalls Dock where we usually got work but if we were unsuccessful we went to the next one. The work was crippling and I will never forget how I felt after a few short hours. By the end of a long ten hours I was almost crying in pain and when I shuffled home I was too tired to eat or read and I collapsed into an unconscious state. Mother was very worried about me but I was beyond caring. Mack of course had joined his mates in the pub having kept the money I earned as well. Very slowly I got used to the work and I became tough like Mack. I was not as tall as him but was of medium height and in those days I was as skinny as a broomstick.

Mack's extra money caused more problems for us as he could now afford to drink more and his hours became later and I could hear mother crying. I prayed he was not hurting her. His hangovers in the morning were terrible and his ability to put in a good day's work worsened. Eventually mother put her foot down and demanded that he hand over all the money I earned. He stopped taking it from me and let me keep it but I gave mother most of it to give her help with household bills. I knew she saved some money each week for us to provide for our futures. She always worried about our health but most of all believed that education would lift

us out of this cycle of poverty and so she planned to use her savings to pay for this. She desperately wanted her children to have a better life than hers. I knew that she had a secret hiding place for her savings and we all prayed that Mack wouldn't find it and he never did. I seemed to remember giving her ten bob most weeks but my memory may be playing tricks with me. Mack's drinking lessened somewhat as he now had less to spend.

At the docks we used to handle all kinds of goods including sugar, rum, coffee, fruit, coal and oil. A huge variety of goods used to come from all over the Empire and the world. I remember once unloading boxes of bearskins. I got used to the work quite quickly and I was soon favoured for jobs before Mack which did not please him.

I thought it was really shocking how badly we were all treated and how many accidents there were and none of the bosses seemed to care. I remember one man being crushed as several boxes fell on him. Together with others I rushed to drag them off him but it was too late. His head was crushed and split open and he did not move. We were ordered to carry his body out of the ship and lay him out on the side of the wharf. We had to rush back to work and at the end of the shift he was still lying there. No one had made any arrangements to take his body away. One of the men arranged for an undertaker to collect him and I was asked to visit his family and tell them the dreadful news. I didn't know how to do this for the best so I just blurted out that he had been crushed to death on a ship and gave them the name of the undertaker. His mother screamed and his wife was crying uncontrollably and I was really distressed to see his two young children looking at me with wide eyes and open mouths and cheeks smeared with tears. Apart from losing their dear father they would now be confined to a life of hunger and poverty.

I think it was then that I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted to make life better for these men and their families. We all lived in miserable damp houses and flats and the men were treated like sub-humans at work. Someone needed to

stand up for these people against the wharf and ship owners and indeed many were trying to do just that. When men tried to fight for their rights and higher wages they nearly always failed. When necessary the Shipping Federation hired expensive lawyers who always won against us. I knew there had to be a way to fight back and improve the lot of these people.

I got involved with Transport Workers Federation and soon became known as a trouble maker. Of course it became harder for me to get work after that and Mack was furious as he became tainted with my reputation. He once kicked me in frustration and I had a really sore leg for days. I knew I had to leave and find alternative work. During this time I got all the books I could find on employment law and spent many hours in the evenings reading and educating myself. The local library was a godsend for me.

I wanted to know as much as those smart-arsed lawyers knew. I read thousands of case studies particularly those relating to dockers and indeed workers of all sorts. I was determined to use straightforward language in future rather than the effluent words of most lawyers. Many used to be paid by the word and others just wanted to complicate situations so that they might be hired to make sense of them once again. I knew that the more I learned the more I could defend the dockers and make life a little bit fairer. I didn't know then that the work I was doing now would take me to heights I could not imagine and I would be able to help to improve the lives of thousands.

I really had to do something else as I was hardly getting any work at all. The Army were desperate for more recruits and so in 1916 I volunteered and signed up. I walked down to Victoria Park where there were a row of tents housing very official-looking uniformed men. Signing up took about half an hour and no one asked my age.

My mother was very sad to see me go and clung on to me when it was time. I was sad for her but secretly I was really excited about leaving home and getting away from my environment. I was setting out on a big adventure and would be meeting other people and seeing places I had only read about. I hoped I would never have go

back to this work and existence and I knew life would never be the same again for me. I couldn't wait to go to war and I was confident that I would survive and enjoy my new adventure. Mack didn't really care and was still furious with me. He didn't say goodbye.

Off to War

I was told to go by train to Portsmouth and when I got to Waterloo the platform was teeming with soldiers. I loved the wheezing sounds of the green steam trains and the shouts and whistles of the guards. Steam and smoke filled the air and the smell of coal and oil added to the excitement but sprayed spots of dirty grease to every surface. There were thousands of people bustling hither and thither, many of them new soldiers like me, and they were herding towards their appointed trains, each one dressed in uniform with huge kit bags slung on their shoulders. I was one of them having been kitted out a few days before and I felt like a real soldier. I could hear the bagpipes but could not see who was playing and many were singing and cheering with sheer joy. A train had just come in and every soldier getting off had bandages wrapped around different parts of his body. One man was being guided by two others and was obviously blind. A small crowd cheered them. There was a terrific excitement in the air as everyone was embarking on a new adventure which probably wouldn't last long but all knew that the world was changing for ever. There were girls crying and waving. I managed to fight my way on to the train and squeeze into the carriage which seemed to be packed with soldiers and kit bags. The train was buzzing with good natured chat with shared cigarettes and chocolate as the whistle blew and the train chugged out of the station amidst clouds of steam. As it picked up speed I marvelled at the beautiful English countryside which I had never seen before. I was so excited as I felt I was embarking on a new adventure leaving my old life behind.

We reached Portsmouth a couple of hours later and as we stepped down we were directed to the road outside. A truck took a group of us to the camp where our training took place over the next few months. Few of us had ever been out of London and most had never spent night away from home before. This was a shared new experience for us and the excitement was contagious.