

# Algeria 1965/66

## Where are They Now?

By John Birkett

SCI's largest development project at the time was set up after Algeria's hard-fought independence in 1962, in Tlemcen province. Among its other problems, that area along the border with Morocco had been strewn with thousands of anti-personnel mines many of which were still live, causing horrible injuries and death to those unsuspecting victims who stepped on them, and also to the villagers' donkeys on which they depended – I recall watching one of our nurses stitching up a poor beast's wounds, though in that case they were probably not caused by a mine.

The project covered many disciplines and a wide area from the historic city of Tlemcen itself, southwards 50 miles to El Aricha and westwards 30 miles to the border, with other volunteer bases in the small town of Sebdoou and the villages El Khemis and Sidi Larbi. Volunteers totalled around 35 long-termers of 1 or 2 years (medics, teachers, social workers, builders, and a small office staff) plus other short-termers in the summer to help rebuild the village of Beni Hamou near Khemis.



Sidi Larbi Mixed School pupils concentrating hard

We hailed from the UK (10 of us), France (4), Germany (8), Switzerland (11), Belgium (5), Netherlands (3), Sweden (1), Italy (1), Spain (2), Japan (1), Algeria itself (8), plus no doubt some others, and not forgetting our two splendid Polish doctors who worked closely with our nurses and with Tlemcen Hospital. The senior doctor managed to arrange for one of our local helpers, a very bright youth of almost 17 from Sidi Larbi or Khemis, to study medicine in Poland.

I was the accountant/general administrator from Jan 1965 to Feb 1966, dealing with the bank, suppliers, customs imports etc and, with our resident Swiss director, reporting each month financially and operationally to SCI, Oxfam and other bodies who funded us. I remember my 14 months with great pleasure, apart from contracting severe jaundice,

probably my own fault from eating something dodgy in my last week, which showed up only when I was back home, leading to 7 weeks in an Edinburgh hospital's tropical diseases unit – but as it also led indirectly to meeting my wife of 53 years it wasn't all bad! I had great respect and admiration for the "sharp-end" volunteers; and I also admired the tolerance shown by ordinary Algerians despite the excesses perpetrated in the independence war.

In summer I drove a varied group 370 miles in our VW Combi to a work camp at Les Ouadhias in Kabylie (east of Algiers) where we joined teams from the Jeunesse FLN, France, East Germany, Bulgaria and Russia, who were also building a new village.



Volunteers arriving at Les Ouadhias



Les Ouadhias village under construction

In June the Defence Minister Houari Boumediene led a peaceful coup d'état against the incumbent President Ahmed Ben Bella, who came from Maghnia in Tlemcen province, but in no way were we or our operations affected.

One long weekend an English nurse, a Swiss nurse and I took a trip with two U.S. volunteers from other organisations in their Land Rover down to Targhit, south of Colomb Bechar in the Sahara (incurring the disapproval of SCI International Secretary Ralph Hegnauer!) which was of course fascinating.

Having kept in touch with other volunteers for some years after my return, I've now stupidly lost contact. To avoid possible unwanted data disclosure I'll not name names – but if you read this you'll know who you are! And you're very welcome to respond.

Salutations and Stay Safe, Inshallah!

John Birkett, now in St. Andrews, Fife KY16 8RZ

email: [johnbirkett@talktalk.net](mailto:johnbirkett@talktalk.net)



Village kids playing on crashed 2CV body