

TAC NEWS

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THE BLOODY ROAD TO BAGHDAD Crisis in the Middle East: 1941

DURING THE NIGHT OF APRIL 2-3 1941, four pro-Ax Iraqi officers calling themselves the "Golden Square", seized power in Baghdad, led by Rashid Ali el Gailani. Thus began one of the least known campaigns of WWII. Fought by only a few thousand troops in a British imperial backwater, its importance lay not so much in what happened then, but in what those events can tell us about the current unpleasantness in the Persian Gulf and what we may expect there in the future.

The Preliminaries

On April 29, as the last British troops were leaving the Greek mainland and Romell's Afrika Korps was making its debut in the Western Desert, a whole new crisis was building in what had once been called the "Fertile Crescent" - now the kingdom of Iraq. Iraq was (as so many other states in the region were) a child of the Versailles Treaty. With the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, the British received a mandate over much of this territory. From 1920 to 1930 the oil-rich valley of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers had been ruled by King Feisal, a British ally (Remember Lawrence of Arabia?). One of the provisions of the treaty establishing Iraq as an independent state was that Britain retained the right to two airbases on Iraqi territory. One of these was located near Basra on the Persian Gulf, the other at Habbaniyah on the Euphrates, west of Baghdad. The British were not allowed to maintain a permanent garrison at these bases, security being provided by local Assyrian Christian militia, but they were granted the right of "transit" for British forces. This meant that Iraqi roads, railroads, rivers, ports and airspace must be free for British use, an important consideration if Britain were to maintain contact with India, especially in time of war.

Perhaps even more important than maintaining Britain's imperial network were the Iraqi oilfields located around Mosul and Kirkuk. The oil from these fields was transported via pipeline west and south through Jordan

and Palestine to Haifa. In addition, Persia's oil pipelines passed through an area of Iraq known as the Shatt al Arab, a fifty-mile stretch of the Tigris-Euphrates ending at the Persian Gulf. These two pipelines provided Britain with the lion's share of the petroleum needed to wage war on the Axis. Any interruption of that flow could threaten Britain's very survival.

In 1933, Feisal died, leaving the kingdom to his son Ghazi, a man of little character and no friend of the West. Things simmered until 1939 when Ghazi was killed mysteriously in an automobile accident and the country fell under the rule of Amir Abdul Illah, acting as regent for the four-year-old King Feisal II. Then came Rashid Ali, long known to be a well-paid Nazi sympathizer. Lulled by veiled promises of German air support from Vichy airbases in Syria, he decided it was time to act and led his group of pro-Nazi officers in a coup. The Regent, hearing of a plan by Rashid Ali to have the king arrested, took young Feisal to Basra where a British ship took them out of reach. Rashid Ali and his supporters declared the Regent deposed. They established a new government with Rashid Ali as Prime Minister.

The Contenders

Iraqi equipment was generally of British origin and many Iraqi officers had been trained there. In 1941, the army consisted of four Infantry divisions and a mechanized brigade. Two of these divisions were deployed around Baghdad. One in Kirkuk to watch the ever-restless Kurds, and one stationed along the Euphrates to the south. The mechanized brigade consisted of sixteen (mostly Italian) light tanks, fourteen (mostly British) armored cars, and two battalions of motorized infantry. There were also four river gunboats. In addition, the Iraqis had around sixty British, American, and Italian aircraft. These were fairly modern and certainly in better shape than the eighteen British training aircraft stationed at Habbaniyah.

The troops charged with security at the Habbaniyah airfield consisted of one battalion of Assyrian Militia. The Assyrians could call on a few 3" mortars, two 3.7" mountain howitzers, and some engineers. There was also a Gate Guard Battery consisting of two well-worn 4.5" Mk.1 QF howitzers, eighteen Rolls Royce armored cars, and about 300 or so RAF ground personnel. To this must be added three British infantry companies from the 1st King's Own Regiment (400 men) that arrived by air in April. Based at Habbaniyah were a motley assortment of training aircraft, mostly Audaxes and Oxfords, with a few Gladiators, Valentia transports, one Blenheim, and several Hart trainers.

