

## **Necropoli – A Tale of Three Cities**

Reality Engineering

Mike Violette

*Dresden, Germany was nearly obliterated seventy years ago in a late-in-the-war incendiary attack. Four thousand five hundred years prior, the Great Pyramids were raised on the plain of Giza. Jerusalem was raised, razed, rebuilt, and traded hands many times in the past three millennia. These cities have all been the sites of wondrous things and terrible things and, like many old cities, the present is built on the bones of the past. Nothing is forever, as we all know, but some human behaviors are eternal.*

### **Giza – The Ancient**

CAIRO: Surging and complex, hustle is the word here, from the moment you get hit upon disembarking the airport and until you load your bags heading out. I must have a big neon sign blinking on my head that says “American! American! American!” which makes me an easy mark. We’re here with our Chinese partners to do a weird little bit of business for Chinese mobile phone manufacturers (I guess we’re all hustling, in a way).

The Egyptian hustle continues all the way to the feet of the Great Pyramids where everything is negotiable and the price is proportional to the amount of each party’s desperation. Here, Sam the Camel Man gives me an offer to ride Columbus the Camel; I’ll ride after Billy takes his turn (and as soon as the camel wakes up). After a few moments of negotiation, we arrive at a price, thirty bucks, for a cheap thrill and a photo.



Billy, Camel, Sam, Me



Done Deal with Sam the Camel Man



Columbus and Khafre

Since the revolution following the *Arab Spring*, the city of 20 million people still has a long way to go for “recovery” if there is such a norm here in this chaotic, noisy, gritty and ancient place which runs at a pace that’s in sharp discord to quiet, sedate, ordered, clean and tidy Germany, which I just departed.

The traffic is not unlike Saigon or Siem Reap or a hundred other surging cities in the third world: the flow is generally in the same direction, but the movements of vehicles are more like surges of pulsing corpuscles, grinding together in an knotted clump, bumping and pushing against each other. Trucks are loaded beyond capacity. The scars on the cars bear witness to this tumult. It is rare to see a bumper that is not bruised and scraped.



Loaded Up!



## Bumped Bumpers

The Necropolis of Giza lies twenty or so kilometers southwest of Cairo proper and our hotel lies in lee of the pyramids. It's odd to walk out on the street and see taxis, cars, buses and motorbikes zipping by these ancient monoliths, which have seen so much human history unwind over the millennia.

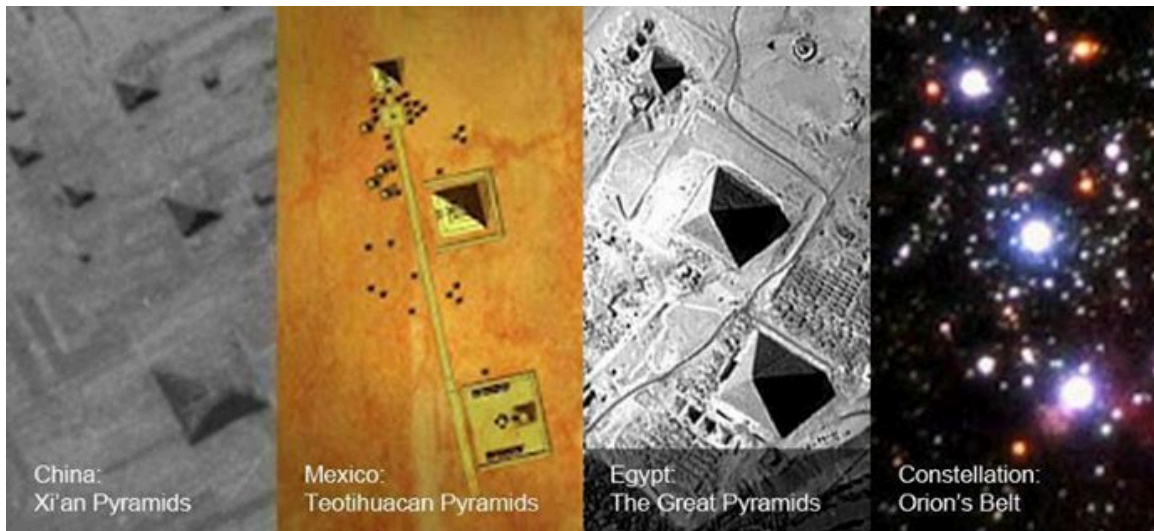
The tourism industry is a bit chaotic and even our host, Morris, seems a bit disoriented as we pull into the Giza "welcome area," a dusty and forlorn parking lot with strange crumpled shapes of abandoned vehicle carcasses, bony horses, locals languishing in the shade next to a relic of a Coca-Cola vending machine, having long since dispensed its last cool bottle of refreshment.

