

# Palestine

*(The author spent the last seven months of the British Mandate in Palestine)*

**"And Abraham passed through the land of Sichem ....and the Caananite was in the land. And the Lord appeared unto Abraham and said unto thy seed I will give this land..."** (Genesis Ch 12 v 6 & 7).

**"The Lord made a covenant with Abraham saying unto thy seed I will give this land"** (Genesis Ch 15 v 8).

**"When Abraham was 90 years old and nine the Lord appeared unto Abraham and said unto him..... 'I will give unto thee and to thy seed after the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession.....'"** (Genesis Ch 17 v 1 & 8).

This was first fulfilled in 1,320BC in the Exodus from Egypt when the 12 tribes of Israel were established in Canaan or Palestine. In AD65 the Jews were rash enough to revolt against Rome and by AD7 Jerusalem was destroyed and the Diaspora scattered the Jews across Europe, Russia and beyond.

On 2 November 1917 the Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour, wrote to Lord Rothschild: I have much pleasure in conveying to you, on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following message of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet: *'His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object it being clearly understood that nothing should be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country'*. I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

On 25 April 1920 the League of Nations entrusted the mandate to govern Palestine to Great Britain. Over the next 20 years the infrastructure was built up, including the construction of Haifa port in 1933. Between 1922-24 the population increased by 342%. The Arab population tripled but dropped from 74% to 48% as Jews flooded in as anti-Semitism grew in Europe, culminating in the Holocaust. The Jewish aim was unrestricted immigration but Arab discontent grew as land was bought up and employment for them was reduced. In the resulting Arab revolt of 1936-39 the British lost control and poured in troops. Eventually 17 battalions and a cavalry brigade restored order on the brink of World War 2. The Zionists embarked on their own militarisation in defence of their settlements and by 1939 had 15,000 troops under command; the basis of the Hagannah, the future Israeli Army. The Arab leadership was exhausted and suffered 5,000 dead and 15,000

wounded. To bring peace the Arabs were given an assurance that Jewish immigration would be limited to 75,000 over five years - 15,000 per year.

During WW2 most Jews cooperated with the war effort apart from Irgun and the Stern gang. Abraham Stern was a Polish Jew who arrived in 1940. His aim was to reach an accord with Hitler by attacking the British thus allowing European Jews to be evacuated to Palestine. He continued attacks on the Palestine Police and the Army until he was killed in 1942. Menachim Begin, a future Prime Minister, took over and continued attacks on Police Stations. In November 1944 the British Minister of State, Lord Moyne, was murdered by the Stern Gang in Cairo.

VE Day was D Day for the Jews and terrorism increased with Palestinian Jewry in full and open revolt. The British HQ in the King David Hotel was bombed on 24 July 1946 with 94 killed, the majority British. This was a Hagannah plan taken over by Irgun who gave no warning. The Jews took hostages against punishment of their terrorists. Two Intelligence Corps Sergeants were hung from an orange tree and their bodies' booby trapped in retaliation for the hanging of three Irgun terrorists in Acre prison.

The Royal Navy had the disagreeable task of intercepting Illegal Jewish Immigrant (IJI) ships bringing Jews from the concentration camps of Europe. By the end of the campaign 47 intercepted vessels were laid up in Haifa and 67,000 Jews interned in Cyprus. Boarding parties had the hazardous task of leaping from warships onto the IJI ships packed with desperate Jews. Their only defence being entrenching tool helms, steel helmets and cricket boxes as protection from ferocious women with their hat pins. The most notorious of the IJI ships was the Exodus which the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin in July 1947 ordered to be sent back to Hamburg in full view of a UN Fact Finding Mission and the world press. This aroused world wide sympathy to which the Palestinian Arabs pointed out that it was Europe who had persecuted the Jews and

argued that Europe and the USA had no right to salve their consciences by creating a Jewish state in the midst of the Arab world.

The British had already announced that they were relinquishing the Mandate and handing Palestine over to the United Nations which in turn produced a partition plan allocating the most fertile half to the Jews who comprised one third of the population. Christmas 1947 erupted in carnage and this was when the author came in.

*(The 60th anniversary of the formation of the Jewish state was celebrated on 14 May. The British finally withdrew through Haifa on 30 June 1948.)*

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In the last article we left Palestine in carnage over Christmas 1947 when the UN plan for the partition of Palestine after the end of British Mandate was published.



