

Brief History of the Assyrian Levies

The Levies were a product of the political upheaval at the end of the Great War that led to the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire. For economic reasons and to avoid friction with the new Iraqi rulers which a garrison of soldiers could cause, the British decided to implement its mandate by the strategy of Air control. The RAF was to be responsible for the security of three mandated countries with eight squadrons of aircraft, with locally recruited ground troops. The Assyrians, a Christian minority some of whom fled Turkey for the relative safety of Iran and Iraq during the war were now in refugee camps. The British could turn its humanitarian principles to practical use by recruiting these refugees to guard its air bases and to undertake whatever ground operations were needed. British Army officers with comparable officers from the indigenous ranks commanded all units.

The force commander was RAB Khaila-Leader of 1000.

Battalion commander was RAB Tremma-Leader of 200.

Company commander was RAB Emma- Leader of 100.

Platoon commander was RAB Khamshi- Leader of 50.

In 1920 when the RAF took over, the Iraq Levies, as they were then known, consisted of three cavalry regiments, four infantry battalions, two artillery batteries and a machinegun company, a total of six thousand Assyrians, Arabs and Kurds. By 1922 the Force was made up of mostly Assyrians. Its tasks were to support RAF operations against Kurds who, not surprisingly, had rebelled when their republic was "cancelled". They continued in revolt throughout the British mandate, and afterwards against the Iraqi government. The RAF reduced this force by more than half, modernized it and established a number of armored car companies. In World War Two these achieved legendary status not only in Iraq but also throughout the Middle East. Their experience in desert operations made them a valuable resource in the Western Desert campaigns.

The League of Nations' mandate over Iraq ended in 1932 with the government established as a constitutional monarchy and all the machinery of government in place. The British government was anxious to maintain its military privileges because of the air routes to India, the far East and Australia. Accordingly, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty of 1932 that followed the mandate took account of the policy of air control that has been in force

since 1922. Under the terms of this Treaty, the RAF was allowed to maintain two major bases, one at Shaibah, south of Basra in the Persian Gulf and the other at Habbaniya, inland and west of Baghdad. The Treaty limited ground forces to two Levies battalions and one Armored Car Company.

Habbaniya, is some sixty kilometers from Baghdad on a bend of the great river Euphrates and with the Tigris gave Iraq its ancient geographical name, Mesopotamia. Between these two rivers is the great fertile area that was the granary for the Roman, Persian and other empires of antiquity. The rivers come together and form the Shat el Arab before flowing into the Persian Gulf. The Euphrates is a meandering river and makes periodic attempts to reclaim its old bed, on which the RAF station was built. It helped make the RAF station an oasis in the desert; its Rose gardens were famous, the roads were lined with eucalyptus trees imported from Australia; the houses and messes were fronted with emerald-green Lawns; tennis courts and sports grounds were plentiful. it must be said that the base was geared for every eventuality except war.

World War Two.

Wartime expansion increased the Levies to a force of some 12000, deployed in Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Cyprus, Lebanon and Syria. it consisted of mostly Assyrians with a small number of Kurds, Arabs and Baluchis. The soldiers of these units were deployed in a variety of duties protecting the RAF throughout the Middle East.

Battle of Habbaniya.

Although Iraq was at war with Germany, many of the younger Army officers disagreed and in 1941 seized power. They were commanded by a group of four Colonels; "The Golden Square" who asked the Axis powers for help. Then the British Government deployed three Indian Army Brigades to the Persian Gulf and in response, the Iraqis invested Habbaniya. Some Eight thousand men with artillery and armour occupied the plateau overlooking the airfield and cut its communications with Baghdad and Jordan. The Habbaniya garrison of one armored car company and six companies of Levies were reinforced by one British army Battalion flown in from Shaibah.

On 30th April, the Iraqis demanded a complete cessation of all military activity at the base. The commanding officers reply was to order an all out attack with the only available aircraft-trainers fitted with makeshift bombsites. These attacked the enemy positions and latter were reinforced by aircraft strikes from elsewhere in the theatre. The German aircraft that had come to help the Iraqis were destroyed on the ground and in the air until the RAF established air superiority over the battlefield. An essential if the ground force were to succeed.

Whilst the air battle was being fought, the Assyrian Levies, armored cars and the army battalion by aggressive patrolling drove the enemy back from key areas. On 6th May, they captured Iraqi positions on the plateau and the enemy began to retreat towards Baghdad. On 17th May, the sight of armored cars of the relieving force from Jordan heartened the besieged. And on 31 May, almost exactly a month after the first attacks, they entered Baghdad, an armistice was signed and a new government installed.