The Pot Boils Over

On April 12, a convoy bound for Malaya was diverted to Basra carrying 20th Infantry Brigade/10th Indian Division^A. The Iraqis opted not to resist their landing and General Fraser occupied Basra without incident under the existing "Right of Transit" agreement. Things remained quiet until Rashid Ali issued the statement that no further British forces would be allowed on Iraqi soil after Fraser's troops had finished "passing through". When a second British contingent landed on April 29, things came to a head. Rashid Ali ordered all British women and children evacuated from Baghdad to the RAF installation at Habbaniyah for "their own protection". The 230 women and children sent there were declared hostages along with 6,000 other civilians. The British embassy in Baghdad was surrounded and sealed off from the outside world. Large numbers of Iraqi troops were on the move throughout the country. The vital oil pipeline running from Kirkuk to the Mediterranean was blocked!

The "Siege" of Habbaniyah

With the arrival of the 1st K.O.R. contingent, the total strength of the Habbaniyah garrison stood at some 2,200. Against this force British air reconnaissance estimated between five and eight thousand Iraqi troops were advancing west along the road from Baghdad, while another brigade of Iraqi forces occupied Ramadi, fourteen miles upriver from Habbaniyah. The base was surrounded. On April 30 Iraqi artillery was observed deploying on a plateau about a thousand yards beyond the base perimeter, placing the entire installation in full view of the enemy. Iraqi reinforcements continued to arrive until their strength at Habbaniyah reached 9,000 men in 11 battalions and 50 guns, but for some reason their commander hesitated to strike.

The British commander, Air Vice-Marshal Smart, was quick to seize the respite granted him by this inaction. A sort of air-shuttle evacuated the women and children via Baghdad to Basra and safety.



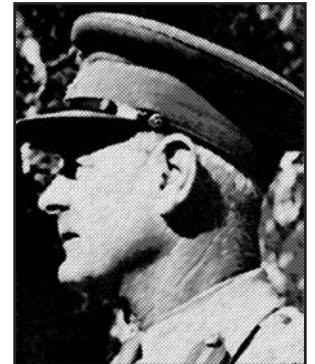
Air Vice-Marshal Smart

Then, having received authorization from the War Office, Smart launched every craft that could be "coaxed" into the air at dawn of May 2 to bomb the Iraqi besiegers. To these were added strikes by Wellington bombers out of Basra. The Iraqis reacted by shelling the base, with strangely little effect^B. The bombing raids were disappointing as well. Despite unloading thirty-three tons of bombs on the Iraqi positions, their well-camouflaged batteries suffered little damage and could not be budged from the plateau. Things stood at an impasse. From the hesitancy shown by the Iraqis, Smart concluded that he could hold his own at Habbaniyah and might even carry the fight to the enemy, at least in the air.

On the political front, Rashid Ali's coup was not receiving the sort of support he expected abroad. The Vichy French had failed to deliver on promises of Luftwaffe intervention via their Syrian airfields. Vichy influence on the Germans was turning out to be more shadow than substance. Among hereditary Arab rulers, a usurper like Rashid Ali was unwelcome at best. The supremely able Ibn Saud was keeping Arabia strictly neutral. King Abdullah of Jordan, a close relative of young Feisal, was sheltering the king and his Regent in Amman. There would be no sweeping Arab uprising against the British, despite their precarious military position.

Habforce

The British force in Basra, little more than a brigade, could not be expected to march up the length of the Euphrates to rescue Habbaniyah. There simply weren't enough of them and no further forces could be expected from India. Therefore, if Habbaniyah was to be relieved, that relief must



General Wavell

come from Palestine to the west. This was problematic. General Wavell was at that very moment engaged in a struggle with the Axis in Libya that threatened the imperial lifeline to India. Operations against the Italians in East Africa, though winding down, were by no means complete. British forces in the Mediterranean were short of both men and equipment after the fiasco in Greece while in the midst of preparing for an imminent Axis invasion of Crete. Malta was in desperate need of reinforcements as well. Finally, the Vichy garrison in Syria was a source of grave concern, threatening to strike at Suez through Lebanon. Wavell could spare no more than a single "mechanized" brigade, cobbled together from components of the 1st Cavalry Division, currently occupying Palestine.