I was serving as the Heavy Weapons officer in 40 Commando Royal Marines which was based in Malta. Our Commanding Officer was Lt Col "Titch" Houghton MC (now Maj Gen) who had been captured during the Dieppe raid. He had trained us hard and moulded us into a happy and efficient unit.

We were ordered to Palestine to help cover the British withdrawal. I left on the 25 January 1948 with the advance party in *HMS Cheviot*, the main body embarked in the cruiser *HMS Phoebe* and transport and stores followed later in the LST *HMS Striker*. On 30 January we arrived in Haifa to the sound of heavy explosions of tit for tat bombings between the Arab and Jewish communities. At first we went into a transit camp outside Haifa. To illustrate the hostility between the two, when I was also appointed messing officer I was faced with the usual complaint about insufficient food. With the CO's permission I took four three ton trucks into the Arab countryside where they were filled with potatoes, the growers being too scared to bring them into Haifa. I sent three on to Jewish merchants and was able to retain one load to augment the Commando's rations.

On 3 February 40 Commando took over responsibility for the security of Haifa port which was the only British withdrawal route, apart from the single track rail line into Egypt, for the 10,000 British troops and hundreds of thousand of tons of military stores which had accumulated from two world wars and the troubled years between. The port measures

2,000 yds East to West and 750 yds from the perimeter fence to the breakwater where ships berthed stern to and were loaded by lighter. Others berthed alongside. The port area, including the Arab suq, is dominated by the 2,775ft of Mount Carmel. Five gates were open and needed guarding: No 1 in the East served the oil refinery, No 2 the railway gate whilst Nos 3, 5 and 10 were busy vehicle and personnel gates. Security was a problem as the port was jointly owned by Jews and Arabs and engaged in commercial traffic and the export of citrus fruit and at the same time was busy with WD chartered ships. The whole unit moved into the port. Our duties were constantly to search for weapons and stop stolen goods being taken out. In general the Arabs engaged in small scale pilfering, usually at night while the Jews went in for the large scale theft of military equipment brazenly using rail wagons and stolen Army vehicles.

Day One gave a taste of things to come. A bomb destroyed an Arab house nearby resulting in an exchange of fire. An hour later two British Palestine Police were killed outside No 3 gate. Their bodies were recovered by us in the face of a large crowd of angry Arabs. Sadly both were ex-Marines. The Palestine Police Force was a fine, brave body of men who bore the brunt of terrorism. Their Inspector General was Col Nicol Gray DSO\* who had commanded 45 Commando during the War. He had recruited many ex-marines. On the same day a patrol arrested two armed Jews and later escorted the body of a Jew, killed by a police patrol, to the mortuary. Examples of thieving and rackets bowled out at that time are: an American timber ship lying on the breakwater for loading had some of her cargo taken over the breakwater into a felucca on the seaward side, the US ship *Flying Arrow*, whose manifest showed she was carrying agricultural tractors was found unloading armoured half tracks, the WD ammunition ship *City of Glasgow* asked for help and a patrol found an Arab labourer with 1,018 rounds of rifle ammunition, a team of Jewish workmen was seen unloading steel sheets from a lighter intended for a WD ship, eight Jews were found running a dump for goods stolen by Arabs; a rare example of inter-community cooperation!



All these attempted thefts and many more were thwarted by alert patrols and the introduction of a universal pass system. Not all incidents were inter-communal. A Company of Mauritian Pioneers was employed as stevedores. A Corporal's patrol checking on the NAAFI warehouse was greeted by a shower of empty bottles. He ordered "*Fix Bayonets*" and they rapidly sobered up.

In town bombing continued at an average of four per week. Most bombs were in stolen WD vehicles. Two 14 ton Staghound armoured cars were acquired for me to man from my Heavy Weapons personnel. With their 37mm guns and coaxial machine guns they were an effective mobile reserve and much used for escorts. An insidious aspect for British servicemen was the constantly corrupting Jewish attempt to buy weapons and ammunition. I was offered £8,500 to leave a Staghound unattended for a few minutes at a nominated street corner. When I told the Corporal in charge he said "*Only eight and a half. I was offered far more!*" My CO told me that if I lost one of those Staghounds he would never want to see me again.



## **Palestine**

In April the situation took a turn for the worse when the C in C of the Arab Forces was killed outside Haifa and at the same time the Jews committed an atrocity which influenced Arab reaction to future Jewish attacks. The Irgun and Stern gang were given the task of capturing the village of Deir Yassin on the road to Jerusalem. Enraged by the tenacity of Arab resistance when it was eventually captured on 8 April 1948, every inhabitant was massacred; a total of 245 men women and children.