We jump in a two-person, horse drawn jitney of sorts and go about twenty feet when our host starts the negotiations. Words heat up. The haggling goes back and forth and it's two-against one, but Morris stays steadfast. The give-and-take lasts for nearly fifteen minutes. At long last, an agreement is struck; Morris tells us later that he negotiated a 60 percent discount on the original price! It's good to have local representation in any negotiation. In spite of the deep reduction, our guide **Moneim** a dark-skinned rail-thin fella sporting a New York Yankees baseball cap, is affable and excited as we lurch through the streets, his narrative as jagged as the ride is jarring.

We loop through the village that lines the great Cemetery of Giza. For a short video tour, visit [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63gu9n\\_Pkoo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63gu9n_Pkoo)

The oldest Pyramid in Egypt dates to about 2630 BC and is named after its entombed Pharaoh, **Djoser**. It was designed and built by his architect Imhotep. Following this work, the Great Pyramids were built on a broad plateau, rising to over 140 meters above the Giza plain. The biggest of the three main pyramids is **Khufu** (or **Cheops**), named after the Pharaoh who was entombed there. The other two pyramids in the complex are **Khafre**, in the center and associated with the **Great Sphinx**, and **Menkaure**, the smallest of the three and situated in the southwest corner of the burial complex. During the building heyday, some 10,000 workers, artisans, bakers, tenders, families, administrators and others lived around the complex, a public works project of an unimaginable magnitude.

The Pyramids remain as one of the largest set of man-made buildings ever erected. Curiously, aerial surveys of Pyramid complexes around the world reveal that the arrangement is common, with a (coincidental?) resemblance to the stars in Orion's belt. But who knows?



### Pyramids and Orion's Belt.

Speaking of reaching towards the heavens, ancient Egyptians believed that a part of the soul remains with the body. This part, the *ka*, must be nourished and cared for in the afterlife, hence the mummification and practice of burying the dead with food and other necessities for the journey beyond. Relatively recent excavations (1990) uncovered cemeteries for workers at the site. The bodies were entombed in mud brick (not mummified) and buried with beer and bread to feed their own *kas*.

One object that has attained a sort of immortality is the Volkswagen Microbus. Cairo is home to what must be the biggest population of VW Microbuses still in existence. Hundreds, if not thousands of the wheezing air-cooled four-cylinders—universally painted white (some with decidedly less paint than others)—troll the streets of Cairo. According to our host, these are all private vehicles with various routes (you better know where you're going). Hop-on, hop-off, the fare, depending, is a few *piastres* and the bus stops appear to be wherever the driver is inclined to pull over.