This brigade was short of transport, only partly trained, and lacking in essential weapons like tanks and armored cars. In other words, it was "mechanized" in little more

than name. Wavell felt obliged to notify London that he considered this force totally inadequate to put down an insurgency in Iraq. He further stated that he believed its efforts would be viewed more as an incitement than as a deterrent to further rebellion. He also reminded London of the threat posed by Vichy forces in Syria and that sending these troops to Iraq would leave Palestine (and Suez) dangerously vulnerable.

However, there seemed no other solution, so the 4th Cavalry Brigade under Brigadier J.J. Kingstone, was organized as the core of a relief column. 4th Brigade consisted of the Household Cavalry Regiment, the Royal Warwickshire Yeomanry, and the Royal Wiltshire Yeomanry (less one troop) mounted in less-than-new 15cwt trucks. To these were added the 1st Essex Infantry, a mechanized regiment of the TransJordan Frontier Force, the Arab Legion, the 60th Field Regiment Royal Artillery (less one troop), one troop of the 2nd Cheshire Field Squadron Royal Engineers, an anti-tank troop, and various service troops. The combined force was dubbed "Habforce" and placed under the overall command of Major-General J.G.W. Clark. Its mission was wide ranging; to relieve the troops currently surrounded at Habbaniyah, to reopen the road and pipeline between them and the TransJordan, and to facilitate friendly contact with the Arab tribes.

Meanwhile, Back At the Ranch...

Beginning on May 1, Air Vice-Marshal Smart sent raid after raid against the Baghdad Airport and the main Iraqi airbase south of the city, destroying some twenty aircraft on the ground. Desultory fighting around Habbaniyah continued with the Iraqis shelling the base and British air attacks on the plateau batteries. The besieging Iraqi infantry, however, remained passive and it wasn't long before the initiative passed to the defenders. Aggressive night patrols, augmented by several raids across the Euphrates, drove the Iraqis to shelter in their dugouts after dark, and they soon gave up any claim to the no-man's-land between their lines and the base perimeter altogether. Smart didn't neglect the Iraqi supply line either, especially attacking the bottleneck where it crossed the river at Fallujah. The Iraqis were beginning to feel besieged themselves.

The initiative changed hands conclusively on the night of May 5-6, when the British and Assyrians raided the village of Sin ad Dhibban or "The Teeth of the Wolf" (no kidding!) by the riverbank about a mile southeast of the camp. The attack was a total surprise inflicting heavy casualties on the Iraqis there, including many prisoners taken in the confusion. The remainder were in full flight by dawn. After that, everything began happening at once. The attackers took up the pursuit, slamming into more Iraqis and a hot little firefight ensued. Several R.A.F. armored cars joined in on their southern flank, supported by low level bombing attacks. However, it was fire from the two 4.5" "Gate Guard" Howitzers that broke the Iraqis.

These guns, relics from the WWI Mesopotamian Campaign, had adorned the main gate of Habbaniyah for over twenty years. When the British decided to defend the base, several techs and a few shells had been flown in from Basra to bring the guns back into working order. When these shells began bursting among the Iraqi infantry, they became convinced that heavy artillery had been flown in secretly.

On the left, a company of the King's Own swept through Sin ad Dhibban and gained the high ground beyond. On the right, the Assyrians demonstrated an unexpected ferocity, driving the Iraqis into full flight! In a moment, the plateau was in British hands. When the Iraqis attempted to bring up additional motorized infantry and guns via the Fallujah road, disaster struck. An air strike hit them just as they were crossing the Euphrates. Spring floods had rendered the ground on either side of the road impassable to wheeled traffic, leaving long columns of trucks helpless and immobile while British aircraft worked them over at will for over two hours! The final toll in this lopsided engagement was 500 killed or wounded Iraqis and over 400 prisoners. British losses stood at forty killed or wounded. Some of these had been caused by Iraqi air attacks on the base before the battle began. The relief of Habbaniyah had become moot.

On May 6, 21st Indian Brigade (4/13th Frontier Force Rifles, 2/4th Gurkha Rifles, and 2/10th Gurkha Rifles) landed at Basra along with two armored car troops of the 13th Lancers and an Indian sapper detachment. This later became known as "Iraq Force". These additional troops allowed the British to tighten their grip on the Basra suburbs despite sniping attacks from Iraqi insurgents. The time had come to reopen the road to Baghdad, relieve the embassy compound, and re-establish normal communications throughout the country.