By 20 April the situation in Haifa became critical and it was decided to remove all British troops from Haifa and let the two sides fight it out. 40 Commando was left to hold the port. At 1000 hrs the Jews opened fire on the Arabs. I was patrolling Kingsway in a Staghound at the time when two British police were caught in the crossfire. We gave covering fire while two gallant Jews in a bus recovered the casualties.

Early on 22 April fighting increased in intensity and the Jews started mortaring the suq. Confusion broke out amongst the Arabs and many panic stricken men women and children, carrying pathetic bundles of belongings, massed outside No 3 gate begging to be let in. I will never forget or forgive the Jews, who had already won the battle, from opening a hail of fire on the unprotected mass and wounding our doctor and a lieutenant who were giving first aid.



The CO opened the gates to let the refugees in and I brought a Staghound up and fired a number of rounds at the row of binoculars watching from the GPO building on Mount Carmel. The firing stopped and the CO said the telephone line to his HQ was hot with requests for us to desist. A truce was arranged by the GOC to discuss the evacuation of 37,000 Arabs from Haifa of whom 12,000 were in the port giving problems of housing and feeding. We ferried these unfortunates across the bay to Acre in lighters over several days. Only 2,500 Arabs remained in Haifa.

The Mandate ended on 14 May and the British withdrew onto Haifa through a series of enclaves. The evacuation of military stores gathered pace and the daily tonnage became an all pervading interest. Attempted thefts of military equipment increased. On 3 June a party of Jews was found loading 25 pounder gun barrels and 96 breech blocks into a lorry. An RM landing craft intercepted a lighter leaving the port from a Danish ship carrying war stores. The coxswain was offered a £500 bribe. The GOC's reserve of 50,000 gallons of petrol in six rail wagons was stolen. The Port Commandant led an armed party in a WD shunting engine and followed the points to recover the train five miles beyond the British enclave. The most serious loss occurred when a Polish driver serving with the British Army defected with a Comet tank.

The Intelligence Officer was in charge of immigration. The liner *Ile de France* anchored off and he went out to clear the mostly Jewish passengers. The Captain then explained that he had a problem and introduced a distinguished looking Oxford educated Arab who had been expelled from the USA with a deportation order signed by John Foster Dulles no less. The Arab said that if he went ashore he would have his throat cut to which the IO could only agree. He therefore wrote in the man's passport "*Not accepted by the British Military authorities.*" Signed H Orpen Lt RM. The liner sailed back to the States and our IO never heard from him or John Foster Dulles again!

A party of US Marines arrived on 17 June in white painted Jeeps to support the UN Mediator, Count Bernadotte. There followed a four day countdown to the British withdrawal on 30 June. 40 Commando was the last British unit to leave and we embarked in *HMS Striker*.



The Royal Marines from *HMS Phoebe* provided the GOC's final guard as the Union Flag was lowered to three cheers from the *Striker*. We

arrived back in Malta with great satisfaction at the many and varied jobs we had done with efficiency and integrity. We had lost no vehicles or personal weapons and no Royal Marine was among the 220 British troops killed by terrorists since the Second World War

*Postscript.*

Within weeks Count Bernadotte had been murdered almost certainly by Irgun. The wretched Palestinians are still refugees and a running sore to relations with the Islamic nations. Our CO, "Titch" Houghton, told me recently that when he was a POW in OFLAG 17, where prisoners from Dieppe were put in chains on orders from Hitler, he was able to do a good turn for a Jewish British Army officer. When we arrived in Haifa he found this former officer in an influential position in the Jewish community and he had promised that 40 Commando would not be targeted and, apart from a few 'overs', we were not.

**Postscript.** In 1973, when I was serving on the Naval Staff in Whitehall, Palestine had still not done with me. One morning we found Cunard advertising a cruise there in the QE2 to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the State of Israel. As there was £8 million of Government money in the vessel there was some surprise and a series of meetings was held in the Cabinet Office to make security arrangements. I represented the Royal Navy and Michael Mates, now MP for Petersfield, represented the Army. As a result of our meetings a number of SBS personnel in plain clothes mingled with the passengers and I sent the Superintendent of RN Diving to inspect the security arrangements at ports of call including Haifa and Ashdod, a new port built by the Israelis. It was fortunate I did so for the Harbourmaster at Ashdod had no idea of the length of the QE 2. Fortunately the cruise was completed safely.

***Peter Thomas***