VW Microbuses

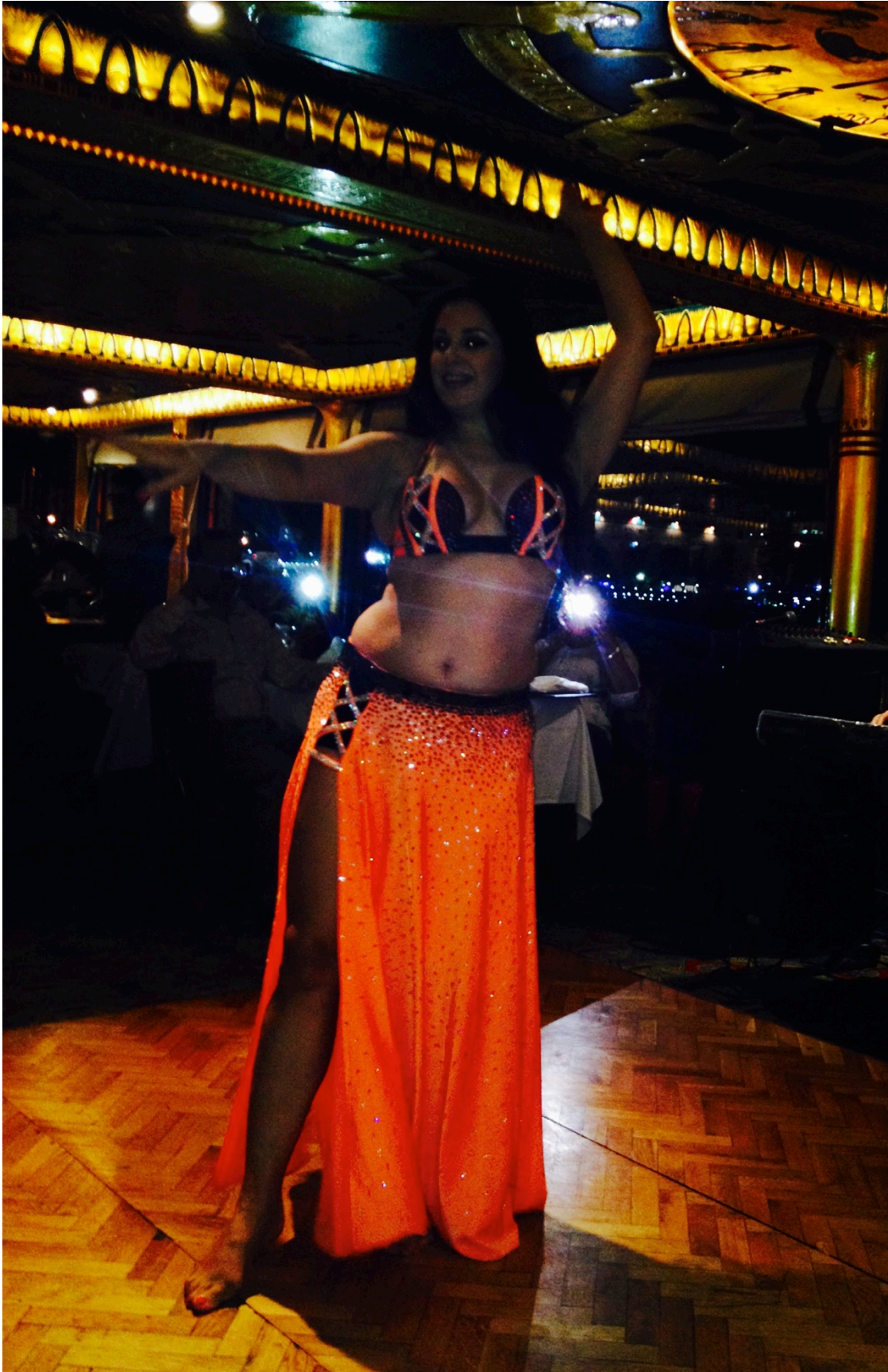
Our objective for this trip is to understand a bit about the Egyptian wireless laws, administered by the National Telecommunications Regulatory Telecom Authority (NTRA), (which has a Facebook page, by the way). The mandate for the Authority is to protect the Egyptian spectrum, much like the FCC in the US, as well as to protect the consumers from inferior mobile phones. The market is strong for “2G” devices, which are affordable and provide basic voice and text communications for the Egyptian public. With 90 million people, the market is large for manufacturers that can provide a value product. The NTRA has an acceptance and a post-market testing program to make sure the imports meet minimum necessary performance standards.



Sphinx and Menkaure

Finally, before we quit the land of the Pharaohs, our host treats us to a cruise on the Nile (pronounced 'Neel') complete with the requisite belly dancer, amply-figured according to local taste, apparently.