The Plot Thickens

On May 7, the first German aircraft landed in Syria en route to Iraq too late to be of any real use to the insurgents, but in time to show Germany's solidarity with their Muslim brothers. Vichy officials spared no effort to assist their passage. Every airbase and facility was placed at their disposal. Also during the month of May, Vichy saw to it that four railroad cars full of French arms and ammunition, a battery of field artillery, and two trainloads of scarce aviation fuel were shipped to Iraq in an act of "malignant generosity"^c.

Despite this, General Wavell still hoped the situation in Iraq could be settled by diplomacy. General Auchinleck, Commander in Chief in India, had other ideas. He demanded energetic action, including the occupation of key points with special attention to Iraq's northern oilfields. Auchinleck sent Lieutenant-General Quinan to Iraq with these orders, only to have them countermanded by Wavell.

Wavell's orders were to safeguard Basra and open up communications with Baghdad "if Iraqi cooperation was secured". In the end, the War Cabinet in London prevailed. They realized that it was three hundred miles from Basra to Baghdad over mostly flooded ground crossed by a nearly medieval network of roads. Progress was bound to be tedious. London placed its faith, therefore, in a bold advance by Habforce.

Think about it. Habforce was expected to advance hundreds of miles through poorly marked country over almost non-existent roads to reach Habbaniyah. Then, they must continue on with no rest, overawe or brush aside all opposition, overcome all obstacles, and finally, by simply arriving at the capitol, bring down Rashid Ali's government and crush the insurgency. This is exactly what General Clark was expected to do. His orders were to move along the Euphrates from Habbaniyah to Baghdad, regain contact with the British Ambassador there, occupy the west bank of the Tigris, and bring the Iraqi arsenal on the east bank under artillery fire. He was then to await further orders.

Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe was making itself felt. On May 13 German fighters engaged British bombers over Mosul. On May 16 three German fighters attacked Habbaniyah, with losses on both sides. Messerschmitts fought Hurricanes over Baghdad. R.A.F. Bombers attacked the four main Vichy airbases in Syria; Aleppo, Rayak, Damascus, and Palmyra. Things were heating up again.

Cavalry to the Rescue

General Clark realized that if he were to cover the 470 miles from the Mediterranean coast to Habbaniyah, he must do it quickly and travel light. The expedition would have to carry all its own food and water, and the flooding of much of the country between these two points was

bound to pose a problem. As a solution, he set up a flying column made up of the Household Cavalry, a battery from the 60th Field Regiment, an anti-tank platoon, a troop of sappers, two infantry companies from the 1st Essex, and a carrier platoon from the same regiment: 2000 men and 500 vehicles. The whole lot was put under Brig. Kingstone, and called "Kingcol". Kingcol moved out on May 11 crossing the Iraqi frontier on the 13th. An RAF armored car company joined them there. The column raced on to Rutba, expecting trouble, but finding Glubb Pasha's "Girls" had already taken the place. Major Glubb reported that Ramadi (now almost an island in the Euphrates flood plain making it nearly unapproachable) was occupied by the enemy.

The good news was that the only other enemy force of any size was covering the Euphrates bridge near Fallujah, mostly composed of the very same troops who had been hustled out of Habbaniyah only a few days before. Kingstone took this under advisement and plunged forward another 160 miles, halting about fifteen miles west of Ramadi. Along the way, German aircraft strafed the column. Having no effective anti-aircraft weapons with them, they were forced to take it with no way of striking back. Kingcol then turned south to avoid Ramadi. Things went wrong pretty quickly after that. Trucks began to break through the surface crust and into the soft sand below. They had to be repeatedly dug out in daytime temperatures hovering around 120 degrees. The advance slowed to almost nothing and supplies were running out. Kingstone was forced to turn back, notifying Habbaniyah of his situation. On May 17, Glubb Pasha notified Kingstone that the Arab Legion had located a little-known track that would allow Kingcol to reach Habbaniyah by marching around the south shore of Habbaniyah Lake in a single march. Kingcol halted for the night along the lakeshore road near Mujara on the evening of the 18th, less than fifteen miles from their objective. *To be continued ...*

IN THE NEXT TAC NEWS - THE CONCLUSION OF "THE BLOODY ROAD TO BAGHDAD"

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