In his report on the campaign, the Air officer Commanding wrote; "I wish to record the outstanding services rendered by the Assyrian Levies and the armored car company. It was on these that the close defense of Habbaniya depended and right well did they carry out their task. Their steadiness under fire, their dash, and complete disregard for danger in attack, provided a valuable complement to the action of their comrades in the air, and helped materially towards the demoralizing of a vastly superior enemy force".

He could have added that although the battle was small in comparison with the great battles being fought in the western desert, the outcome was probably more important. If the Germans had seized Iraq, the southern route to the Russian Caucasus front would have been opened, the oil of Iraq would have been denied to the Allies and the outcome of the war could well have hinged on this one small encounter.

In recognition of this action the Levies were renamed the RAF Levies, the only indigenous RAF force to be so honored.

THE BATTLE OF SARANDE

As part of the expansion to meet the needs of war, an independent paratroop company was established. It consisted of 150 Assyrians and 50 Kurds with a small British element. In 1944 they were deployed to Italy in response to a request from the commander Adriatic Forces for "paratroops trained in mountain warfare". The Adriatic forces had the task of not only helping the partisans in their fight against the Germans but of sealing off the ports the Germans would use when withdrawing troops from the Dodecanese and other parts of the Aegean.

One such port was Sarande on the westernmost tip of Albania. To seize the port a commando (about 250 strong) had landed on the outskirts but could not advance further because of the enemy resistance from Mount Sarande overlooking the port, hence the call for reinforcements.

Just before dawn, the 1st Assyrian parachute company landed by the Royal Navy at a spot about five kilometers south of the port. At first light the German commander saw the landing but decided, as a good commander should, that his men could have breakfast first and be ready to fight the enemy on full stomachs. Little did he know that the Assyrians were hardy men whose abode was the mountains of Iraq. One of their pastimes was to race up and down these mountains and the Mount Sarande climb, about half the average height of their home mountains, presented little difficulty. Setting off at a jog they outstripped their British officers and caught the German garrison who were just finishing breakfast. After a brisk firefight, the Germans surrendered and the Levies settled down to their breakfast. Unfortunately, the Germans were not the only people taken by surprise. The Royal Navy and the RAF had not realized that the mountain was in friendly hands and attacked with naval gunfire and rockets. RAB Khamshi Schlemon Bukko was dispatched with a patrol to contact the Commando and get them to send a message to HQ that the objective had been captured and would they please ask the Navy and the RAF to cease firing. Seeing troops coming from the direction of the enemy, the commandos opened fire. Bukko was hit but had enough strength left to call out "Stop shooting. We are British". His cry, in an Assyrian accent, was greeted with derision and another burst of fire. "British are you? Not b...y likely". Eventually the commandos saw their error and ceased firing. Henceforth the Paratroop Company sardonically referred to themselves as experts in combined operations, having been shot up by the Navy, Army and RAF in a single operation.

On their return from Sarande, the levies found that they were heroes. In the parochial climate of Adriatic operations, everybody, including the enemy, knew what others were doing and news of the Assyrian Levies exploits traveled fast. Dressed in red berets adorned with crossed silver daggers, parachute wings on their uniforms and commando daggers at their sides they cut quite a dash even amongst the polyglot troops who used Bari as their base for relaxation.

The hero worship did not last long as they were soon deployed to Athens where a rebel Communist force had seized most of the city and were close to seizing power. The government and the British ambassador were holed up in the King George Hotel; the RAF headquarters at Kifissia was in enemy hands and only a small portion of the city was held. The levies came under command of the First Airborne Brigade and began the unpleasant, and dangerous, task of house-to-house fighting. This was made even more unpleasant by the order that a cease-fire was to be observed every afternoon to let the housewives do their shopping. How many enemies this order let through their lines disguised as peasant women is anybody's guess. Eventually the task in Athens completed, the company was withdrawn to their base at Gioia Del Colle, near Bari.

POST-WAR

In 1948 the political scene changed once more and sounded the death knell of Levies. The post-colonial relationship between Iraq and Britain was formalized at the Treaty of Portsmouth. This gave the RAF the right to maintain air bases in Iraq but left unresolved the problem of enlisting Iraqi citizens in the armed forces of a foreign power. The Assyrian Levies remained in this limbo until 1955 when the British further role and the force was disbanded at Habbaniya in May 1955. Although both the Colonial Office and the Air Ministry developed a comprehensive system of compensation and resettlement for the Assyrians who had served the British so loyally the Iraqi government had little affection for them and the hardship inflicted on them later makes distressing reading, to say the least.