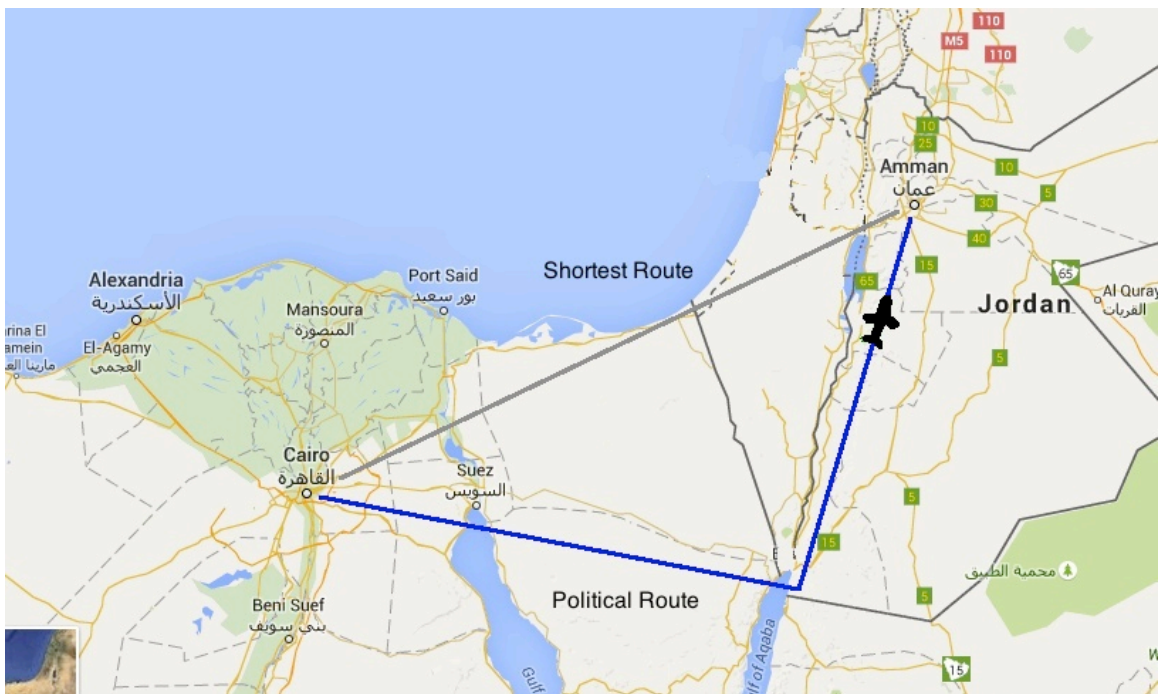




## Jerusalem – The Contentious City

Flying from Egypt to Israel directly is possible on some carriers, but my itinerary looped me via Amman, Jordan. The journey takes about 20 minutes longer than it should because flying through Israeli airspace is restricted. Like most current airplanes the Royal Jordanian flight shows the flight map on a video screen. The direct path is a dotted line between Cairo and Tel Aviv and at first I thought we'd take the proverbial shortest-distance-between-two points.

However it is clear, after 10 minutes or so we were not taking a direct flight and our path would East-Southeast across Sinai to take a hard left at Aqaba, Jordan at the southern-most tip of Israel. Arabic cities are well-marked on the flight map, but the display shows no Israeli city names, just blank space. The following day, on the Amman-Tel Aviv flight, even our destination is unnamed. This not-so-subtle denial of Israel's existence is, of course, all a byproduct endemic conflict in some of the most contentious real estate on the planet.



Flight Map

The complexities of tangled centuries of Middle East politics is not easy to sort out. However, the end-result for all of us is the same: dust-to-dust, as they say and the eastern side of the city is home to two enormous cemeteries. The bones of many Muslims and Jews wash up against the ancient walls. The Muslim cemetery rides

right to the Eastern wall, with the massive stones from Solomon's times still holding up the foundation and tall walls spilling down to a valley where the Muslim cemetery ends and the Jewish cemetery begins, which coats the shoulder of the Mount of Olives.

## **Issa and Me**

Issa (Jesus or Joshua, appropriately enough—he says his western name is Christophe) is my Palestinian driver who has raised four daughters and one son. One of the daughters is an OBGYN, another is a PhD and the son is studying to be a lawyer. They went to the esteemed Hebron University, which was organized after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank after the 1967 Six Day War as a place for Palestinian students to matriculate.

I met Issa at the Jerusalem train station. I had just disembarked and he was standing next to his car, in the taxi queue, waiting for a fare and I approached and said "Hello."

He looked at me. "Where are you going, sir?"

I replied. "I don't know. I've never been here before. I want to look around." A shadow of exasperation crossed his face, 'oh boy this won't be an easy 100 shekel fare.'

He shrugged and threw up his arms. "Well, you can go to the Old City, the Mount of Olives, Mount Scopus, from there you can see Jordan" He paused and asked. "What do you want to do?"

I nodded. "All of it. I am only here today. What do you suggest?"

A calculus kicked in and he eased. "OK, sir. I will give you a tour of the two famous Mounts—Mount of Olives and Mount Scopus—Gethsemane, the Garden of Tears, and a view over the Old City." He paused. "Then we go into the Old City, see the famous gates, the Tomb of Mary, The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and some markets: The Muslim section the Christian section and the Jewish section."

"How much for that?" I asked. "And what about a return to Tel Aviv?"

