



LINE TRACES LONGEST CONTINUOUS TREK BY A WAR CORRESPONDENT IN WORLD WAR II. NUMBERS, MARKING STOP-OFFS, CORRESPOND TO CAPTION NUMBERS UNDER PICTURES BELOW



GEORGE RODGER, LIFE PHOTOGRAPHER

# 75,000 MILES

IN HIS OWN PICTURES AND WORDS, GEORGE RODGER TELLS OF HIS TRAVELS AS LIFE WAR PHOTOGRAPHER

**E**arly the morning of July 9, 1942, a lean young Englishman in British Army uniform stepped alone from an Atlantic Clipper at LaGuardia Airport in New York and lit a cigaret. This ritual marked for George Rodger, LIFE staff photographer, the end of the longest journey by any photo-reporter or newswriter in this or probably any other war. He had gone 75,000 miles from December 1940 to early last month—more than three times around the world. His war picture odyssey

took him from Glasgow, Scotland, to Duala, Africa, across the Sahara and into Eritrea, Ethiopia, Iran, Syria, Libya, India, China and Burma (see map above). Constantly doubling back on his tracks, he saw battle action in a dozen places. From time to time LIFE has published photo-reportage by George Rodger on this roving assignment. Now the editors let him tell his own story of his travels, with his own pictures arranged chronologically and his own words used as captions.

## GEORGE RODGER ON THE ROAD: A PHOTOGRAPHER AND AUTHOR'S JOURNAL

George Rodger was born in Hale, Cheshire, in 1908. Driven by wanderlust at an early age, he signed on as a trainee deck officer on a British tramp steamer in 1925. From the outset, the young adventurer documented his experiences in long letters to friends and family, soon taking up photography as well in order to be able to furnish his accounts with his own image material. After sailing round the world twice with the merchant navy and a number of lean years during which he worked as a seasonal labourer during the Depression in America, impoverished, Rodger returned to his homeland in 1936.

However, George Rodger's future path as a professional photographer soon became apparent. He was initially employed by the BBC's *The Listener Magazine*, and from 1938 worked for the Black Star Agency. His photos of the Blitz—the German air force's air-raid over London—caught the attention of *LIFE* magazine, which took him on as a war correspondent. His first assignment, a four-page story called "*LIFE* spends a Wartime Weekend on the Thames," was published in the August 17 issue. His "war odyssey" had begun: from December 1940 on, Rodger primarily documented the troop movement of the Forces Françaises Libres (FFL) in the Libyan desert, in Chad, and in Eritrea. From there, he set out for Abyssinia (Ethiopia), which was occupied by Italian troops, for Syria, and for Libya. An extremely hazardous war reportage then took him to Burma.

In 1943, while deployed in Italy, he made the acquaintance of Hungarian photographer Robert Capa. The two of them became close friends. Rodger photographed the liberation of France, Belgium, and Holland by the Allies. On March 25, 1945, he accompanied Prime Minister Winston Churchill and Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery on an extremely dangerous mission: when they—six weeks before the unconditional surrender—crossed the Rhine River

### CAMEROONS



**1** French Duala in French Cameroons Jan. 18, 1941 on a British motorship, later sunk with all hands. Free French have not heard of me, want me to photograph only scenery.



**2** Permission to follow Free French comes when General de Larminat arrives. I said that was grand and where were they? He said they were attacking Kufra, up in Libya.



**3** From Free French headquarters in Chamber of Commerce Building, De Larminat assigns me an officer as guide, sends us north from Duala to the fighting in Libya.



**4** Our caravan of two Chevrolets is ferried across a Cameroon river in the heart of the jungle. Absolutely everything had to be carried, including food for two months.



**5** Each evening we shoot a buck to save on tinned food. We take the best cuts and natives appear by magic to squabble over the rest. Not shown are vicious mout-mout flies.



**6** Halfway through jungle, we come into Bouar where a few white Free Frenchmen are drilling big Sarra tribesmen. The jungle, which is greatly overrated, is thinning out.

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Bitte Bildlegende ergänzen!

near Wesel in an infantry landing craft and spent half an hour in enemy territory. Rodger was also present at the signing of the Instrument of Surrender of All German Armed Forces in Holland, in Northwest Germany, including all Islands, and in Denmark. He was one of the first photographers to enter and document the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

Marked by this traumatic experience, Rodger decided to abandon war reporting. In 1947, he founded Magnum Photos along with Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, David Seymour, and William Vandivert. In order to be able to offer enough valuable photographic material as an independent agency, the founding members decided to divide the world into geographical zones, with Rodger becoming Africa correspondent. His first extensive trip took him 28,000 miles across the continent from Cape Town to Cairo. In his photographs, he documents nature and the peoples of the continent he had already discovered during the war years and whom had fascinated him all his life.

His urge to travel and the need to record what he saw and experienced both in writing and visually were hallmarks of George Rodger's working methods from the start. During World War II, he conscientiously recorded events and circumstances in countless journals. During his two-year journey across Africa as well, not only did he produce impressive photo essays, he wrote every day. His notes provided both background information for his picture captions—a method common to many photojournalists—as well as source material for newspaper articles and books.

For George Rodger, written accounts were just as important to him as the visual documentation. Using just one or other form of narrative was not sufficient: only by combining words and images did Rodger arrive at a satisfying result.

It is noteworthy in this respect that, in his first two publications, *Red Moon Rising* (1943) and *Desert Journey* (1944), about his experiences as a reportage photographer in Africa and Burma during World War II, text predominates. The

photos served more or less as illustrations. Only with time did the photographer develop sufficient self-assurance to allow his pictures to predominate. Evidence of this is the photobook *Le Village des Nubas* published by Robert Delpire in France in 1956.

In addition, Rodger's approach to reportage was personal from the outset. He never digressed into generalisations and politics, but reported accurately and without exaggeration what was happening in front of his eyes. That was his forte and also what made him unique—combining words and images into a homogeneous personal narration that ultimately comes across to us as a piece of world history as well.

In his foreword to *Desert Journey*, Rodger notes: “When I left England at the height of the 1940 London Blitz, bound for the Free French Camerouns, I began a diary for my own interest and for my friends to read on my return home. The notes for this book were taken from that diary. Therefore, although in the course of my travels I visited several battle zones, the book is more a saga of travel than a chronicle of war. In it I make no pretence at analysis—no attempt to comment on the strategy of the various campaigns, to criticize the past or foretell the future. I write only of what I saw.”