He responded. "For the tour, five hundred shekels. If you want go back to Tel Aviv, uh, eight hundred, eight hundred shekels for everything." He said it firmly and with finality. Two hundred bucks for the day. I thought a second. Yeah, I had that in cash—I had taken out six hundred shekels at the airport and another four hundred at the train station.

"So maybe five or six hours? Then to Tel Aviv?" I looked at him. He nodded. "Deal. Let's go." We shook hands and the tour commenced.



Camel Above the Old City. The golden Dome of the Rock.

I hopped in the back of his late-model Mercedes sedan and we started off. He was a bit quiet and I didn't have a clue where we were going. I pulled out my wallet and counted out the cash. "I'll pay you now." This seemed to relax him a bit and we motored onto the freeway, drove a few kilometers and then pulled off the highway to get some diesel. The highway from the airport has a tall wall because it cuts through an Arab neighborhood.

The off-ramp was a fortified checkpoint and we pulled off the freeway into a small village. "Hmm, Issa said. This is new." The checkpoint was manned by a half-dozen Israeli Army with assault weapons.

The sight of armed 20 year-olds would be a normal sight around this perennially tense land.



Girl Soldier. Automatic Rifle and iPhone

A bloody city, Romans, Christians, Crusaders, slaughtered their enemies by the thousands over the thousand of years of the existence of this place. Still, oddly, although it is a city of death and humans seeking others' annihilation, there is an energy here. It is like a center of gravity of human faith that transcends rationality. It's just a big rock in a bigger desert, after all, but with so many remarkable solemn places: the birthplace of Mary, King David's Tomb, a vast Muslim cemetery, the Wailing Wall, the Dome of the Rock.

The corridors under the old City are lined with shops for tourist and travel. The Christian, Muslim and Jewish sections lie along side each other. Ordinary persons living ordinary lives in an extraordinary setting.



Jerusalem Market

Issa's insights were very valuable, as a Gentile who only knows the Holy Land from Catechism lessons learned long ago and largely forgotten. The names ring, though, still. Here, from the base of the Old City, the graves of Muslims press against the wall while across the valley, towards the Mount of Olives, lie the bones of Jewish faithfully departed. Both faiths eternally bound together in the same dust.



Muslim Bones and Jewish Bones

### **Issa and Kuwait City**

After a tour of the sites, Issa takes me northwest towards Tel Aviv, the lightning tour of the Holy City now finished. By now, having shared some talking and walking and hummus, he's relaxed and tells me how Saddam Hussein did him a favor a few years back.

Seems he was working in Kuwait City as a driver, delivering medicines and ferrying patients around for a hospital. "I take the medicine and give it to the company there." He says.

But Issa hated working in Kuwait and was fussing about it to his boss, George, a fellow Palestinian who managed the car service. One of the things he missed was a cold beer.

"I tell him, I dreenk, but not that much. But I dreenk...alcohol. Everything they have here, but no beerh. He told me...nobody dreenk that much here. I tell, look, I know how to make the beer, but this stuff I need, he brings this to me from the British...I think they how to make the beerh."

Hops?

“Yaasss! And I start to make, a lot. One day he visit to me my place. ‘ah you have a cold beerh’ I say ‘yes yes’ and we start to dreenk together.”

“Now it was the day off for us, Thursday and Friday. I tell my friend George ‘This time I go to Cyprus and I *don’t want to come back!*’ I said ‘that’s eet”

‘But you signed contract!’ George told me. “You must!”

‘I told him ‘I don’t care. I don’t want to come here again. I don’t want that.’

When was this?

‘This was in 1989.”

“George, my friend told me ‘Look you to go Cyprus now, go there, have a rest. Take Thursday and Friday and take Saturday off and I make for you paper to come into Monday for work.”

“I say ‘OK, I see. Make what you want.’ I go to Cyprus. So I go to Larnaca.”

“I leave Kuwait in Wednesday. Five o’clock. I go to Cyprus; I have a friend in Cyprus. I told him I want to to dreenk something, to eat something. He’s from Lebanon he says ‘I will take Lebanese restaurant. When we move from his apartment, it was twelve O’Clock. We go to this restaurant, we sit, we eat, we dreenk, we joke, we dreenk, we this. Tch. I look in the TV! Something shooting! A war! I read ‘Iraq occupy the Kuwait!’ Tch. Ah! I look in the TV. I think this ees film. I look, I move my face, I don’t care. I thenk this ees film. I don’t think so this is the news.”

“But I understand the Greek. I move my face again. Ahh! I don’t say anything. I go to the telephone, I call my friend in Kuwait, George. He answer! I ask him ‘What’s happening in the Kuwait? You see bombs, you hear bombs,’ he say’s ‘I hear bombs, many bombs, maybe this is something they have from the Amir, he married his son or something?’ I tell him ‘What’s married?! Iraq! He occupy the Kuwait! Saddam in the Kuwait!’ He said ‘ Are you foolish?’ I say ‘Not foolish.’ Then cut the telephone.”

“I tried to call, I tried to call. That’s it. No more telephone.”

So you couldn’t go back?

“No! I don’t go back to Kuwait, big problem for me, if I go back, I am Palestinian. Tch. I can’t go back, but I didn’t want anyway.”

He smiles. “So when Saddam occupied Kuwait. I was lucky.”<sup>i</sup>

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## **Dresden: The Unintended Necropolis**

“Through the roar of the flames streaming far and wide, the groans of the falling victims were heard; such was the height of the hill and the magnitude of the blazing pile that the entire city seemed to be ablaze; and the noise - nothing more deafening and frightening could be imagined. “-Josephus Flavius<sup>1</sup>

These words were written about Roman the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in AD 70; they could very well have described the horrid nights of February 13-14 1945 which saw Dresden Germany turn into a flaming Necropolis. Germany was on its knees, retreating and largely unable to defend its cities from waves of US and British bombers.

This city has been rebuilt, remarkably, from mountains of rubble.

Kurt Vonnegut, who was held prisoner-of-war in Dresden up until the end of the war adapts his memories of the events into his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, wherein the fictional Billy Pilgrim jumps time and space. Vonnegut commented that the Firebombing of Dresden “was so meaningless, finally, that one one person on the entire planet got any benefit from it. I am that person. I wrote this book which earned me a lot of money and made my reputation, such as it is. One way or another, I got two or three dollars for every person killed. Some business I’m in.”<sup>2</sup>

The decision to destroy Dresden so late in the war was hotly debated as Germany had largely been beaten. Dresden did have some rail yards and was one of the last largely undamaged cities in Southern Germany, but was not really critical to the war effort. The firebombing was a massacre that killed anywhere from 30,000 to 100,000 people in about 24 hours. The numbers are disputed, inflated, perhaps on the high end. Suffice it to say, it was almost all a civilian population that was targeted. The debate over the reasons continues.

Some of the reasons that have been debated included using brute force destruction to demoralize the populace, boost morale in the UK or as retribution for Hitler’s raids on London (Coventry, notably).

In any event, World War II was a pivot point in warfare. wherein civilian populations had always been targets of mass-extermiation, such as the 1099 Crusades when tens of thousands of Muslims and Jews, fighting together, were massacred inside the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem by marauding Christians.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/jewishtemple.htm>

<sup>2</sup> The Firebombing of Dresden. P. 530

But now, whole cities could be destroyed from the skies. This novel “philosophy” of extinguishing cities ultimately led to the use of atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. 100,000 people could be killed in once shot.

What is remarkable about Dresden is the restoration and rebirth that came after the war, most rapidly after the reunion of East and West Germany and the expiration of the German Democratic Republic. Funds for restoration flowed from the West, monies raised included efforts by UK and US flyers that had participated in the destruction.

The most amazing restoration was completed just over ten years ago. The utterly destroyed Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) was rebuilt to its original design, at a cost of some €180 million. Lying as a ruin for 45 years, reconstruction was undertaken in earnest in the 1990s with the project gaining momentum after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of the two Germanys.



Dresden Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) after the Firebombing



Dresden Rebuilt

## Home

A mother's friend, a WWII war bride from China, was laid to rest shortly after I returned to Washington. She was interred with her late husband at Arlington National Cemetery, on the grounds of the former residence of General Robert E. Lee. The cemetery was sited there as an eternal "tribute" to Lee's legacy wreaked by carnage of the American Civil War. With so many graves practically hugging the Custis' family home, Lee never returned.



Arlington Cemetery

All cities have one thing in common, humanity continuing to build in these places where we all eventually will return to the soil.

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<sup>i</sup> George turned out to be fine. He made his way to Cairo a few days later, but had no money or way to get out. Issa flew to Cairo to help his friend. George is now safely back in Israel.